

PART THREE

HURGHADA



The seafront, Hurghada

5 – HURGHADA

Monday, 9 December

When we eventually reached the Red Sea (which looked very blue), we turned northwards and approached Hurghada. At first the city appeared to be very uninviting until, after a few turns, we found ourselves in a very exclusive area; we now drove along a wide street past huge modern hotels and exclusive souvenir shops. We finally came to a stop outside our large hotel: the Swiss Inn – though it bore no resemblance to anything Swiss.



The Swiss Inn Hotel, Hurghada

Inside we were brought into a room, where we were treated to complimentary soft drinks while our luggage was being brought in and rooms were being allocated to us. Eventually everything was in order and we set off with members of the staff who showed us to our rooms. I had a large comfortable room with two beds and a poorly-lit bathroom in Block 1; the block itself was about the size of a normal hotel. I was given my little suitcase and, after I had got a few things in order, I set off to help Rosaleen with her luggage. However, no sooner had I closed the door than I realized that I had left the key in my room! I cursed, told a member of the staff about what I had done, then went back to the reception area in search of Rosaleen. I helped her bring her bags to her room, which was just two doors away from mine, but neither of us could open the door. Fortunately a young man was able to help us; we had simply been leaving the electronic key too long in the lock! Once Rosaleen had moved into her room, a man working in another room came along and opened my door.



The foyer of the Swiss Inn Hotel, Hurghada

Inside my bedroom, I organized a few things, ate the last sandwich that had been part of my packed lunch, then had a much-needed shower. I also managed to send my stained trousers to the laundry to be washed. Afterwards I set about sending some photographs of recent places of interest to friends as I now had access to the hotel's free Wi-Fi service. Having done this, I made my way to the very noisy restaurant above the huge foyer, where I helped myself to a rather indifferent dinner, choosing food from various long tables scattered here and there. I asked a waiter for a glass of draught Sakara beer, and was given the beer in a small glass that would normally be used for water or a soft drink.

After the meal I took a walk to the seafront; although the Red Sea looked good, the surroundings looked very tacky. I then retired to my room to write my diary but found it very difficult thanks to loud amplified rap music and an MC shouting into a microphone to a group of young people outside. The racket went on until ten o'clock, when it mercifully stopped. By now I had developed a strong dislike of this huge and impersonal hotel and wished that I could leave it immediately.

I finished writing my diary by eleven o'clock, then finally went to bed, exhausted.

Tuesday, 10 December

I woke this morning at about seven o'clock feeling greatly refreshed after a good night's sleep. When ready, I made my way to the restaurant just before eight o'clock, thinking that it would be quiet, but it was quite busy and noisy. After a good deal of time trying to find where certain things were, I finally sat down and had breakfast. The omelette that had been made for me turned out to be rather soft and bland.

After I had finished eating, I returned to my room to wash my teeth, and shortly afterwards went out to take a walk. As it was boiling hot outside, I took care to stay in the shade as much as I could. I ambled down the wide road past various oversized plush hotels, then turned right at a junction. I now found myself in a more typical Egyptian street full of shops and various buildings, some of them in an unfinished

state, on either side of the road. This instant change was something of a shock. One shop had the words ‘Smoking Market’ displayed outside. I now had to step off the pavement from time to time as it was blocked with bricks or rubble. The construction methods being used in some of the unfinished buildings looked rather dodgy.



A street near the hotel, Hurghada

I emerged at the end of the street and found myself standing beside a busy main road full of traffic. From here I turned back and, back in the modern street where all the big hotels were, I walked a little farther. I noticed that most of the signs outside the shops here were written in English, German and Russian.

Back in the hotel I met one of the ladies in our group who asked me if I would like to go to the Hurghada Museum with her. I immediately said yes and, after she had failed to find anyone else in our group who wanted to join us, she went to a desk in the lobby and ordered a taxi. She paid €10 and, after a short delay, we went outside with the driver and set off. Having passed the museum yesterday, I knew that it was not far away. The driver, however, seemed to be rather uncertain about where it was and ended up at the exit rather than the entrance. A security man told him that he would have to go around to the other side of the building. The driver did this by turning the car around on his side of the dual carriageway and driving in the opposite direction, against the traffic. Fortunately there was a turn to the left not far away; he took this narrow road, turned left again and soon approached the museum’s entrance. When we got out of the taxi, he told us that he would wait for us.



