

lonely planet

Egypt

includes guide to Pharaonic gods, tombs & temples

Katie has wanted to see the pyramids since she was a kid. Plans were tentatively made, but cancelled in the wake of September 11th, 2001. We were concerned about what the Americans might do next, and what would be the reaction in the Middle East. Now it's April, things are no worse and we're off to Egypt.



Cairo, 2 April, 2002

The first impression is of New York on the Nile, with elevated highways and chaotic traffic. Our battered Renault taxicab delivers us through the maelstrom to the relative peace of Zamalek, an island neighbourhood of residences, embassies and tree-lined streets.

The main street through Zamalek is 26 July Street, named for the date on which the unloved monarch King Farouk abdicated, following a popular uprising. The modernization of Egypt starts with that event and leads to the present chaos of Cairo, a city that has grown too much, too fast.

Other great cities have gone down that road, London in the industrial revolution or New York in its immigration boom of a hundred years ago. The problems of those days were bad water, epidemics of disease, crowding, horse manure and filth running down the streets. Cairo, a boom town of the motor age has a million cars and bad air. But, you can drink the water here, walk about and meet the people in complete safety and you can get around by subway or taxi. Not just a pretty face, Cairo is hard work.



26 July Street operates on two levels. Above our heads, it's a highway with six lanes of traffic on four lanes of road. At ground level, there's the stop and go of urban traffic and wide sidewalks with open storefronts.

We land at Mayfair Hotel, operated by an Egyptian-Canadian man who introduces himself as Taher. His reception area is proudly decorated with Canadian flags and a framed Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Our little room for E£63 (C\$23) with brekky looks into an air shaft. With no street exposure, it gives us a welcome break from the din of Cairo traffic. Mayfair also has a pleasant, shaded terrace from which you can look down on Aziz Osman Street and watch the accidents.



**MAYFAIR
HOTEL**

9, Aziz Osman St., Zamalek
Branch of 26 July St. - Cairo
Tel. : 7357315 - Fax : 7350424
web : www.mayfaircairo.com
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فندق ماي فير

٩ ش العزيز عثمان الزمالك
متفرع من ٢٦ يوليو
تليفون ٧٣٥٧٣١٥



Canadian Management



There's a crash and we all look out from the terrace to see what's happened. The driver of the black previously unblemished car has his hands around the neck of the driver in the van. Passers-by pull them apart.

"Which vehicle had the right of way here?" I ask the man standing next to me.

"They both had the right of way. Oh don't worry about it" he says, responding to my puzzled look. "It happens on this corner about once a day."



On our first full day in Cairo, we head out to the pyramids at Giza. What can you say about the pyramids? Very big, very old.

The surprise is the lack of tourists. We expected to see a crowd, but the biggest groups are school outings, Egyptian kids visiting their own history. As tourists, we are easily outnumbered by the touts and hustlers. This is something we will have to get used to.

"Allo! Where you from?"

"Canada"

"Canada Dry! You want camel ride? I give you very good brice."

"La, shukran" (no, thank you)

" Why not? Is very good camel. Here, lady, sit on camel, you will see. Only twenty bounds!. You can ride all around!"



Kate is standing her ground. There's no way he is going to get her on that camel.



To the north is Cairo, visible from this high plateau as far as you can see in the smog. To the south is the empty desert, and on the horizon, the distant pyramids of Saqqara.



One of the hustlers is peddling kaffiyas, a good thing for me because I have arrived in Egypt with no hat.





Day two, we attend the Egyptian Museum, and have a treat after, with tea and sheesha in a tea room on Midan Tahrir.



There's a soccer game on the big-screen T.V. and the room is full of excited fans, all drinking tea and smoking their hookahs.

The best outing in Cairo is a riverboat that runs two hours down to Qanater where dams control water levels in the Nile delta. The dam area is an urban escape, like the Toronto Islands, a place where you can sit on the green grass in the shade, or rent a bicycle, a horse, a caleche, a motorbike, a felucca. The all-day excursion costs E£5 per person, (less than \$2) and it's a great way to meet the people. There are no tourists on this boat.





There's one very low bridge that almost blocks our way. The skipper raises a ruckus with his horn and everyone on the upper deck has to crouch down. Screaming and ululations as we pass under, creating an echo chamber.







Galloping horses and smelly little motorbikes charge through the crowds at Qanater, all quite unregulated. As everywhere in Egypt, there is a heavy police presence armed with automatic assault rifles, but they take no interest in traffic control. An Egyptian friend explained it like this: *"Egypt is a very free country. You can do just about anything you want here, as long as it doesn't irritate the government."*

One of the green parks has a large building in it, and the guards at the gate are dressed in military gear, not the black woolen outfit of the police. As we approach the gate a young soldier steps forward. Gesturing with his assault rifle, he explains to us in perfectly understood Arabic that if we enter, he will have to shoot us. But he says it with a smile.

