

Egypt, 2002

Today there is a lot of concern about traveling in the Middle East. Returning from almost 2 weeks in Egypt, I am writing my thoughts about what I saw while exploring the area. I have included some photos I took.

ASWAN

This was my third trip to Egypt and I saw many changes since my last visit a number of years ago. Our goal was to fly directly from Houston to Aswan by way of Paris and Cairo. Our good friend from Valencia, Spain Ingrid Roddis met us in Cairo. Ingrid speaks many languages and is always very helpful in our travels throughout the world. Arriving late at night, we had arranged a car to pick us up at the airport and to my surprise the hotel had arranged a police escort from the terminal to the other side of the Nile. The airport is some distance away from Aswan in the Western desert, so I assumed that there was some kind of security necessary through this desert area. However, there was little traffic and we arrived at one of Egypt's most famous and historic Old Cataract Hotel where we were warmly welcomed.

The Old Cataract Hotel served as a movie set for Agatha Christie's "Death on the Nile" and is now owned by Sofitel. It has recently been refurbished with all types of new and luxurious furnishings, and has been the ultimate hospitable respite for many famous persons over the last century. An impressive Moorish-style structure, it is surrounded by lush gardens on a rise above the river. The rooms are very large with high ceilings and have large balconies with splendid views of First Nile Cataract. The cataracts themselves are small granite islands in the middle of the river clustered with picturesque palms and even some historic ruins on some of them. The view is something that resembles a movie set as the river flows down from the dam around the small islands. Sailboats called feluccas are lazily sailing around these cataracts while sweeping sand dunes in the distance topped by the Aga Khan's large mausoleum on the distant horizon make the scene look like a glorious painting and the sunsets and afterglow are stunning.



Balcony view from the Old Cataract Hotel

Time here was spent in lazily sailing the cataracts and enjoying the fine local cuisine served at the hotels in the area. Aswan is highly prized by all Egyptian Arabs and serves as a winter retreat and retirement area for many Egyptians. After the long plane ride we selected this wonderful place to rest up before taking the journey farther north to Luxor.

LUXOR

Arriving at the Luxor airport is something itself. The new airport is not finished yet and the old baggage area is a scene of confusion with many porters vying for custody of the off loaded airline bags. Taking an old taxi to our hotel we rode with the breeze blowing heartily through the downed windows with the luggage strapped to a rack on the cab's top. On the way we passed through rural small village areas where lots of the transportation is by donkey and cart and the housing is very humble.

Finally winding our way through the Luxor streets we arrived at the Old Winter Palace on the east bank of the Nile, which is also famous for housing many famous guests in the last century. The previous time we stayed at this hotel it had seen grander days and looked tourist worn. At that time we moved to the New Winter Palace next door which was more comfortable. However now, the Old Winter Palace is the place to stay now that it has become another Sofitel five star hostelry with the finest of furnishings and services. The halls are wide and the rooms very large and the hotel's huge gardens and pool area are lavish with all types of ferns, palms and other foliage.

Luxor is a place like no other on earth, a place where the grandeur of ancient Thebes sits alongside of the modern town and its inhabitants. The sheer size and number of its wonderfully preserved monuments have made it Egypt's greatest attraction after the Pyramids. Predynastic remains indicate that the area has been inhabited for at least 6000 years and it has been called the World's largest open-air museum. Although there are taxis to be had in Luxor, many prefer to take the horse and carriages to destinations in the city such as the Temple of Karnak and the sound of horses hooves clapping up and down the street during the night can be heard on the tree lined corniche of the Nile.



Pam and Ingrid –Luxor Transportation

The Winter Palace also has balconies overlooking the great river so evening sunsets to the west can also be enjoyed here.



Balcony view of the Old Winter Palace

The hotel is located directly adjacent to the great Luxor Temple, which we visited several times. Two rows of crouching Sphinxes face the main entrance and at one time extended all the way to the Karnak temple, which is some distance away to the north. The front pylon is massive and flanked by two huge statues of Rameses II (1279-1213 BC) and the interior great court is surrounded by a double row of columns with lotus bud capitals and more giant statues are to be found there.



