

**Travel 2002**  
**Egypt, Jordan and Syria**

**January 2002**

**Suzanne & Jim Russell**  
**with**  
**Egypt Tours**



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# Itinerary

## Egypt, Jordan & Syria

Suzanne & Jim Russell & Shirley Cameron

2 – 26 January 2002

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Egypt:</b> \$1Aud = £2 3E £1E=43cAud  <b>Jordan:</b> \$1Aud = .3 Jordanian Dinar 1JD=\$3.3Aud  <b>Syria:</b> \$1Aus = £25 Syrian £1Syr=4cAud		<b>2 Jan.</b> 1 <b>Melbourne</b>  QF444 dep.MB 3.30. arr. SY 4.45. MS861 dep.SY 8pm. (Egypt Air) (8 hours)	<b>3 Jan.</b> 2 <b>Cairo</b>  Arr.Sing.1.15am Dep.Sing. 2.15am. Arr. Cairo 7.15am (11 hours) Giza Pyramids (Cheops, Chephren, Micerinus). Sphinx. <i>El Gezira</i> <i>Sheraton</i>	<b>4 Jan.</b> 3 <b>Cairo</b>  Cairo Citadel. Egyptian Museum. Memphis. Sakkara. Carpet Factory  <i>El Gezira</i> <i>Sheraton</i>	<b>5 Jan.</b> 4 <b>Cairo</b>  Alexandria. Catacombs of Kom ash- Shuqqafa. Pompey's Pillar. Montazah Palace.  <i>El Gezira</i> <i>Sheraton</i>	<b>6 Jan.</b> 5 <b>Cairo to Luxor</b>  Police Academy. Bazaars of Khan el Khalili. Board train to Luxor.  <i>overnight on train</i>
<b>7 Jan.</b> 6 <b>Nile Cruise – Luxor</b>  Arr. Rly Stn after breakfast, board ship.  Temples of Karnak. Temple of Luxor.  <i>MS Pioneer</i> <i>(Luxor)</i>	<b>8 Jan.</b> 7 <b>Nile Cruise - West Bank.</b>  Temple of Hatshepsut. Valley of Kings. Valley of Queens – Tomb of Nefertari. Colossi of Memnon.  <i>MS Pioneer</i> <i>(Edfu)</i>	<b>9 Jan.</b> 8 <b>Nile Cruise – Edfu.</b>  Horus Temple. Kom Ombo.  <i>MS Pioneer</i> <i>(Aswan)</i>	<b>10 Jan.</b> 9 <b>Nile Cruise – Aswan</b>  High Dam. Temple of Philae. Perfume shop.  <i>MS Pioneer</i> <i>(Aswan)</i>	<b>11 Jan.</b> 10 <b>Abu Simbel Aswan to Luxor</b>  Flight to & from Abu Simbel.  Great Temple of Abu Simbel. Temple of Hathor. Disembark MS Pioneer. Coach to Luxor. <i>Luxor Hilton</i>	<b>12 Jan.</b> 11 <b>Luxor to Hurghada</b>  Coach through mountains to Hurghada (on the Red Sea).  <i>Royal Azur</i>	<b>13 Jan.</b> 12 <b>Hurghada</b>  Submarine to view Red Sea fish and coral.  <i>Royal Azur</i>
<b>14 Jan.</b> 13 <b>Hurghada</b>  Safari to Bedouin Village.  <i>Royal Azur</i>	<b>15 Jan.</b> 14 <b>Hurghada</b>  Snorkelling trip in Red Sea.  <i>Royal Azur</i>	<b>16 Jan.</b> 15 <b>Hurghada to Cairo</b>  MS154 dep. Hurghada 7.20pm. arr. Cairo 8.20pm (1hr)  <i>El Gezira</i> <i>Sheraton</i>	<b>17 Jan.</b> 16 <b>Cairo</b>  Pharaonic Village. Cairo Tower. Felucca ride Farewell Dinner  <i>El Gezira</i> <i>Sheraton</i>	<b>18 Jan.</b> 17 <b>Cairo to Amman (Jordan)</b>  Old Cairo. Church of St. George. Hanging Church. Mosque of Amr ibn al-As. Coptic Museum. MS701 Dep. Cairo 6 45pm. Arr. Amman 8.15pm. <i>Regency Palace Hotel</i>	<b>19 Jan.</b> 18 <b>Petra (Jordan)</b>  Coach to & from 'Lost City' of Petra  <i>Regency Palace Hotel, Amman</i>	<b>20 Jan.</b> 19 <b>Amman (Jordan) to Damascus (Syria)</b>  Der'a Border Crossing  Jerash (Jordan)  <i>Hotel Cham Palace, Damascus</i>
<b>21 Jan.</b> 20 <b>Damascus to Palmyra</b>  Baghdad Café. Temple of Bel. Statue of Lion God. Garden Of Athena.  <i>Hotel Cham Palace, Palmyra</i>	<b>22 Jan.</b> 21 <b>Palmyra to Aleppo</b>  Krac des Chevalier.  <i>Chahba Cham Hotel, Aleppo</i>	<b>23 Jan.</b> 22 <b>Aleppo to Damascus</b>  Aleppo Citadel. Hammam Yalbougha an- Nasry. Jamaa al-Kebir Mosque. Souqs. Maalula: Church of St. George. <i>Hotel Cham Palace, Damascus</i>	<b>24 Jan.</b> 23 <b>Damascus to Cairo</b>  Cairo Citadel. Umayyad Mosque. Al-azem Palace Museum. Covered bazaar. MS723 dep. Damascus. 9.15pm. arr. Cairo 11.15pm (2hr).	<b>25 Jan.</b> 24 <b>Cairo to Singapore</b>  MS860 dep. Cairo 3.30am. arr. Singapore 7.40pm. (10h.10m.) dep. Singapore 8.50pm	<b>26 Jan.</b> 25 <b>Singapore to Melbourne</b>  Arr. SY 7.55am. QF423 dep.SY 10am. arr. MB 11.20am. (22h.50m.)	

# Maps

## Egypt, Syria and Jordan





## Jordan



## Syria





# Egypt

*Birthplace of one of the greatest civilizations the world has known, modern Egypt retains the glory of the pharaohs in the extraordinary monuments they left behind, dotting the entire country. The centuries following the pharaonic rule brought Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Turks and Europeans – to mention only the main players – to the seat of power, and they have all left their mark.*

*Modern Cairo, the over-bloated capital and the continent's largest city is a chaotic collision of the Arab world, Africa and the remnants of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism.*

*Through it all flows the Nile, without which Egypt could not exist. On either side of the Nile lie harsh deserts, occasionally softened by pockets of life in the oases. Southeast of the famous Suez Canal stretches Sinai, a region of awesome beauty and a place of refuge and conflict for thousands of years. An unparalleled paradise off the Red Sea coast combines with the natural and architectural marvels of the land to make this a fascinating destination.*

## Wednesday 2 January 2002 - Melbourne to Singapore

Day 1

We left home at 1pm, courtesy of Mum and Dad, who took us into Spencer Street and then on to the Skybus for a quick trip to Tullamarine. Through the formalities in less than ten minutes and we met Shirley and headed for the Qantas Club.

QF444 to Sydney left on time and the transfer bus whisked us across the airport to the international terminal. Through the formalities at the Egypt Air desk and then we again presented ourselves at the Qantas Club, and, as expected, were told that we were not entitled to enter, because we were not travelling on with Qantas.

The Egypt Air business class passengers on our flight were offered entry and when asked if we were travelling with them we said, - 'yes, with Mrs Cameron' - and so we joined Shirley for a drink.

It was nearly 9pm before our airbus departed on the 8 hour trip to Singapore. Windows seats, two abreast, but not the most comfortable, and with restricted leg room. Everyone had to disembark at Singapore for 20 minutes while they cleaned the plane and then we went through the full security check again as we reboarded.

## Thursday 3 January 2002 - Singapore to Cairo

Day 2

The next leg is 12 hours to Cairo, interspersed with several good films and several bad meals. Scheduled arrival time is 7.15am, but actual arrival time is 9.30am - we think the captain must have been on a bonus if he saved fuel by crawling through the sky.

Our tour group - 114 people - passed through customs and immigration, were met by the tour leader and loaded into three buses outside Cairo Airport Terminal. Then a long wait while the luggage is loaded. The size of some of these cases is unbelievable - either they have come to stay for a year or they intend to take home a couple of full size statues. We see a very battered police car, with a young policeman blowing kisses to the girls in our bus. I take a photo as a joke about police escorts, but to our surprise it is the car which paves the way through the Cairo traffic to our hotel.



Lunch on the way to Giza



## Arab Republic of Egypt

*Area: 997738 sq km*

*Population: 70 million*

*Capital: Cairo*

*Head of State: President Hosni Mubarek*

*Official Language: Arabic*

The hotel Sheraton El Gezira sits on an island between two branches in the Nile Delta. From our balcony we look down the Nile and over the central city. We are given 20 minutes (we showered, made tea/coffee and did our washing!) and then it is off for a quick look at the Great Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx.

On the way there we stop at Kentucky Fried and while others go through the full menu, Shirley and I eat an icecream and Jim starts his diet?



**The Great Pyramid of Cheops**

All a little overwhelming as we are sleep deprived, cultured shocked and not quite ready to fight off the many postcard sellers, t-shirt sellers, and camel and horse riding touts etc. The area is guarded by some of the many tourist police we are to see over the next two weeks, but, as we are to find out, they are more interested in demanding baksheesh in return for allowing tourists to climb on the monuments, than in preventing damage.



**Many Camels - not many tourists**

The largest, the Pyramid of Cheops, stood at 146m when it was completed around 2600 BCE, but has lost 9m over the years. Its base covers 13 acres and it is said to comprise 2.3 million yellow limestone blocks, hauled from the Upper Nile, each weighing 7 to 10 tonnes. Nearly as big is the Pyramid of Chephren and the smallest of the three at Giza is the Pyramid of Mycerinus. The pyramids are the only one of the Seven Wonders of the World still in existence. Nearby is the Sphinx, a 73m long lion's body, with a human head, carved almost from one huge piece of limestone left over from Cheops' Pyramid. The Turks used the Sphinx for target practice and shot off its nose and beard, part of which is now in the British Museum.



**The Sphinx and the Pyramid of Cheops**

On the way back we stop at a papyrus shop - a vast range and we given a demonstration of the making, but the work appears to be expensive and we have the feeling that this shop may be chosen on the basis of the level of commission paid to our guides.



**Papyrus making demonstration**

We have had our police escort all the way, and an armed policeman sitting in the front seat of our bus at all times.

Dinner is buffet style on board 'The Place', a floating restaurant moored next to our hotel. A good range of salads, chicken and fish dishes and desserts, but we forewent the Egyptian wine at

\$80Aus a bottle. Those that that did invest are unimpressed. To bed and a sound, long sleep, ready for the 6am early morning call.



Dinner on the floating restaurant

## Pharaonic Egypt

About 5000 years ago an Egyptian king named Menes unified Upper and Lower Egypt for the first time. For centuries beforehand, communities had been developing along the Nile. The small kingdoms eventually developed into two important states, one covering the valley as far as the Delta, the other consisting of the Delta itself. The unification of these two states, by Menes in about 3000 BC, set the scene for the greatest era of Egyptian civilisation. More than 30 dynasties, 50 rulers and 2700 years of indigenous – and occasionally foreign – rule passed before Alexander the Great ushered in a long, unbroken period of foreign domination.

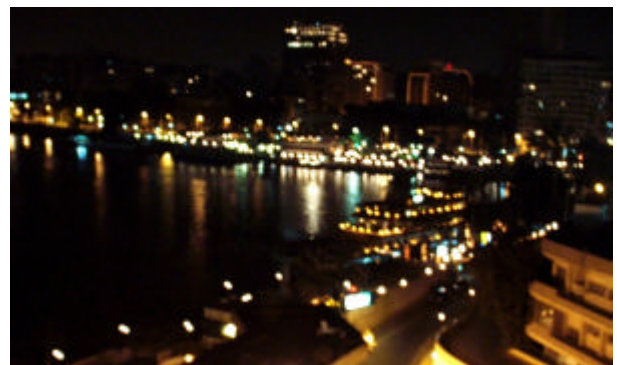
Little is known of the immediate successors of Menes except that, attributed with divine ancestry, they promoted a highly stratified society, patronised the arts and built many temples and public works.

In the 27<sup>th</sup> century BC, Egypt's pyramids began to appear, King Zoser and his chief architect, Imhotep, built what may have been the first, the Step Pyramid at Saqqara. Zoser ruled from the nearby capital of Memphis.

For the next three dynasties and 500 years – a period called the Old Kingdom – the power of Egypt's pharaohs and the size and scale of their pyramids greatly increased. The size of such buildings symbolised the pharaoh's importance and power over his people. The pyramid also gave the pharaoh steps to the heavens, and the ceremonial wooden barques buried with him provided the symbolic vehicles to the next life. The last three pharaohs of the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinus, built the three Great Pyramids of Giza

By the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty (about 2490-2330 BC) it is clear the pharaohs had ceded some of their power to a rising class of nobles. In the following centuries Egypt broke down into several squabbling principalities. The rise of Thebes (Luxor) saw an end to the turmoil and Egypt was reunited under Mentuhotep II, marking the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. For 250 years all went well, but more internal fighting and 100 years of occupation by the Hyksos, invaders from the northeast, cast a shadow over the country.

The New Kingdom, its capital at Thebes and later Memphis, represented a blossoming of culture and empire in pharaonic Egypt. For almost 400 years, from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties (1550-1150 BC), Egypt was a great power in northeast Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Renowned kings and queens ruled and expanding empire from Memphis, and built monuments that even today are unique in their immensity and beauty. The most startling of them is perhaps the Temple of Amun at Karnak, just north of Luxor. But by the time Ramses III came to power (1198 BC) as the second king of the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty, disunity had again set in. The empire continued to shrink and Egypt was attacked by outsiders. This was the state of affairs when Alexander the Great arrived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.