The Hurghada Museum



Exhibits in the Hurghada Museum

Inside this new museum I bought two tickets, which more or less covered the €5 that I owed the lady for the taxi fare, and we went into the first room. Although it was dimly lit, the exhibits were very well illuminated. Arranged in chronological order, most of them were clearly labelled, though some lacked any information. Although most of the objects were small, they were nonetheless very interesting. The selection began with pottery and statues from the distant past, many of which were very beautiful, and ended with objects from the Roman period. Also included were Coptic Orthodox icons, items from a Jewish synagogue, and portraits of important people of the late 1800s and early 1900s. As in nearly every other place that we had visited, the area on the way to the exit was devoted to souvenirs and various other things for sale.

Our taxi driver approached us when we stepped outside, and in no time at all we were back in our hotel. In my room I sat down and selected more photographs that I had taken, which I sent to various friends at home. At about one o'clock I returned to the lobby to see if I could get some lunch but, noticing Dodi, I went over to him and told him that I would pay him for this afternoon's submarine experience and tomorrow's excursion. We set about doing this via a link that he sent to my phone but, as it did not work, I told Dodi that I would pay him in cash. He said that this would be fine and that I could pay him later.

At this point a minibus arrived and we were whisked off along the road to a nearby building, where we transferred to tiny little vehicles that drove us *through* the building and then to a pier overlooking the bay. Eventually a small ship made its way to us, docked and disgorged a group of people. We then climbed aboard, making for the upper deck so that we would enjoy the best view, and shortly afterwards we set off across the sea to a submarine positioned beside a jetty. I had assumed that we would be going under the water in a conventional submarine, but this turned out to be a small vessel designed expressly for tourists.

When the ship docked, we left it and made our way to the little submarine, climbing down into it using a ladder. Inside were forty seats facing the portholes in such a way that two people had a clear view through one porthole on each side. Beside me sat Angelina and her teddy bear, Louis.

As soon as we were seated and welcomed by a young man who spoke to us over the loudspeaker system, the submarine began to move forwards and then downwards.

At first we saw little or no fish, though all of a sudden a large shoal of several



In the submarine, Hurghada

different varieties appeared from nowhere. Cameras clicked as everyone tried to photograph them. We very quickly discovered why so many fish had appeared: two divers, both equipped with oxygen tanks, had scattered food into the water for them.

The divers now swam past the portholes, waving and pretending to shake hands with us. One of them had a camera and took a photograph of Louis the teddy bear beside Angelina and me. Although the fish were interesting, there were very few varieties and so I was a little disappointed; I had imagined that travelling under the sea would be similar to looking at an aquarium. However, being under water in a submarine was certainly a novelty. Everybody around me was enchanted by what they saw and amused by the divers' antics, most of which were quite novel.

Later, the submarine went lower and bumped a couple of times on the sea floor. At one point we passed fake sunken treasure, skeletons of large fish, and so forth; in one place there was even a ruined boat. At last we turned around and headed back to our starting point.

At the end of the journey we emerged from the submarine and returned to the boat. Once everyone was on board, we set off for the mainland. During the journey a photographer bothered several people, trying to take photographs of them, but they shooed him away. Four people who had turned away the photographer and were sitting opposite me, on one side of the boat, were Hungarian. Shortly afterwards, we were handed certificates for our journey beneath the waves; after we had written our names on them, one of the men on the boat wrote our names in Arabic on the right hand side. As I happened to be sitting beside an elderly lady in our group named Pauline, the man fetched another certificate and wrote 'Pauline loves Charles' in Arabic on it. Pauline laughed when she was told what he had written, and explained that we were not married! For fun, I put on a show of hugging Pauline, and she had a good chuckle. She then carefully put both certificates into her bag. When I looked at my Certificate of Experience carefully, I read that 'The holder of this certification has completed an underwater voyage along the coral reef of the Red Sea in Hurghada, Egypt The Sindbad Submarines reaches a depth of 25 meters. (*Sic*)' I had no recollection of seeing a coral reef.

We eventually returned to dry land and were driven back to our hotel. When I returned to my room, I discovered that new locks were being fitted to the bedroom doors, which meant that I did not have the room to myself. I therefore used the bathroom and, as I now felt rather peckish having eaten no lunch, walked to the seafront and went into the small Waves restaurant. Joining some of my companions, I ordered a burger and chips as that was the only food available at this time of the day. With this I had a small glass of beer. I chatted to my friends, then later returned to my room and collected my diary. I then made my way to the foyer, where I found Dodi and, having calculated how much money I owed him in the local currency, I got what I needed out of the cash machine and gave it to him. I then found a relatively quiet corner, where I sat down and began to write about what had happened today so far.