Line of crouching Sphinx near the Luxor Temple



Main pylon of the Temple of Luxor

The Luxor temple is open till late at night and is spectacularly lighted and many prefer to visit this site in the cool evening when the shadows reveal a different vista.



Ingrid and Pam in the Great Court

Farther north along the cornice on the east bank of the Nile River one may journey to the massive Temple of Karnak. This site encompasses a huge area and is characterized by its huge forest of giant carved papyrus-shaped columns. It is a spectacular complex of sanctuaries, kiosks, pylons, and obelisks all dedicated to the Theban gods and the glory of the pharaohs.

The entrance features a processional avenue of ram headed sphinxes that lead to the front of a great pylon. Entering one sees the Great Court similar to that at the Luxor temple, but on a much grander scale.



Entrance to the great Temple of Karnak



The giant pillars at the Temple of Karnak



Courtyard of the temple at Karnak

THE WEST BANK

But across the Nile, on the West bank there are many great things to see. There is now a bridge across the great river but it is about 15 km south. Most prefer to just take a small launch from Luxor to the other side where many more temples, tombs, and the Valley of the Kings and Queens await to be visited.



The glorious west bank of the Nile

Arriving on the West Bank one passes through lush green fields approaching the Desert Mountains in the distance. These mountains are where the tombs and temples of ancient Thebes are found. Kings and queens, royal children, nobles priests, artisans and even workers were entombed in these cliffs and magnificent temples to honor the cult of the pharaohs are to be found here.

There is a central ticket office that opens at 6 AM where one can purchase tickets for the monuments and tombs, but camera tickets are also required and no flash pictures may be taken in the tombs. Pam and Ingrid crossed the Nile by launch in the dark at 4:30 AM to be in line for tickets to the tomb of Queen Nefetari. Only 150 tickets a day are sold and they are sold out in about 30 minutes.



Valley of the Kings Tomb



Entrance to King Tut's Tomb

We had hired a van and Abdou, our driver to take us to a main parking area but a small Disneyland –like tram then ferried us farther up the canyon to a point just down the hill to the first tomb entrance. Each tomb has a guardian and they are more than eager to show you around inside for baksheesh (a tip). Some are lighted

but many wall paintings are only seen through a system of mirrors reflecting the outside sun. It has been said that the paintings were made using this type of lighting because torches inside the tombs would have created too much smoke. Many of these paintings are in excellent shape and it is hard to believe the visible brush strokes were made as old as 5000 years before Christ.



Example of tombs and sarcophagus



An Example of some of the tomb wall paintings

Nearby, just over the hill from the Valley of the Kings we visited the Temple of Hatshepsut at Dier al-Bahri. The freestanding structure is one of the finest monuments of ancient Egypt. Daughter of Tutmosis I, Queen Hatshepsut ruled as Pharaoh for 20 years and died in 1458 BC. The temple was raised in her honor. The temple is reached by a long causeway leading up the mountainside.



Temple of Queen Hatshepsut



Temple wall relief

Farther down the mountainside in the valley of the west bank our van took us to the Ramesseum, raised by Ramses II to the glory of himself so he could live forever in this funerary temple. It is mostly in ruins but contains the collapsed giant Colossus Statue of Ramses that once stood 17.5 meters (over 57 feet) in height.



Jim Inspecting the Rammeseum



The giant collapsed head (Colossus of Ramses II)

Another underrated temple least visited but really should not be missed is the Medinat Habu temple which is only second to Karnak. This is a beautiful structure where it is worthwhile to spend a few hours in exploring. It was the center of the economic life of Thebes for many centuries and was still inhabited in the 9th century AD. We entered the through the Syrian Gate, a large two story building. From there we got a view of the first pylon and then entered several courtyards with reliefs of Ramses III.



Medinat Habu Temple Syrian Gate



Medinat Habu Temple First Pylon



Medinat Habu Pylon showing Ramses III Conquests



Medinat Habu courtyard

Next was a visit to the Tombs of the Nobles. These are some of the best but least visited. Nestled in the foothills and among the old houses of the old village of Gurna are more than 400 tombs that date from the 6th dynasty to the Roman –Greco period. The locals serve as guides and are eager to show you what they have under their humble homes.

