

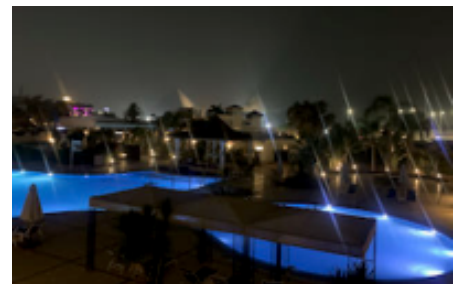
“Egypt - on my bucket list!” There’s a fascination with this crossroads of civilizations and its thousands of years of history. The Nile River running through the desert. Pyramids and the Sphinx. Mummies and tomb robbers. It was time to tick Egypt off OUR bucket list. Being unfamiliar with the country, the customs and the language, we decided to travel with a group. We chose Road Scholar (formerly “Elderhostel”) due to its reputation for organization, value and learning in small groups. They suggested a long and varied reading list. For months we pored over books and maps and watched videos. We compared notes with fellow Seattle travelers John & Kathy. How did Egypt come to be? Why is it so intriguing?



People started settling along the Nile over 10,000 years ago when the river first gave life to the desert. The rains fall far away in the highlands of Africa. The White Nile starts at Lake Victoria in Tanzania, the Blue Nile rises to the east toward the Red Sea, and the two join at Khartoum in Sudan. The river flows over 4,000 miles on its way north to empty in the Mediterranean Sea. In Egypt, north of the cataracts (waterfalls or shallows), the river slows and the valley widens enough for agriculture: date palms, wheat, alfalfa, and cabbage, plus the lotus and papyrus that are the symbols of Egypt’s

upper and lower kingdoms. About 95% of Egypt’s people have always lived in this narrow green strip where annual floods bring water and nutrient-rich silt. The Nile flows north but the prevailing winds are from the north, ideal for transportation: sail “up south” or float “down north”. Trade routes went south to gold-rich Nubia, east to the Levant, and across the Mediterranean. The barriers of deserts, cataracts and the sea provided Egypt with natural defenses against invasion, supporting Egypt’s millennia of kingdoms and dynasties, when pharaohs were both human and god.

We arrived in Cairo late at night, and were guided efficiently through the visa, baggage and transport gauntlet to meet our Road Scholar guide. Eman is licensed by Egypt’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and has undergraduate and masters degrees in history and egyptology. Her fascination began in childhood with weekly visits to the pyramids. Eman would be our professor, our advisor and our “fixer” for the duration. The bus wove from the airport through old Cairo, in traffic called the worst in the world. “There is only one rule – there are no rules”. We passed donkey carts and tuk tuks, saw mosques and neon lights, and got our first glimpses of the Nile. Then ... in the distance ... pyramids! From the balcony of our room at the Steigenberger Pyramid Hotel, those distinctive triangular shapes were faintly discernible through the hazy night sky. Even after the long flights, we were barely able to sleep in anticipation.



Good morning! “Saba al-Khair”, or “Sebaho” for short. Eman clearly and patiently went over the daily schedule, security procedures, appropriate clothing/shoes, water (drink only bottled), toilets (“relief temples”) and tipping (“to appreciate them for their excellent service”). She trained our group on the use of “Whispers”, receive-only radios with earbuds allowing us to hear her even in crowds.

Road Scholar provides activity ratings from “Easy Going” up to the “Let’s Go!” category of our Egyptian Odyssey. The itinerary was packed, so “Yallahayna!” Let’s go! We started on the Giza Plateau with the pyramids of Khufu and Khafre. Khufu (Cheops in the Greek) ruled in the 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, during the 25<sup>th</sup> century BCE, so these pyramids are about 4600 years old. They were built to last, for the neverending



afterlife of the pharaoh who was a god in human form. While ancient Egypt seemed to be obsessed with death, Eman reframed the afterlife as a joyful continuation of this world. Khufu’s is the tallest and largest of all the pyramids, the only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World still in existence. It’s hard to comprehend the sheer size of this monument. Ascending a few of its steep steps still left us far below the entrance that had been used to bring in the

remains of Pharaoh Khufu. Before sealing the entrance the myriad of items that he would need in the afterlife were carried in, from food and drink to household items and boats and shabti (small servant effigies who would do any work necessary until the end of time). Next to the Great Pyramid of Khufu is that of his son, Khafre. In filial respect he promised his pyramid would be smaller than his father’s. He kept his word - but had it built on a higher level so it LOOKS taller.