Cairo at night, from our hotel window



More postcard and t-shirt sellers than tourists at the Pyramids



Sure enough, the 6am call comes and we crawl out of bed and go to breakfast - a full scale buffet with cereals, fruit, yoghurt, scrambled and boiled eggs, sausages etc., cold meats, cheese, salad vegetables, pastries and breads.



**Saladin Citadel**

Off to the Cairo Citadel. As Friday is a Muslim holy day there is little traffic and we make our way through the city with little regard to traffic lights. Our guide, Professor Adel (Professor of Egyptian History at Alexandria University) explains that the traffic lights are there to make the streets look 'happy' and our experience is that they have no other purpose. The Cairo Citadel has many buildings, including the huge central alabaster Mosque of Mohammed Ali (a powerful and reformist ruler in the first half of the 1800's). The terrace overlooks the city, with a view of the old Coptic and Islamic parts of Cairo.



**Mosque of Mohammed Ali**



**Inside the Mosque**

Next we go to the Egyptian Museum with its 100,000 relics and antiquities of Egyptian history. As the Lonely Planet says - trying to see everything is likely to induce 'chronic pharaonic phatigue'. At this stage we had little idea of the intensity of security precautions in Egypt and, stupidly, I had my Swiss army knife in my bag - it was immediately confiscated, to be returned at the end of the Museum tour.



**The Egyptian Museum**

Prof. Adel is an excellent teacher and he first takes us through the Tutankhamun Galleries. 'King Tut' was a relatively minor Pharaoh who ruled for only nine years, dying at 18 years of age in 1345 BCE. His claim to fame lies in the fact that his tomb was hidden for 3300 years and, so far, is the only one found with the treasures still intact. It



was discovered in 1922 by an Englishman, Howard Carter, after five years of searching.



**Tutankhamun's throne**

The treasures are meant for the Pharaoh to use in the afterlife, and are prepared from the time each begins their reign. As Tutankhamun ruled for such a short period there was little time to prepare his gold, silver and precious stones objects, yet there were thousands of priceless treasures in his tomb when it was opened.



**A Tutankhamun funerary bed**

The treasures that would have been made for the longer reigning pharaohs, and looted from the tombs over the centuries, must have been unbelievable. Seventeen hundred of the tomb objects for Tutankhamun's use in the afterlife are on display, including the famous gold and turquoise death mask.

Next comes the room devoted to Akhenaten, the heretic pharaoh, who established a

monotheistic faith to worship the sun god and was the husband of Nefertiti.



**Tutankhamun's gold sarcophagus**

The Royal Tombs of Tanis room houses a collection of gold and silver amulets, funerary masks, daggers, bracelets, collars, gold sandals and gold finger and toe covers. The newer parts of the collection are well displayed, but much of it is in old, poorly lit display cases and crowds of tourists push through the narrow passages.

## **Egyptian Museum – from Lonely Planet**

*More than 100,000 relics and antiquities from almost every period of ancient Egyptian history are housed in the Egyptian Museum. To put that in perspective, if you spent only one minute at each exhibit it would take more than 9 months to see everything.*

*With so much to see, trying to get around everything in one go is liable to induce chronic 'pharaonic phatigue'. The best strategy is to spread the exploration over at least 2 visits, maybe tackling one floor at a time.*

*Admission to the museum is £20 (£10 for students). Access to the Royal Mummy Room costs an additional £40 (£20 for students); tickets for this are bought at the 1<sup>st</sup> floor entrance to the room. The museum is open from 9 am to 4.45pm daily, but closes between noon and 2pm on Friday. If your visiting on Friday morning, you can't get back in with the same ticket in the afternoon.*

## **Old Kingdom Rooms**

**Ground floor, Rooms 32, 37 & 42.** Room 42 holds what some consider to be the museum's masterpiece, a larger than lifesize statue of Chephren (Khafre), builder of the second pyramid of Giza. Room 32 is dominated by the double statue of Rhotep and Nofret – the simple lines of the limestone sculpture make them seem almost contemporary, despite being around for a

staggering 4000 years. Also in here are the panels known as the Meidum Geese, part of a frieze that originates from the mud brick mastaba at Meidum, near Al-Fayoum (to this day, the lakes there are still host to a great variety of bird life).

## Tutankhamun Galleries

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor.** Without a doubt, the exhibit that outshines everything else in the museum is the treasure of this young and comparatively insignificant pharaoh who ruled for only nine years. About 1700 items are spread through a series of rooms. Room 3 contains the astonishing death mask made of solid gold, while rooms 7 & 8 house the four gilded shrines that fit inside each other and held the gold sarcophagus of Tutankhamun at their centre.

## Graeco-Roman Mummies

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Room 14.** This room contains a small sample of the stunning portraits painted onto wooden panels the placed over the embalmed faces of Graeco-Roman period mummies. Most of these portraits were discovered in the Al-Fayoum oasis, just southwest of Cairo.

## Royal Mummy Room

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Room 56.** This room housed the bodies of 11 of Egypt's most illustrious king and queens, who ruled Egypt between 1552 and 1069 BC, including Ramses II.

## Akhenaten Room

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Room 3** This room is devoted to the 'heretic king' who set up ancient Egypt's first and last monotheistic faith. Compare the bulbous bellies, hips and thighs, the elongated heads and thick Mick Jagger-like lips of these statues with the sleek hard edged norm of the typical pharaonic sculpture. Also very striking is the delicate but unfinished head of Nefertiti, wife of Akhenaten.

## Royal Tombs of Tanis

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Room 2.** One of two new galleries opened in 1998, this is glittering collection of gold and silve encrusted amulets, gold funerary masks, daggers, bracelets, gold sandals and finger and toe coverings from five intact New Kingdom tombs found in the Delta site of Tanis.

Our buses are nowhere to be seen as we try to leave the Museum. Security has gone into top gear as the President of Egypt is arriving and we are told to stand back. After a 20 minute wait the President arrives, disappears into the building, and our bus, coming down a side street, is then

allowed to stop very briefly while we all clamber aboard.

From here we go to Memphis, 24km south of Cairo. On the way the bus stops for lunch at McDonalds!! - a couple of strange looks at us as I buy some flat bread from the street seller, and bananas and large juicy mandarins from a stall, but some others soon followed suit.



Along the road are partly unfinished houses - we are told that the custom in Egypt is to complete the ground floor, with the upper floors' corner pillars only. As each son marries, he completes the next storey and brings his wife to live there. We are told that building regulations are not something which builders worry too much about!



Memphis was the ancient Old Kingdom capital of Egypt, founded around 3100 BCE and had many magnificent palaces and gardens. Its importance was reflected in the cemetery on the west bank of the Nile, with hundreds of royal pyramids, private tombs and sacred animal necropolises.





**Alabaster Sphinx**

Today there are few signs of past glory, but many ruins and relics, together with some statues in the Museum of Memphis. The Museum, a stark walled garden, contains an eight tonne alabaster sphinx, statues of Ramses II, the sarcophagus of Amenhotep and the alabaster beds on which the sacred Apis bulls were mummified before being placed in the Serapeum at Saqqara.



**Fallen statue of Ramses II**

The open air building within the grounds contains a 14m tall statue of Ramses II, flat on his back, probably toppled to the ground by an earthquake.



**Step Pyramid**

A few kilometres away, at Saqqara, we see a vast site strewn with pyramids, temples and

tombs, including the step pyramid, the first type of pyramid built. The underground tombs are fascinating, with their friezes of everyday life still quite clearly depicted on the walls.



**Reliefs carved in stone 3000 years ago - tombs at Saqqara**



I was offered postcards for one pound. It seemed a reasonable deal until I pressed further - he then admitted it was an English pound he was asking - I told him to run away, but others were caught.

The jewellery store provided many in our group with an opportunity to buy, as did the carpet factory. Children carry out the carpet weaving and knotting for half of each day and attend school for the other half. They are paid a small wage and stay for four years. We were told that they chose and enjoyed this work, but few of them seemed to be smiling.

The police escort again kept close to the bus and our plain clothes policeman with the obvious long thin bulge under his suit coat (a small machine gun) kept a watchful eye from the front seat of the bus. Dinner was at the same place as last night, with a similar menu, but with the addition of some very tasty dips and flat breads - delicious.

A 7am start on the bus to Alexandria via El Alamein. This time we have two armed police on the bus and the lights flashing on the police escort car as we are led through the outskirts of Cairo. We have been told we are taking a short cut through the desert and as we reach the turn off we are joined by a police vehicle with two police sitting in the back, machine guns held at the ready out the low windows on each side. Soon two motor cycle police outriders sweep in to lead our convoy.



**German War Memorial - El Alamein**

Two hundred km from Cairo and we reach El Alamein with our first glimpse of the Mediterranean. First to the German War Memorial, a most impressive monument.



**Australian & New Zealand War Memorial**

Next the museum, with an interesting display of WW2 desert equipment and a diorama map' with commentary' showing the battle lines around Egypt. Excellent brass reliefs of the commanders, although General 'Montgamry' and

Field Marshall 'Wivel' might be puzzled by the spelling of their names.



**Commonwealth War Graves**

The Commonwealth War Graves are in a remote desert spot with simple but effective buildings and gravestones. A chill wind sweeps across the desolate hillside and it is hard to imagine just how grim it must have been fighting in both the summer and the winter.



**Sanctuary in the German War Memorial**

We speed along the Mediterranean foreshore towards Alexandria. The one hundred kilometre stretch is lined with development sites, each of them containing around 500 to 600 identical three to four storey apartment blocks. Some of them are of interesting architectural design, but the net effect is thousands of buildings spread over an area about half a kilometre deep,



with a four lane highway on one side, the Mediterranean on the other and one hundred kilometres long.



**Along the coast road to Alexandria**

There is not a person or a car to be seen, and we are told they are holiday apartments owned by the wealthy in Cairo and used about three times a year. I said that we were speeding along as, at this stage, our police escort is ploughing through the traffic, lights flashing and moving everyone out of our way and we are in Alexandria in double quick time.



Alexandria was founded in 332 BCE by Alexander the Great, and became the capital of Egypt, a trade centre and focal point of learning. It is on a harbour and only fragments remain of another one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Lighthouse on the island of Pharos. Built to protect Alexandria, it was a terraced tower, 120m tall, and burnished copper mirrors reflected the light of the fire burning at the top of the tower for 160km. The ancient library of Alexandria held 500,000 volumes and the stunning new library was

opened yesterday by Boutris Boutris Ghali. By the mid 600's Alexandria had been captured and Cairo became the capital of Egypt.



## **The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World**

*Off the top of your head, how many of the Seven Wonders can you name? Most people rarely get beyond two or three, and then usually with some accompanying confusion over the status of the list: are the Wonders from the Bible? Are they mythological? Did they ever exist at all?*

*The answer to the last of these questions is a definite yes, at least in six-sevenths of the case.*

*The Wonders come to us through the writings of the classical historians. They belong to the Hellenistic world of the eastern Mediterranean and the seven are all, bar one, sites that could easily be reached by sea from centres of Greece and Rome. The origins of the list are lost, but the principal text describing the Wonders was compiled by Philo of Byzantium, writing in 225 BC. The list has varied through the ages and the number of Wonders has run up to 10, but since the advent of printing, in the Middle Ages, there has been a popular consensus fixing the seven as: The Statue of Zeus at Olympia; the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus; the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus; the Pharos of Alexandria; the Colossus of Rhodes; and the Pyramids of Egypt.*

*The Pyramids may be the only surviving Wonder but the work done by archaeologists has fairly conclusively proven that five of the other Wonders did also indisputably exist. A question mark is attached to the Hanging Gardens.*

*By comparing their findings with the ancient classical texts, the archaeologists have succeeded in completely demystifying the Wonders. We not only know that they existed, we also have a very good idea of what they looked*

*like, how they were built and for what purpose – the Wonders were no more than monuments to the wealth and greatness of the cities that built them. They were the Statue of Liberty and the Sydney Opera House of the classical world. The exception is the Pyramids; ironically the one Wonder that still exists proves the greatest mystery of them all.*

*Anybody interested in reading more about the Wonders and the archaeological detective work that led to their rediscovery is recommended to look out for the superb 'The Seven Wonders of the World' by John and Elizabeth Romer*

Through the city of Alexandria, a maze of narrow market streets, with the stalls quickly moved out of the way as our huge bus weaves through. Some amazing clothes for sale including jewelled belly dancing outfits, brilliant satin underwear and large bloomers stretched out for display.



Our first stop is the Catacombs of Kom ash-Shuqqafa, dating back to 2CE. They are the largest known Roman burial site in Egypt, discovered in 1900 when a donkey fell through a hole in the ground. Three tiers of tombs and chambers are cut out of rock to a depth of 35m. They are entered by a spiral staircase and bodies would have been lowered on ropes down centre shaft. There is a banqueting hall where families feasted to pay their last respects. The walls of the central chambers have horizontal holes for some 300 bodies and the chambers and connecting passages are lined with wall paintings.

### **The Catacombs of Kom es-Shoqafa**

*This warren of tombs, on three levels, also contains the Triclinium, where relatives used to sit on stone benches to feast the dead, and a central tomb with reliefs of bearded serpents. Inside are 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD statues of Sobek and Anubis wearing Roman armour.*

Next is Pompey's Pillar, a hilltop site with a tall obelisk, a 30m high pink granite pillar, The Crusaders mistakenly credited it to Pompey but it

was actually erected in 291AD for Diocletian. The complex built around it was destroyed as part of the Crusaders assault on the pagans. Now it sits on a hilltop, littered with concrete blocks and rocks, overlooked by high rise flats. The police presence is noticeable, with lookouts and sentries, but we are amused to see a Kalashnikov slung over the back of a chair. When one of our group takes a photo, the gun is quickly shouldered and the photographer frowned at.



