

Egypt – Jordan Journal

December 2016

Our Next Overseas Trip is About to Begin
Sunday, November 27, 2016 (Day -3)

Hello Travel Fans,

On Tuesday we begin our second overseas tour of the year – three weeks in Egypt and Jordan. Again we're going with a packaged small group tour, this time hosted by the Smithsonian; just show up and they do the rest. We've come to favor small groups because we make friends and share the experience with others, and it's far more interesting than traveling alone. This group consists of 20 people, mostly couples, from the United States with a professional archaeologist as a guide who will be with us the entire time.

The attached pdf is the advert that caught our attention and caused us to sign up. We added on a 4-day extension to Jordan to see Petra. The only change we made is that we bought the land package only and arranged our flights to Cairo and back from Amman by ourselves so as to arrive two days early. The official schedule had us arriving in Cairo late Friday evening and beginning a full schedule of activities the following morning; we're arriving two days early to adjust to nine time zone changes (!), rest a bit, and see a few things in Cairo at a relaxed pace on our own. (And we saved \$1K by booking the flights ourselves!)

The flights gave us a good scare: we're booked with Lufthansa -- and Lufthansa pilots were on strike until last night! They're flying again so we should get to Cairo without having to test our travel insurance.

We fly out of SGU early Tuesday afternoon (no need to overnight in Las Vegas) with stops in Denver and Frankfurt, arriving in Cairo at dinner time on Wednesday, 22h 15min after departure. That gives us two full days to do whatever before the tour officially starts on Saturday morning. We return to the USA on December 19th.

A benefit of group travel is we'll get to know our tour director, who is Emily Teeter, a Research Associate specializing in Egyptology at the famous Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. So we'll have a real expert with us.

As you see from the attached pdf, highlights of the trip include visits to pyramids, museums, and famous temples (Karnak, Abu Simbel, etc.) but also several days cruise on the Nile and on Lake Aswan. It should be fun.

I'll write a daily journal (this is the first entry) and will attempt to send it to you nightly, but I have no illusions about internet service in Egypt. It was terrible in New Zealand and will be spotty at best in Egypt.

Even reviews of our 25-story 4-star hotel in Cairo complain about internet service. So I'll send when I can, probably often several days worth at a time, but if you don't hear from us don't assume we were necessarily captured by terrorists; more likely we're just out of range. And remember that we enjoy hearing back from our friends, but *please don't return* any photographs or documents I send – they can badly screw up our connection (and have several times in the past).

I bought a new camera with a marvelous 60:1 wide-angle / tele-photo zoom lens and the ability to shoot in low-light conditions, so I'm hoping to have some good photos to share. And I'll have my trusty Sony pocket camera. I also travel with Apple's lightest laptop so I can write properly with MSWord, edit and label photos, etc., as we go and not have daunting archiving tasks waiting for our return.

We've already booked two future trips for April and for May.

Thanks for letting us share our adventure with you. I hope you enjoy following along.

- John (& Barbara)

Tuesday – Wednesday, November 29-30, 2016

Hello Friends,

We travel for adventure – but the adventure is supposed to begin AFTER we arrive at our destination, not while trying to get there.

Lufthansa pilots ended one strike this past weekend, but then immediately called another to begin on the day of our departure! We spent all Monday morning scrambling to find alternatives – very stressful – but ended up taking the advice of our tour company to stick with our original plans and let Lufthansa and Travelocity figure a way to get us there. And we do have travel insurance. Late on Monday we received by email a revised itinerary with booking numbers – we were good to go with new flights.

When we attempted to check in at the St. George airport for our flight to Denver, the agent told us we were not booked, despite the paperwork we showed him. We and he spent an hour on our phones with Travelocity trying to get it fixed -- but ended up having to buy two fresh tickets (or return home) and we were the last to board.

We spent our entire time in Denver trying to arrange for a refund from Travelocity – with zero results. Again their agents were clueless. At least our new flight to London via British Airways (vs. Frankfurt via Lufthansa as originally planned) went off without a hitch – and as a bonus we had three seats and could spread out for a miserable overnight flight. But as we were boarding we got an email that Travelocity had cancelled all our return flights!

So we arrived at Heathrow after breakfast and checked with Lufthansa and confirmed that we are indeed booked on our return flights – unless the Lufthansa strike continues until the 19th. But we'll worry about it then. And continue pressing Travelocity for a refund when we return and have phone service again.

We're both very tired after only a few hours sleep in tiny seats that would make the passenger seat of our car seem first class. Our layover here in Heathrow is over nine hours (!) but at least we'll eventually be on our way to Cairo. We should arrive at our hotel shortly before 2 a.m. Our plans for our first day in Cairo include sleeping-in.

- John (& Barbara)

Thursday, December 1, 2016

Day 1: Depart USA

According to our official group schedule, this is "Day 1" of the tour – leaving the USA. We did that already, and for us its our first full day in Cairo. And a day to rest from 28 hours in transit.

The flight from Heathrow to Cairo was only 5 hours and uneventful, made better because we each had three seats and could spread out.

We landed at 12:30, were met and shuttled to our hotel, and went to bed at 2:30 a.m.

We're staying at the Fairmont, a 5-star hotel chosen by our tour group, so when we extended our stay it was natural to be here and we'll have our room for 5 nights. For some reason (felt sorry for our long flight?) they upgraded us to a 5-room suite: large entryway, living room, bedroom, conference room/office, kitchen, two bathrooms, and walk-in closet in addition to a regular closet. There are 3 big-screen TVs and 4 picture windows in a corner unit, all looking down 14 stories on the Nile. All is marble, glass, and polished woods with pictures and several statues in corners. We're quite overwhelmed; this is 2 or 3 stars above our normal fare and 3 times the size of what we need. Apparently Smithsonian tour groups travel in style. We also feel under-dressed, but we'll adapt (or they will).

We were up at 10:30 (could easily have slept longer) for their buffet breakfast of many familiar but some unfamiliar foods: "beef bacon", a red bean dish I really enjoyed, and fried eggplant. The coffee was too strong; I may stick with tea (or add a lot of milk and sweetener, which they do). Barbara was one of two women at breakfast without a head scarf.

The views W and N from our room are spectacular, looking across and down the Nile. We can see the Great Pyramid in the distance from our

window (the others are lined up behind it).

With a late start it's a short day and we decided to spend it at the Egyptian Museum. Its overwhelmingly huge, so we concentrated on the Tut exhibit; we'll return at least once again to see more. The Tut material is almost endless and we spent almost two hours slowly going down the line, marveling at how many treasures were crammed into one small tomb. A favorite of mine was an iron dagger very recently discovered to have been hammered from a meteorite. I didn't buy a photo permit today but in any case they don't allow photography in the Tut treasure room, but you can read about it at

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/01/dagger-king-tut-tomb-iron-meteorite-egypt-mummy>. I'll take photos when we return, probably tomorrow.

The museum is more than 100 years old and definitely looks it. There are endless objects in ancient wood cabinets with few captions and fewer in English. I'd prefer a few items with interpretation, and presumably this will happen in the new \$1 billion replacement museum that will open in next year.

It drizzled in the morning and was blowing a storm in the afternoon, and the air was yellow from dust blown over from the Sahara, so we scratched plans to walk around a bit and came straight back to our hotel a 40-min walk (or 40-min taxi ride) away. We watched the sunset from the rooftop pool area on the 25th floor.

Our only experience of Cairo so far has been from a taxi. Random observations: no women have uncovered heads; the main building material is cement, painted sand-yellow if at all; if there are traffic rules they're totally ignored and the traffic makes Los Angeles look pretty drivable; sidewalk vendors (outside the museum) are super-aggressive -- I learned the best way to "bargain" is to act completely disinterested and not even look at the merchandise while they lower the price farther and farther; restaurants have smoking and non-smoking sections; web pages open right-justified; hotels (including ours) and government buildings have high concrete blast walls facing the street.

Then time in a bar to sip an Egyptian beer (tastes like Coors) and write this while waiting for dinner time. (BTW, the internet connection here is excellent, so I can send lots of photos.)

We declined to wander into the neighborhood to find dinner, and ate the in-house. It was a 6-star experience too wonderful for words and I think Egypt's entry in the international buffet competition.

Tomorrow is another free day in Cairo, and as the weather is supposed to clear we'll walk around some – and load up on souvenirs (not).

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Our hotel, right. We're on the corner on the 14th floor overlooking the Nile.

The Great Pyramid in the distance from our hotel window, beside a concrete high-rise.

Barbara about to enter the Egyptian Museum.

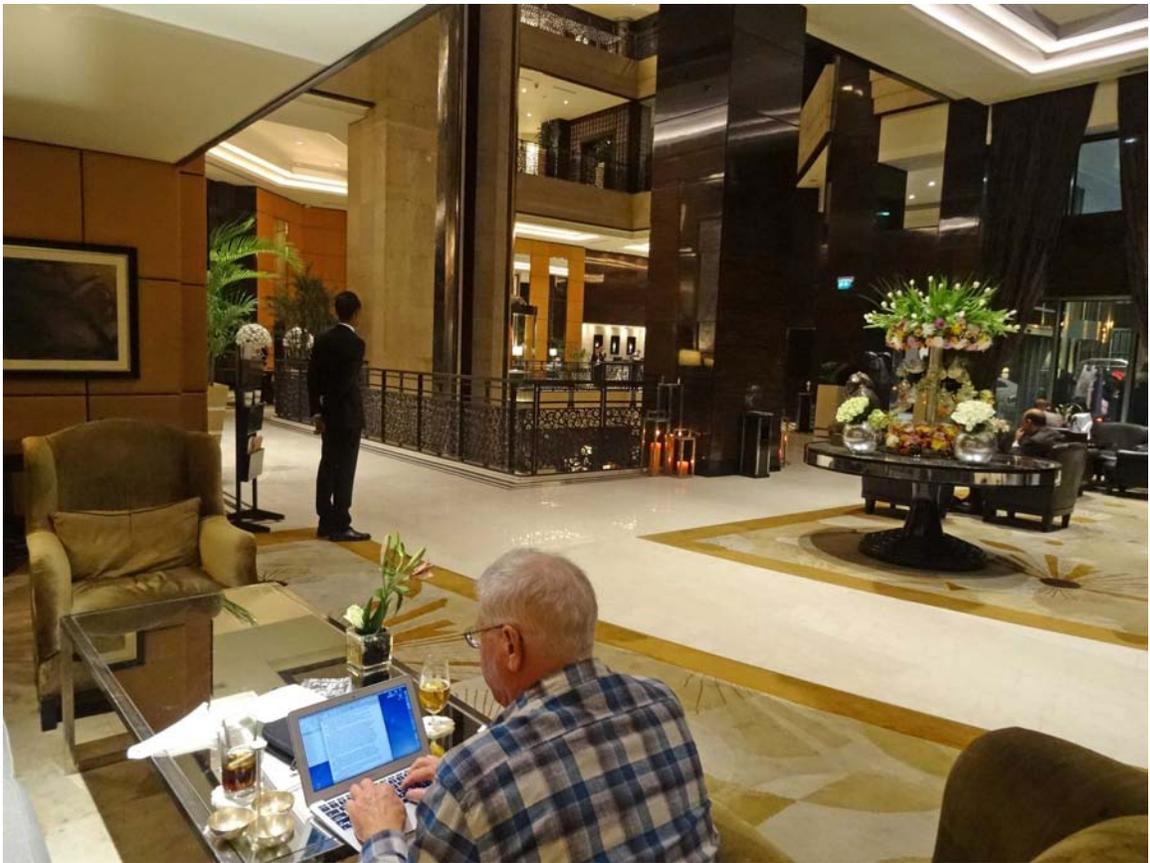
Me looking north from the rooftop pool area. Enlarge it and count the rooftop satellite dishes.

Me typing this email in the lobby. This is the kind of dive where a bottle of beer comes in an ice bucket with cocktail pistachios and Egyptian cotton beer mat and napkins. You can't make out the 5-story waterfall flanking the elevators. I don't know what this is costing and don't want to know; Mr. American Express will take care of it when we leave.

The desert table at the buffet.









Friday, December 2, 2016

DAY 2: Arrive Cairo

We arrive in the Egyptian capital and transfer directly to our hotel. As guests' arrival times may vary greatly, we have no group activities or meals planned. Accommodations: Fairmont Nile City

Hi Friends,

[I'll begin each email with the official description from our official itinerary. Actual events that occur may be different. My comments begin below the dashed line.]

According to the official tour itinerary, the group arrives today and this is their Day 2, but we think it's deceptive that Days 1 and 2 of the 15-day tour are used in getting to the starting point; any actual touring doesn't begin until Day 3. And Day 15 is the first day you're gone, flying home, not the last day of activities. So the 15-day trip is actually 12 by my counting. But whatever.

Breakfast at the hotel included lentil soup, yogurt, and figs. Plus coffee with milk and sweetener. Barbara was fascinated watching a lady in a full burka (only eye slits) eat, which is quite an operation. Her partner (the male who owns her) was dressed in sweat pants which seem to be the rage here.

The back to the Egyptian Museum for another 3 hours. This time we took photos (including a surreptitious one of Tut's meteorite dagger while the guard was playing video games on his phone), and we saw the Royal Mummies. I'd just read a book about Hatshepsut and got to see her in person. By now we think we've seen the best of the museum.

