

3 – ASWAN AND AROUND

Thursday, 5 December

When I woke at six o'clock this morning and went to breakfast at 6.45, I discovered that we had arrived in Aswan. I was ready by 7.30 to go on a tour that would bring us, first of all, to the Philae Temple. This, I knew, had been removed from its location on Philae Island and reassembled on Agilkia Island after the new high dam, constructed during the 1960s, had caused the river to rise close to the historic site. Our journey this morning started in a coach that drove us through the scruffy outskirts of the city and brought us to a small port where we saw lots of small boats coming and going. Walking down a wooden jetty, we approached one of the boats and scrambled aboard. Very shortly afterwards we set off and sailed quickly to the nearby island.

It did not take us long to reach the temple, which was believed to be one of the burying-places of the god Osiris (the god of fertility, agriculture, the afterlife, resurrection, life, and vegetation), who was held in high reverence by the Egyptians to the north and the Nubians to the south. In fact, the temple was dedicated to both Osiris and Isis, who were brother and sister, and who were also married.



Philae Temple, Agilkia Island, near Aswan

Once we had gone through the entrance with the tickets that Dodi had given to us, we walked a short distance and found ourselves looking at the fine temple that was at the end of a square flanked on either side by elegant porticoes. While Dodi told us about the place and its history, I took several photographs using both my camera and phone. Although the place was in good condition, many of the carved figures had been damaged by the Coptic Christians who had brought the ancient Egyptian culture to an end. Inside the temple we saw lots of columns and intricate carvings on the stone walls. Once again I was surprised to discover that the temple was far larger than I had imagined it to be. Dodi drew our attention to various details, such as some small

temples; one of them, dedicated to Isis, Hathor and a wide range of deities related to midwifery, was covered with sculptures representing the birth of Ptolemy Philometor, and also a figure of the god Horus. The story of Osiris was also represented on the walls of this temple. An elaborate cross was also carved on to one of the columns; no doubt this was added by a Christian. The place was also home to a family of cats.



Top: a decorated wall in the Philae Temple; bottom: Trajan's Kiosk, Agilkia Island

We made our way through the temple fairly quickly and soon emerged at the back. I took some more photos and wandered over to an unfinished Roman monument, known as Trajan's Kiosk – or Pharaoh's Bed by the local people. After I had looked around the place again, I wandered over to a nearby café, where I joined my companions and drank some water. When we were all ready, we left in a boat and headed back to the mainland. By the time we arrived at the port, the place was full of vendors selling souvenirs. One item caught my attention: a simple small two-stringed fiddle with a circular soundboard, held upright and bowed with the hand facing upwards. I was immediately reminded of a similar type of instrument played in China: the *erhu* (literally 'two strings').

Aboard our coach once again, we now drove across the old dam spanning the Nile and continued southwards along the west side of the River Nile, approaching the modern and more famous High Dam, which had a lot of heavy security along the approach to it. When we drove along a straight road, with water on either side, Dodi told us that we were actually driving across the dam! To our right was the huge Lake

Nasser, which is five hundred kilometres long, and to our left was the River Nile. Despite the presence of so many signs warning that no photography was allowed, we stopped at a certain point, did a U-turn, drove back a little and stopped near a tourist shop and café, where we were allowed to take photographs! Here we looked at and snapped pictures of the river and the dam looking northwards, then crossed the road and took photos of Lake Nasser, which Dodi told us was full of crocodiles. He also mentioned that people caught baby crocodiles and brought them home, where they were treated as pets until they became too big. When this happened, they were brought back to the lake. From these two vantage points we were able to see the huge dam clearly, and also the buildings at each end.



Top: the River Nile from the High Dam; bottom: Lake Nasser from the High Dam

Having looked at all this, we clambered aboard our coach once again and were driven back towards Aswan, but we stopped en route in Sadat Street near Aswan's city centre to visit a perfumery and aromatherapy clinic, where we would be told about the products on sale. Dodi, however, did warn us that the products were very expensive. Inside, we went down a staircase to a large basement room where we were invited to sit down on seats arranged around the walls. A man introduced himself and told us about the products available here; the names of them were printed on lists, copies of which were now given to us. I allowed a couple of female employees to spray or rub a little of some of the various liquids on my hands or wrists and, as instructed, I inhaled the perfumes. The demonstrations went on for a while, then

stopped when the young man told us about the prices and the discounts on offer if one were to buy certain quantities of items. Angelina, who was sitting beside me and had been diligently writing everything down, got such a shock at the total cost that she quickly lost interest. However, several ladies in our group joined a queue at the cash desk on the ground floor.

