

by Michelle A. Gervais (April 2003)

I have always wanted to return to Egypt, this past April I finally got the opportunity. Since I was traveling with someone who was a 'first timer' I had to be sure to include all of the not to be missed sights which was fine by me as it had been seven years since my last visit. I was also determined to add some of the sites that are not usually frequented by the average tourist. My companion and I are the type of travelers who always have to be on the go so I had planned an intense itinerary. We stayed at the Nile Hilton, which is directly across from the Nile and has the Egyptian Museum as its neighbor. This was a great location as it was within walking distance of some highly recommended restaurants including one of my favorites the Felfela. We began with the familiar in Cairo with visits to Memphis the capital of the old kingdom and Sakkara where you will find the Step Pyramid of King Djoser. We added Dahshur to see the Bent and Red Pyramids, and Meidum to see the first attempt at a pyramid. The latter is a bit of a drive into the desert but we both considered it well worth the time.



We left Cairo on an EARLY morning flight for Abu Simbel, a place that I consider to be one of THE not to be missed highlights of Egypt. The temples that were built during the reign of Ramses II are spectacular to behold and the fact that they were moved when the Aswan Dam was built so that they would not be submerged in Lake Nasser is an amazing story in itself. From here we flew to Aswan and settled into the Old Cataract Hotel. We cruised along the Nile between the small islands, past the Mausoleum of the Aga Khan, and disembarked on the west bank of the river where we mounted camels for the short journey to the ruins of St. Simeon's Monastery. It is very easy to engage a felucca on the bank of the river right in front of the hotel. We also explored the delightful Nubian Museum, walking distance from our hotel, and spent a few hours after dinner poking around the local bazaar, two streets up from the Nile.



On our first and only full day in Aswan we took a boat to Philae Temple, a beautiful structure dedicated to the cult of Isis. It was originally built on the island of Philae, hence the name, but was moved in the 1960's to Agilka Island after the construction of the high dam threatened to submerge the monuments. Since I had already seen the Aswan Dam and the quarry of the Unfinished Obelisk and my traveling companion had no interest in either one, we headed for the Temple of Kalabsha, A monument dedicated to the Nubian god Mandulis, it is one of the few structures built by the Nubians that was rescued from Lake Nasser. The site, which is reached by boat, is seldom visited, receiving only the tourists who take the Lake Nasser cruise. On the day we were there, we were the only people—the two of us, our guide and a guard for the site. What a treat it was to have the place to ourselves! We headed back to the Old Cataract for our final night in Aswan. The hotel is a lovely place to stay...as long as you are willing to pay the extra dollars for a Nile view room. Late afternoon teatime on the veranda, watching the sunset is a great way to unwind. The only way you can do this is if you are a guest at the hotel. Otherwise, they may charge you a fee to enter their grounds. Aswan is often overlooked by most tours and is usually just a starting or ending point for Nile cruises. If you have the time, consider adding a day here. The town is small enough that it is easy to explore on foot, the market is interesting and there are a couple of good restaurants along the river. An extra day will give you the opportunity to visit Kalabsha or St. Simeon's Monastery and the Nubian Museum.



Speaking of Nile cruises...this was another activity that my companion had no interest in, and since I had already experienced it, I was looking forward to traveling along the river by car. We joined a "convoy" of vehicles headed to Luxor. Along the way we stopped at Kom Ombo and Edfu. These are two of the usual stops for the cruises. Depending on your travel day you may miss that crowd, always a good thing. We did not visit Esna as it is on the other side of the river and is no longer on many of the cruise itineraries. Having now experienced the cruise and the convoy I have to say each has its pro's and con's. For



many people the cruise is one of the highlights of their tour. I prefer the driving option as it made it possible for us to maximize our time and fit more into our schedule. Upon arrival into Luxor we checked into the New Winter Palace Hotel, right across from the river and next door to the Luxor Temple. We had views of both from our balcony. We arrived late afternoon but still had daylight hours left so we took a walk along the river and had a leisurely dinner at one of the excellent restaurants within walking distance of our hotel.

We visited all of the usual places on the West Bank: Valley of the Kings, Mortuary Temple of Queen Hatshepsut and the Colossi of Memnon,. We bypassed the Valley of the Queens as the Tomb of Queen Nefertari was not open to the public. Because this was a private tour, I was able to add sites that are not included in the standard cruise itineraries. We explored the great memorial Temple of Ramses III, and the Medinet Habu, the best-preserved mortuary temple of Thebes. It contains more than 75,350

sq ft of decorated surface across its walls. We also visited the Ramesseum, the mortuary temple built by Ramses II on the site of Seti I's ruined temple. It took twenty years to complete and reportedly rivaled the wonders of the temple at Abu Simbel. Our last stop was at Deir el-Medina, the ruins of a village that housed the craftsmen and workers who dug and decorated the tombs and other Theban monuments. This site is important because it has revealed many of the facets of ordinary life in Egypt. The best part from a tourist's perspective is the beautifully decorated tombs in its necropolis.

The paintings are rich in detail and color. Actually, the best part was having the place to ourselves as there were very few tourists in the area. Our guide Mohamed timed our visits well so that we were always just ahead of or behind the crowds, reinforcing the fact that a good guide is everything. It is well worth adding a day in Luxor to visit the sites



that are most often bypassed by conventional tours. We spent the afternoon in Luxor Temple and the Karnak Complex and still had enough time to visit the small but interesting Mummification Museum.

Leaving early we joined a convoy and headed north to Abydos, an area with archaeological remains from all periods of ancient Egyptian history. It was the main cult center of Osiris, the lord of the nether world. It was also the burial place for the first kings of a unified Egypt. Next we headed back towards Luxor stopping first in Dendara. This was a significant site for the cult of the goddess Hathor. There are also figures of the god Bes, a patron of childbirth, carved above the column capitals. The reliefs on the exterior walls are superbly preserved, and portray the divine birth and childhood of the infant Horus, whose rites legitimize the divine descent of the king. These two sites are visited in our tours to the Western Oasis and Amarna. I am glad I added the extra time in Luxor. The sites are incredible, the walk along the Nile is enjoyable, and there are good restaurants within walking distance of the hotel. From here we head back to Cairo.



I saved the best for last and so upon arrival in Cairo we headed to the Mena House Hotel in Giza. We stayed in the Garden Wing and had an absolutely gorgeous view of the Giza Plateau from our balcony. We spent the rest of the day relaxing and exploring the main hotel. When you go, make sure you check out their collection of photographs from the beginning of the 20th century. My favorite is of the tourists on top of the pyramid...taken when one could still climb them. We explored the Giza Plateau on our last day in Egypt. Even though you can no longer climb the pyramids, you can enter them. You can take a camel ride around the area and visit the small but impressive Solar Boat Museum. My favorite pastime is Sphinx gazing. He is soooo massive. You can attend the Sound & Light Show at night or if you are fortunate enough to have a room with a balcony that overlooks the pyramids you can do what we did...sit and watch day turn to night at one of THE MOST impressive places on earth.