An experience in the Egyptian Museum: while browsing the exhibits I was approached by a half-dozen young men who surrounded me and took turns taking photos of each other posing with me; they were very friendly. I was baffled as to why they would want to do that but humored them. Barbara was appalled, and when she explained they were fishing for my wallet I felt as totally stupid as I actually am. I don't carry one – just a small amount of cash in an Oyster Card folder in my front pocket. But boy – are some people clueless!

We had planned to walk around the Tahrir Square area (site of the 2011 revolution) but didn't know that Friday is Muslim Sunday and all the stores were closed. TAIF, as opposed to TGIF. So we took a taxi back to the hotel (at less than 1/3 the cost of a taxi booked by the hotel). On the way back I photographed a blast wall mentioned yesterday.

Still wanting to get out for awhile we then attempted to walk along the Nile in front of the hotel, but the extreme dirt and road noise made that too unpleasant – so back to the hotel for a drink.

More random things we noticed: Museum guards (all 3 or 4 of them) carry submachine guns. Crossing a street with the walk / don't walk sign on green is suicide – drivers completely ignore it and don't even slow down. You just have to walk across the street and stare the drivers down; they seem to respect that. In order of importance drivers use the accelerator, horn, and brake, and lane markers aren't even taken as suggestions. Every person we've met has been friendly; one fellow who saw us hesitate before crossing a busy street took us by the arms and led us to safety. Christmas decorations are going up. About 1/5th of the sidewalks are broken. We rarely see even a small boat on the Nile. I've yet to see an attractive Egyptian woman.

BTW, the view from the rooftop in yesterday's photo is the same as from our room, only our room is lower. We are enjoying the views.

Dinner was at our hotel restaurant. We're sure we could eat well for 1/3 the cost elsewhere but there are no restaurants within walking distance, especially after dark. And it was excellent.

I met Hassan our tour guide and we're now officially part of the group. Activities begin with a wake-up call at 6:00 a.m. – part of the reason we arrived early.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos (four, because internet is good):

A web page as it appears, right-justified. There are 16 pounds to the dollar and it's taking me awhile to learn to quickly make mental conversions. I'm rusty on my 16-times table.

Barbara admiring the only known statue of Khufu, builder of the Great Pyramid. There's irony in that he built the largest pyramid but has the smallest statue.

A treasure with no label or any signage to call attention to it: the only surviving wood sledge used to haul blocks in building the pyramids. I learned about it from a documentary and looked for it. Note the wood display cases which seem almost as old; they're from another era of museum exhibits.

A blast wall to foil terrorist attacks. We have to go through airport-like security to enter our hotel.

The image is a screenshot of a web browser window showing a Google search for "egyptian pound to dollar". The search results page is in Arabic. At the top, the search bar contains "egyptian pound to dollar". Below the search bar, there are navigation links: "الرئيسية", "الأخبار", "صور", "فيديو", "خرائط", "المزيد", "أدوات البحث". The search results show "حوالي 4,020,000 من النتائج (عدد الثواني: 0.43)". The main result is a conversion: "1 Egyptian pound = 0.056069 U.S. dollars". Below this, there are several search results from XE and themoneyconverter.com. A Chrome notification is visible on the left side of the browser window, and a language change prompt is also present.

egyptian pound to dollar

الرئيسية الأخبار صور فيديو خرائط المزيد أدوات البحث

حوالي 4,020,000 من النتائج (عدد الثواني: 0.43)

1 Egyptian pound =
0.056069 U.S. dollars

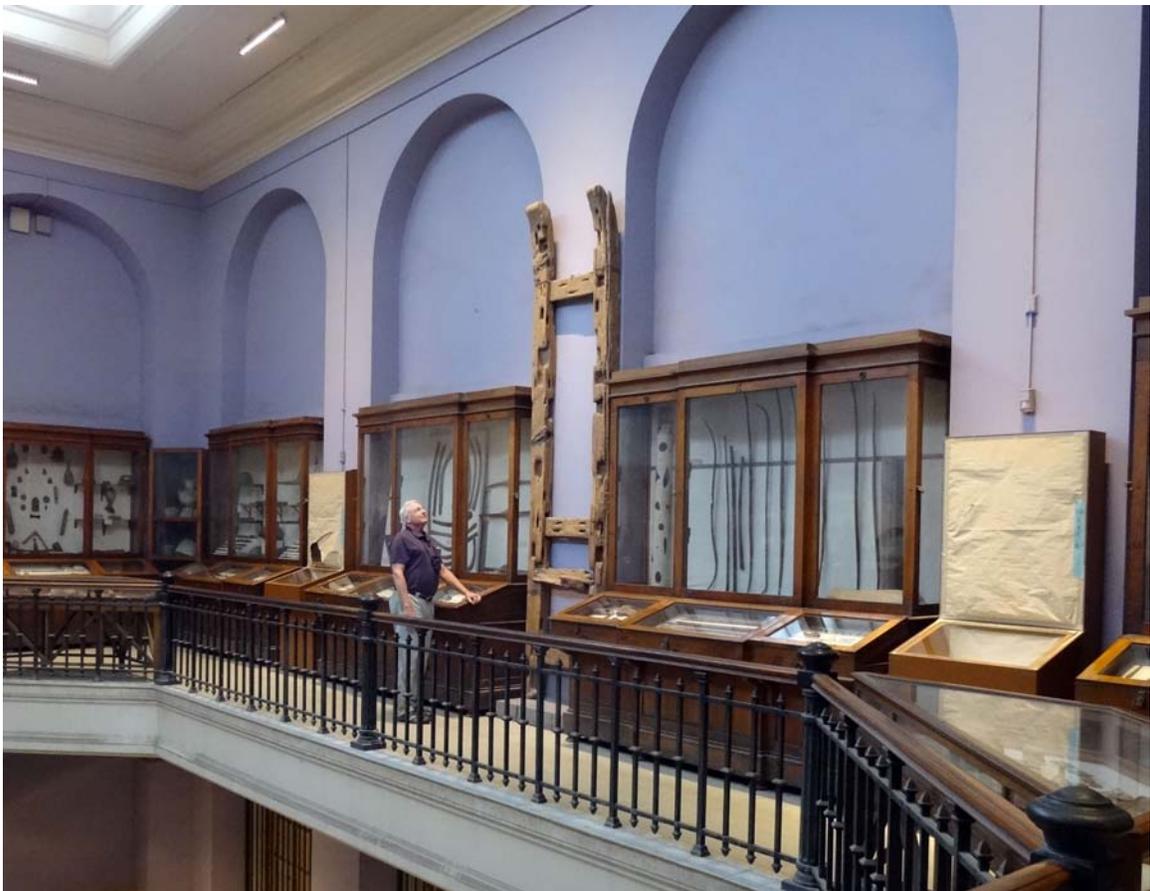
إعلام المسؤولة - مزيد من المعلومات

[XE: Convert USD/EGP. United States Dollar to Egypt Pound](#)
ترجم هذه الصفحة [www.xe.com](#) > XE Currency Converter - Live Rates
USD to EGP currency converter. Get live exchange rates for United States Dollar to Egypt Pound. Use XE's free calculator to convert foreign currencies and ...

[Convert United States Dollar to Egyptian Pound | USD to ...](#)
ترجم هذه الصفحة [themoneyconverter.com/USD/EGP.aspx](#)
Convert USD to EGP Currency: United States Dollar (USD), Country: United States of America, Region: North America, Currency: Egyptian Pound (EGP), ...
埃及镑 · A Libra Egipcia · Livre Égyptienne

تسجيل النسخ
التقني
نعم، أريد تنزيل Chrome

Change to English
الاستمرار باللغة العربية
إعدادات اللغة





Saturday, December 3, 2016

DAY 3: Cairo

We meet our fellow travelers, Smithsonian expert, and tour director and begin with a morning briefing about the journey ahead. Today numerous contemporary and ancient districts comprise Egypt's capital and most populated city, Cairo, standing on both sides of the Nile River. Our full-day tour begins at the world-renowned Egyptian Museum, which holds more than 120,000 relics and antiquities from almost every period in Egyptian history. We continue on to the Citadel of Saladin, a spectacular medieval fortress set high on a hill with extraordinary views of the city below. Built in 1176 to guard against the Crusaders, the Citadel was the home of Egyptian rulers for nearly 700 years, including famed leader Mohammed Ali, whose gilt tomb is inside. Later this afternoon, after a sandwich lunch, we return to the hotel.

Tonight we enjoy a reception at the hotel before our welcome dinner at a local restaurant. Accommodations: Fairmont Nile City

Hello Friends,

We have both a tour director (Hassan; archaeologist and former curator of the Egyptian Museum) and expert guide (Dr. Emily Teeter, archaeologist, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago) who will both be with us the entire time. Plus we have a guard who looks secret service (dark shades, suit, and all) and who carries a concealed sub-machine gun.

We were afraid we'd not have enough time at the Egyptian Museum while on our official tour so saw it twice already, but we were there for 3 full hours today. But it's good we went before because Hassan, who knows the museum inside-and-out, spent 2+ hours on specific highlight exhibits so we had less than an hour to see (again) Tut and everything else. So we would have been disappointed had we gone today only.

We learned that the little statue of Khufu from yesterday was carved 900 years after his reign (I thought it was contemporary); statues we admired greatly yesterday were of Khufu's brother and his wife; I finally found the breast plate with the scarab made of Libyan Desert Glass that I show in my meteorite talks (and now have my own photo of it, taken while the guard was telling people elsewhere to put away their cameras); I had missed a rare statue of Hatshepsut; the sledge dates from the New Kingdom; and other things.

The main thing we learned as we were both swarmed by kids who wanted to take our photos, is that there have been few tourists since the revolution 5 years ago and these are kids from the provinces who may not have been to big-city Cairo before -- and they've never seen a tourist, so we were as interesting as anything else. Our guide constantly shooed them away. Even groups of very young girls (age 8?) would surround us and take our pictures, and older kids would show us that we were going to be posted on their Facebook pages. The older kids got to practice a few words of English and I would shake their hands and slowly say "it is a pleasure to meet you" or the equivalent. It was fun watching Barbara slowly making her way toward a door surrounded by a flock of at least a dozen young girls half her height following and photographing her (she said "I feel like a Kardashian".) I think we might not get the same reception in Germany next year. It was fun -- I don't think I've ever been close face-to-face with so many smiling kids delighted to see me.

Hassan is a great guide and we're learning a lot. It really helps that, in contrast to our recent Crete trip, we use little audio devices we wear around our necks with earplugs; he talks normally and we hear him clearly despite the ambient noise. His English is excellent (no super-thick accent) and his speech informal and colloquial. He especially appreciated my compliment when I told him I used to train tour guides.

Our second stop was a fortress built by Saladin nearly a thousand years ago to repel the Crusaders and within it a mosque built by Mohammed Ali, the founder of modern Egypt from just over 200 years ago. This is the first mosque we've ever been in (it's actually a historical tourist site) and the way the architects supported the huge dome on four pillars is amazing.

I left my new big camera on the bus and let my little pocket Sony camera serve me. It's so much easier to carry although I could have gotten better photos inside the mosque with its larger lens.

It was sunny but only reached 70 so the locals were bundled up in at least one sweater; they're not used to the chill. But slightly warmer weather is ahead with no rain.

After a late afternoon rest at the hotel (time to sort our photos) we had a group dinner on a floating Lebanese restaurant on the Nile – a good end to a great day.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Typical Cairo street scene. This is the modern area; we'll be in the old historic district tomorrow.

Typical modern apartments. This takes up much of the city of 17-22 million, depending on how you count.

These kids mobbed Barbara to take her photo, but when they noticed me taking a photo of them taking photos of her they all turned and posed.





Sunday, December 4, 2016

DAY 4: Cairo

This morning we begin with a tour highlight as we reach the Giza Plateau and the Pyramids of Egypt, including the Great Pyramid (or Pyramid of Cheops), which ranks among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. For years, scientists have debated about how these massive tombs were built, and to a great degree, the mystery remains unsolved today. The largest structure is the great Pyramid of Cheops, built around 2600 BCE. In front of the Pyramids stands the serene Sphinx, carved almost entirely of one piece of limestone and submerged by desert sands for thousands of years.

After lunch at a local restaurant we encounter Old Cairo - so named because the ancient Roman fort named Babylon stood here - the city's oldest section that is a maze of medieval streets, Islamic mosques, minarets, and domes. We begin at 5th-century St. Sergius, the oldest church in the area. Inside, 12 columns representing the 12 Apostles separate the nave from the aisles. We also visit the restored Ben Ezra Synagogue, Egypt's oldest, which resembles the 4th-century Coptic church it once was. Sadly, Egypt's Jewish community is fast disappearing and there are seldom enough worshippers here to hold a service.

Another stop today is el-Mauallaqa, the "hanging church" built over the bastions of a Roman gate. Believed to date from the 7th century, the church features a ceiling that resembles an ark, and a carved marble pulpit considered the finest in Egypt.

After a long day of outdoor exploration we return to our hotel late afternoon. Dinner tonight is on your own. Accommodations: Fairmont Nile City

Hello friends,

Well - this was a great day and one of the highlights of the year. We saw the pyramids and the Sphinx, and it's hard to top that. The only negative (other than I would have spent more time) is that fog was thick and white and made it very hard to photograph the monuments against a bright sky.

