

Egypt: the experience of a lifetime



THE STREETS OF CAIRO

By Sean McLennan

There is something about Egypt that inspires. How can we look at the structures and art of this ancient civilization and not be moved beyond words? My own fascination with Egypt began when I was a child, and has continued throughout my life. It had always been a dream of mine to visit this country and see these monuments for myself, because no matter how many pictures you look at, no matter how many books you read, there is just nothing as powerful as the real thing.

My goal is not to try and succinctly summarize an entire country for you, nor to point out why the history of this country is important to our own. All I wish to convey to you is that, even in this day and age, it is still possible to have certain kinds of experiences; that the profound wonder and awe of discovery is still attainable. Egypt, by and large, invented tourism and so the range of possible experiences is staggering. You can stay in five-star hotels and be herded from site to site in air-conditioned busses (making a number of stops at “reputable” merchants along the way), or you can lie on the beaches of the Red Sea and take part in some world-class scuba diving. These are not the experiences I mean; I speak to those that like to have control over their destination and get down and dirty by doing things themselves. I speak

to those that have a sense of adventure and fascination with history.

I visited Egypt with a close friend of mine, Pam, and the memories we have of this trip are some of the best of our lives. On the Giza Plateau, we had the run of the rock tombs that surround the Sphinx and Pyramids, and could explore them alone and at will. We hiked up the side of an outcropping of rock that overlooks the Plateau and witnessed a spectacular sunset behind the world’s grandest monuments. We had time completely to ourselves in the little-visited (but every bit as remarkable) pyramid at Dashur, on military grounds just south of Cairo. We explored the desert around Saqqarra, finding barely excavated ruins. We were welcomed into the homes of locals in Luxor and arranged a special police convoy to see the unforgettable Temple at Abydos in the heart of an Islamic-fundamentalist area. Although they don’t quite constitute “Indiana Jones” material, none of these activities are on the typical tourist itinerary. Each was imbued with a sense of discovery untainted by the trappings of traditional tourism. At times we were able to escape the crowds, the noise, the would-be guides and the hawkers, enabling us to truly get a sense of what it would be like to find one of these sites or to actually have been there when they were in their full glory. The beaten path in Egypt is paved and four-lanes across, but it’s not hard to make a detour. The side roads are little more than paths, but with a little perseverance they’re navigable.

Choosing a time of year to visit Egypt is important, and usually just a trade-off between how much heat you can handle and how many tourists you can handle. The summer is definitely the off season because of the heat—you’re certainly looking at the high thirties, as high as fifty degrees in the south. Of

course, the lack of humidity helps make it more bearable. By contrast, in the winter the nights and the tombs can be downright chilly (take a sweater!) and that also drives people away. High seasons are in the spring and fall, when the temperatures are most moderate.

Pam and I landed in Cairo with a reservation at a hotel downtown and no other plans. Accommodations vary widely, from as little as \$10CDN a night to hundreds of dollars a night (this, of course, also depends on the season). For the most part, you get what you pay for. If you’re on a budget and take the attitude that you’re not in the west and so your expectations shouldn’t be too high, the \$20CDN range will get you something that has decent running water, clean beds, and is bug-free. Don’t be afraid to call from Canada—anyone who answers will speak enough English to at least make a reservation.

Very quickly you will discover that there is no such thing as a fixed price in Egypt—especially for you as a rich foreigner! Prices will immediately go up. Everything is negotiable, including hotel rooms, so don’t be afraid to fight for a good deal. And don’t be afraid to walk away—once you’re there, it’s perfectly acceptable to ask to see your room before you commit and reasonable to insist on checking out more than one hotel. In Cairo, you’ll probably want to be within walking distance of Tahrir Square (centre of the downtown attractions including the Cairo Museum) and there are a number of reasonably priced hotels nearby. The other major cities along the Nile—Luxor and Aswan—aren’t really big enough for location to make an appreciable difference. Guidebooks are the best place to get a good handle on accommodations—I recommend *Lonely Planet* and *Anthony West’s Traveler’s Key to Ancient Egypt*.

Between cities, the best budget transportation is the train. It’s fast and reasonably cheap, even the first class seats (highly recommended). Of course, to get the full Egyptian experience, you might choose a leisurely Nile Cruise—they are not difficult to arrange and vary greatly in duration, cost, destination and how tour-inclusive they are. You’re best off shopping around for one while there—guidebooks and your hotel can help you make the necessary arrangements.



THE TEMPLE AT KARNAK

Within cities, you won’t have any difficulty finding transportation. Often taxis will come to a screeching halt to offer rides to foreign pedestrians. In Luxor and Aswan, south of Cairo, horse-drawn carriages are also a major form of transportation. You’ll be declining offers at every turn and may come to regret actually trying to walk anywhere. It is also not uncommon to hire a taxi and driver to chauffeur you personally for the day.

The key to dealing with transportation is *agreeing on a price first*. In Cairo, if you have a good idea of how much the taxi *should* cost, you can just hand the driver a wad of cash as you jump out and hope that he wasn’t expecting more. Still, it’s always best to negotiate in advance: meters simply aren’t used. If you do get into a tight situation, it’s good to know that the police (they are *everywhere*) are inclined to favour tourists, since a huge portion of the country’s economy depends on them going home with a good impression.

Egypt isn’t exactly a gay mecca,



THE SPHINX

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KALABSHA

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although there is a thriving (primarily male) underground subculture. Homosexuality is not illegal (although arrests can be made on public decency grounds) and, in fact, it is quite common practice among straight men. Sex between men is explicitly forbidden by Islamic law, but in Egypt there exists a strong social division between public and private life, and as long as it never gets out, and as long as you're playing the traditional male role in such encounters, there is no dishonour. It even appears culturally preferable to the more heinous

crime of sex with a woman outside of marriage. In fact, foreign men wearing earrings or exhibiting other perceived homosexual traits will often be the target of same-sex attention and propositions, invited or not. Foreigners of both genders are held in low esteem and assumed promiscuous, so it has become socially acceptable for them to be an outlet for sexual frustration. In Cairo, the Nile Hilton next door to the Cairo Museum, hosts the closest thing there is to a gay bar (the surrounding area near the Nile and Tahrir Square are notoriously gay areas).

That being said, there are much better places in the world to have fun of that nature if you're so inclined—here you are much

better off focusing on the sights and monuments. And, in that regard, there is more than enough to keep you occupied.

Abandoning organized tours and going out on your own is demanding, make no mistake. And when I recommend going with no fixed plans, that does not mean going without goals. Do your homework and know what you want to see! Be flexible and give yourself as much time as possible. If there is any humanly possible way you can get student ID, do—it will save you a fortune on site admissions (by far one of the biggest costs you'll encounter). And learn your Arabic numbers, both written and spoken (Pam and I used card games to practice); the first time a merchant discusses acceptable prices with his partner in Arabic, you'll realize why.

There will be ups and downs. At times you will be taken advantage of. At times you will be overwhelmed. At times you will be so frustrated by the people you encounter on the streets, you'll be ready to tear out your hair. (The encounter usually proceeds: "Welcome to Egypt!" "Thank you." "Where are you from?" "Canada." "Ah! Canada Dry!", then they try to sell you something. It grows old very quickly). But at times you will be elated beyond anything that you have ever imagined, and all the negative aspects fade away. The enormity of this ancient civilization will

forever be impressed upon your psyche. You will return home with more than a handful of cheesy photos and souvenirs. You will return home changed.

All photos in this story by Sean McLennan



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