**Pompey's Pillar**

### **Alexander & the Ptolemies 332-30 BCE**

*After Alexander the Great's death in 323 BCE, his empire was carved up by his generals and one of them, Ptolemy, began the next dynasty.*

*This ended with Cleopatra VII when she and her brother Ptolemy XIII ruled under Roman protection. Ptolemy had Rome's representative, Pompey, killed and then he banished Cleopatra. She turned to Julius Caesar for help and he had Ptolemy thrown into the Nile, but then was assassinated himself.*

*Cleopatra then turned to Marc Antony, who was in line for the Emperor of Rome title. A union between an Egyptian queen and Roman general was not popular in Rome. Octavian (later emperor Augustus), the nephew of Julius Caesar (and brother of Marc Antony's existing wife) attacked.*

*As the victorious Roman fleet sailed toward Egypt, Cleopatra reputedly put an asp to her breast rather than face capture, and so ended the Ptolemaic dynasty.*



## Roman Rule 30 BCE-638 CE

*The Romans established trade centres and imposed their rule. They endeavoured to eradicate the old Pharaonic religion causing many to turn to Coptic Christianity, also condemned by the Romans.*

*The oppressive Roman rule ended in 640AD when the Arabs rode out of the deserts of the Arabian peninsula and established a base outside the Roman fortress city of Babylon. The base later became the Islamic city of Cairo.*

As we make our way to the Montazah Palace for lunch (it is now 5pm and most of our group seem to be on the verge of killing and eating a camel if only they could find one) we can see that Alexandria is built on the water's edge - a 20 km corniche around the waterfront and behind that a 3km deep crescent of high rise apartments. The Palace is at the far end of the harbour and was originally the summer residence of the royal family, now the same for the President.



The Blue and White Theme in the Restaurant

Part of it has been refurbished as a luxury hotel and we eat in what was originally the harem. An excellent meal looking out over the extensive gardens.

Our police escort must have been in a hurry to get home, as we sped the 200km back to Cairo, sirens sounding and lights flashing all the way. A long, but fascinating day, from 7am to 10pm.

## Montazah Palace and Gardens

*Acres of formal gardens and beautiful beach make Montazah the foremost city pleasure grounds. Montazah Palace, a grand structure built in a mixture of Turkish and Florentine styles, is now a state guesthouse. Pleasant afternoons can be spent in Shallalat Gardens, which include rockeries and an artificial pond, Nouzha Gardens, near Alexandria Zoo, and Antonaidis Gardens, where classical statuary is set among what were once the private ground of a Greek family.*



Lit up for Christmas

**Sunday 6 January 2002 - Cairo to Luxor**

**Day 5**

We have been told that the police in our group will be leaving for their official visit to the Egyptian Police Academy at 9am, so decide to go down to the bus and see them leave, dressed in their best outfits. To breakfast and as we form a 'guard of honour', we are told that everyone was expected to come, not just the police. Like us, few others knew this, and the numbers are starting to look embarrassing.

So, with a little urging, we jump on board (not really dressed for the occasion). Half way there our bus does a U turn. The other bus has broken down, so we cram the rest of the group on board and set off again, by now very late, but with our police escort all the way we are soon there.



Welcome to Police Academy

We have the full official welcome by the General (that's what they called him!) and then we inspect the Academy - 800 acres of impressive looking buildings (but internally the poor workmanship and maintenance of the buildings is starting to show already), sports grounds, parade grounds, stables, emergency training towers etc. etc. The kitchens were state of the art, preparing 24,000 meals a day as there are 4500 trainees plus staff, at any one time.



**? Tonnes of rice cooked each day**

Next we go to the impressive new grandstand overlooking the parade ground. The band plays, the horses are paraded and the sniffer dogs (very large alsatians) demonstrate their skills.



Unfortunately it is pouring with rain (Cairo gets 5 rainy days per year) and, because of us, the members of the police band are standing, with their instruments, in the pouring rain. Even worse, the magnificent, brand new transparent coloured dome over the entrance hall to the grandstand has rain pouring through it, much to the surprise of the

General. I think there will be a full investigation within the hour.



**Sniffer dog**

A buffet lunch is served, then comes the official speeches and presentations. Each of us is presented with a boxed Police Academy key ring by the General. It was all an unexpected and very interesting opportunity and we really appreciated being invited.



**Presentations to all**



**Some of the buildings on the 800 acre site**

Back to the hotel, take some photos from our balcony and then there is just time to pack and leave for the train, stopping off for a wander around the busy Khan al-Khalili bazaar for an hour on the way.





**Cairo Tower and the City**



**The Nile from our hotel balcony**

This is one of the biggest covered markets in the world, stalls lining each tiny lane, and each lane specialising in a specific type of goods. Diners at the coffee houses are provided with a hookah pipe at each table. It is in this bazaar that we see a range of machine guns for sale, a policeman standing over them.



**al Hussein Mosque**

Next door to the bazaar is the al-Hussein Mosque, one of the busiest mosques in Cairo and nearby is the al-Azhar mosque, founded in 970 CE. It is one of Cairo's earliest mosques and the world's oldest surviving university. The Sheikh of al-Azhar is Egypt's ultimate religious authority.



**al Azhar Mosque at dusk**



**Khan al Khalili Bazaar**

**Top Left - Hookah stall Top Right - Clothes**

**Bottom - Perfumes**

## **Arab Conquests 640-1517**

*The Islamic factions warred between themselves, and with any invaders, from 640 CE and 1517 CE.*

*The Christians of Western Europe (the Crusaders) attacked those occupying the holy sites of the Bible, taking Jerusalem in 1099 and advancing through Palestine and into Egypt, where they were repelled and a new ruler, Saladin rose to power.*

*The built the citadel that dominates the Cairo skyline still. His dynasty was overtaken by another Islamic group the Mamluks, who ruled for 267 years, building many outstanding buildings, funded by their control over the sea link between Europe, India and the Orient.*

*Their power waned at the end of the 15thC when Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, freeing merchants from the heavy taxes imposed to use the canal link.*

To our bus to find that the driver has driven the bus under a canopy while filling with petrol and several windows are smashed. We squeeze onto one of the other two buses and to the station. The train is on 'Egyptian time' so we wait on the platform, shivering in the icy wind blowing off the snow in Greece and Turkey. Some of our group seemed to have thought that it is always hot in Egypt and they are looking very blue.

On the train - very comfortable cabins with seats which convert to 2 berths and at 8.15 the train moves smoothly out of Cairo station for the 9 hour trip to Luxor. At 8.20 there is a terrible crashing noise and the train stops very suddenly, everyone falling over, and the porter and drinks trolley making a nasty mess in the corridor. Much rushing up and down, then it is reported that a coupling between carriages broke, with the air brakes automatically and instantly stopping the train.



### **Bound for Luxor**

There are doctors in our party, injuries are inspected and appear to be only bruising and so we wait. Dinner is served to us (not worth describing) in our cabins. Four of the inhabitants of carriage two are in the bar drinking and when they return to their carriage there is nothing there, just the dark - it has disappeared, with all their belongings. They are given free drinks and told not to worry, it will get to Luxor sometime tomorrow and tonight a bed will be found for them somewhere on what is left of the train!

Meanwhile those who are still in carriage two have been left behind on a side track, with no idea of what is going on. The police (Victorian) involved were all for getting off, but after they were assured no train could hit them (it was dark and they were a single carriage on a track) they had dinner and then played lawn bowls with the dinner oranges along the corridor. There were 16 pretty 'cheesed off' train travellers who arrived well after us the next day, but they did have their very own engine all the way to Luxor.

To bed on a rocking train - little sleep with a lot of dozing.

**Monday 7 January 2002 - Luxor, Nile Cruise**

**Day 6**



**Welcome to the Nile Pioneer**

One of the good things about the train disaster is that instead of arriving at 5am in Luxor, we arrive at 6am and breakfast is served shortly before our arrival. Buses to the M/S Pioneer, and we have a reasonably large cabin with refrigerator and TV (yet to find an English speaking channel). A shower, then a walk around the narrow, busy streets of Luxor with school children and others greeting us.

Luxor is the ancient, great city of Thebes, capital of Egypt for almost 1000 years, and the site of incredible riches gathered by the Pharaohs. Lunch at 1pm and at 2pm our bus takes us to the



Temples of Karnak. Professor Adel has rejoined us so we will have the benefit of his expertise.



**Entrance to the Karnak Temples through the avenue of ramheaded sphinxes**

The Temples of Karnak are one of the largest monuments of Pharaonic Egypt, covering a site of over 100 hectares. At the centre is the Great Temple of Amun, surrounded by smaller temples, a sacred lake, sanctuaries and other structures dedicated to the Theban gods of the Middle and New Kingdom rulers. Work was carried out over 1500 years, starting around 2500 BCE. Rows of sphinxes line the entrance to the Temple of Amun, which leads into the Great Court and the Hypostyle Hall.

The Hall consists of 134 giant papyrus shaped columns, each 23m tall and 10m in circumference. It is the largest columned temple in the world and the two biggest cathedrals in Europe would easily fit in the Hall together.



**School excursion**

Next we go to the Temple of Luxor, built by the New Kingdom Pharaohs, Amenophophis III and Ramses II, discovered in 1883. As we explore this temple, Professor Adel gives us an excellent history of the development and use of the temples, explaining the way in which life is depicted in the wall paintings (although his accent left some of us a little confused as to whether it was the god of fatality or the god of fertility he was indicating).



**Luxor Temple**



**Rameses II - Hypostyle Hall -Details on lintel**





**Luxor Temple at twilight**



We walk back to the boat, have a drink and then it is time for dinner (the emphasis is on quantity, not quality). We left the dining room as the band and the conga line started and before the Luxor Police Chief arrived to formally welcome us. A quiet coffee in our room and then bed.



Isis and Osiris are the most often depicted gods in the temples and burial chambers. Osiris is the god who gives wisdom and goodness, but was slain by his brother Seth. His wife Isis (always shown with the sun disc around her head) is overcome by grief and manages to find his scattered remains, bringing him back to life and this allows him to enter the afterlife. Their son, Horus, defeats Seth and takes over the role of his father.

The walls of this temple show stories about giving offerings to the gods and the gods in return handing the key of life to the Pharaohs. If a Pharaoh rules either Upper and Lower Egypt he is depicted with the crown of that region, and after the two areas were unified the Pharaoh is shown with a combined crown. We see depictions of the life of the Pharaohs, such as eating, watching the dancing girls, slaying enemies and the workers building, fishing and tilling the soil. This temple was the setting for Aida in 1988.



**Felucca on the Nile at Luxor**



Another early start as the wake up call is due at 5.45am for a 6.15am breakfast. At 7am we are on bus and off to the West Bank of the Nile and the City of the Dead (the Pharaonic burial area). We pass through vegetable (huge cabbages) and sugar cane growing areas and mud brick houses in villages.



**Temple of Hatshepsut**

The West Bank at Luxor was the site of hundreds of tombs and temples of the ancient city of Thebes, built to honour the Pharaohs and the members of their courts. The necropolis supported a large city of workers - artisans, labourers, priests and guards, all perfecting the techniques of tomb and temple building and decorating, passing the secrets down through their own families.



**Dancing girls depicted on the temple walls**

Secrecy and concealment was the key to tomb design so that the artefacts could not be stolen, thus preventing the mummified Pharaoh from reaching the afterlife. The tombs were designed to resemble the underworld, with a long, inclined rock hewn corridor leading to antechambers and finally the burial chamber. The paintings, reliefs, food, furniture and other everyday living needs are placed in the tomb to assist the mummified body into the afterlife.



**Hatshepsut on her throne**

Our first stop is the Deir al-Bahri, originally a complex of temples built in the valley and into the cliffs of the Thebes mountains, over many hundreds of years during the Middle Kingdom. The only building still standing is the mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, slowly being restored to some of its former glory and a perfect setting for Aida (1997). It is a large pillared structure, partly rock cut and partly free standing, formed on three levels with wide stone staircases leading up to each terrace. Originally it would have been surrounded by gardens and approached by a sphinx lined avenue. Inside the walls are decorated with coloured drawings of the gods, the people of the Queen Hatshepsut's court and everyday living and worship.



**Cave tombs in surrounding hillside**

Some of the work still exists today, 3500 years later, the colours a little faded, but clear, due to the use of gum from tree sap and egg added to



the paint. Following the death of Tuthmosis I in 1495 BCE a controversy arose over succession, won by the formidable Hatshepsut. Only the third queen to rule, she declared herself a Pharaoh (by claiming divine birth, as did most Pharaohs), the first woman to rule as king, which she did for 20 years, ordering the artists to depict her as a man.

In the same area is the Valley of the Tombs of the Nobles where the dignitaries are buried, but with far greater simplicity than the royal tombs.



**Making our way up the Valley of the Kings**

Our next stop is the Valley of the Kings. We fight our way through the market stalls lining the entrance road, open our bags for inspection, arms and legs wide for the hand scanner to be run over us, and then we are allowed in. Thomas the Tank Engine takes us to the top of the hill and we are ushered into the Tomb of Ramses IX by Prof. Adel. He really knows his history of art and gives us an excellent background to a number of the wall paintings and the use of each of the chambers and passages. The painted bas-reliefs on the passage walls leading to the burial chamber show the gods protecting the Pharaoh in the afterlife and the many foods and other offerings given to the gods in return.



**Hieroglyphics on the walls of the Tomb of Ramses IX**

Hieroglyphic stories carved into the walls and pylons help the Pharaoh on his way and his mummified body is still where it would have been placed on the granite stone in the burial chamber.



**Scenes on the wall of the Tomb and inner Chamber**



**Offerings to the God**



The Tomb of Seti II and the Tomb of Sethnakht & Queen Tawsert are similar, with slightly different symbolic artwork lining the walls and ceilings.