Today is Friday, the sabbath, and religious services broadcast from the nearby minaret try vainly to compete with the noisy canned music of the outdoor restaurants.



On the return voyage, some young people have rigged up a tape player; the music is rhythmic and repetitive. With finger cymbals, clapping and dancing they keep the party going all the way back to Cairo.

We meet a young couple who lived for twelve years in New York and left in the wake of the recent events. Their two little girls are American Citizens. Also, Nadia who is married to a Texan, on a family outing with her brother who speaks fluent German. They invite us to join their group for tea.

And Mohammed. Mohammed is a teacher of English in a madrassa school.

"I have ordered a set of English language tapes from B.B.C. That is the standard for English pronunciation, yes?"

Yes it is, but there is also an American standard pronunciation.

"I hate America. I will use the B.B.C. language."

I never go into controversies when travelling; I try to behave as a guest. But Mohammed wants to talk about his hate list which includes America, Israel and all Jews and particularly the person of Ariel Sharon the Israeli Prime Minister. *"He is a murderer, a war criminal. They should kill him. I would like to kill him!"*

"O.K. agreed, Sharon is a war criminal, but look Mohammed, I'm a practical man, an engineer. I don't have your passion for this. If you do kill Sharon, what will happen next? Will the Israelis then choose a more moderate leader, or will they elect someone even more extreme than Sharon and make matters even worse? Are the Palestinians really going to defeat the Israelis or will they in the end have to settle with them?"

"Sharon deserves to die. For the rest of them, it is written that at the end of days we will destroy all the Jews. Even the rocks and trees will call out to us – 'A Jew is hiding behind me. Come and kill him!'" And after this is done, the day of judgement will come. What I tell you is true. It is written."

Mohammed goes to rejoin his group of friends on the top deck and invites us both to join them. Thanks, but we are going to hang down here where it's shady and the passion is musical, not political or religious. He returns in five minutes with a rose.

"I have spoken very strongly. I am afraid you will think I am fanatic. I am not really fanatic. I would like to be your friend." He gives me the rose.



It seems the world needs a dialectic, a struggle between this and that. The whole twentieth century was a battle between the thesis of capitalism and the antithesis of communism. I remember well the futile exercises we practiced at school, huddled in the hallways, covering our eyes and the backs of our necks for protection against atomic bombs. Somehow, we got used to it.

So soon after the end of that bout, a new challenger has entered the ring, one who has stood outside for about five centuries or so. In this corner - Islam, returning for a grudge match, armed with the strength of Sharia law and a moral certitude that comes directly and infallibly from God. In the other corner, fresh from a recent victory, is secular global capitalism, confident in the supremacy of its economic laws. There is no middle ground in these struggles. You can step aside and watch, but know that your spectator seat is not a place of safety. Here I sit, holding a rose given me by an angry Islamist who wants to be my friend. I go upstairs to visit Muhammed and his group, and we exchange addresses.

"Muhammad my friend, you have to travel, you have to meet those who disagree with you. There are many ways of seeing the truth, even that which is written."



As we sail back to Cairo, the wind has come up and it carries with it the dust of the Sahara. The dust irritates our eyes and turns our hair to a wild gritty tangle. We chew the air, the fine grit crunching in our teeth. The sun's disk, pale and moon-like hangs low in the late afternoon sky.



Across the street from the boat landing is the Ramses Hilton Hotel. We are heading for the train station, but first we need to impose on Mr. Hilton's hospitality for a pee. We enter the vast cathedral of the lobby, all gritty and wind-blown, carrying our back-packs. I'm reminded of that scene where Peter O'toole's Lawrence of Arabia walks out of the desert into the Cairo Officers' Club. An Arabic-looking gentleman in a fine western suit is being examined with a metal detector, and his baggage taken apart. We are waved through without a glance. I sure hope he gets in because he appears to be the only person here who is not an employee.

We sit at a little stone table by a brass railing and a waiter approaches. "I'd like a Stella and Madame would like tea, and where is the bathroom please?"

"I'm sorry sir, but there is a ten dollar or forty-three pound per person minimum. Shall I bring menus?"

My impatience pops out, I'm getting desperate here. "How is it I can negotiate with Cairo's taxi drivers but I can't do business with Mr. Hilton?"

He bends down close to my ear, like a co-conspirator, "Go upstairs. That stair there. Go in the dining room. No minimum." He walks away.

The dining room is magnificent, a full height window wall overlooks the Nile, city lights reflecting on the current in the gathering dusk, tables set with pink linen and real silver, flowers, candles flickering in little glass chimneys. We take a table at the window, a scene from a luxury travel brochure, except for two scruffy imposters, their back-packs leaning against a column, consulting their Lonely Planet. No other customers.

We have our beer and tea and our relief, and we're very careful not to spill on the tablecloth. Thank you Mr. Hilton. Not such a bad fellow once we figured out the rules.