I now wandered outside to join some of my companions and chat to them. I noticed that a police car was parked nearby. However, its presence did not stop local people approaching us and trying to sell us souvenirs. We had to wait quite a long time for the ladies in the shop to rejoin us. At last we set off and drove back to our ship in Aswan, arriving there in time for lunch at 1.30 p.m.

After a good meal of fish, potatoes and vegetables, followed by some slices of orange and small cakes, I went to my room and had a nap for about thirty minutes. I then got myself ready and joined the others in the entrance hall for our boat trip around Elephantine Island and a visit to Seheil Island. This was where the Nubian people had been moved to after their original homeland had been flooded by the Nile after the completion of the new High Dam.



The boat trip to Seheil Island, south of Aswan

We now transferred to a small tourist boat that was moored nearby and set off as soon as everyone was on board. Despite the stench of fuel from the motor, it was nice to travel along the river, especially when the sun emerged from behind some clouds and the weather suddenly improved. We saw just a little of Elephantine Island as we sailed past it and headed southwards. Eventually we left the city of Aswan behind and began to approach Seheil. When loud pop music was played over a loudspeaker, I followed other people's example and climbed up to the top deck on the roof of the boat, where it was much quieter.

Earlier, Dodi had told us about the Nubians, a Nilo-Saharan speaking ethnic group indigenous to a region that is now in northern Sudan and southern Egypt. Originating from the early inhabitants of the central Nile valley, they are believed to represent one of the earliest cradles of civilization. In the southern part of Egypt, the Nubians differ culturally and ethnically from the Egyptians, although many have intermarried with members of other ethnic groups, especially Arabs. They speak Nubian languages as a mother tongue, which are not taught to non-Nubians, and also Arabic as a second language. Dark-skinned, they differ considerably from the Egyptian people.

As we approached the small island, we noticed that many of the houses and buildings were painted in bright colours. When our boat had docked and we had stepped on to dry land, we followed Dodi up some narrow streets to a large house, painted in a rather shocking shade of blue. This belonged to the Rabihi family, whose name was painted over the door and also on the walls. Hanging over the door was a stuffed crocodile. Although this was supposed to be a 'typical' dwelling, it looked rather touristy and over-the-top. Just to the left of the entrance was another doorway with 'WC' painted over it.



A house on Seheil Island

Inside, we stopped at what looked like a large tank covered with wire netting, where we could see a couple of crocodiles. On the far side of this a few baby crocodiles could be seen in another tank. The man of the house then appeared, took out one of the little ones, tied up its mouth, and invited people to hold it for photographs. I just touched it briefly, recoiled, and moved away. I looked around the large room with its blue, yellow and pink walls, stopping to look at framed collections of paper money from various parts of the world, photographs of people (possibly members of the family), and a display of handbags, headscarves, necklaces and figurines, which I guessed were probably for sale. Shortly afterwards I joined my companions in another room, where they were seated at a table drinking tea or soft

drinks. I drank a cup of tea, which was very welcome. I then wandered up to the roof, where I had a look at various curved roofs and unusual architecture that could be seen from this vantage point.



A pharmacy on Seheil Island

Soon afterwards, we left the house and followed Dodi through the narrow streets past the many souvenir shops; although the place was certainly geared up for tourism, it was interesting to see. At one point we came across a couple of camels outside a building, passed more brightly-coloured houses, and stopped to photograph an amusing advertisement for Viagra, which I had spotted outside a pharmacy.



A school on Seheil Island

We then turned left, heading for the river, and walked into a building that turned out to be a school. After I had taken a few photos of the place, I joined my companions in one of the classrooms, where a teacher, dressed in a long white robe and holding a long stick, was waiting for us. He was standing beside a white board displaying the letters of the Arabic alphabet written on the left side, from right to left, and the numbers one to ten, on the right side, ranged from top to bottom. Rapping his stick against the board to get our attention, he got us to repeat the names of the letters: 'alif, baa', 'taa', 'thaa', etc., which we managed to do reasonably successfully. After we had gone through the Arabic alphabet, he then turned to the numbers. Pointing to the first one, he gave us the pronunciation, *wáaHida*, which we repeated. Number two was pronounced 'ithnéen, and number three was *thaláatha*. He then went through the same three numbers again, and we repeated them after him. After we had done this, he pointed his stick at the first one, said nothing, then pointed the stick in our direction: silence. He pointed the stick at number two, then at us: silence again. He then pointed to number three, and once again it was greeted with silence. Feigning exasperation, he repeated the pronunciations, got us to repeat them, then tried us once again: none of us could remember the words in Arabic. He then went through all the numbers, but nobody could repeat them without his help. He then gave us the numbers in the Nubian language, which were even more difficult to remember.