In the bus and to the Valley of the Queens, where a number of us have tickets to go into the Tomb of Nefertari. Only 100 of these are issued each day and you are allowed in for just 10 minutes to prevent deterioration of the wall paintings by the moisture from breathing - no bags, no cameras and try not to breathe are our orders! \$6US million was spent to prevent deterioration of the tomb, prior to it being opened to the public.



**Brilliant decoration in the Tomb of Nefertari**



Nefertari was the favourite of the five wives of Ramses II (the Pharaoh known for his monuments of self aggrandisement). The walls are covered in scenes of Nefertari in the company of the gods and they are magnificent, still brightly coloured after 3000 years. All the artefacts in the tomb have been plundered over the centuries.



Next to an alabaster shop where Shirley and I do a deal with the salesman. We both like a small malachite Egyptian cat but they are £E50 (\$25Aus) each - we offer £E60 for two, which is turned down. A bit of haggling by Shirley and they agree, so we are quite pleased with our purchase.



**Alabaster factory**

On the way back to the boat we pass the Colossi of Memnon, two 18m high seated statues of Amenophis III, sitting out in field surrounded by cabbages, and they are all that remains of a temple built by him. They were badly damaged in an earthquake in 30BCE.



**Colossi of Memnon**



**The MS Nile Pioneer pulls away without us**

The bus pulls up just as the M/S Nile Pioneer moves away from the bank (we have

arrived back half an hour after it is due to sail), but it comes back to the bank, the gangplank is lowered, we are on and it is off. We are going up the Nile - some discussion about this, but it is pointed out that we are moving up the river towards its source, to the area known as Upper Egypt.



**Police escort us at all times**

We watch the sun set from the open upper deck as we pass children playing around mud brick houses and little fishing boats.



**Sunset on the Nile**

Drinks in our cabin with Shirley and then we dress for the Captain's Cocktail party. The party becomes a prolonged affair (no food or drink served at this stage) as the Captain appears to be needed elsewhere to get us through the Esna lock.

He appears and we then celebrate the wedding of two of our group and presentation of a gift. They are both in the police group and were actually married several days ago in Cairo, but had kept it a surprise until the event. We toasted the couple with our 'Captain's Cocktail' (one non-alcoholic drink) and then to dinner at 9pm. Many have brought glamorous outfits for the occasion. We enjoy the dinner of chicken soup, avocado and crab, roast beef and strawberry shortcake and then we are off to bed, while the revelry kicks.

## Pharaonic Egypt Temples

### Cult temples

*These served as the god's house on earth and were constructed of stone so they would last for eternity. Inside a massive mud brick wall was the temple, priests residences, workshops, storehouses and a sacred lake. Reliefs and paintings acted as protection against evil influences and to instruct on temple rituals, according to function.*

*Access to the parts of temple depended on a persons status. Worshippers walked along a paved route, sometimes lined with sphinxes (eg Temple of Amun at Karnak) leading up to massive pylons guarding main gateway, carved showing the king victorious over enemies. A privileged few would pass through the gate and into peristyle court, an open courtyard with colonnades on three sides. This was considered semi-public and often featured artwork of coronation scenes and the king performing public duties.*

*The priests then moved through the hypostyle hall, containing massive columns decorated with plant artwork, the walls depicted scenes of everyday life with the people bringing gifts and the kings making offerings. The ceiling had stars and the sun, all designed to resemble life in the surrounding forests*

*From here doors led into a small dimly lit inner chamber and a hall where the daily offerings were prepared. The sanctuary, was at the most remote part of the temple with the shrine and god's statue in the centre and only accessible to the high priest and the king, the walls decorated in reliefs depicting the twice daily offering ceremony.*

### Mortuary temples

*The mortuary temples were for worshipping the dead Pharaoh. They were originally a simple structure connected to king's pyramid, then they developed into huge complexes during the New Kingdom when they were built away from the tomb. The main reason was security, in order to keep the underground tomb hidden.*

### The Gods

*Over 3000 years, Ancient Egypt produced many gods. The ones mainly depicted in temples on view today are:*

*\* Anubis, black with a canine or jackal head, god of embalming.*



*\* Aten, an aspect of the sun god Ra, depicted as a disc from which rays extend, ending in outstretched hands.*

*\* Hathor, daughter of sun god Ra, goddess of joy and love, often depicted as cow or woman with cows ears or horns between which sits a sun disc.*

*\* Horus, sky god, son of Osiris and Isis, depicted as hawk or man with hawk's head.*

*\* Isis, wife of Osiris, mother goddess, possesses magical powers, depicted as woman with throne or sun discs on head.*

*\* Osiris, god of fertility and underworld, depicted in mummy wrappings, holding crook and flail, wearing conical head dress including rams horns and tall plume.*

*\* Ra, the sun god, depicted as man with falcon's head resting on sun disc.*

## **Egyptian Mummies**

Mummification in ancient Egypt took about seventy days to embalm a body. Since the Egyptians believed that mummification was essential for passage to the afterlife, people were mummified and buried as well as they could possibly afford. High-ranking officials, priests and other nobles who had served the pharaoh and his queen had fairly elaborate burials. The pharaohs, who were believed to become gods when they died, had the most magnificent burials of all.

First, the body was washed and ritually purified, then the inner organs removed. A slit was cut into the left side of the body so that the embalmers could remove the intestines, the liver, the stomach and the lungs, each being placed in a canopic jar and embalmed using the hygroscopic salt natron, which served to dry out the organs and discourage bacteria from decaying the tissues. The

lids of these jars were fashioned after the four sons of Horus, who were each entrusted with protecting a particular organ.

After the removal of the inner organs, the body cavity was stuffed with natron. The brain was then removed through the nose using long hooks. The body was then placed on a slanted embalming table and completely covered with natron, allowing fluids to drip away as the body slowly dried out, taking about forty days.

After another cleaning, the body was rubbed with unguents to aid in preserving the mummy's skin. The embalming cut in the side of the body was sewn up and covered with a patching depicting the protective eye of Horus.

The body was adorned with gold, jewels and protective amulets. Fingers and toes were covered with protective gold caps and individually wrapped with long, narrow strips of linen. Arms and legs were also wrapped, then the entire body was wrapped to a depth of about twenty layers.

The embalmers used resin to glue the layers of wrappings together. The wrapped head was covered with a mummy mask. Finally, the last layer of bandages went on and was given one last coating of resin. The mummy was then ready for burial.

The mummy and canopic jars were transported to the tomb and religious ceremonies held to prepare the dead for the afterlife. The Opening of the Mouth ceremony was believed to allow the mummy to see, hear, eat and drink in the spirit world.

**Wednesday 9 January 2002 - Nile Cruise**

**Day 8**



**Caliches at Edfu**

With breakfast came the stories of the 'treasure hunt' by competing teams as part of last night's fun, which ended sometime between 1am and 2am - the participants didn't seem to quite remember the exact time and a few of them appeared to be missing from breakfast. Others missing breakfast were a number reported to be suffering from the 'Pharaohs Revenge', blamed on everything from touching Egyptian money to the ship's water supply.

Overnight we have moved further up the Nile to Edfu and at 9am we are into caliches (horse drawn carriages) to visit the nearby Horus Temple. Our driver is asking for baksheesh before we have moved 50 metres - many events are paid for in our tour, but the baksheesh demanded probably

equals the official cost. Chaos reigns at the temple entrance, but our group finally enters and Prof. Adel takes us in hand and explains the architecture, art and customs of the temple built to honour the god of Horus, the falcon headed son of Osiris.



**Entrance Pylon to the Temple of Horus**

This is the best preserved temple in Egypt and was built by Ptolemy III in 327 BCE. At the front is a large pylon with a falcon in black granite guarding each side of the entrance.



**Courtyard at the Temple of Horus**

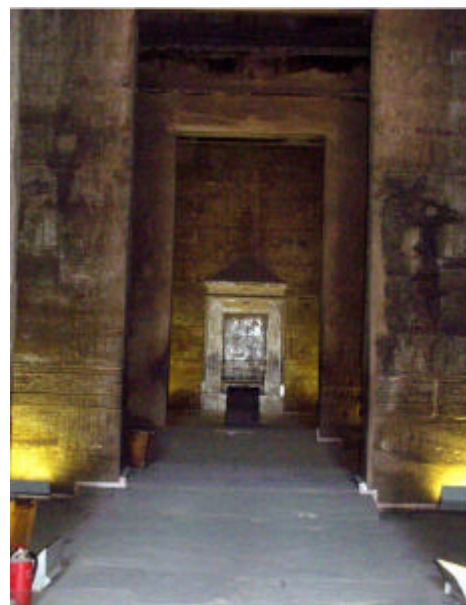


**Richly carved walls of the hypostyle**

The walls of the many small rooms and the Great Hypostyle Hall are covered in drawings of offering scenes and the story of the birth and life of Horus and his punishment of the murderers of his

father, the god Osiris, believed to be the founding father of Egypt. The hieroglyphic writing chiselled into the stone walls is prolific and quite unworn and the huge shrine carved from one boulder of granite is still intact.

The aggressive market sellers are waiting for us as we walk back to our caliches and then we have to fend off our driver who has become even more persistent in his demands as we return. Sailing time is listed as 11am, but we do not finish at the temple until 12noon. Prof. Adel tells us not to worry. Shirley and I exchange the comment that it is just as well Jim is not the Captain or we would all be walking to Aswan by now.



**Holy of Holies - Edfu**



**Horus**

On board and lunch is a BBQ on the open deck. The sun is shining, the deck is set up with chairs and tables and the buffet of many foods



stretches across the stern. It is all very relaxing as the palms and pastures on the banks of the Nile pass by only metres from us. The food is excellent - felafels, meats, salads, vegetables and sweet Greek style desserts. We relax for a while sitting around the pool enjoying the sun and scenery.



**Large feluccas laden with rocks waiting for the wind.**

Around 6.30pm we reach Kom Ombo and pull in to visit the nearby temples by night. One is dedicated to Horus the Elder, the other to the crocodile god Sobek. Tonight is the galabiyya party and most people dress in Egyptian gear for the occasion.

## Religion

*The Middle East is the birthplace of the three big monotheistic world religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The followers of these religions worship the same God, the main difference being the understanding of when the revelations ceased to be received on earth. Judaism adheres to the old testament, Christianity adds on the New Testament and the Muslims claim that the Quran contains the final words of God (Allah), explaining the points not clearly made by earlier prophets.*

## Islam

*Islam was founded by the prophet Mohammed, who at age 40 (610CE) began to receive revelations from archangel Gabriel. The revelations, said to be the direct word of Allah, continued for the rest of his life and he transcribed them as the Quran which has remained unaltered since that time. The Quran mentions many of the same prophets as the Bible, Jesus as one of them, but does not recognise him as divine. By*

*Mohammed's time other religions had split into factions and were complicated by rules and rituals. Islam offered a simple alternative based on a direct relationship with God, with five pillars of faith:*

- \* Shahada - public declaration that there is only one god and Mohammed is his prophet.*
- \* Salat - praying five times a day, Friday noon prayers in a mosque.*
- \* Zakat - 1/40 income to the church for the needy and to promote Islam.*
- \* Ramadan - fasting in daylight hours during the month of Ramadan, to bring the individual closer to God.*
- \* Haj - pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime to purge all past sins.*

## Coptic Christianity

*Before the arrival of Islam in Egypt, Christianity was the predominant religion in Egypt. St. Mark, the companion of apostles Paul and Peter began preaching Christianity in Egypt around 35CE, and it became the official religion in 4thC CE. Jesus preached in what is present day Israel, but Christians are a minority in the Middle East and only Muslims can have Saudi Arabian nationality.*

*The largest Christian group belong to the Coptic Church of Egypt which split from the Byzantine Orthodox Church in the 5thC. The number of Christians in the Middle East is in decline, mainly due to migration. Their schools have provided a better education, leading to a lower birth rate and higher paying jobs, in turn promoting an ability to migrate to countries offering them a higher standard of living. Other religions are a small minority.*

## Population

*Egypt is the most populous country in the Arab world with around 62 million people, with Arabic as majority language. There are three main racial groups:*

- \* The Hamito-Semitic race peopled the Nile, including the Berbers, recognised by the women with faces fully covered or just the eyes showing.*
- \* Bedouin Arabs, 1/2 million nomads, who migrated from to Arabia live in the desert areas, but are now tending to be less mobile.*
- \* Nubians, who are taller, with a darker skin, from the Aswan area between Egypt and Africa, much of their land disappearing with building of the Aswan Dam.*



**View from our cabin at Aswan**

Breakfast, then into the buses to visit the High Dam of Aswan. Aswan is the southern most city in Egypt and close to Nubia, so the inhabitants have distinct Nubian features - tall and dark. Elephantine Island sits in the middle of the Nile and excavations on it have revealed a town, temples and a Nileometer. There are a number of Nileometers along the river, dating from Pharaonic times, rebuilt by the Romans and restored in the 1800's. They measure the height of the river, giving an indication of water available for the crops, and this was used to set the level of taxes, based on the potential size of the season's harvest.



The British built the first dam above First Nile Cataract at turn of century, at that time the largest dam in the world. In 1956 the controversial Sadd al-Ali or High Dam was built 6km upstream from this. Nasser, who came to power in Egypt in 1952, was sympathetic to Russia during the Cold War and several Western countries and the World Bank suddenly refused promised funding. He nationalised the Suez Canal, France, UK and Israel invaded, and were stopped by the UN, then the Soviet Union offered funding. The dam wall is 3.6km across, 980m wide at the base and 111m high and when completed in 1971, the water that

collected behind it became Lake Nasser, the biggest artificial lake in the world.



