

January 2008 – Egypt and Jordan

We flew from Detroit to Dusseldorf, and then four hours further to Cairo, Egypt. We had arranged this tour through the Egyptian national travel agency and can recommend their services; <http://www.misrtravel.org/>. We cut out the middle-man, and for the price of most group tours, we had a private guide, car and driver. There was a MISR agent to greet us upon arrival and help us with visas, immigration and customs.

We spent two days in Cairo touring the Pyramids and Sphinx, the Citadel, a few mosques and King Tut's treasures in the Egyptian Museum. We passed on the camels rides at the pyramids. We wandered the alleys of the bazaar, shopping for everything from tacky tourist souvenirs to clothing and exotic spices. Our guide invited us to a café for mint tea and a few puffs from a hookah pipe. The weather was pleasant with the temperatures most days in the 60's. The Pyramids at Giza were the definite highlight of the trip and the principle reason for our visit. They did not disappoint. Sixty pyramids remain of the 200 built 5000 years ago. The aliens who designed and helped the ancient Egyptians construct the pyramids must have been very proud.



Cairo itself is a crowded, dirty, loud city. Rich developed a cough from the filthy air, and the drivers are crazy. The authorities have wasted a lot of money painting lane markers that are routinely ignored. Horns blow all day and night. In reality, "walking like an Egyptian" means crossing the street is a major adventure that requires bobbing and weaving across multiple lanes of speeding cars. We were surprised at the lack of beggars for a major city. We suspected that they have either been locked up or transported outside the tourist areas. A commonly heard request is for "baksheesh." Baksheesh is used interchangeably to mean tip or bribe or handout. Many guards offered to take us to restricted areas or allow photos where they are prohibited in exchange for a little baksheesh.

Egyptians seem to believe that rules are made to be broken. On our flights, the Egyptian passengers routinely wandered up and down the aisle ignoring the seatbelt signs and warnings from the flight attendants. Poverty and corruption are endemic. The Egyptian government attempts to fight hunger by subsidizing bread. There are thousands of small government approved bakeries that buy discounted flour. Bread deliverymen weave bicycles in and out of Cairo's traffic balancing loaves piled high on their heads. Official bakeries are supposed to sell bread for about one cent. Government inspectors who earn \$42/month certify that the bakeries are following the rules and, in turn, the baker gets a bonus of around \$1000 per month. In reality, some bakers just resell the flour at an inflated price. People push and shove to get to the barred windows to buy bread. At some bakeries, the friends of the baker are allowed to the front of the line in exchange for a little baksheesh. They resell the bread on the street for five cents (twenty cents for foreigners). We thought that the job of bread inspector must be pretty lucrative. But after further consideration, the best job is the guy who hires the bread inspectors.



We spent four nights on a Nile River cruise. Our ship, the Movenpick Royal Lotus (http://www.moevenpick-hotels.com/hotels/MS_Royal_Lotus) has 60 very luxurious cabins and an attentive all-male crew. Ours was the nicest cruise ship cabin that we ever had. The food was pretty good, although Cheryl developed a case of "Ramses' Revenge." There are 300 ships working the 100 mile stretch between Aswan and Luxor, and we usually rafted five deep at night. The Nile irrigates a narrow, but fertile green strip in the otherwise barren desert. One afternoon we chartered a traditional wooden felucca and enjoyed a sail on the river. We watched the sky glow orange as the sun set, silhouetting the dark palms. It was just like the paintings we've seen at the "Starving Artists" show. Up until now, we thought that they were merely a vivid conjecture.



Tourism has recovered markedly since the terrorist attacks on tourists in Luxor (1997), Cairo (1997), Egypt Air over the Atlantic (1999) and Sharm el Sheikh (2005). Over 10 million tourists visited in 2007, but the vast majority were European. There were few Americans. We figured that total and sustained peace in the Middle-East may not happen in our lifetimes, so now was as good a time as any to take the relatively minor chance of a problem. The Egyptian authorities have acted strongly against potential future acts against tourists. There are hoards of machine-gun toting, but bored, tourist police at all the major sites and riding on the larger buses. All the temples, monuments, hotels and cruise ships have installed metal detectors, but complacency has taken root, and the warnings from the machines are routinely ignored. Perhaps the placebo effect of all the security makes some visitors feel comfortable. Egyptians are very lax about rules and laws, but hurting the tourists is clearly a big no-no.

Along the way, we were taken on hurried tours through several ancient temples, tombs and monuments. We gave up on memorizing the 31 dynasties and their leaders. The carvings and treasures continue to pay tribute to the oversized egos of these ancient pharaohs thousands of years later. Cheryl especially enjoyed visiting King Tut's tomb and seeing his mummy. At Abu Simbel, the huge statues were moved up a hill to avoid the new lake when the Aswan High Dam was built. It was restored in such detail that we questioned its authenticity. It felt more like Disneyworld than antiquity. We saw several mummies, both human and animal. The dried remains and visions of afterlife still fascinate. Mmmmm..... crocodile jerky!