The Great Pyramid is as impressive as you would expect, and I'm not going to spend words recording my amazement. But it is indeed amazing, as is the second pyramid too (less so the third, but only in comparison with the other two). Barbara climbed up to the entrance but we didn't have time to go in. We had been warned about the aggressive vendors but were easily able to shoo them off (we were taught Arabic for "scram".)

Next to the “Solar Boat” which also is impressive in its dimensions and age. We’re told we’ll never see an older actual boat.

And the Sphinx, where we definitely didn’t spend enough time. But the fog began to lift and we could get in a few decent snaps. I carried my new camera and ‘broke it in’.

And finally to a 7th century Coptic church and synagogue from the same area. By this time we were all rather tired.

The evening ended with a lecture on ancient Egyptian religion by our U of C lecturer followed by a light dinner in a cafe downstairs.

So that’s a short matter-of-fact account of the day.

One of our group – I call him Doofus (and you can tell who he is because he wears his baseball cap backwards – a sure sign) has been late 4 times now, once 20 minutes late at a 30 minute stop. Our tour director has lost his patience, and the rest of us too. He was advised to carry enough taxi money to get himself back to the hotel when he gets left behind. It would be good riddance. The rest of the group seems more-or-less OK but we’ll not be bonding with anyone. Our tour director is fantastic.

One thing we can’t help noticing: there’s more garbage everywhere than you can imagine – perhaps enough in all if you gathered it together to make another pyramid. Some piles of garbage have dogs rooting thru them; others are on fire and smoldering. Its an incredibly dirty city.

Other things we notice: vendors and stores are on a small scale, sometimes just a pile of oranges on a cart. Side streets are very narrow, usually too narrow for a car. We occasionally see a horse cart or guy riding a burro. Little enclosed three-wheel motorcycles are common, and some are taxis. There is a huge number of unfinished buildings.

We’re learning a bit about the 2011 revolution, Mubarak, Morsi, and current Egyptian politics. They’ve had an interesting time recently and aren’t out of it yet. What happened to Egypt when Morsi was in power is a warning for what would happen to the US if someone like Pence got in power – scary! Our tour director is culturally sensitive and calls them “idiots” to hide his true feelings.

The Egyptian pound drops daily and I’m now using a 20:1 conversion factor – much easier on my brain.

Early tomorrow (our wake-up call is at 4) we fly south to Luxor and board our boat for a several-days Nile cruise. We won’t have phone or internet until Friday, we’re told, so expect a longer email then.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:



Barbara looking at the Great Pyramid beyond the Middle Pyramid in the fog.

Standing on the base of the GP.

Looking up the north wall; note Barbara in blue.

The Sphinx (what else?).

Barbara inspecting a camel. She declined to ride off across the sand.

A three-wheel motorcycle. This one is in good shape; most of them are beat up.









Monday, December 5, 2016

DAY 5: Cairo / Aswan / Embark Lake Nasser Cruise

It's a very early morning as we set off for a 7:00 flight to Aswan, where we visit the Aswan High Dam. Considered a miracle of engineering when completed in 1965 after some 18 years of work, the dam was built to harness the mighty Nile. Numbers tell part of the story: it stands 11,811 feet long, 364 feet tall, and at its base is 3,215 feet thick. For some context, 18 times more material was used to construct the Aswan High Dam than to construct the Great Pyramid at Giza. But in addition to doubling Egypt's electrical supply, the dam's construction - and subsequent creation of Lake Nasser, one of the world's largest manmade lakes - also caused the relocation of up to 90,000 Nubians from their homeland and the flooding of a number of irreplaceable monuments in the lowlands, including legendary Abu Simbel. So the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, in conjunction with UNESCO, embarked on a rescue project beyond the scope of anything ever before attempted: they dismantled several ancient sites, stone by heavy stone, and rebuilt them on higher ground. Throughout our tour of this region, we'll see several monuments and temples which have been moved from their original location and now sit higher up, away from Lake Nasser's edge.

After our tour of the dam, we visit the Nubia Museum, an acclaimed showcase of Nubian art and architecture. Completed in 1997, the museum received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2001 and is renowned as a center of African and Middle Eastern archaeology and scholarship. Mid-day, we embark our river ship for our four-night Lake Nasser cruise. After lunch onboard, this afternoon we visit the Temples of Philae, a complex of Ancient Egyptian temple ruins dating from the fourth century BCE. Originally located further upstream, the temples (which contain the purported burial place of the god Osiris) were moved to their current location on Agilkia Island in order to preserve them from the rising waters. Tonight we dine and overnight aboard our Lake Nasser ship docked in Aswan.

Hello Friends,

Our wake-up call was at 4 – no one’s best hour – with a box breakfast for the bus to the airport. The flight to Aswan was uneventful as our guide shepherded us through all the airport obstacles. No one could finish breakfast, which was mostly white bread and an apple, but we were told that the bus driver would go through what we left and see that it got used, even if only to feed animals – “no food is wasted in Egypt.”

To backtrack slightly, we were told that a police car had followed our bus everywhere around Cairo, but we hadn’t noticed it behind us. But we definitely noticed the police escort with flashing lights that proceeded us through pre-dawn Cairo to the airport. Between the kids swarming to be photographed with us, an armed guard aboard our bus, and a police escort with flashing lights, we feel kind of special. Like celebrities almost.

In Aswan it was onto a bus to go, again with a police escort, to a small boat to take us to a small island to tour the Greco-Roman Temples of Philae. Hassan did a wonderful job of explaining the history of not only these buildings but also the religious conflicts of the time, but his lecture went on longer than I can stand still. He has a lot of enthusiasm and knowledge and makes things understandable, and is a great guide.

Then to our boat – actually a floating hotel – M/S Prince Abbas, to be served lunch and take the rest of the day off. The boat has the shape of a brick with 3-1/2 floors of cabins and 1-1/2 decks of lounging areas with internal bars and lounges. It’s in the low 80s so we’ll all enjoy being on a top deck catching a breeze and enjoying doing very little. Barbara and I bought a thick photo book of Egypt and we’ll go through it. And maybe have a beer or two – the idea of just relaxing sounds pretty good right now. And catching up on our sleep. Our cabin is as roomy as a typical good hotel room except for the tiny RV-size bathroom, but we don’t expect to be inside much.

We didn't visit the museum. No explanation was given, but everyone only wanted to get to the boat and put their feet up or take a nap.

So we're tied up to the pier for the night, not going anywhere. The view is of an industrial dock surrounded by crumbling concrete structures, so no pretty sunset tonight. At the moment I'm in the shade on an upper deck about to sort through the 200+ photos of the pyramids we took yesterday. Having been up since 4, I'd prefer a coffee to a beer.

We've not seen much of Nubia, but the little we have is extremely harsh. This is what it would be like if people tried to build a civilization in Death Valley. We're told it regularly reaches the 120s and it's not rare to hit 130 in the summer, and St. George is a lush forest in comparison – and we haven't been out of the town of Aswan to the real desert. And the people are different; these are Nubians, and they're jet black.

Tomorrow we “set sail,” so to speak, and begin to putt-putt across the pond.

- John (& Barbara)

Photo:

Temples of Philae, used from ca. 300 BC – 300 AD, vandalized by Christians in the following century (but not destroyed), and raised out of Lake Nasser and reassembled on higher ground in the '70s.



Tuesday, December 6, 2016

DAY 6: Lake Nasser Cruising - Kalabsha Temples / Wadi el-Seboua

We are in the heart of ancient Nubia, the country that bordered southern Egypt during antiquity and was Egypt's gateway to Africa. Though heavily influenced and often ruled by Egypt, Nubia had a culture and history distinct from that of its more powerful neighbor. It had its own kingdoms, some of which were cooperative with Egypt's, while others were competitive. While Nubia has long been incorporated as a part of Egypt, some Nubians have struggled to maintain their culture and traditions, many of which is now dying out because of assimilation and changing times. This morning we set out to tour New Kalabsha, site of Kalabsha Temple, the largest freestanding Nubian temple of them all, which was moved and reconstructed here from Old Kalabsha when Lake Nasser's rising waters threatened the site. This sandstone temple dedicated to Mandulis, the Nubian god of religion, preserves Egyptian and Greek history; both languages are carved into the temple walls. After exploring the site, we return to our ship for lunch. We'll then sail to Wadi el-Seboua where we'll dock for the evening. Accommodations: M/S Prince Abbas

Hi Friends,

Wake-up this morning was at a more civilized 7 a.m. – giving everyone time to catch up on sleep, our greatest priority – when we cast off at breakfast and motored perhaps a whole mile to the Kalabsha Temples. This is a complex of several temples that were rescued from various locations and reassembled adjacent to each other on one island. The main temple was built by Caesar Augustus in 30 BC, so it would be too new to bother about except that (a) it's the second largest that was rescued, and (b) it's a Roman temple built in the old style with figures in the ancient style, hieroglyphs and all. Another temple with wonderful painted figures dates from Ramses II. Again Hassan did a wonderful job of interpreting both the architecture and the hieroglyphs in 2 hours, so the trip is quite educational as well as touristy.

Doofus leaned against some 2,000-year-old painted carved reliefs. I heard about it later; had I seen it myself I would have taken him to task.

Apparently we'll have our personal guard with us whenever we're ashore, and he carries what looks like an uzzi.

Upon returning we motored deeper into darkest Nubia and the shore receded into the distance and finally disappeared. This is a big lake! Hassan gave an interesting lecture on the several Egyptian languages. We should get college credit for the trip.

Free time after lunch! At one point there was nothing to see but water in all directions; later we were close enough to one shore to see

how arid the baked rocks and sand are. There's no internet here so I've had plenty of time to read all the references on Nubia I preloaded onto my laptop, and that gives time to begin the thick book on Egyptian history and monuments we bought in Cairo. (Without the internet the days are two hours longer.)

I haven't had much need to use my new strap-over-the-shoulder camera. Our little pocket Sony is so much more convenient to carry and does a fine job.

A wind came up in the afternoon and drove everyone indoors. And I had planned to work on my tan.

The evening lecture by Teeter was about ancient Nubia and the salvage archaeology carried out when the Aswan dam was being built in the '60s. That's an entire amazing story.

Dinner conversation is good – this is a smart group of mostly-retired professionals.

I went up to the upper deck, which is unlit, to look at the stars. The sky would be super dark if it weren't for the bright 1st-quarter moon. I'm not tempted to stay up until midnight to see it fully dark.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Our ship – a floating hotel without a lot of nautical charm and a complete contrast to the 5-masted sailing ship we were on in May.

These painted wall reliefs are not ancient, although they are old. They were commissioned by Caesar Augustus but were done in the classic style that people were used to. BTW, you're probably not supposed to lean against them.

These petroglyphs are definitely old – perhaps 10,000 years or so – and they portray wildlife when the area was wetter and cooler. When the Sahara dried out roughly 7,000 years ago (the previous global warming!) people moved out of the desert to the Nile valley.

A view of the passing landscape from our ship. The sky is light because of both dust and humidity, I believe.





Wednesday, December 7, 2016

Day 7: Lake Nasser Cruising- Wadi el-Seboua / Amada

We spend this morning in Wadi el-Seboua exploring the reconstructed Dakka temple, dedicated to Thoth, the god of wisdom and justice. We also visit the Temple of Meharakka, dedicated to Serapis, a god created to unite the Greek and Egyptian religions. These temples were significant elements of the Aswan High Dam relocation project; both were preserved and moved to their current locations during the 1960s. We then set sail on Lake Nasser and enjoy lunch on board as we cruise to Amada. Here, we tour the 18th dynasty Temple of Amada, built during the reign of Tuthmosis III and the oldest surviving Lake Nasser temple. We enjoy dinner on board and overnight in Amada. Accommodations: M/S Prince Abbas

Hello Friends,

Our Nubian adventure continues. Actually it's starting to become redundant as most of the temples are the same age and similar design and construction. I'd rather we had used some of this time at the pyramids (although we will return there, but not to Giza, to see other, older pyramids). This morning's two temples were built by Ramses II around 1300 BC and the Ptolemies around 300 BC, and we continue to learn quite a bit of history and language (eg., the hieroglyph for king is a house "per" with another glyph for great "a" equals "great house" [sort of like White House] but the Greeks pronounced the "p" as an "f" and "per-a" became "fer-a").

Our boat seats 120 but there is just us and a largely Japanese group for about 35 total. There's plenty of room. The high temp was in the low 80s so it's plenty warm and I'm in shorts, but we're told that only two weeks ago it was unbearably hot. The tourist season ends next week for two weeks (Christmas - New Year) and resumes January thru March.

I've asked both our expert guides about the construction of the Great Pyramid, and both give stock answers that I don't find convincing. The French architect Jean-Pierre Houdin came up with detailed alternative plans nearly 20 years ago that I find somewhat convincing, but he's an outsider so Egyptologists completely ignore him. That's even though no Egyptologist is an architect or engineer (I believe) and just waves his hands at the problem. I'm quite sure that at least some of what our two guides tell me is wrong, and Hassan is not very receptive to hearing what I have to say (I'm not an Egyptologist either!). It is definitely interesting to speculate on how progress is made in the different disciplines, and the process is quite different in the soft sciences (the humanities) vs. the hard (physics, astronomy).