In the school classroom on Seheil Island

He now ordered one of the men in our group to step up to the board. Once again he gave the man the pronunciations and, like the rest of us, the man could not remember them. Putting on a show of anger, the teacher ordered the man to turn around and face the board with his hands against the wall above his head, and went through the motions of slapping his bum, much to the amusement of everyone. The man was ordered to sit down and, much to my consternation, I was called up. Like all the others, I failed to remember the pronunciations and had to submit to a similar 'beating'. A lady was ordered up, but she was as bad as everyone else.

Then, much to everyone's surprise, Eoghan, the elderly man in our group, got up, approached the teacher, ordered him to give him his stick, and pointed to the numbers. 'A h-aon, a dó, a trí', he began in Irish and, to everyone's great amusement, went through all of the numbers without stopping. He then pointed the stick at the teacher, glared at him, and challenged him to repeat all the numbers. At this, the teacher raised

his eyes to heaven, shrugged, turned to the wall, and proffered his posterior for a beating. At this point, everyone in the classroom erupted into uncontrolled laughter.

The session ended with the teacher writing our names in the Arabic script, and some of the people tried writing them on the board, copying the letters that the teacher had written. Maybe because I was hoping to have a chance of doing this, I was not invited up to the board.

Before we finished, Dodie asked us what our ‘Arabic’ numerals were based on. Knowing the answer to this one, and having noticed the original form of the numbers displayed over the white board, I put up my hand and shouted, ‘Angles’. Dodie confirmed this and pointed to some of the numbers displayed above him.

We finally said goodbye to the teacher, who was now smiling broadly, left the school and walked to a nearby jetty, where we waited for a boat to bring us back to Aswan. I sat down at the aft of the boat with Melissa, a young lady with black hair who was very friendly with everyone, and whom I had often seen in deep conversation with Dodi. As the boat sailed away from the island and the sun began to set, Melissa told me all about herself and her interest in the spiritual aspect of ancient Egypt’s religion and philosophy. A recently confirmed priestess of a confraternity dedicated to the veneration of the Egyptian goddess Isis, she had been here not so long ago and had returned to visit the country once again. I found her to be quite a fascinating person, and we had a long and interesting conversation as the boat sailed back to Aswan and our cruise liner.



Asking for trouble with Melissa, Aswan (courtesy Kate Monaghan)

Eventually we clambered off the boat and made our way along the jetty to our liner. En route, I spotted a sign that was hanging over a seat that read, ‘Please do not allow men and women to sit on the same seat’. I pointed this out to Melissa and, for fun, we both sat on it together and I put my arm around her. When some of our companions arrived at the spot, I pointed to the sign, and cameras were produced. When they had finished photographing us, we moved on.

Back in my room, I wrote some of my diary, then went to the restaurant, where I had a quick dinner washed down with a glass of red wine. Once again, a group of waiters, banging a drum and singing loudly, entered during the meal and presented one of the ladies in our group with a birthday cake. Obviously taken by surprise, she

allowed herself to be escorted from the table, and happily danced with the singers. When this was over, she returned to her seat and the cake was cut into thin slices, which were passed to all of us.

When this was over, I excused myself as I wanted to go to bed early because of the following morning's early start. When I rose to leave, Dodi asked me, 'What about the belly dancing?' and I politely told him that I was more interested in sleeping than watching such a spectacle. Back in my room, I got myself ready for bed. However, just as I was about to settle down for the night, I heard loud Egyptian music being played in the nearby bar: it was obviously for the belly dancer. I cursed when this started, but there was nothing that I could do to stop it. Fortunately the racket finished after half an hour or so, and shortly afterwards I fell asleep.

Friday, 6 December

I did not sleep for very long, for I was woken by a noise outside; it sounded as though somebody was trying to get attention by ringing an electric bell. However, I later discovered that it was a faulty fire alarm. As soon as the noise stopped, it started again. This went on for quite some time until the problem was finally fixed. Eventually I fell asleep again. I was woken at 3.45 a.m. by my alarm clock; while I got myself ready, the official wake up call came at four o'clock.

