

## **My Trip to Egypt**

I had been planning a trip to Egypt for several years now. As a student of history, visiting the ancient ruins of the pharaohs was high on my Bucket List. Unfortunately, the events of 9/11, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, made me wary of traveling to that region of the world. To compensate, I opted to tour the ancient ruins of Mexico the previous year, marveling at the pyramids and temples I saw there. But putting things into perspective, as wondrous as the Mexican ruins were, the archeological remains in Egypt predated them by thousands of years. When President Obama was elected in 2008 I was hopeful the image of America would change in the Middle East. So you can only imagine my glee when he chose Egypt for his first overseas presidential visit. Believing that the view of the United States had softened, and with the announced withdrawal of American combat troops from Iraq scheduled to begin in September of 2010, I finally decided it was time for my much-anticipated visit to the Land of the Pharaohs.

Earlier in the year I checked for affordable tour packages on the Internet, looking for those specializing in the ancient glories of Egypt. As a single traveler I'm always hit with the dreaded 'single supplement' fee, so I tend to fancy the budget tour companies as a means of keeping my costs down. One such company is Gate 1 Travel. I booked what I thought was a very reasonably priced package that included all air travel from New York City. My initial out-of-pocket expenses (beyond the package cost) were the round-trip journey from my hometown in Miami to New York City, and about six meals not included on the tour. The program also contained a four-day Nile River cruise, along with hotel stays in Cairo and Luxor, and I opted for an additional excursion to see the great temples in Abu Simbel in the southern-most region of Egypt. My departure date was August 22.

Originally, I did not intend to visit Egypt this late in the summer, a time when most guidebooks caution against traveling to this region because of the hot weather, which at times can exceed 120 degrees in the desert. But I had no choice in the matter; my vacation leave for the month of May was declined at work and the only other available slot was at the end of August. To make matters worse, Cairo was experiencing continuous electrical

brownouts attributed to the failure of several giant turbines at the Aswan High Dam, sparking angry street protests. Another thing I hadn't anticipated was Ramadan, the Muslim Holy Month – which this year began during the month of August – and how this would affect my trip. Even still, I was beside myself with giddy anticipation and resolute in my decision to go. Short of an act of war, or a serious terrorist threat, nothing was going to stop me from finally seeing the Great Pyramids of Giza!

## DAY ONE

On Sunday morning, August 22, 2010, I boarded an American Airlines flight to JFK Airport. The entire month prior to my trip I kept saying a little prayer, hoping the weather in Miami would hold up for my departure date. It was hurricane season down here, and August has been known to be an exceptionally brutal month for tropical storms. I had a four-hour window to catch my connecting EgyptAir flight at JFK, so as long as nothing hindered my flight out of Miami, I was certain there would be no transportation problems. Ha! In my prayers, I neglected to ask for good weather *in New York City*. As it turned out, a horrendous storm struck the Big Apple just prior to my 6:30pm departure for Egypt, and what ensued was a traveler's nightmare.

EgyptAir's flight MS 986 to Cairo was delayed thirty minutes at boarding time, the first of what would become a seemingly endless series of delays. By seven o'clock we were onboard and taxiing to the runway; meanwhile, a massive weather front was pounding the city, and lightening strikes in the distance could be seen from our airplane windows. The idea of taking off under those conditions worried me...okay, it *frightened* me. By 7:30 pm, while still on the tarmac, the pilot made an announcement in Arabic, and from the convoluted English version that followed a few minutes later I understood our take-off was being delayed an hour and a half by the control tower. In fact, as we sat on the plane, all hell had been breaking loose in the skies above us, with JFK suspending incoming flights due to severe turbulence in the area. Five members of our tour group did not make it to Cairo until the following day as a result of the bad weather, having missed their connecting flights into New York City.

I had requested an emergency row seat thinking I would have more legroom for what I thought would be a ten and a half hour non-stop flight to Cairo. I was dismayed to discover that my window seat in the back right-hand exit aisle was situated in front of a jutting evacuation raft encasement, which really hindered my leg space. I had to tilt my torso at an angle in order to stretch my legs, developing a nagging lower back pain that plagued me on and off throughout the trip. There were very few non-Egyptians on our flight, as well; all the conversations around me were in Arabic, and the flight attendants' strong accents made it difficult for me to understand them at times. As our take-off kept getting delayed further into the night, I had no idea what was going on...*only that I was sitting in the most uncomfortable seat ever made!*

They decided to serve us dinner while we sat idling on the tarmac. I am not a very picky eater, something I learned from my days as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Southeast Asia, and I actually enjoyed all the meals that EgyptAir served. (I'm one of those rare people who enjoy airline food). Shortly after dinner the pilot announced something to the effect that we would continue taxiing down the runway, and I took this to mean we were ready to depart. But then I heard someone in back of me say we were *thirty-three* in line for take-off, which didn't sound encouraging at all. It was also still raining very hard outside and my unease had not abated one bit. Well, I needn't have worried about launching off into a storm because we continued to taxi and wait for another two and half hours until the sky cleared. We were finally in the air around 11:00 pm, after sitting on the tarmac for nearly four hours!

The flight was very interesting. The young Egyptian man sitting in the seat next to me – together with his friend who sat in the row behind us – would go into the bathroom every so many hours and emerge all washed with his shoes in his hands, and then kneel directly in front of me in the exit door space area to perform his Muslim prayers. They took turns doing this, prostrating themselves inches from my seat, the whole while I kept thinking: *Is this normal? Should I, or anyone else for that matter, be concerned? And did they have to do this next to the emergency door? Was I the last line of defense here? Was it my job to ensure they didn't yank open the emergency exit in-flight, causing all of us to be sucked out over the Atlantic?* Ironically enough, as I was thinking this, I was holding in my hand a copy of that week's Time magazine, which had the following question emblazoned across its front cover: **Is America Islamophobic?** I took a look around and

nobody seemed in the least perturbed by what these two men were doing. One of the stewardesses saw my concern and pointed out others who were also kneeling in prayer throughout the plane, making me feel embarrassed by my own irrational fears. Although, I have to admit, I barely slept during the flight. Every time either one of those two men got up to go to the bathroom, visions of the shoe bomber crossed my mind. I know, *its stupid*, but that's how I felt at the moment. By comparison, on my trip home, after spending more than a week surrounded by mosques and hearing calls to prayers everywhere I went in Egypt, I didn't bat an eye. In fact, I'm certain I invoked Allah's name on more than one occasion whenever we hit a pocket of turbulence.

By the time we landed in Cairo on August 23rd, Day One of my trip was officially over...

## DAY TWO

We touched down at the newly built Cairo International Airport just after 3: 30 the following afternoon. Egypt's time is six hours ahead of EST, but there was a bit of confusion over the actual time on the ground; devout Muslims cannot partake of food or drink of any kind from sunup to sundown during the Holy Month of Ramadan, so the government decided to suspend Daylight Savings Time to allow its citizens to break fast an hour earlier than usual. After we got off the plane, I followed the other passengers to the immigration section, stopping beforehand to cash \$100 into Egyptian pounds from one of the various bank tellers lining the walls in front of the Immigration booths. The exchange rate was 5.6 to 1, so I received 560 LE. I had this annoying habit of referring to my Egyptian pounds as *pesos*, which confused the heck out of the other tour members, not to mention the vendors on the streets.

Prior to departing for Egypt, I had called the Egyptian Embassy in Washington, DC and inquired as to their visa entry protocol. I was assured I could purchase the visa at the airport for a fee of fifteen American dollars. I also downloaded an official visa application form from the embassy and brought along a passport photo, which I was told to do so by the staffer I spoke to on the phone. When it was finally my turn, the immigration officer, a rather stern-looking young Egyptian woman, told me I needed to purchase

the visa stamp where I had just exchanged my dollars; the visa application form and the additional photos were not necessary. I paid for a one-month visa stamp and got back on the immigration line.

Once I cleared Immigration, the rest was a cakewalk. As I descended the escalator to the baggage claim area I could see a man holding up a GATE 1 sign. He introduced himself – although I cannot remember his name – and told me to get my luggage and meet him back by the escalator. When I returned with my luggage, there were four other tour members with him: Dedra Risin (from Georgia) and her 76-year-old mom, Marie Tillman (from New Orleans), and two young men from New York City, James Keenan and Jose Hernandez, who were traveling together. At this point we met our beautiful tour director/guide, Hala el Sayed. She informed us that five other tour members had missed their connecting flight in New York and would be joining us in the city of Aswan the following day. We then proceeded out of the airport and into an awaiting tour bus and drove the short distance to the Iberotel Hotel where we would be spending our first night. The temperature was hot, but nothing unbearable for a Miamian, at least thus far.

I was thoroughly exhausted from the trip over, having slept very little on the plane. After we were checked in, Hala gave us our room entry cards and told us where to meet for our 7:30 pm orientation meeting. I immediately took a hot shower. The Iberotel Hotel was a very nice, modern facility, with a beautiful marbled lobby and big spacious rooms. The bathroom was also big, with a bidet next to the toilet. The hotel is a popular spot for wedding receptions in Cairo; I even took some photos of a lively wedding party just before retiring for bed later that evening. Hala told us to take advantage of the big pool area of the hotel, but I was too excited and wanted to go outside and take some pictures of the neighborhood.

The Iberotel Hotel is located on Cairo International Airport Road, in the Heliopolis area of Cairo. The Heliopolis section of the city is a thriving community of businesses and upscale housing, and home to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, whose residence is nestled off one of the main avenues...*but you couldn't tell any of this from where the Iberotel was situated.* The hotel was conveniently located five minutes from the International Airport and primarily served as an overnight accommodation for most travelers (with the exception of the wedding receptions held in its great hall upstairs). When I walked passed the security gate with my camera in hand, I was disappointed to see...well, *nothing*, really. There was some

construction going on in the street immediately in front of the hotel, and there was a busy thoroughfare off to one side, and an overpass with cars zipping by, but not much else. I did see a mosque on the other side of the highway and crossed the street to take a better picture of it. I had read in the travel books that it is prohibited to take photos of government buildings or military facilities or personnel, but nothing about mosques. So I began clicking away when suddenly a tourist policeman, clad in the trademark white uniform, started shouting at me from the other side of the roadway. At least, I *think* he was shouting at me. I also remembered reading that one should just quickly walk away before the police arrive if they start shouting at you; in other words, play ignorant and just move along. A good piece of advice, I thought, especially since I had left my passport and ID inside the safe of my hotel room and would be unable to identify myself if asked to do so. I tried my best to *nonchalant-it* across the street to the Iberotel, but I may have sprinted. At either rate, I was back inside the safety of my hotel before the policemen could cross the traffic-filled road. After that brief experience, I decided I would not venture out any more on my own.

At about 7:30 pm I went to the lobby and met the other members of my tour group (at least, the ones who had made it to Cairo so far) and we followed Hala to the conference room behind the reception desk. We introduced each other: Besides Dedra, Marie, James and Jose, we were now joined by Viviana Bolton from Virginia, and Glenn and Aaron Shirley, a father and son team from Illinois, and Kim Height and her mother Theim (I hope the spelling is correct) from Maryland and Virginia. The remaining five members of our group were still enroute. Hala went over the itinerary for the rest of the week, reminding us we had an early morning flight to catch for Aswan.

After our orientation meeting the tour members gathered at the hotel restaurant near the pool area for our first real meal in Egypt. Both GATE1 and the travel books cautioned against drinking the tap water, so I stuck to bottled water the entire trip; and it was also strongly suggested not to eat uncooked vegetables, or fruits I didn't peel myself. I must admit, though, during my vacation I ate a lot of delicious food – and from many different sources (hotel restaurants, on the cruise ship, at local eateries) – including salads and fruits and just about everything else they put in front of me, and neither I nor any of the other members of our tour group (from what I can tell) got sick or developed intestinal problems. Dinner was a very friendly affair. Our group was small and we began to bond immediately. I selected a

grilled meat dish with roasted veggies and rice. James and Jose ordered a bottle of Egyptian wine with two glasses, but the waiter brought them *two* bottles of wine, instead. They tried to explain they did not want two bottles, but the waiter didn't understand them and kept leaving the extra bottle on the table, which I thought was pretty funny. This confusion with the wait staff continued throughout our trip, and while much of it was due to a lack of communication, Hala reminded us that most Egyptians had been fasting for almost 20 days already, and were probably a little light-headed and befuddled. In the end, James and Jose decided to pay for the extra bottle and take it back to New York City as a souvenir... *with a funny story attached.*

After dinner, I briefly checked out the tiny casino behind the pool; it was devoid of guests. Egyptians are not permitted to gamble, so the casinos are there strictly for foreigners. I decided to retire to my room for the evening and try to get some much-needed sleep.

