

# **EGYPT 2024**

## A CRUISE UP THE RIVER NILE



**CHARLES GANNON © 2024**



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This account is about a Travel Department tour in Egypt that started in Cairo on 30 November 2024 and finished on 12 December in Hurghada.

During this period €1 was equal to about 53 Egyptian pounds (E£).

Cover photographs: the Pyramids at Giza (top) and sailing up the Nile from Luxor aboard our cruiser (bottom).

The language spoken in Egypt is Egyptian Arabic; it uses standard Arabic letters, which are written from right to left. In this travelogue, all words and place names are transcribed into English.

My thanks to Emad Fathy who has kindly checked the information in this travelogue, and to Andrew Robinson, who has proofread the text.

# PART ONE

## CAIRO AND AROUND



*A view of the Pyramids of Giza from the Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo*

## 1: CAIRO AND GIZA

Saturday, 30 November 2024

Although a long queue zigzagged its way slowly to the Egyptair check-in desk in the departure area, Dublin airport was relatively quiet at about eleven o'clock in the morning. While waiting in the queue, I spotted a few women who I guessed were members of the group that I would be joining for our thirteen-day trip in Egypt; one of them was a pleasant lady named Kate. Eventually it was my turn to approach the woman at the desk. As I was travelling light and had just one little suitcase and a backpack, I did not need to check in any luggage. I was then free to walk to gate 302 which, as I was delighted to discover, was in a familiar circular area where there was a water fountain. Although it was quite packed, I managed to find somewhere to sit. To kill time, I took my battered copy of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* out of my backpack and began to read it, from the start, yet again.

I had always wanted to go to Egypt. My fascination with the country had started when I was a boy, aged nine or ten, when Polish neighbours of ours had invited us to dinner one evening. After the meal, the husband (who had worked on the Aswan Dam) put up a screen, turned on a projector and showed us slides that he had taken while he had been in Egypt. A fascinating land of deserts, pyramids, temples, tombs of former pharaohs, and the powerful river Nile, dazzled my senses and made me want to know more about this extraordinary country and its history. Over the years my dad brought home books from the library about Egypt and, in particular, about the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by the Earl of Carnarvon and Howard Carter. Because of my deep interest in all this, I chose a copy of Leonard Cottrell's book *The Secrets of Tutankhamen* for my Christmas 1971 First Prize in Belvedere College. I was very envious of my mother when she went to see the great Tutankhamen Exhibition in the British Museum in 1972. In the May edition of a school magazine that I had designed, typed and produced, I interviewed the daughter of one of my father's friends who had gone to London to see the exhibition, and illustrated the article with drawings of some of the artefacts that had been found in the young pharaoh's tomb. Another book that I acquired at this time was Howard Carter's *The Tomb of Tutankhamen*, published in 1972, which my mother and father gave me for my birthday.

In 1977, four years after I had left school, I discovered that the BBC would be broadcasting lessons in Arabic on the radio. Curious, I bought the book that went with the course, *Introduction to Arabic* (for the grand sum of 90 pence) and, having read the introduction, tuned in and listened to the first programme on Radio 3. However, as it was broadcast on the medium waveband instead of the usual FM frequency, I was unable to hear it clearly because of so much interference. As I could not distinguish between the various guttural sounds or hear the difference between long and short consonants, I got no further than the first lesson and gave up the attempt.

In 1996, when I was working in our national television station, I thought about travelling to Egypt, despite the fact that terrorists had been killing tourists there since

March 1993. Knowing that it was a potentially dangerous place, I took the precaution of telephoning the Department of Foreign Affairs. When I asked a man at the other end of the phone whether it was safe or not to visit Egypt, he very emphatically replied, 'No!' I then asked him about Peru and Bolivia in South America; although he told me that these countries were not particularly safe, they were much safer than Egypt. I therefore went to Peru and Bolivia with a British travel group in 1997 and put Egypt out of my mind for the time being. However, friends of mine were brave enough to go there during the summer of 1997, and were accompanied by police on motorbikes everywhere they went.

