

# TRAVELOGUE

## Egypt - Traveling Through Time

by Melissa Wolcott

Build it and they will come. And so they did. And so they still do for 5,000 years. I am, of course, speaking about the great pyramids of Giza.

I recently had the opportunity to realize a lifelong dream to travel to Egypt, the land of ancient pharaohs and mystery. It was all I expected and even more wondrous.

I contacted The Egyptian Connection in N.Y. for travel plans, and it turned out to be a terrific find, as they did a super job of arranging everything, from airport pick-ups to hotel, to private guides, etc. — all for less \$\$\$ than I could do on my own (and I did try to figure it on my own!). They arranged for 2 nights in Cairo, 4 nights on the Nile cruise, including a fly-down to Abu Simbal, and 1 more night in Cairo.

We chose to travel in May, as it is not too hot yet, and is in between seasons for travel rates.

June, July and August are supposed to be brutally hot. As it turns out, we had wonderful weather — couldn't have been better.

In the month before we left, I did some research as to what we wanted to see in our limited time there — most of it on America On-Line, the computer network. That is a great source of information — from finding out the latest State Department travel warnings, and any health requirements or visas needed for anywhere in the world, to opinions from fellow travelers on what to see and do, and not to see and do. (You do need a visa for Egypt, which can be obtained from the Egyptian consul in Washington, or when you get to Cairo, at the airport.) The message boards from other travelers proved to be invaluable. I even found out which side of the Nile Cruise boat to get a room on for the best view! (Left side, if traveling up river).

The Egyptian Connection (via Blue Sky Travel, which is all over Egypt) set us up at the Ramses Hilton in Cairo for our first 2 nights. It is a beautiful hotel on the Nile, within walking distance to the Egyptian Museum. Our wonderful guide (Mr. Ragheb Ali) picked us up at the hotel and took us through the museum — which is a great starting point for touring the country, as most of the treasures have been removed

to there. it was overwhelming to say the least, especially King Tutankhamun's treasures. It is almost too much to take in at once. One has to wonder what the ancient thieves plundered from an important pharaoh like Ramses II, when a minor one like Tut had such fabulous treasures.

On to the pyramids. They are located in Giza, which is separated from Cairo by the Nile. You've seen them in the movies and on TV, but they are truly awesome in person. Traveling throughout Egypt leaves one dazed by the monuments and the work that went into them. I thought by now, when you entered the pyramids they would be air conditioned, with escalators taking you up and down, and a gift shop inside. However, to my relief, they are just as they have been forever — no A/C, no gift shop, and



a wooden plank with little strips of wood across to hold your footing on the very steep (45°), and narrow incline into the pyramid. You have to crouch down to get in, and it is quite awkward. The room which once contained the sarcophagus is made of black granite blocks, so finely seamed that you cannot slip a credit card in between blocks — another Egyptian "how'd they do that?" Of course, the obligatory camel ride beckoned us next to the pyramid. I thought "how very touristy" and then I thought "how can you come all the way to Egypt, stand next to one of the wonders of the world, and not ride the camel?" So we rode. It was only \$4. Had to do it. Didn't have to wear the Arab headgear, but did anyway. Tourists.

We flew down to Aswan to embark on the Nile cruise which ends at Luxor.

We debated whether to bother to go to Abu Simbal for the few hours allotted, as it is out of the way (150 miles south of Aswan) and an extra \$150 each for plane fare. My fellow travelers on-line said ... yes! We went, and it turned out to be one of the most memorable times of our trip. Abu Simbal is home to the great temple of Ramses II, and the most magnificent — enriched with beautiful intaglios, and 4 colossal figures of Ramses (each about 70 feet high) at different stages of his life (he



lived to be 97 and fathered 102 children. It was built 3,200 years ago. A smaller temple dedicated to his favorite wife, the beautiful

Queen Nefertari sets nearby. These temples had to be relocated to save them from the flooding by Lake Nassar (a result of the building of the huge Aswan Dam to the north). The engineering feat was incredible. The temples were cut in 30-ton blocks and reassembled 200 feet higher. The ancient architects had it over the modern ones, however, as when they built the temple, they arranged for a shaft of sunlight to shine way inside the temple to light up a statue of Ramses on two days a year — his birthday and his coronation day. The present day engineers screwed up, and it's one day off!

Abu Simbal itself is a small, poor, farming village (400 people), no cars, and feels like the end of the earth. It is quietly beautiful. The cleanest of air, and very silent, with a lovely cool breeze. The vista is of deep blue water surrounded by desert. The few hours we had there were too short.

The Nile cruise boats are not like the "Big Red Boat" or the "Carnival". They are more like paddlewheel boats without the paddlewheel, for lack of a better description. We were on the Sheraton "Aton".