Shortly before seven o'clock I returned to my room and put my diary away. As there was no sign of my washed trousers, I telephoned reception and spoke to a man who said he would look into the matter. As arranged, I then knocked on Rosaline's door. When she emerged, we walked towards the seashore and the Lebanese Restaurant, which Dodi had recommended. While we studied the menu, we were approached by a young man who was trying to interest us in purchasing an exclusive and expensive bottle of red wine. We politely thanked him and told him that we only needed one glass of wine each with our meal. We then chose a wine from the restaurant's list and finally ordered some food. We started with a bowl of soup that we helped ourselves to from a cauldron nearby and then, after a long wait, the main course appeared: minced beef in pastry. The dessert that we ordered turned out to be a sugary concoction that had been baked, once again, in pastry.

Having eaten and chatted for some time, we ambled back to our rooms and discovered that there was more ear-splitting entertainment for youngsters in the central garden. Even with the glass doors of the balcony firmly shut, I could hear the racket while I tried to write my diary. In the end had to give up the attempt as I could not concentrate properly because of the noise. When the music did not stop at ten o'clock, I went down to the reception area to complain about it. The young man I spoke to said that they should have stopped at ten o'clock and, picking up the phone, promised me that he would speak to somebody and get them to finish. I returned to my room and was disgusted by the fact that the 'music' and shouting did not stop until 10.45 p.m. Tired by this stage, I put my diary away and went to bed. The thought that I would be leaving this dreadful place late during the following night was very comforting.

Wednesday, 11 December

Our last full day in Egypt. Having slept well, I was up shortly before seven o'clock this morning. After eating breakfast with a couple of my companions, I returned to my room and sent some more photos to friends on WhatsApp. Later I went out for a pleasant walk down to the beach, where I removed my sandals and socks and had a short paddle in the Red Sea. I dried my feet easily by lying down in the sun on one of the many deckchairs lined along the narrow beach. I then returned to my room, where I did some preparatory packing and then, at midday, made my way to the foyer, where I joined five of my companions: two men and three ladies. Dodi appeared a few minutes before we set off at 12.30 and I handed him a wad of notes (£ 2,700) for today's optional excursion into the desert to visit a Bedouin camp.

Outside the hotel we squeezed into the back of a minivan, in which there were three other people, and set off. Travelling along some of the main roads, we quickly left the city and drove inland towards the desert. At a certain point we left the road, entered an enclosed area, and parked beside some other minivans. We then climbed out of our uncomfortable vehicle and followed the driver into a large building with the words 'Shepherds Castle' painted on one side. The inside bore no resemblance to a castle, and there were no shepherds to be seen. The large hall inside looked as though it was designed for entertainment, as all the rows of seats and low tables faced a small circular stage. When we and some other people sat down, a young man began to explain to us what would be happening during the day. The first activity would be whizzing around on quad bikes over the sand, the second would be driving four-by-fours, and later we would be driven in our minivans to the Bedouin camp. We would then return to the Castle in the evening, where we would have dinner and enjoy some live entertainment that would include belly dancing and a whirling dervish performance.

When the young man finished speaking, we hired goggles, had scarves wrapped around our heads and over our noses and mouths, and followed the fellow out to a long shed that was full of quad bikes. Some of them had one seat and others had two, one behind the other. I chose one of the latter and, as I had never driven a motorbike before, asked for a driver. Once we had been given helmets, we got on our four-wheeled bikes, started them and set off across the sand. As I was sitting behind the main instructor, we set off and led the way, though another local fellow took over as leader. At first everyone drove at a relaxed pace while they got used to their bikes, going around in wide circles, and my driver kept an eye on them from a distance. Any

time one of my companions lagged behind or got into difficulty, my driver zoomed over to help.



Quad bikes in the desert near Hurghada

After a short while, during which everyone had become familiar with their bikes and the controls, we came to a stop, then set off again at a faster pace. While the others went ahead, following their leader, my driver took off at speed, bumping over the little dunes and rocks in order to keep his eye on everyone. Once again, anyone who dallied behind was urged to put on a spurt and keep up with the others. Occasionally he needed to help some of my companions when they got lost or their bikes developed problems and refused to move. As for myself, I reckoned that I was enjoying myself more than anyone else as my driver was doing far more mileage, though I did have to hold on tight for fear of being thrown off the bike!

We spent quite a lot of time doing this – much more than I expected – but finally we returned to the Castle, where we rested for a short while. Eoghan, who had not wanted to go on a quad bike, had stayed here, minding some of our belongings. After

everyone had recovered from the bikes, we were brought out to another shed that was full of four-by-four vehicles. Once again I was wary of driving and so sat beside Seán, one of the men in our group. Fortunately for everyone the vehicles were simple enough to drive, for there was only a steering wheel, an accelerator and a brake; there were no gears. One of the instructors got the vehicles going and off we went across the sandy wasteland, bumping over the dunes with the stench of diesel in our nostrils. Seán proved to be a rather erratic driver and frequently took short cuts; at one stage when he was travelling too quickly and everybody else had stopped, he crashed into the car in front of us. Fortunately no damage had been done.