In the afternoon we saw another temple, this one by Thutmosis III (he's very famous) around 1400 BC with intact detailed carvings with

paint. The temple was moved intact (not disassembled and then reassembled) to higher ground when Lake Nasser flooded the area. All these temples are impressive and our guide Hassan is great, but I'm getting ready for a day off to just sit on an upper deck and watch the scenery go by.

This evening I gave a half-hour impromptu star talk with my laser pointer (I never leave home without it) to a few people including our U. of Chicago Egyptologist. My knowledge of Egyptian sky lore is very limited but I do know the sky. Unfortunately bright moonlight ruined it; this remote spot in Nubia without moonlight would be one of the darkest places on earth.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

We're not sure what this guy with a donkey cart was doing, but we see them now and then (even in Cairo) so he was worth a snap.

Typical view of the desert from a temple. Harsh, no?

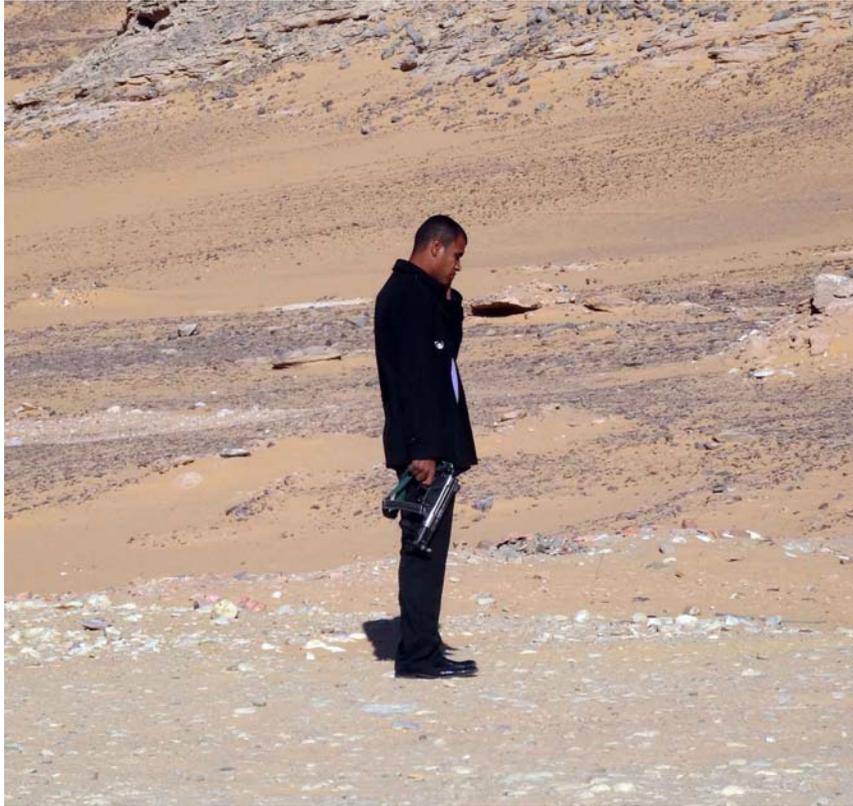
Barbara bought a souvenir!!!! It was all of \$8 US, and the gift shop on the boat would take US dollars but not Egyptian pounds (and didn't want to give change in dollars). Their money isn't worth much and is worth less each day. Now Barbara's set for Halloween forever.

One of our security guys keeping careful watch over the monuments. He's there to protect them, not us.

Hassan interpreting a Rameses II wall mural from around 1250 BC







Thursday, December 8, 2016

DAY 8: Lake Nasser Cruising – Amadal Kasr Ibrim / Abu Simbel

During breakfast onboard this morning, we sail to the settlement of Kasr Ibrim, the last vestige of Nubian culture still in its original location. After a brief visit during which we learn about this ancient settlement from our ship (as it's prohibited to go ashore here), we enjoy lunch on board, then cruise to Abu Simbel. Here, we see the results of some of the most audacious rescue efforts performed by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities. One of the most breathtaking locations in all of Egypt, Abu Simbel comprises a massive complex of temples guarded by four colossal statues of Ramses II, each more than 60 feet high. Inside, the walls are covered with incredibly well-preserved murals depicting scenes of Queen Nefertari and her court, and of King Ramses in battle. This is truly an astonishing place; one you'll be glad was preserved for posterity. After visiting Abu Simbel, we have an afternoon at leisure aboard our ship. As the desert sun goes down, we return to Abu Simbel and experience one of the highlights of our trip: a dramatic sound-and-light show amid the massive statuary of Abu Simbel. We enjoy dinner on board our river ship where we spend the evening. Accommodations: M/S Prince Abbas

Hello Friends,

I wondered how dark it really is out here in the Nubian desert, so stepped out up before dawn to find out. Yes – dark – but not quite as dark as the North Rim of the Grand Canyon which is 8,000 feet higher. I enjoyed viewing the morning sky which extends to the southern constellation Centaurus.

We “sailed” south all morning, passing ruins and gazing at the ultra-barren scenery. I’ve had additional conversations with our Egyptologist and have additional thoughts on how people in a discipline accept (or don’t) new ideas. I’m an outsider so perhaps shouldn’t be critical, but there’s a pattern and I’m seeing it yet again. She did accept copies of some videos I brought on a flash drive, so we’ll see what she thinks after she’s familiar with the new ideas in them on how the pyramids were constructed.

Before lunch Hassan gave us a non-scheduled talk on Islam – mostly the history. Interesting, but there’s the issue of the difference between the theoretical religion as explained to us (which sounds pretty good) and the reality of people who practice it (often less good).

We spent the afternoon at famous Abu Simbel, familiar from many photos and from the story of its rescue from the rising waters of the Nile as Lake Nasser filled. We slowly toured the inside rooms which extend back a surprising distance and that are on a grand scale like the façade, with many interesting deep carvings of offerings to gods and battle

scenes, some even with paint from 1250 BC. I carried my big camera to get photos inside in the dim light, but was almost thwarted by the many “no inside photos” signs. The one guard couldn’t be everywhere and I’m pleased with how well my few quick snaps turned out, so the new camera is doing what I’d hoped it would.

The exit from the temples is through the gift shop, which is ¼ mile long, but we’re getting good at running the gauntlet. Don’t pause; don’t look at anything; especially don’t make eye contact; just keep your head down and pointed straight ahead. A minor factor is we don’t know how many of the items were made in China. And Barbara already has her souvenir.

We were back for the sound-and-light show under the stars. I’ve never wanted to attend a sound-and-light show and would have skipped this except it was included and paid for, but it was as hokey as I’d expected so now I know to never attend another. It wasn’t that the narration was in Japanese (they’re the predominant visitors here) or that the sound quality was terrible; the story was over-the-top awful and the graphics not much better. I wondered how it compared with the show Ramses II would have put on if he’d had the technology. (Actually his incised graphics inside are over-the-top, so maybe he would have approved.)

Again it was about 80° at 22° latitude, so we’re enjoying warm sunny weather. Tomorrow we start back north – by bus.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

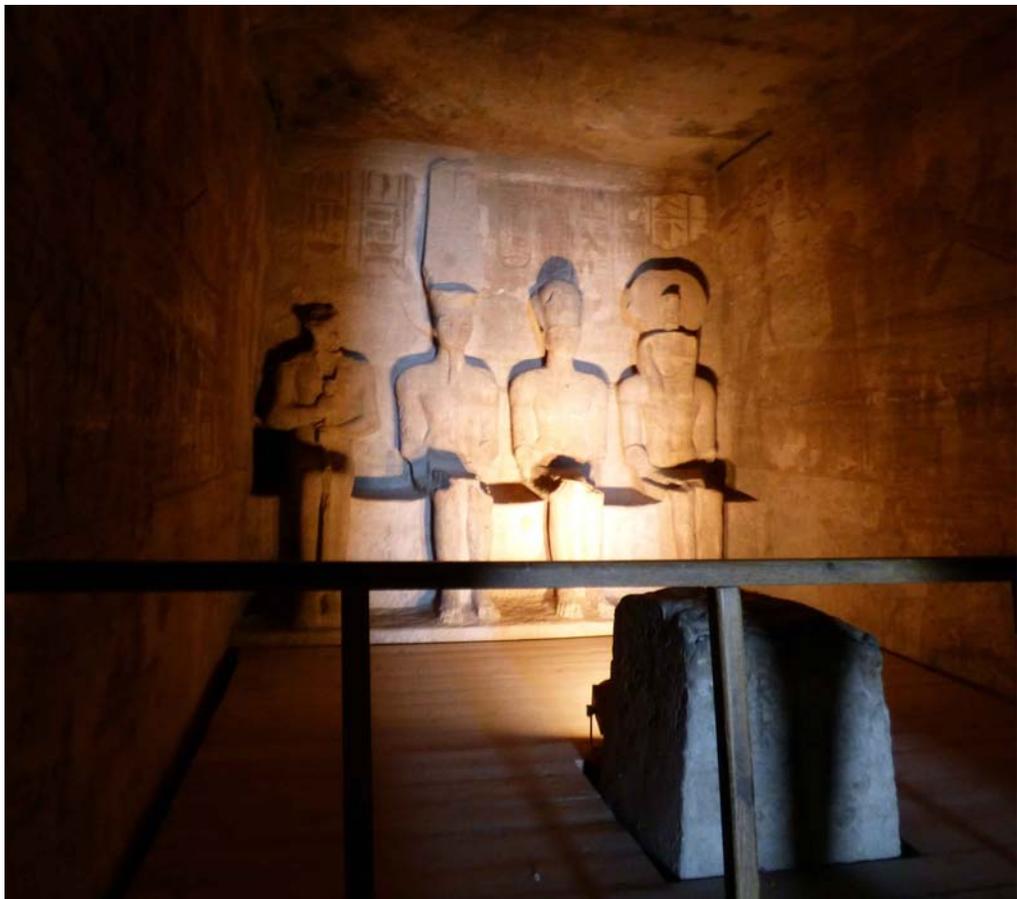
Abu Simbel with two handsome tourists posing in front. Note how very few other tourists are here, which surprised us, but this is way off the beaten path; Nubia isn’t on the way to much.

The Queen’s temple on the adjacent cliff. Both were carved out of the sandstone hillside with temples inside that go back deep.

A scene inside looking back toward the entrance. Note the lack of anyone else including a guard.

The holy of holies, lit on two days of the year when the sun shines down the long corridor and illuminates Ramses (second from left) and another god (to his left).





Friday, December 9, 2016

DAY 9: Disembark / Abu Simbel / Aswan / Embark Nile Cruise Ship

This morning you may want to rise early to experience the sunrise over the temples at Abu Simbel. After breakfast, we disembark our ship and board a motor-coach for the 3~-hour ride across a corner of the Sahara to Aswan. Here we embark the second ship of our tour, our home for the three-night Nile cruise, and enjoy lunch together onboard. This afternoon, we board small feluccas, replicas of ancient Nile sailboats, for a relaxing afternoon sail.

We admire the river scenery as we make our way slowly down the Nile, passing close by the Botanical Gardens on Kitchener's Island, home of the British hero who helped tame the Sudan; Elephantine Island, with its huge granite rocks; and the tomb of the Aga Khan. Then we dine and overnight aboard our Nile ship in Aswan. Accommodations: M/S Royal Lily

Hello Friends,

Abu Simbel is our turn-around point, so after an early breakfast it was aboard a bus to slowly (50 mph) head north back to Aswan (where we boarded our southbound boat on Lake Nasser) to transfer to another boat for our 3-day cruise north down the Nile, which begins tomorrow.

The Sahara (locally "The Western Desert") is what you'd expect: endless sand broken by eroding rock piles and no vegetation. Often its flat like an infinite lakebed of sand. It's impossible to visualize how far it extends, which is to the Atlantic a continent away, and it certainly looks endless. There was a military checkpoint every so often. Most of the traffic on the two-lane highway was trucks but usually no other vehicle was in sight. There were a few tiny villages with a mosque and some vegetation, so they must have a well. Basically it was a time to nap. This is our first actual bus trip and I was thinking back on our day-after-day on a small bus (van) in New Zealand last year, so in comparison this one trip isn't bad at all.

We're learning about recent Egyptian history as well as ancient – Nasser (nostalgia), Sadat and Mubarak (corruption), Morsi (fanaticism), Sisi (order) and even the exiled royal family (nostalgia for a golden age that didn't really exist). All very interesting. And Zahi Hawass, who surrounded himself with a cadre of colleagues who established archaeological fiefdoms and kept down the new generation – who have since come into their own and deposed him.

Eventually we arrived back in Aswan.

Added to the schedule was a look at the "unfinished obelisk," the largest ever had it not cracked while being chiseled out of solid granite. Unbelievable that they could imagine cutting it out and then floating it

down the Nile – and then standing it on end. The guard guided me out by hand over the uneven surface – and got his dollar tip. (It had to be one of us; might as well be me. I keep a few dollars handy for the occasion.)

Then to check in on the ship that will take us north to Luxor, and it is a luxurious ship (we learned that the words “luxury” and “luxurious” come from Luxor) and a buffet lunch. Wifi is extra but we’re glad to have it. The first thing we checked is to confirm that our return flights are in order, and they seem to be – but that was not guaranteed. Our cabin again is plenty big and with a picture window that looks out onto the Nile. And again it’s high 70s – shorts weather.

I bought my own galabeya in the gift shop, so now both of us are set for future Halloweens. I told Barbara that we should wear ours to dinner on the last night.