During the early part of 2024 a Travel Department brochure was posted to me, offering discounts if holidays were booked by a certain date. As by now I had done quite an amount of travelling and was seriously thinking of putting my feet up, I was inclined to throw the brochure into the bin. However, I flicked through it and my eye alighted on a tour entitled *Egypt – Nile River Cruise* which, I discovered, catered for solo travellers. Curious, I sat down at the computer and had a look at the itinerary. Knowing that I had a voucher for a holiday that had been cancelled in 2020 because of Covid and that the price of the tour would be reduced by €75 if booked before a certain date, I went through the motions of booking the trip as I could not remember how much money was left in the electronic voucher. I discovered that it was worth €330, which meant that the price of the trip would be reduced by a total of €405. At this point I stopped, slept on it, then finally decided to book the tour. After I had received confirmation of my booking I went to my local library, where I borrowed the *Lonely Planet* guide to Africa, which offered a very brief – though useful – guide to Egypt. Two more books from the library, *Egypt and the Egyptians* by Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter and *Lives of the Ancient Egyptians* by Toby Wilkinson, gave far more background information and proved to be very interesting. The next thing I had to do was apply for a visa to enter Egypt; as soon as I had paid €91 for this and had received it in December, I began to fill my little leather suitcase with a selection of light cotton shirts and all the various things that I would need for the trip.

At midday, I put down *Brideshead Revisited*, pulled a package containing a cheese and ham sandwich out of my backpack and ate it while people came, went and queued at the various airport gates. When I had finished eating, I gulped down some water from the nearby water fountain, then washed my hands in the men's room. I then managed to find somewhere to sit near the actual gate from where our Egyptair plane would leave for Cairo. After a long wait, a queue finally formed and we were allowed to board the aircraft. I found myself sitting in the middle, near the wings, between two ladies; the one by the window, who was chatty and friendly, was named Rosaleen. I soon discovered that we had many things in common, such as a love of classical music, and that we were avid BBC Radio 3 listeners. As we had plenty to talk about, the time went quickly.

The plane eventually took off at 1.40 p.m. and the journey started. I was glad that I had eaten my sandwich earlier, for lunch was served quite late. The main hot dish consisted of lamb, potatoes and cooked vegetables. Rosaleen and I skipped the desert, which looked as though it contained fresh fruit, for both of us had been warned about the dangers of eating certain types of fresh fruit and salad in Egypt. We had been advised to eat only fruit that had been peeled.

The meal over, Rosaleen began to watch a film: *The Shawshank Redemption* (which I had seen some years previously) and I continued to read my book. As we passed over Venice, we saw the sun setting. By now the lights in the plane had been

dimmed, allowing people to have a nap. However, one of the ladies in our group, who was sitting on the other side of the plane, constantly coughed loudly. I correctly identified it as a smoker's cough.

At long last we began to approach Cairo; by now we had advanced our watches by two hours and it was about eight o'clock. Looking out of the window, we could see the huge city beneath us lit up. We finally landed at about 8.30 p.m. Outside the plane we boarded a bus which, when full, drove us quite a long distance to the airport building. Although the arrivals area was huge and impressive, the service was very slow. The passport control was rather chaotic, and we had a very long wait for our luggage to arrive. At this point we met our guide: a pleasant young man named Dodi. He later explained that this was not his real name, which was Emad Fathy; as the late Princess Diana's companion Emad Fayed was better known as Dodi, our guide had been given this nickname.

When at last the luggage had been reclaimed (though one lady's luggage had mistakenly been sent to Luxor), we left and followed Dodi to the exit. Here we waited for a security man who would accompany us on the coach that would bring us to the hotel. When the coach arrived and all the luggage was stowed away in it, we set off and drove through the busy capital's heavy traffic. During the journey, Dodi spoke to us over the coach's loudspeaker system, welcoming us and telling us about the constantly expanding capital, which now housed some 22,624,000 people. He also told us about the currency used here, the Egyptian pound (£, E£, £E, LE or EGP), which had been losing its value over the past few years. For example, in 2008 there had been about E£10 to the British pound, whereas now there were E£64.46 – or about E£53 to the euro. He advised us not to bother changing money, for people here preferred to be paid in euro or dollars, especially in paper notes, which could then be put into bank accounts. (The only disadvantage about this was that prices of goods could sneakily be increased when converted into foreign currencies.) Dodi also told us what to expect during our stay in Egypt, and mentioned some tantalizing optional tours and events that we could avail of if we so wished.