Out the front door, a uniformed flunky whistles for a taxi and we are gone, leaving the Ramses Hilton to its solitary Arabic guest.

Off we go now to Ramses Station to catch a train to Aswan. While at the station, I am compelled to wait in line for a loo; occasionally this can be a challenging experience in a place like Egypt.

I remember the first time I ever confronted a squat toilet, long ago in rural France. I thought it looked like the entrance to Hell. Over the years, I've got used to them, but still when I push open that door, I'm hoping for a western-style facility.

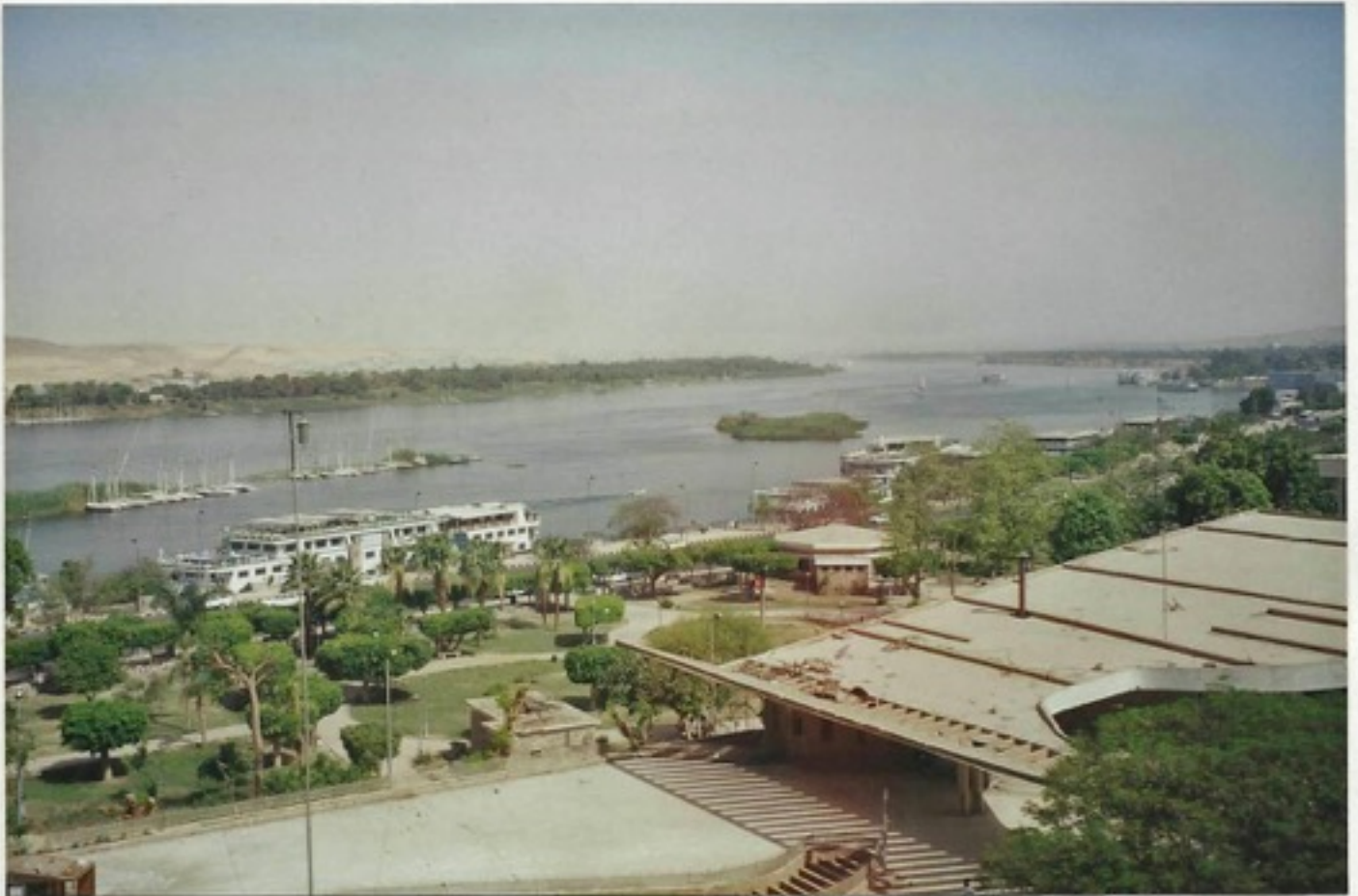
As I reach the head of the line, a jellabiya-clad fellow comes out of a cubicle and I find my wish has been granted, (il hamdu lillah). But the toilet has two big muddy foot-prints where he has squatted up on the seat.

I wonder, is this the first time the fellow has seen a western toilet? Did it look to him like the entrance to Hell?