**Monument given by France**

It led to an increase of 30% of arable land in Egypt, but prevented the flow of silt, causing a heavy use of fertilisers, which meant the disappearance of the fishing grounds at the mouth of the Nile. Near the dam wall is an impressive stone monument in the shape of a lotus flower, a gift from France. As we take in the view from the dam wall, a truck load of sitting camels goes by (how do they get the last camel to sit down - camels need a lot of room to sit and stand??), on their way to a nearby market, to be sold as meat.



**Camels off to market**

The High Dam project required the rescue of a number of Pharaonic monuments and



UNESCO funded moving them at a cost of \$US40 million. One of these monuments was a temple complex on the island of Philae.



**Boats waiting to take us to Temple of Philae**

The Temples of Isis and Hathor were moved stone by stone to nearby Agilka Island, 20m higher. We are taken by boat to Agilika Island to explore the Temple of Philae, which is dedicated to the god Isis, who found the heart of her slain husband, Osiris on Philae Island.



**The Temple of Philae**



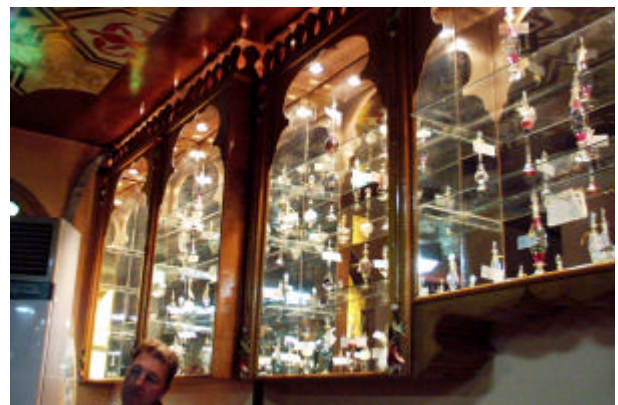
The oldest part dates from 4C BCE but most of the existing structures were built by the

Romans prior to 3rdC CE. The temple is decorated with scenes of the mourning of Isis by Osiris and Horus and drawings of the Pharaohs and Emperors making offerings to the gods.



**Pylon at the Temple of Philae**

On the way back we visit a government perfume shop. It takes 1 tonne of flower petals to make 300ml of perfume and I keep looking out (in vain!) for the millions of acres of flowers that must be grown in Egypt to fill the bottles of perfume essence on the shelves (not to mention the claim that they supply all the world's major perfume manufacturers with their essences as the basis for perfumes).



**Perfume Shop**

Back to the boat for lunch and we find that our felucca ride has been cancelled as it is too rough and windy for tourists (it is reported to be 2 deg. and raining in Cairo). We watch feluccas heeling and swaying in the wind for a while from top deck (cold and windy) and out the large window of our room, then it is time for drinks and to dinner. The soup course has been excellent at each meal, the other dishes OK, but nothing out of the ordinary. Many people seem to have suffered

from the 'Pharaoh's revenge', but for us, so far, so good.

Tonight's entertainment is a belly dancer who was just! We went to bed and then heard next morning that a Sufi Dancer had later performed.

This was originally a form of worship for followers of a mystic Muslim order and they spin and whirl to attain a trance like state of devotion. It has become more of a dance entertainment now and the performer last night was evidently excellent.

## **Friday 11 January 2002 - Abu Simbel**

**Day 10**

A slightly later rise today, breakfast (the omelettes made on the spot are popular) and then into the bus to Aswan airport and onto the 10.30 plane to Abu Simbel for the 35 minute trip. We must fly as the police will not allow land travel. It is free seating so a rush for window seats, but most of these are taken with those who boarded in Cairo. We were lucky.



**Lake Nasser from the air**

Another 10 second bus trip from the plane to the terminal, then a shuttle bus to the temple. The entry to Ramses II Great Temple of Abu Simbel is through a visitor's centre with illustrated descriptions of the moving and rebuilding of the original temple prior to the building of the High Dam.



**Ramses II - Great Temple of Abu Simbel**

The temple was carved out of the solid rock on the west bank of the Nile between 1290 and 1224 BCE and was dedicated to the gods Ra-

Harakhty, Amun and Ptah as well as the deified Pharaoh who built it, Ramses II. Over the years the Nile and the desert sands shifted and the temple was covered and forgotten. It was discovered by chance in 1913 by Swiss explorers and then the British excavated it in the 1900's.



**Some of the wall decorations**



It had to be cut into 2000 huge blocks weighing 10 to 40 tonnes each and reconstructed inside a specially built mountain 200m away and 65m higher than the original site. Guarding the entrance is four statues of Ramses II, each more than 20m high and smaller statues of his mother, wife Nefertari and some of their children. Reliefs on walls depict the Pharaoh in battle, slaying enemies. The temple is aligned so that on the equinoxes, 21 March and 21 September each



year, at 6am, the sun reaches right through temple door to shine on statues in inner sanctuary.



**Top Left - Statues of Ramses II**  
**Top Right - Column with carving of Hathor -**  
**Goddess of joy and love**  
**Bottom - Temple of Hathor**

The other temple here is the Temple of Hathor, fronted by six statues 10m high, dedicated to Queen Nefertari, again moved, including the wall paintings depicting offerings to the gods and the Pharaohs armies at war. They really are amazing structures with colossal statues, carved in the rock on the side of the hill and most of them still intact after 3000 years of weathering.



**The Temples of Abu Simbel**

Back to the airport onto the plane and we return to the boat, pack our bags and board the bus for the 4 hour trip through the desert to Luxor with our police escort. It is desolate country, and we travel along a poor road, lined with mud brick houses most of the way.



Around 8pm we arrive at the Luxor Hilton, a very smart hotel with a superb buffet dinner - a choice of many, many foods, very welcome as our diet on the boat had become quite monotonous. Tonight we are given the news that our 'luxury resort' in Hurghada has no water and we stay at another, 'more luxurious resort'. The bad news is that it is 20km out of Hurghada. To bed in a large and comparatively luxurious room, setting the alarm in time for a 7am departure.

**Saturday 12 January 2002 - Luxor to Hurghada**

**Day 11**



**Our convoy stretches into the distance**

Breakfast the next morning is another vast spread of foods and everyone tucks in as we are told that there will be no lunch today. It is an early start as we must move across the desert with the morning convoy and armed escorts. Vehicles may only cross at two designated times each day and there is a minor panic due to some of our group being a little tardy (as usual). There are about 20 buses and cars in our procession and it is bare, sandy country, part of it steep rocky hills and just a

little forbidding, but police cars in front, between and at the end and police in each bus.



**Lunch stop on the way**



**Desert mountains by the road to Hurghada**

We reach our 'luxury resort' at Hurghada and it certainly is - a large complex of many rooms surrounding huge swimming pools and all rooms overlooking the Red Sea. Contrary to previous information (which should not surprise us, as very

little happens according to our itinerary) we have a choice of several restaurants for lunch. All meals and drinks, including wines and spirits (except for those imported), are inclusive at the Royal Azur, so this is turning out to be a low maintenance trip. We have not had to pay for a meal yet and the major cost is toilet stops at E£1 (50c) per pee.



**Royal Azur - Hurghada**

Shirley, Jim and I eat at the beach side buffet restaurant, with a good range of salads, hot dishes and desserts, then walk along the 'beach', not quite the quality of sand we are used to, but we touch the warm, clear Red Sea water. A rest for the remainder of the afternoon in our very pleasant room and then a drink while watching DW news (we also have CNN here). Our room is a route march to the bar so we take it in turns to get a beer/wine. Dinner is at 7pm, buffet, and a vast range of dishes.

**Sunday 13 January 2002 - Hurghada**

**Day 12**

A late start, then to breakfast, everything you could think of having for breakfast and a few things you wouldn't think of. I enjoyed the pancakes with honey and fresh limes.



**The 'Yellow' submarine Sinbad**



**Submariner - has a certificate to prove it**

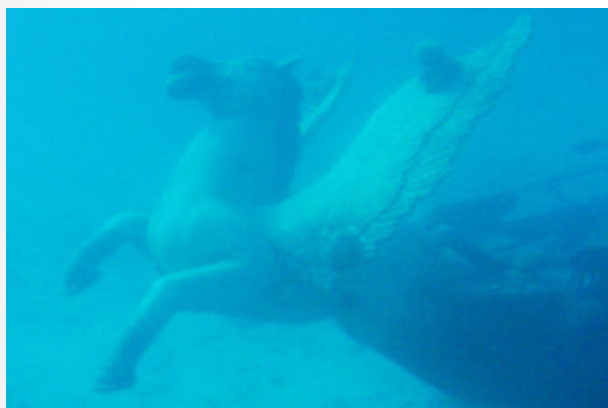
A recovery rest and it is time to catch the bus taking us into the yellow submarine. We are



actually 30km out of Hurghada, not 20 as we were told, so it takes about 45 minutes through bare desert with many resort buildings between the road and the Red Sea. We are taken out on a boat to 'Dream Island', a pontoon covered in fake rocks moored in the Red Sea. Next to it is our submarine, so we climb down the conning tower, the hatches are closed and we go down 15m. We must wear a numbered neck tag and the number corresponds to one of the seats arranged along the sides of the submarine, each facing a large port hole.



A diver accompanies the boat, feeding the fish as we make our way through a valley containing coral (the colours are very pale compared to the Barrier Reef). The fish are large and colourful but not nearly as plentiful as in Queensland.



**Winged Horse figurehead on 'Phoenician Wreck'**

At one point a laugh goes up as we pass an 'old Phoenician ship' with a large winged horse on the prow and surrounded by 'ancient' clay pots and urns.

Our fellow sailors are mainly Germans, who fly directly from Hamburg to Luxor, cruise the Nile and then come to Hurghada for the sun and swimming. Back to the bus and we return, again the flash resorts on one side of the road and the simple mud brick houses of the locals on the other.



**Dream island with Sinbad alongside**

Lunch at the buffet poolside restaurant, a session on the internet sending an email, catch up with others over a cappuccino and relax watching DW television. We will probably not go into downtown Hurghada again as all reports from others indicate that the hassling to buy is just as intense as elsewhere and we can do with a rest from being harangued non-stop.

Then it is time for dinner and the big decision - BBQ or Italian tonight. After an inspection we decide to go to the BBQ - beef shashliks, chicken and spicy sausages, salads etc. Roast lamb and vegetables for those who prefer. Icecream and banana fritters (or a choice of a dozen different cakes) for dessert. Coffee in the lounge listening to a reasonable singer and then it is time for bed.

**Monday 14 January 2002 - Hurghada**

**Day 13**

An overcast day with occasional sunshine, so to breakfast, a wander around the 'resort' and then into jeeps for our 'safari' into the desert. We have seven jeeps, graded according to the intensity of bouncing across the sand dunes (a group of us insisted we would only go if it was

gentle, while the young ones wanted the whole deal). Our driver played his part well and we enjoyed our ride through the desert, over quite hilly terrain and to a Bedouin village. Their dwellings were of the packing case type with a dirt floor and set around the edges of a sandy valley.



**Photographer at work as we speed towards the desert**



**Bogged in the sand**



**Fun in the dunes**



**Desert mountains**



**Dwelling at the Bedouin village**



**Kissing camel**



**Bread making**

A short camel ride, visit to the well, a talk about Bedouin customs and then dinner (chicken brought from the hotel and cooked over hot coals) was ready. Back through the desert in the pitch black, a stop to view the stars (and a couple of moving satellites) and we were back about 8pm. Minestrone soup and a glass of chianti in the Italian restaurant and it was time for bed. Whilst we enjoyed the ride through the desert and seeing the clear night sky with stars and satellites, we felt the



Bedouin village was a little contrived and exploitative.

### **Turkish Rule 1517-1882**

*By the early 1500's Turkey was emerging as a strong empire looking to unify the Muslim world and successfully overpowered Egypt in 1516 at Aleppo, placing Egypt again under Ottoman rule. Trading revenues and taxes went back to Constantinople until the next attacker, Napoleon, with France's superior musket wielding army, gained control, mainly to counter Britains growing influence in the east. This lasted only a few months before Admiral Nelson destroyed the French fleet off Alexandria and the Turks attacked. The British and the Turks joined force in Syria and the French departed. Mohammed Ali, an Albanian in the Ottoman army gained power and conquered parts of Sudan, Greece, Syria and Arabia and by 1839 he controlled most of the Ottoman empire. He implemented many reforms in Egypt, transforming the country from feudalism to a semblance of industrialisation and opening it to foreigners (by 1860 Thomas Cook was organising tours down the Nile).*

*European bankers exploited the need for funds which Egypt could not repay, so Britain, the major creditor over loans for the Suez Canal, announced it was taking control until the debts were repaid.*

### **British occupation 1882-1952**

*The underlying reason for the British was to retain control of the Suez Canal and the Egyptians resentment of the occupation grew into retaliation when the British stormed a rebellious police station near the Suez Canal and on 26 January 1952 Cairo was set on fire.*

### **Independent Egypt 1952 onwards**

*The British controlled King Farouk fled and Colonel Nasser ascended to power and proclaimed the country as the Arab Republic of Egypt. His power was strengthened when he resisted threats by Britain and France on his announcement that he would nationalise the Suez Canal.*

*Egypt's relations with Israel had been hostile ever since Israel's founding in 1948 as Egypt had sent soldiers to aid the Palestinians in fighting the newly proclaimed Jewish state. Nasser publicly supported liberating Palestine, massed forces east of the Suez and blockaded the Straits of Tiran, resulting in the closure of the southern Israeli port of Eilat. Israel struck first and won the Six Day War, controlling the Sinai peninsula and closing the Suez Canal. Nasser's successor, Sadat turned to the US for support, moving away from the USSR and in 1973 launched a surprise attack across the Suez Canal, restoring national pride. In 1977 Sadat began negotiations with Israel, Israel withdrawing from the Sinai and Egypt recognising Israel's right to exist, viewed by the Arab world as a betrayal and leading to Sadat's assassination.*

*Vice-president Mubarak took over and for a decade kept the lid on the Islamic extremist until the early 1990s when poverty and unemployment fostered violence, targeting a valuable source of income, tourism, resulting in a number of deaths. Harsh penalties were introduced and economic conditions improved, so it with horror and surprise that in 1997 there was a fire bomb attack on a tourist bus outside the Egyptian museum and several weeks later 58 tourists were shot in Luxor. September 11, 2001 has further decimated tourist numbers and in some places where there would normally be thousands of visitors at this time, we were the only people and souvenir vendors were obviously desperate.*

**Tuesday 15 January 2002 - Hurghada**

**Day 14**

A late breakfast, (but we not on our own in that) and then to the Dive Shop to book a snorkelling trip on a reef in the Red Sea (\$US9). A siesta to prepare ourselves and then back to the Dive Shop to be fitted for full length wet suits (\$US5 extra, but worth it). Great hilarity when I appeared, walking with difficulty - I was told I had it on back to front (the knee reinforcement was behind my knees instead of in front, causing the walking problems). I returned to the Ladies and had another go. I tried to explain that our wetsuits at home had the zipper down the front, not the

back, but I think by this stage I had really blown my image as an experienced snorkeller!

