“Stay Calm”
Travels in Egypt in February
A Travel Report

by Marian-Ortolf Bagley & Allan R. Brockway
Introduction

People have been writing—and people have been reading—travelogues ever since the first traveller sent home the first postcard scratched on a sherd or stone: “Having wonderful time. Wish you were here!” Travelogues appeared in various forms over the centuries. Sometimes they were reports by commercial travelers (Marco Polo), sometimes by war correspondents or diplomats (Ernie Pyle, T.E. Lawrence), sometimes by pure adventurers (Richard Halliburton). And some were by ancient Egyptians, e.g., the report of Wenamun and the tale of a shipwrecked sailor. But whatever form they took, travelers’ tales reported the wonder and mystery—sometimes the agony and hardship—of places and peoples unfamiliar to their readers.

Ancient Egypt is no longer unfamiliar. The History Channel, the Discovery Channel, and other like television outlets have brought the pyramids, the temples, and the tombs of millennia-old kings and nobles into all of our homes. And, indeed, we ourselves have repeatedly returned to Egypt. Yet every time we return there is something new—and always, ever always, this ancient culture, which is so genuinely foreign to us, presents puzzles that cry out for solution.

In the pages that follow we have attempted to explain some of those puzzles in the course of a day-by-day account of almost three weeks with a guided tour led by Thomas Mudloff and organized through the agency of the Spiekermann Travel Service. What we have written cannot legitimately be called a “travelogue,” as the accounts by intrepid 19th-century solo travelers could be. Ours is, rather, a “trip report” or, perhaps, a “travelers’ photo-essay.” Whatever it may be called, for us the experience of writing made vivid what we had seen and heard in a way that would have been impossible otherwise. We are grateful for Tom’s leadership and for fellowship with the interesting and experienced group that he and Wahid Gad shepherded from Alexandria up the Nile to Luxor and back to Cairo.

Marian-Ortolf Bagley and Allan R. Brockway, May 2008
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Monday, 28 January 2008

The journey to Cairo from Minneapolis began in the middle of the night. I awakened at 2:30. The conscientious Skybird taxi driver hovered outside my house by 3:45, fifteen minutes early. Ayers Bagley helped get my bags to the taxi and bade me “bon voyage.” The road to the airport was on well-cleared streets, just ahead of a predicted sleet storm.

At the airport I hauled in my new wheelie and joined the line waiting for the Northwest desk to open, pleased that I could do this under my own steam. The zippers on the old suitcase had betrayed me the day before, so I bought one with four wheels that I could move myself, and checked it all the way through to Cairo.

The Northwest plane took off at 7:00 for an uneventful flight to JFK. Once well into the terminal I spotted a woman “pusher” who helped me the rest of the way. She managed to reach Allan Brockway on her cell phone. Allan, who had flown up from Tampa earlier that morning, had made his way from the Delta terminal to meet me in the terminal providentially used by both Northwest and Egypt Air. After I described Allan to the pusher, this resourceful woman found him on the floor above where he was looking for me around the Egypt Air check-in desk. Then, from the balcony, she showed him where I was waiting below. So the problem of how to meet up at JFK before we flew to Egypt was solved.

We celebrated the start of our third trip together in the nicest restaurant we could find in the terminal. We chose our favorite meals, a pattern that we followed on the entire trip when we had a choice, Allan deciding on a ham and cheese grilled sandwich, while I chose chicken breast and salad, the last green salad that I would have for a month. We whiled away time until the 2:30 p.m. check-in at Egypt Air started, where we found that our travel arranger, Ihab Zaki of Spiekerman Travel, had indeed succeeded in booking seats together for us. Then we had another wait until the plane took off at 6 p.m.

The 11-hour flight to Cairo seemed endless. The cabin air was warm and stuffy. Allan had the sense to eat very little of the beef meal, while I chose the only other option, the fish entree, which I was to regret before the bumpy flight was over. Next time I intend to pack all of my own food.

Tuesday, 29 January 2008

After landing in Cairo early in the morning, we were met by our efficient local agent, Michel Francis, who waited for us in the entry hall holding a sign displaying our names. He greeted us courteously, pasted visas into our passports, whisked us through the entry
formalities, claimed our bags, and directed us to his waiting van. We were in good hands! (egypttravel@cng.com.eg, Treasure Egypt tours)

He explained that we were to spend the afternoon in the lobby of the Heliopolis Me-ridien until he would collect us for the drive to the train station for the departure of our 6:00 p.m. train to Alexandria. We had thought we would be on an afternoon train and were disappointed that we would travel in the dark, unable to see the countryside. So we had another long wait in front of us, jet-lagged as we were.

We settled into the hotel dining room where I had pumpkin soup while Allan, typi-cally, chose a grilled cheese sandwich that turned out to be very dry, in the English manner. The rest of the afternoon passed slowly. We waited in the chilly lobby of this huge tourist hotel which was being remodeled to be even larger. It reminded me of an airport terminal. I paced around in the lobby and halls much of the time, sometimes passing the carpet unrolled in one distant corner at afternoon prayer time for devout clients. Not only was it chilly and blustery outdoors, the lobby, with its 2-story tall windows, was very cold.

Exactly at 5 p.m. a white Treasure Egypt van with Michel and driver appeared, just when daylight was starting to dim, gradually turning into night by six p.m. We watched this spectacle every day in Egypt, sometimes seeing the great sun orb pass under the hori-zon to the underworld. But on this gray and windy day the sun was hidden behind clouds as night fell.

After battling the heavy rush hour traffic for forty-five minutes we reached the once elegant train station, built in what is called the “Andalusian” style. We had a maddening delay at the entry to the parking area, presumably until the correct forms were found by the attendant, or until enough bak-sheesh got us inside. Michel led us through the vast crowd milling in the station and around to the train platforms. The hectic scene reminded me of the Atlanta train station in “Gone With the Wind” or could have worked as a stage set for a Dr. Zhivago mob scene. Meanwhile the hands on the sta-tion clock inched toward 6 p.m. when the train was scheduled to depart.

At one point, when I was about to explode with anxiety, Allan turned to me and, with a slow downward hand ges-ture, said firmly “Marian, stay calm.” This soon became our mantra: Stay Calm!
The image of the busy crowd in the station was unforgettable, made more memorable because we could not photograph the drama that was going on around us. We saw one other Western traveler waiting on the platform, followed by a porter pulling a metal trolley piled high with the amount of luggage one associates with a “Grand Tour.” Locals crowded in on every side. The other side of our platform was packed with young Egyptian soldiers in light-weight khaki clothing. Were they on their way to the crisis at the Gaza border? While it was too hectic and too dark to photograph here, a week later we took some guerilla photos of the train station from our tour bus when we were driving to the Shepheard Hotel, during the heavy Cairo evening rush-hour traffic, again at 6 p.m. Somehow, the building seemed less dramatic from the freeway over-pass. But we knew the scene was wild inside.

Meanwhile the station clock said 5:55 and our train was scheduled to depart at 6:00. The scruffy train to Alexandria rolled in moments later. Michel deposited our bags somewhere on the train with a guard, showed us to our reserved seats in the first class car, wished us well, and was off. The train slowly rolled out of the station north-westward toward Alexandria where were to spend the next five days before our group tour caught up with us. We settled down in our Victorian-style upholstered seats, glad for the heaters along the wall, totally exhausted, jet-lagged after being under way without sleep for nearly forty hours—part of the experience of journeying halfway around the world in the twentieth-first century.

In the relative peace of the train car Allan explained that when he finds himself in such a dramatic kind of situation he tries to sit back and let those responsible for us be responsible. “We are in their hands.”

We had barely made it to the train in time, testing my sense of urgency almost beyond endurance. “Stay calm.” We also learned that there is something called Egyptian time (as elsewhere there is Mexican time, Australian time, Russian time, etc.).

Two and half hours later we pulled into the dark and deserted Alexandria main train station, which reminded me of Paddington Station in London. The other passengers filed out of the car, presumably commuters returning to Alexandria after conducting business in Cairo.
After we left the train car we found that our bags had been mysteriously deposited on the platform. We could see a figure rapidly approaching us in the distance, a deputy from Treasure Egypt, who led us along the platform in the cold rain to the station building, pulling our bags. He guided us out onto the street, where a van and driver awaited us. We were driven through a tangle of dark one-way streets to the historic Hotel Cecil, which overlooked the corniche road and the sea. The journey from the United States to Egypt was almost over.

We checked into our rooms as fast as we could. Allan turned in immediately while I repaired to the dining room where I was pleased to find traditional Egyptian lentil soup on the menu. From my seat in the corner of the tall chilly dining room overlooking the corniche road, I saw rain pounding against the tall glass windows, slowly sliding down. In my jet-lagged state of mind I saw ice and sleet patterns on the glass, reminding me of a Minnesota winter—there in Egypt. It was indeed bitterly cold and windy, unseasonably so.

**Wednesday, 30 January 2008**

We needed Wednesday to be a recovery day and stayed in most of the time. A stormy weather front from Europe brought heavy gray skies and gale force winds. The unheated dining room was filled with heavy gray skies and guests investigating the elaborate breakfast buffet or, already seated, enjoying their coffee, European coffee or thick Egyptian coffee in tiny cups. From the dining room we could see palm trees bent way over along the corniche road. Indeed, the hotel was right on the Mediterranean. There could be no better place to stay. After breakfast we took photos from the balconies of our rooms on the quiet side of the hotel, quiet because we overlooked an alley and a back street.

It was all that we could do to muster energy to make our way to the Tourist Bureau a block away, leaning against the wind, where a friendly woman gave us brochures and information. We were glad to have a day to stay inside.

Back at our hotel, we could see that our tall rooms were retro-fitted with modern Japanese air conditioner/heaters. Installed up near the ceiling, any heat that was produced hovered high above. The rooms were
barely warm while the wind howled outside. During the night a mysterious rattling sound had awakened me. A loose shutter? When I tried to speak to the floor man about the erratic “bom-bom” sound, he led me to a cabinet in the wall outside my room revealing what I guessed was an ancient ventilation system that predated air conditioners. Behind the wooden door was an air shaft, presumably to the roof, that would circulate air during the summer heat. Now, when the howling wind sucked air out of the hotel, the cabinet door went “bom-bom.” He pointed to a corner room more distant from the cabinet. I moved to this quieter room for the rest of the stay in Alexandria. I have learned to stay packed so moving rooms is easily accomplished.

We had time to explore this venerable hotel. The Hotel Cecil reminded me of the historic Hotel Safir in Algiers, built in 1929, where I stayed previously, a building that featured the first Otis elevators in Algeria and perhaps the Middle East. The elevators in the equally historic Hotel Cecil had similar elegant wrought iron cages located in the center of the six story building, surrounded by the rooms. The elevator doors, made of polished metal, sported brass signs mounted at eye level warning passengers about proper behavior should the elevators fail. When we rode the elevator to the top floor we discovered a pleasant Asian restaurant and a roof garden with a wonderful view across the corniche that follows the arm of the sparkling coast that leads to a fort.

**Thursday, 31 January 2008**

We decided to venture out. The wind had died down some but it was still chilly. Allan had visited Alexandria before during one of his six earlier trips to Egypt, indeed just two years before, so he played tour guide. The hotel doorman directed us to a driver standing
by his bright turquoise taxi, waiting across the street from the hotel entry—his stretch of the curb, we later discovered. Thus we found ourselves in the hands of a Zorba-like character. Allan negotiated the price before we got in the vehicle. It included driving to the catacombs of Kom el-Shukafa and Pompey’s pillar, waiting for us while we visited the archaeological sites, and then driving us back to the hotel. He was ours for the entire morning. Or rather, we were his all morning while he practiced his English, crowing “happy-happy” or “no happy; no pay” much of the time.

At the catacombs we descended many stairs that circled around a perfectly cylindrical shaft designed to allow the Romans to lower caskets to the deepest levels. We picked our way around tour groups to catch a glimpse of a Sepulchral Chapel carved out of rock that was ornamented with eclectic pharaonic emblems that are an Alexandrian fusion of Egyptian and Greco-Roman styles.

Then our driver took us to the site of Pompey’s Pillar, which rises from the ruins of the ancient Temple of Serapis, or the Serapeum. Allan noted that elaborate new walls and railings all around the perimeter had been added since his last visit. A broken dark sphinx had vanished from the site as well. Later Allan showed me photos on his laptop that he had taken at the same site two years earlier. This was a major project that employed many workers. We could see that the area was being made into an attractive and impressive tourist destination.

After walking around the site we climbed down into tunnels where the Apis Bulls had been buried and worshipped in ancient times. Here we came upon a crew of workers carefully steel brushing and sealing the tunnel walls. These walls, much like the tunnels in the catacombs we had visited earlier, were carved out of sedimentary rock once at the bottom of the sea.

We returned to our waiting Zorba taxi driver. He sped down one-way streets the wrong way and made heavy use of his horn, which sounded like an emergency vehicle siren or a fire engine, to clear the road ahead. All of the cars and taxis wove in

Serapis was a Hellenistic–Egyptian deity developed by the Ptolemaic dynasties that ruled Egypt from about 300 to 30 BCE. Identified with the Apis bull (which the Greeks associated with Osiris), Serapis was a god of the underworld.

The pillar was named in the Middle Ages for the Roman general, Pompey (who was murdered in Alexandria), but actually was erected in the 4th century CE in honor of the Emperor Diocletian from the ruins of the earlier Temple of Serapis.
and out frantically in the narrow streets. Not all the vehicles ran on petrol!

On our way back to the Cecil Hotel in that battered turquoise taxi, I noticed a pharmacy that was fortuitously located just around the corner from the hotel. I walked back to the pharmacy and entered a small room, perhaps twelve feet square, that was two stories tall. A balcony ran around the room from which it was possible to reach higher shelves. From floor to ceiling, the walls were lined with Victorian wooden cabinets and shelving that held all sorts of medicines and health aids.

“Does anyone speak English?” I ventured. Two young women wearing artfully draped headscarves came to my aid, although it seemed to me that other people were waiting, too, perhaps to have their prescriptions filled. I explained my problem, which they discussed. My g.i. tract was still on edge after eating that heavy fish on the turbulent plane. They decided that I should consult with their senior pharmacist, a handsome older woman, also wearing a neat headscarf, whose strong presence commanded the room. Her English was fluent, suggesting she has had much experience assisting Cecil Hotel guests. I was interviewed for symptoms. She decided on remedies. One medicine made in England was produced. Another box of tablets was added. I was to pay for these at a little cage at the exit where a man reigned.