Shortly before 4.30 I was sipping tea in the lobby with four of my companions, all ladies. A sleepy-looking Dodi appeared a little later. We then left the ship and climbed into a minibus, in which there were two drivers – one to take over when the other got tired. When we were seated and ready to go, the engine was started and off we set towards the famous rock-cut temples of Abu Simbel that had been relocated in 1968 to higher ground so that they would not be submerged by Lake Nasser, the Aswan Dam reservoir. As the name Abu Simbel was so familiar to me, I was determined to see these two temples and so, like the ladies in the minibus, I had happily paid extra money to go on this excursion. The reason that we had started so early in the morning was because of the distance that we would have to travel: it would take us four hours to get to the site, and another four to return.

Although it was Friday, the Muslim holy day, there was little traffic on the roads at this ungodly hour, and so we made good speed at first. However, we and other vehicles had to stop just outside Aswan because the motorway that we needed to travel on was not due to open until 5 a.m. After quite a long delay, we eventually got on to the road and the driver put his foot down on the accelerator. The road bore little resemblance to a motorway, for the single road that we travelled on had only two lanes. We later discovered that the left hand side of the motorway was being built, though there was no sign of work being done to it now because of it being a holy day.

As it was pitch black at this hour of the morning, we could see nothing, and so most of us fell asleep, including Dodi. I felt very drowsy. Later, when the sun began to rise, we could see a vast expanse of flat desert on either side of the road, though we did pass an occasional rocky hill. On our right we could see hundreds of huge pylons carrying electrical cables across the otherwise bleak landscape. By now we had crossed the River Nile by using the road over the old dam, and had headed westwards. Shortly afterwards we turned and continued south-westwards.

On and on stretched the desert; I slept now and then, and later listened to what some of the ladies were chatting about. As they all were very interested in history and archaeology, they were quite knowledgeable about various cultures and events during the distant past. A couple of them had bad coughs.

After about two hours, we eventually came to a stop at a rough-and-ready wayside restaurant and shop. After having a quick look around the place, I queued to get a cup of very milky tea in the shop. I then sat down with the ladies and ate some of the food, including a banana, that we had been given this morning in bags. When we had finished our breakfast, we returned to the minibus and continued our journey.

We now passed a canal, a lake, and a military barracks, and saw patches of green in the distance, where farm machinery could be seen moving about. These large green fields looked very much out of place in the middle of such a stark desert!

Eventually we turned left off the road, bumping across a rough surface, and gradually began to approach our destination, Abu Simbel. At last we reached the place and stopped in a large bus and car park. Dodi gave us tickets, which we used for the electronic gates and, following him, we walked around to Lake Nasser. Turning a corner, we approached the impressive entrances of the two massive temples that had been moved from a lower level and rebuilt here: the Great Temple of Ramesses II on the left, and the Small Temple of Hathor and Nefertari on the right.



The Great Temple of Ramesses II, Abu Simbel

We stopped outside the Great Temple of Ramesses II and gathered round Dodi, who explained everything to us with the help of photographs in a folder that he had borrowed from a man a little earlier. These two temples had originally been carved out of the mountainside in the 13th century BCE, during the 19th Dynasty reign of Pharaoh Ramesses II, and construction had lasted for about twenty years. After many years the temples fell into disuse, and the Great Temple eventually became almost covered by a sand dune. The temples were forgotten by Europeans until March 1813, when the Swiss researcher Johann Ludwig Burckhardt found the smaller temple and the top frieze of the main one. Burckhardt told the Italian explorer Giovanni Belzoni about his discovery, but Belzoni, who travelled to the site, was unable to dig out an entry to the temples. Belzoni returned in 1817 and succeeded in entering the complex. A detailed early description of the temples, together with line drawings, was subsequently included in Edward William Lane's *Description of Egypt* (1825–1828).

The salvage of the Abu Simbel temples began in 1964 with a multinational team of archaeologists, engineers and skilled heavy equipment operators working together under the UNESCO banner; the project cost some \$40 million at the time. Between 1964 and 1968, the entire site was carefully cut into large blocks (up to 30 tons,

averaging 20 tons), dismantled, lifted and reassembled in the new location 65 metres higher and 200 metres back from the river. This was one of the greatest challenges of archaeological engineering in history. Up at the higher level, an artificial hill to house the temples had been built around a domed structure, under the supervision of a Polish archaeologist, Kazimierz Michałowski, who worked in the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw during the 1960s.