Our cruise took us over the four days to The Temple of Philae, the Aswan Dam, Kom Ombo Temple, Temple at Idfu and culminated at Luxor with the Valley of the Kings and Queens, and temples at Karnak and Luxor. We took side trips in falukas (small sail boats), ferrys and horse & buggy rides to get to the different temples.

The artwork in a lot of the temples is in surprisingly good shape considering its antiquity. Some of the colors in Ramses tomb at the Valley of the Kings looks as if it was painted yesterday. I found the most beautiful artwork of all to be in the tombs of the workers (the artisans that painted the pharaohs tombs). They depicted beautiful people in everyday life, rather than gods.

The cruise itself is very relaxing, complete with a swimming pool. The food is quite good, and sunsets spectacular over the Nile, watching falukas slowly sailing by. We had been forewarned about drinking the water, and anything that the water might come in contact with (salads, fruit, iced

drinks.) So we stayed with cooked foods and bottled water, and did fine.

Some of the most fun times are spent in the various bazaars haggling over trinkets and souvenirs. The "deals" you can get are better in Aswan and other stops than in the bazaars at Cairo. You will hear the term "baksheesh" a lot, which means "tip". The Egyptians are extremely helpful, but have their hand out all along the way for a little baksheesh. It is always worth it, as a pound or two (a pound is about 30¢) makes them happy. They are a very friendly lot, and bend over backwards for tourists. Absolutely everyone speaks English, or understands enough to get by.

The cruise was wonderful and exhausting. By the end of it you are truly "temped out". If you watch the Travel Channel, they occasionally run a half-hour show on the Nile cruise which will give you an idea of what it's like.

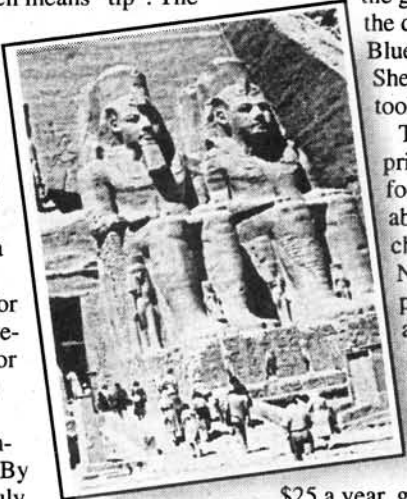
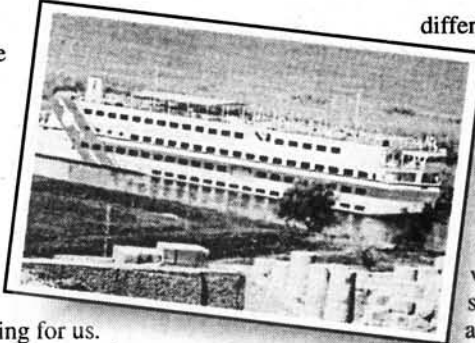
Our last night in Cairo was spent at the Sheraton El Gizirah Hotel Towers and Casino, which had one of the most spectacular views I have ever seen anywhere. The

hotel is located on a peninsula that juts out in the middle of the Nile, so our 15th floor room looked straight down the winding Nile, with Cairo on the left and Giza on the right. At a certain time of day, you can see the great pyramids in the distance. Our Blue Sky tour rep, Sherrif Hanafy, took care of everything for us.

The cost of getting to Egypt is pricey, but once you're there, food and hotel are very reasonable, and sometimes downright cheap! The 4 night Sheraton Nile Cruise cost \$898 for two people, which includes all food and tours. They also have 3,5 and 10 night cruises available. Since we knew we were going to stay at the Sheraton El Gizirah, we joined the Sheraton Club, which, for \$25 a year, gives you upgrades and late check-out world-wide. It is well worth it. I doubt we would have had the spectacular room view we had without it. The regular rate per night was quoted at \$115 (off season), with the card it was quoted at \$87 — and this is a world class luxury hotel!

I must say, however, Egypt is not for everyone. It is a poor nation, with a culture very

different from ours. If you go with an open and accepting mind, you will learn a lot from the oldest civilization in the world. If you stay in Cairo, and travel the



tourist routes, there doesn't seem to be any safety problem. Stray off the beaten path and wander into heavily fundamentalist cities or villages, and you may run into trouble (according to my "on-line" sources). We never experienced any hint of any problems. The State Department keeps on top of conditions, so if you're considering traveling to Egypt, keep checking on the situation. If you, like me, have always had a desire to go, you must do it — you won't regret it. However, if you like Egyptian things, but don't have to urge to travel, plan to see the Egyptian treasures that will be arriving right here in St. Petersburg in January at the new International Museum — I'm sure it will be wonderful!

For travel information, contact The Egyptian Connection, 68-12 Fresh Meadow Lane, Fresh Meadows, N.Y. 11365, (800) 762-3848.

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