Gurna and the tombs





Nobles Tomb Wall Paintings



Grape Decorated Ceiling of a Tomb



CAIRO

Leaving Luxor we were scheduled on an Egyptair 747 flight to Cairo, The plane flies directly to Luxor but was late coming from London, so we waited and waited at the airport and finally arrived at the Marriott Omar Khayam Hotel on El Gizera Island in the middle of the Nile at about 2AM. Our room was not ready so we were given a 6-room suite high overlooking the Nile that first night. It was huge but too spacious for our taste. We had booked a lower rise garden room so for the next few nights we were accommodated. The desk clerk thought we were crazy to give up the suite on the 19TH floor of the tower but we felt more comfortable in the cool quiet garden area of the large hotel. The Marriott has about 6 restaurants and has a wonderful outdoor dining area where the local Arabs are fond of late night gatherings over the giant smoke pipes and coffee or tea. It truly is the place to be for many locals in the evening hours. Getting up early the next morning, we started with breakfast at Roy's Country Kitchen in the hotel where the waiters are dressed in country overalls and plaid shirts. For a minute, I thought we were in Kansas.

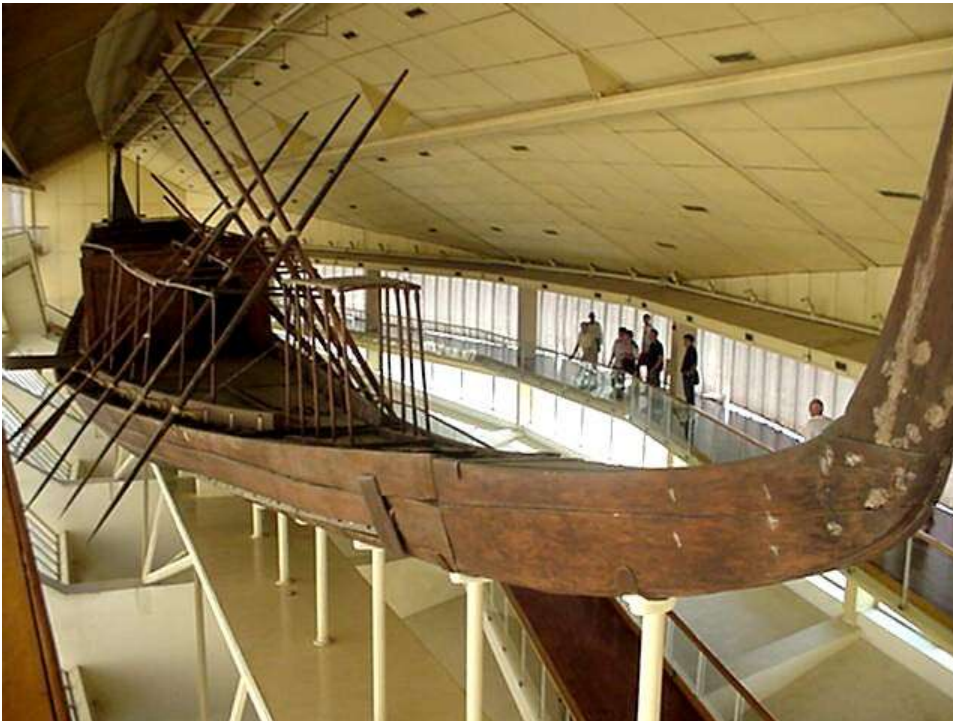
We then secured another van and headed for the Pyramids where we roamed the desert around the great remaining 7th wonder of the world and again visited the large ancient boat that had been unearthed just south of the great Pyramid of Khufu.