### DAY THREE

I received a wake up call at the ungodly hour of 4:00 am. Our bags were to be picked up at 4:15 in front of our rooms by the bellhop, and we were supposed to be ready to board our bus for the short ride to the airport by no later than 4:45. To say I was groggy would be an understatement. I was hoping I could sleep on the plane. Hala had ordered a boxed breakfast for all of us, which was waiting in the lobby.

I should stop here and tell you about a cultural aspect of our trip which proved to be, um, *frustrating*, to say the least. It is called *bakshish*, what my travel book referred to as the 'art of giving'. In the West, we might look upon it as Tipping Gone Wild. In Egypt, this concept of 'I scratch your back, you scratch mine' is not only widely practiced, but actually *expected*. Perhaps you may consider yourself a generous and conscientious tipper back home...well, let me enlighten you, my friend. Everyday Egyptians consider tipping as a normal remuneration for services rendered. *Any* service. Whether it's the bellhop carrying a bag, or the attendant in the public bathroom, or the man you ask to take your picture in a museum, or the person who hands you a pair of plastic shoe slip-ons when entering a mosque.... *it doesn't end*. A co-worker of mine who went to Egypt in

February warned me about this and suggested I bring at least a hundred dollars in singles for this very purpose. I heeded his advice, but even I was surprised at how fast I ended up handing out dollar bills. You'd think I was printing them in my hotel room! But the concept of *bakshish* was very evident whenever we reached the domestic airports, and I could observe Hala discreetly giving out 50-pound notes to the airport staff that facilitated our passage through the ticket lines. So, future travelers to Egypt beware...bring a pocketful of dollars, 'because *bakshish* will make you want to scream: bak-SHEESH!

EgyptAir's flight MS 130 took off at 6:00 am on schedule. Cairo's notorious smog, coupled with winds blowing in from the desert, seemed to obscure the horizon in a sandy grit, and it wasn't until we were high up above the clouds that visibility improved. The flight to the southern city of Aswan (where we would be boarding our cruise ship) followed a path directly above the mighty Nile River, which was clearly visible from our altitude. I was assigned a middle seat, sandwiched uncomfortably between Dedra and her mom, Marie; but when the plane took off it was half empty and everyone on board began switching to seats in vacant rows. This was true on all our domestic flights, so we pretty much got to sit wherever we wanted once we were in the air. The ride to Aswan lasted just under an hour and fifteen minutes, but I remained on the plane together with Hala, Dedra, Marie, Kim and her mom, Thiem. We were continuing on to the small town of Abu Simbel, and would meet up with the rest of the gang on the cruise ship later that morning.

I decided to purchase the excursion to Abu Simbel after watching a fascinating History Channel show about the place. Situated approximately 300 kilometers further south of Aswan, along the Nile, there are two temples nestled just below Lake Nasser and the frontier border with Sudan (a country in the grips of a brutal civil war less than 25 miles away). Abu Simbel itself can only be described as a *one-camel* town, for there was nothing spectacular to see in this dusty desert community in the heart of the Nubian territory. Its claim to fame are the two temples built by Egypt's grandest pharaoh, Ramses II, which, on the surface, were dedicated to a triad of gods (Amon-Ra, Harmakes, and Ptah) but in reality were nothing more than awe-inspiring, majestically wondrous glorifications to Ramses II (known as The Great), who had a massive ego and wanted to show the Nubian people just how *great* he really was. The temples in Abu Simbel are considered among



the most magnificent in all of Ancient Egypt. And let me tell you, it was definitely worth the trip to see them.

We touched down at the tiny Abu Simbel airport 45 minutes later, and boarded an EgyptAir bus for the short ride to the temple site. When you enter the site, you're actually facing the back of the mountain that houses the temples, and must walk a five-minute trail around its base to reach the front. Even at this early hour the heat of the sun and desert made it rough going, and I began sweating profusely, but when we finally arrived at the temples what an awesome sight it was! Buried for centuries underneath the desert – until 1813 when a Swiss by the name of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt accidentally came upon the four massive stone heads protruding from the sand – it took several years to completely excavate. During the 1960s, the formation of Lake Nasser to the north, as a result of the Aswan Dam, threatened to submerge the temples, and a major international archaeological relief effort was developed to save them. Piece by painstaking piece, the temples were dismantled and then reconstructed into the mountains above the original site.

The Great Temple was carved directly into the rocky mass of the Nile Valley between 1274 and 1244 B.C. The façade, 31 meters high, consists of four colossal statues of the seated Ramses II, the faces depicting different stages of his life. The inner sanctuary temple, and its chambers, are carved directly into the mountain, and contain a main corridor flanked by eight more giant statues of Ramses II. Along this chamber wall are carvings and brightly painted symbols and pictures depicting the life and achievements of the mighty Ramses II, all of this in a remarkably intact state, including the actual coloring on the walls and ceiling. In the back of the main chamber is the inner sanctuary, a sacred four by seven meter room that contains the seated statues of Ramses II with the triad of gods: Amon-Ra, Harmakes and Ptah. The inference here is quite obvious; Ramses II is telling all who enter that he is, in fact, a living god. This temple was built along a very precise scheme; twice a year, during the equinoxes, sunlight reflecting into the temple illuminates the statues in the inner sanctuary of Amon-Ra, Harmakes and Ramses II. The statue of Ptah is never illuminated, which is remarkable, *since Ptah is the god of Darkness*.

The second, smaller temple (but by no means any less awe-inspiring), is officially dedicated to the goddess Hathor, but is in reality a glorification of Ramses II's favorite wife, the legendary Queen Nefertari. Never in

pharaonic Egypt had the wife of a sovereign been represented on the façade of a temple as large as her husband right beside it. She must have been quite a beauty to attain this status. Inside this temple there are carvings and writings and paintings depicting the Queen and the goddess Hathor, but throughout are images of Ramses II, letting everyone know who the *real* boss was.

I took many pictures of the facades of both temples, but unfortunately it is prohibited to photograph inside the actual structures. Hala purchased for us a series of official photographs of the inner chambers from the vendors inside the site area. We spent approximately an hour and a half at Abu Simbel, and then walked around the other side of the mountain back to the awaiting bus for the trip to the airport. By now, the sun was beating down on us unmercifully, and all of us were drenched in sweat. I was a little worried about 76 year old Marie, who was lagging behind and walking a tad haphazardly. At one point she handed me two oval shaped sandstones she had picked up near the temples and asked me to carry them for her. I placed them in my small backpack and didn't think much about them until later. Back at the airport, as we were being screened by security prior to boarding the plane back to Aswan, an armed guard pointed to me and told me to step out of the line. I was slightly confused but not worried since I didn't have anything to hide...until, that is, I remembered the two stones in my backpack, which were now inside the x-ray machine. I was told to take off my shoes, and the whole while I kept glancing over at sweet little Marie, thinking: "*Honey, if I go down, I'm ratting you out!*" I was certain they had laws against pilfering the antiquities, and visions of me being sodomized inside a desert prison by a camel-smelling Nubian danced through my head. Luckily, it was a false alarm, and I gratefully put my shoes back on and hurriedly boarded the plane. (Aside: one of those sandstone rocks now sits on my bookshelf!).

The flight back to Aswan took just over thirty minutes. We arrived at the Aswan dock area just before noon and boarded our riverboat cruise ship called the Nile Symphony. I had a single cabin, which was small, but adequate, and the bathroom had great water pressure and reliable hot water. The shower area was a bit tight, but I made do. There was a window that could be slid open, rendering a nice view of the Nile River. This would be our home for the next four days so I took the liberty of unpacking my suitcase and hanging up my clothes. An hour later, we gathered downstairs in the dining room and had a wonderful buffet lunch. All of the meals served

on the boat were excellent. Turns out the ship was practically empty, this being the off season. Besides our gang, there was another tour group of about a dozen people from South Africa and Australia, and that was it; the staff waited on us hand and foot. The Nile Symphony was an older boat, but it was beautifully decorated, with plush red carpeting and what looked like mahogany panels in the upstairs bar lounge area. The sundeck had a small, chest-deep pool with very cool water, which made for a fantastically refreshing dip after a hot, sticky morning of sightseeing.

After lunch, I took another shower and was overcome with fatigue and laid down in my cabin for a three-hour nap. At five o'clock, the gang assembled in the lobby. Hala had secured a sunset felucca boat ride for us (cost: \$16) with coffee, tea and pastries served on board by one of the riverboat's waiters. Feluccas are traditional lateen-rigged sailboats, and have been, in one form or another, coasting up and down the Nile for thousands of years. Our felucca was captained by a weather-faced Egyptian dressed in a *gallebeya*, a long peasant dress; his young teenage son was the second-mate. They hoisted the sail shortly after five and we shoved off for a pleasant hour and a half long ride around the Nile River portion of Aswan. The mosques in the city had already started their calls to prayer, announcing the end of the day's Ramadan fast, and the townsfolk were in a festive mood, preparing to spend the rest of the evening chowing down in the celebratory company of friends, family and neighbors. Along the banks of the river, grown men and boys were swimming, and many would call out to us in greeting (or asking for money) as we sailed by. Several boys even swam up to our felucca for a closer look at the tourists.

The waters of the Nile were so calm you couldn't help but sigh with relief and truly relax (with a cup of coffee or tea in one hand, and pastry in the other); the sun was setting, and there was a nice breeze blowing. It was absolutely beautiful. Atop a hill on the left bank of the river we could see the famed pink limestone mausoleum of Aga Khan Muhammed Shah, the spiritual head of the Ismailian Muslims, a sect whose followers make pilgrimages to the city. We sailed around Kitchener Island, known as the Island of Trees for its varied species and lush vegetation. In the distance we saw the majestic top of what I believe is the only Egyptian Orthodox church in Aswan. We even sailed by an oval-shaped building housing a McDonald's restaurant. Towards the end of the trip the captain's son regaled us with several songs while banging on a hand-held drum, including his

rendition of “she’ll be coming around the mountain when she comes”...only his version stated “she’ll be smoking *marijuana* when she comes”!

Night was rapidly falling by the time we returned to the dock area, and a group of us guys decided to venture out into the city streets. We walked several blocks, to a town square, and surprisingly were not bombarded with vendors or pushy horse carriage drivers (something we encounter elsewhere throughout the tour). Everyone seemed to be eating or gathering festively for the night’s revelry and paid little attention to five Western men making their way down the sidewalks. Glenn and Aaron were searching for an ATM machine, and we went back to the dock area until we found one. We then returned to the boat for dinner, meeting the five remaining members of our tour group who had just arrived: Peter Veitch and his two teenage sons, Ben and Sam, from Ontario, Canada, and Darlene and Dave Weber from Illinois. They had all missed their connecting flights out of JFK when the storm hit, but the poor Canadians also had the misfortune of having their luggage lost. They spent the entire Nile Cruise wearing the same clothes they’d purchased in Aswan later that evening; their luggage didn’t catch up with them until we were in Luxor.

After dinner, we convinced Hala to take us to the Aswan Bazaar near the town’s center. We were anxious to try our negotiating skills and pick up some souvenirs. Even at night, the market (known as a souk) was as colorful as anything your mind can conjure up when thinking of this region. Spices were sold by the kilo out of sacks, scarves and clothes items were hanging from poles and racks, water pipes and trinkets of all shapes and sizes covered tables, intricately-patterned rugs hung down from stall ceilings, vendors in all types of traditional Egyptian dress were hawking their goods, enticing you with offers of “My friend, just one American dollar!” only to discover later the cost was actually ten times that amount.

It was a great experience for us, serving as a real learning curve. I happened into a shop next to the spice store where several of our members had decided to pick up some condiments to enhance their culinary skills back home. I asked the vendor how much his T-Shirts were; a simple question, *right?* What ensued was a lesson in *How Not to Negotiate a Sale in Egypt*. The vendor told me to select the shirts I was interested in, so I picked out three Egyptian cotton T-Shirts with embroidered lettering on them. Nice, but nothing fancy. He asked me what sizes I wanted, I told him. When he returned with the shirts from a back room, and I was certain they were the

ones I wanted to buy, the haggling began. Only, I didn't really haggle. It was more like an Abbot and Costello comedy skit gone awry. I actual bargained *in reverse*. It almost seemed as if he said "ten" and I would argue "No, fifteen", and then he'd reply "all right then, twenty" and I put my foot down and offered "Twenty-five!" Granted, I'm exaggerating for effect, but the outcome was not that far off. The vendor asked me if I was going to pay in American dollars or Egyptian pounds. The mistake I made was trying to pay in pounds, because I miscalculated the exchange rate, thinking that 200 pounds was only ten American dollars. When the vendor told me 220 pounds, I smiled and thought, *not so fast, my friend*, and offered him 200 pounds, *take it or leave it*. He made a great show of looking like I was taking the food out of his baby's mouth, but then conceded to my price. I handed over the money triumphantly; he gave me my bag of shirts. When I turned around to leave I found Dave standing there, witnessing the entire exchange.