 BILLET A PRIX GLOBAL	 TRAIN NO.: 84	29958 PAIEMENT : CASH
PARCOURS : I DE : CAIRO A : ASWAN	DATE 5.4.02 HEURE 20.00	ONE DPL 
NAME : Paulsen Wagon Wk. shop.	 VOITURE No. : 2	PAX Two
NO. OF PASSPORT :	NUMERO DES PLACES : 5-6	Prix Total des Wagons Lits 90-2-4169-0
NATIONALITE : Canadian		Prix Total 8-4-2002 CAIRO - R. A. E.

صورة المسافر

We buy the Wagon Lit sleeper train for the 1000 Km overnight ride to Aswan. Fed and bedded down while isolated in a tiny compartment for 15 hours, at E£700 (\$250), we won't do this again. Egypt is an expensive place to visit if you intend to see it without really visiting. The Wagon Lit, the cruises and the guided tours are all set up to spare you from discomfort or the perception of danger, but they are costly and they diminish the experience



We check into Hotel Ramses, at \$30 including brekkie. Our room has a splendid view over the Nile

The scene below our window is the back yard of the tourist police building. These young men stand guard all day wearing black wool outfits in the desert heat. Guards are at street corners, hotels, tourist sites, official buildings and all along the river. This is where they live when they are off duty. It's a hard assignment. From our high window, we watch them eating, washing, talking, playing cards, doing their prayers and bedding down on the ground.