Inside the Great Temple of Ramesses II, Abu Simbel

When Dodi had finished telling us about the temples, and in particular about the main one in front of us, we approached it and gazed at the four colossal 20 metre (66 ft) statues, each representing Ramesses II seated on a throne and wearing the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. When we went inside to look around and take photos, we were not surprised to find it full of people. The hypostyle hall (or pronaos) was supported by eight huge decorated pillars; the colossal statues along the left-hand wall bore the white crown of Upper Egypt, while the ones on the opposite side wore the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. The second hall had four pillars decorated with beautiful scenes of offerings to the gods. From here we entered a transverse vestibule, in the middle of which was an entrance to the sanctuary. Here, against the back wall, were rock-cut sculptures of four seated figures: the divinity Ptah, the deified king Ramesses, and the gods Amun Ra and Ra-Horakhty. Dodi had told us that the axis of the temple was positioned by the ancient Egyptian architects so

that the rays of the sun would penetrate the sanctuary and illuminate three of these statues on 22 October and 22 February, leaving Ptah (the God of Darkness, on the left) unlit. This phenomenon was now reproduced by the use of an electric light.



The Small Temple of Hathor and Nefertari, Abu Simbel

When we had taken a look at some of the nearby side chambers, we left and rejoined Dodi outside. He now brought us to the other temple, dedicated to the goddess Hathor and Ramesses II's chief consort Nefertari. Here the rock-cut façade was decorated with two groups of colossi separated by a large entrance; on each side of the entrance was a statue of Ramesses, each of which was flanked by a statue of the queen. Unusually, this was one of very few instances in Egyptian art where statues of the pharaoh and his consort were equal in size.

Inside, we discovered that this temple was much smaller than the first one. Here, the hypostyle hall was decorated with scenes depicting the queen playing the sistrum (a simple hand-held percussion instrument), together with an assortment of gods. In one of the scenes, Ramesses was either presenting flowers or burning incense. We looked around some of the other areas in the temple, admiring the various depictions on the walls, then left.



The Temples of Ramesses II and Nefertari, Abu Simbel

Outside once again, we rejoined Dodi and walked along a path that curved around the artificial hill that had been constructed around the temples, and approached a large modern building that served as a café, a shop, and an exhibition hall. In this we watched part of a film about how the statues and various parts of the temple had been cut up and moved to their present places. When we were ready, we left, returned to our minibus and began the return journey to Aswan.

We arrived at the restaurant-cum-shop, where we had stopped during the morning, at about midday, and sat down to eat some lunch. This consisted of more goodies from the bags that we had been given. However, I saved a croissant for later.

After we had finished here, we set off again and finally arrived back at our ship in Aswan at about 2.30 p.m. As lunch had been delayed until now, we joined our companions in the restaurant. I just ate some fruit and a few small slices of cake. This done, I went up to the sun deck with my diary, pen and reading spectacles, and sat down in the shade to write my diary. When I had written enough, I asked Dodi if the nearby Coptic Orthodox Cathedral was open; after he had made a couple of enquiries, he told me that it was open all day.

I therefore put my diary aside, left the ship, and strode along the seafront, ignoring some cheeky boys who were trying to sell me various things. This, in fact, was my first experience of walking in an Egyptian street on my own; I certainly would not have done this in Cairo. As the huge cathedral was not far away, I soon reached it and went in through the open gate. As there seemed to be two entrances, a lower one and a higher one, I tried the lower one first. I now found myself in a huge low-ceilinged chapel, all of which looked very modern and clinical. The icons hanging on the walls also looked very modern and naïve. I wandered up towards where the altar was, but a curtain had been pulled across the area where it was positioned. However, as there was a gap between the curtain and one side of the opening, I was able to peer in and observe the altar and the sacred area.

I then left the lower floor and climbed up an elaborate curved staircase to the main part of the cathedral, where I was able to see the spacious interior and the inside of the fine dome above it. Although impressive, it still looked very cold and clinical. Wandering up towards where the altar was, though here it was completely hidden from view with an elaborate curtain, I found a lady who spoke English and was

showing a young couple around the place. I was invited to join the little group, and the lady told us about the various points of interest to be seen. She mentioned that the curtain nearby was only drawn back when a service was in progress, and that no members of the public were allowed into the area near the altar.

We slowly made our way towards the back of the cathedral, where a box for donations was pointed out to us. We were also told that we should give a small donation to the man who cleaned the place. I put a small amount of money into the box and, when the man appeared, gave him a couple of euro. When, on the way out, I saw the guide and the young couple heading for a souvenir shop within the grounds, I quickly left the place.

Once again I walked briskly back to the ship, returned to my room, and brought my diary up to date. Afterwards I treated myself to a very welcome shower, washed my socks, organized a few things, then went up to the dining room for my evening meal. As many members of our group had gone off to see a *son et lumière* show in the Philae Temple, only a few of my companions were dining onboard this evening. I ate with them, chatted for a while, then left shortly before ten o'clock.

Back in my room I brought my diary up to date, then went to bed. A very good, though rather exhausting day.