Dave is a retired professor of genetics at the University of Illinois who still does field work on corn crops. In other words, he is *infinitely* more intelligent than me. He asked me, "Richard, how much did you pay for those shirts?" I smiled and told him, "I ended up paying fewer than ten dollars for all three" He frowned and replied: "Isn't the exchange rate 5 to 1?"...At which point I felt this sinking pit of a feeling in my stomach as I tried to do the math... *I actual paid \$40 for three cotton T-Shirts. FORTY DOLLARS!* Holy Bath and Beyond, I could have purchased these shirts cheaper at Abercrombie and Fitch! I immediately spun around to protest this reamery, and found the vendor standing there smiling like the cat who just fucked the canary. I argued with the vendor that I had overpaid for the shirts, and it was his turn to beam triumphantly and say, *yes, I had*, but that he would give me a better price on the next item I wished to buy. I stormed out of the shop, with Dave following behind me.

As I met up with the other members of my group and recounted what had happened, I didn't feel *too* bad; from what I gathered, everyone had a similar story about being overcharged or paying more than they wanted. But the final insult came when Dave spotted Kim, Thiem and another member of the gang haggling with a street vendor over some scarves. The vendor saw that Dave was interested in his T-Shirts, which were exactly like the ones I had just purchased, and shouted, "One American dollar!"...Dave couldn't resist glancing at me when he asked, "These shirts are *one* American dollar?" The vendor inquired what sizes he needed and I leaned over and whispered: "Please don't buy these shirts for a dollar, Dave, I'll feel even worse than I

already do”...but, like most of the vendors who quoted ridiculously low prices, it was too good to be true, and when Dave went to pay for them, the price increased dramatically. Some intense haggling went on, and Dave stuck to his guns, forcing the vendor to lower his price to eight dollars for three shirts, which I thought was a real bargain considering how much I had paid for mine, but Dave decided he wanted the shirts for a dollar a piece (I think to rub it in) and the deal fell through.

I did manage to jump on a good bargain when Kim got the same vendor to lower his scarf prices to \$2, and I immediately picked up five. So the evening wasn't a total bust. I even had a cagey Egyptian come up to me as we were leaving the market area and asked me if Kim and I were married, and when I replied we were not a couple, he immediately asked me how many camels would I accept for her? At first I thought he was serious, but later I realized this must be a running joke all over Egypt, since every city we visited I was asked the same question. Kim has no idea how close I came to actually selling her...but then again, *what was I going to do with five camels?*

It had been a very long day, and tomorrow we would be getting up early to see the ancient sights of Aswan. When we made it back to the boat I called it a night, and slept soundly.

## DAY FOUR

I had set my little travel alarm clock for 5:30 am, but somehow I still overslept. Luckily, the reception desk gave everyone a wake-up call at 6:00. I jumped into the shower...well, that's not exactly true; seeing as how the shower area was rather small...I *squirmed* into the shower and rushed downstairs to the dining hall. The breakfast buffets were my favorite, and I gorged myself knowing I wouldn't be eating again until the afternoon. After breakfast, we boarded a tour bus for a full morning of sightseeing in the city of Aswan. Accompanying us on each bus trip was a national security officer, who was always well dressed (sometimes in a formal suit), and carried a submachine gun underneath his jacket. Back in 1996, a group of Islamic extremists, bent on overthrowing Mubarak's government, attacked and

murdered scores of European tourists in Luxor, hoping to frighten off foreign visitors and bring about economic instability to the country. The end result was that tourists are now better protected than ever, and armed police officers escort all tour buses and cruise ships. There was a different security officer assigned to us each day, and for the most part were very quiet, courteous and watchful. With the exception of one young man in Cairo, who kept hitting on us for a tip!

Aswan, known as Syene in ancient times, lies on the right bank of the Nile, 886 kilometers from Cairo. This area is where the Valley of the Nile, with its typically gentle landscapes, comes to an end and the Nubian territory begins. Egyptians consider themselves a different race, separate from the Arabs who invaded from the Arabian Peninsula and gave them their language and religion, or the darker-skinned Nubians who hail from the lands to the south. In essence, Aswan serves as the gateway to black Africa. Beyond this city of approximately one million inhabitants, farmlands are replaced by vast stretches of desert sands, and the calm waters of the Nile are transformed into turbulent streams around the rocks of the First Cataract. I asked Hala where the feared crocodiles of the Nile were, and she said the Aswan Dam serves as a choke point for these monstrous creatures, which is why so many people swim calmly long the river.

Since the third millennium, trading and bartering in the Nubian territory had provided the pharaohs with their best woods, precious ivory, perfumed spices, finest ostrich feathers, gold and even their fiercest warriors. This area of Egypt served as the only communications route between the Mediterranean Sea and the heart of the black continent. The pink granite known as syenite, which was widely used in Egyptian religious architecture in the building of temples and the sculpting of colossi and obelisks, were quarried from this region up until the Roman times. The pharaohs also maintained a powerful garrison in Aswan to control river traffic and the desert caravans. Today, besides its many preserved archeological sites, the mildness of its climate makes Aswan an ideal winter resort area, and the southernmost launching point for the enormously successful riverboat cruising industry.

We began the day's sightseeing by visiting the Temple of Philae, one of the best-preserved Ptolemaic temples in Egypt. The island of Philae was the largest of the three islands at the south end of a group that comprise the First Cataract, but it was later partially submerged when the old dam was created.

When the newer Aswan High Dam threatened to further erode its structure, the temple was dismantled and rebuilt on its current islet (Agilkia), above the rising waters of the Nile. To access the temple, we had to ride a felucca boat to the islet.

There are several temples on Agilkia, all dedicated to the goddess Isis, the bride of Osiris, whose sacred eternal resting place is believed to be nearby. When we arrived on the islet, Hala took us to a sitting section and gave us a brief lecture on the mythology surrounding Isis. I do not want to bog down this journal with too many historical details...besides, I'm not sure I can remember everything Hala said that day, *anyway*...suffice it to say that Isis, the goddess of divine love and generating power, resurrected her husband, Osiris, the god of the afterworld and the fecundating force, after he was killed by Seth, the god of destruction. She later gives birth to Horus, a warrior god depicted by a falcon, who avenges his father's death at the hands of Seth.... *are you still following me?* I would recommend to anyone interested in ancient Egyptian mythology to go out and read a book on the subject, since I will not be able to do it justice in these short pages.

The entire site took hundreds of years to complete. The oldest temple was constructed by Nectanebo I (380-362BC); most of the other buildings were built under various rulers of the Ptolemaic dynasty and completed by the Romans. The island complex includes four main structures: the pavilion of Nectanebo, the monumental temple of Isis with its annexes, the charming pavilion of Trajan (to honor the Roman emperor) and the smaller temple dedicated to the goddess Hathor. The largest structure, of course, is the Temple of Isis, covering a quarter of the space on the island. The boats dock near the Hall of Nectanebo, and you walk past a Roman colonnade and through the gates of Ptolemy II. The massive pylon (the front wall entrance of any temple) has densely worked carvings of offerings to Isis. You then walk through an open court area and pass the hypostyle hall of columns; further back are antechambers leading to the Holiest of Holy chamber where statues of Isis and the pedestal mount (which, at one point, held a small replica of her sacred boat) are displayed. Inside the gate, on the north wall, bas-reliefs depict the Egyptian concept of the source of the Nile: Hapy, the god of Upper and Lower Nile, is shown in a cave surrounded by a serpent while he holds two vases from which water flows. Ancient Egyptians believed the Nile actually began around the area of the First Cataract, and conducted annual rites to the gods in this region that were attended by the pharaohs.



On the eastern side of the island is the unfinished Temple of Hathor with interesting reliefs of musical entertainments, including one of the god Bes, a dwarf god of childbirth and laughter, playing a harp. Since I had a tendency to make humorous remarks during the tour, the members said that I should adopt Bes as my ancient god. And along the riverbank is the Kiosk of Trajan, a large structure illustrated with scenes of the Roman Emperor Trajan making offerings to Isis.

After our visit to the Temple of Philae, we drove through the city of Aswan to an ancient granite quarry site to witness the 'unfinished obelisk'. This quarry produced granite for statues, obelisks, and temple blocks. But at the heart of its center is the famous unfinished obelisk, still visible where it was originally carved out of the granite rock side. It would have measured 42 meters high and weighed more than 1,150 tons, but developed a crack along the middle and was abandoned. We saw notches along the ground made by large ball-shaped hard stone tools that would be filled with a special heated solution; when this solution cooled, it broke the granite into blocks. At the site, there are sample stone tools one can maneuver to see how they dug into the granite. *Whew!* The entire process seemed very labor-intensive! What is even more amazing than the backbreaking work required to cut and shape these granite slabs was the transportation of these massive things to the places where they would be used. They had to be hauled down the quarry, moved to nearby boats and shipped via the Nile. It really makes you appreciate the temples even more.

We also drove over both the Aswan High Dam – stopping for a photo op – and the much older Lower Dam (built by the British between 1898 and 1902 and still functional today). The Aswan High Dam was completed in 1971 with the help of the Soviet Union, and was a 'national dream' for then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser who died the year before it was finished. Its twelve giant turbines doubled the country's electrical output, and the control of the floodwaters increased the size of cultivated lands by almost one third. But on the downside, the cutoff of nutrient-rich silt from the floodwaters forced farmers to use chemical fertilizers that have created serious ecological problems for the country. Also, the creation of stagnate water by the reduction of the river flow has led to endemic outbreaks of bilharzias (schistosomiasis), a parasitic infection that destroys the liver. During the summer, repeated brownouts have been attributed to the breakdown of two

turbines at the dam, and the consensus among Egyptians is that corruption has played a part as to why they have not been repaired.

Afterwards, Hala took us to a ‘government-sponsored’ store, the first of several we would be ushered to throughout our tour. Aswan is known for its essential oils merchants, who make concentrated oils from a variety of flowers and plant and sell them to pharmaceutical and perfume-making companies all over the world. For example, jasmine and lotus oils are main ingredients in the most expensive perfumes made in France. The place we visited was called Mohammed Al Fayed’s Essence of Life Perfumes Palace. Essential oils have been a trade and bartering product of Egypt for thousands of years, and are mentioned routinely in the bible (particularly frankincense and myrrh).

By the end of our trip, most of us realized these jaunts to ‘government-sponsored’ stores (with their official logo of authenticity backed by the government and even Gate1 Travel) were nothing more than heavy-handed sales pitches designed to separate us from our money. Even Hala admitted she got a percentage (in terms of points to buy goods) of whatever we purchased. But having said that, they were also informative and a lot of fun, with demonstrations and free drinks and beautiful displays in very nice surroundings (and had very clean bathrooms, I might add).

At Alfayed’s Perfume Palace we were escorted to a downstairs lounge, the wonderful smells wafting through the air softening our sales resistance, and sat on comfortable cushioned sofas. They served us sweetened hibiscus tea and Turkish coffee, and then this attractive (yes, he *was* attractive...I think its part of their sales pitch) and entertaining young Egyptian man gave us a most fascinating demonstration of aromatherapy, passing bottles of mint, jasmine, lotus and eucalyptus oils under our noses with the help of a dedicated staff. At one point, the demonstrator even massaged some eucalyptus oil onto the temples of Kim (who suffered from headaches...*or so she claimed*) and from the relaxed look on her face, I thought she was going to melt onto the floor and beg this man to marry her!

He asked for male volunteers to go into a back section for a free five-minute massage. Peter and I raised our hands. They made us take our shirts off and lie face down on a sofa, while several young employees rubbed a mixture of sandalwood and eucalyptus oils on our backs, shoulders, neck and head. *Heck, I’m getting relaxed just thinking about it!* When we rejoined

the group I was as loose as a goose and extremely vulnerable to whatever other sales gimmick they had in store for us. Buy three bottles of any essential oil, they said, and get one free! I ended up spending \$160 for four 100 ml bottles of essential oils (I chose mint, sandalwood, eucalyptus and frankincense), which came packaged in a nice little box. When I got back to the boat I couldn't believe I had spent this much money, and vowed to keep a tight rein on my travel budget...yeah, *right!* Every time we showed up at one of these 'government-sponsored' stores, my wallet opened up like a lotus flower and I acted like a drunken sailor on a one-night furlough.