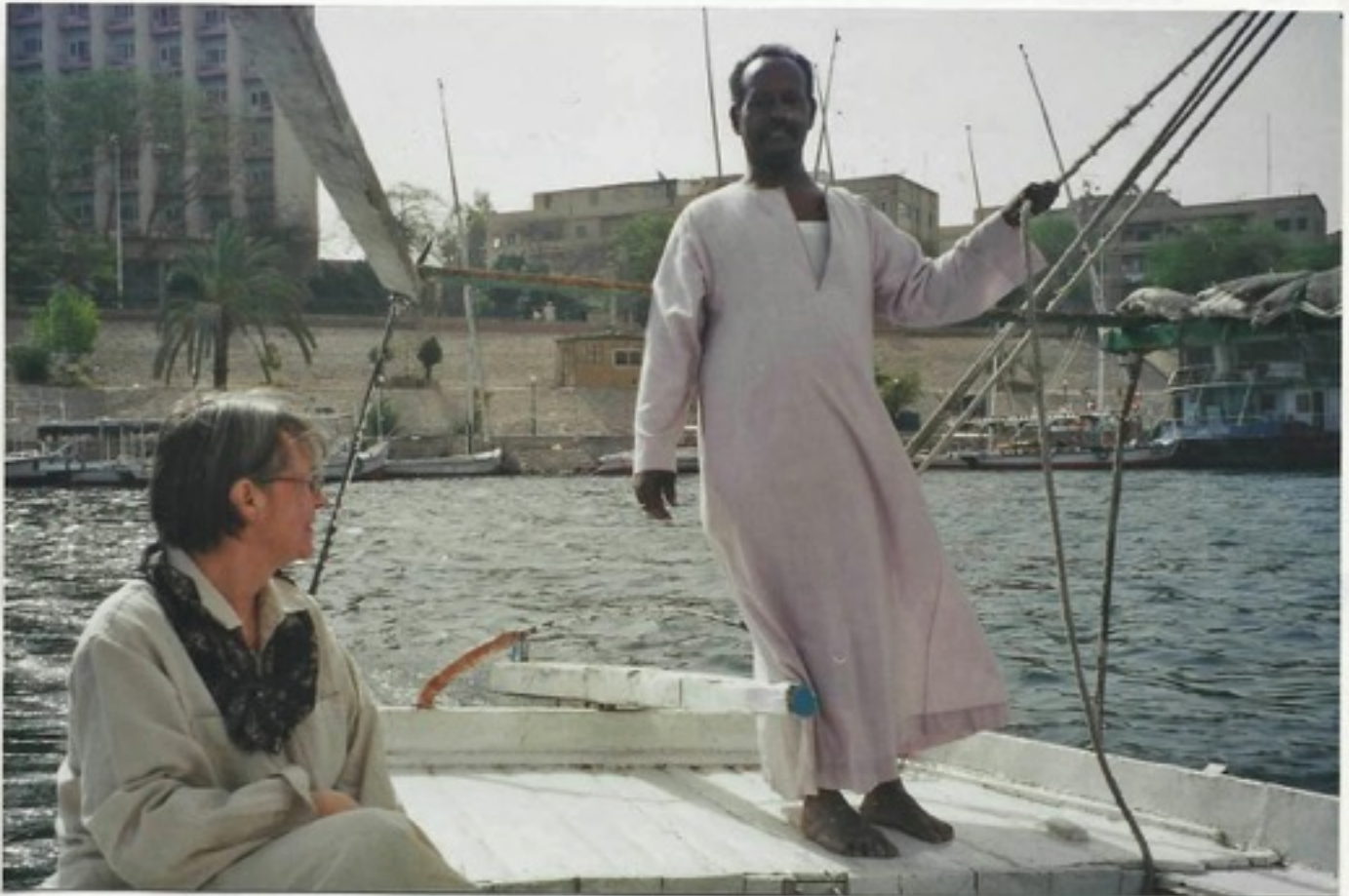


Walking along the corniche, the river is to our left, a green park up the hill to our right. A large steel bolt bangs down on the pavement just in front of us. The ubiquitous young policeman is there; he signals us to stop while runs up the hill in pursuit, with his Kalashnikov at the ready. Minutes later, he returns, apparently not having found the trouble-maker. We continue our walk.



مجلس محلي محافظة أسوان
انتخبوا مرشحي الحزب الوطني
من اجل الرخاء، وشباب أسوان
عبدعوض محمود ٨ ساعد
دياب عبداللهم ٢ البعل
أحمد راشد ٦ القانون
عبد الرحمن ابا زيد ٣ السياحة
محمد رجب ١ الزراعة
مع تحياتي لجانة عوض توك

Allo. You want taxi? No, thank you. Why not? Is very good taxi. Where you from? Canada. Canada Dry! Where you going? Nowhere. I take you there, only five bounds. You want to go to high dam? No thank you. Maybe later, yes? O.K. maybe later. What hotel you are staying? I will pick you up. What time I should pick you up? No, no. When I need you I will find you. My name Muhammad, and that is my taxi. You find me here, OK? Muhammad



Allo, you want felucca? Where you from? Canada Dry! I give you good brice!

We take the felucca tour around the Elephantine Islands and across the front of the classy Old Cataract Hotel. There is a pre-sailing haggle from £40 down to £20 and then a longer post-sailing haggle from £20 up to £21.50. After the din of Cairo, this place and this river feel like the entrance to Heaven. Egyptians in the smaller places like to disparage Cairo just as Canadians do to Toronto.

"Cairo is the Mother of the World, but here you can live better. I do not want to live in Cairo."







The street markets are lively and colourful, everything can be bought here and everything is negotiable. *"Allo! Come see my shop. Come in! Where you from?"* There are a lot of vendors and very few tourists. The hustle can be intense at times, but it's never aggressive or threatening.













I buy a jallabiya for about \$10, and find it much more comfortable in the heat than trousers. With my kaffiyeh and head-band worn in the bedouin style and sunglasses, I look like Yasser Arafat and receive a lot of approving comments and thumbs-up from passers-by.

One young man approaching with mock seriousness and a pointing finger calls out – *"If Sharon see you he will kill you!"*

"NO! I will kill him first!"

"Hah Me too."



We have been cooked and sunburned in Aswan and after drinking gallons of tapwater, we are both feeling ever so slightly "indisposed". Enter Ahmed, an energetic young man with a cell phone welded to his ear who works out of our hotel and sells leftover spaces on cruise boats, among other things. After some hours of discussion we have decided to treat ourselves to a rest cure: two days in a German cruise boat, for a leftover price, the voyage terminating at our next destination, Luxor.



So this is where the tourists are, on these floating palaces cruising the Nile and attending the sites on air-conditioned buses. In between excursions they sit around the pool, eating and drinking very well. In the evening, entertainments are brought in. We see German boats, Italian boats, French, English and Japanese boats. No Americans at all.





Our German fellow travellers are a quiet lot with little of the boisterous forced enjoyment that you might expect. We sit on deck too and watch the Nile valley pass by. The scary thing is that except for our language deficiency, we would appear to fit right in.



These two people have been playing craps continually and intensely, shaking their dice in a cup and writing scores on a notepad. They have seen nothing else. At meal-times they add up the page, have a quick look around and head downstairs.

The people on the floating palaces are like travellers from another planet. Indecently naked, drinks in hand, They wave to the shore and make videos. There's a barrier of water between the two groups, and barriers of culture and religion and wealth and centuries of time. What do they think of all this, these rural Egyptians? The only reaction comes from the children. They wave and whistle and ululate as we pass by.



Along the way we pass many of these ageless villages. Do they date from the pharonic era or are they of recent construction? How could anyone tell? In these places you can live on nothing; you keep a plot of beans, onions and whatever, a few chickens, you do some seasonal agricultural work, fish in the river, attend to your prayers and you get by. You get everything that you need and nothing that you want. From these places come the millions who swell the populations of Cairo looking for a better life. We pass by, observing their daily riverside rituals - carrying buckets of water, bathing, doing laundry, watering donkeys.



The daily program posted by the grand staircase announces a jallabiya party in the bar tonight. Costumes are passed around for those who want them, fancy bejewelled colourful costumes like good ol' boys in a shriners' parade. I wear my Arafat outfit. Every time someone takes my picture, I demand bak' sheesh, but it gets me nowhere.