After a twenty-minute journey through heavy and slow-moving traffic, passing some rather exotic-looking buildings and mosques, we found ourselves driving beside the River Nile and approaching our accommodation for the next two nights: the Holiday Inn Cairo Maadi Hotel. A security man pulled back a big heavy gate, and we drove in. While our luggage was being taken out of the coach, we were given electronic keys to our rooms and had our passports checked – a procedure that took quite a long time.

Eventually I was free to go up to my room on the sixth floor. After a certain amount of confusion in the small lifts – I discovered that a sensor inside had to be tapped with the electronic key before the button for the floor was pressed – I went up, accompanied by a bellboy who insisted on carrying my little suitcase to my room and then stood smiling at me inside until I gave him some money. The large room contained two single beds and was very luxurious. Glass doors led to a small balcony, from which a view of the River Nile could be seen in the darkness. Although late by now, it was still very warm outside.

Once I had organized my things, I sat down to a simple supper of a bread roll and some cheese. After I had washed my feet and written about my journey in my diary, I finally went to bed at 1.15 a.m. (11.15 p.m. in Dublin).



Sunday, 1 December

Although it was quite cool out on the balcony first thing this morning, it was a fine sunny day. Before me was the calm River Nile, seen now in daylight. I had woken at seven o'clock after a short night's sleep and now was doing my morning exercises with the balcony door slightly open. As I was washed and dressed by the time I received my wakeup call, I went downstairs to the restaurant for breakfast. After a fairly good meal (cereal, hot food including scrambled egg and sausages, then some small buns and tea) I returned briefly to my room, then went down to the lobby to join most of the others at nine o'clock. I was not too surprised that certain people did not turn up on time and kept us waiting.

At last we went outside, got into our coach, and set off through the heavy traffic towards the newly-opened Grand Egyptian Museum, on the other side of the Nile. On the way, Dodi gave us receivers and earphones so that we would be able to listen to the explanations during our stay. He also told us about the buildings that we passed on the way and, as we approached our destination, informed us that the new museum had been designed by the Irish architect Róisín Heneghan and her Chinese colleague Shi-Fu Peng of Heneghan Peng Architects. The organizers had received 1,557 entries from 82 countries, making it the second largest architectural competition in history. The judging had been completed in June 2003.



*The Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo*

We eventually stopped at this huge, low-lying building, which was shaped like a chamfered triangle in plan. Built on a large site two kilometres northwest of the pyramids, the museum's east and west walls point directly to the Great Pyramid of Khufu and the Pyramid of Menkaure. When we left the coach, we went through turnstiles, put on our earphones and listened to what Dodi had to say about the extraordinary building before us. We stopped to admire the unusual features of the museum's exterior; one section was adorned with hieroglyphs and cartouches.

Inside there was a huge entrance hall, the size of which made us all gasp in amazement. In it was a large statue of the pharaoh Ramesses II placed in a prominent position. Dodi told us how this 82-ton, 3,200-year-old and 11-metres-tall statue had been brought to the then unfinished museum: it had been transported, in a standing position, by two huge lorries that had travelled very slowly overnight through the city from Ramesses Square, where the statue had originally stood.



*The entrance hall of the Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo*

When we had finished looking around this huge central hall, Dodi pointed to some seats near a gift shop where we would meet after seeing around the museum. He then brought us to a gently inclined travelator that slowly brought us upwards towards the exhibition rooms, passing a number of stone statues on our left, then stone columns. At the top, we paused to look through a large window that afforded a fine view of the pyramids of Giza in the distance: our first glimpse of these world-famous ancient burial places.



*Some of the many artefacts displayed in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo*

From here we made our way towards the twelve rooms that housed many artefacts carefully arranged in chronological order, which had originally been housed in the older National Egyptian Museum in Cairo's city centre. Since this new museum had only been open to the public within the past month, many of the important exhibits – including the famous Tutankhamun relics – had not yet been moved here.