After a delicious buffet lunch, the Nile Symphony finally set sail. We would be arriving at a small town called Kom Ombo around six o'clock to see the Ptolemaic temple erected to the gods Horus and Sobek. It is interesting to note that we were currently in Upper Egypt, sailing northward to what would become Lower Egypt. The reason for this confusing bit of geography is that the Nile River is one of the few rivers that flows from North to South, so in Ancient times, the southern part of the country was considered Upper Egypt because that is where the water 'flowed up to'. Anyway, it was so hot I decided to join Kim and Dedra in the swimming pool after lunch. Kim had to lend me her cap so that my bald head didn't blister in the glaring sun. We later lounged around the sundeck with other members of the group and then I think I may have taken a brief nap just prior to our arrival at Kom Ombo.

When we reached the pier of Kom Ombo later that day our boat docked alongside three other riverboats. In order to reach dry land, we literally walked through the main lobbies of the three other vessels, which were connected by gangways. Kom Ombo was a sleepy-looking village whose only claim to fame was the unusual temple a short walking distance from the docks. It was unusual because it is actually a fusion of two temples set side by side. The left part is dedicated to the falcon god Horus the Elder, a solar warrior god who is known as the exterminator of the enemies of Osiris. The right side is consecrated to the crocodile god Sobek, a primordial divinity to whom the creation of the world is attributed, and a god of fertility, who, like Horus, also vanquishes the enemies of Osiris. Hala told us ancient Egyptians feared Sobek, considered him evil, and that it was not unusual to see images of good and evil side by side, like the concept of ying and yang, good and bad, can't-have-one-without-the-other sort of thing. This temple was also built by the Ptolemies, who completely reconstructed the existing

temples founded by Amenophis I and Thutmosis III more than a thousand years earlier.

There were so many tourists arriving at the Kom Ombo temple it resembled a scene out of Disney World. I had a difficult time following Hala's lecture once we entered the site due to the throngs of people and the noise level. I was hoping this wouldn't be the case the rest of the trip onward, seeing as how all the riverboats were heading in the same direction. There are more than 400 riverboats plying the Nile, but as the tour continued, we did not experience the kind of madhouse scenario that unfolded at Kom Ombo. One of the unique aspects was the double-gated pylon, one for Sobek, and the other for Horus. This particular temple was not as well preserved as the others we had seen, but I do remember a back wall section dedicated to the achievements of Imhotep (the great ancient architect from 4750 B.C.) who devised the idea of using limestone in the construction of the pyramids. He is depicted as a god, with one of the Ptolemies making offerings to him. Pretty unusual in itself.

Some other things I learned while at this site: a relief, which is the word for carvings, were sometimes raised, and sometimes indented. Why? Indented reliefs were used mostly indoors since they were not as exposed to the elements and would not erode as quickly, whereas raised reliefs were used primarily for columns and outer walls. Another fascinating thing about the Kom Ombo temple is that just about every square inch of this site had writings or carvings. It is theorized the priests, knowing that Christianity was gaining a strong foothold over Egypt, wanted to lay down as much information as they could about the ancient religion for posterity's sake. Previously, they would hoard knowledge of the ancient gods in order to strengthen their own status in society, but that seemed to go out the window at Kom Ombo. At the back of the temple we could clearly see the storage rooms used to inventory the offerings people made to the gods. Priests would often hide between the walls and moan out their approval to the worshippers after they left their offerings so they would think the gods were pleased. We saw the remains of an underground room that was used to measure the rise of the Nile River. This was done for tax purposes: the higher the river rose, the more rich mud was deposited along the banks, the better the crops, more crops meant higher taxes!

When we concluded our visit at Kom Ombo temple, we followed the crowds back to the dock. Some of us wanted to do a little shopping, but because of Ramadan the few shops we saw were mostly closed already, their owners happily eating after a day of fasting. This adorable little girl clad in a black burka came up to me and offered to sell a handful of cheap plastic bracelets for ten Egyptian pounds. I didn't want to buy them but she kept insisting with her broken English. I told her I would give her three pounds for one bracelet if she would let me take her picture. She glanced nervously at her dad and brother standing near a storefront, and then nodded, but said, "Please, hurry", as if her family might be offended if I took her photo. We quickly exchanged money and bracelet, then I held up the camera and said, "Smile"...She seemed reluctant to do so at first, glancing nervously back at her family, but when she saw they weren't looking, she beamed me the biggest smile in the world and I took her picture before she ran away.

After dinner, Hala had us gather up in the lounge area for a lecture on Egyptian history. It was not a formal lecture, mostly a loose description of Egyptian society, and her own personal views on the current political situation... and on the topic of Islam, which I will keep out of this journal to avoid any problems (wink-wink).

Some of the things she did discuss that I can talk about (in random order):

First, the temples that we were seeing (at the Island of Philae, Kom Ombo, and tomorrow at Edfu, etc) were built between the periods of 200 B.C. and 200 A.D., and...

- 80 % of Egyptians are Sunni Muslim (no Shiites in Egypt); 20 % are Coptic Orthodox Christians. And, yes, there is some discrimination towards the Christians. The Apostle Mark spread Christianity to Egypt from Alexandria, and it spread quite rapidly, first as an underground religion, than, once the Romans embraced it (following Emperor Constantine's conversion) it remained dominant until Islam was introduced in 641 A.D.... although it would take another two centuries before Islam became the primary religion. *Why?* Christianity appealed to the symbolisms of the ancient Egyptian religion, or mythology, and that is why it spread quickly. For example, the notion of Christ as the Son of God was similar to the notion of Ra, the Sun God (son-of-God, Sun God); the resurrection theory is one that is also prevalent in the

mythology of Osiris; even the symbol of the cross was adapted from the Nile symbol of the Ankh. Islam, by comparison, was introduced in a heavy-handed fashion, with very little similarities to the ancient beliefs. But once it took hold that was that!

- The term Coptic, which refers to Old or Ancient Egypt, was originally coined because the later ruling classes of Egypt could not pronounce the word Aigoptf, which is what the Egyptians called themselves. And even today, the version of Arabic spoken in Egypt is laced with remnants of the Coptic language spoken before.
- The vast majority of Egyptians are farmers, who settle along the Nile River and live pretty much the way their ancestors have lived for thousands of years. They reside in mud brick homes they can easily dismantle or rebuild wherever they need to. But during the past forty years or so there has been a revolution brewing amongst the farming class due to the introduction of electricity and technological advances such as the television, cell phone, computers, etc. Many of the younger generation now can see how other people live, and they don't want to be farmers anymore. The only problem is, there are no jobs for them.
- The donkey and the cow are the indigenous animals of Egypt. The camel is a relative newcomer!
- Egyptians do not consider themselves to be either Arabs or Africans, but rather their own race of people. There are basically two groups of Egyptians, the ones in Lower Egypt (in the North) and the darker-skinned Nubians of Upper Egypt (in the South), who, ironically enough, do not consider themselves Egyptians! There are also Bedouins, nomadic tribal people who live in both the Eastern and Western desert of Egypt, and do not consider themselves loyal to the country but to their own ethnic clans.
- The number one industry in Egypt is tourism. More than 13 million people visit Egypt each year. Hala argues that the reason this industry is so successful is because it is privately owned and driven. Which was her way of saying the government basically screws things up!
- Social norms do not encourage individuality; the family is paramount, as is religion. Belonging to a family or community is seen as better because, while you may lose your individuality, you gain a strong support group for life.

This was the gist of what I got from this particular meeting with Hala. The points mentioned above are included solely because this was something that was said by the guide, therefore a part of the tour, and not my own personal viewpoints on these matters. *Um, this is my official disclaimer.* And this wrapped up the fourth day.

## DAY FIVE

This morning we were allowed to sleep late. That is, if seven o'clock is your idea of sleeping late. The Nile Symphony had sailed overnight to the town of Edfu, about 110 kilometers south of Luxor, so we could witness what I thought was the best of the Ptolemaic structures: the Temple of Horus.

Before I describe our visit to the Temple of Horus, I want to describe the layout of a typical temple structure, so you can envision what these buildings looked like, *in general*. Some were bigger than others, some had more ornate carvings than others, some were better preserved than others, but *all* of the temples were built along a similar design. The best way to describe this is to take you on an imaginary walk through a typical temple:

- First, you approach what is known as the *pylon*, the massive front wall of the temple. On the wall will usually be bas-reliefs (or raised carvings) of the god or gods to which this temple is dedicated, and possibly depictions of the ruler who built the temple, and other depictions of offerings to the gods. In the center of the pylon is the entrance to the temple, above this will usually be a symbol of a solar disk with wings or another god-like image for 'protection'.
- Next, you walk through the pylon entrance into an *open courtyard*, usually surrounded by outer walls/colonnade. This is the area where the commoners would come to make prayers and offerings to the god of the temple (there might be slabs or tables to place the offerings). One distinct feature of all the temples is the elevation of the floor; as you walk past the pylon, the floor begins to incline slightly, so that as you journey from the front to the back of every temple, the floor will rise up. Another feature of the courtyard is that it is open air, to symbolize Daylight.

- As you continue past the courtyard, you enter what is known as the *Hypostyle Hall*, a room, or possibly a series of rooms, which contain massive columns with carvings on them. This section is designed to convey a feeling of the wooded outdoors, the forest or wildlife reminiscent of the Nile Delta. The top of each giant column is carved like a plant or flower. Along the walls might be depictions of the god or stories about the ruler who built the temple. This section has a ceiling, but allows some light to enter its hall, and is symbolic of Twilight.
- Walking past the hypostyle hall section, you enter the *antechamber*, which can consist of several enclosed rooms with carvings and writings on both the inner and outer walls depicting scenes from the life of the honored god and possibly the ruler who built the temple. The enclosed nature of this part of the building symbolizes Darkness.
- Finally, you've reached the last enclosed room inside the temple, known as the *Holiest of Holy*. The floor here is at its most elevated. This sacred chamber contains the statue of the god being honored, and in front of this statue, in the center of the room, is a pedestal mount with a statue or wood carving of the Sacred Boat the god travels in.
- Behind most of the temples are storage rooms used to inventory the offerings made by the public, and these storage facilities can be above and below ground. The priests were in charge of maintaining the temples and storing and dispensing the offerings.
- Why did the Ptolemies or Roman Emperors bother to rebuild these temples? They did so to legitimize their authority amongst the Egyptians. Egypt was a very wealthy province of the Roman Empire, and to keep their control over the locals, they built these temples and inserted their images in the carvings and writings to show that they, like the pharaohs before them, were also descendents of the gods.

After breakfast, we piled into a tour bus and drove to the Temple of Horus in Edfu. Because it was the last big temple to have been built – (it was started under Ptolemy III around 237 B.C. and finished 140 years later by Ptolemy XII) – and was constructed well above the Nile River, it is one of the best-preserved structures of its kind. Of the Ptolemaic temples I saw, this was my favorite. It is almost identical to the one in Dendera. The large solid pylon had two black granite falcons (representing Horus) on either side of the entrance. The pylon was divided into four stories of rooms. The central courtyard was flanked on three sides by columns with various types of



capitals. The Great Hypostyle Hall contained three rows of massive columns, plus another lesser hall of three more rows of columns. There was a court of offerings beyond this, and steps leading up to the terrace and then the vestibule in front of the sanctuary (the Holiest of Holy chamber). There are ten rooms, each with its specific characteristics, which lead to the 'corridor of mysteries' and extend around the sanctuary. The carved depictions on the walls between the back of the temple and the outer walls are nothing short of a storybook rendition of the exploits of Horus (the entire epic of his battle with Seth is vividly portrayed).

There was one awkward moment when we reached the back outer walls of the temple. A Hungarian man, who was serving as a guide to a group of other Hungarians, was lecturing beside Hala in a very loud voice. Hala, tired of having to shout over this man, asked him to please hold his voice down. The Hungarian seemed insulted, and his reply really pissed Hala off. She reminded him that he was a 'foreigner in her country', which was a loosely veiled reference to the fact that foreigners cannot serve as tour guides in Egypt. The man then made some kind of remark in his native language that made his group laugh out loud, further infuriating Hala. She was not a happy camper after that, and hurried us along. To get even, she informed the tourist police that a Hungarian was serving as a tour guide...*I guess she got the last laugh*, judging from the way the police hurried off to find this offending foreigner.

We returned to the Nile Symphony and set sail again, this time for our final destination: Luxor. The rest of the day was spent cruising down the Nile, enjoying the beautiful view from the sundeck of life along the famed waterway. We passed farmers working their fields, or transporting goods on donkey-drawn carriages, and children playing and swimming in the river or tending to goats. We saw the mud brick homes of the peasant farmers, and the different versions of rural mosques. In the distance, beyond the greenery of the Nile banks, we could see the rocky skyline of the Western Desert, resembling the canyons of Arizona. During the middle of the afternoon, our riverboat reached the town of Esna and we passed through its two dam locks, fascinated by the workers steering our vessel along the locks with maritime ropes. The second of the two locks lowered our boat onto the next level of the Nile. From here we continued our journey to Luxor.