The next day I thought of something else that I needed so I returned. I was remembered and greeted warmly while the whole place came to a halt. The senior lady immediately left her duties to inquire after my health. I thanked them all for their kindness and can still see the the young women, the senior lady, the clerk in the cage. Having disrupted their business routine a second day I thanked them warmly and left, pleased to have been in such good and kind hands, feeling much better.

Although the clerks at the pharmacy chain in Minneapolis may recognize me as a client, the experience there is always hectic, especially in the late afternoon when there is a long line of people who become cross if one needs to ask questions about a prescription or billing, or takes time to write a check. Everyone is waited on and dispatched as quickly as possible. The contrast is palpable.

That evening we took the 1920’s elevator up to the Asian restaurant on the top floor of the Cecil Hotel where we were so pleased with their sweet and sour shrimp and their chicken with black bean sauce, and the fine Omar Kayyam red wine that we returned the following night. But it was still far too cold and windy to dine outdoors on the roof terrace, overlooking the curving shore of the Eastern Harbor that ends at the Quayetbey Fortress.
Friday, 1 February 2008

The weather was improving slowly, and most importantly, the wind was easing. Rejecting the importuning of the taxi driver, who was positioned as before beside the Saad Zaghloul Square opposite the hotel, we walked south from the Cecil Hotel, away from the sea. On El Nabi Danyal Street we discovered many building styles, from Classical Revival, to Art Nouveau to 1930’s Moderne, all the while picking our way around the piles of sand and debris that accumulates around sidewalks that are being redone. At one intersection we passed cars under cloth wraps that were casually parked way out in the middle of the street. We had time to enjoy our walk during this quiet Friday morning, the Muslim holy day. We soon reached our destination, the Roman Theater and the remains of a third-century bath.

Photographing the Roman Theater, popular with tourists, meant dodging groups, sometimes large groups, of people, which a local feline didn’t bother to do.

Behind the theater, a tourist policeman volunteered to show us the Roman baths in another less visited area, an offer we accepted. Of course, he demanded baksheesh for his services. “Baksheesh” soon became a verb.

The small theatre, which dates from the 2nd century CE, is technically called an odeum, a type of theater used for musical productions and council meetings. Restored, its ancient function is maintained today.

Behind the theatre, the Roman baths are still in ruins.
The Misr Train Station (where we had arrived three days before), faces a park-like square, Midhan el-Gumhuriya, across the way from the Roman Theater complex. We reached the station just as the main noon Friday prayers were taking place. When we walked through the building out to the train platform, we saw that a generous area was nicely prepared for prayers. A large prayer rug covered the concrete floor where the train tracks began. Many men had gathered for the communal worship. The amplified voice of the officiating cleric, preaching the Friday sermon, reached to the far reaches of the station.

This morning the train station seemed so much friendlier in the bright sunlight than it had during the stormy night of our arrival.

**Saturday, 2 February 2008**

The weather seemed milder so, again, we decided to walk, as suited pilgrims. We took off eastward along the corniche road, or Esplanade, toward the great new Alexandria Library where we spent the day. It was easy enough to cross the Esplanade to the seaward side near the hotel, but much farther east the traffic was so heavy and hectic that we were stranded, unable to cross. Nevertheless, we refused offers of a buggy ride, to the expressed disappointment of the buggy owner, who would have been happy to take us across the road to the Library behind him.

When a fearless little girl, perhaps ten years old, approached on our side of the street, ready to cross, we walked with her. A child led us across the automotive melee! We weaved slowly in and out of traffic, from moving car past moving car, miraculously without mishap.
So we reached the magnificent **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**, designed by and built by the Snøhetta Hamza Consortium, that overlooks the Eastern Harbor, presumably near the same site as the ancient Royal Library of Alexandria. The stone exterior is ornamented with carved alphabet forms from around the world.

The domed disk covers a vast multi-storied interior space that receives daylight from many strips of glass that line the pleated dome. Inside, tall columns fill the space as in a forest, each one ready to unfurl a wall in case of fire.

Virtually every detail about the Royal Library of Alexandria is disputed by scholars.

It may have been founded by Ptolemy II (ruled 281-246 BCE). It may have been destroyed by Julius Caesar (48 BCE), by Aurelian (273 CE), by Theophilus (391 CE), during the Muslim conquest (642 CE)—or by all or none of them.

But everyone agrees that it was the largest research institute and collection of manuscripts in antiquity. The goal of the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina is the same—to amass the wisdom of civilizations, both physically and digitally.

We bought tickets for the Antiquities Museum underneath the library proper, a gift from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. The collection includes 1070 pieces from the time of the Pharaohs, the Greeks, and the Romans, plus Coptic and Islamic Egypt, all gathered from other important museums in Egypt—as well as artifacts found during excavations at the site of the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina.
theca and recently found underwater at the Eastern and Western harbors.

For many visitors the star of the museum is a mosaic depicting a beautifully detailed dog, life size, made from the tiniest mosaic bits. Dating from the 2nd century BCE, the mosaic was discovered in 1993 during excavations at the site of the Library of Alexandria. This dog might remind those of a certain age of the Victrola logo of the early 20th century.

We took a break for lunch in a nearby refectory building that is part of the library complex. It was filled with students from the adjacent university. The students were concentrating on their lap-top computers in groups or on their own. The beautifully groomed and trim women students wore artfully arranged head scarves, fashionable tops, and tight jeans. Cleopatra eye make-up was much in evidence. Clearly, we were surrounded by the cream of Egyptian society. I enjoyed ordering a plate of vegetables and rice not on the menu while Allan found a tasty sandwich to his liking.

After the lunch break we returned to the Library. We passed by the Internet Archive which contains all web pages from 1996 until today, supported by the Bill and Malinda Gates Foundation. We wandered around the two museums within the library itself. The Manuscripts Museum showcased an impressive precious manuscript collection. Another gallery displayed historic prints and drawings of Alexandria, including the one at right of the Municipal Gardens near the Rosetta Gate. While waiting for the National Museum to open the next day (see below) we visited the garden.
After a long and very satisfying day in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina we slowly made our way back to the Cecil Hotel along the Esplanade, enjoying the glistening sea and the bustle of street life that makes this city so delightful.

That night we joined the *paseo* on the Esplanade where hundreds of locals strolled together, arm in arm, or settled into cafes overlooking the sea. The scene was very lively. People were seeing and being seen. We could see entire families sitting on ledges here and there. The few parks or squares were over-flowing. Young couples walked along the seaside, courting. The corniche road was jammed with cars and vans packed with riders. The city had come to life again after dark.

**Sunday, 3 February 2008**

We were at the end of our “pre-tour tour” in Alexandria, instructed to be at the National Museum at 9 a.m. in order to meet the group with which we would spend the next two weeks. So we took a taxi to the National Museum, just west of the train station we had explored two days before, arriving well before the appointed time. Since we were early, we strolled through the nearby park by the Rosetta Gate. It looked much like the photograph in the gallery at the Library, minus the sepia tones.

Then we returned to the National Museum, a gem of a museum housed in a converted mansion. No tour group, no tour bus. So we waited, and we waited, until finally we paid our own way in and began exploring the museum without benefit of a guide.

In the dark galleries objects were dramatically spot-lighted. Here are some examples.
We had visited most of the museum’s galleries (we were photographing Late Period block statues) by the time our guide, Wahid Gad, located us. From him we learned that the bus had been delayed by hectic Cairo traffic and accidents on the road in heavy fog. Many of the participants, who had flown into Cairo on Saturday, had come with Wahid to Alexandria but a sizable contingent—including the tour leader, Tom Mudloff—had been delayed by a snowstorm in Chicago and would only reach Alexandria that night, thus effectively missing the first day of their tour. Their experience persuaded us all the more that it was indeed a good idea to arrive a few days early, especially when traveling in winter. Our early days in Alexandria had given us an especially vivid Egyptian experience, quite apart from the tour we were about to embark upon. And we had had no weather delays!

The recent arrivals spent a short time in the museum before Wahid gathered us onto the bus for a visit to a popular local ice-cream parlor en route to Fort Qaitbay which guards the end of the west side of the East Harbor. When we approached the restored fort we had to walk into the brisk wind coming in from the sea. Wahid took us through the little mosque in the fort, telling us that it was the oldest mosque in Alexan-
dria. We climbed up into the building to view the west harbor back to the corniche road along the sea. The air was remarkably clear so that we could see the the roof of the Alexandria Library in the far distance.

A pleasant lunch followed in one of the celebrated fish restaurants overlooking the corniche. We were introduced to our fellow travelers, all Egyptophiles, almost all having visited Egypt before, and/or having taken classes at the Field Museum with Tom Mudloff, our scholar-leader. Tom and the Chicago contingent finally caught up with us that evening, completing our group of seventeen people.

After lunch we drove back east along the Esplanade to visit the Alexandria Library. (the second time for us). Allan and I chose to spend the hour or two allowed for the group visit to go back to the Library Reading Room where we registered to use a computer. Although the connection was slow, Allan was able to get on line to check his email messages, and Marian sent an email home. Later we learned that the email took a long time to reach Minnesota because an off-shore cable carrying electronic communication had been damaged through a freak accident. Ayers emailed us that information, having read about the accident in the local Minneapolis newspaper.

As the day ended, we all repaired to the Cecil Hotel where the newcomers settled into their rooms (we, of course, stayed in the rooms we had enjoyed for almost a week). The Chicago contingent finally joined us at dinner, weary, but enthusiastic. They would not really experience Alexandria at all, since we were scheduled to depart at seven the next morning.
Egypt’s Secret Sites and Hidden Treasures
By Allan R. Brockway & Marian-Ortolf Bagley

A report on a 2-week trip organized by Spiekermann Travel Services of Eastpointe, Michigan. Academic leadership provided by Thomas Mudloff, Field Museum, Chicago. Local Egyptian guidance by Wahid Gad.

Marian’s drawings that appear throughout, including those that form the “logo” of the report, were done “on the spot.” She wishes especially to thank Judith Doll for the sketch book that Tom Mudloff, Judith’s husband, delivered to her during the tour.

Marian’s account of our pre-tour concluded with what had been scheduled to be the first day of the formal tour. The present report takes up from there but before we embark on an account of the specific events of 4-17 February 2008, we think a few general remarks about the tour, its leadership, participants, accommodations, and daily schedule might be in order.

Leadership

Thomas Mudloff, lecturer in Egyptology at the Field Museum, Chicago, leads groups to Egypt and the Levant several times each year. Allan had been with Tom several times in Egypt; both of us participated in a Mudloff tour in the Levant in 2007 (see Marian’s report at http://www.abrock.com).

Wahid Moustafa Gad, Egyptologist, presently a licensed Egyptian tour guide, a source of knowledge about his native land and its history who proved invaluable. Allan was with Wahid (and Tom) in the oases of the Western Desert in 2005.

Participants

There were sixteen participants, including Tom and Wahid. The leaders sat at the front of the bus (where the microphone was). The rest of us arranged ourselves in roughly two groups: those who had traveled with Tom before (nearly half of the participants) at the
back of the bus, everyone else further up. As is often the case, this seating arrangement remained static for the entire two weeks. And—as is always the case in Egypt—a security man, weapon “hidden” in his jacket, travelled with us.

**Accommodations**

Two types of accommodations were provided. First there was the bus—because we spent almost as much time in the bus as in hotels, or so sometimes it seemed. The bus was fairly new but the air conditioning system could not be adjusted beyond “on” or “off.” “On” was frequently chilly. Equipped with an on-board toilet, and large enough to allow two seats for everyone, the vehicle was otherwise quite satisfactory.

Hotels ranged from 4-star to 1-star (0-star?). We’ll make reference to some of each. Marian does well at recalling meals while Allan can’t remember what he had for breakfast. So notes about food certainly are Marian’s responsibility.

**Daily Schedule**

The usual departure time from each hotel was 7:00 a.m., which meant waking no later than 5:30, bags into the hall for porters to collect, buffet breakfast, onto the bus ready to depart at 6:55. It is a pattern familiar to everyone who has travelled on group tours world-wide.

Excellent lunches packed at the hotel where we had stayed the night before were stowed on the bus, a particular convenience when driving through areas without restaurants suitable for large groups and when, because of long distances and short time, we could ill afford stopping for lunch.

12-hour days were not unusual, consumed by visiting sites and traversing the distances between them. On the longer drives Tom presented carefully prepared lectures that provided historical and archaeological context for what we had seen and were to see.

*Monday, 4 February 2008
Alexandria to Bubastis*

Everyone was on the bus well before the 7 a.m. departure from the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria. Box lunches, prepared by the hotel kitchen, were already on board; we would be driving through
countryside on the way to Tel Basta, countryside that is not well equipped for tourists, so we needed to be self-sufficient when it came to food.

Once past the early morning traffic in Alexandria, we reached the “agricultural road” that winds through the lush Nile delta. The landscape changed to one of neat sugar cane fields and palm trees interrupted here and there by hamlets of little farm houses, or tiny houses just scattered around the fields. The flat roofs were piled high with fodder for livestock that roamed loose, sometimes guarded. These timeless scenes seemed taken from the biblical story books of childhood. Friendly locals would eagerly wave to us from their yards or fields or along the road, as though the appearance of our bus was the most exciting event of their day.

We found the site of ancient Bubastis on the outskirts of Zagazig, the capital of the Sharqiyyah Province and the home of one of Egypt’s largest universities. We parked beside a vast field with stone blocks and fragments scattered everywhere. A crew was working to improve the packing lot, preparing the site for future tourists. The field in front of us, filled with tumbled stones and fragments of ancient columns,
had once been a very large red granite temple dedicated to Bastet, who was often depicted with the head of a house cat (though sometimes as a lion, like Sekmet). We strolled around the site, trying to find clues to where the pieces might fit together. It was a rambling building site without a building, as though a huge earthquake had leveled everything. In fact, the temple achieved its present condition as the result of quarrying, both ancient and modern—a ready source of already dressed limestone and granite is hard for modern builders of any age to turn down.

In its heyday the temple covered 15 acres—rivaling in size and importance the temple complex at Karnak. Today the ruins give so little obvious evidence of that importance that some guide books and websites recommend that tourists do not take the trouble of visiting there.