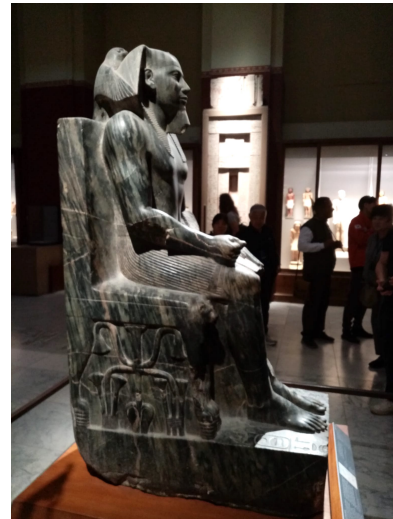
*Items on display in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo*

(For this reason, we would be brought to the National Egyptian Museum this afternoon to see them.) We stopped at a big chart that showed us what periods of Egyptian history were represented in each of the twelve rooms, and then went into the first one, which contained items from the earliest period. What we saw in this room – and the subsequent ones – was a fantastic collection of various things: sections of carved and painted stone walls, jewellery, statues of various sizes and styles (including a wonderful painted one of a seated scribe), painted models of warriors holding spears and shields, small painted models of people doing everyday chores, a model house, model wooden boats containing model people, a mummified crocodile and, in the final few rooms, a stone sarcophagus and various objects dating from the Roman period. As we did not rush, Dodi patiently explained everything to us and then, when we had seen everything, left us and told us to be back at the seats downstairs by a certain time. In a bit of a daze by this stage, I wandered back through the rooms and stopped to look at a few things once again before returning to the main hall and joining my companions. Many of them had gone into a gift shop nearby and now were emerging with souvenirs and presents.

When we were finally all together, we left and headed back towards the coach. However, I lagged behind, for two of the ladies seemed to be in no hurry whatsoever to leave. I kept my eye on them and encouraged them to hurry. Eventually they caught up with the rest of us and we returned to the coach. I joined Rosaleen, as I had done this morning, in the seat behind the security man at the front.

We now drove back to the city centre and stopped at a boat that had been moored to the bank of the River Nile, and which was now used as a restaurant. We were brought up to the shaded top deck, where we sat down and were given a basic, though tasty lunch: an assortment of starters that were quite filling, a main course consisting of a huge helping of chicken with rice and vegetables (which none of us were able to finish), and a dessert. I washed all this down with a bottle of Sakara beer, which had been recommended to us. During the meal I had the pleasure of sitting beside Kate, whom I had met the previous day in Dublin Airport.

After the meal, I made use of the men's room where a young man made a great show of cleaning the floor and being helpful, in the hope of receiving a tip. As I now had some coins in my pocket after paying for the beer, I gave him €1 when I left.



*The Egyptian Museum, Cairo, and a statue of Khafre enthroned*

Back in the coach we now drove through some narrow streets through chaotic traffic to the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, now commonly known as the National Egyptian Museum in order to distinguish it from the modern Grand Egyptian Museum that we had visited during the morning. This national museum turned out to be a pleasant redbrick building in Tahrir Square; it had been designed by the French architect Marcel Dourgnon in 1897 and was built in 1902 by the Italian company of Giuseppe Garozzo and Francesco Zaffrani. When we got out of the bus, we admired the classical garden and fountain in front of the building while listening to what Dodi had to tell us about the museum, then went inside.

We now found ourselves in a rather dark interior packed with people from all parts of the globe. Dodi led us into some of the rooms and showed us several important items, such as a statue of the pharaoh Khafre enthroned, a tiny ivory carving of Khufu (whose great pyramid we had seen in the distance this morning), and statues of Menkaure, all of whom were fourth-dynasty (2613–2498 BCE) pharaohs.



*The throne<sup>1</sup> and a ceremonial chair of Tutankhamun, Egyptian Museum, Cairo*



When we reached the far end of the building, we ascended a grand staircase and found ourselves in the Tutankhamun section: a large area containing various items found in the young pharaoh's tomb, now displayed in glass cases. One of the most striking objects was the throne of the young Tutankhaten (later Tutankhamun): a relatively small wooden armchair covered in gold leaf with a depiction of the famous pharaoh and his wife, Ankhesenpaaten (later Ankhesenamun), on the inner side of the back. Above them could be seen rays coming down from the Aten, the god represented by the disk of the sun. An elaborately decorated ceremonial chair with a curved seat was displayed in another glass case, and not far away could be seen one of the two black and gold figures that had guarded a blocked doorway in the tomb.