That evening was Egyptian Night onboard the Nile Symphony. Hala asked us to dress in traditional Egyptian clothes. I purchased a blue

*gallebeya*, a long peasant dress, from the shop in the lobby for \$10, and showed up barefoot for dinner (Hala suggested my sneakers were not a good match). The food that night was strictly Egyptian fare: *koshari*, a pile of rice and macaroni topped with lentils and garnished with hot sauce and fried onions, an assortment of pita and other flatbreads, plus dipping sauces, shish kabobs of chicken and beef, lamb dishes, etc. All of it was delicious! Afterwards, we gathered in the lounge room upstairs for some musical fun and games. There was a dance contest that Marie “Cuttin’ The Rug’ Tillman won. We also participated in a musical chair-type competition with plastic water bottles, passing them between our legs and over our shoulders, which was pretty funny. The high-light for me was the ‘potato pusher’ race, when two members of our group (James and Jose) and two male members from the other tour group competed in a hilarious race to see who could push a potato across the finish line by thwacking it with another potato dangling between their legs. *Priceless!* After the lounge activities we called it a night; tomorrow we would be docking in Luxor, another early morning of sightseeing awaited us.

## DAY SIX

We were now docked in Luxor, the place the ancient Egyptians called Thebes, which served as the religious and cultural capital of the Empire from the Middle Kingdom onward. Approximately one sixth of all the ancient monuments in the entire world are reportedly in this city, solidifying this area as a cultural hub for the booming tourism industry. We would spend the next two days visiting the region’s marvels, but that was hardly enough time to take it all in. Hala divided our sightseeing in Luxor by focusing this day on the West Bank of the Nile, in an area known as the Theban Necropolis, dedicated to the afterlife.

We began our day early to try and avoid as much of the summer heat as possible. Our tour bus began traversing the two valleys in the western hills of Qurna shortly after seven o’clock in the morning. This section of the west bank was dedicated to the deaths of the royals and their nobility, and the fascinating journeys that awaited them in the Afterlife. The deep northern ravines of these limestone hills – in what can only be described as an unforgiving stretch of desert – house the areas known as the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens, the Valley of the Nobles, and the Valley of

the Workers, which contain the final resting places of these ancient people. The Theban King Thutmose I, who ruled from 1528 to 1510 B.C., was the first pharaoh to construct a rock-cut tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Appalled at the looting of the pyramids, Thutmose I opted to hide his burial tomb deep in these mountains, and from this point on, the succeeding pharaohs followed suit. There are more than sixty of them buried here, their underground tombs scattered over the valley hills sacred to the local goddess Mertseger (she who loves silence) and Hathor (the goddess of Joy, Music and Love).

As we drove from our mooring in Luxor to the limestone hills of Qurna, the landscape changed dramatically from one of farmlands to unrelenting desert and mountain valleys, and I could understand why the pharaohs chose this spot to hide their tombs. Not that it mattered in the end, though; the majority of the royal burial chambers were eventually discovered and looted. There is even evidence that during Roman rule visitors would come and gaze at these tombs just like the tourists who flock here today.

Our first stop in the Theban Necropolis was the mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut, who ruled from 1479 to 1458 B.C. Set against the dramatic cliffs of Deir el Bahri (named after the Coptic Monastery that was erected on this site thousands of years later), the temple has been restored to a remarkable degree. One interesting note: while Queen Hatshepsut was a successful ruler, she apparently pissed off her stepson, Thutmose III, whom she had to marry in order to rule, and following her 'mysterious' death, and Thutmose III's ascension, he had her image defaced on all statues bearing her likeness. So even in her own temple, Hatshepsut's face was chiseled off. This practice continued under succeeding pharaohs, who probably didn't like the idea of a strong female ruler, a sexist notion that still prevails today.

The bus had to park almost at the entrance of the Deir el Bahri Valley, and we then boarded a trolley cart that took us to the base of the temple. As we dismounted the trolley, the driver took off suddenly and slammed into Kim, who was knocked to the ground and suffered some minor bruises and cuts. I am not a superstitious man by nature...*ahhhhhh, maybe I am...* but I hoped this wasn't Hatshepsut's way of welcoming us to her temple! The entire structure raises over three massive terraces; the first two were originally covered by trees (you can still see some of the stumps). Along the colonnades between the first and second terraces are illustrations of boat-building and the transportation of obelisks, but the most famous illustrations

are at the back of the second terrace where there is a depiction of Hatshepsut's expedition to the land of Punt (Ethiopia, I think) with her full entourage in tow. Flanking the ramp heading up to the third terrace are chapels dedicated to Hathor and Anubis. The temple of Hathor was also defaced, but you can still see a spectacular depiction of a massive naval parade on one wall, and the chapel's giant columns are also intact. The Chapel of Anubis (the god of Mummification and Death, usually depicted as a human figure with the head of a dog) has 12 fluted columns and amazingly preserved colors. I asked one of the locals to pose for a picture with me here (I had to slip him a dollar afterwards!).

Our next stop on this tour of death was the Valley of the Queens, which lies just south of the Valley of the Kings, set back into the desert area known currently as Biban el-Harim ("the gates of the Queens"). The ravine at the entrance contains various steles (commemorative stone slabs) praising the deeds of Ramses III. Prayers to gods Osiris and Anubis can still be seen etched into the rocks. Both queens (the wives of the pharaohs) and their offspring (royal princes) were interned here. Approximately 80 tombs have been found in the valley, dating from 1300 to 1100 B.C., and some are incomplete, or have been seriously damaged by the campfires of desecrators, or used as stables. The most important tombs were those prepared for the wife of Ramses III and three of his children who died young. There are pictures depicting the offering rites to the gods, and of Ramses III presenting his sons to the god of the afterworld.

Only two tombs were available for viewing when we arrived. And neither one was as spectacular as the ones we would see at the Valley of the Kings. Queen Titi's tomb had once been abandoned and used as a stable, but the paintings are exceptional, with hues dominated by purplish pinks. There are pictures of the Queen wearing a braid, which is usually associated with young people, so it is assumed she died young. The resting chamber contains a small sarcophagus. I cannot remember the name of the royal of the second tomb we visited. What I *do* remember is that the small tomb was hotter than a convection oven, *and I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there!* Photography inside the Valley of the Queens is prohibited, and each tomb had 'caretakers' who handed out pieces of cardboard (for fanning purposes) and to watch for camera-wielding tourists. They also had their hands out when we exited. James secretly activated his cellphone video camera and was able to get a nice view of the tombs. I thought I could do the same with my digital camera, setting it on video mode and holding it clandestinely in

the palm of my hand while dangling it from my side as inconspicuously as I could. I was delighted to have pulled it off, but when I boarded the tour bus and checked the video, I was disappointed to discover I had filmed my own ass for about two minutes.

Next, we drove further north through this rocky gorge for another kilometer and a half before coming upon the incredibly packed parking lot of the Valley of the Kings. Before we entered, Hala told us to leave our cameras on the bus; not only is photography not allowed in this sacred place, no electrical gadgets of any kind are permitted on the premises (James' cellphone included!). A no-nonsense security staff screens all visitors with metal detectors and x-ray machines. Once we were inside the actual valley, Hala gave us a brief lecture at the visitors' reception area, informing us that we could only enter *three* tombs with our ticket stub. Due to the heavy human traffic inside the burial chambers, humidity levels were endangering the delicate paintings on the walls, and it was determined that visitors could only view three tombs to limit the exposure. There were also two tombs – those of Tutankhamen and Ramses VI – that could be seen only by paying an additional fee. Hala told us to skip the Tutankhamen tomb since all of his storied treasures are actually in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (which we would be visiting on the last day of our trip) and only his actual mummy is present in the chamber; she did suggest we fork over the extra 50 pounds to see the Ramses VI tomb, and so I did.

The gang split up, everybody scurrying off to see the tombs they'd earmarked. I visited Ramses VI's resting chamber first, since it was right next to the reception area. A long corridor, divided into three sections, led to a hypogeum (a subterranean burial chamber) consisting of two rooms. The first holds the granite sarcophagus of Ramses VI and has scenes of the "Book of the Dead" on the walls and astral scenes and beautiful images of Nut, the goddess of the sky, on the ceiling; the second is cruciform and decorated with scenes from the "Book of Caverns". I was concerned about the confinement in these tombs, being a tad claustrophobic, but I needn't have worried, most of the corridors and hypogeums were quite spacious...they had to be, to allow the massive sarcophagus to be lowered inside!

Later, I hooked up with Peter and his sons, Ben and Sam, and we visited Ramses III's tomb. The burial chamber was never occupied but had been nicely decorated with paintings and images of...um, something Egyptian. It

was hard to decipher the various drawings, since each depicted images pertaining to that king and/or his god of choice. Without a guide it was hard to tell. (Note: guides are not permitted here, either, to avoid the congestion of perspiring tourists listening to lectures, clogging up the tombs and further raising the humidity levels).

We then proceeded up the pathway to where Thutmosis III's tomb was. Hala told us this one would be a physical challenge, and boy, were we in for a workout! There is a narrow, steeply inclined staircase (commonly referred to as The Ladder), which rises up through a ravine along the mountain wall and into a chamber at the top. It was tough going. We came upon a group of exhausted French tourists who were taking a breather half way up in a mini resting area. When we finally reached the chamber at the top, we discovered that the *actual* tomb was deep inside the bowels of the mountain, and we had to descend another narrow, steeply inclined corridor to reach it. The heat and humidity inside this hypogeum was stifling, and what made matters worse was that there was nothing to see. Apparently, Thutmosis III died before they could complete his chamber. (Note: when the Pharaoh died, all work on his/her tomb ceased since the new King or Queen would now commission work on their own resting place). If the climb into the tomb had been a daunting one, the climb out seemed like a life-and-death struggle. I don't think I have ever perspired as much in my entire life as I did getting out of Thutmosis III's tomb. At one point, something happened to Ben, possibly heat exhaustion, and his dad had to wait behind to coax him along and make sure he was all right. Afterwards, Ben decided not to enter any more tombs, and I borrowed his ticket stub. Peter, Sam and I continued on to view two more tombs nearby, but by now we were rushing to get back to our group.

This was an impressive site, all those elaborate tombs with their subterranean chambers carved deep into the mountains, in an area so seemingly inhospitable. I wish I had the opportunity to visit all the catacombs, but that would be impossible without taking numerous visits to the valley.

Next, we were taken to another "government-sponsored" store, a successful alabaster shop right in the valley where we were given a presentation on how alabaster statues and crafts are made, served more hibiscus tea, and then set free to roam the shop of finished products. It was very lovely...*and extremely expensive*. James wanted to buy a foot-long statue of (I believe) Horus, but the price was a prohibitive \$350. The

following day in the Luxor bazaar he was able to buy the same statue for only \$50! Years ago, when the Egyptian government began organizing the Valley for tourism purposes, attempts were made to re-locate the local peasants who had been living in these hills for thousands of years. Many of the peasants balked, remaining in their small villages nestled along the valley entrances, and most are employed in the alabaster trade today.

Prior to returning to the boat, we stopped for a five-minute photo-op at the Colossi of Memnon, two gigantic statues that are all that remain of the enormous Mortuary Temple of Amenophis III. When I got back to the Nile Symphony I took another shower to cool off and spent much of the afternoon on the sundeck with some of the other members in friendly conversation. The other tour group on the boat had taken an early morning hot air balloon ride over the valley and shared their harrowing experience with us. Apparently, the pilot misjudged the landing zone and they touched down on an angry farmer's cornfield. Some of us had been game for a hot air balloon ride the following day, but after hearing of the other group's near-accident we opted to pass. This was our last night on the riverboat, and after dinner we were treated to a dancing show in the upstairs lounge featuring a male whirling dervish dancer and a curiously clad belly dancer. Since it was Ramadan, the woman was not allowed to show her stomach, which I thought defeated the whole purpose. In fact, her entire performance seemed lackluster and quite boring. The whirling dervish dancer was a lot of fun to watch, though. This is a traditional Sufi dance introduced by the Turks wherein the male dancers twirl constantly without stopping, while their costume dress spirals up and down over their torso. It's amazing they don't get dizzy and lose their balance. Heck, I got woozy just *watching* him. After the show we called it a night. Checkout was another early morning process, and we had another full day of sightseeing ahead of us in Luxor.