Ancient Basta was already in existence when Khufu and Khafre (Giza pyramids, 4th dynasty) erected temples there. Later kings, such as Amenemhat I (12th dynasty) and Ramesses II (19th dynasty), added their own touches. The Bastet temple ruins seen today come largely from the temple of three 3rd Intermediate Period rulers named Osorkon.
Herodotus, the 5th century BCE “Father of History,” found Bubastis to be a far more popular place to visit. He told of an annual festival attended by 700,000 devotees of Bastet during which scandalous behavior was the norm and “more wine is consumed than during the whole of the rest of the year.”

One monument, which has been re-erected, surveys the chaotic scene around it: a colossal statue of a queen, thought to be Meritamun, a daughter and, then, consort of Ramesses II. Not counting the platform upon which she presently stands, the queen is about twenty-three feet tall. This statue is the only intact piece of sculpture at Tell Basta and it, of course, has been reassembled. When Allan visited Tell Basta in 2002, the colossal statue, still in pieces, was being excavated by German archaeologists (photo above right).

We were able to see only the ruins of the Bastet temple. The site, however, contains much more, including Ka Temples (don’t ask) of 6th dynasty kings, a Middle Kingdom palace, various other tombs of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, and a necropolis where once thousands of mummified cats gave evidence of Bastet’s adoration.

Like many Egyptian deities, Bastet changed over the centuries. In the 2nd dynasty, she was a fierce protector depicted as a lioness. But by the 3rd Intermediate Period she had become a house cat with many kittens to whom women desiring children prayed. It makes one wonder what she was in the first Persian Period, when Herodotus visited!

Though various authorities tell us that the statue is from the time of Ramesses II and is a portrait of his daughter Meritamun, Tom Mudloff has studied the text carved on it and discovered the name of “Osorkon II Meryamun,” who ruled from Tanis in the 9th century BCE. Who, then is the queen? Did Osorkon re-carve Ramesses’ statue?
We climbed back on the bus for the drive north through the countryside to the site of Tanis, which is the sole attraction of the little village of San el-Hagar.

The 2-hour ride through the Delta took us past waterways, fields, villages, people going about their daily life, knowing certainly that we in the tour bus were aliens from another world. We knew it, too.

We were accompanied while in the Delta—and other parts of Egypt, too—by an escort of police in pickup trucks or patrol cars (sometimes both), in addition to the armed security guard who rode with us in the bus.

There was something unsettling about riding in a bus that is traveling at speed through poverty-stricken villages behind siren-wailing military vehicles.
The ancient structures had tumbled to the ground at Tanis, too, but there were more identifiable fragments than at Bubastis. As we left the bus, the pink granite gate of Sheshonq III (Dynasty 22)—presided over by Ramesses II (Dynasty 19)—lay before us. Allan and Greg Vogel, the most dedicated among the group’s photographers, strode ahead to have a clear shot of the whole site without other people obscuring their pictures. (Greg complained that Allan kept getting in his way!)

Through the gate, a sign informed us that we were standing in the Temple of Amun but there was precious little to differentiate the temple from the area surrounding it. Fallen pieces of statues, columns, and stones engraved with hieroglyphs lay everywhere.

Tom, and some of the participants who had studied hieroglyphs with him in Chicago, had a marvelous time. The hieroglyphs on some of the fragments were very deeply cut, which defied any later attempt to alter or mutilate them (a common practice throughout Egyptian history). Brilliant sun side-lighted the carved glyphs beautifully, making Tanis the perfect place to practice reading hieroglyphs. Indeed, we all quickly learned to recognize one of the cartouches of Ramesses II.
Those glyphs of Ramesses tell a tale. Tanis was the capital of Lower Egypt during the 3rd Intermediate Period Dynasties 21 and 22, whose rulers were not native Egyptians but Libyans eager to prove themselves “legitimate.” There were lots of Ramesses II statues for them to appropriate, not exactly in the next field but thirty miles away at Ramesses’ delta capital of Pi-Ramesses. So Ramesses dominates Tanis just as he does almost every place else in Egypt.

A wooden platform caught our attention. There, under a protective roof, we found an open tomb with two empty sarcophagi. This was the final resting place of two kings named Sheshonq III & IV. Adjacent to their tomb was a collection of more 3rd Intermediate Period royal tombs, discovered in 1939 by French archaeologist, Pierre Montet.

1939: World War II. That’s probably why we had not heard of Montet’s discovery of these unplundered royal tombs with riches exceeded only by those of Tutankhamun.

The tomb of Psusennes I (Dynasty 21) had not been touched since it was closed in the 10th century BCE. It contained a vast amount of rich burial goods, not the least among which was Psusennes’ solid silver coffin. We later were to see this hoard, as well as other finds from Tanis, in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

There was a second silver coffin, which belonged to Sheshonq II, in another chamber of Psusennes’ tomb. This coffin was unusual, not only because it was made of silver (which was more rare than gold) but because the head on its cover was that of a hawk, not of the king himself.

As the pictures above illustrate, no sign of this wealth was visible at Tanis and it is poorly displayed even in the Egyptian Museum. When we reached Cairo and visited the museum, one of the first places we searched out was the Tanis gallery and, within it, the two silver coffins. Unfortunately they were almost hidden in darkness against the wall, although small items were better displayed in lit cases. A few steps down the hall the King Tut gallery was packed with people. Here, at Tanis, we had it almost to ourselves. Marian drew out her sketch pad to capture a quick likeness of the coffin of Psusennes I.
But the Egyptian Museum comes later in the trip, toward the very end. Meanwhile, there was much to see at Tanis and we tried to see as much of it as possible. For instance, we took a closer look at the Gate of Sheshonq III.

Opposite the colossus of Ramesses II what should there be but an 18th dynasty granite head of Amenhotep III! And, then, inside the gate itself, a badly weathered triad of Re, Ramesses, and Ptah-Tatenen (a 19th dynasty creator god). These kings of Dynasty 21 and 22 had no shame. They took from any of their predecessors—the Egyptian pharaohs they had supplanted in the delta—whatever there was to take. But most of all they took from Ramesses II, probably because he had left so much for them to take.
An inscription on the truncated colossus of Ramesses II pictured below contains the conclusion to one of Ramesses favorite stories, one that he carved on monuments all over Egypt: the Battle of Kadesh, a conflict in his 5th regnal year with the Hittite monarch Muwatalli II in what is now modern Syria. Ramesses, of course, gloried in a magnificent victory, a version that was disputed by Hittite chronicles.

Sixteen years later, the conflict was resolved in a peace treaty with a new Hittite king, Hattusili III, which was confirmed by the marriage of Ramesses to Hattusili’s daughter. The princess is never heard from again.

Security for tourists, particularly American tourists, was heightened during our stay this year. Palestinians from Gaza had broken through the border of Egypt to buy food they were prohibited from buying in Israel. Rumor had it that some Palestinians had made it to central Egypt and were “looking” for American tourists. This soldier watching over Tanis was, however, not out of the ordinary.
Tanis to Cairo

We boarded the bus for what turned out to be a long trip to Cairo, not least because we were stopped at a railroad crossing. The police escort, with its flashing blue lights and loud siren, could whisk us through bustling market villages but it could do nothing about a train!

The little illuminated clock on the ceiling of the bus read 3:00 when we started on our way south. When the clock glowed 5:00 we were still on the highway, but ensnared in sprawling Cairo’s rush hour traffic. At 6:00 we were within sight of the Ramesses train station, just about the time the train to Alexandria would be pulling out. We could see the station in the dark from an overpass as our bus battled the heavy traffic.

Once the Nile was in view our spirits lifted, but just following the congested streets from one side of the city to the other, past the Nile Hilton, took most of one more hour.

When we finally parked in front of the historic Shepheard Hotel at nearly 7:00, Michel Francis (whom we had last seen when he put us on the train to Alexandria almost a week before) was waiting to greet us and assign our rooms.

After claiming those rooms, we sped to the dining room, which seemed to be staffed by young apprentices. Eventually our table was set up properly and we were able to order dinner. Two other tour participants joined us for conversation, which was somewhat difficult because a singer was entertaining at the top of her lungs. It was a curious cultural experience. Evidently having a live singer, accompanied by a recording, in the dining room was considered appropriate to the ambiance of this elegant hotel. We enjoyed her breaks more than the music. Thus, we were happy at the end to retreat to our quiet and comfortable rooms after a very long, though profitable, day.
On the way to the Fayoum, a fertile area surrounding a large lake located a little less than 100 miles south-south-west of Cairo, we stopped at two of the Old Kingdom pyramid fields, Dahshur and Abusir.

We knew, of course, that these names were borrowed from the names of villages nearby. But for ancient Egyptians, they were just part of the huge necropolis on the west side of the Nile, opposite the ancient capital of Memphis.

Since our itinerary was focused on places unlikely to have been visited by introductory Egyptian tours (with one or two exceptions, this was a repeat trip for everyone) we stopped at neither Giza nor Saqqara but went straight to Dahshur to take a look at two pyramids, both built by the first king of the 4th dynasty, Senefru.

Even though we had been to Egypt before, we still had to think hard in order to keep the various dynasties and their pharaohs in order, especially since we weren’t visiting the archaeological sites in the ancient chronological sequence. For instance, the Delta sites we had just seen dated from Dynasties 21-22 in the 3rd Intermediate Period (11th-7th centuries BCE) while Senefru’s pyramids at Dahshur, where we were going, were Dynasty 4 in the Old Kingdom (27th-22nd centuries BCE). The mind boggles at the expanse of time.

So when we came upon the Bent Pyramid, as the sun lifted itself over the artificial mountain’s peak, we could know only imperfectly the timelessness that was ancient Egypt, that Tanis and Dahshur in some way were of the same time while ours was not.
The Bent Pyramid was the second of three pyramids that Senefru is known to have built. The first is at Meidum (where we will go on February 8, day after tomorrow) and the third is right here at Dahshur (see below). The Bent Pyramid is sometimes called the False Pyramid because it is “bent,” as real pyramids are not supposed to be. The bend occurred half way up when the angle of the sides was reduced by about ten degrees. Why? We find it helpful to remember that Senefru’s son and successor, Khufu, had not yet constructed the Great Pyramid at Giza. The standard pyramid design, which later would prevail for centuries, was still being developed—the Bent Pyramid may have been an experiment that didn’t work.

Our whole group walked the entire distance around the pyramid, which covers about 8.8 acres of desert, noticing as we did so that a large number of the original limestone casing stones were still in place, one of the facts that was pointed out by Tom and Wahid when the group paused for the kind of informed discussion that characterized this tour.
That a pyramid at Meidum could be seen in the distant haze from Dahshur was a visible reminder to us that the pyramid fields lining the west bank of the Nile were intentionally related to one another, that later kings demonstrated their continuity with those who had gone before by their choice of final resting place. We will have occasion to remark on this conjunction later in the day when we visit Abusir.

But now we clambered back onto the bus for the short ride to Senefru’s third pyramid, the **Red Pyramid**, where he was entombed.

Senefru’s engineers, learning their lesson, designed the Red Pyramid with almost the same angle of slope they had used for the completion of the Bent Pyramid. The result was this “true” pyramid, the first of its kind. One of us (Allan) believes it to be the most beautiful pyramid in Egypt. (Later, Khufu’s designers—who, for all we know, might have been the same ones who worked for Senefru—employed the Red Pyramid’s angle for the Great Pyramid.)

Some of the group chose to climb up the side and into the Red Pyramid but others, including both of us, elected to circle the structure as we had done at the Bent Pyramid. We could see that the Bent Pyramid, where we had just been, was not that far away.
Imhotep Museum

Our guide, Wahid, told us that we had an opportunity to visit a new museum, opened only in 2006, that was not on the itinerary. The Supreme Council of Antiquities has a policy of building new museums outside Cairo, creating new destinations for tourists and spreading the prosperity that tourism brings. Tourism, of course, is the leading industry in Egypt today. We had already seen public work projects in Alexandria on archaeological sites and the new library and museums there—and now the splendid new Imhotep Museum. Unlike the Egyptian Museum, but like the National Museum in Alexandria, we were allowed to photograph freely here.

The new building echoes the entrance to the reconstructed wall around the Step Pyramid that Imhotep built for King Djoser (3rd Dynasty) at nearby Saqqara. Powerful electronic doors opened when we approached. Once inside the cool space we were surrounded by art and architecture from the era of Imhotep, Djoser’s vizier and architect. In the Step Pyramid, Imhotep had created a burial monument of dressed stone, replacing the mud brick construction of earlier mastaba tombs. His innovations led directly to the design of the huge 4th dynasty pyramids that came afterwards.

Just inside the museum door we found the base to a monumental statue of Djoser with the king’s feet remaining on it. But the inscription on the base makes the artifact significant beyond measure—it contains the name and titles of Imhotep. Imhotep’s was an exalted position indeed.
Upon entering the main hall we saw, straight ahead, a display of some of the turquoise faience tiles that lined the walls of the symbolic royal palace deep beneath Djoser’s pyramid.

Within the doorways of this impressive presentation, which gives museum-goers a glimpse of a Saqqara they probably will never have opportunity to see otherwise, are reliefs of Djoser running in the Heb Sed festival.

Galleries on either side of the entry hall displayed choice collections in this mercifully small museum. We could walk around the beautifully installed objects without being overwhelmed or exhausted, the complete opposite of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The exhibits were gratifyingly instructive.
A mummy, covered with paintings in perfectly preserved color, documents the color palette available to Egyptian painters. A closer look at the painted necklace below the head reveals rows of floral patterns, including lotus buds and opened lotus rosettes. The lower part has boldly designed registers that depict harvest scenes and multiple gods. Flat areas of pure color surround the shapes most effectively. This 30th dynasty mummy was discovered recently in a tomb at Saqqara. There was no inscription so the identity of the deceased is unknown.

Another display case contains a cache of Late Period bronzes found at Giza. Isis suckles Horus (depicted here as a small man), a prototype of the mother and child theme that has prevailed in religious iconography until now.

At right is a 5th dynasty scribe, Ptah-Shepses, reading from a scroll that he may have written himself. Scribes, literate and sophisticated theologically, were among the elite of the elite in ancient Egypt. We are in debt to them for they recorded the rich literature that today tell us what we know of their life and times.
The beautiful new museum was not uncrowded, so at times we had to compete with other visitors. Before we had to leave the museum Allan stopped to take another picture of the hieroglyphs on the statue base that records the name of Imhotep. Just then an enthusiastic tourist jumped right in front of him! The tourist’s hand effectively obscured the crucial part of the inscription. Never fails!