We are handed our masks, flippers and snorkels, then it is into a van and onto a boat at the nearby harbour and twenty minutes out to a reef at Sheik el-Arab Bay. Into the gear, down the ladder and away. Our leader takes us round a reef and out into choppy waves. It is too far for me to be confident about the return journey so Jim and I return to look at the fish and coral around the boat - good, but still not as good as the Whitsundays.



**Top - Diving in the Red Sea**  
**Bottom - Diving Party - Maria, Leslie, Suzanne and Jim**

We are with a group of young Russians from near Moscow and they ask us about the weather in Australia - they were surprised to hear

that we meant +10 as the average winter temperature, not -10 degrees. They have paid \$US280 for their airfare and one week at the Royal Azur, which seems an incredible bargain. They are not happy with the weather here, expecting it to be much warmer. We presume prices are low as no one is travelling and the whole area is almost deserted. Most of those at Royal Azur are Russians and we are told (by our police informants) that money laundering by the Russian mafia is a major problem in Hurghada. We are now closely watching the Russians around us to see how sinister they look.

Back to the hotel after several hours of good fun, a drink at the bar (I had a mango juice and local brandy, very pleasant) and we must get ready for dinner. It really is a hard life at these resorts, but I will be quite ready to leave by tomorrow - one can have too much of a good thing! We are told that our group (they have never had Australians before) are very welcome as we are seen to be polite, honest and sober, evidently quite unlike the Russians, who are the main guests, and friendlier than the Germans, the other major group.

It is 'Far East' night in the main restaurant, but we decide to eat Italian and we enjoy minestrone, antipasto, fish and fresh mandarins, with a glass of chianti and then to bed.

**Wednesday 16 January 2002 - Hurghada to Cairo**

**Day 15**



**Downtown Hurghada**

A slow start (it's that sort of place), to breakfast and then onto the bus for a look at the shops in the town of Hurghada. We wander around being hassled to buy all the way and then there is a shop with an older man sitting outside who just smiles and goes on doing his crossword. I like the look of this shop, we go in and I buy a gold

necklace. When we say we are from Australia he brings out a worn piece of paper to show where his sister and parents live - Taylors Lake, Melbourne. I am very pleased with my purchase.



Back to Royal Azur in the bus and lunch at the beach restaurant, a siesta, a swim in the pool (heated to a very pleasant temperature), another



siesta and it is time for a early dinner (pizza in the Italian restaurant) before we go to the airport for the flight to Cairo.



**Sunrise in Hurghada**

The Royal Azur is very pleasant with little to do but eat, drink and swim, but for us it has been one day too many. A slower pace when we were looking at the Pharaonic temples and tombs, with enough time to really take in their magnificence and history, would have been much more to our liking.

Absolute chaos at the airport where they endeavour to pass the large luggage, piece by piece, through the hand luggage scanner. There is luggage everywhere, no hope of identifying anything, (making a mockery of security) and it is with amazement that we see it all appear on the conveyer belt in Cairo after our one hour flight.

Back to the El Gezarah Sheraton and as it is nearly midnight we fall into bed.

**Thursday 17 January 2002 - Cairo**

**Day 16**

To the breakfast spread and then we negotiate a taxi to take us to the Pharaonic Village. Entry is not cheap - about \$30Aus. The Village has been built on an island in the Nile, and we are taken by boat through canals on the island, with a recorded tape playing, explaining the statues and tableaux along the sides of the canal. As we come up to each of about fifteen tableaux, with appropriately dressed actors depicting an aspect of life in Pharaonic times, the actor 'villagers' begin their activities - tilling the fields with real oxen, herding real goats, making mud bricks, etc. etc. and after the boat passes they lapse back into resting and chatting - all just a little contrived.



**The viewing boat takes around the canals**



**Pharaonic fisherman**



**Pharaonic village life**

We alight from the boat on the island to be met by a guide who takes us around houses belonging to different strata of the Pharaonic population, explaining the architecture and activities of each household. There are several small museums in the privately owned village (a

little like Sovereign Hill on a smaller scale) and our guide takes us to the mummification museum and the Islamic museum. She was well informed and articulate and it was an interesting experience to go once.



**Mock-up of Tutankhamun's tomb**

Back to the hotel for a short siesta and then a walk around some of the back streets of our island between the branches of the Nile. As we walk along the bank for a short distance we see several of the many sports clubs (tennis courts, running tracks, swimming pools, large gardens with eating areas) which cover a considerable area of the island. Judging by those inside, sitting under the palms, taking tea, they are for the wealthy of Cairo. We also pass behind a local hospital where hospital debris, including a used transfusion bag lies on the footpath. Cairo really is a confusion of wealth and poverty.



**Royal Palms in the approach to the Cairo Tower**

In the centre of a large park is the Cairo Tower, 187m high and built in 1961 as a gift from the US.



**Cairo Tower, 197 metres high**

We pay our £E32 each and are whisked up in the lift to the top of the Cairo Tower, a view overlooking the vastness of Cairo city with its 60 million people.



**Cairo from the Tower**





**Pyramids through the smog**

The outline of the pyramids can be seen in the distance.



**An additional 'bowing statue' on the left**



**Courtyard in the Opera House**

On our way back to the hotel for our £E80 sunset felucca ride we stroll through the the grounds of the Opera House.

The felucca is moored at our hotel and we had to hire the whole boat for an hour. When I check, we can take a couple more people, so we sell seats to others in our tour group. We didn't end up with a profit, but it did help to defray the cost.

One couple, who were about to leave for home, had only £E20 left and were wondering how they could spend it.



**Sunset cruising in a felucca**

They, the others and ourselves were delighted as we sailed around a wide stretch of the Nile, the sun slowly disappearing and the lights of the surrounding streets and buildings coming on. It was very pleasant sitting back on cushions and quietly moving through the water.



**Views at sunset**



Tonight is a farewell dinner and what a debacle. We have all paid an extra \$30 Aus for dinner and a Brazilian show (you may well ask, but no, we have no idea why Brazilian). The food is OK but evidently some of those who were a bit slow going to the buffet didn't find much left. The drinks are exorbitant prices - we paid \$4Aus for bottle of water, others at our table paid \$15Aus for

a glass of orange juice and the young ones at the next table kicked up a rumpus when they were charged \$14Aus for half a glass of coke. A number of people paid and then were asked to pay again, but as no receipts were issued they could not prove that they had paid (we later heard that the waiters had pocketed the cash). The band played at a volume that could be heard on the other side of Cairo while a well padded and sparsely dressed

Egyptian girl wiggled her bum in front us. We left, as did a number of others!!

It was a pity, after 114 people had enjoyed a great fortnight together, to end on a sour note. The 98 returning travellers boarded their bus around 1am (we did not stay up to farewell them) to return to Australia. The remaining sixteen of us are ready for our flight to Jordan.

## Friday 18 January 2002 - Cairo to Amman

Day 17

To breakfast in the main dining room and some of our 16 Syria and Jordan travellers are up and about. After breakfast Shirley and ourselves hire the Sheraton limousine, with driver, (£E65 for three hours) and set off to explore the area known as Old Cairo. It dates back to the 6thC BCE on which the Roman later established a fortress, called Babylon-in-Egypt.



Excavating a Tower of Babylon



First stop is the Church of St. George, (of dragon fame) built in 1909. Five patriarchs storm up the church steps, and the church lights, including a huge chandelier, are turned on, people rush up to be blessed by the patriarchs as they pass, they do something inside the altar area and then they rush out again. We are told to stand back as they pass!

The main entrance to the area is between the remains of two round towers of Babylon's western gate, built in 98CE. Excavations have revealed a quay several metres below street level.



Inside the 'Hanging Church'



Above this is the Al-Muallaqa or Hanging Church, the centre of Coptic worship and called this because it was built to hang over the quay. It has a very high, triple barrel vaulted wooden roof structure and ornate wall mosaics. It is the centre of a major UNESCO project to lower the ground water level in the area and thus save a number of important historical buildings, including the Towers



of Babylon. The Church is thought to have been started in the 4thC CE.



**De-watering project to protect the ancient buildings**

Next is the Coptic museum where there is an interesting display of mosaics, manuscripts, tapestries and Christian artwork. The architecture and carved wooden ceilings of the museum building are of equal interest to the artefacts.



**Ancient manuscript in the Coptic Museum**



**School ground in Coptic Cairo**

Our driver then shows us into the narrow alleyways of the old city and we wander through

churches, an old synagogue, the Chaplet of St. George and we overlook the grounds of a primary school where the children are playing.



**Alleyway in Coptic Cairo**

Back to the car and we stop to look at the oldest mosque in Cairo, the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As, on the way to the hotel. It has a large courtyard, with many worshippers - being noon Friday everyone must pray in a mosque.

To the hotel for coffee and a banana in our room, a siesta and it is time to pack and leave for our flight to Amman, Jordan. Into the bus and off to Cairo Airport with police every 100 metres the whole way, (Bill Clinton is visiting the pyramids at Giza today) to find that our flight has been delayed by three hours.

One and a half hours after take-off we land in Amman, the capital city of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, into a bus and to the Regency Palace Hotel where a full scale dinner awaits us. It is now 11pm and although we were served a meal? on the plane, we pick and choose among the interesting dishes offered in the hotel dining room and then to bed.

Egypt has been a fascinating mix of rich and poor, old and new, harassment and friendliness, rubbish piled high and, in Cairo, thick smog. There is a very strong police presence, both for security and for control, with many road barriers which cannot be passed by anyone without discussion with the police and licence plates being recorded.

# Jordan

*Jordan was one of many countries that escaped from a long period of Turkish rule after WW1 and the new state of Transjordan was established. When the 1948 Arab-Israeli War ended in victory for Israel, King Abdullah occupied the West Bank and part of Jerusalem and changed the name of the country to Jordan. He was assassinated in 1951 and his grandson, Hussein, took over at the age of 17, reigning as a widely respected monarch until his death in 1999, his son Abdullah II taking over from him.*

*Jordan lost the West Bank and its part of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War, King Hussein later playing a peace broker role in the Middle East and signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1994. This stability has encouraged tourism, assisting the country to become economically sound, although this may not continue given the dearth of tourists we saw.*

*The majority of the 5 1/2 million people live in a narrow strip running the length of the country on the East Bank, the remaining 80% of the country is desert. The majority of Jordanians are Arabs, 60% Palestinian Arabs and 92% of the population are Sunni Muslims.*

**Saturday 19 January 2002 - Petra**

**Day 18**

Wake-up call at 6.30, breakfast at 7 and away in the bus to Petra. Sixteen in a large bus so we spread out very comfortably. A four hour trip (with our police officer in the front seat of the bus) to get there through desert terrain, with the occasional Bedouin camp,



**Cave Houses on the approach to the Siq**

Petra was built in 3rdC BCE by the Nabataeans who carved palaces, temples, tombs, storerooms and stables out of the pink rock cliffs. From Petra they commanded the trade route from Damascus to Arabia as the spice, silk and slave caravans passed through. The Nabataeans mastered hydraulic engineering, iron production, copper refining, sculpture and stone carving and then had to abandon the city due to several earthquakes, a massive one in 555AD.

Petra is approached through a narrow siq, 1.2 km long, and up to 80m high through the centre of a solid iron-laden sandstone hill. The siq

is a deep vertical split in the hill formed by violent movement of the earth's crust. Shirley and I covered the 500m approach to the siq in the traditional way on horseback, then it was on foot, along the original stone roadway through the cool passage. The siq ends with the sight of the Khazneh or Treasury, carved from the cliff face. Some of the buildings, such as the Crusader Fort and the High Place of Sacrifice are way up on cliffs and others, including the 8000 seat amphitheatre and the colonnaded street are at ground level. The city centre is beyond the siq continuing for another 2km, and we complete the 7km round trip, returning through the Siq, the only entry/exit point to the lost city of Petra.



**Entering the Siq**





Camels and driver carved on the wall of the Siq, water channel below for supplying water to Petra



Roman ruins at Petra

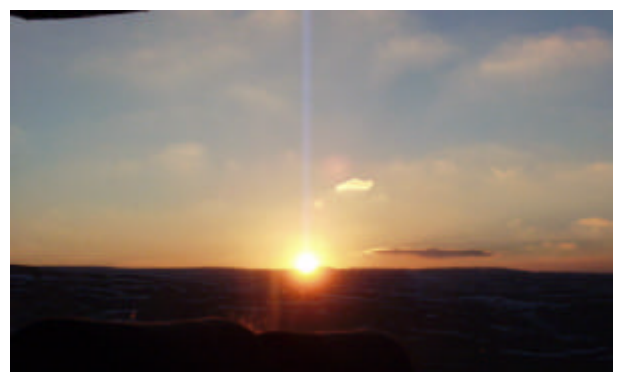


Shirley and Suzanne ride home

A little quicker coming back on the bus, a drink in our room (note for next time - if you take soap from a hotel because it smells nice/looks pretty, do not store it in your brandy glass - your next brandy will have a distinct perfume taste) and dinner is ready at 8pm. CNN for a few minutes and then lights out.