Eventually we returned to the Castle, where we handed back the helmets and goggles, sat down and relaxed. As no lunch seemed to be forthcoming and I was getting hungry, I went over to a counter in one corner of the hall and ordered a hot dog with tomato ketchup. The fellow behind the counter took a long time to prepare this, but at last it arrived, piping hot. I ate it and drank some water that I had brought with me.

Soon after I had finished this we returned to our minivan and set off across the desert, following another minivan, towards the Bedouin camp – the attraction that most of us wanted to see. As it turned out to be quite a distance away, we drove quickly, bumping and swerving all over the place. As there was no road as such, only tyre marks, we wondered how the drivers knew where to go. Soon after we started, the driver played some loud Arabic pop music on the van's cassette player or CD machine. A lot of it was very much up-to-date rap music with all sorts of weird special effects, and most of the music used the Arabic scale, which incorporates quarter tones. By now I had grown quite accustomed to this scale, even though certain notes sounded quite out of tune. Occasionally we heard songs sung in our familiar Western scale.



The Bedouin camp near Hurghada

As we neared some mountains that we had noticed in the distance, we caught our first glimpse of the Bedouin camp. My heart sank when I saw a row of minivans parked by a low wall – it was obvious that we had arrived at a tourist trap. As well as lots of tourists, we noticed several permanent buildings built of brick and plaster.

Clambering out of our cramped minivans, we stretched our limbs and followed a guide to the small village. Here and there were a few basic dwellings made of black wooden sticks, presumably in the local style. A more modern stone building nearby had been painted in bright colours and the word 'Supermarket' was displayed on one side.



The supermarket in the Bedouin camp

First of all our guide brought to see three small and rather scrawny-looking camels who were tethered near some small buildings. One of them had been taught to 'kiss' visitors by licking the person's nose. I wandered around and took some photographs but was called back by one of our Castle lads, who was determined to keep us all together. Shortly afterwards we were brought into a traditional dwelling, where we saw two elderly women, completely enveloped in black clothing, baking bread on what looked like a huge pan. When it was baked and ready, our guide lifted up the large thin circular piece of bread using a stick, and encouraged everyone in the room to tear a piece off and eat it. It was quite tasty. Seeing a pretty young girl sitting near the door dressed in colourful traditional clothing, I took a photo of her.



Bedouin people in a traditional dwelling

Afterwards we were encouraged to take a look in some of the other houses, but each of them was full of trinkets for sale. Standing outside one of these places, I tried to take a photo of a lady wearing colourful traditional clothing but she obviously knew what I was trying to do and kept turning away. Eventually she turned around and went into her home.



Camels at the Bedouin camp

Eventually we were rounded up and brought to a row of small camels, which we were encouraged to ride. At first I had no intention of doing this, but changed my mind when I realized that they seemed to be easy to mount and that I had never been on a camel before. I was directed to one of them belonging to an elderly man who, without saying anything, indicated that I hold on to the short stick rising from the front of the saddle. I got up on the animal's back, held on to the stick while it got to its feet, and we prepared to set off. However, at this point a young girl appeared and communicated with the man using sign language. I now realized that the owner of the camel was a deaf mute.



A camel ride in the Bedouin camp

Shortly after we set off, the man signalled me to give him my phone so that he could take some photographs. I handed it to him and he took several of me on the camel, then adjusted it to take shots of himself with me and the camel. He also took a couple of videos. I found it somewhat amusing to discover that these people, who

were migrants and who theoretically lived out in the wilderness, knew all about our modern technology.

When we returned to our starting point, I thanked the man and pressed a euro coin into his hand. I was now happy that I had finally had the opportunity to ride on a camel. Back with the group once again, we followed our guide to some of the touristy shops, but none of us wanted to buy anything at this stage. We then continued to a large wooden building where we sat down on long benches and drank tea from tiny cups, which were brought to us by smiling ladies.

We then ambled back to our minivan, pausing at one point to look at a tiny mosque. Squeezed into our cramped vehicle, we left the place and set off towards the Castle with a dramatic view of the sun setting behind us. Soon darkness descended and we bumped our way onwards, following the other minivan, which now had its headlights on. Once again we were treated to some more 'music' from the van's loudspeakers. It was pitch black by the time we returned.