## DAY SEVEN

Up at 5:00 am. I squared away my room bill at the reception desk and then joined my fellow travelers for our last delicious meal on the boat. Although most of us had already turned in envelopes with our gratuities to the riverboat staff, some of us decided to pool another separate tip for the

dining room waiters who did an outstanding job. There was one in particular who would entertain us with 'magical' stunts at the table, like balancing a fork and spoon on the head of a toothpick. Very clever fellow.

After our luggage was loaded onto an awaiting tour bus, we headed into the city of Luxor to visit the amazing temple complex of Karnak. If the West Bank of the Nile in ancient Thebes (modern day Luxor) was dedicated to death and the afterlife, then the East Bank was associated with symbols of life and rebirth. This was the administrative, religious and living area of the great city. Modern Luxor has developed in much the same fashion, with the main hotels, restaurants, office and residential buildings all on the east bank. The main street is Corniche el Nil, which runs the length of the town. One of the annoying aspects of this charming city is the street vendors. They can be quite aggressive in their dealings with tourists who are the main source of income for the local populace and must be wrung dry, it seems, like finely-washed Egyptian cottons.

The most awe-inspiring site in Luxor, and not to be missed, is the incredible Karnak Temple. It is actually an enclosure containing a complex of temples dedicated to Amun-Ra, with some of the earliest ones on the eastern side built during the 20<sup>th</sup> century B.C. By the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Amun-Ra became known as the King of Gods when power shifted from the north (Memphis) to the Upper Egyptian city of Thebes, and many temples were erected in his honor. But none as spectacular as Karnak. It seems that almost every ruler who followed contributed something to the site until it became this vast collection of temples, halls and statues; but the pharaohs mostly associated with its principle construction or enlargement are Amenophis III, Seti I and Ramses II. Since the current entrance is on the western side, the general rule is that the further you walk into the complex, the older the structures.

We entered through the massive western-side pylon fronting the Nile River, which was never completed but still stands more than 140 feet tall. On the inside wall of the pylon are the remains of a mud brick ramp used in its construction, and archeologists believe this was how the massive stones of the Great Pyramids may have been moved into place. Past the pylon is an open courtyard containing the large kiosk of Taharka, and off to the right-hand side is the temple of Ramses III. Straight ahead you enter the enormous hypostyle hall with its towering 134 columns, once brightly colored, resembling redwood trees rising up in a forest, dwarfing anything of human



scale. This hall was originally roofed and contains magnificent reliefs. Beyond this area, heading east, are a series of towering obelisks with more sanctuaries and temples and pylons. It is quite an eyeful. The complex branches out beyond the hypostyle hall eastward and northward. The east-west layout follows the track of the sun and represents celestial power; the northern axis parallels the Nile River and symbolized terrestrial (royal) power. Adjacent to the back, eastern section of the complex is the Sacred Lake, a huge pool area where the priests would perform ritual navigations; this also housed the living quarters of the priests. Further off into the northern section is the Sanctuary of Mut, with temples dedicated to Ramses III and Amenophis III. The grandeur of this complex makes it almost impossible to take it all in with just one visit, and we could see more excavations and restorations going on, so it is possible the site might get even *bigger*.

Our next stop was the Temple of Luxor, approximately 3 kilometers away from Karnak, but connected by an avenue of sphinxes that is being excavated and restored today (much to the annoyance of the locals, some of whom had to be relocated so their homes can be torn down for this massive archeological effort). The Temple of Luxor was built primarily by Amenophis III during the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C., enlarged by Thutmosis III and later finished by Ramses II, who plastered his image everywhere on the site, as if taking credit for the whole thing. The temple actually lies below the level of the street. Over a period of thousands of years the abandoned temple was obscured by the growing terrain; an entire city was eventually built over its remains, including the partially standing Mosque of Abu Hagag, before it was re-discovered and excavated.

Once you enter the Temple, you will see a colonnade with 14 columns standing almost 65 feet high. This area was finished by Amenophis III's son, the famous King Tutankhamun (King Tut), and beyond are the Court of Amenophis III and a hypostyle hall with 32 more columns, plus chambers and sanctuaries and a birth chapel depicting Amenophis III being presented by gods Horus and Aten to Amon-Ra. What really struck me about this place, though, were the enormous statues of Ramses II, whose ego led him to dominate his surroundings, even in temples originally built by others.

Before checking into our hotel – the Winter Palace Pavilion – Hala took us to another ‘government-sponsored’ store, this one a jewelry shop so that we could purchase *cartouches*, the long, bullet-shaped medallions many

Egyptians wear around their neck, which normally has your name engraved in hieroglyphics on one side and good-luck symbols on the other. When the Rosetta Stone – the tablet found in Alexandria by Napoleon’s troops during the early 1800s – was finally deciphered and ancient hieroglyphics was understood, it was discovered that the name of the pharaohs were outlined in these ‘cartouches’, so it became popular to have your own made. I purchased a sterling silver cartouche with 18 karat gold edges and lettering. The front of the medallion has the hieroglyphic symbols spelling out Richard, and the back has three symbols: the ankh (representing long life), the scarab (the Egyptian beetle representing good luck) and the Eye of Horus (a symbol that protects you from evil spirits). The cartouches, which are custom-made, were hand-delivered to our hotel later that evening. I also bought my daughter Rachel a small gold ankh.

The Winter Palace of Luxor is an historic and absolutely beautiful hotel. The Palace was once the winter vacation home of King Farouk, the last Egyptian monarch overthrown by Nasser in 1952. It was later converted into a very popular (and expensive!) resort. We stayed in the Pavilion section towards the back, but the main Palace area was stunning, with giant chandeliers and grand staircases, majestic sitting rooms and parlors, high-ceiling corridors with royal paintings on the walls. The swimming pool was ginormous! It was divided by a section containing stepping-stones that the wait staff could use to cross the pool without having to go around it, creating an illusion of ‘walking on water’. My room was outstanding; I was even able to take a bubble bath in the giant bathtub.

After a group lunch by the poolside café, I joined Dedra, Viviana, Kim and her mom Thiem, on a brief shopping stroll along the Corniche el Nil next to the hotel, buying some silver jewelry and souvenirs in the only shop I encountered that actually had prices on their merchandise. *It was a pleasure to shop without haggling.* The only sour moment was when this very tall Egyptian tout accosted us on the sidewalk as we exited the hotel grounds and wouldn’t stop badgering us about taking a horse carriage ride to the local market. I mean, this man -- who must have been well over 6’5 and had a striking resemblance to Lurch from the Addams Family show -- walked step-in-step with us and wouldn’t shut up or take “no” for an answer. We would go into a shop and when we emerged, *there he was again!* It took every inch of self-control not to turn into the ‘ugly American’, because I came within a camel’s hair of insulting this giant bastard.

Later that evening most of us got together for an outstanding buffet (featuring local dishes) served at poolside. The entertainment included dervish whirlers and another lame belly dancer. I use the word 'entertainment' loosely here, for the show was about as well choreographed as a kindergarten recital. At one point, three of our waiters were up on the stage doing...what exactly, I cannot tell you. But it was good for a laugh. I wanted to go to bed early since we had a 4:30 am wake-up call for the following day. We were flying back to Cairo and had to be at the airport super early. But I was not able to go to bed until after 10:00 that evening; Kim and I stayed up in the lobby waiting for our cartouches to be delivered!

## **DAY EIGHT**

I had set my travel alarm clock for 4:00 am, needing the extra time to shower and repack. Besides my dirty laundry, I had also purchased quite a few souvenirs and trinkets, and enough archeological pamphlets and local history books at the sites we visited to inaugurate my own personal Egyptian library. Trying to cram all of that into my K-Mart luggage proved to be as daunting an engineering feat as building the pyramids! By 4:45, the bellhop knocked on the door to pick up my over-sized bag. Since my dollar reserves were woefully depleted, I had to slip him three Egyptian pound coins (the equivalent of 60 cents), instead; he didn't seem too pleased, especially after he hoisted my heavy bag onto the luggage cart.

Hala had arranged an early morning breakfast for us -- prior to departing for the Luxor International Airport -- but the distance from our rooms in the Pavilion section of the hotel to the main dining room was so long, I had less than twenty minutes to eat by the time I got there. I managed to wolf down an odd assortment of fruits, granola cereal and bread. Our flight to Cairo left earlier than the itinerary originally stated. It was a one-hour flight, with enough empty seats to allow each one of us to spread out comfortably. As we approached Cairo we flew over an industrial area spewing thick plumes of smoke from giant smokestacks. I wondered if this was the reason the capital was always blanketed in hazy smog. I read the air-quality in Cairo is so poor -- even by Third World standards -- that foreigners with respiratory problems are not advised to spend more than three days here. Which is a

shame, since Cairo is twice the size of Paris with much to explore. When we touched down at Cairo International Airport, I discovered that my ATM card did not work in Egypt and Dedra was kind enough to lend me \$80 in pounds from her account. Thanks, Dedra!

Built around 969 A.D., Cairo was originally a royal enclosure (a gated community, if you will) for the leaders of the new Fatimid occupation, who took over from the Syrian Umayyad rulers. Eventually the city began to spread out, encompassing the older neighborhoods and areas of Fustat (Old Cairo) and crossing the Nile to fill the valley all the way up to the once isolated Giza plateau where the three Great Pyramids are located. Today, Cairo's approximately 20 million inhabitants make it the third largest city in the world (behind Japan and Mexico). The over-population problem in this massive metropolis has only recently been addressed, as more *Cairenes* (as the people of Cairo call themselves) are opting to move into suburbs in the desert. Serviced by massive water pipes and new electrical grids, these satellite developments offer an alternative to the increasingly unhealthy environment of what is now becoming the new Old Cairo. And although the city might seem intimidating, dense and crowded, it is relatively safe and the people extremely warm and friendly (at least when I visited).

Today's activities were supposed to be at leisure, but Hala decided to take us to some of the sites we were planning to see tomorrow in order to lighten the final day's load. Our tour bus drove through the Heliopolis area of Cairo, traversing down the main avenue in a congested mess of traffic. As we approached the residence of President Hosni Mubarak, security was evident everywhere; on every corner, road divider or side street you could see both uniformed soldiers and policemen standing at attention, and a larger private detail of suit-and-jacketed members of the national security force keeping a watchful eye over everyone. You'd think that with this type of law enforcement presence they'd at least make an attempt to move the traffic along. Cairo is notorious for its traffic jams. But to get anywhere in this timeless city you need to possess the skills of a stock car racer. Traffic signs are apparently nothing more than adornments here, and I cannot count the times we cruised right by a red traffic light as if it were invisible. White lines on the roads are merely a suggestion, as motorists often choose to drive directly over them, positioning their vehicles in both lanes for easier 'cutting off' capability. And merging into traffic can be as harrowing an ordeal as trying to intersect the Cross Bronx Expressway on a bicycle. The only reason we made it anywhere was because of the size of our tour bus, it's

behemoth-like structure creating its own pathway as it cut through traffic like a runaway circus elephant. I now see why Egyptians make great New York City cab drivers.

We drove past the famed City of the Dead; a sprawling maze of above ground tombs stretching for more than four miles. It has been a principle cemetery since the Arab conquest (established in 642 A.D). Originally, caretakers were the only ones to live here, but as the city grew, and the poor population expanded, two million inhabitants now call this place home, living side by side with the dead. For decades, the Egyptian government denied the existence of the cemetery people, but within recent years a government service center and a public school have opened up near the gravesite to accommodate its residents. The travel books cautioned against visiting the cemetery at night, for personal safety reasons... but quite truthfully, I wouldn't visit a place called the City of the Dead even during the day time!

We came upon the famous Citadel of Cairo, built by the famous Muslim conqueror Salah el Din in the late 1100's on the eastern edge of the city. Salah el Din was an Iraqi Kurd who entered Egypt around 1163 with an army sent by the Syrian ruler Nur el Din. By 1171, he had made himself ruler of the country, establishing the Ayyubid Dynasty, and quickly set about to modernize its defenses, the cornerstone of which was the magnificent and virtually impregnable walled compound that dominates the Cairo skyline. His successful campaign to expel the Crusaders from Jerusalem made him well known and feared in Europe as Saladin. Although we did not go into the Citadel itself, it is quite large and contains several museums and mosques that are worth a look, if for no other reason than to get a real historical perspective. The prison inside the Citadel is still used today by the military. Only those accused of military crimes, or acts of High Treason, are kept there. This includes the four assassins of former President Sadat, who were later hanged inside the prison walls.