These ancient pyramids of Giza weren’t the beginning. The first dynasty began even earlier with Pharaoh Narmer, who united Upper and Lower Egypt over 5,000 years ago (about 3100 BCE). Burials began in simple tombs built of the sun-dried brick used in most early Egyptian construction. Tombs evolved into mastabas, bench-type rectangular structures used to protect the entrance and deter robbers. In the Third Dynasty (about 2700 BCE), vizier/architect Imhotep created the Step Pyramid for Pharaoh Djoser, a series of mastabas built one upon one another on the plains of Saqqara. Small stone blocks were used



instead of traditional mud bricks, the pyramid shape joining earth to the heavens, ever closer to the sun god in all its forms. Pharaoh Senefru (or Sneferu) wanted a smoother (non-stepped) path for the sungod to reach the apex. The first attempt at Dahshur was started at such a steep angle that the sidewalls threatened to fall in on the burial chamber. The angle was reduced and the “Bent Pyramid” eventually finished, but it wasn’t good enough for the pharaoh. Instead Senefru built the Red Pyramid,

the oldest complete pyramid still in existence. We hiked up to the entrance, then backed down the long low dark steep stuffy and slightly claustrophobic 250-foot long corridor into the vaulted ceiling room which was probably the burial crypt of Senefru. And Senefru's son was Khufu, builder of that Great Pyramid on the Giza plateau.

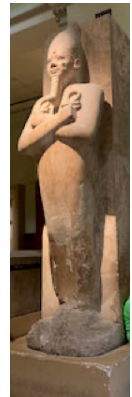


While in Cairo we visited the Great Sphinx, with its giant human head (of Khafre) perched atop the body of a lion. The Sphinx is 240 feet tip to tail, cut from the bedrock of the Giza Plateau. The new GEM (Great Egyptian Museum) will display all the King Tut items, but was behind schedule (surprise!) and still not open. We were disappointed but the "old" Egyptian Museum in Cairo had far more than we could absorb in our short visit. We studied

larger-than-life statues of Rameses II, who ruled for almost 70 years at the start of the New Kingdom (about 3500 years ago). Rameses The Great didn't want to occupy a 92-year old shriveled toothless body for his afterlife, so his statue is of Rameses at 32 years, a young virile man-god, muscular abs and all. Who can blame him? Forever is a long, long time so you might as well look and feel good! Sculpting was done for maximum durability – stone supports behind



body, fingers curled around an object and limbs held close to minimize breaking of body parts. Statues of pharaohs in life show movement, with one foot in front of another and a straight beard. Those after death had crossed arms and curled beard. There were so many items on display: busts of Nefertiti and Hatshepsut, well-preserved mummies and funeral possessions of Yuya and Thuya, golden thrones, canopic jars, nesting sarcophagi...



This all happened in our first two days. It was overwhelming. For two weeks we traveled along the Nile and across thousands of years, our guide patiently explaining and answering endless questions. We absorbed what we could. (Anna: "I'm going to take this class pass/fail." John: "I'm just going to audit the course!") Our group of 21 were "seasoned" travelers with a thirst for learning and an abundance of laughter. Rarely did anyone discuss health or doctors or politics. We sat back and enjoyed the ride, including our team-building exercise on camels.



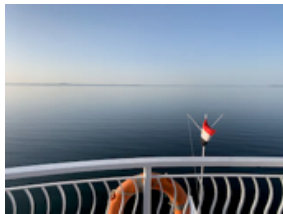
Sporting colorful blankets and halters, the camels looked well fed and tended even though they grunted and groaned like senior citizens as their knees unfolded off the sand. These "ships of the desert" (so called for the rolling motion of moving the legs on the same side at the same time) carried us for a short ride on the Giza plateau while the galabaya-clad handlers took our photos, expecting to be "appreciated" upon our return. They were.

