

## A Journey of Mixed Memories

The journey I made in the Spring of 2008 from Cairo in Lower Egypt to Abu Simbel in Upper Egypt remains in my memory, though for many of the wrong reasons.

Our hotel was actually in Giza, just 20 kilometres south west of Cairo. It was adequate enough and you could see the pyramids from the roof terrace. Outside our hotel was a wide road with a barrier down the centre, separating the motorized traffic going from left to right in front of the hotel from that going from right to left on the further side. I emphasize *motorized* as the rule obviously did not apply to (or was not obeyed by) donkey carts and other non-motorized vehicles. But how many lanes of traffic there were supposed to be on each side remained a mystery; the lanes fluctuated in number and traffic meandered seemingly at whim. At night it was clear that lights on vehicles were an optional extra. So we were introduced to the chaotic traffic of Giza, Cairo and, as our trip would show, the rest of Egypt.

We had, of course, visited the pyramids and sphinx in the heat with the myriad of other tourists, and visited Cairo's Archaeological Museum, a couple of mosques, a Coptic church and other sites. But, alas, what impressed us most besides the chaotic traffic was the incessant hassling by street vendors, often quite threatening, whenever we dared to venture onto a street or pass a stall. It was something we were going to meet again and again in Egypt and which I have not come across with the same intensity in any other country.

It was, however, now time to leave Cairo and begin our journey; but we did not take the most direct route to Abu Simbel. We made a detour through the Sinai peninsula on a coach complete with armed guard. One might expect to see the Suez canal on this detour; but it was not to be so. Our guide explained that both sides of the canal were military zones and we would not be allowed there. We crossed *beneath* the canal through the Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel without getting a glimpse of the canal at all.

So we crossed from Africa into Asia and entered the desert region of the Sinai peninsula. On the the journey through the peninsula we stopped 25 and a half kilometres south of the tunnel at a sandy place with a few palm trees and a well. We were told that this was Ain Musa, Moses' well: the place named Marah in the Book of Exodus, where Moses made the brackish water become sweet for the Israelites to drink. We were somewhat skeptical and, indeed, the identification of Marah is disputed.

From there we continued on our journey, taking a lunch stop before arriving in the late afternoon at a place with many palm trees which our guide assured us was Elim where we are told in Exodus "there were twelve wells of water and seventy date palms." Our guide assured us there were seventy palm trees and invited us to count them; he failed to mention the twelve wells!

So at last we arrived at the Morgenland Village Hotel, near St Catherine's Monastery. It was not the best hotel that we stayed in! Also, by this time, nearly all our party had succumbed to a stomach bug. They blamed it on a cafe in Cairo where we had had lunch the previous day. The ironic thing was that they had all made sure they had a cooked meal; I, without thinking and feeling very hot, had ordered a salad. But I was the only one completely unaffected by the bug!

The next day, many had got over the bug, though quite a few had not. Those still active made far too brief a visit to St Catherine's monastery in the late morning: we were hurried through the Church of the Transfiguration, then the

Charnel House and past a rather untidy and nondescript shrub claimed to be descended from the burning bush seen by Moses. Our guide was clearly not over-enthusiastic about the monastery, otherwise he would have started out earlier, and so the Museum and Library were given a miss. This I much regret as I discovered later that the library contains the second largest collection of ancient codices and manuscripts in the world and the museum houses the world's best collection of ancient icons. Sadly, however, our group leader was way out of his depth in Egypt and allowed the local guides to do more or less as they pleased.

From the monastery we went for lunch nearby before attempting the two and a half hour climb up what is now called Mount Sinai or, in Arabic, Jabal Musa, Moses' Mountain; though whether it is the same as the Mount Sinai of the Old Testament is disputed. It was a very hot afternoon and I regret to say I found the heat too much and turned back about half way up. However, four stalwarts from our party did make it to the summit.

After a second night at the Morgenland Village Hotel we resumed our journey southward, passing out of the desert to arrive at the resort of Sharm El-Sheikh on the Red Sea in time for lunch in the luxury hotel where we were to spend the night. The resort, however, could, apart from a few stereotypical Egyptian touches to humour tourists, have been an up-market holiday resort anywhere in the world.

The following day we flew from Sharm El-Sheikh back to the Nile, landing at Luxor airport. We were to spend the rest of day and the following two days in Luxor - the Thebes of Ancient Egypt. So it was back to the heat, the chaotic traffic and the persistent in-your-face hassle of street vendors and stall holders. It was in Luxor we saw our first traffic lights; but we soon learnt that their changing colours were merely street decoration and served no practical purpose.

During our stay we visited the two great temple complexes of Karnak and Luxor, took a trip over the Nile to the Valley of the Kings where we braved the queues in the overpowering heat for as long as we could, visited museums and endured a disappointing and unsatisfactory *son et lumière* at the Karnak Temple.

At last came the day when we met with other minibuses, coaches and cars at 6.30 in the morning to proceed to Aswan with armed guard at the front and rear of the convoy. After making stops *en route* to visit temples at Edfu and Kom Ombo, the convoy arrived in Aswan in the afternoon.

After booking in at our hotel, we took a walk along the Corniche, marvelled at the Coptic cathedral in its imposing position and found a small restaurant by the Nile to enjoy afternoon tea. Although we were still subjected to some unpleasant hassling from vendors, it was thankfully less that we had experienced in Lower Egypt. One of the Aswan inhabitants told us we were now in Nubia and Nubians were nicer people.

After a day of sightseeing, which meant a visit to the Aswan Dam as well as to ancient remains, and an afternoon felucca trip on the Nile, we spent our last evening in Aswan before the final leg of our journey.

In the morning we flew from Aswan airport to our destination at Abu Simbel. The whole of the 320 kilometre flight was above Lake Nasser, an impressive and vast reservoir stretching from Aswan through southern Egypt and into northern Sudan; it is one of the largest man-made lakes in the world.

When we arrived at Abu Simbel, we found the hotel was pleasant and the people friendly. Now we could really believe we were in Nubia; it was so different from our experience of Lower Egypt!

After booking in at the hotel, we went to see the two Abu Simbel temples: the temple of Nefertari, Ramesses II's favourite wife and worshipped as the embodiment of the goddess Hathor, and the larger temple of Ramesses himself as well as of the gods Amun, Ra-Horakhty and Ptah. The temples form the most beautiful and imaginative construction of this remarkable Pharaoh, and were carved out of the mountain side during his reign in the 13th century BC.

Thirty three centuries later, they represented a tremendous challenge when engineers of the world community had to move the mountain side and its temples in order to save them from the rising waters of Lake Nasser. The result of their efforts is truly outstanding!

After dinner that evening, some of us went back to the temples for a *son et lumière* show. This was by far the best that we saw in Egypt. There were animated scenes of the life of Nefertari and Ramesses as well as a re-enactment of the "miracle of the sun" by which twice a year – once on the anniversary of Ramesses' rise to the throne, and once on his birthday – his temple's inner sanctum is lit by the sun's rays: an example of the builders' precision in alignment and of Ramesses' egotism.

So after a journey from Lower Egypt, with unpleasant memories of chaotic traffic, heat, dirt and, above all, of the persistent and aggressive hassling of street vendors, we arrived at last in the southernmost part of Upper Egypt at Abu Simbel with its pleasant memories. Though the journey was, indeed, memorable for many reasons, it is not one I would wish to make again.