The Imhotep Museum was, for us, one of the high points of the tour but we couldn’t stay there forever—another pyramid field awaited us.
Our visit to Abusir was the last stop in an already full day and we were getting tired. Where was Abusir, really? It was time to look again at the map.

We had started the day at Dahshur with the 4th dynasty pyramids of Sneferu and had just come from the Imhotep Museum, which celebrated the architect of 3rd dynasty Djoser, near the entrance to Saqqara.

Though virtually everyone had been to Saqqara perviously, somehow it seemed we were missing something by not stopping there as we went north to Abusir. Nevertheless, when we looked south, there was Djoser’s Step Pyramid. And to the north were the 4th dynasty pyramids of Giza. These pyramid fields, indeed, were one field within which kings of the various dynasties tended to cluster together.

At least four 5th dynasty kings built pyramids at Abusir but one, that of Neferefre, was not completed and is in total ruin. The remaining three (from left above), belonging to Sahure, Niuserre, and Neferirkare, are severely damaged. The removal of their facing stones left the poorly constructed inner structures to collapse of their own weight.

In the short time we spent at Abusir it was not possible to walk to the back side of these pyramids so we’ve taken the liberty of using a photograph from a previous trip to illustrate their physical relationship. These kings who were entombed here are sometimes called “Sun Kings” because of their identity with the sun god, Re, a name they incorporated into their own names. We also were unable to walk the relatively short distance across the sand to the Sun Temples that are unique to the 5th dynasty.
Leaving the bus, we walked on the concrete walkway that parallels the causeway leading to the pyramid of Sahure. The paved causeway, originally enclosed over its 257-foot length, connected the king’s valley temple at the Nile with the pyramid above.

The second king of the 5th dynasty, Sahure was the first to construct his pyramid at Abusir. Though the pyramid was much inferior in construction to the 4th dynasty Giza pyramids, Sahure’s mortuary temple, attached to the east side of the pyramid, was large and lavish. Two columns with palm frond capitals that been re-erected invited us to enter what was left of the temple. We were pleased to find one of the capitals sitting intact on the original paving stones near a red granite block containing Sahure’s cartouche that, after 5000 years, retained a bit of what was once its brilliant color.

We found it difficult to get any sort of mental image of the structures among whose ruins we now found ourselves—and we had the impression that others of the group also had difficulty. What’s to be made of a jumble of broken columns, holes in the ground with
ramps leading into them, and piles of stone that, we knew, were at one time shining pyramids? Tom and Wahid did their best to enlighten us as we carefully made our way around. Still, we continue to struggle to fit the pieces of Abusir into place.

An Egyptian archaeologist who was working at Sahure’s pyramid allowed us to enter the shaft to the burial chamber but refused to let us photograph inside. Something about they had yet to publish their findings. He didn’t need to be overly worried for nothing very photogenic was in there!

(Note the tone of frustration about capricious limitations on photography in Egypt.)

The early kings of the 5th dynasty lived—and died— at a time when Egypt’s economy was, for whatever reason, in a recession. Their pyramids were smaller, more hastily built, and generally more crude than those of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure on the Giza Plateau to the north. In fact, they were built as step pyramids with the steps filled in to make them look like “true” pyramids. They apparently hadn’t learned anything from Senefru. Things must have picked up by the time of the last king of the 5th dynasty, Unas, whose pyramid at Saqqara is the first to contain what are known as “Pyramid Texts.”
In the picture at left the steps in Neferirkare’s pyramid (the second built at Abusir) are clearly visible; the casing stones are gone, so the structure is revealed. Next to it is the pyramid of Niuserre, which he positioned between the one of his father, Neferirkare, and that of his father’s brother, his uncle, Sahure. This was a close-knit family! No pyramids are closer together than these in all of Egypt.

We had noticed a structure that looked rather fresh and new when we first arrived at Abusir but now that we were about to leave we took a closer look at it. The mastaba tomb of Ptahshepses (not the scribe of the same name whose statue we saw in the Imhotep Museum), is, it turns out, one of the remarkable features at Abusir. But all we were able to see was the reconstructed entrance with its striking lotus bud columns. Only later, while writing this report, did we realize that the time constraints of the tour schedule had prohibited us from seeing a spectacular non-royal Old Kingdom tomb.
By now it was mid-afternoon and we were more than ready for lunch. Back on the bus, we were driven to a fashionable country club for a meal that was more like dinner. Not only was the building in the English style, it overlooked a riding ring where a young girl on an English saddle was exercising her horse, starting slowly and gradually working up to a gallop. She provided a hypnotic distraction during our meal. This lunch break seemed more like England than Egypt.

The bus clock registered 5:17, when we began a 2-hour drive to the southern shore of Lake Qarun in the Fayoum, where, by the time we arrived, the sun was setting across the lake.

When we straggled into the lobby of the Helnan Auberge-Fayoum waiters greeted us with glasses of chilled “karkadei” the brilliant wine-colored hibiscus tea that signals “welcome” in Egypt, which we sipped while we waited for our luggage. This hotel was to be our comfortable home for the next three nights.

As usual, dinner followed at 7 p.m. Tourist hotels in Egypt usually provide fine buffets in the evening as well as at breakfast. At dinner one might chose from the dinner buffet or order off the menu. While the bedrooms were warm and comfortable, we learned to wear our warmest jackets when venturing to the unheated dining room where we were joined by our fellow travelers as well as Egyptian families.

About this time Tom brought out a sketchbook, cunningly outfitted with colored pencils, that his wife, Judy, had sent along as a gift for Marian. During the rest of the trip Marian carried the sketchbook everywhere we went, making use of it to sketch the drawings that enrich this report. She found it especially useful in places where cameras were forbidden.

Although the rooms overlooked a busy road, the french doors were well insulated so the rooms were amazingly quiet. The curious traveler who peered out would see a half dozen guards in front of the hotel at all times, day and night.
The first of our two full days in the Fayoum dawned cold and blustery, a meteorological phenomenon that was ameliorated for us by the luxury of an 8 a.m. departure instead of the usual 7 a.m.

We climbed into several 4-wheel-drive vehicles for an off-road expedition. After driving along the shore of the great lake called Birket (Lake) Qarun for a few miles, we turned off onto the sand, sometimes following tire-tracks, sometimes not. At times the drivers of our vehicles raced each other toward our first destination—Dimai. The wind was overpowering when we climbed out of the vehicles.

**Dimai**, a caravan town founded in the third century BCE and abandoned 600 years later, is now a moonscape way out in the endless desert on the north side of the lake. The ensemble resembles a huge standing stone circle. But in the days of founder Ptolemy II and, later, the Romans, it was on the shore of a much larger lake and a bustling hub of the caravan route across the Western Desert to the Mediterranean and on to Rome.

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**Note on the Fayoum**

Often called an oasis, the Fayoum is a depression west of the Nile that is made fertile by the Nile itself and not, as is a true oasis, by underground springs.

The present Lake Qarun is what is left of an immense “inland sea” that made the Fayoum the first fully developed agricultural area in ancient Lower Egypt. The lake is now saline but the “oasis” remains an agricultural center.

Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom (12th dynasty) created irrigation canals and other water works. Many archaeological remains are from that period.

The Fayoum was also critical to the Romans for its agricultural produce.
Instead of stones we saw the remains of tall mud brick walls that looked like gigantic cuneiform tablets stuck upright in the sand. Close up, we could see that the small square mud bricks were strengthened with bits of straw and specks of potsherds. We leaned into the wind as we maneuvered around the site, walking along the stranded walls that were no longer rigid in their uprightness, but had slowly relaxed into softer contours with age.

The Ptolemaic rulers called the town Soknopaiou Nesos meaning “Island of Sobek (the crocodile god).” It may not have been an island but rather a peninsula after Ptolemy succeeded in reducing the lake’s size by diverting water to irrigate the fields provided for retired soldiers. The military retirement program for soldiers of both the Macedonians and the Romans consisted of land in distant provinces. Dimai was a military outpost that protected caravans, so some soldiers may have remained on after their tour of duty was completed.

The ruins among which members of our group scattered, though extensive, were only the remains of the temple compound; houses, warehouses, and various other buildings—including a dock where boats unloaded cargo for the desert caravans—spread over a much larger area.

Its ancient name gives us a clue that this site was dedicated to the worship of Sobek, (the god who had a particular claim to the Fayoum throughout pharaonic history) but the stone and brick temple that we could see dates from a later, Christian, period.
To our surprise, Wahid said we were permitted to collect sherds. So while we walked around the site we paid attention to the sherd-covered sand under our feet. We couldn’t resist pocketing bits of pottery, adding and subtracting when more interesting ones appeared. We picked up thick sherds, fragments of heavy vessels that stored grain or oil. We held fragments of cooking pots and plates. One had part of a handle, suggesting a cup. Some of the sherds were decorated with colored brush strokes. It was moving to feel the indented groove of the potter’s fingers. So, as we walked, almost everyone watched the ground as well as the mud-brick structures. And Tom looked over a footed saucer Marian found.

On our way to the cars we read the sign. No one had noticed it before.
Our own caravan of modern cars quickly ferried us the short distance across the desert to a little Middle Kingdom temple called Qasr El-Saga. This compact unfinished temple is made of massive uniform sandstone blocks.

Inside, a narrow corridor opens to seven parallel shrines. There are no inscriptions to tell people who can read inscriptions who was worshipped in this temple but those same people think its plan and construction are similar to Middle Kingdom temples in other parts of the Fayoum. That’s good enough for us.

The building foundation extended all around, making fine seating for visitors.

While we were encouraged to examine the temple thoroughly, we were warned to stay away from a drama taking place down the hill, just out of sight. So, in order to comply with that edict, we walked away from the group to see what might be at a ruined building a little way up the slope. There was nothing ancient about it and ample evidence that it had been used by passersby within recent days. We did not tarry there.

Our drivers and guards had parked their
trucks at right angles and stretched what is called “Ramadan” cloth like a roof to create a field kitchen. Here they grilled chicken and cooked vegetables for everybody.

Meanwhile Marian continued to admire a basket, which held pumpkin seeds for the driver, that was perched on top of the dashboard of the vehicle in which we had been riding. Later on she made an offer the driver could not refuse; thus his basket became her Egypt souvenir, eventually to join her collection of Tohono O’odhom baskets made in the American southwest by artisans using a similar technique, in a similar climate.
We left our Fayoum hotel at the usual 7 a.m. in our regular bus to visit Karanis, perhaps the largest Greco-Roman city in the Fayoum during the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century BCE. Founded by the same Ptolemy II we had met the day before at Dimai, Karanis boasted as many as 3,000 inhabitants, many of them former soldiers and their families. It not only survived but prospered for 700 years, one hundred years longer than Dimai.

The ruins of Karanis largely are of the city that developed after Octavian (Augustus Caesar) defeated Anthony and Cleopatra, the last pharaoh of Egypt. Like Ptolemy, Caesar settled his veterans in the Fayoum, as some of the papyri found at Karanis testify.

In 1925, Francis W. Kelsey of the University of Michigan began excavation and salvage work during which he found many papyri that are still yielding information about life in this Roman provincial town. They are now in the University of Michigan Papyrus Collection. Unfortunately, the small museum, where artifact finds are displayed, was closed at the time of our visit.

Though we had no opportunity actually to check out the offerings in a local market, we were able to glimpse several through the bus window as we travelled through. This one in the Fayoum, near Karanis, was the largest.
Upon leaving the bus at Karanis we read the sign that had been installed by the Supreme Council of Antiquities. And we noted in passing that the logo of the SCA incorporated the sun disk and rays ending in hands that was the “logo” of Akhenaten, whose city we were to visit two days later.

It was obvious that others, many others, had preceded us on the sandy trail up to the ruins. Marian, in particular, watched the ground—alert, as she always is, for unexpectedly treacherous footing. But, no matter what we watched, we were constantly aware that we were being watched—and watched out for. Guards, always present, were especially obvious at Karanis.

A pickup truck with our soldiers preceded us toward the southernmost of two temples. Dedicated to a couple of crocodile gods, variant forms of Sobek, this temple, like almost all temples in Egypt, was built on the foundations of predecessors. We were reminded that sacred buildings around the world, not just in Egypt, have been built at the holy sites of earlier peoples, cultures, and religions.

Entrance to the South Temple is by way of what is known as the Gate of Claudius, so called because the inscription on the lintel says in Greek that the temple was dedicated by Nero and taken over by Claudius.
Inside, the altar has a cavity where priests may have hidden while delivering oracles. A deep niche in an anteroom provided storage space for the mummy of a sacred crocodile.

From the roof of the temple we had an overview of the site, including remnants of the residential areas. Overall the sensation of being on the set of a science fiction movie was inescapable. It was a feeling that increased with the knowledge that every bump in the sand-swept landscape represented another dwelling or public building where people had lived their lives and died their deaths.

The North Temple, built on an earlier foundation like the South Temple, likewise was dedicated to local forms of the crocodile god, Sobek.
The Roman bath, once richly decorated, contained both cold water (frigidarium) and hot water (caldarium) bathing areas, plus a sauna (laconium) and lounge area (apodyterium).
After we left Karanis we passed through El Fayoum, a bustling city, where we stopped to see a group of ancient water wheels, now used as the official symbol of the Fayoum province. Used to lift water from lower to higher levels primarily for irrigation, there are more than 200 of them in the Fayoum.

Local vendors quickly saw an opportunity to sell baskets. While attractive, these baskets were not of as high a quality as the one Marian bought from the 4X4 driver yesterday.

Our security detail waited patiently while we took in the sights and did our shopping.

We spied goats on a stoop, a clothing shop, fields as green as Ireland, and a butcher.
Our last stop of the day, before heading back for dinner and then to the Helnam Auberge for a lecture-discussion with Tom, was at the 12th dynasty pyramid of Senusert II.

Since most of what we have seen in the Fayoum had been ruins of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, it would good to be reminded that this fertile area had been very important to the Middle Kingdom kings, who had concentrated many of their building projects here.

Senusert II is known specifically for his construction of dykes and canals that extended the irrigation system of the Fayoum, syphoning off water onto larger and larger farms that would have otherwise drained into the lake.