*Top: Tutankhamun's middle and inner coffins<sup>2</sup>; bottom: Tutankhamun's death mask<sup>3</sup>*

However, the main and most impressive things to be seen in this part of the museum were displayed in three dark rooms where photography was prohibited: the second and third elaborate gold-plated sarcophagi (both of which had been encased in an outer first sarcophagus) in which Tutankhamun's body had been placed. The spectacle was truly stunning and I spent quite some time examining these two

amazing sarcophagi, marvelling at the detail of the ornamentation. It was hard to believe that such fine and highly accurate work had been done some 3,345 years ago. Indeed, I began to feel quite emotional looking at these fine masterpieces from the distant past, for I had waited for so long for this moment; for me, it was a dream that had finally come true. Also on display in these darkened rooms was Tutankhamun's death mask, which originally had rested directly on the shoulders of the mummy inside the innermost gold coffin. Made of two sheets of gold that were hammered together, the mask weighed 10.23 kilograms or 22½ pounds. As preparations for the young pharaoh's mummification had been done in a great hurry, some experts believe that the mask had been originally intended for another pharaoh.

Dazzled by all the gold, along with the inlay of enamel and semiprecious stones, I turned my attention to some smaller objects displayed in glass cabinets, took one last lingering look at the superb coffins, then left the darkened rooms and made my way down to the exit, which Dodi had pointed out to us earlier. Unsurprisingly, the way out brought me through a very busy souvenir shop, where I bought a good-quality printed guide to the museum and three types of special soap for a friend.



*The Khan el Khalili Bazaar, Cairo*

From here I wandered outside, where I sat down in the shade and chatted to some of my companions until Dodi arrived to collect us. We now got on the coach and were driven through various narrow and crowded streets to the Khan el Khalili Bazaar. As several of us, including me, were tired by now and did not want to see this, we decided to stay in the coach. However, as the driver had to park the coach in a nearby parking area, this was not possible. We therefore followed Dodi to a nearby restaurant where we could order a hot drink and relax while the ladies went off to look at the shops. The owner brought us through the rather scruffy premises and invited us to sit down at tables overlooking the entrance of the bazaar: a narrow street lined with small shops selling souvenirs, clothing and many other things. The boss, who was cheerful and had a good sense of humour, asked us what we wanted to drink; some of us chose strong coffee, served in glasses, and others, including myself, asked for tea. We passed the time agreeably by chatting and laughing, but were constantly interrupted by people, mostly men, who kept arriving and trying to sell us something. Kate, who was sitting opposite me, made the mistake of making eye contact with these people, who constantly did their best to persuade her to buy something. Fortunately, she

eventually managed to get rid of them. Although a very noisy part of the capital, the noise level suddenly increased when the deafening call to prayer began a large mosque nearby.

At last we all assembled together outside the restaurant and Dodi brought us back to the coach. We now returned to our hotel in the dark and went upstairs to a noisy disco area where we were treated to free drinks and nibbles that had been kindly paid for by Dodi. As I was tired by now and not much in the mood for this, I joined a group of my female companions and asked for a glass of orange juice. As the ladies were talking among themselves about things that did not interest me, I soon excused myself and went up to my room, where I relaxed and wrote some of today's diary entry. As I felt hungry later, I went down to the restaurant where we had eaten breakfast this morning, and helped myself to a plate of fish, rice and vegetables, which I washed down with a small bottle of white wine. I finished the meal with a sinful selection of cakes and desserts chosen by the head waiter. The bill came to a little over E£900, which I increased to E£1,000 (about €18). I then returned to my room and went to bed. It had been quite a fascinating day.

Monday, 2 December

Although we would be leaving Cairo later today, this morning we would be taken to see the famous pyramids of Giza – surely the most extraordinary and one of the best-known sights in Egypt. I got up at seven o'clock and, after an early breakfast, returned to my room and left my little bit of luggage outside my bedroom door as instructed. I was down in the reception area by nine o'clock but, as my little suitcase and bag had not been brought down to a storeroom as arranged, I spoke to the man in charge who said that my luggage would be fetched and stored.

I then went out to the coach, where I joined my companions, but we had to wait some considerable time for the two unreliable ladies to join us. Eventually we got going and drove through heavy traffic to the outskirts of Cairo, where we saw endless badly-built and ugly apartment blocks, many of which were unfinished and had no roofs. The reason for the lack of roofs was explained to us: it was a clever way of avoiding paying tax as the building was deemed to be unfinished, and it facilitated the building of an additional floor if and when the family expanded. Flooding by rain was not a major worry, for it rains only ten or eleven times a year in Cairo.