On the summit of the Citadel is one of Cairo's greatest mosques, the Mohamed Ali Mosque. It has a huge, typically Ottoman dome, and sits on the edge of the escarpment over Cairo, giving it an unusual amount of light and fresh air. It was commissioned between 1830 and 1848 by the great Egyptian ruler Mohamed Ali Pasha in memory of his eldest son who died in 1816. The mosque was not completed until 1857 under the reign of Said Pasha. Mohamed Ali established the last royal monarchy of Egypt, which

ended with the overthrow of King Farouk in 1952. Visitors are allowed to freely enter the mosque and take photos, but all must remove their shoes (or place plastic slip-ons over them) and it is forbidden for women to enter without properly covering up their bodies. Viviana was wearing a shoulderless blouse and was immediately stopped by a small group of burka-clad Muslim women who were patrolling the entrance. She was given a shawl to wrap around her shoulders before she could enter the holy place.

The Mohamed Ali Mosque, with its twin minarets, is truly beautiful. It was the largest to be built in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and can easily be seen when entering Cairo from any direction. Known also as the Alabaster Mosque because of the alabaster panels tiling the lower story and forecourt, the mosque has a huge central dome surrounded by a series of smaller and semicircular domes, with two elegant cylindrical minarets of Turkish design with two balconies and conical caps. The central dome rises more than 160 feet. Inside the mosque is a great feeling of space (the areas measure 41 by 41 meters), made even more so by the use of two levels of domes. The central dome sits atop four arches that are perched upon colossal piers. The floor is still covered in the original red-colored rugs from the 1800s. Because the architect who designed this building could not use – according to Islamic tradition – any artwork depicting humans or animals, the walls and panels have ornate and elaborate patterns. When we exited the mosque, we were afforded an extraordinary view of Cairo, or what we could see of it through the smog.

Our next stop was the Khan El Khalili souk (bazaar) in the Islamic district of central Cairo. This traditional Arab market place was first built in 1382 by Amir Jarkas al Khalili. It was a former Fatimid cemetery site where caravans of traveling merchants could rest and engage in trade. Today, it is a bustling maze of dense twisting alleys, with shops and stalls on every corner selling everything imaginable. It is the most famous souk in Cairo, with numerous restaurants, food vendors and coffeehouses selling Arabic coffee and offering shisha, flavored tobaccos smoked in a water pipe called a hookah. And although the area is becoming more of a tourist attraction with each passing year, it still retains its genuine Arab feel and character.

In April of 2005, a suicide bomber detonated a device that killed or wounded almost two dozen Egyptians and foreign visitors in the Khan El Khalili bazaar, keeping tourists away for a while. But all indications are that the souk is very safe today, with the occasional pickpocket thief providing

the only nuisance. Hala gave us an hour and a half to wander about the bazaar while she sat in a coffee shop. After my experience with some of the female members of our group back in Luxor – who would stay glued to one spot while shopping – I decided to stick with the men, who were more adventuresome and wanted to explore a little. Because of Ramadan, most Egyptians were still sleeping off the previous night's revelry, and the marketplace was not as busy as one would expect, although it was still crowded in sections.

I wanted to buy some additional scarves as souvenirs. Jose suggested we purchase them together (since he needed to buy several for his sisters) in order to get a really good price. Initially, the vendors were quoting a price of between 9 and 10 dollars for each cotton scarf. These were much better quality than the ones I picked up in Aswan for \$2 apiece, but I was not prepared to pay almost ten bucks for them. Thanks to Glenn and Aaron, though, we didn't have to do much haggling. When the vendor we selected gave us his price, Glenn asked, "*How much for 25 scarves?*" At first, the vendor thought Glenn was offering to pay twenty-five pounds (the equivalent of about \$5) for a scarf, and said no. When he finally understood that Glenn wanted to purchase 25 individual *pieces*, he lowered his price to \$5, making Jose and me very happy. But Glenn, a retired Illinois State Trooper, decided to play hardball. He did something none of us ever thought of doing up until then, effectively putting an end to all the haggling: Glenn simply whipped out 500 Egyptian pounds in assorted denominations (\$100 American) and said, "I'll give you *all of this* for 25 scarves." I thought the vendor was going to faint when he saw all that money being waved under his nose, and immediately acquiesced. Turns out Glenn ended up with thirty scarves -- some kind of mix up when they counted them out -- so his bargain was even better. Jose and I were just happy to be in on the deal!

After the bazaar we drove to the beautiful Hilton Pyramid Golf Resort (our home for the next two nights) in the Giza section of Cairo. This particular area is on the outskirts of the city, and by 'outskirts' I mean *desert*. There is an amusement park called Dreamland not too far away, which had a roller coaster that could be seen from the main highway, and if one continued further south you would reach the Fayum Oasis where many of its beautiful flowers are used to make essential oils, but other than that, the hotel, with its golf course, was pretty much it. If we wanted to venture out and about we would need to hail a cab. But most of us were exhausted, having been awake since 4:00 that morning, and opted to stay in the hotel.

We gathered at this outdoor café near the pool for lunch, where I finally tasted an Egyptian pizza (they had signs advertising them everywhere); a veggie lover's kind, which was awesome! After lunch, I went and took a much-needed nap and was awoken by Kim who called my room twice to inquire if I was going to join them for dinner. A group of us formed in the lobby and decided to try one of the hotel's four major restaurants, an Italian eatery called, oddly enough, *Jasmine*. Next door was a soon-to-be-opened Chinese restaurant, and I wondered what their name was going to be: *Bertonelli's*? The food was not bad, and reasonably priced, but the waitress screwed up the orders on the final bills, which caused some confusion and arguments. After dinner I could barely keep my eyes open and called it a night.

## DAY NINE

Today was our final day in Cairo and we had a fun-filled sightseeing schedule ahead of us. Our wake-up call was for 7:00 am, we would be visiting the Great Pyramids of Giza and Hala wanted us there as early as possible to beat the heat and the large crowds that begin amassing by noon. Actually, we were suppose to see the Egyptian Museum first, but a foreign dignitary was being given a special tour of the building and Hala decided it would be better to visit in the afternoon. I had awoken at 5:00 am, having napped the previous day, and was unable to go back to sleep. Normally, the first thing I do when I get up in the morning is make a pot of coffee. This has been a routine of mine for decades. But since landing in Egypt I've had to wait until our scheduled breakfast was served before I could get my morning java fix. Today, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

There was a coffee pot in my room, with a little tray next to it containing two cups and a little bowl of Nescafe, sugar and creamer packets. *Heaven*. I filled the coffee pot with bottled water, plugged the thing in and turned it on. Nothing. The pot did not work. I then replugged the machine in every available wall socket, but to no avail. *The heck with this*, I thought, *I intend*



*to have a cup of coffee this morning even if I have to pay for it!* I called room service and asked them for a pot of coffee with sugar and cream on the side. About five minutes later, a staff member knocked on my door. I was still in my boxer briefs, so I stood behind the door when I opened it. To my dismay, the young man was only holding a little bowl of Nescafe, sugar and creamer packets. Apparently, the room service person I spoke to misunderstood me. I accepted the bowl, but when the man turned to leave, I stepped out into the corridor to explain what I wanted...and the door closed behind me, locking me out. I was now standing in the corridor in my boxer briefs, holding a bowl of Nescafe, sugar and creamer packets. I'm certain I let out an expletive, for if ever there was a time for a good curse word, this was it. The waiter made a gesture not to worry, that he would come back with a key card. So I waited for another five minutes, in my underwear, for my 'hero' to return, praying none of the other guests decided to take a stroll at this hour of the morning. When he came back and opened the door, I motioned him inside the room, showed him the coffee pot, and explained that it did not work. He understood, and in his limited English told me he would bring me a new pot. I waited about fifteen minutes before he knocked on my door with a new coffee maker. I doled out two precious U.S. dollars in appreciation. He smiled; I smiled. I poured water in the new coffee pot, plugged it in, hit the button and proceeded to take a shower, confident that my cup of Joe would be waiting when I finished.

I may have used even more colorful expletives when I discovered that the *new* coffee pot was as useless as the old coffee pot. *It didn't work, either.* My patience worn thin, and my body wracked with caffeine-withdrawal jitters, I called the front desk and asked to speak to the manager. I told him what happened, and he assured me a 'technician' was on his way. I didn't know they had coffee pot technicians. The man who showed up was dressed in gray overalls and had a utility belt strapped to his waist with enough gadgets sticking to it that I was certain this guy could *build me* a new coffee pot if need be. I sat on the edge of the bed and watched this techno-marvel at work. He turned the pots upside down, played with the buttons, took turns plugging and replugging the pots into different sockets. At one promising point, he unhinged a screwdriver from his belt, but on second thought decided to put it back. He now turned to me, held up his index finger as if to convey he understood what the problem was, and then made a back-up call on his walkie-talkie in Arabic.

A few minutes later another technician arrived, and from the deference the first technician showed the new one, I assumed this was the *Head* Technician. These two men proceeded to perform a battery of tests on the pots and checked all of the wall sockets to make sure they were functioning, and finally, after about fifteen minutes, the Head Technician turned to me and in halting English said, “*Sir, the coffee pots do not appear to be working.*” I stood there stoically, reminding myself I was in a foreign country, and refrained from uttering, “No shit, Sherlock.” He told me they would bring me a new one. Another ten minutes passed before the original waiter knocked on my door again. In his hands was what I can only describe as a coffee urn, the kind hospital cafeteria’s use. I don’t know what was worse, trying to figure out how many liters of water this thing took, or lugging it across the room. By the time I made my first cup of coffee, almost two hours had lapsed. Breakfast was actually being served downstairs and I could now go to the main dining hall and help myself to as much coffee as I could choke down. But I was determined to have a cup in my room. *And dammit, I did!* It tasted like crap.

By 8:00, we boarded our tour bus and headed off to see the Great Pyramids of Giza. Our hotel was actually not far from the site (I could see the pyramids from my balcony). As we entered the grounds we saw tourist police on camels patrolling the area. Until now, I hadn’t seen too many camels in Egypt...a lot of donkeys, but very few camels. That was all about to change. In fact, I was about to get Up Close and Personal with my very own camel. But let me tell you about the pyramids first...

Giza is the name currently given to the gigantic burial grounds of ancient Letopolis (what is now modern-day Cairo). It covers an area over two thousand square meters wide, resting on a plateau with an escarpment on the southeast edge sloping down about 40 meters. At one time, a canal extending from the Nile separated the desert zone from the fertile land at the base of this bluff. The principle monuments here are the Sphinx Abu el-Hol (the “terrible one”) and the Great Pyramids, the largest, the pyramid of Khufu (Cheops), the middle pyramid of Khafre, and the smallest one, the pyramid of Menkaure (Mycerinus). These are the only remaining monuments once described by the Greeks as part of The Seven Wonders of the (Ancient) World.

The Great Pyramids were built on a plateau along a diagonal line from northeast to southwest – so that none of them could ever block the sun from

the others – and are aligned along the Orion Belt of stars. In fact, the entrances of the pyramids are all on the right side so as to line up with the Polar Star. Each one had a complete monumental complex consisting of a mortuary temple (always on the eastside of the pyramid where the final funeral service of the pharaoh was held prior to his entombing), a causeway and a valley temple. There are also three subsidiary temples next to the pyramids Khufu and Menkaure. Built mostly of limestone and granite, all three pyramids have a burial chamber excavated in the rock and set almost in the center of the main body of the construction.

Khufu now measures 137 meters high, but it was originally 146 meters. Apparently, 150,000 cubic feet (of the overall 2.5 million cubic feet) of stone blocks have either been eroded or were removed and used for the construction of Cairo by the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. There is very little difference in size between Khufu and Khafre, but they do differ in internal organization. Khafre was designed as a normal pyramid, while Khufu protects a pseudo-monument built into the heart of the pyramid itself containing the ‘king’s chambers’, a galley causeway of great size and the ‘queen’s chamber’ a few meters from the foundations. The pyramid of Menkaure is considerably smaller than the other two (only 66 meters high and 108 meters wide), and although perfectly built, it had to be terminated hurriedly and various parts were completed in mud brick and soon deteriorated.

There is a paved road that winds itself around the pyramids to a parking area on the backside of Menkaure. This is the best spot to take a photo of all three pyramids together. A short walking distance away is the staging area for the camel rides. The cost for a 45-minute ride was 100 Egyptian pounds (\$20), but no sooner than we mounted these creatures, our guides began reminding us to tip them at the end! I had to fork over an extra three dollars when it was over. In all fairness to their aggressive tip mongering, the guides did a good job of keeping us upright on the camels and took nice pictures of us against the backdrop of the pyramids. My camel was already lying on the ground, its legs collapsed beneath it, when my guide told me to go ahead and mount it. Actual camel riders sit sidesaddle, with both feet dangling on one side, but for tourists they make you put your legs over the animal, like a horse. And Thank God they do, because when my camel bolted upright it felt as if I was going to be catapulted into the air. The only thing that made me stay on the animal was my legs, which were dug deep into its haunches, and the death grip I had on the saddle horn.