The limestone casing of the pyramid is long gone, leaving the mud brick core.

Dinner was at a pleasant restaurant on the lake, where Ramadan cloth shielded us from the wind. There was some mixup with the menu having to do with fish. Marian remembers it in detail; Allan would rather not.
On our way out of the Fayoum we stopped at Meidum, the last of the Old Kingdom pyramid fields we would visit. It seemed as though it was three years, and not three days, since we had been looking at Senefru’s Bent Pyramid and Red Pyramid at Dahshur! (Time on this trip had its own contours, limited neither to Egyptian nor American time.) Yet here we were at Meidum with the so-called Collapsed Pyramid looming before us.

Most Egyptologists affirm that the Meidum pyramid was the first built by Senefru, the king who started the 4th dynasty, though they usually add a caveat that Senefru might have taken over a pyramid begun by Huni, last of the 3rd dynasty. Either way, the pyramid ended up being Senefru’s earliest attempt at creating a “true” smooth pyramid.

And he might have succeeded. Clearly its outer structure did not collapse, as the image of a planned implosion to bring down a modern apartment building might suggest. Instead, the mound of rubble at its base probably resulted from the standard pilfering of stone for later buildings that left pyramids all over Egypt in ruins.

Senefru had pyramids on the brain. Why he would have abandoned the effort at Meidum is not at all clear. Did he think he needed to be buried closer to the great Djoser at Saqqara?
Though we had declined the offer to enter the Red Pyramid, we took up the challenge here. We clattered up the exterior stairway to the entrance half way up the side of the pyramid. Once inside, we crawled up rather steep stairs that led to the tall but small and unfinished burial chamber. The Egyptian workers must have been slender and agile to have used this snug stairwell!

Once again, we marveled at the inconsistencies in the photography policy of the Supreme Council of Antiquities. Here we were not only allowed to take cameras but were encouraged to use flash!

We studied the stunning corbelled stone work overhead. We could see the way the stones were layered or cantilevered to hold up the next layer above. Those in the group who had climbed into the Red Pyramid were reminded of the corbeling there, which suggested that Senefru had retained the same architectural and engineering firm to build all his pyramids.

Crowded into the burial chamber that Senefru had never used, Tom provided his usual explanation for what the pyramid was all about, while Marian made good use of the sketch pad his wife, Judy, had thoughtfully sent along, remembering how Marian had sketched in Syria the year before.
Before descending the stairs from the pyramid entrance, we paused to survey the surrounding terrain where a massive mastaba tomb—Number 17 according to the Petrie numbering—dominated the landscape. Adding to the mystery of Meidum, this tomb has no name for its owner, though whoever it was, was someone of tremendous importance, perhaps a son of Senefru.

But there is more than the close-in mastaba out there in the desert. There is, in fact, a huge mastaba field, with countless tombs, most of which have not been excavated. One that has been is the tomb of Nefermaat (also probably a son of Senefru) and Itet, his wife, which contained the famous “Meidum Geese” now in the Cairo museum.

It is possible to crawl into Mastaba 17, through a looters’ hole, and view the sarcophagus that is still in place. Some of the group chose to do so while the rest of us walked around to see the spot where the original entrance had been.
It took us almost three hours to drive south from Meidum to Tuna El-Jebel, bypassing El-Minya, the city where we were scheduled to spend the night. The ride through the desert on the west side of the Nile River was not unpleasant. We watched women tending their sheep when we left the Fayoum region. And, then, when the road strayed from the river, we noticed mile upon mile of apparently unoccupied houses and low walls that seemed to indicate housing developments that had not yet developed.

We entered the site of Tuna El-Jebel through wrought iron gates where we were met by friendly children who rushed up to greet us, eager to practice their English greetings and to pose for photographs. On a school outing, they were very excited. They were soon reprimanded and called back by their teachers.
During the Ptolemaic and Roman periods Tuna el-Jebel was a necropolis of the nearby town of Hermopolis that was, among other things, a cult center for Thoth, the god of wisdom, learning, writing—of scribes. Priests and nobles made their tombs at Tuna el-Jebel but so did Thoth or, more precisely, the animal symbols of Thoth. We went into the immense catacomb that was the depository for thousands upon thousands of mummified ibises and baboons, placed there by devotees of the god.

The mummies of these animals were placed in containers and then stored in niches in the walls of the catacomb. Many broken pots once held the bodies of birds and baboons sacred to Thoth; save for one baboon (below right), the mummies themselves are gone. Tomb robbery, some even in modern times, has taken its toll.

Catacombs were not typical of Egyptian burial practice. This one, and the one we visited in Alexandria—once containing the bodies of people, not animals—resulted from the influence brought to bear by the Ptolemaic (Greek) and Roman rulers.
The tomb of Potosiris, which was built about the time Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, looks more like a temple than a tomb. Potosiris, a high priest of Thoth at Hermopolis, had to be a wealthy and powerful man to be able to afford a tomb like this for himself and his family. It combines Late (Persian) period and Greek architectural styles. Cameras were not permitted inside but, at any rate, our attention was drawn to the columns that retain some of their original color, providing hints of the splendor that once was. We noticed the fine palm capitals on the two outer columns.
The necropolis stretches out behind the tomb of Potosiris. It contains tombs that include the governors of Hermopolis as far back as the 5th and 6th dynasties, plus many others. The other tomb we visited is the tomb of Isadora, a young woman who drowned in the Nile in 160 BCE while fleeing with her lover who was not favored by her father. Her mummy is still there. We peeked in, took one look in the crowded room and fled.

Isadora’s father built the sumptuous tomb for her that included an elegy in Greek. It seems that, after some time had passed, a cult grew up around her memory the result of which was the chapel that was not open to visitors.

It was true everywhere we went on this trip: there was much we did not see. For instance, we missed a Roman waterwheel and deep well, in addition to many other tombs. But it had been a long day already and we still had to drive back north to El Minya and our hotel for the night. Along the way, there was more of the Egyptian countryside, including the towers of Coptic churches.
Bags were being loaded onto the bus outside the Mercure Minya Hotel and we were encouraged to board in preparation for departure to Beni Hassan.

Looking past the bus toward the river, we were enthralled at the sight of mist rising in the early morning and remembered that, in virtually rainless Egypt, the nightly condensation of Nile provided needed water for cultivation. Could it be that, when the ancients saw what we were seeing, they thought of Tefnut, the goddess of moisture?

Yesterday, at Tuna el-Jebel and here at Minya, we were on the west side of the Nile but Beni Hassan was on the east. We had to cross the river. On the way, we passed lush fields (were we seeing clover grown for animal fodder? wheat or barley, basic staples? cotton or flax?), complete with cow herders and women completely enclosed in black garments. There was virtually no way to determine whether they were Muslim or Coptic Christian here in Middle Egypt.
Beni Hassan was a necropolis for nomarchs (provincial governors) during the Middle Kingdom’s 11th and 12th dynasties. The time frame is 2100-1800 BCE, roughly 1000-1500 years earlier than Tuna El-Jebel, where we were yesterday. Who says time-travel is impossible!

Generally tombs in all periods were built on the west side of the Nile—where the sun set and the sun god began his nightly journey through the underworld. But these tombs are on the eastern side where the limestone cliffs made them possible. The officials who finally rested there may have been consoled by the fact that the openings to their tomb-chapels looked straight across the Nile into the setting sun.

We climbed the long flight of stairs on the hillside to where the tombs were dug

In the distance we spied the line of tombs and the long stairway up to them before we actually arrived.

into the cliffs, and everyone needed a rest after the steep climb. The haze over the river, by the way, is air pollution, not morning mist.
Of the thirty-nine tombs, four of the decorated ones were open, two from the 11th dynasty (Khety and Baqet III) and two from the 12th dynasty (Amenemhet and Khnumhotep II). Despite numerous offers of backsheesh, the guardians refused to allow us to photograph inside any of them. Fortunately, Marian’s sketch book was always at hand, even when we were waiting for the gates of the tombs to be opened for us.

When we were finally allowed in, we found walls entirely covered with small drawings arranged in registers, like ancient comic strips. Some registers showed scenes of male figures practicing gymnastics or wrestling. Other drawings depicted battle scenes, desert hunting, fishing, farming, sailing, crafts production, musicians. Offering scenes and funerary processions were on other walls.

The decoration in these tombs was different from any we had seen before. For one thing, it was done with paint on flat walls instead of on bas-reliefs. And, for another, it depicted scenes of every-day life in such a way that we had the feeling we were privy to the actual way life was lived in Middle Egypt 3500 years ago.

A Note about the 11th & 12th Dynasties

The first part of the 11th dynasty is placed by most Egyptologists at the end of the First Intermediate Period, a time of political disunity and, indeed, discord, in the years between the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom. Early 11th dynasty kings ruled only from Thebes.

Nomarchs, such as Khety and Baqet III, lived in the last years of the 11th dynasty and may at that time have been more like warlords than governors of states within a national polity. They probably had small armies and levied tribute on travelers through the territories they controlled.

The kings of the 12th dynasty pulled Egypt back together and, in so doing, reduced the power of the nomarchs. Amenemhet, who was nomarch of the Antelope nome during the rule of the 2nd king of the Middle Kingdom, Sesostris I, probably was losing his authority as central administration regained strength.
We’ve taken the liberty, because our cameras were useless this time round, of including, from each of the four tombs we visited, a photograph that Allan took on a previous trip, when the guards were more amenable to persuasion.

Khety (11th Dynasty)
Khety was the son of Baqet and the decoration is like that of his father—scenes from the life the deceased had lived and which he anticipated in the afterlife. The fluted lotus bud columns are purely decorative, not necessary for holding up the roof. Originally there were six of them; the bases of three missing ones are visible in the photograph and the hanging capital of the sixth is barely discernible behind the complete column at left.

Baqet III (11th Dynasty)
The walls of this tomb are covered with scenes of birding, hunting, and fishing in the marshes; spinning and weaving; and—above—wrestling, a sport that served also for military training.
Amenemhet or Ameni (12th Dynasty)
Amenemhet, the predecessor of Khnumhotep, recounted on his tomb walls that he was the “Great Overlord of the Province of Oryx” during the reign of Sesostris I (20th century BCE). Decoration in this tomb continues the pattern of the other Beni Hassan tombs, with domestic scenes combined with wrestlers and other now familiar themes. Are the yellow objects bee hives?

Khnumhotep II (12th Dynasty)
About 100 years later than Baqet and Khety, the hunting scenes and general stylistic patterns are not that different. Of particular interest in this panel are Syrians, wearing very distinctive striped robes, trading with Khnumhotep. Could it be that there really were camels in the Middle Kingdom and that the Syrians are leading one?

Marian drew the figures for the report’s “logo” while we were inside Khnumhotep’s tomb.
Standing on the cliff outside the row of Middle Kingdom tombs, we could see a long stretch of the Nile River, a sight that must have inspired the entombed nomarchs.

We made our way down the long tiers of steps toward the rest house (toilets and coffee) and the waiting bus. As we reached the Nile cultivation, we were struck by the sight of three women in colorful dresses bearing loads of branches on their heads. Unveiled and wearing red, even when they wore black, they surely were Copts.

The next and last stop before driving to Assiut was modern Tell el-Amarna, the ancient city of Akhetaten, built by the so-called heretic pharaoh, Akhenaten. In order to get there we recrossed the river on the bridge toward Minya, drove down the west bank to a ferry, and crossed the river again. This journey turned out to be as interesting as the archaeological ruins.
During the 2-hour bus ride from Beni Hassan to the ferry that would take us to Akhetaten we continued to pay attention to areas through which we travelled. Here is a sampling of what passed outside the windows of our moving vehicle.
There was some discussion about whether it would be possible for the bus to drive onto the ferry. It wasn’t a very long discussion: our big bus would have taken the entire vehicle space, with no room for all the cars that wanted to go at the same time. So we abandoned the bus with the assurance there would be a smaller conveyance on the other side to deliver us to Akhenaten’s city. We shared the ferry, not only with local citizens and their automobiles but also with their livestock.

As the ferry takes us over to the Nile’s east bank we may pause to think back to yesterday (which already seems a long time ago!). On our way from Tuna El-Jebel (on the west bank of the river) to the hotel in Minya we had passed one of the Akhetaten boundary stelae.

When Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten and moved his capital to this pristine location in Middle Egypt, he marked out the boundaries of his new city with fourteen stelae carved into the cliffs, each depicting himself with his wife, Nefertiti, and some of their daughters. They are shown worshipping the Aten, the disk of the sun whose rays end in tiny hands. The text on each stele announced Akhenaten’s intention that the city never grow larger than the area encompassed by the stones, which had been blessed by the Aten.
It had been the end of an already tiring day and some of our fellow travelers decided to remain in the bus but we, and a few others, trudged up the steps to the glass-enclosed monument, “Stele A,” according to the 1892 designation by W. Flinders Petrie. It is one of three that are west of the Nile. We were interested to learn, only after returning home, that the area marked out by the boundary stelae west of the river is considerably larger than that of the city itself, on the east. We would be interested to know if anyone has discovered any irrigation canals, which would indicate that the western part of Akhetaten was farmland.

The ferry deposited its cargo and we all loaded into a smaller van for the short ride to Tell el-Amarna. The security guard who had been with us all the way in Middle Egypt posed for his picture with two local bus passengers crowded in.

Considering all the time and trouble it took to get to Amarna, the time we spent at the site itself was far too brief. In truth, compared with many other important ancient Egyp-
tian sites, Amarna is not very photogenic. And so tours that cater to people who want to take pictures in order to claim they have “been there” may well avoid this place. We, however, were, by definition, an “archaeological” group of people who were somewhat familiar with the site’s unique history. We deserved to have had time to see more of it than we did. Some, perhaps most, of our group had never been to Amarna and were unlikely to come again. It is a pity that our schedule did not allow more flexibility.

That being said, we did climb up to the north tombs and visit a few of them (no photography allowed) and looked down at the site where a “new city” had once blossomed only to be abandoned and largely destroyed when it’s creator died. Our ever-present armed guard stayed close by.

The Small Aten Temple, like the city itself, was dismantled in the collapse of Akhenaten’s religio-social experiment, but two of its columns have been reconstructed to provide the occasional visitor with some idea of how magnificent it must have been.
As the afternoon wore on, we were taken in the small van back to the ferry and, from thence, to our regular bus. The final destination that evening was Assiut, the largest town in Middle Egypt, which is known to be a center of both Coptic Christian and Muslim fundamentalism (and the resulting tension between them). The region is also known to be most unwelcoming to foreigners.