Gut abend, Herr Arafat. Wie gates sie heute?





We have landed in a strip of posh hotels out at the south end of Luxor. The hotels don't seem to be doing much business but the touts are ever hopeful. The most memorable one is about eight years old and speaks very well in English. His persistent little voice comes from down by my elbow. *"Allo! Where you from? Canada Dry! You want felucca? My felucca right here. I take you Banana Island, only forty pounds. Come, I show you, we go. Why not?"*

"Maybe tomorrow."

"We should go today, weather is good today"

"And tomorrow it is going to snow?"

"Who knows, tomorrow we may die."

"Look! There's no wind today."

"No wind, no problem, I have motorboat too. Come, I show you"



Luxor has one traffic light. It's on the Corniche right at the corner of the Luxor Temple and a sign reminds us that "Respecting The Traffic Light Is a Progress and Civilized Aspect" But the sign is not written in Arabic and the traffic light does not work. It demonstrates the difficulty of doing things in Egypt that we simply take for granted in Canada.

The sign might better say – "This is Egypt. Enjoy your visit but don't expect everything to be just like it is at home." Such a sign could well be posted at every entry point to every country.



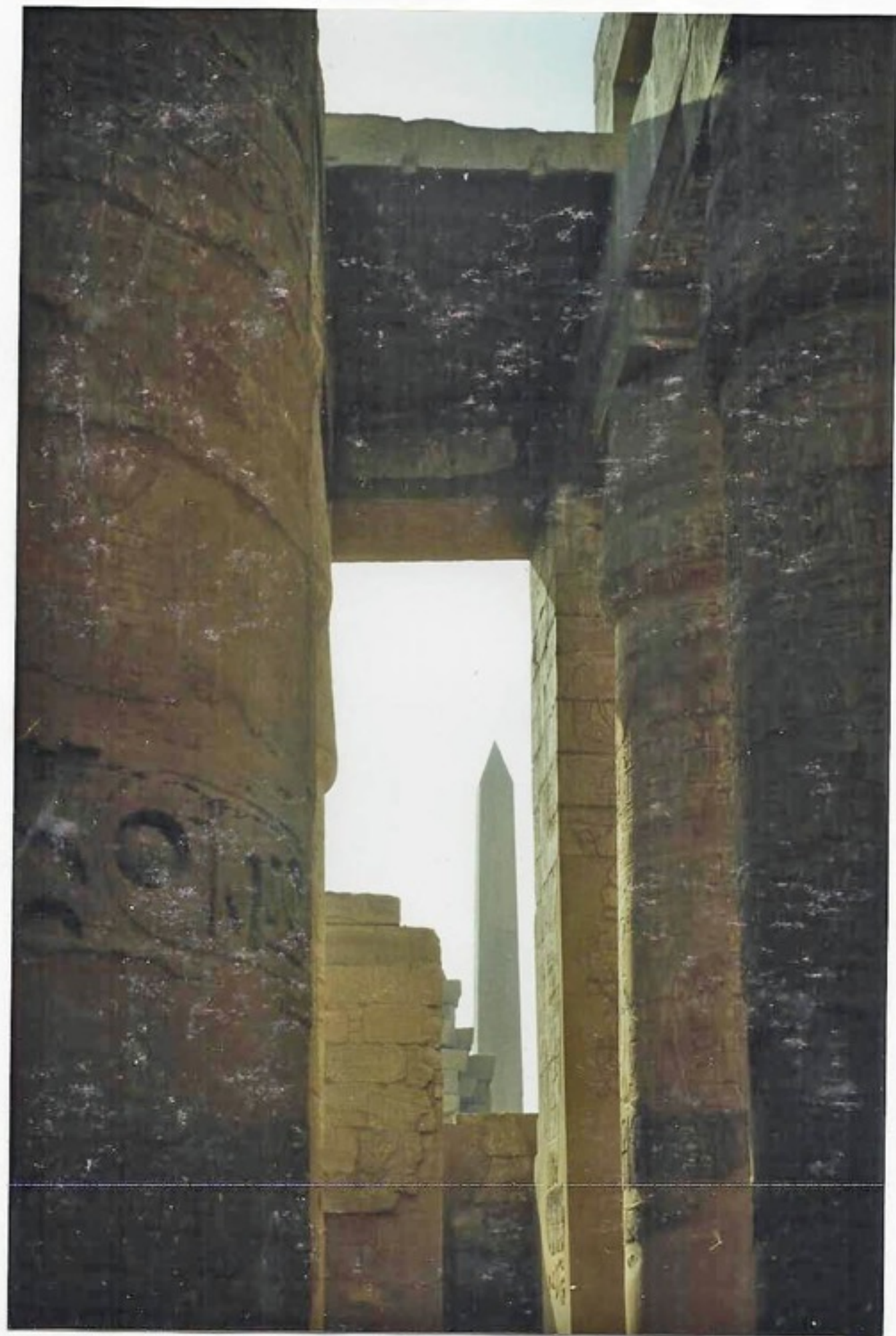




At the entrance to the Temple of Luxor there are two great statues of Ramses II, and a tall obelisk. There is also another plinth which used to support another matching obelisk. Can you guess where that obelisk has gone to?