Top Left - First view of the Treasury  
Top Right - The Treasury  
Bottom - Temples carved into the rock face



Sunset as we return to Amman

**Sunday 20 January 2002 - Amman (Jordan) to Damascus (Syria)**

**Day 19**

Another early day as we leave the hotel at 8.15am for a tour of the city of Amman. The cost of our two minute phone call home is a bit of a shock

at \$150Aus. The city is a mass of grey limestone (local) cube shaped buildings, the only variation being the texture of the external surface of the

bricks on a smooth to rough continuum. Amman has been occupied since at least 3000 BCE and was originally built on seven hills, now spreading across 19 hills.



**Ruins of the Temple of Hercules**



**The Citadel and the Temple of Hercules**

We go to the Citadel, an old Roman garrison which overlooks the western part of the city. We look down on a Roman amphitheatre seating 6000 (built around 2 CE in the reign of Antonius Pius when the city was called Philadelphia) and the palace of the present king, Abdullah II, eldest son of King Hussein (died 1999 and revered in Jordan - every time our guide mentions his name, which is often, he adds 'May his dear soul rest in peace').

Within the Citadel is the remains of the Temple of Hercules and the domed hall where the caliph heard the complaints of his citizens. Although it is cool at the top of the hill, the sun is shining brightly over the city. Last week this hill

was covered in snow. Overhead we can see, every four or five minutes, Hercules aircraft circling and then flying off to the south.



**The Auditorium**

Amman appears to be a friendly city and is much cleaner than anywhere we visited in Egypt. On the outskirts of the city we pass a Palestinian refugee camp. This one houses 120,000 people and there are 13 of these camps in Jordan. They are called camps but are in fact apartment blocks, housing, with a range of community facilities. 50% of the 6 million Jordanians are from Palestine, many coming after the Arab-Israeli War in 1948 and the Six Day War in 1967 when Jordan lost the West Bank and its half of Jerusalem to Israel.

The road north from Amman to Jerash passes through the fertile Jordan Valley with terraced olive groves, 'polyhouses' (tomatoes?), fruit trees irrigated by underground water. Jerash is a well preserved Roman city, discovered in 1806. Digging has continued since the 1920's but 90% of the city is still covered. It was established when Pompey conquered the area in 63 BCE and became part of the province of Syria and then one of the cities of the Decapolis (10 cities forming a commercial league by Pompey). It peaked in 3AD with about 80,000 people, then went into decline.



**Oval Forum at Jerash**

The city is entered through the triumphal arch of Hadrian, along the colonnaded street to the



hippodrome, which seated 15,000. The South Gate still remains, one of four in a 3.5km long city wall.



**South Gate - Triumphal Arch of Hadrian**



**Murray singing in the 'sweet spot' in the South Theatre.**

Inside the wall is the Temple of Zeus, the forum and the amphitheatre, holding 5000 spectators. The acoustics here are quite amazing - we tested them, and a voice from the stage could be heard clearly from the top seats. There was one small 'sweet spot' in the centre of the stage where a voice was amplified throughout the theatre, but from 10cm to the right or left, whilst it was still clear, it was not amplified. Circular holes in the

stone wall around the lower stage had a similar effect, the sound from one being heard clearly in another.



Next stop is the Cardio (so called because it is the heart of the city) or colonnaded street, still paved with the original stones and chariot wheel ruts clearly visible. Along the Cardio is the nymphaeum, the fountain built as a temple to the Nymphs.



Next is the Temple of Artemis, dedicated to the patron goddess of hunting and love and surrounded by massive granite columns. Our guide showed us just how well balanced the huge columns are by balancing a key on a small stone under the base, pushing on the column and seeing the key slide under the gap when the column tilted slightly just with his weight.



**Our guide demonstrates the delicate balance of the column**

By the middle of the 5thC CE Christianity had become the major religion in the region and many churches were built (each family had their own). The remains of several still exist including the church of St. Cosmos and St. Damianus, with its original mosaic floor depicting birds and animals.



We head for Der'a, the Jordan / Syria border town, through rich red countryside, with many olive groves and expensive looking multistorey houses on large blocks of land.. There is obvious wealth in the countryside. Through passport control in just a few minutes due to the influence of our Syrian guide, Nadir, and into the

narrow winding streets of Damascus, the capital of Syria.

Damascus is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, with a current population of around 6 million people. There is record of an urban settlement here about 5000 BCE, later becoming a Persian capital, then falling to Alexander the Great and becoming a Greek city, then a major Roman centre. In 635 CE the city fell to the Muslims, then moved through Mongol, Mamluk, Ottoman and French control over the centuries.



**The Grand Cham Hotel, Damascus**

The Grand Cham Hotel is certainly grand - we are way out of our depth here. Shirley and I front up to the cashier where we sit in a wood with mother of pearl inlay chairs at a matching desk, to cash a \$20US travellers cheque and divide the £1000 Syrian between us (\$1Aus = £25Syrian). Then the three of us sit in the lobby bar listening to a trio (piano, flute and violin) play, while we drink dry sherry (Carlsberg for Jim) and eat the tasty range of snacks set out on our table. We later talk to the trio - three girls from Russia who say they are not really enjoying their time in Syria, but seem to appreciate us thanking them for their playing.

Dinner is buffet salads - very good including asparagus, artichoke hearts and about a dozen other choices. Then steak, chips and vegetables served hot from the kitchen, followed by choices from the dessert bar. To bed & it is another early start tomorrow.



# Syria

*Historically Syria included Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and present Syria. Its coastal towns were important trading posts for the many empires that ruled the country over the centuries. It became part of Ottoman Turkey and was given to France after WW1, causing some resentment, as it had briefly been independent.*

*During WW2 France agreed to independence, but did not withdraw until 1946. Between this time and 1970 there has been continual internal power conflicts and coups, and since this time President Hafez al-Assad has retained tight control. In 1998 he was elected for a fifth seven year term and has indicated that he is not inclined to peace making with Israel.*

*There is a general air of disrepair and untidiness and the country appears to be less wealthy than Jordan, and less of a police state than Egypt.*

*Syria has a population of 17 million, of whom 90% are Arabs. Islam is practised by 86% of the Arabs, of whom 80% are Sunni Muslims*

## Monday 21 January 2002 - Damascus to Palmyra (Syria)

Day 20

Yet another early start as we head out of Damascus at 8am bound for Palmyra in the north. We are passing through flat desert country, scattered small villages surrounded by olive groves and the occasional military installation with planes. There is a bare mountain range several kilometres to our left, part of the Golan Heights.



**Bagdad Café**

Morning tea is at the Baghdad Cafe, one of the few dwellings along the desert road. It consists of a hut, a tent and a beehive house - these are designed to protect against the extreme heat of the summer. At this stage we just need to be protected from the extremely cold wind blowing off the snow on the nearby mountains.

Dotted through the desert are oases, the way-stations for the old camel caravans on their way between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. The biggest is at Palmyra (150km from the Orontes River in the west and 200km from the Euphrates in the east), now one of the world's

great historical sites. Palmyra was an Assyrian caravan town for over 1000 years, later a Greek outpost for two centuries, then the Romans arrived in 217AD and it became a centre of great wealth.



**Beehive house and tent - Bagdad Cafe**

Bel was the most important of the gods at the time of the Greek occupation, and the centre of the Temple of Bel still stands, surrounded by a large walled courtyard with pillars, archways and water channels added over 100 years of the Roman occupation and still intact.

To a lunch of dips and flat bread, roast lamb and chips, and fresh fruit at a restaurant overlooking the Roman site. We visit one of the many Funerary Temple towers in the nearby valley and then we return to the City of Palmyra and the colonnade of pillars over a kilometre long, lining the main street, and entered through Hadrian's Arch. Along the street are side streets leading to the amphitheatre, the agora, Diana's pool and the Temple of Bel-Shamin, a shrine dedicated to the god of rain. One section is decorated with granite

pillars brought by camel from Aswan in Egypt. 20 camels were used to carry the columns some 20m high. At it's height the city covered some 50 hectares and held 100,000 people.



**Temple of Bel**



The site was covered in sand until the 1950's and it is thought that one section, still to be fully excavated, may have been Queen Zenobia's palace. She was an able but ambitious ruler, only for a short time following her husband's suspicious death.



**Roman water pipes**



**Top Left - Funerary Tower  
Top Right - Triumphal Arch  
Bottom -Grand Collonnade**



**Amphi theatre**







**Qalaat bin Maan (Arab Castle)**



**Palmyra from Qalaat bin Maan**

Way on the top of a nearby hill is a 17thC fort and our bus labours to the top for a view of Palmyra at sunset - spectacular.

On the way to our hotel we stop for a while in the main street for a spot of shopping - we wander up the street, chatting with the locals (little hassling, although one shop keeper offers me the commission if I bring our group to his shop!) The

shops are small with basic, old and dusty goods. Chickens are being cooked on gas rotisseries, frozen meat hangs in glass walled freezers and a restricted range of fruit and vegetables (very poor quality, much of it mouldy) is on offer.

We thought that the Hotel Cham in Damascus was pretty impressive with a chandelier hanging the full length of the four storey entrance lobby, but the foyer in the Palmyra Hotel Cham is unbelievable - it is a 50m long colonnade of full size Roman pillars with mirrors at both ends to make the colonnade appear endless. The surrounding areas could only be described as opulent Roman. We are served an excellent dinner at the table - it is nice to be waited on, and by well trained waiters - all very pleasant.



**Hotel Lobby**

**Tuesday 22 January 2002 - Palmyra to Aleppo (Syria)**

**Day 21**



**Toilet to the left - mud underfoot**

Breakfast prior to an 8am departure, with the hotel dining room (and our room) overlooking the Roman site. Homs is three hours down the highway and we stop on the way for a look at a beehive house in the desert. It is now raining so the desert has turned to thick mud and we decline the walk through it for a herbal tea. Homs is an industrial area and we keep moving, headed for the Krac des Chevaliers, 10km on and described by many as 'the finest castle in the world'.

The first fortress to be built on this site was erected by the Emir of Homs in 1031, but it was the Crusader knights around the middle of the 12thC who expanded it to the well preserved castle/fort which still exists. Built to hold a garrison of 2000, it has an outside wall with 13 towers and

an inside wall and central buildings. A moat dug out of rock separates the two walls. Within the central buildings are many buildings including the baths, great hall, loggia, and a chapel (and dungeons with a hole way above, where the prisoners were dropped down onto the stone floor).



**View from Krac des Chevaliers on a wet cold day**

We climb up onto the top of the outer wall, where there is the potential for magnificent views right to the Mediterranean coast, but not today as it is pouring with rain. The thunder and lightning adds atmosphere to this extensive and forbidding fortress.



**Krac des Chevaliers**

Lunch is in a warm restaurant next to the castle - dips and pita, chicken and chips, fresh fruit - we try to do justice to it as it is delicious, but we are struggling to eat three big meals each day.



**Gothic vaulted cloisters**



**Castle courtyard**



**Irrigation water wheel at Hama**

Our bus heads through the pouring rain towards Aleppo. We stop for a short while at Hama where there are several large wooden water wheels, some still operating. These water wheels



were built in Roman times to raise water for irrigation into aqueducts. We arrive at Aleppo after dark (sunset is around 5.30pm, but there is no sun

today) and dinner is served in the dining room, the citadel lit up on the distant hill.

**Wednesday 23 January 2002 - Aleppo to Damascus (Syria)**

**Day 22**



**Sunrise in Aleppo - Citadel illuminated on the skyline**

Aleppo is Syria's second largest city and since Roman times has been an important trading post. It still has covered souqs, a citadel and khans or caravanserais (merchant's inns, where the camels were unloaded to rest for the night).



**Entrance to the Citadel at Aleppo**

Our first stop is the citadel, which dominates the city at the eastern end of the souqs, and is surrounded by a moat, with a bridge leading to a 12thC fortified gate. The fort is reasonably well preserved and is slowly being restored - it was one of the few buildings where we actually saw the

restorers at work. From the citadel walls we can view the whole city of Aleppo. One section which has been magnificently restored is a large wooden panelled room with a ceiling of stained glass and colourful painted patterns, most likely used for civic receptions (a large portrait of the president hangs on the wall).



**Aleppo**



**Buildings in the Citadel**



**Roof of a 12<sup>th</sup> C bath house**



was originally constructed in 1491, most recently restored in 1985. The first room is a large area with a balcony around the four sides and on each level are women and children, resting on the couches and drinking tea. A corridor leads to a tiled room with smaller rooms leading off, where women are sitting or lying under sprays of warm water. Next comes a larger circular room, hot and steamy, where women are showering and children playing and sliding across the wet and slippery tiled floor. It is interesting to see, but we do feel a little embarrassed walking through fully dressed, our shoes no doubt muddying the spotless floors.



**Entrance to the Hammam (Baths)**

We make our way back down the highway to Homs. From Homs to Damascus the desert is covered with snow which fell yesterday. Lunch is at a roadside restaurant - a tasty Syrian dish of oregano cooked on flat bread.



**Entrance bridge to the Citadel**

Next stop is the Hammam Yalbougha an-Nasry, a bath house where it is ladies only today, so the men have to wait outside while we go in. It



**We stop for a short break at the Eiffel Tower**





**Snow covered countryside**

Further through the snow to the village of Ma'alula, a village built into the rocky hillside where the people still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

(possibly the earliest, still existing church in the world), the priest tells us about the icons and paintings around us, from the 17thC and 18thC.