One thing I didn’t bring that I miss is a wristwatch. I’ve not worn one since my first iPhone years ago, which is always in my pocket, but an iPhone doesn’t do much here so we brought only Barbara’s, for emergencies. But I often need to know the time to attend a lecture, board the bus, etc. My wristwatch is somewhere in a drawer at home and for the next trip I’ll put a new battery in it and see if it still works.

After lunch we cruised the Nile in a felucca – kind of fun with good views of the buildings along the water – and we had a small police boat escort (which seemed a little much). Then to the new Nubian Museum, a modern building that is in complete contrast to the ancient Egyptian Museum in Cairo. We’re not especially into Nubian culture but, of course, they have interesting pieces on display. When we left at 6 everyone was glad to have no more activities planned for the day.

Dinner was 5-stars. I really enjoyed the fish that melted in my mouth.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos: (I’m paying big-time for unlimited wifi so will send plenty of photos)

The road across the Sahara -- not the place for a break-down.

Apartment building in Aswan. It’s not a clean town (none are).

Barbara – always in blue – giving scale to the unfinished obelisk.

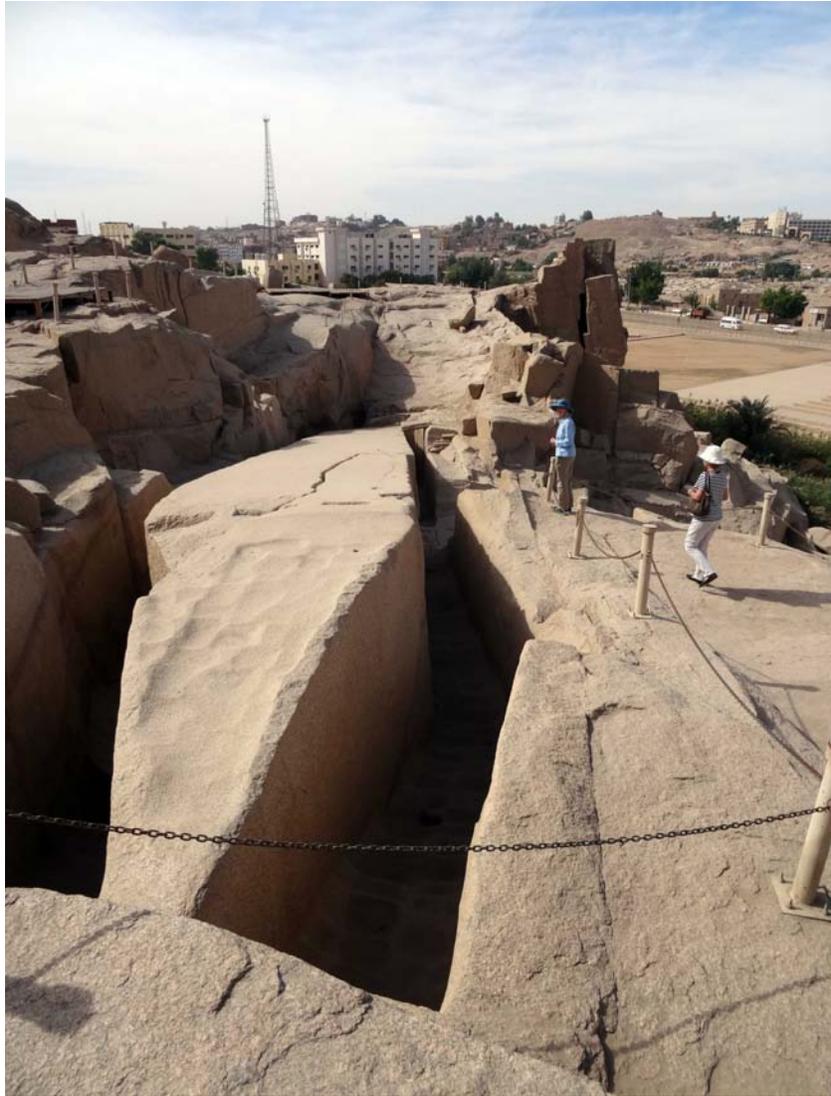
Me led by the hand by a well-armed guard (a) so as to not stumble, and (b) to generate a tip. Barbara tried to take my hand from him but he shooed here away. You know what’s happening so you go along with it and have a dollar handy.

Our felucca. Very gentle and pleasant to sail on.

Our captain. Elsewhere this would be a costume for effect; here it's what men wear.

Fishermen with nets.









Saturday, December 10, 2016

DAY 10: Nile Cruising – Aswan / Kom Ombo / Edfu This morning we sail to the site of the ancient trading town at Kom Ombo, which sat on the great caravan route from Nubia. Here we see outstanding Nile views from an unusual double temple, dedicated both to the crocodile god Sobek and to the falcon god Haroeris (Horus the Elder). Then we return to the ship for lunch, and later afternoon tea as we sail to Edfu. On board tonight you're invited to a party wearing traditional Egyptian *galabeya* as we overnight dockside in Edfu. Dinner is on our ship tonight. Accommodations: MIS Royal Lily

Hello Friends,

At dawn we motored on our floating hotel (which again has the shape of a brick) north to Kom Ombo, a Ptolemaic temple dedicated to crocodiles. Our expert guide Hassan continues with a full course in Egyptology but I'm rapidly losing interest; it's now just one more temple. Our guide yelled at Doofus for climbing a wall, but he's impervious to learning; 20 minutes later the armed guards yelled at him for climbing a different wall. So it goes. There's no cure for doofus-ism.

The gauntlet of vendors upon exiting the site has also become more bothersome, perhaps because they're more desperate as the tourist season comes to a holiday pause or because the novelty of pushing them away has worn off. But we could have purchased some very nice things (embroidered T-shirts for \$2, etc.) for cheap – far below thrift store prices. We almost hate to pass them up but if we paused or made eye contact we'd be mobbed.

Apparently there's a famous Chinese model (famous to the Chinese, not to me) on board our ship and who was at the temple when we were, and a cadre of photographers was shooting her rather than the temple, or actually her against the temple. They're obnoxious and the next one to step directly in front of me when I'm trying to take a picture is going to get smacked with my hat. And they're unnecessarily loud. I understand that the "ugly Chinese" has replaced the "ugly American".

After lunch another temple, also Ptolemaic (300 BC – 300 AD), which seems too recent to bother about, in Edfu. I would have skipped it except (a) the boat was docked so there wasn't that much else to do, (b) we'd be sailing and I'd already had a few hours to watch the scenery go by, and (c) this is the best-preserved temple of its age. I've been using a trekking pole in the temples, far more for balance while standing than for walking; standing still for 40 minutes makes me very tired and I avoid doing that, except here while listening to Hassan. Anyway – the temple was amazing. I wasn't too interested in the interpretation of the hieroglyphs which is religious and ceremonial, but the scale and massiveness of

the temple was super-impressive. Hassan didn't talk about how they built it but that would have interested me most. Really impressive – but I already said that.

Equally fascinating was our horse-cart ride both ways through town from dock to temple, looking at the activities of the people as they shopped etc. I took a lot of photos with the camera palmed in my hand so as to not be too obvious, most of which didn't turn out. Equal with Bolivia this is the most foreign place we've been too – very exotic. The ride thru downtown Edfu was one of the highlights of the trip.

Before dinner we had a lecture on Luxor – tomorrow's destination. I'll have to pace myself – both for standing and listening/learning.

Barbara had a conversation that revealed that Doofus has recognized emotional problems and a rough life. One of the other passengers is a counselor who recognized what is going on and who has taken him under his wing to help him get thru the trip. So I've been harsh on a fellow who has real issues.

The bar serves local brandy at \$4 per shot, so that's where I'm ending the evening: brandy and wifi.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Four typical Nile scenes, three rural and one urban. The river isn't very wide – maybe a tenth of a mile – and the cultivated area extends anywhere from a few feet to I-don't-know (a mile or so?) – but mostly not far. It's a very long, very thin country.

Barbara admiring cobras we're assured are harmless. Another snake is around her neck. She's always liked pets.

Boarding our brick-shaped boat that draws about 5 feet of water. Barbara is always in blue.

Street scenes from our horse-cart ride through Edfu. These aren't National Geographic quality but they were shot on the fly. The first shows part of our cart, the second vendors, the third ladies lining up for 3-wheel motorcycle taxis, the fourth a bakery (bread is piled on boards outside), and the last a horse cart which is common here.













Sunday, December 11, 2016

DAY 11: Nile Cruising – Edfu / Luxor / East Bank

This morning we explore Edfu's Temple of Horus, considered Egypt's best-preserved ancient temple (having spent centuries buried beneath desert sands). Construction of the complex began under Ptolemy III in 237 BCE and was completed nearly 200 years later; the temple's remains were not discovered until 1900. We see the 12 enormous columns that stand in front of the Great Halls, and stop to admire the wall inscriptions in the Hall of Consecrations. We return to our ship for lunch and this afternoon's cruise to Luxor (our final sail), as we enjoy afternoon tea along the way.

Upon arrival in Luxor this afternoon, we head to the East Bank where we visit the splendid Karnak Temple, which was under construction for some 1,500 years. It comprises the three main temples of Amun, Mut, and Montu, as well as smaller enclosed temples and several outer temples located a short distance north of Luxor. We also see the temple's enormous pylons, the Temple of Ramses II, the Great Hypostyle Hall, and the two Obelisks of Hatshepsut. As an added highlight for our Smithsonian departure, we will meet with John Shearman of the American Research

Center in Egypt to discuss their work at Karnak Temple (groundwater lowering, conservation and cleaning in the Khonsu Temple).

Next, we travel to Luxor Temple, where the statue of Amun-Ra, the sun god and god of creation, would travel in a procession from Karnak Temple for festivals held during annual flood season. Over the years, more rulers built onto the temple, including Tutankhamun, Ramses II, and even Alexander the Great. We visit the Great Court of Ramses II, the Temple of the Theban Triad, and the obelisk, whose twin stands in the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Tonight on board is a show of Middle Eastern belly dancing; we dine on our ship. Accommodations: MIS Royal Lily

Hi Friends,

[We've been warned that we'll be deviating from the official schedule, sometimes completely changing it, but I'll continue to include it at the top for no good reason I can think of. Consistency, maybe. For starters, we saw Edfu yesterday.]

We docked in Luxor at sunrise (it was too smoky from burning cane fields to get good photos) and are spending the day here. After breakfast we saw the Temple of Karnak and in the evening Luxor Temple.

I won't attempt to describe Karnak, which they bill as the largest temple complex in the world. It's certainly impressive with rows of stone columns scores of feet high holding huge stone roofing beams, and a granite obelisk that is nearly 100 feet high. And it goes on and on. Truly a mind-boggling engineering feat. Our expert lecturer Emily from the University of Chicago arranged for us to see a recently restored side room not open to the public and that was a highlight – after more than 3,000 years the colors are bright once you strip away the grime (they buy Q-Tips by the barrel).

There's a big festival in town for Mohammed's Birthday which is tomorrow. We've seen camels and horses decked out as if for parades and a lot of noise. We're not sure what we'll see of it tomorrow.

In the early evening we were bussed to The Papyrus Institute (a shopping opportunity; we passed, but it was interesting to see how it's made) followed by a night-time tour of the Luxor Temple. It's another unbelievably grand structure that I won't attempt to describe, but like Luxor it's over-the-top. Do see them if you ever can, and we're very glad to have.

Dinner was 5-star as all meals this trip are. I've not commented much on the food, mostly because they don't cater to the British so it's not horrid; it's excellent and we'll be glad to back off to moderate portions when we return home. Today it included quail, melt-in-your-mouth fish, select cheeses, and pastries you only see in expensive glossy

books. Next month lunch will be a sandwich and half apple, so I'll indulge now.

At 9 we were treated to a belly-dancing and whirling dervish show. The live music that accompanied the dervish was as non-Western as anything I've heard. And what's not to like about authentic belly-dancing (except when she begins dancing with members of the audience)?