You win the cigar if you guessed Place de la Concorde, Paris.







We buy the tour to Valley of the Kings and Hatshepsut Temple in an air-con minibus, trying to go easy on ourselves in the intense heat of this place. We seek out the shaded places and scamper like rats across the open spaces to the next shelter. The other passengers in our mini refrigerator are an international bunch of young back-packers. Our guide is Aladdin, in Arabic say Al ad **din**.



We have come out into the light long enough to be photographed.

Luxor sits on top of the old Egyptian capital Thebes, dating from about 2000 BC to 1000 BC. You can see the old city where it has been preserved in the "Temples of Karnak" on the north edge of town. Not just another ruined temple, this is a great city with monumental architecture, long vistas and grand public spaces. We are as future travellers coming upon the ruins of Paris or Washington in the year AD5500.

We sit in the public squares and great halls trying to see it again with all its brightly coloured finishes and animated by the Theban people. It's overwhelming.











Walking through a market street on our last day in Luxor, we pass a shop that sells tape cassettes and CD's.

"Allo! Welcome to Egypt! Where you from?"

"Canada"

"Celine Dion!"

Yes, yes, oh yes, thank you!



ABDO ALAA ROZAIK
 TAXI DRIVER
 TO ANY WAY
 ADDRESS – MAMNON S.T
 WEST BANK - LUXOR

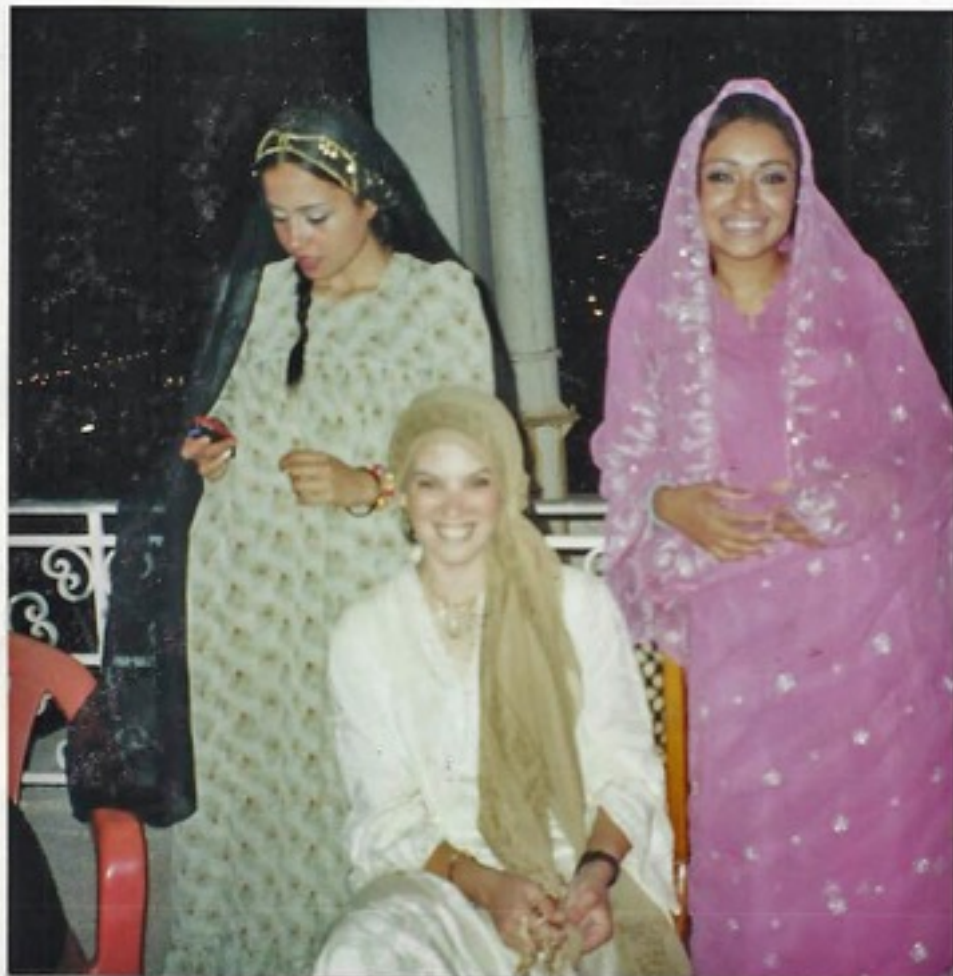
Tel : 095 / 310051 Tel : 095 / 312271

Our hotel in Luxor has a rooftop terrace a perfect place to catch a breeze and watch the sunset. It's usually quiet up here, but tonight we are invaded by a group of university students from Cairo. They are celebrating the last night of their class trip to Luxor.