**Old cave homes around Ma'alula**



**Convent Sts. Sergius et Bacchus**



**Ma'alula**



**Inside St. Sergius, possibly the earliest, still existing church in the world**

Our bus slowly climbs the steep Al-Qalamoon Mountains to the monastery of St Sergius. In the church, built in the 4thC CE



**Convent of St. Takla, Ma'alula**



**Shrine of St. Takla**



A short distance down the hill to the Convent of St. Takla where some climb the steps in the cold to see the view.

We continue on to Damascus, back to the Hotel Grand Cham and dinner is served in the revolving restaurant on 17th floor of our hotel. Delicious dips, a main course of several BBQ meats - lamb cutlets, spicy sausages, beef kebabs and dessert is platters of tiny pastries filled with

different fillings such as toffee pistachios, almonds, fruits. To bed, and a wake up call comes at 4am - not ours. Soon after there is very loud shouting in Russian two doors down the hall. I wait for a while, the shouting gets louder, then I gently call 'quiet' at their door - louder shouting, then I bang on the door and shout 'QUIET' in my best schoolteacher voice. There is silence!

**Thursday 24 January 2002- Damascus (Syria) to Cairo**

**Day 23**



**Umayyad Mosque, Damascus**

This morning we enjoy a tour of Damascus city. First stop is the Umayyad Mosque, where the women in our group have to don full length robes to enter.



**Dressed for the Mosque**

It was built in 705 and designed to be the greatest ever - it certainly is large.



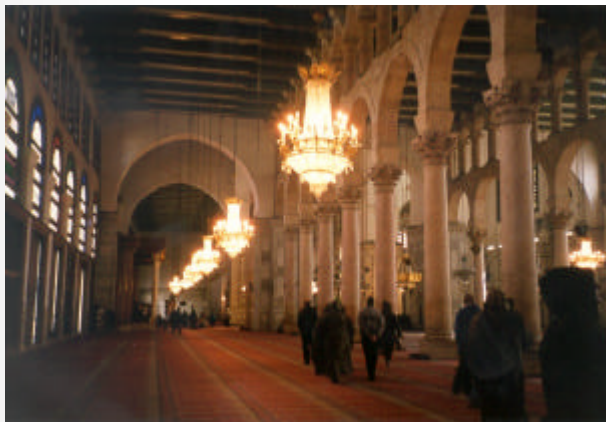




**In the grounds of the Mosque**



**Shrine of St John the Baptist's Head**



**Inside the Mosque**

Next to this is the red-domed Mausoleum of Salah ad-Din (Saladin, 1138-93), one of the great heroes of Arab history. He was born in Iraq, a general in the army and gained control of Egypt, then Syria and moved on to Mesopotamia, crushing the Crusaders in the Battle of Hittin and taking Jerusalem. This provoked Western Europe to begin the Third Crusade, bringing him up against Richard 'the Lionheart' of England and after many clashes they signed a peace agreement in 1192, giving the coast to the Crusaders and the interior to the Muslims.



**Salah ad-Din's Tomb**

The al-Azem Palace was built in 1749 for the governor of Damascus and is now a museum. We wander through the rooms, inspecting tableaux of schoolrooms, sitting rooms, weaving, musical instruments and other displays of past and present traditional Syrian life.



The covered souqs are in the Old City, covering several hectares beneath vaulted stone ceilings, some parts of which date back to the 13thC. We wander through, although the main part has been closed for the winter months for some restoration work.





**Graceful gardens of the al-Azem Palace**

The nearby spice market is an interesting mix of jewellery shops, spices and dried fruits, nuts, ornate candles and other bits and pieces. We manage to sample some fruits and nuts from a grateful stall holder who rewards me for catching a basket of sultanas as a large woman inadvertently sweeps it off the counter



**The spice market**



**St Paul's Chapel on the site where Paul was lowered in a basket to escape the Romans**



**Straight Street, Damascus, mentioned in the Bible**



**Sand artist at work**

We chat to a delightful couple from Homs while they are having the 'sand artist' (makes coloured sand in a bottle with designs eg a camel) make them a flower design sand bottle. It takes some time and her English is very good - she teaches Arabic in a secondary school - and to our surprise she later tracks me down in the market and presents me with a large red candle.

Back to hotel at 3pm, to pack and prepare for the long flight home. At 5.30 we head for Damascus Airport, via a hilltop panoramic view over Damascus on the way.

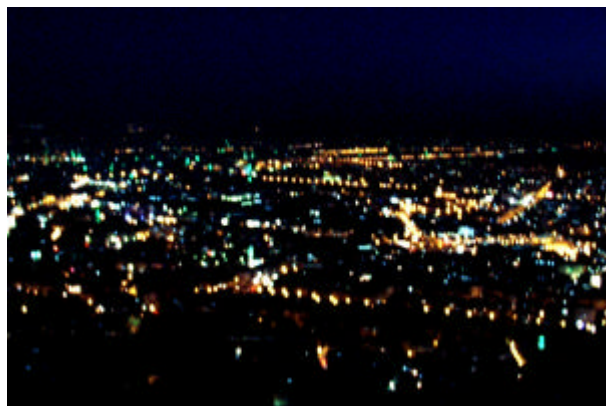




**The lights of Damascus way below us**

The 9.15 plane for one and half hours, seeing the pyramids lit up as we circled Cairo before landing. Then comes a three hour (turned out to be five hours) wait in disgusting Cairo airport. The cold and dirty waiting areas are just

passages and the toilets are filthy, with people demanding money from us, to use them.



**Our last look at Damascus**

**Friday 25 & Saturday 26 January 2002 - Cairo to Melbourne**

**Day 24 & 25**

The plane leaves at 4.30am Friday morning for a ten hour flight to Singapore. Jim repairs his footrest and hopes engines are in better condition. The meal served is appalling and must have been prepared in Egyptair's Cairo airport kitchens. Shirley says the food in the sharp end of plane is not much better. We both doze for most of time - the first time I look at the screen showing flight statistics I find that six hours have passed without my noticing so I must have 'deep dozed'. Just as well - best not to contemplate Egypt Air's plane or service.

We enjoyed coffee in Singapore Airport, courtesy of Shirley's plumber, who gave her some Singapore dollars to spend. An eight hour flight to Melbourne with good meals, no doubt from Singapore kitchens. Shirley claims she saw Shrek for the sixth time on Egyptair flights. Into Sydney at 9am Saturday morning, waved through customs, and onto transfer bus to Domestic Terminal. We board the 10am flight to Melbourne, arrive 11.15,

met by Karen and home by midday, some 30 hours since leaving Damascus.

A great trip, we saw for ourselves some of the Egyptian history we studied at school and have read about for so long and it was even better than we expected. I guess Cairo lived up to perceptions even if we did hope it might be cleaner. The smog (mainly vehicle emissions) was such that, even in the middle of some days you could not see a building 500m away. Jordan was a clean and friendly country with many of its biblical references still to be seen and Syria, whilst almost as dirty as Egypt, had so much history visible all over the country.

Occasionally the hassling and the demands for baksheesh nearly got too much for us, but that fades against the memories of seeing 3000 years of history unfold before us.

# The Middle East

## Early Civilisation & Egypt

The earliest known organised human societies appear to have been around the valley of Nile and there is evidence that a cultural grouping of people emerged in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) around 5000 BCE. 7thC BCE saw the conquest of Egypt by Assyria and the rise of the first Persian empire.

## Alexander the Great

In 336 BCE Alexander the Great assumed the Greek throne and began to conquer Asia Minor Middle East, Persia and North West India. After his death the area was carved up by his generals until the Roman legionaries conquered the whole of the Mediterranean between 188 BCE and 30 BCE. After 395CE, the conquered Middle East area was known as the Eastern Roman or Byzantine empire. The Sassanians, a dynasty based in what is now Iran, ruled the area to the east and only the nomads of the desert and South Arabia remained independent.

## Rise of Christianity

In 66CE the Jewish people revolted against Roman rule and were exiled, the Romans razing Jerusalem and rebuilding it as a Roman city. The revolt had been fomenting for many years and one of anti-Roman orators had been Jesus of Nazareth, but it was not until 331CE that the newly converted emperor Constantine of Rome declared Christianity the official religion of the empire.

## Islamic Religion

Mohammed was born around 570CE in the Arabian town of Mecca and began to preach in 613CE, after his first revelation, challenging the pagan religions. As a result he and his followers had to flee to Medina in 622CE and this 'Hejira' marks the start of the Muslim era in the Islamic calendar. Mohammed, known as the Prophet, and his followers returned to conquer Mecca, followed by a rapid spread of followers over the all Middle East. After his death his companions, the caliphs, argued over leadership, leading to the rift which still exists between the Sunni Muslims and the Shi'ite Muslims.

The Muslim capital moved to Damascus, in Syria, under the Omayyad dynasty, building many

ornate mosques, but being toppled by accusations of corruption. The new dynasty, the Abbasid, established what is regarded as the golden age of Islamic culture and society at Baghdad around 750CE. This is the era of 'The Thousand and One Nights', with institutes of arts, culture, science and of translations which enable us to understand early classical literature.

## The Crusaders & the Mamluks

By the 10thC infighting had led to the Turkish guards holding power and the Byzantine emperor and the Greek Orthodox Church were forced to turn to the Roman Catholic Pope for help.

The Pope saw advantage in assisting the eastern empire, particularly in the Holy Land, and so began the Crusades. The Crusaders defeated the Muslims (Richard the Lionheart versus Saladin), but over the next 200 years the tide turned and the Mamluks, a military dictatorship, took over Egypt, Syria, Palestine and western Arabia. They ruled for the next 300 years.

## The Ottoman Empire

By the 14thC the Ottoman empire was on the rise - the Sultans gradually absorbing the whole of the eastern Mediterranean including Egypt, into the Turkish Empire. The empire reached its peak under Suleyman the Magnificent (1469-1566). After him the Ottoman empire gradually declined and in 1498 Europe's colonial expansion began with Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, originally only as way stations on the route to India with little attempt to conquer or penetrate the interior.

In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt in France's attempt to build a Middle East empire, but the British forced them out after three years to protect their Indian interests. In 1805 Mohammed Ali, an Albanian soldier in the Ottoman army came to power as the Ottoman sultan's viceroy in Egypt. With control over the army, he grew more powerful and by 1839 he had effective control of most of the Ottoman empire. In 1869 his grandson opened the Suez Canal, but the country was deeply in debt, particularly to the British, who took over rule.

## World Wars I & II

With the outbreak of WW1 in 1914 the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany and Sultan Mohammed V declared a jihad (holy war), calling



on Muslims to rise against Britain, France and Russia. The end of the war saw Britain dividing the Ottoman empire between itself (Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq) and France (Syria and Lebanon). The Ottoman dynasty was overthrown and a secular Turkish Republic declared under president Ataturk. The religious establishment fought a similar move in Persia, so the leader had himself crowned as shah and changed the name from Persia to Iran. Only Egypt and Libya became involved in WW2, with battles fought at El Alamein and Tobruk.

## **Nasser & the Suez Canal Crisis**

In Egypt, Nasser, an Arab, rose to power and in 1956 nationalised the Suez Canal, defying Israel, Britain and France. He supported Palestine in its fight with Israel but each encounter ended in Israel gaining more land. An embargo on oil

supplies to the west by the Gulf States encouraged the US to broker a peace agreement, although one of the results was a permanent increase in oil prices leading to vast wealth going to the Gulf's sheiks. Millions of people migrated from the poorer Middle East countries to the Gulf states to attempt a better life.

## **Recent Times**

In Iran the shah fled the country, Ayatollah Khomeini came to power following an Islamic revolution, Iraq invaded Iran, agreeing to a cease fire in 1988, and in 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait but was driven out by US troops. The Lockerbie plane bomb has focused attention on Libya since then and most of the problems in the Middle East are now centred on terrorist activities between Israel and the Palestinians.

# **Israel & the Palestinian Territories**

## **Border Territories**

Egypt, Jordan and Syria all share borders with Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The first International Zionist Congress was held in Basel in 1897, the participants sharing the belief that Jews would never gain acceptance in European society and that God had given Palestine to the Jewish people - 'The Promised Land'. Hitler's rise to power in Germany sent hundreds of thousands of Jews fleeing to Palestine, causing tension with the indigenous Arabs.

In 1947 the UN voted to partition the country into Arab and Jewish states with Jerusalem a shared city and, when Britain withdrew its sovereignty over Palestine in 1948, the Jewish people declared the land as theirs, called Israel. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War broke out, with Israel victorious and the Arabs controlling only the Gaza Strip (assisted by the Egyptian army) and the West Bank, including part of Jerusalem (later annexed by Jordan).

## **The Six Day War**

Jewish people continued to expand the areas they controlled and Palestinian Arabs emigrated as refugees to other countries or lived under Israeli occupation. In 1967 Egypt, under Nasser, mobilised his army to liberate Palestine

but Israel destroyed the Egyptian air force, quickly ending the Six Day War. Israel now controlled the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank (from Jordan), and the Golan Heights (from Syria). Pressure to reclaim lost lands built up in the Arab states and in 1973 the Egyptian army advanced on Israel. The war soon ended with Israel gaining more land and Egypt and Israel eventually signing a peace agreement in 1979.

## **1993 & 1998 Peace Agreements**

During the 1970's and 80's Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel sporadically attacked each other, gaining attention but little support on the world stage and leading to a 1993 agreement (brokered by Kissinger, USA) to hand over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho to autonomous Palestinian rule.

A further USA brokered agreement in 1998 has not been implemented and the fighting continues today, with militant factions in each group, Syria's demands for the return of the Golan Heights, confrontation with the Hezbollah in Lebanon and the future of two million Palestinian refugees in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon still in dispute.

## Useful links:

<http://syriagate.com/index.htm>