Our wake-up call is at 4:00.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

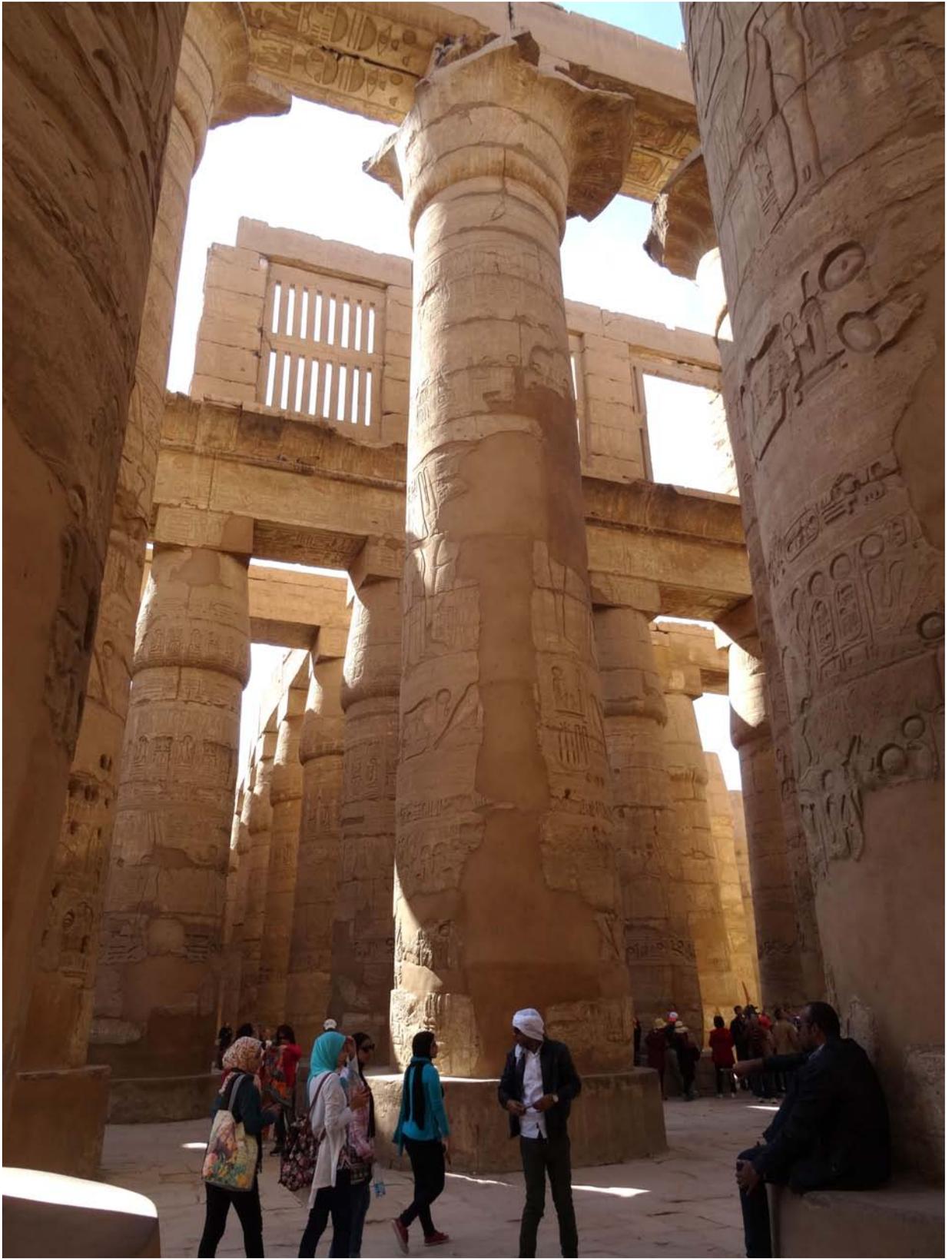
Part of Karnak's Hypostyle Hall. These stone blocks are huge, folks. It has withstood the "test of time" well considering that it was probably built by the lowest bidder.

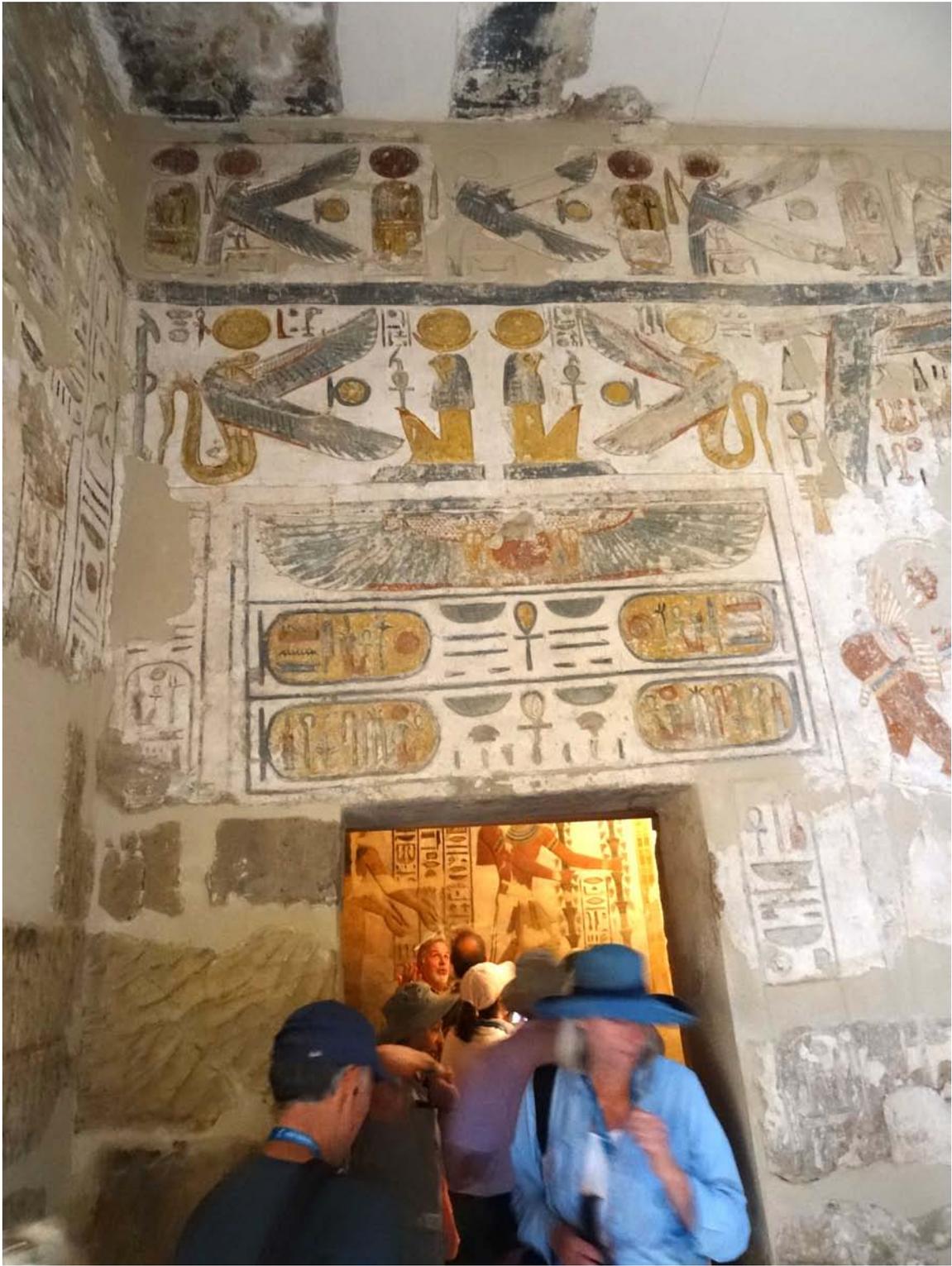
The University of Chicago is restoring this and a few adjacent small rooms. They've been closed to the elements so since they were painted so the colors are still there under thousands of years of grime, waiting to be revealed.

This temple comes in kit form, but we're told there are no immediate plans to reassemble it. Jigsaw puzzle fans should apply, but the box top is missing.

Street scene snapshot from the bus. Many shops - especially food shops - have most of their merchandise outdoors. It's really sad to see a ragged vendor sitting next to a small pile of oranges on a blanket, hoping to sell one.

Luxor at night. The columns are more than a dozen feet thick and I don't know how high, holding up heavy cross beams.









Monday, December 12, 2016

DAY 12: Disembark / Luxor / West Bank

You may wish to rise early this morning and view the West Bank of "the world's greatest open air museum," as Luxor has been called, from above in an optional hot air balloon ride. Later this morning we disembark our

Nile ship and set out on an exploration of Luxor, the ancient city that surpasses even Cairo in the number and importance of its ancient sites, which date from 2755 BCE.

We begin on the West Bank at the haunting Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens, an isolated valley holding the tombs of more than 50 kings, queens, and nobles, each in a tomb constructed underground in an attempt to mirror the underworld. For many years Egyptians inhabited this vast City of the Dead in an attempt to protect the tombs from grave robbers - though sadly, some of the tombs were indeed looted over the centuries. What remains, however, are some of the most magnificent paintings you'll see anywhere in Egypt. The tombs were filled with sand, which not only protected everything inside, but also served as a sort of embalming element for the paintings, preserving them from the wind and sun. Today some of the paintings have been covered by glass for further protection, and photography is strictly forbidden inside the tombs. To visit all the tombs would be impossible; your tour director will select some of the most interesting for you to see. We also have special highlights today for our group. We will tour the village of Deir el Medina, home to the artisans who constructed the Valley of the Kings, and we will stop at the temple of Ramses III and meet with the staff of the Epigraphic Survey at Medinet Habu to see their work.

Continuing on, we visit the dramatic Temple of Hatshepsut, dedicated to one of the few female pharaohs; and the enormous Colossi of Memnon, two 64-foot-high statues that once guarded the gates of a mortuary temple. After our Luxor excursion, we check into our hotel where you have the afternoon and evening free to relax and enjoy the hotel's amenities. Lunch and dinner today are on your own. Accommodations: Steigenberger Nile Palace

Hi Friends,

We were up at 3:50 a.m. to ferry across the Nile and take a shuttle bus to the launching point for our hot-air balloon ride "over" the Valley of the Kings. We launched well before dawn (it was sweater weather) and were 2/3 thru our flight when the sun rose. The wind drifted us past but not over the Valley of the Kings (and nowhere near Luxor) but we got a good view of Hatshepsut's Temple and other nearby excavations, but especially the sugar cane fields which is where we landed. My major impression is of being jammed so tightly in the wicker basket which held 18 that it was difficult to turn around or even take a deep breath. The sunrise over the Nile was great, and we enjoyed looking down on farmers beginning to work their fields and moving around on donkey carts.

Then a crap breakfast box of two bananas (which were good) and several sandwiches that set a record for the ratio (97:1) of bread to meat or cheese with a half-gram of cucumber filler while on the way to the Valley of the Kings. No photography is allowed so you'll have to Google it, but we went into 4 tombs including Tut's (he's there in a Cinderella-like glass display case; he'd like that). All tombs were richly decorated, sometimes in bright colors, with strange painted carvings. The tombs we went in had passageways about 10 x 10 feet with gently sloping ramps, so they were easy to navigate. All very interesting. But no photos.

I finally had it with the guards, who are older Egyptian men in galabeyas and turbans with their hands out for "baksheesh." They would take my arm (or try to; I wouldn't let them) to help me over a step, use a flashlight to point out a picture, or say something about the ceiling – and then hold out their hand and rub their fingers together. I finally told one "No! Scram!" and he replied in English "OK". Enough is enough. On the other hand, Barbara gave to a crippled beggar and I had no problem with that.

Then on to Hatshepsut's Temple which I'd always wanted to see. There's surprisingly little to see because the sanctuaries are off-limits – just the patios. But I'm glad we got to see it. I bought an embroidered white cotton shirt for \$3 (the original asking price was \$15, but he came down).

Lunch was a treat: a home-made feast served by a wealthy farmer and his extended family who does this on occasion for Smithsonian. It was wonderful food – and the first good bread I've had in Egypt (their own family recipe). They showed us their grain grinder and oven, both ancient but quite functional.

And then a small boat back across the Nile to our Steigenberger hotel which is at least one star above what we're comfortable with. Our patio which overlooks the Nile (and where I'm writing this) is larger than some hotel rooms we've stayed in. But their internet absolutely sucks. I tried to connect for 40 minutes and gave up – it sort of works but redefines slow. I told the manager that it's a beautiful building but with such poor internet they get only 4 stars in my review, and he seemed somewhat distressed by that, but I'd rather have functional internet than highly polished marble floors and fancy chandeliers, and for the price (around \$300/night) expect them to provide it.

After a well-deserved rest break we were off for an hour horse-cart ride around old Luxor, and that was another highlight. We somehow made our way thru the bazaar which I'm unable to describe; you had to be there. Our cart was as wide as the street (about 8 feet), we brushed under hanging merchandise, and people backed up to keep their toes uncrushed. They were selling everything you can imagine, mostly from

tiny stalls on the street, and it was busy, colorful, and noisy. I didn't bring my camera because it was after dark, but it was brightly lit and I might have gotten some wonderful shots. Next time.

We both skipped dinner. Lunch was plenty and we've been over-eating.

With the internet as useless as it is I'll hope this text goes through, and I'll attempt the photos separately – probably when we return to Cairo late tomorrow.

Tomorrow is Medinet Habu and Deir el Medina in the morning and flying to Cairo after lunch. BTW, the consensus is that we've all seen enough temples and tombs and half the group is skipping tomorrow morning's sightseeing. I'm not the only one who is saturated and seriously considered sleeping in.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos (all highly compressed):

Hot-air balloons over the Nile at sunrise.

Hatshepsut's Temple from the air.

Hatshepsut's Temple from the ground.

Very common vehicle both in the country and Luxor.

Street vendor with few wares tending his water-pipe, shot down from the bus.

The latest design mud oven that cooks up to 40 loaves of very good bread at a time.