From Cairo and Giza we flew "up south" to Aswan. The High Aswan Dam was built in the 1960's to provide hydroelectric power while controlling the annual flooding. The

dam created 300-mile long Lake Nasser, the largest human-made reservoir in the world. UNESCO began an international safeguarding campaign to rescue 22 monuments in Lower Nubia, southern Egypt and northern Sudan which would be submerged in the process. "It is not easy to choose between a heritage of the past and the present well-being of a people, living in need in the shadow of one of history's most splendid legacies..." We bussed across some very stark desert from Aswan to Abu Simbel,



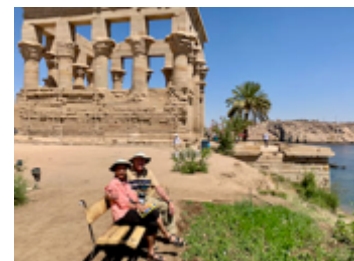
perhaps the most famous of these relocated world heritage sites, near the border with Sudan. The Temple of Abu Simbel ("father of the firstborn") was built by Rameses the Great to demonstrate his power over the Nubians. Carved directly out of the rock hillside, four giant statues guarded the temple. The entrance was aligned so that on two special dates each year, the sun's rays would shine inside onto statues of the gods Ra-Horakty, Amun Ra and Rameses, but not striking the fourth - Ptah, the god of darkness. A smaller temple to goddess Hathor was built alongside in honor of Nefertari, the favorite wife of Rameses. (He had many wives and over 100 children.) Thousands of years later, about 250,000 tons of rock were sliced into giant pieces and relocated into a newly built hill. Each cut was planned to minimize damage to the paintings, carvings and hieroglyphs of the temples and statues. The clock was ticking as the waters of Lake Nasser rose, lapping at the feet of Rameses the Great during the years of reconstruction. Abu Simbel was twice a miracle, first when built and again



when moved fifty years ago. Even the alignment was retained - the sun still shines on the statues inside the temple two days each year. Watch the YouTube videos on the Rescue of Abu Simbel and be amazed. For three days the M/S Omar El Khayem carried us along the arid shores of Lake Nasser. We were shuttled ashore to see other heritage sites which had been moved and rescued. The Temple of Amada, built during the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1295 BCE), was the oldest Egyptian temple in Nubia. Its painted reliefs and



inscriptions were in incredible condition, accidentally preserved by the plaster added when the temple had been converted to a church. Wadi El Sebou (Valley of Lions, named because of its double row of sphinxes guarding the temple) was relocated along with the temples of Dakka and Maharraqa. The entire Philae Temple complex, built late in Egypt's history (c. 380-145 BCE) and dedicated to Osiris, was moved only about 500 yards - lions, obelisks, pylons, columns, and all. And the villages? About 800,000 Nubians were "relocated". It wasn't clear where or how.





Back at the town of Aswan we transferred to the M/S Royale, another relatively small ship (about 50 cabins/100 guests) for three nights on the Nile. The boat cruised downstream (north), the riverbanks looking very green after the barren shores of Lake Nasser. A short buggy ride took us to Edfu,



the walls carved with the story of the god Osiris, loved by his wife Isis, killed by his jealous brother Seth, avenged by his son Horus. The temple had been completely covered by sand for centuries, creating the most perfectly preserved temple in Egypt, and perhaps in the

world. We stopped at Kom Ombo ("hill of gold"), dedicated to falcon god Horus and crocodile god Sobek, built during the Ptolemaic/Roman era (3<sup>rd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE). The narrow green banks of the Nile passed slowly by, contrasting sharply with the yellow/brown/red sands and cliffs behind. Small fishing boats. Dahabiyas & feluccas. Water buffalo and goats.



We finally docked in Luxor, right across the street from the famous temple, seeing the long avenue of the sphinxes. The grand temples of Karnak and Luxor were built about 1-1/2 miles apart on the east bank of the Nile, where the sun rises, for Egyptians to worship their pharaohs and gods.