Eventually we reached Giza (the south-western part of Cairo) and stopped in a large car park that contained many other tourist coaches. As I had done on the previous day, I hopped out of my seat to help my companion Rosaleen and several of the other ladies to negotiate the steep steps. We had now arrived at the largest pyramid at the site, named after the pharaoh who had been buried here: the Great Pyramid of Khufu, which had been built in about 2,600 BCE. From here we had a distant view of the other pyramids: the second tallest one, Khafre, the smallest one, Menkaure, and three subsidiary structures associated with Menkaure's pyramid.

As we approached the mighty pyramid of Khufu, we turned on our receivers and listened to what Dodi had to say about it. The oldest of the famous Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, it served as the tomb of the pharaoh Khufu, who ruled during the Fourth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom. At the original height of 146.6 metres (481 feet), this Great Pyramid was the world's tallest human-made structure for more than 3,800 years. Over time, most of the smooth white limestone casing had been removed, lowering the structure's height to 138.5 metres (about 454 feet). The pyramid was built by quarrying an estimated 2.3 million large blocks locally, weighing 6 million



tonnes in total; the majority of the stones were not uniform in size or shape, and were only roughly shaped. It is thought that a wide ramp was constructed around the pyramid, which was used to drag the blocks up to the level at which they were needed. Evidence of the tools used to cut the blocks was discovered in an abandoned quarry nearby: hardened arsenic copper chisels, wooden mallets, ropes, and stone tools. Wetting the stone blocks shortened the time needed to cut them. It has been calculated that about 3,500 quarrymen could have produced the 250 blocks per day that were needed to complete the pyramid within 27 years. It has been calculated that between 13,200 to roughly 40,000 conscript labourers, who lived in workers' camps nearby, were needed to build this pyramid.



*Khufu, the largest of the Pyramids of Giza, outside Cairo*

Although little was to be seen inside the pyramid, for everything in it had been stolen, anyone who wanted to go inside could join a queue and buy a ticket at the main entrance. As I was determined to see the interior chamber, having come all this way, I was happy to leave my bulky camera, receiver and earphones with Rosaleen, join a few of the others, clamber up some of the huge stone blocks to the entrance and buy a ticket. With me came Kate and an elderly man named Eoghan, who had brought two walking sticks with him. Dodi had warned us that it would not be easy to make our way up to the main burial chamber.

At first we had to wait until a large group of people emerged and then, after some prompting from people behind us – ‘Come on, what’s keeping you? Let’s go in!’ – the young people ahead of us finally made a move and in we went. As the interior was lit with electric lights, we had no trouble seeing where we were going. The first bit was easy, for the long corridor was level and the ceiling was high. However, the next section, which sloped upwards and had a very low ceiling, had to be clambered up in a crouched position. To prevent people slipping, wooden laths had been placed at regular intervals along the floor. When we reached the end of this section, we walked along another one that was both level and high. Several times I had to help Kate, as

awkward steps from one section to another had to be negotiated. Eoghan, who had been following us at a slower pace, had disappeared from view by now.



*Left: at the entrance of Khufu; right: the sarcophagus inside<sup>4</sup>*

At the end of this level section came an exceptionally low but short one; at one point I raised my head to see what was in front of me and banged my head against the stone ceiling. After a moment of sharp pain and dizziness, I stumbled forward and made it into the tall inner chamber. Here, the ancient granite sarcophagus that had once housed Khufu's coffin could be seen at the far end. The space looked exactly like what I had seen on a television programme just about a week previously: the ceiling, consisting of nine stone slabs, was very high, and the walls were made of granite blocks. In one corner were several ugly-looking pieces of electrical equipment that supplied fresh but hot air to the chamber. Kate and I did not spend much time in this stuffy environment; after I had taken a few photographs, we left and began our journey back to the entrance. This time I went ahead of Kate and helped her whenever she needed it. Going down the slopes turned out to be far less energy-sapping than going up, though earlier I had seen people looking very exhausted while making their way out. At last we reached the entrance and breathed fresh air once again.

Outside we met some of our companions and walked with them to a nearby café, where we relaxed in the shade. When everybody was together once again, we returned to our coach along a path lined with souvenir shops, where vendors kept approaching us, trying to sell us various things. Keeping with Kate, I avoided all eye contact with them and waved them away.