Tuesday, December 13, 2016

DAY 13: Luxor / Cairo

We transfer to the airport for the flight to Cairo. After checking in at our hotel, we navigate the exotic Khan el-Khalili bazaar, Cairo's most popular and believed to be the largest in the Middle East, if not the world. Here you can visit artisans who have passed down their skill from generation to generation, perfecting all types of crafts including wood, perfume, leather goods, and glassware. There are bargains to be had on almost every corner, but you are expected to barter hard for them. This afternoon is free for independent exploration and dinner on our own. You might wish to visit the beautiful Coptic Museum with displays chronicling Egypt's Christian history, or return to the Egyptian Museum to see the incredible exhibition of artifacts excavated from the tomb of the young King Tutankhamun ("Tut") in 1922 by an English archeologist. The King ruled for just nine years, but during that time he amassed great wealth, much of which was buried with him in the form of gold amulets and jewelry, a coffin of solid gold, and an exquisite mask of gold and lapis. Or you may wish to visit the Gayer-Anderson Museum, which houses a former British doctor's eclectic collection of artwork and which served as a filming location for the James Bond movie *The Spy Who Loved Me*. Lunch and dinner are on your own today, and your tour director will be more than happy to offer dining suggestions. Accommodations: Fairmont Nile City

Hi Friends,

[To my surprise the photos went last night, although it took over 20 minutes to send all 3 MB. I'm still giving the hotel 4 stars on TripAdvisor.]

Again we didn't follow the schedule. Half our group skipped the morning tour and I'm sorry I didn't too (I was thinking seriously of joining them). I'm totally templed-out. And we still have Jordan to go!

So this morning we went to the grand temple complex of Medinet Habu, which I've heard about for decades, and which is remarkably complete. Our U of Chicago lecturer arranged for a long presentation on epigraphy which has been their mission for almost a century. I took no photos; enough is enough. A month from now the temples will all run together in my mind and I won't remember which was which.

Then to Deir el Medina, the village of the workers who carved and painted the tombs in the adjacent Valley of the Kings and who made their own tombs. We climbed down steep steps into one which is richly decorated and looks fresh.

After a rest at the hotel we bussed to the airport for our short flight back to Cairo with lunch in a restaurant on the way.

Once in Cairo we crept thru traffic in our bus (Cairo isn't our favorite city) to the Khan el-Khalili bazaar. I was expecting it would be like the wonderful souk in Marrakesh that we wandered thru for hours amazed by all the merchandise, but no – it was a long row of obnoxious vendors selling souvenirs. I chewed out our tour director for delivering us to people we had been trying to avoid all week, then we hung around for an hour for the bus to shuttle us to the hotel. The non-tourist market is elsewhere.

Again we skipped dinner. The Egyptians are just starting to get hungry at 9 but if we haven't eaten by then we don't. That's why we carry a few granola bars. We're back to our original Cairo hotel with a view of the Nile, but from a regular-size hotel room that doesn't even have a table to sit at. So I'm in the bar so I can type properly. But the wifi is great.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

A corner store followed by a supermarket for comparison. Enlarge to see them best.

Barbara in the big market. Her thumb is up because she just paid three times what she should have.

A café from the bus. Note the guy with the bubble pipe.

Street at night with markets from the moving bus.







Wednesday, December 14, 2016

DAY 14: Cairo

Today we visit some of the finest sites in Egyptian antiquity, beginning this morning at the open-air museum at Memphis, Egypt's first capital dating to the early 4th century BCE. Once a magnificent city ruled by legendary King Menes who united Upper and Lower Egypt (ca. 3100 BCE), Memphis is now a pleasant remnant of long-ago times, with sculptures, a Sphinx, and a limestone colossus of Ramses II. Our next stop is at nearby Sakkara, a necropolis used for more than 3,000 years to bury Old Kingdom royalty - and still largely unexcavated today. Much of Sakkara's splendor remains, and can be seen in the Step Pyramid, which was once the largest stone structure ever built. The Step Pyramid forms the center of a remarkable funerary complex, which includes a broad "hypostyle" hall (a structure whose roof is supported by columns), a great court, and stone altars representing Upper and Lower Egypt.

Following lunch, we immerse ourselves with more pyramid history. Exclusive for our Smithsonian departures, we will visit the lesser-visited site of Dahshur; home to the Bent and Red pyramids. Here we will learn about the progression of pyramid building. Ancient builders profited from the errors and triumphs from the work done on the Bent and Red pyramids. The knowledge gained from this site allowed the world-renowned Giza pyramids to be constructed. We return to our hotel late

afternoon in time to rest and relax before our farewell at the hotel to toast our Egyptian adventure. Accommodations: Fairmont Nile City

Hi Friends,

We slept in 'til 6, then were off early to beat the worst of the morning traffic to head to Memphis, the original capital and then long-time spiritual capital, to see a giant fallen statue of Ramses II. It's so big they built a museum around it.

Then to Saqqara, site of the first pyramids. One we saw was a huge pile of rubble, but a very steep ramp took us roughly 100 feet down a passageway not quite 5 feet square to a decorated burial chamber from about 2700 BC – certainly the oldest space we have ever been in. The electricity was off so we navigated by flashlights and camera phones, which made it more mysterious and eerie.

Then to a nearby finely carved temple above a tomb of an overseer. No photos allowed. The expansive daily scenes of fishing, farming, etc. were carved in fine detail and quite amazing, especially considering their age.

And on to a real pyramid – the Step Pyramid, the prototype of all that followed. We got to look at it from close and walk thru its adjacent funerary temple. That's my last temple; one more and I'll scream. I skipped the final temple and gazed longer at the Step Pyramid.

We were to have also seen the next two pyramids that were constructed, the Bent and Red Pyramids at Dahshur, but skipped them “to save time” and just saw them from miles away. I really, really wanted to see them (and now never will) but bit my tongue so as to not always be the one causing trouble.

As we left I gave our tour director Hassan my green laser pointer, which he'd been borrowing each day, and he was VERY appreciative. I think they're not available in Egypt, and not affordable if they are.

Lunch was at a nearby restaurant. We were impressed with the security there and as we traveled: we had a suited armed guard on the bus (he was friendly; the others have stayed in the background) plus a police car behind our bus and one in front with the lights and sirens going – a real motorcade. We were going slow enough to shoot photos out the window, and as discretely as I could got quite a few good ones both in the morning and afternoon. Should the escort make us feel afraid or reassured? (We felt safe.) We certainly weren't unnoticed; the locals must have thought we are real VIPs.

And finally a long, very slow bus ride back to the hotel for a 3-hour rest. This is a hotel where a beer in the bar comes in an ice bucket with a big cup of pistachios on the side.

Things I've noticed: In rural areas perhaps 2/3 the older men and a few younger were galabeyas; they are less common but still seen in Cairo. Horse- and donkey-carts are quite common in the country even though they're being replaced by 3-wheel motorcycle carts. Kids commonly and men occasionally ride donkeys in the countryside; not rare at all. In rural areas women wear all black and head scarves, period. Many shops are 1/3 the size of our garage. Garbage is thick and everywhere. Most tourists are Chinese and Japanese; we westerners are definitely the minority. Our guide tells us corruption is the rule, especially at the top, and it's an enormous problem. People double-park in heavy traffic to load and unload or whatever, snarling traffic that already is impossible. Police are everywhere, generally behind little shields or barricades. Dogs and cats are everywhere too, and they look feral; cats have been in many of our restaurants begging food from underneath the tables until the owner shoos them out. It looks like half the buildings are unfinished, but we think that's deliberate – they're leaving them so that they can add upper stories when needed. I've seen men with as few as three visible teeth; I suspect many people have never seen a dentist (except perhaps to pull a tooth when it gets too rotten). Coffee is served with breakfast but never after lunch or dinner – if you want a cup, go to the bar (if there is one). Everyone but everyone is friendly, from the kids that come up to say Hello to adults that smile back when we smile at them; people seem generally happy. Our hotel has Christmas decorations (trees, lights, greenery, etc.) everywhere – just like home (but no snowmen or baby Jesus); we hear Christmas carols in the background.

The evening ended with a cocktails and a farewell dinner. I wore my new galabeya, white Egyptian cotton shirt, and turban and made a minor sensation (laughter and applause). Our tour director and Egyptologist are not traveling on.

Tomorrow we get to sleep in until 5:30 and then depart Egypt.
- John (& Barbara)

Photos (plenty because internet is good):

Cairo street scene – donkey cart and market.

The burial chamber of Pharaoh Teti deep under his pyramid; Old Kingdom.

Security in front of our restaurant. Notice the guy on top with the machine gun. We felt quite safe from pick-pockets.

Street scene: an auto dealership.

Street scene: this guy set up a cloth market in the street.

With our tour guide Hassan at our farewell party. We'd never seen him dressed like this.







Thursday, December 15, 2016

DAY 15: Cairo/ Amman / Petra, Jordan

This morning we board the 1-1/2-hour flight to Amman, where we then board a motorcoach for the drive to Petra. Along the way, we stop in Madaba, "City of Mosaics," whose chief attraction is a mosaic map of Jerusalem and the Holy Land dating to the 6th century. It took more than two million colored stones to create this work of art; amazingly, each one remains in place today. After visiting this ancient masterpiece we have an early lunch then continue on to the important pilgrimage site of Mt. Nebo, where Moses was buried overlooking the Jordan Valley. We see the site's 4th- and 6th-century Byzantine churches, the first of which was built to commemorate Moses' death. The churches are closed for renovations, but we should be able to view the Jordan Valley and catch glimpses of Jerusalem's rooftops in the distance. Traveling on, we reach Petra and our hotel late this afternoon, and dine there tonight. Accommodations: Moevenpick Resort Petra

Hi Friends,

We were up at 5:20 to shuttle to the airport for our 90-minute Royal Jordanian flight to Amman. Our next two trips will not have such early wake-ups; I'm ready for something more restful. The standing joke is that we need a vacation to recover from our Egypt vacation, which was really a short course in Temples & Tombs rather than a vacation. I'm looking forward to just reading a novel on the deck of a ship while the scenery slowly passes by with no early wake-up calls and the only times I need to know are meal times.

Also no more cities of 20+ million people. It was fun to see Cairo from the bus and I'm glad we did, but I don't need to do it again. Once we return home Palm Springs will be the biggest city we'll see for several months.

But the pace continues unabated. The 11 of us who continued on for the extension were bussed to Saint George Church to admire a mosaic made in 530 AD that is one of the earliest maps anywhere – a map of the Holy Land. I like old maps and this is the second-oldest I've seen, so that was nice. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madaba_Map]

Then a short ride to Mt. Nebo which is where Moses saw the Promised Land, and is buried (somewhere nearby). We looked down on the Dead Sea, the Jordan Valley, and to Israel in the distance. Our thoughts on seeing the Dead Sea were, now that we've seen it we don't have to return to see it again. (Note to self: was Moses a real historical figure? – don't know.)

That was all OK, but after a late but nice traditional lamb-chicken-rice lunch we set out at sunset for a 3+ hour ride across the desert to

Petra, our destination, and to a hotel 100 feet from the entrance. We were all beat by the time we arrived – especially Barbara who checked email and headed straight to bed, not feeling her best. Petra better be good – between the plane and bus it’s a hell of a long way to travel to see something. This hotel too is all marble and fancier than we’re used to or would choose. And it has fast and free internet.

It’s cold here. We went from shorts weather in Cairo to mid-40s in Jordan, and everyone’s bundled up, including the locals. I’ll finally get to wear the warm clothes I’ve been toting around for two weeks.

First impressions of Jordan, almost entirely from the bus: FAR more prosperous than Egypt, visible many ways (most sidewalks not broken; some trash but not overwhelming; shops look prosperous; no donkey carts; no vendors in the street -- but these are quick impressions only). Architecture and dress more Arabian (different flavor). Deseret Highway is 4 lanes divided (not 2 lanes undivided as in Egypt). More later.

Anyway – we’re both real tired. Goodnight
- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Quick snap street scene in the town of Madaba. Note the intact sidewalks, paved street, and general look of prosperity. Egypt is a 3rd world country and Jordan appears to be 2nd world, so there’s “a world of difference” between them.

1500-year-old mosaic map of the Holy Land. The legends are Greek to me.



Friday, December 16, 2016

Day 16: Petra

Today we explore Petra, the "rose-red city, half as old as time" that was established around the 6th century BCE and eventually drew fame for its success in the spice trade and for its ingenious hydraulic engineering systems. Forgotten for more than a thousand years, Petra was rediscovered only in the 18th century; the central part of the city wasn't excavated until 1958. In fact, even today only a small fraction of this UNESCO World Heritage Site has been uncovered. But what we see here today is enough to astonish and astound even the most experienced traveler: monuments and buildings - temples, tombs, palaces, and dwellings - carved directly into cliffs of a solid mass of rock. Built as a fortress by the wealthy Nabateans, the city that once stood here housed nearly 10,000 people. The ruins are remarkably well preserved, giving us a true glimpse into the lives of those who lived and worked here. The architecture represents some of the most sophisticated of its time, and the variegated rock changes colors with the sun, transforming from a rosy pink to a golden yellow. It is, quite simply, a glorious sight.

We travel on foot, entering Petra by the breathtaking mile-long canyon leading to the site. Among the sites on today's itinerary: the 8,000-seat amphitheater, the colonnaded street, the Temple of the Winged Lions, and the Royal Tombs set high up into the cliffs. If you wish, you can visit the large and stunning monastery by climbing a staircase of stone at the far end of Petra - a strenuous effort that will result in stupendous views of the surrounding desert. Or relax and have a drink in one of the beverage tents scattered throughout the site. After this full - and fulfilling - day of sightseeing, we return to our hotel late this afternoon. This evening is at leisure for dinner on your own. Accommodations: Moevenpick Resort Petra

Hi Friends,

We were both exhausted last night (Barbra skipped dinner) and slept like the dead until almost 7. I would have slept longer if I could have.