Our 'caravan' began slowly moving towards the pyramid of Menkaure, and I kept swaying side to side in the saddle. Many of the tour members commented about how uncomfortable the ride was; it was hard to imagine crossing vast sections of the desert on these gangling animals. At one point, my guide offered to take a photo of Dave and me, and asked me to take off my hat -- which also had a handkerchief underneath for added sun protection -- in order to get a better shot of my face. When I did so, I couldn't put the hat back on because of the way the camel was swaying, and I was now trying to balance my hat, handkerchief, water bottle and camera in one hand while trying to hold onto the saddle horn with the other. I don't know what the Arabic word for 'imbecile' is, but I'm almost certain my guide uttered it. I nearly fell off the camel when it went down a small hill. The guide told me to lean back so that the camel wouldn't be pushed forward by my weight. I leaned so far back -- fearful of this animal careening forward out of control -- that I almost fell off the saddle. All in all, though, it was a lot of fun. I can only imagine what Hala must have been thinking, seeing us riding off into the desert on these docile creatures. Such a typically touristy thing to do. But somehow my trip to Egypt wouldn't have seemed complete without a photo of me atop a camel!

After the camel ride, the bus stopped at the foot of the Khafre Pyramid and we were given an hour or so to explore and take pictures of the two largest pyramids. The top portion of Khafre still has an outer layer of limestone plaster covering it, and Hala told us the Great Pyramids were once decorated with elaborate paintings. I took several photos standing in front of Khafre, and of the mortuary temple nearby. I then walked over to the Khufu Pyramid next door, which was built around 2560 B.C. as the tomb of Fourth Dynasty Egyptian Pharaoh Khufu (also known as Cheops). It took approximately twenty years to build this pyramid. Staring up from the bottom, you had the illusion of a stairway extending up into the Heavens. Some of the stone blocks were massive, weighing into the tons. I wanted to touch them, like the ones at Khafre, but there was a guardrail around it and grumpy Ramadan-famished caretakers who would admonish tourists who got too close. Standing in front of these engineering marvels begged one to ponder how they had been built. There are many theories, ranging from the practical to the bizarre: mud brick ramps to pulley systems made of wood and papyrus ropes, to assistance from aliens, nobody is really sure. But in the end, most Egyptologists agree it was probably a combination of ramps, pulleys and elbow grease.

At the southern base of the Khufu Pyramid is the Solar Baroque Museum, which houses the reconstructed remains of a 4700-year-old boat found to have been carefully disassembled into 1,224 separate pieces and buried near the pyramid in a sealed pit as part of the internment rites for the pharaoh. It is possible that this graceful vessel with its high curved prow and narrow entry was used to transfer the dead king to his final resting place. At any rate, it was definitely worth the extra 50 Egyptian pounds to see it.

We then drove to the southern edge of the site to get a close-up view of the Sphinx. This half cat, half man statue (symbolic of the Lion's strength combined with the wisdom of Man) was carved out of the bedrock, and is supposed to represent the likeness of Khafre (Cheop's son), whose pyramid looms majestically in the background. The temple of the Sphinx has two aisles separated by six granite pillars, and appears to have been originally built during the First Dynasty, but later reconstructed or restored numerous times during the Fourth Dynasty. I was unable to get a very good close up shot of its massive 'paws', which form the walls in front of the Sphinx, due to restoration/excavation work blocking the view. But I did walk around the ramp areas on the sides and took some nice pictures from there.

As we were leaving the site a very ugly scene unfolded in the parking lot. A woman vendor approached Dave and Darlene and tried to sell them some really elegantly crafted scarves. Her asking price was so high, around 180 Egyptian pounds (approximately \$37) that Dave immediately said no and continued walking towards the bus. The woman vendor's husband -- apparently enraged that she had not made the sale -- began beating her and threw her to the ground. What was so sad was that no one came to this poor woman's aid, or attempted to stop the man from harming her. The woman vendor later ran up to Dave and Darlene and lowered the price tremendously but I'm not sure if Darlene wanted to buy anything after that incident. I guess it's difficult not to pass judgment on a society where women are truly second-class citizens; and this was also a feeling I got from my conversations with Hala.

We then continued driving into Cairo, through the abandoned-looking tenements of Giza, and stopped at our final 'government-sponsored' store, a souvenir shop that sold what I thought were very reasonably priced items, including silver and gold jewelry. Many of us lamented the fact we hadn't stopped here first, seeing as how we had pretty much gone through most of

our 'souvenir money' by this stage of the tour. I did manage to buy some nice medallions for my nieces here, and a shot glass with an Egyptian symbol on it that a co-worker requested. Hala surprised us when we re-boarded the bus with freshly baked pita bread purchased from a sidewalk vendor. It was grainier and chewier than the stuff we get back home, but much tastier, too! We munched on the bread as we made our way to the Egyptian Museum.

The Midan Tahrir Square is in the epicenter of the city. Boarding the eastern side of this square is a frontage of large office buildings and stores, not far away is the American University of Cairo, the Arab League building, the drab Mogamma government building (housing over 18,000 bureaucrats), the famous Nile Hilton and the Intercontinental Hotel. Tahrir Square (as it is commonly called) is also home to the reddish-pink stone building of the Egyptian Museum of Cairo, *a stop not to be missed if visiting Egypt!* Built in 1897, and opened to the public on November 15, 1902, this historic building has over 130, 000 items, with a representative amount on display and the rest in storerooms. There are two floors, with 107 halls. The ground floor contains the huge statues and displays, and the upper floor has the smaller statues, jewels, Tutankhamon treasures and the royal mummies. The only way to describe the atmosphere in the museum is to stop and imagine what a museum in an Indiana Jones movie might look like. There is no air-conditioning, and dust has accumulated on the tops of the statues. The information cards in the display windows are yellowed with age, and some are hand-written. The tiles on the floor are in serious need of repair or replacement. And yet, this place is magical. You will wander from hall to hall like a child in a toy store, 'ooohing and aaahing' at the magnificent antiquities on display.

The museum is divided into seven basic sections: (1) The Tutankhamon Treasures (2) Pre-dynasty and Old Kingdom monuments (3) First intermediate period and Middle Kingdom monuments (4) Monuments of the Middle Kingdom (5) Monuments of the Late Period and the Greek and Roman Period (6) coins and papyri (7) Sarcophagi and Scarabs. On the upper floor is the separate Royal Mummy Room, which currently contains eleven mummified remains of the famous pharaohs of the New Kingdom.

Photography is not permitted in the museum, and all visitors must pass through a thorough x-ray security section. Cameras are usually confiscated here and returned upon leaving. Hala rented an audio system from the

museum, which we carried around our necks and plugged into our ears in order to better hear her lecture (the acoustics in the building was terrible). Unfortunately, the audio devices had the annoying habit of tuning in and out, and many of us simply chose to not use them. Since our time was limited, we immediately crossed the Sarcophagi and Scarab hall and climbed the stairwell to the upper floor where Hala gave us an informative tour of the great Tutankhamon treasures. We saw the famous funerary mask and inner coffin, made of solid gold, and an assortment of gold jewelry buried with King Tut. In the outside hall, we walked down a corridor witnessing display after display of items King Tut used in real life...several thrones, chests to carry his personal effects, underwear and clothing, different styles of sandals, picnic table, etc, etc.... meanwhile, Hala lectured away.

When we exited the Tutankhamon exhibit area, Hala gave us about an hour to wander about the museum. Glenn, Aaron and myself paid the extra 100 Egyptian pounds to enter the Royal Mummy Room. Initially, the room displayed 27 different pharaohs, but in 1981, then-president Anwar Sadat closed the exhibit down, probably out of respect for the dead royals. In 1985, the room was re-opened to the public, but only a select few mummies from the New Kingdom were put on display. The incredibly preserved mummies (I believe I counted eleven) are kept in temperature and pressure controlled glass cabinets. The word 'mummify' is actually a Persian (Iranian) word meaning 'to tar', so in actuality, mummification is a process of tarring the deceased's skin, then wrapping it in linen, a process that is repeated several times before the king is placed inside a series of coffins and then entombed inside the larger sarcophagus. The mummified remains that really impressed me were those of Ramses II and Ramses III, and even ole Thutmose III, whose treacherous tomb almost killed us back at the Valley of the Kings. There was also a mummy supposedly of Queen Hatshepsut, but there seemed to be some discrepancy over whether or not it really was her body.

I managed to take a brief walk around the ground floor area prior to meeting the others by the entrance, seeing some of the larger statues on display. What a shame we didn't have an entire day to spend in this place! It was with a heavy heart that I boarded the bus.

By now it was well after two o'clock in the afternoon, and way past our lunchtime. Hala took us to a restaurant favored by the locals, where we had a feast of pita bread, with *Baba Ganoush*, an Arabic dish of aubergine (eggplant) mashed and mixed with various seasonings, *Tzatziki*, a Greek or

Turkish meze or appetizer made of strained yogurt and mixed with cucumber, garlic and other seasonings and spices, and served cold as a dipping sauce for the pita bread, a dish made of boiled potatoes with olive oil and herbs, meat balls and barbecued chicken. Dessert was a sliced piece of guava fruit. Bloated to the max, we returned to the Hilton, where a group of us spent the rest of the afternoon in the large swimming pool.

At 6:30, we gathered in one of the conference rooms of the hotel and said our goodbyes to Hala (and each other, really), sharing our experiences and giving suggestions on how to improve the tour; exchanging emails with promises to write. Peter, Ben, Sam, Kim, Thiem, Glenn and Aaron would all be leaving for the airport at 8:30 that evening. Viviana was leaving at some ungodly hour (3:00 am or so), she was taking a flight with a stopover in France; and Jose, James, Dedra, Marie, Darlene, Dave and myself would be leaving at 6:00 am the following morning, all of us on the same EgyptAir flight back to JFK. That evening, after the first group had left, I got together with Dedra, Marie and Viviana in the café by the pool for a light dinner (the girls also had drinks). It was fun gossiping about the trip, and laughing over the funnier moments. Later, James joined us briefly. Before I went to bed, I repacked everything and separated the clothes I would be wearing for the return trip home, which didn't require a lot of thinking since I only had one clean pair of pants and shirt left! I made sure to set the hotel room alarm clock and verify the wake-up call with the front desk. I barely slept, though.

## **DAY TEN**

I was afraid the ride to the airport might be delayed by traffic, based on the congestion I'd seen up until then, but there was no traffic at that hour of the morning, and we made it to Cairo International Airport quickly. The driver, whose name escapes me, made sure we got through immigration and customs without any problems, and I handed him the last of my dollars and whatever small denominations I had left of Egyptian pounds. We had a delicious box breakfast prepared for us back at the hotel, and Jose bought coffee for James and me inside the terminal. I must say, Cairo International Airport is pretty well organized, and we boarded our flight on time. I sat in an aisle seat behind Dedra and Marie at the back of the plane; James, Jose,



Darlene and Dave sat further ahead. We hardly spoke on the flight back to New York City. Jose gave me two sleeping pills that I shared with Dedra, but neither one of us got much sleep. After arriving at JFK, at approximately 3:00 pm EST, I lost touch with everyone once I retrieved my luggage and cleared customs. I proceeded to board the sky train shuttle, heading over to terminal 2 where I had to wait three hours for my Delta flight back to Miami. I was overcome with exhaustion on the final leg of my trip, and was able to lie down on a row of seats and get some sleep since the plane was half empty. The entire journey home took over 19 hours!

I will never forget my trip to Egypt. In a span of ten days I took eight separate flights, traveling more than 8,000 miles, went from Cairo to the southernmost tip of the Nubian desert, traversed the Nile River and spent nights in three major cities. And while it is impossible to experience all of Egypt in such a short period of time, I whole-heartedly recommend touring as a means of seeing what is most important. Different tour packages allow the traveler to focus on specific areas like the antiquities, or the beach resorts, or the religious and cultural life of Egypt. There is something for everyone here.

The ancient priests used to write down the stories of the kings and gods thinking that once something was committed to the written word it would be preserved for all time, keeping the legend alive forever. And so it is with my journal. Years from now, when my memory slips and fades, I will always have these pages to remind me of the things I saw and did in the Land of the Pharaohs. To my fellow travelers (Peter, Ben, Sam, Kim, Thiem, Dedra, Marie, Viviana, Darlene, Dave, Glenn, Aaron, James and Jose...and Hala!) I thank you for a wonderful time, and hope the pages of this journal will also bring back the memory of this trip whenever you read them. Although the perspective is mine, we all shared the experiences outlined within. If I omitted anything, please forgive me.

Until next time, may your Ankh be long, your Scarab always be lucky, and the Eye of Horus keep you safe!

Richard C. Rodriguez

My trip to Egypt occurred between August 22 and August 31, 2010