This is a young adults' party with chaperones, with no alcohol. They party as our grandparents might have done years ago. Everyone is costumed and playing a role, with rambunctious good humour. They pull us into their celebration and into their photographs. Someone is observing a birthday too and cakes are passed around. They are open and generous with us. There is something old-fashioned about this in our cultural terms, but I wonder if our young people today would be capable of pulling off an occasion like this. I can see it in a theatrical group perhaps, but not in a typical group of students. We party with our new friends until after midnight, and then turn in. They go on.

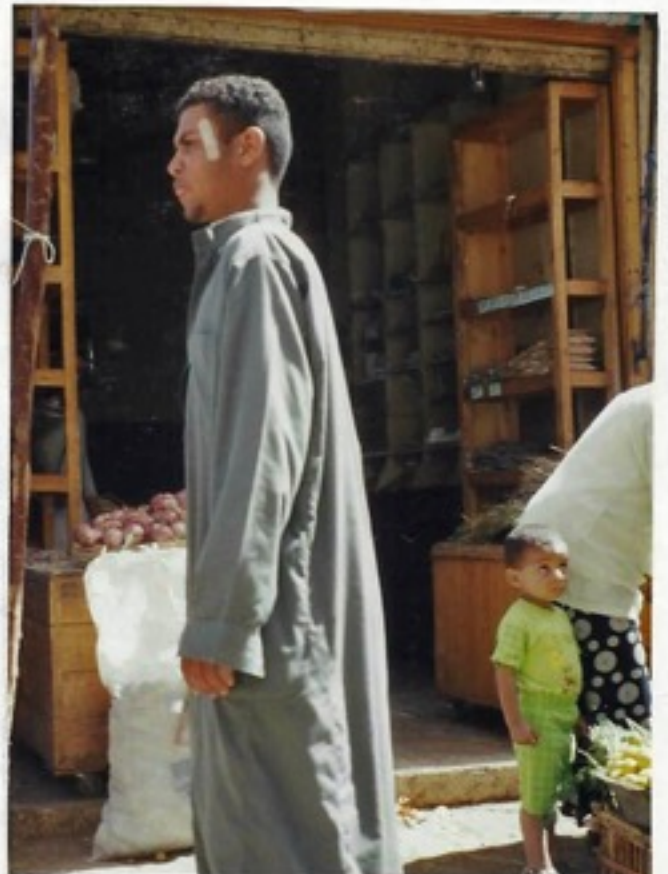














Remembering our dreary and expensive Wagon-Lit experience, we thread our way through the back streets of Luxor to find the station and buy a normal train ride to Cairo. We keep asking "fein al mahatta?" and people point us in the right direction. "Shukran". The street dogs of Luxor are goats; they wander around in the traffic, sniffing into corners, watching the passing scene, wagging their tails.

Tickets to Cairo on the overnight train, 2nd class sitting up, are only £36 (\$13). An afternoon nap in our hotel will prepare us for the big trip.



We wake up about 10PM and walk with our back-packs to Midan al Mahatta. The streets are dark, the holes in the pavement quite invisible, but tea rooms open to the street create islands of light. A quiet murmur of conversations carried out over tea and sheesha; occasional vehicles with lights out pushing through the foot traffic.

We find the station again and thus oriented, return a short distance to a falafel shop we have seen. Falafels and Coca Cola under the buzz of fluorescent lights overlooking the street. Passers-by enter our light, cross our stage like extras on a film set and disappear into the darkness.

I always have a feeling of loss, leaving a place that I am not likely to visit again. "There's nothing to see here", you might say of this back alley, but I'm trying to absorb the sounds, sights and smells and hold on to them. The station is near by. We'll walk there in a few minutes and just disappear. Rather like mortality isn't it?

In Cairo we return to our Canadian host Taher and take a room with a 3:00 a.m. wake-up call for our early morning flight to Paris.



Our driver, Aziz, is a friend of Taher's; he shows us his family pictures on the long drive to the airport. Aziz lives in Giza, right next to the pyramids. He proudly holds up a picture of his seven year old daughter who goes riding on horseback once a week. We have walked his neighbourhood and seen the many stables there.

This is the run to the airport, a time for summing up. For all the people who told us the Middle East is too dangerous, nah! We never experienced any kind of hostility or threat from anyone. For those who think Egypt's future is all in the past, nah! I have this picture in my head, too romantic perhaps, of Aziz's little girl galloping across the desert in the shadow of the great pyramids, and imagining that she lives at the centre of the world.