Besides crossing the street, the biggest danger that we felt was the risk of being overcharged. The markets are busy, loud places. Few prices are marked. We had to negotiate for everything. Most shops have touts outside who will say most anything to get tourists inside. They'll put their hands on the arm of a man, but women are not touched. The conversation usually started with "Where are you from?" One shopkeeper held up a dress and told Cheryll "Five Egyptian pounds" (about one dollar). When she tried to buy it, it was only being sold in combination with a necklace for 130 pounds. Cheryll felt burned and prepared to play tug-of-war with anyone who pulled that one on her again.

Buying beer was also a rich, cultural experience. Islam prohibits alcohol, and few places sell beer. We stopped at one store and were informed that there was "no beer in Aswan." At the next store, the shopkeeper asked if we wanted beer. We said "yes" and he took us into his back room. He had a cooler that was full of tea and soft drinks, but hidden behind the tea were cans of beer at inflated prices. Capitalism sometimes trumps religion. After further negotiations, we bought a few cans, but left feeling like crack junkies.

Luxor has a reputation for the most annoying shopping experience. A few shopkeepers even posted signs advertising "Hassle-Free Zone". But they didn't mark any prices. Eventually, we tired of the onslaught, and tried a different approach. When they asked "Where are you from?" we answered "Latvia." This resulted in some of the most wonderful blank stares that we had ever seen. Nobody had ever heard of Latvia. "Do you speak English?" We responded "Leettle." They usually gave up and left us alone. It was great.



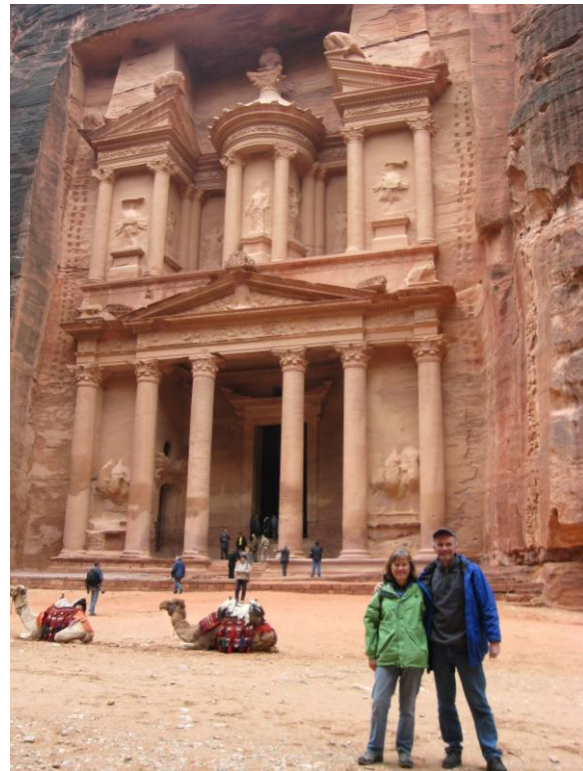
Our flight from Cairo to Amman, Jordan was a little over an hour. It would have been shorter, except we steered around Israeli airspace enroute. It seems that even 40 years after Israel won the Six Days War, they are still not taking any chances. We stayed at the SAS Radisson. This is one of the three foreign hotels that Al Qaeda attacked simultaneously in 2005. A suicide bomber with an explosive belt killed 38 guests at a wedding in the room off the lobby. Two years later, they take security very seriously. Barricades prevent driving near the lobby, and everything going in is x-rayed. Guests pass through a metal detector, and are frisked if the alarm sounds.

Amman is literally a breath of fresh air after Egypt. Rich's cough disappeared and Cheryl returned to regularity. Amman is hilly and spotted with pine trees. It's a little cooler than Egypt due to the higher elevation. The roads and drivers are much better, although litter is a problem. Horns are used with much more discretion. Most of the stores really are hassle-free. Some prices are even marked and non-negotiable. Rich enjoyed a heated conversation with the locals even though he didn't understand a word. Jordan is a kingdom and there are pictures of the king everywhere. He seems to be well-liked, but one guide thinks that he is a playboy.





We drove several hours south to the lost city of Petra. These temples are hidden in a deep colorful canyon and were featured in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. They were carved thousands of years ago into sandstone mountains. They are surrounded by thousands of cave dwellings. They may not be as large as the pyramids, but what they lack in mass, they easily make up in artistry and craftsmanship. You can't help but compare Petra to the other lost cities of Peru's Machu Picchu and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. We could imagine how overwhelmed and intimidated the primitive people must have felt when they first saw Petra. Today, Bedouins from a nearby town sell souvenirs, drinks and rides on donkeys, horses and camels to the tourists.



On the edge of Petra, we climbed a mountain to an ancient monastery and viewed across the desert into the Holy Lands and the destination for our upcoming trip in March; Israel. We enjoyed both Egypt and Jordan and can recommend a trip for our more adventuresome friends. We'll probably put them on our "Been there, done that" list. Stay tuned at <http://www.odendahls.com/>.