Instead of continuing to use pyramids which were easily discovered and robbed, burials were now in tombs hidden in the Valley of the Kings on the west side of the Nile River. Backed by a natural rock pyramid, the tombs are



scattered around the valley with more still being discovered. The Theban Mapping Project begun in 1978 by Dr. Kent Weeks marks the location of each discovery, with famous boy-King Tut being KV62. (See YouTube videos on Dr. Weeks, including one done by the BBC.) We saw the mummy of Tut-Ankh-Amun in KV62, as well as visiting three other tombs, absolutely gob-smacked by the hieroglyphs and

Painted reliefs and stories they told. Egypt depends on tourism but the hordes bring humidity and carbon dioxide



as well as careless touching, so visits are restricted and many artifacts are protected by glass. The Valley of the Queens for beloved wives and children is also on the west side of the Nile.

These tombs were decorated with reliefs, paintings, carvings and hieroglyphs to rival those of the pharaohs. Nearby is the Temple of Hatshepsut, a monument to her



determination, despite attempts by later pharaohs to obliterate her from history. Queen Hatshepsut started as regent to a very young pharaoh, but ruled by herself wearing the false beard of the pharaoh for 22 years, bringing wealth to Egypt through extensive trade. In the same area are the Colossi of Memnon, being rebuilt like giant three-dimensional jigsaw puzzles

with missing parts and extra pieces scattered about the countryside, and no picture on the front of a box to help. At the end of each visit we walked through rows of vendors lining our return to the bus. Eman coached us on how to navigate this “Valley of the Hawks”, starting with simple head shaking and moving to “Laa” (no thanks) and finally to a firm, non-smiling “Khalas!” (“Stop! Enough! I’m done!”). It’s always good to know “shukran”, or thank you, as well.

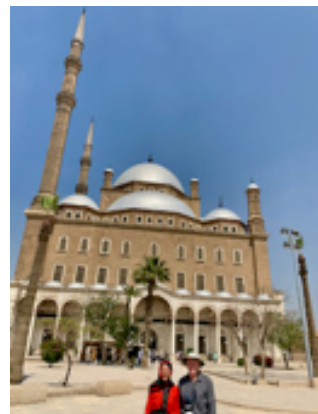


On the east side of the Nile we were again overwhelmed, this time at Karnak. A cult temple dedicated to Amun Ra and his wife/goddess Mut, Karnak is the largest religious complex ever built. The temple complex at Luxor was much smaller, but unique due to its variety. There were temples dedicated to Egyptian gods, a Roman temple, a Christian church and an 8<sup>th</sup> century mosque (one of the oldest in Luxor). The Luxor Museum was a true gem, each artifact beautifully displayed and described.

Our tour guide “Eman-Siri” had answers to everything, bottomless patience, flexibility when the schedule needed to change, and a great sense of humor. She followed the party line in government and politics and the status of women’s status. To her, ancient Egypt was first and best from architecture and engineering to medicine and calendars. Eman



coordinated our lectures on everything from geology to restoration procedures to hieroglyphs and the Rosetta Stone. We came to recognize patterns: gods (Horus, Hathor, Anubis, Bes, Sobek, Hapi); papyrus and lotus; battle and conquests; construction styles



(pylons or monumental gates at entry ways and hypostyle halls supported by columns); oblong cartouches containing the names of pharaohs. Eman explained the five pillars or ritual obligations of Islam, touring us through gorgeous mosques as well as Coptic Christian churches in Cairo. She helped us with local foods: hummus, falafel and baba ghanouj; dates, oranges, and guava; labneh (yogurt),



olives, cheeses and endless desserts. As a Muslim during Ramadan, she took no food or drink (including water) from sunrise to sunset, introducing us to the concept of “iftar”, the fast-breaking meal eaten after sunset.

“But is it safe?” Really – where is it safe? Not in the United States, home of mass shootings. We felt very safe on our trip - except perhaps in the chaos of Cairo traffic. An Egyptian antiquities & tourism “official” (plainsclothed guard) was always with the group. Every hotel, museum and archeological site screened people and bags. Every site had a guard, to protect the treasures of history as well as the tourists who are Egypt’s primary source of income.



We’ve been home for weeks and are still learning, reading, talking and thinking. No wonder people have spent their lives studying Egypt. There is too much to tell in a journal or absorb as a reader. If you can do it – go!!! And if not Egypt, what fascinates you? Life is short. Seize it!



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