In the big hall once again, we were invited to go to a long room upstairs and help ourselves to a buffet dinner. Playing safe, I skipped all the salads and just took a few items of cooked food: rice, chicken, and vegetables. The only drink on offer was Coca Cola, which I did not want.

I then followed the others downstairs to our seats in the hall and sat down to eat the food. At this point music was played from loudspeakers and a scantily-clad young lady came out to do some belly dancing on the small circular stage. Because of the low tables and the necessity of bending over to eat the hot food, I saw little of the performance. It seemed that I did not miss much as there were just ragged bursts of applause from the audience; indeed, the dancer had to cue them to applaud as it was almost impossible to know when the music and dancing was about to end.

After this, another young lady appeared dressed in a colourful whirling dervish outfit and began rotating to different music. Once again, I saw little of this as I was still eating my dinner. However, as I had finished by the time the third item began, I was able to watch a spectacular show of playing with fire done by a young man, who whirled flaming sticks of different lengths around him and up into the air. He was rewarded with enthusiastic applause when he finished.

At the end of the performance, the day's entertainment came to an abrupt end, and we were thanked for coming. We then left, got into the minivan for the last time, and were driven at speed along the dark roads back to our hotel, which we reached by 6.15 p.m.

I now went up to my room, spruced myself up and, after my cleaned trousers were eventually returned to me, went back down to the foyer, where I got more money from the ATM as I wanted to give Dodi a generous tip for all the hard work that he had done over the previous ten days. However, as I could not see him anywhere, I went up to the restaurant, where I ate some fruit and a few little sinful desserts, washed down with a glass of beer. Later I joined some of my companions for a while in the foyer and then, as there still was no sign of Dodi, I returned to my room. After I had done some packing prior to tomorrow's departure, I wrote some of my diary; once again there was more loud music outside. Fortunately it stopped at ten o'clock and so I was able to go to bed shortly afterwards.

Thursday, 12 December

I was rudely awoken from a deep slumber at 1.30 a.m. by my phone ringing at the other end of the room beside the second bed. I jumped up to answer it and then, as I

felt hot and sweaty all over, I began to strip in readiness for a shower. However, just as I was doing this, there was a knock on the door. I opened it and found Rosaleen in a terrible state as blood was oozing out of one of her eyes. She asked my advice as to what she should do, and I encouraged her to go downstairs to the reception desk and talk to somebody there. I then stepped into the shower, where I had a quick wash, then dried myself. Dressed, I quickly put the rest of my things into my suitcase and small bag, and went down to the lobby.

After a short wait, a coach arrived and, after we had formally identified our luggage, we climbed up the steps and sat down inside. Fortunately Rosaleen's eye had stopped bleeding by now; just before getting into the bus, a doctor had arrived and had examined her.

We now set off for the nearby airport. When we reached it and had taken our luggage out of the coach, we went through a security check, queued for the check-in desks, then went through a second security check, during which I had to surrender my bottle of water. We then found our way to the correct gate and, after a short wait, boarded our flight to Cairo. This took off at 04.45 and lasted an hour, during which most of us slept.

When we arrived in the domestic Terminal 1 of Cairo Airport, we said goodbye to Dodi at the point where we had to leave him. There were hugs for everyone and kisses for the ladies; it was clear that everyone in the group had appreciated everything that he had done for us during our stay. I shook hands with him and handed an envelope full of Egyptian paper money to him, apologizing for having to give him a tip in local currency rather than in euro. He thanked me, wished me well, and we parted.

Most of us stuck together and went off to have a look in the various shops. I found bottles of Egyptian wine and selected one for a friend who would be collecting me in Dublin. I joined a queue to buy it but, when I showed the man my boarding pass, he told me that I could not buy alcohol in this terminal building – I would only be able to purchase it in Terminal 2, the international one. Disappointed, I joined a few of my companions, and together we walked to the next terminal building, which was not far away.

Once inside the building, I made for one of the duty-free shops but, seeing no wine, asked an employee where I could buy some. I was directed to another section of the shop, where I found no Egyptian wine; all they had was wine from various European countries. I selected a good French wine, bought it, joined my companions in a café and ate some food from a bag that had been given to us this morning. We then made our way to the gate, and shortly afterwards were driven in a bus to the plane that would fly us back to Dublin. The plane turned out to be a very comfortable jumbo jet with only a few people in it.

Shortly after I sat down in my seat, I fell asleep. When I woke, about half an hour later, I was surprised to discover that we were still waiting in the airport. At about nine o'clock in the morning we finally took off and soared up into the heavens, leaving Cairo and Egypt behind. Although we had only been in the country for eleven full days, Egypt had made such a huge impression on me that I had come to the conclusion that this had undoubtedly been the best and most exciting trip that I had ever been on.