Excavated area around the base of the Khufu Pyramid and the Distant Boat House



The Great Western Desert near the Pyramids



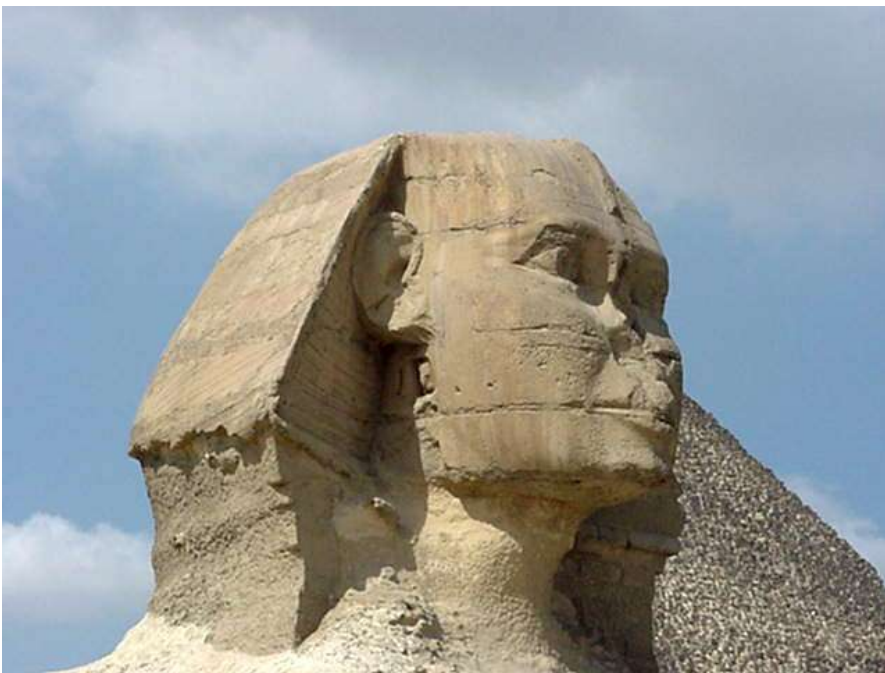
Ancient Boat found at the base of Khufu Pyramid

Taking a short ride down the hill from the Pyramids we then explored the Sphinx and this time were allowed to traverse around the entire structure. There is a

touristy sound and light show at night, but we had seen that on a previous visit and truly once is enough.



THE SPHINX



Close up of the Head

Near the Pyramids is a historic hotel called The Mena House and it is always a good place to freshen up after trudging through the desert. One can sip a cold drink or have lunch while looking through the beaded windows at the massive structures nearby.

After a brief rest, the three of us headed to Saquara where the Step Pyramid is located. It is the oldest of the Pyramids having been built for King Zoser in 2750 BC. It is about 20 km south of Cairo located out in the stark desert again just west of the lush Nile Valley. On the way we stopped at a village site to view the famous tapestries made by the children of Egypt.



The Ancient Step Pyramid at Saquara

On our last journey to this site, we were able to witness a mummy being excavated from one of the ancient tombs as work is continually being done here and new tombs are being found at regular intervals. We were able to see some of the more recent finds that are normally locked but a few Egyptian Pounds readily brings a custodian with a key. This is a lonely area with few tourists, so an armed mounted tourist policeman followed us around the area at times.



Saquara Excavation Area and One of the Tomb Walls



Leaving Saquara, our van headed back to the city and the Cairo Marriott. I earlier had attended an international geological conference at the Cairo Convention Center, so some of my business interests were finished.

Visiting the Cairo Museum near the Nile Hilton and relaxing in the beautiful gardens of the Marriott wound up the trip. We boarded out hotel transportation at 4:15 AM and headed to the Cairo airport for the journey home on the final day. We managed to return to Houston in one long day after plane changes in Paris and Atlanta. Thus ended a most memorable trip and probably the best Pam and I have ever taken. I look down at the dust of centuries still on my boots and think how lucky we were to have taken that voyage to a land that exists almost beyond our imagination.

When Howard Carter peered into the chamber King Tutenkamen's tomb , he was asked what do you see?. On my visit to Egypt, I can only join him in repeating the simple answer he gave in two short words in saying...."Wonderful things"

**Jim Richards
November 2002**