Although tourist accommodations are not available in Assiut, according to guide books, our trip arranger had resourcefully booked our overnight stay in the Guest House of Assiut University.

The “guest house” turned out to be a vast hotel reminiscent of Soviet architecture, which we suspect was built during the 1970s when the Soviet Union was a strong influence in Egypt.

We were met in the lobby by a group of young men, presumably students, who wrestled our bags onto the elevators and up to our rooms, awaiting tips. Meanwhile our Egyptian tour guide, Wahid, took care of arrangements for us very smoothly so we were able to ignore the cold behavior of the desk clerks. Dinner that night was in a cavernous dining room in what felt just like a chilly conference hotel.

And then it was off to bed for a sound night’s sleep before an early departure to Abydos, the extremely ancient cult center devoted to Osiris, god of the underworld.

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**A Note about Amarna**

The years between 1352 and 1336 BCE, the reign of King Akhenaten and his principal queen, Nefertiti, were the most unusual and disruptive in all the millennia-long history of ancient Egypt.

Following the long and glorious rule of Amenhotep III, his son, Amenhotep IV, took the name Akhenaten, built a new capital half way between Memphis and Thebes and declared that the Theban gods, specifically Amun, were no longer to be worshipped. In their place was the disk of the sun, Aten. The name of the new capital city, Akhetaten, honored the new central deity.

Although, because of his worship of the Aten, Akhenaten is sometimes called the “first monotheist,” he actually did not try to replace all the gods of Egypt. Local gods still held sway and ordinary people still wore amulets that protected them from various evil forces. Instead, the opposition the “heretic pharaoh” faced was the priests of Amun at Karnak temple in Thebes (modern Luxor).

We can imagine the social disruption the outlawing of the lavish public festivals might have produced for a people without the distraction of television! And it doesn’t take much imagination to understand that the treasury of Karnak, which by the time of Amenhotep III had rivaled the wealth of the monarchy, could be appropriated for the expense of building a new city from scratch.
The group gathered after a quick breakfast for a 6:30 departure from Assiut, mounted our so-far trusty tour bus, and settled in for the almost 4-hour ride to Abydos. This was going to be a very long day but a day that promised, nevertheless, to be one of the most interesting of the entire trip.

Our destinations, apart from a hotel in Luxor for the night, were some of the most spectacular buildings of ancient Egypt yet standing: the temple of Seti I at Abydos and the temple of Hathor at Dendera.

As in the Delta—and, in fact, everywhere we went in Egypt—people in the villages waved to us when we drove through and naturally we waved back through the plate glass of our bus windows. A few tour participants reported that friends and family had expressed concern for their safety in such a “troubled” area as Egypt. Indeed, the region through which we were traveling—Middle Egypt—had, not very long ago, been considered dangerous for tourists. We, however, encountered only friendly welcome.
We drove through areas that were increasingly prosperous, including some stylish new housing with attractive balconies above lower garages and utilitarian rooms. Though apparently occupied and, for practical purposes finished, many still had rebars jutting into the air from their roofs. It seems that so long as a house isn’t “finished” it can’t be evaluated for property tax. It’s a wonder any house ever gets finished!

Approaching the Seti I Temple at Abydos, we had our first glimpse of the monumental building, which really spread out before us when we left the bus and began to ascend the steps toward the entrance.

Meanwhile other spectators approach with much less reverence. We, more serious pilgrims, ascended the staircase (which, of course, was not part of the original temple), eager to enter the first of the two courtyards ahead of us.
Visitors to ancient Egypt soon learn that Ramesses II is everywhere—including Abydos. The son and successor of Seti I, he completed the temple after his father’s death. So the first thing we saw, before entering the temple, were the square columns on what is now the façade (they were once the backdrop to a courtyard added by Ramesses). On each of the twelve columns Ramesses is shown with one of three gods: Isis, Horus (left), or Seti. The carved figures are approximately life size.

We walked past the columns but before we could enter the hypostyle halls of the temple we had to present our tickets to the guard, who tore off his portion and handed ours back. We have quite a collection of these ticket stubs, each identifying the place of visitation.

The temple originally had seven entrances leading to the seven cult chapels inside, but when Ramesses II added the courtyards and an entrance pylon (now gone), he sealed six of them, leaving only the one through which we entered, past the lotus bud columns.

Openings in the roof of the first hypostyle hall allowed rays of sunlight to cut through the darkness. But the darkness of the second hall was interrupted only by artificial lights at floor level that illuminated the genuinely remarkable, still brightly colored, reliefs of Seti receiving favors from the god of each of the seven cult chapels that line the back of the second hall.

These chapels are dedicated, first, to the

A Note About Abydos

If we had been trying to look at ancient Egypt chronologically we could not have done better than to begin at Abydos. Here is where kings of Dynasty 0 (Narmer), Dynasty 1 (Qa’a) and Dynasty 2 (Khasekhemwy) had tombs. Abydos was in at the beginning.

But the most important tomb at this ancient site was that of Osiris, the lord of the underworld. Kings of all dynasties naturally wanted to be buried next to Osiris so they created cenotaph tombs, tombs that commemorate (as we might say) kings who actually were buried somewhere else, such as Giza or Thebes.

Ancient Egyptians thought differently than we do. For them, the cenotaph was more than a memorial, it was real. The cenotaph tomb of Osiris, the Osirion next to the temple of Seti I, was the real tomb of Osiris. Hard to understand? Not if you’re an ancient Egyptian.
deified Seti and then to Ptah, Re-Horakhty, Amun (left), Osiris, Isis, and Horus.

We moved in the dim light from chapel to chapel where floor-level spot lights were aimed at the bas-reliefs. Pools of light enhanced the otherwise dark interiors of the chapels. Maybe the stone floors were not three millennia old but they were rough, which required watching where we put our feet.

The back wall of six of the seven chapels has a “false door,” while the Osiris chapel has an actual door leading to rooms dedicated to Osiris. These chapels house an overwhelming assemblage of painted bas-reliefs—arguably the finest in all Egypt—that provide invaluable information about the rituals that were performed in honor of the various gods. A major component of the rituals involved “offering” in the sense, for example, that Seti is shown “offering” to Horus or Osiris or Isis or another of the gods.

There were various kinds of offerings, but the “table of offering” was a motif that caught our attention. In some chapels we saw the representation of a table with its tabletop surface folded upwards, to make the objects on the table completely visible. Here we see the king offering in perpetuity, made to nurture the god of the chapel with the beauti-
ful fruits of this world. Lush lotus blossoms drape over the top. There may be hand woven baskets neatly filled with sweet grapes from the Delta. A generous assortment of melons, pomegranates, grapes as well as other fruit that grows in the Delta and the cultivation along the Nile. Carefully prepared poultry, clusters of ducks or geese, and haunches of meat might be arranged in layers, along with a lavish array of beautifully shaped breads. Fine containers holding scented ointments might appear below the table. Also (photo on previous page) there is libation, the pouring of a liquid into a bowl for the god. Not surprisingly, the gods required the very same comforts of everyday life as did their worshippers.

In a narrow corridor leading from the second hypostyle hall to the south wing of the temple and then out to the Osirion, we passed one of the most important documents of ancient Egypt: the “Abydos Kings List.” Cartouches of seventy-six kings are carved on this wall—everyone Seti I wanted to claim for his history from Menes or Narmer (1st Dynasty) to Seti himself. But, Tom pointed out as he identified the cartouches of various pharaohs, there are quite a number of kings Seti didn’t list. Hatshepsut isn’t there, all of the 2nd Intermediate Period kings aren’t there, and, particularly significant, none of the Amarna kings are there. Everyone after Amenhotep III until Horemheb—meaning Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV), Semenkhkare, Tutankhamun, Ay— is absent. By publishing this list, Seti estab-
lished the legitimate royal succession. It was as though the “heretic pharaoh” and his successors had not existed. Indeed, according to the Egyptian world view, they had not!

Tom Mudloff spent a good bit of time explaining the Kings List, reading some of the cartouches. He pointed out how important it was for Seti I, the first major king of the 19th dynasty (his father, the general Ramesses I, first of the dynasty, had been a commoner) to ensure that the ancient gods were re-established as well as the kings who honored them.

Above the Kings List, is an inscription that asks Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, “Lord of the tomb,” to supply 1000 each of loaves of bread, bottles of beer, cattle, etc., expressed in short-hand symbols for this standard offering that succored both gods and deified kings.

At the left of the List itself we saw Seti standing beside his son, Ramesses II, who is reading from a scroll. This depiction establishes Ramesses as the next in the royal line though, of course, his cartouche does not appear. At the right of the List we were happy to see another of the table of offerings that now were popping into view everywhere we looked, or so it seemed. (See Tom’s full discussion of the Kings List.)

We took a quick look at the famous relief depicting the king and his son roping a bull and were reminded that the bull was one of the symbols that denoted royalty.

Only then did we walk up the corridor that led from Seti’s temple to the Osirion.

Behind the Seti I temple we approached the curious structure known as the Osirion, the cenotaph tomb of the god of the underworld, Osiris. The central chamber of the tomb is open today but
originally was covered, as a tomb should be. A stone coffin and canopic chest once rested on an island here surrounded by ground water, which it still does, suggesting the primeval waters from which, in the Egyptian myths, all creation emerged.

Built on the model of pharaonic tombs, the tomb of Osiris required a mortuary temple, just as did the pyramids. Seti I constructed that temple, which we had just left, as well as the Osirion itself (through probably on the foundation of much earlier buildings). The vision of the temple and of the tomb required that they go together.

As we surveyed the Osirion, we suddenly realized that we’d not seen any members of our group for some time. Were we (they?) lost? We retraced our steps into the temple but saw no sign of anyone we recognized so, since we were on our own, we set out for the cenotaph temple of Ramesses II, which lay less than a quarter mile away over the sand.

Reunited with our group at the temple of Ramesses II, we nevertheless made our own way through the still standing entrance to admire the brilliant colors that had survived for 15 centuries, though open to the elements for much of that time.

Not as complex and unique as his father’s temple, Ramesses’ is comparable to mortuary temples on the west Nile bank at Thebes. Indeed, this temple may have been thought of as a smaller version of Ramesses’ mortuary temple, the Ramesseum, at Thebes.

Though the roof is long gone, the remaining walls stand as high as six feet or more and some of the inner rooms are virtually intact. Throughout, the reliefs have retained their
original coloring to an extraordinary degree, thereby giving visitors like us an excellent impression of the original appearance.

Splendid offering tables show vials of scent and an array of breads, fruit, and ducks. Cartouches of Ramesses naturally fit neatly among the kneeling figures, papyrus, and lotus, symbol of eternal life.

The allotted time at Ramesses temple was limited but we used what was available to peer into corners and, in general, wander around taking pictures. Tom and Wahid pro-
vided their usual translation of various hieroglyph panels. But at this temple we were more
interested in artistic compositions than the words that accompanied them. Again, the dif-
fering forms of offering tables captured our attention.

The thought had been to walk another half mile or so across the desert to see some
1st and 2nd dynasty tombs but the tourist police refused permission. The extra time was
spent in studying the outside of the Ramesses temple, where there was yet another retell-

ing of the Battle of Kadesh. In a long continuous narration that serves as a billboard,
Ramesses advertised his great victory where he claimed to have defeated the Hittites.
That the Hittites also claimed victory was something his subjects didn’t need to know!

_Abydos to Dendera_

Back on the bus, we began the ride to _Dendera_. Lunchtime was near so out came the box lunches while we looked through the windows at the countryside and villages flowing past. We saw new construction and people in colorful dress.

At Dendera, after leaving the bus, we approached the Temple of Hathor by way of a long recently-created paved walkway that was designed for the mobs of tourists who visit the temple daily. And there _were_ mobs; some of us compared them to the crowds at Disneyland.

We passed by a Roman fountain (there are two of them) at the end of the entrance path on the way into the temple precincts. We stopped to look at its four columns with
their curious capitals but then had to hurry to catch up with the rest of the group, which had already handed their tickets to the gate keepers. We had seen similar capitals in the catacombs in Alexandria, but were not permitted to photograph them there.

Before we go on, we should note that, like most Egyptian temples along the Nile, Dendera faces the river but, unlike others, it is oriented on a north-south axis (rather than east-west) because the Nile makes a great loop at this point in its passage north to the sea.

Our bus had come from Abydos to Dendera in a convoy of taxis and other buses—one of the security measures Egyptian authorities put in place. We were to continue in the convoy all the way to Luxor yet this day, which meant that our time to visit this important temple was constrained by the pre-determined schedule of the convoy. We knew we could not afford to tarry if we were to see everything the recently installed signage informed us there was to see. In the event, we did not see it all, though hurry we did.
We hastened through the gateway, built during the time of Roman emperors Domitian and Trajan, set into the massive mud brick wall (also built by the Romans), that surrounds the temple complex. Immediately upon our passage through the gateway, we found Wahid, who was not adverse to theatricality, showing us a relief of the god Bes, which had been found elsewhere in the compound.

Before going to the temple itself, we turned right to visit the Roman birth house (mammisi). A “birth house,” by the way, is not a maternity ward but a temple appendage that celebrates the marriage of the gods and the birth of their offspring.

In the reliefs below we see what to us today is a curious scene. The central figure (with cow horns and sun disk) is Hathor, who is nursing Horus. Horus, of course, is her husband. Behind her is Ihy, or Harsomptus, son of Hathor and Horus. At right is the emperor Trajan, holding the boat in his hand that takes Hathor to the Edfu temple for an annual “honeymoon” with Horus.

We walked around the birth house and so approached the Temple of Hathor from the side. And, then, looking up, we could see that Hathor’s face on every one of the capi-
tals had been obliterated, probably by Christian Copts who were offended by the “pagan” images. We were to see this same vandalization throughout the temple.

If the Christian vandalization is discounted, this Temple of Hathor is in virtually pristine condition: it’s columns, it’s roof, and most of its decoration are intact. Of course, it dates from the Greco-Roman period, which, compared to temples from the time of Ramesses the Great, is almost yesterday.