*The Pyramids of Giza*

Back in the coach, we drove around the area, passing the other two main pyramids, Menkaure and Khafre, and stopped in a car park where we had a good view of all three pyramids and, in the distance, the city of Cairo. As Dodi had promised, this spot offered the best views of the pyramids. Down on the sand, a short distance from where we had gathered, was a lone camel; when its owner appeared, people were invited to have their photographs taken either with the animal or on it. I stayed put, but a few members of our group climbed up to the seat and were lurched forward when the camel stood up. For those taking videos of what was happening, the owner got the camel to walk around in a circle.

While this was happening, Angelina (the lady whose luggage had been sent to Luxor) placed a teddy bear wearing a red jacket bearing the words 'Louisburgh Foróige' on a low wall, facing the pyramids, and took a photograph. She had done this for her nephew, a first-year student who was involved in a youth development programme known as Foróige. This programme encouraged students to bring the teddy bear, known as Louis (from Louisburgh) on holidays, and take photos of him with the logo on the back of the jacket facing the camera. At the end of the school year, the students would be encouraged to put together a portfolio of all the places that Louis had visited.



*The Sphinx, near the Pyramids of Giza*

We eventually left and drove to the other famous attraction nearby, the Sphinx. According to some of the experts, the face of this huge limestone statue of a reclining Sphinx appears to represent the pharaoh Khafre, which would date the construction to some time between c. 2558–2532 BCE. We were told that the original shape of the Sphinx, the oldest known monumental statue in Egypt, was cut from one piece of bedrock, but it has since been restored using layers of limestone blocks. Nobody knows why the nose was broken off; close inspection suggests a deliberate act using rods or chisels. In order to gain access to it, we were brought through the Valley Temple, which had at one time been used for mummification ceremonies, then afterwards as a sun temple. Dodi drew our attention to the fact that there were hardly any gaps between the blocks of granite used to build the walls. No roof had been found when the temple had been excavated; it is believed that the stone blocks may

have been taken to build houses. Dodi also told us that an altar had once been placed between the Sphinx's long paws. When we had reached a high platform beside the huge statue, we rested while people took photographs of the famous head and the view of the pyramids behind it.

After visiting the Sphinx, we were driven to a village nearby, where we were brought to a place where we could watch a demonstration of how papyrus was made. The demonstration, given to us by a young man who spoke heavily accented English, was interesting enough, but I made myself scarce afterwards as I had no intention of buying any of the gaudy artwork that had been printed on the sheets of rough papyrus.

We then drove back to our hotel in the city, where we collected our luggage. After another delay, caused by the same two unreliable ladies who had held us up this morning, we set off for the airport, for we were now to fly to Luxor, where our cruise up the River Nile would start. After another long drive, we eventually arrived at the domestic terminal building, which looked a little shoddy, and checked in for our flight. As we had not eaten any lunch, most of us went upstairs to a small café, where I ordered a toasted bread and cheese sandwich. I ate this while sitting with some of my companions, and drank some bottled water that I had taken from the hotel.

When I had finished eating, I discovered that it was time for us to proceed to the boarding gate. Slightly confused by the signage, I asked a man who worked in the airport where we should go, and he pointed us in the right direction. Once again our bags were scanned (I was able to hang on to my remaining water) and we sat down in a general area until we discovered that we could proceed to the plane. However, after waiting quite a while outside the door, we were told that the staff had not finished cleaning inside, and so we were sent back to the waiting area.

When at last the plane was ready, we returned along the covered walkway and boarded it. As the more troublesome of the two ladies, who perhaps had an autistic spectrum disorder, sat down beside me, I took my copy of *Brideshead Revisited* out of my bag and began to read it. By the time we took off it was dark outside, and, as the plane rose into the night sky, the lights of Cairo twinkled below and gradually disappeared from view. The next section of our trip was about to start.

## Notes

1. Courtesy of [egyptmuseumcairo.eg/thecollection/](http://egyptmuseumcairo.eg/thecollection/)
2. Courtesy of Wikipedia and La Russa, the Egyptian Museum, Cairo
3. Courtesy of Wikipedia and Roland Unger
4. Courtesy of Wikipedia and Jon Bodsworth