Then into Petra. They don't emphasize that it is a 6-mile round trip to the far end and back, and I confess that it wore me out. But it was good to be walking. (We're all thinking of tomorrow's long bus ride back.)

It was chilly -- -- but we were prepared. I had gloves on at one point. Then the sun came out and it was pleasant.

First you walk down a wide canyon or narrow valley, then a narrow slot canyon typically 20 feet wide that would have done credit to Utah (it resembled in dimensions the Zion Narrows) and that twisted for about a

mile. The “Treasury” – the structure you always see representing Petra -- is at the end of it, and then you continue on down a wider canyon sometimes on a Roman road and past modest Roman-era ruins to the restaurant, which was our real goal. The Treasury is an impressive piece of work and worth the hype; the other tombs not so much, but the canyon was pretty amazing. I was especially tired when we got to the hotel 7 hours after our departure and we both crashed until dark. I would have liked to walk around town a bit but didn't have the energy. Anyway, it's a tourist town.

So was it worth it? Only if you're in the area. We could have stayed in Egypt for a small fraction the time and cost and seen yet another temple of at least equal interest.

Speaking of cost, prices here are different than in Egypt – 3 to 12 times higher. Cokes are only a few times more expensive, but admission to a temple in Egypt is \$6 and to Petra \$75. I had a beer in the hotel lobby: \$15.50 – almost as much as Norway! Souvenirs except postcards are MUCH more expensive. We're glad we did our souvenir hunting already; it would be too costly to buy the same things here. The vendors are equally as numerous and at least as aggressive and their tactics don't endear us to them.

So we have an evening to catch up on Facebook etc.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

The lobby of our hotel where I'm writing this. I'm a life member of International Youth Hostels, but this is a step above their dorms. The sound of the fountain at center is soothing. Not shown is the large Christmas tree.

The canyon leading down to the good stuff. Carriages bring people back up who are willing to pay \$30 for a 1.5-mile ride. Barbara is pretending to be cold. The chest-high slot on the far side of the canyon is a chiseled-out water trough acting like a mini-aqueduct.

The Roman road the leads past bases of columns, steps up to a temple, and a triumphal arch to the restaurant.





Saturday, December 17, 2016

DAY 17: Petra / Amman

This morning we leave Petra bound for Amman, traveling the Desert Highway that was the region's original north/south road dating to Biblical times. The once and current capital of one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, Amman is known for its harmonious blend of ancient and contemporary architecture, and also for the countless relics of its Roman, Byzantine, and Arab past. Upon arrival we stop for lunch at Hashem restaurant, renowned for its falafel sandwiches, a Middle Eastern specialty. Then we set off on a walking tour that takes us off the beaten tourist path and acquaints us with this lively Middle Eastern capital. We begin with a visit to the Wild Jordan Centre, where we meet local Jordanians at this non-governmental organization engaged in enhancing and maintaining the beauty and economic vitality of Jordan's nature reserves. The Centre also offers an opportunity to purchase unique hand-crafted items such as nature-inspired silver jewelry and decorated ostrich eggs.

We continue on to the Ottoman-style King Hussein Mosque, built in 1924 on the site of an ancient temple in the heart of downtown Amman; then through the busy streets and vegetables markets to the Nymphaeum, a

2nd-century fountain hidden behind private houses and shops. Our next stop comprises another 2nd-century landmark, the 6,000-seat Roman Theatre, which is still used today for sporting and cultural events; and the ancient Citadel (El-Qala), which offers excellent views of the city from atop Jabal al-Qala'a, one of Amman's signature seven hills. After checking in at our hotel, the remainder of the day is free for independent exploration. Dinner tonight is on your own. Accommodations: Le Meridien Amman

Hi Friends,

We both slept 9 hours last night which gives an indication of how much they're wearing us out. But we're caught up now – and ready to be worn down again.

After breakfast it was that dreaded 3-1/2 hour bus ride back to Amman thru the Arabian Desert which is devoid of life; it makes the area around Las Vegas seem lush. The gift shop at our “truck stop” rest stop was over-the-top furniture, carpets, clothes, etc.

Upon arriving in Amman we ignored the detailed printed schedule and drove straight to The Citadel, the fortified hilltop with a ruined Roman temple and a panoramic view of town – and another small museum. We can't escape museums, and by now we're tough customers who expect the finest in antiquities. But each one has something new.

Then a walk through the main downtown shopping district (noisy and crowded) with a detour through the vegetable market – quite interesting and with very high quality food. Lunch was a falafel sandwich while standing in a crowded alley; tasty but not restful. Then on to admire the huge Roman theater which is in fine shape and still used.

And lastly to our palatial hotel at 3:30 to have the rest of the day free with dinner on our own. [I guess the free time is in place of the Jordan Centre, which wasn't even mentioned.] The hotel is too huge and too formal for my taste and I won't feel comfortable in one of the several lounges sipping a \$15 beer, so will spend it in our room, which is large and which is comfy.

We're not in a neighborhood that encourages walking around, and it's dark at 5 (and chilly; the high was 52°), so it's another long evening in. We had a light dinner at the local restaurant across the street from the hotel for \$24. I'll watch some more documentaries I brought on my laptop. Internet is intermittent but free so we'll take it.

I don't have a lot of comments on Jordan or Amman. Frankly, traveling to Jordan has never been on our list, even low down; we're here to see Petra but mostly because only two weeks in Egypt seemed too short a stay for how far we traveled to be here. We're not terribly interested in Jordan, and it's more upscale than Egypt and so less exotic.

No donkey carts (just for tourists at Petra); the streets – and sidewalks! -
- are paved; no impressive mounds of trash; definitely no bargains for
souvenirs.

Another difference: in Egypt the guard who accompanied us looked
like Secret Service, while the guard who is accompanying all 11 of us
everywhere here looks Army. I don't know how effective he would be
against a sneak terrorist attack, but we feel safe from pickpockets with
him nearby. And his presence makes it easier to cross the streets – we
just shuffle across in a mass and hold up traffic, which is barely moving
anyway. He also got us quickly thru the several military checkpoints along
the highway; they might have boarded the bus and checked all our pass-
ports if he hadn't been riding shotgun.

Tomorrow is our last day in Jordan and of our adventure – and it's
predicted to rain all day.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Shot out the bus window in the Arabian Desert enroute to Amman. We
have no idea what the goats find to eat.

Amman from the Roman-era hilltop fortress. Note the theater at lower
left.

The caption says this and its companions may be the oldest statues on
the planet, ca. 8000-7000 BC (as opposed to figurines).

Our guard (Federal Police) in a pensive moment. He's with us all the time.

Street scene in Amman.

Another street scene in Amman. Shopkeepers move their wares onto the
sidewalk and some set up tables on the curb, making the walking lane
rather narrow.

In the Farmers Market

Ditto – cabbages much larger than Barbara's head.

The back half of our hotel's largest lobby. They don't put us up in the
local equivalent of Motel 6.











Sunday, December 18, 2016

DAY 18: Amman / Jerash

We travel today to the Roman ruins of Jerash, dubbed the "Pompeii of the East" for its splendid state of preservation. Because of its popular trade routes, Jerash flourished during the reign of Alexander the Great when it became part of the Holy Roman Empire's Decapolis (the 10 major Roman cities of the East). After the Persian invasion of 614 and a series of consequential earthquakes, Jerash survived as nothing more than a small rural village until its rediscovery in 1925. Here we explore the colonnaded streets, theaters, churches, and temples that comprise the largest Roman site outside of Italy. We return to Amman mid-afternoon then dine together tonight at our hotel. Lunch today is on your own.

Accommodations: Le Meridien Amman

Hi Friends,

[An error in the above description: it was part of the Roman Empire, not the Holy Roman Empire. Just for the record.]

A personal note: we just received word that my son Jack, who has been servicing missiles for Lockheed in Bremerton, Washington, was just offered a job assembling rockets for Musk at SpaceX in Los Angeles. He's super-excited. His rocket experience comes from serving aboard missile-

carrying submarines while in the Navy. I've been accused of being a "rocket scientist" but I'm not (astronomy is different) but he'll come close as a Propulsion Technician. I'll send him a case of suntan lotion, something he's forgotten exists.

We didn't begin the day's activity until 9:00. That's the latest starting time for the entire trip. We hardly knew what to do with ourselves all morning – except eat a full breakfast since lunch will be on us. We joked in Egypt that we'd need a vacation after our Egypt trip, and now we have it.

And we had a good scare: Barbara tried to check in online with Lufthansa and found that our tickets are not valid! Recall the problems we had getting here, so it was quite believable that we were screwed again. We asked the hotel concierge to help us, and he called Lufthansa, but after 10 minutes on hold he gave up, told us to try another time, and walked away. So when our tour director arrived a few minutes later we laid it out for him, he called his office, and a half-hour later, while we were on the bus, they called him back to say we had been issued new tickets with new numbers. So we believe we will fly home tonight but we're no longer sure of anything. At any rate we'll show up at the airport and hopefully fly away, inshallah. I'll let you know in a final email late Monday (or whenever!) that we got home. We depart Amman at 2:20 a.m.

At 9 this morning we bussed 45 minutes north of town to the Roman city Jerash which is partially reconstructed. We've seen a lot of Roman ruins in the past few years but these are the best, so it was a good outing. The hippodrome is complete as are two theaters and the main colonnaded street plus much more, and archaeologists will be reconstructing it for decades. A continuous drizzle took the edge off it but we were mostly able to ignore it.

Barbara bought a final souvenir – a checkered red scarf for 3 Jordanian dinar. She looks like a terrorist.

Then back to the hotel at 2:00 for five hours of free time. The hotel is in a business district with nothing to see if we were to walk around, and no one is going anywhere in a chill drizzle (45°), so basically we're entertaining ourselves until our farewell dinner. Praise be to Allah for internet in the rooms (I'm picking up the local lingo).

While we wait for our taxi we hear that gunmen have targeted tourists and police at a site in Jordan south of the Dead Sea, quite some way from here. I imagine our private guard will be on high alert the next few weeks or so. Such actions really hurt the local economies.

So soon we leave for the airport and about 30 hours of transit to return to our nice home where everyone speaks a known language.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Me in my most fashionable poncho standing below one of the theaters with the Temple of Zeus at center.

The stage of that same theater. Some Arabs came out of the stonework (actually stonework) and gave us a quick bagpipe concert (!) for tips. I didn't make this up. And I didn't take a picture because that would have been an automatic tip. So imagine the sound of bagpipes playing Amazing Grace as you admire the photo.

The main Roman street through town connecting the N and S gates. It was once colonnaded with shops on each side. The pavement is original; the puddles are modern.





Monday, December 19, 2016

Day 19: Depart for U.S.

Very early this morning we depart for the airport for our flight to the U.S. and return home.

Hi Friends,

We left our hotel at 11 p.m. Sunday night and arrived at the airport check-in by midnight after being stopped for 15 minutes at a new airport security check caused by the terrorist attack at a castle earlier in the day. To our relief our tickets were in order, so we'll never know what the problem was when Barbara couldn't check in online in the morning.

My pocket-size mini-binoculars caused a fuss at the scanner; I was taken aside and held for 10 minutes while an agent took them and my passport to higher-ups to decide what to do with me. He kept asking "Where you go?" and I replied "I go America" and "I go home", but what he really wanted to know was where in Jordan I had gone with this spy equipment. Eventually I was released from custody. I can understand that they're all kind of jumpy, but really!

Our first flight put us in at Frankfurt at 5:30 a.m. local time for a 7-hour layover. Do you know how hard it is to entertain yourself for so long in an airport? Note to self: avoid 7-hour layovers. At least we were warm and dry.

There's a bakery in the airport and I was tempted to load a sack-full of wonderful German bread to take home, but we can get some almost as good at our local upscale Harmon's grocery store. But the bakery items sure did look good.

The flight to Denver was uneventful, but 10 hours is just too long to sit cramped motionless in tiny seats. The International Court of Justice should outlaw such torture. I'd upgrade us to business class if it wasn't several hundred dollars an hour more. I wish I had knock-out pills to put us in suspended hibernation.

In Denver it took an hour to go thru immigration. Then we spent a totally fruitless 70 minutes on hold to Travelocity to resume our effort to get a refund for the screw-up on the initial flight outbound three weeks ago. Sigh. They're totally hopeless. We'll try again one rainy day when we have nothing better to do – and can work crossword puzzles or read a book while on hold (and where it's quieter than Denver International).

Our final flight to SGU was delayed 5 hours, so we ended up with a 9-hour layover in Denver. Jesus H Christ -- this is just too much. By this time both of us had had it – this makes travel no fun.

Now we're about to board, and assuming our plane actually gets to St. George we'll arrive home after a 90-minute hop across the Rockies and a shorter taxi ride sometime after 1:30 a.m. – to a very cold house. We

turned off the water heater and set the thermostat at 44°, so our electric blanket turned on high will save the night. We'll arrive home nearly 36 hours after we left our hotel in Amman!

We hope you enjoyed these emails and sharing in our adventure. Within a few days I'll post them as one pdf file at our travel website in case you want to re-read them as one document.

On Thursday we head to Borrego Springs in our motorhome for the winter, arriving Friday afternoon. Then we can finally rest – which we're both looking forward to.

Over and out.

- John (& Barbara)