Including those we saw at the entrance, the hypostyle hall is comprised of twenty-four columns with unusual 4-sided Hathor capitals (every single side of which is defaced).
The ceiling is blackened by ancient smoke, again probably from the structure’s usage by Coptic monks in the first five centuries of the common era.

Not all Hathor images were destroyed, however. The one, below, on the ceiling of the hypostyle hall, for instance, where the goddess is showered by the sun’s rays, may have been too high up for the monks to reach. The panel shows a complex symbolic chart of the sky that includes Roman Zodiac signs along with the sky goddess Nut swallowing the sun (Re) in order to give birth to it each day. And the original Egyptian blue is still there!

The thoroughly defaced panel at left contains some things that were not defaced—because they were not carved in the first place. Here, in the upper left, are two
of the empty cartouches found in the temple. A cartouche, of course, contains the name of a king. Empty cartouches were supposed, eventually, to hold kings’ names, too. That they were not filled is indicative of the unsettled politics toward the end of the time when anyone remotely “Egyptian” ruled the two lands.

We’ve decided not to report on everything we saw inside the Hathor temple, partly because each of us had been there on earlier trips but largely because the crush of tourists made careful examination impossible this time round. There was the crypt where cult equipment was kept and there was the hall of appearances (with six Hathor columns), for instance, but we’ll pass them by in order to go on up to the temple roof where the famous “Dendera Zodiac” once was. Now in the Louvre, a copy has taken it’s place. We crowded in with Tom to hear his explanation but the mob made comprehending difficult.

Several years before, each of us had been able to ascend to the roof of the hypostyle hall, from which it is possible to view the birth houses, the sacred lake, and various other features of the temple complex. Not so this time. In 2004 a tourist had fallen from there and died; the area has been closed ever since.

While most of the group was learning about the zodiac we took the opportunity to see what else was on the roof. Our guide, Wahid, pointed out to us that, over in the the roof’s southwest corner there was a small kiosk to which the statue of Hathor (kept most of the time in a crypt beneath the temple floor) was taken for a New Year festival in which the goddess was united with the sun disk.

By looking over the roof edge we could see the thick and wide mud brick wall surrounding the temple and its ac-

A Note About Hathor
Hathor is seen as a sky goddess, as a cow, in serpent form, and at times in human form with cow's ears and horns, often with the sun disk between the horns. She is often seen full face. Hathor is the goddess of love, music, dance, alcohol, mistress of foreign lands and can have mother qualities. (Tom Mudloff)
companying structures. The gate, like the wall, Roman-built, opened onto the town, which was supposed to have a temple of Horus of Edfu within it. As we learned at the Roman birth house, Hathor and Horus, with their son Ihy, formed the “triad” worshipped at Dendera and also at Horus’ temple at Edfu.

On the back wall of the Temple of Hathor we saw inscriptions of the pharaoh who was largely responsible for the construction of the temple as it stands today: Cleopatra VII.

A Note About Dendera

Although the extant temple is Graeco-Roman, that is, Ptolemaic, its predecessors date far back into the Old Kingdom. Many kings through the millennia honored Hathor by building here, among them were some of the greats: Pepi I, Thutmose III, Amenhotep III, and, of course, Ramesses II.

The complex is more than the temple. Surrounded by a massive mud brick wall, it includes two birth houses, a sacred lake, a sanatorium, and a structure devoted to Isis (a third birth house), not to mention a necropolis.

Here she is with Caesarion, the son whom she had with Julius Caesar, who became her co-regent at the age of three under the name Ptolemy XV. Strictly speaking, the last of the pharaohs of Egypt, he was murdered by the Roman emperor Octavian in 30 BCE when he was seventeen years old. According to Octavian (Augustus Caesar), two Caesars was one too many!

Opposite the relief of Cleopatra and Caesarion is a small building called the Iseum that celebrates the birth of Isis—another birth house. And down the slope to the right is the sacred lake. We didn’t go there on this trip, though back in the days when it was per-
missible to visit the highest roof of the temple, we had had a clear view of the sacred lake, filled with palm trees instead of water.

The mobs of people were streaming back to the buses, the convoy had formed, and we needed to scramble over the uneven pavement to regain our seats for the 40-mile drive to Luxor and our rooms on the great river at the Steigenberger Nile Palace, which would be our home for the next four nights.
Yesterday, we had driven about 100 miles from Abydos to Luxor or Thebes, known to the ancient Egyptians as Waset. Upon arrival we had continued along “the strip” to the Steigenberger Nile Palace Hotel at the southern end of the city, from which today we were to cross the river to the West Bank and the storied Valley of the Kings.

But before we start out, just a few words about our accommodations in Luxor. We were assigned rooms in Steigenberger’s multi-story tourist hotel that overlooked a central atrium. A night club materialized on the ground floor of that atrium every night we were there. Singers, drums, guitar, and some throbbing or squealing instruments filled the atrium until half past ten. The walls of the rooms vibrated with raucous pop music. At one point a pseudo-whirling dervish whirled to pseudo-ethnic music that madly increased in speed. There was no escape, not with earplugs, nor with sound muffling headphones.

The following mornings we faced our usual 6 or 7 a.m. departure, so the light sleepers endured sleep-deprivation during the four nights in Luxor. Some in the group were assigned outside rooms which, although they had constant traffic noise, evidently were relatively quiet compared to the rooms on the atrium. The hotel was full, so it was not possible to switch to a “quiet” outside room.

And that’s all we will have to say about the Steigenberger Nile Palace.

After a quick breakfast, and still blinking our eyes open, we once again boarded our trusty bus and allowed it to transport us over the Nile bridge to the cult temple of Ramesses II, known as the Ramesseum.

Mortuary temples of the New Kingdom pharaohs line the West Bank of the Nile River. Unlike their predecessors of the Old Kingdom, who attached funereal structures to their pyramid tombs, New Kingdom kings hid their tombs deep underground in the Valley of the Kings but proudly displayed their temples on the Nile bank, where they surely would have been a magnificent spectacle during the 19th and 20th dynasties.

By this time we were familiar—almost too familiar!—with Ramesses II. And our first glimpse of the Ramesseum confirmed our conviction that we could spot this king’s signa-
ture anywhere. Just for a feeling of the temple, here are a few ways we looked at it, including (immediately below, left), the fallen Ramesses that inspired Shelley’s poem, “Ozymandias.” And, at the bottom of this page, a row of Ramesses’ sons.
Upon leaving the Ramesseum, we drove immediately to the Valley of the Kings where, instead of stopping at the entrance to the East Valley, where the New Kingdom tombs are concentrated, we veered right into the West Valley, which contains (so far as is now known) only two royal tombs, those of Amenhotep III and Ay. Our first destination was the tomb of Amenhotep III.

A visit to this tomb, which has seldom been open to the public since it was discovered by Napoleon’s expedition in 1799, was one of the “perks” of our tour. The perk came at a price, however—$110 per person. We had been informed of this additional cost before departure, however, and so were prepared to produce the cash in dollars.

Apart from the sign, there was no evidence of a tomb entrance until a couple of guardians began to roll away the stones to reveal the sloping passageway. That was the last photograph we were allowed to take. One would think—we certainly did—that for the price we paid the least we should have been permitted was to take non-flash pictures! Not so. The Supreme Council of Antiquities, guided by the wisdom of its General Secretary, Zahi Hawass, ruled supreme.

As is appropriate for an important ruler of the New Kingdom who reigned for about sixty years in the 14th century BCE, the tomb was deep and wide, consisting of two corridors with a pillared chamber at their junction and a burial chamber with a crypt and annex rooms. The tomb, of course, had been looted in antiquity and further looted, even by reputable archaeologists, in more recent times. The actual mummy was removed and stored in a cache in the tomb of Amenhotep II by priests in the 21st dynasty. It now resides in the Mummy Room of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Once the stones covering the entrance were moved away, we filed down two long corridors that jogged and kept on going until we reached the burial chamber way below, which we had all to ourselves. We could see that the tomb had suffered much damage and learned that it is in the course of restoration with the support of Japanese donors, who are
playing an increasing role in Egyptian archaeology. The restorers, whose equipment was stored in one of the annex rooms, had added wooden supports or buttresses.

Since photography was not allowed, and the length of time for our visit was unclear, Marian quickly started a drawing of a painting on one of the pillars. She chose to draw a colored painting of two nearly life-size figures, presumably Amenhotep III being welcomed to the underworld by a figure with a curious stand on her head that was crowned by a falcon. We later discovered that this stand represented Hathor, “Lady of the West,” with the Horus falcon on top.

The goddess is shown as a tall slender figure in profile except for the frontal view of her two shoulders, as demanded by Egyptian artistic conventions. These conventions lasted for centuries down through and long past the New Kingdom, when Amenhotep III’s tomb was built. The lines down the center of the figure on the left show an unfortunate vertical crack in the wall.

For a moment let us jump back to Abydos, where Marian drew a similar composition of the pharaoh Seti I being welcomed to the underworld by jackal-headed god (left). The iconography is similar. We see Seti holding the ankh that signals he has become a god.

While Marian drew, others tried to decipher hieroglyph legends but, finally, we all were told to leave Amenhotep III, much too soon.
Our next stop in the West Valley was the tomb of Ay, the successor to Tutankhamun. Named for the decoration in Ay’s tomb, the West Valley is known, particularly by tour guides, as Wadi el-Gerud or Valley of Baboons. Once we climbed down into the burial chamber, we saw a fine wall painting of twelve baboons, marking the hours of the night. The baboon is one of the representations of Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing. Again, not knowing how long we would be there, Marian quickly sketched a particularly fine baboon in the upper right hand corner of the baboon wall.

We were allowed to photograph in this tomb (beaucoup backsheesh!), so people in the group quickly scattered to the corners of the small burial chamber with their cameras.

The tomb of Ay has a painting of a pedestal table of offering with a beautifully composed still-life of food for sustenance of the gods or the deceased, including a woven basket of fruit and vials of scented ointment. We soon realized that painted tables of offering were essential tomb elements, with clues to the most important fruit, vegetables, flowers, meat, and valuables. Once tuned-in to seeing the motif, we started noticing them more frequently and remembering where we had seen them before, particularly at Abydos. The papyrus thicket and a flock of birds may represent “happy hunting” in the afterlife.

Now it was back to the Valley of the Kings itself. Spoiled by the isolation of the West Valley, the mass of tourists, while not unexpected, was somewhat of a jolt. Since we
were last there, several years ago, a new Visitors Center had been constructed. We went through security in the new building, which—worthy of an international airport—had been subsidized by the Japanese government. Indeed, we found ourselves amidst many Japanese tourists as we boarded the automobile-tired trolly cars that took us up to the rest station opposite the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Wahid handed each tour participant a ticket that afforded entry to any three of the open tombs in the Valley, so everyone started studying the maps on information posters, deciding which ones looked most desirable. We were given a time to be back at the bus and the group scattered.

“Where is Marian?” Wahid asked, holding a special ticket that was required for Tut’s tomb. She had last been seen over near the entrance to Tut so our guide headed that way in search of her. He found her—inside the tomb. She had blithely walked past the table of the ticket-taker and past the guard station (both of which were inexplicably unattended), strolled down the short inclined plane into the burial chamber, and started taking pictures. We must point out here that photography inside the tomb of Tutankhamun has
never been permitted, even in years past when it was allowed in all the other KV tombs. Marian is unrepentant; she insists she didn’t know she was supposed to have a ticket!

We had just been in the tomb of Ay, over in the West Valley, and noted its wall of baboons. Now we see a similar wall of baboons in the Tutankhamun tomb. A comparison is too much to resist.

Which one is which? The one on the left, Tutankhamun’s, is thinner than Ay’s, on the right. But it is tempting to think that Ay, who succeeded Tut on the throne of Egypt and who, almost certainly, performed the “opening of the mouth “ ceremony at Tut’s entombment, organized the decoration of both tombs, employing the same design team.
Once Marian was safely extricated from Tutankhamun we set about using our 3-tomb tickets. As things turned out, we only used two of the three in the time we had left. The first was the tomb of Tausert and Setnakh, where Marian began to sketch.

The story of this tomb is convoluted. Suffice to say that Tausert, upon the death of her husband, Seti II, ruled Egypt as regent during the short reign of her step-son, Siptah. When Siptah died, Tausert assumed the full royal regalia to be pharaoh in her own right. She began construction of her tomb while she was still Royal Wife of Seti II and continued construction during her Siptah regency and, of course, during her own rule.

But there’s more to this story. With the death of Tausert, the 19th dynasty came to an end. History is vague at this point but somehow a new ruler, Setnakh, arose and ruled for eight years before his son, Ramesses III, the last of the “great” pharaohs, assumed power. Ramesses did something strange. He remodeled Tausert’s tomb and, instead of interring his father in the tomb that Setnakh had been in the process of building for himself, placed him in that of Tausert. The result was two burial chambers. Tausert’s decoration was substantially unchanged except for the usual replacement of her name with that of the usurper. Though this tomb had been open since antiquity, scenes from the various books of the dead and other decoration are remarkably well preserved.

Time was running out, as it always did, especially when we took time for sketching. So we decided to pop into a tomb, that of Ramesses IV, which was on the way back to the Visitors Center and the bus. We wouldn’t have time for our third tomb.

Ramesses IV, the third king of the 20th dynasty, assumed the throne following the death of his father, Ramesses III. Things were not going well in Egypt at that time but that didn’t stop the new Ramesses from constructing a magnificent tomb. Unlike most of the other KV tombs, it goes straight into the cliff with almost no downward slope to its main corridor. We didn’t stay long in this tomb, however, only allowing enough time for Marian to make a few sketches of the king.
We were late for the bus. Actually, we hadn’t paid much attention to the instructions on how to get back there, so we sat on a bench and waited for other participants to walk by, intending to join them. Nobody came, so eventually we started through the, now neatly organized, gauntlet of vendors beside the Visitors Center. And there came Wahid, frantically searching for us. We’re not sure, but we think we began to get a reputation for being late. There just never was enough time!

Time now was time for lunch, which was laid out for us at the Africano Restaurant, an upper-floor eatery overlooking a busy street. The fabric awning over the tables looked familiar. We had seen this “Ramadan” pattern at Qasr El-Sagha when our 4X4 drivers had draped a tent between their vehicles to provide shelter for that day’s lunch in the desert (page 45).

Lunch over, we resumed our tour of the West Bank—to Deir el-Medina, village of the workers, the artisans, who dug and decorated the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. In this picture, which Allan took in 2003, it may be seen that the tomb workers lived in a walled village, to which outsiders were not admitted. We would call it a “gated community.”
We entered the small but colorful tombs of Sennedjem and Inherkhau but were not allowed to take pictures (fingers get tired of typing those words). As non-royal tombs go, these must be among the absolutely must-see.

**Sennedjem**, a “Servant in the Place of Truth,” (Place of Truth is what the workers’ village was called in its day) lived with his family in this elite village during the rule of Seti I and Ramesses II (19th dynasty). The glorious detail with which he decorated his tomb, which Allan caught way back in 2002, suggests that he may have been one of the artists who produced the magnificence of the tomb of Seti I, where we didn’t go on this trip.

**Inherkhau** lived and worked a dynasty later than Sennedjem. He announced himself as “Foreman of the Lord of the Two lands in the Place of Truth,” a title he held during the time of Ramesses III and IV (20th dynasty).

A 21st century (CE) cartoonist might caption the picture on the right: “Help, don’t eat me!” But he would be missing a standard Egyptian gesture for worship.
After leaving the tomb of Inherkhau and waiting in a small shelter where a few vendors peddled their wares, we noticed a Tourist Policeman engaged in prayer.

There was a striking contrast, it seemed to us, with the scenes of prayer we had seen in the tomb. Two very different religions, observed in very different ways, yet both practiced in the sun-drenched Egyptian desert and both requiring supplication and obedience to one or more distant deities.

Though by this time it was getting on toward late afternoon, the day wasn’t over.

One more important set of tombs was yet to be seen. The group split. Most of us went with Wahid in the bus to the Valley of the Nobles, while Tom and two others (Greg and Leslie) set out on the trail that the tomb builders had taken thousands of years ago on their way from their village to their jobs in the Valley of the Kings.

The trail leads over a ridge and around el-Quern (The Horn), the peak that, because it resembles a pyramid, may have encouraged the 19th dynasty kings to locate their necropolis beneath it. We felt its power when we were in the Valley only hours before.

The Valley of the Nobles isn’t really a valley but is so called in order to maintain symmetry with the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. Hundreds of tombs of viziers, priests, scribes, military men, and other New Kingdom “nobles” were dug into the wadis surrounding el-Quern, many with lavish decoration that depicts daily life in ways that the decoration in the royal tombs cannot.

Over the nobles’ tombs there existed until very recently a village of about 10,000 people who made their living by selling to tourists trinkets and their own products, including occasionally excellent pottery along with fake archaeological artifacts. The area known as Sheikh Abdel-Qurna, or simply Qurna, had a reputation for being the home of tomb robbers who would dig through the floors of their mud brick houses into the tombs below.
Their reputation blossomed in the 19th century when the (in)famous Abd el-Rasul family happened upon the mummy cache at Deir el-Bahri (near Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple) and items from it began to appear on the antiquities market. In more recent years, the Qurna people, including literally swarms of children, welcomed and sometimes hassled tourists.

The Egyptian government has encouraged the residents to leave for a very long time. They were not permitted piped-in water, for instance, for fear that leakage would damage the tombs, and electricity often had to be stolen from the power grid. But the people refused to leave, even rejecting offers to relocate them to brand-new houses. Eventually, however, the government prevailed. By late 2006 everyone had been moved to New Qurna and bulldozers had cleared the land of their houses, even those that proudly carried the sign of the Hadji, those who had made the journey to Mecca. Our visit to the Valley of the Nobles had a very different feel than that of earlier visits.

The three tombs we visited were located in the al-Khokha section of Qurna, near the start of the causeway to Hatshepsut’s temple. We entered two of them—those belonging to Nefersekheru and Neferrenpet—from a small square courtyard at the end of a short ramp cut into the hill that separates Qurna from Deir el-Bahri. The third, joined to Nefersekheru’s, belonged to Dhutmosi; we entered it through a low doorway.

Neferrenpet (or Kenro) was “Chief Scribe of the Treasury of the Temple of Amun-Re (Karnak)” during the reign of Ramesses II—a very responsible position. Decoration in his 2-room tomb covers every inch of walls and ceiling. Below: Neferrenpet (second from left) with his wife and parents.
Nefersekheru was “Scribe of the Divine Offerings of all the Gods,” among various other titles such as “Officer in the Treasury of the Southern City,” during the 19th and/20th dynasties. He probably was the successor to Neferrenpet in some of these offices and almost certainly employed the same tomb builders—ones who specialized in decorative ceilings.

The original entrance to the tomb of Dhutmosi, also called Paroy, is now sealed but a small opening has been made at the end of Nefersekheru’s tomb through which we crept. Living in the time of Amenhotep II or Thutmose IV (18th dynasty), he had the titles, “Head of the Secrets in the Chest of Anubis, Sem-Priest in the Good House.”
We scrambled out of the tomb and up into the bus for the short ride over to Deir el-Bahri where we were to meet Tom and his companions who were completing their trek over the mountain from the Workers Village, Deir el-Medina.

Tourists still swarmed over the levels of the Hatshepsut temple but we were not to be among them this time round. So we watched from afar while we waited for our colleagues to arrive. We did not have to wait long before someone spotted them making their way down the cliff-side.

The day was done. All that was left was to make our way back to the Steigenberger Nile Palace for something to eat and an attempt at sleep before an early start the next day.
We had to leave the Steigenberger Nile Palace very early lest we kept the police escort, outside the city, waiting. Usually we were the ones kept waiting, but, since we couldn’t venture forth without our heavily armed escort, we followed their schedule. Our bus followed their vehicle south to the quarries at Gebel Silsila, almost 100 miles south of Luxor, then later drove some 30 miles back north to el-Kab. Travelers who have been on Nile cruises will be familiar with Edfu, on the west bank of the Nile, not very far from el-Kab, and Kom Ombo on the east bank, south of Gebel Silsila.

Since the decision was taken to visit Gebel Silsila first, we drove past el-Kab and Edfu (which was not on our itinerary) through farming land and small villages that gave us the opportunity to snap more pictures from the moving bus of Egyptian life that had changed little over the centuries—save, of course, for Coca-Cola and English signs.

After inching its way down a rough road toward Gebel Silsila, crossing irrigation ditches where ripples resembled the zigzag hieroglyph for water, the bus parked in a field on the east bank of the Nile, where we waited while Wahid contracted with a boatman to take us across the river.
At **Gebel Silsila** the Nile narrows to a width of about 1200 feet, cutting through a mountain of sandstone from which quarries on both sides of the river supplied building stone that was ferried downstream to Luxor for New Kingdom monuments. The quarrying continued until the Greco-Roman period.

As we climbed on board a small boat, what we first noticed on the opposite bank was not quarries but a rock-hewn structure that we correctly surmised was a temple. Called the Great Speos of Horemheb, the temple is dedicated to seven gods, including Horemheb himself.

**Horemheb: King of Upper (Sedge) and Lower (Bee) Egypt**
The trail along the river through the ancient quarry was lined with hieroglyph inscriptions and shrines of various kinds. Tom took pleasure in reading the tributes to the gods found thereupon.

Marks of the ancient workmen’s chisels remain on the walls of sandstone and, sometimes the mark of their work gang as well. The ramp where cut stones were slid down to barges on the river also reveals the holes through which rope was run to tether the boats while loading.
Before leaving Gebel Silsila we admired a dahabeah under full sail. There are only a handful of these restored vessels on the Nile today. Various versions of them have been in use from far antiquity but they are best known as the preferred mode of river travel for wealthy English adventurers in the late 19th century.

And then it was on to el-Kab, an Upper Egypt site with history that reaches back to pre-pharaonic times. (Vulture Rock, with ancient rock art, was on our itinerary but somehow we never made it there.) It was a huge city that, with its counterpart of the other side of the river, Hierakonpolis (where the famous Narmer Pallet was found), formed what we might call a metropolitan center. The principal goddess, Nekhbet (depicted as a white vulture and universally worshipped in Upper Egypt) gave present-day el-Kab its original name: Nekheb.

Not much of the ancient city remains and we saw only a bit of what there is. We started with a small 19th dynasty temple to Thoth . . .
...but then moved uphill to a Ramesses II temple, restored by the Ptolemies, where a stele of Ramesses II extending a censer to Re-Harakhte and Nekhbet graced the court-

yard. Inside, the image of the cow goddess, Hathor, stared, full frontal, down upon us. . .
and Nekhbet, the vulture goddess, protector of the city of Nekheb, spread her wings.

Further down the road, we stopped at a little temple of Amenhotep III and his father, Tuthmosis IV, that was a chapel for the barque of Nekhbet. Later caravans paused here for refreshment. Many gods were observed here, specifically Hathor and, of course, Nekhbet. But what impressed us most was not the ancient inscriptions but those more recent, specifically 19th century “inscriptions.” The tombs and temples at el-Kab are replete with 19th century graffiti.
Finally, there was the necropolis at el-Kab. We looked into a couple or three of the tombs but the one that is most historic, that provides the most data for the history of Egypt, is the tomb of Ahmose, son of Abana.

Here there is written an account of the feats of this man, an admiral in the army of King Ahmose, under whose rule the alien Hyksos were expelled from Egypt, ending the Second Intermediate Period and ushering in the glorious New Kingdom of the 18th through 20th dynasties. Ahmose, son of Abana spelled it all out on the wall of his tomb.

We then piled back onto our bus, returning to Luxor and the Steigenberger Nile Palace for another sleepless night before the strenuous next day, at Wadi Hammamat.

Wadi Hammamat, in the inhospitable Egyptian Eastern Desert, is the most natural and shortest route between the Red Sea and the Nile River. Used by ancient traders, it linked Red Sea ports to Coptos on the Nile, where the river swings farthest to the east, between Dendera and Thebes. Wadi Hammamat’s significance, though, was more than offering a way through the mountain ridge that parallels the Red Sea. It was a source of gold,
jasper, beryl, and, particularly, of the green bekhany stone that was valued for statues and sarcophagi and was even considered sacred.

We were not there as traders or in search of minerals or to quarry stone. We were there to view the inscriptions that people from pre-pharaonic through very modern times had sometimes scratched and sometimes carefully inscribed on fallen stones and the cliffs.

As usual, we met our security patrol at the edge of town early in the morning. This time we drove 45 miles north of Luxor before turning east near the ancient site of Coptos and followed a road through the wilderness of the Eastern Desert another 125 miles, nearly to the Red Sea.

As we began to see barren mountains begin to rise out of the equally barren desert, the question arose: where is the rock art? Tom didn’t know, Wahid thought it was “somewhere around here,” apparently the security people didn’t know and neither did the bus driver. But then there appeared a small café with a few vehicles parked nearby. After an inquiry or two, Wahid came back with a local guide who ordered the bus to turn around and soon we stopped at the side of the road to learn that we had blithely driven right past our destination. Rock art was everywhere only a few steps from our bus! Soon the group was clambering around the treacherous rocks and scrambling up onto ledges where the inscriptions could be seen and, in some instances, read.

Our idea of “rock art” was linked to the writings on stone in the American Southwest that are difficult, if not impossible, to identify by artist or by date. There was some of that here at Wadi Hammamat but there also was a great deal that contained readily read royal cartouches and actual dates. The engineers and artists who accompanied the laborers who quarried the stone left a record of their deities—especially Min, protector of travelers and traders, particularly in the Eastern Desert, as well as the god of fertility—in addition to the pharaoh whom they served. On the next pages we offer a sampling.
14 February 2008
Return to Cairo

We took a short early morning flight from Luxor back up to Cairo where we had a brief visit to the Egyptian Museum. Bemoaning the lack of permission to photograph, we chose to study the materials in the Tanis section, where Marian sketched the silver coffins found there (see page 25).

Next was lunch at a nearby huge restaurant crowded with tourists taken there for a quick buffet meal—a truly depressing experience. The wine we ordered turned out to be cheap red poured into little bottles with labels of more expensive wine. While everyone else at our table just grumbled, Marian quietly located the manager, complained, and got everyone’s money back. Unaccompanied by an apology, however.

And then we checked in to another tourist hotel, the huge Cairo Sheraton, where we climbed a dramatic stairway into an elegant lobby with glitzy chandeliers, but later found the rooms to be in need of renovation. There was none of the charm of the Shepheard Hotel, where we had stayed when last in Cairo, two weeks before. Here are a few sights en route to the hotel.

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier site of Anwar Al-Sadat’s assassination in 1981.  

Very Different Roof Tops
Today was a “free” day in the itinerary. Tom volunteered to take anyone who wanted to see the Pyramids over to Giza. We chose to repack, rest, and have an early meal at the Japanese restaurant in the hotel. Cairo was the inevitable anticlimax to this trip; both of us were more than ready to go home.

But there was one more day of sightseeing, this one having nothing to do with pharaohs or tombs or temples. It was a whirlwind day and, despite rest the day before, the entire group was demonstrably tired.

Here’s a quick look at where we went and what we saw.

**Mosque of Ahmed Ibn Tulum**
The Gaynor-Anderson Museum was made from two adjacent Ottoman houses. It preserved a “Sabil,” which was a house where drinking water was distributed to the public from the cistern.

The English owner of this building collected turned wooden screens, called “mashrabiya,” that he salvaged from other Ottoman houses. Here is a view of the city through one of them.
The museum was a hodgepodge that reflected the eclectic taste of its owner:

Harem women could watch events in the reception room below through the little openings in the grillwork, which interested Marian particularly.
We had the usual very early departure for the airport and the 11-hour flight back to New York. The check-in at Cairo airport was orderly and uneventful. But at JFK in New York City we were faced by a very inefficient arrangement for re-checking luggage after customs.

We had to wait an hour for our bags to appear, and then had to move them up to another floor where airline desks, once staffed with a half dozen workers, now had only one person. We had to stand in a very long and slow line to re-check Marian’s luggage for the flight on Northwest back home to Minneapolis. A couple of hours after Marian was on her way, Allan had to wait in another long line at Delta in order to check-in for his flight to Tampa. So entry into the United States was difficult, and JFK an airport to be avoided at all costs. We were tired.

Despite last-minute hassles, we were happy, very happy, at the end of this trip, ready to live it again it as best we could. And that is what we’ve been doing during the weeks, indeed months, since. We hope you, who have lived it with us, are happy with it, too.

Minneapolis/Saint Petersburg
May 2008
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