

# Pyramids, temples, and the S.S. Sudan



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## Beginning in Cairo

Above, left; The S.S. Sudan is the last remaining side-paddle-wheel steamer on the Nile River. Above, right; An unofficial greeter at Luxor Temple. Bottom, left; The Sphinx stands guard at the Pyramids of Giza. Lower middle, left; A mosque near Karnak Temple. Upper middle, left; Menkaure Pyramid with Cairo in the background.

## Dave Gibson Egypt

The population of the Cairo, Egypt, metropolitan area numbers 22 million people. Rush hour's crushing traffic wrapped us in a chaotic tangle of cars, trucks, minivans, tuk-tuks, and motorcycles during our hour transfer to the hotel. The majority of the vehicles had bent bumpers with scratched and dented sides. Horns beeped incessantly in a series of three or four honks from each driver as they weaved and darted across unmarked lanes. Our guide informs us that there is no auto insurance or traffic laws in Egypt and taillights are obviously optional. I counted as many as fourteen people crammed into minivans. A small minority of the motorists are Indian workers as young as twelve.

Built in 1886 as a hunting lodge for Viceroy Khedive Ismail Pasha, the palatial Mena House sits on 43 acres of beautifully lush manicured lawns and gardens accented by water features. Its spring-fed heated pool was built in 1890 and was the first hotel swimming pool in Egypt. Prime Minister Begin, President Sadat, and Jimmy Carter met there in 1977 for peace talks leading up to the Camp David Agreement. Opulent in every respect from its marble walls and floors to the oversized fluffy pillows, we entered our pyramid view room expecting to catch a glimpse of the tip of the Great Pyramid from our veranda. What we got overwhelmed us as the pyramid filled three quarters of the sky.

Hibiscus juice, smoked fish, lox, capers, brie cheese, omelets, assorted meats, fresh fruit, and a large selection of fine pastries were among the offerings at the extensive breakfast buffet. Our waitress took note of my fondness for skim milk and thoughtfully had two cafes full chilling on ice waiting for me the next morning. Sometimes it is the people you meet along the way that make a difference.

Within spitting distance from the pyramids, we crossed the street with our driver and guide. Consisting of the Great Pyramid of Giza, Pyramid of Khafre, and Pyramid of Menkaure, the Pyramids of Giza were all erected between 2600 and 2500 BCE during the Fourth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom.

Originally the tallest, the Great Pyramid of Giza stood at 481 feet. It was built by

Pharaoh Khufu to serve as his tomb. One hundred thousand well-compensated laborers toiled 27 years, three months per year, between Nile River flooding to complete the project. The only remaining of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, it was the highest man made structure on earth until the Eiffel Tower was built in 1889. The number of blocks used were 2.3 million, each weighing between 2.5 and 15 tons apiece, bound by mortar and then capped with a smooth white limestone casing.

All of the pyramids' white encasement, except on the apex of the Pyramid of Khafre, is missing due to scavenging during the building of modern Cairo. The valuable artifacts inside the burial chamber of the Great Pyramid were looted in medieval times. As a conduit to the afterlife for Khafre's son, Khufu Pyramid is now the same height as the Great Pyramid at 454 feet, but is built on higher ground, appearing larger from certain angles. The third and relatively speaking newest of the pyramids is the Pyramid of Menkaure. Less than half the height of his grandfather's pyramid, its base is sheathed with red granite topped by white limestone floated down the Nile from Aswan.

The entire necropolis complex contains lesser pyramids, ruins of settlements, mortuary temples, mastabas, and over 9,000 rock-cut tombs spanning the first to thirteenth dynasties. The iconic Sphinx was sculpted from a limestone outcrop left over from pyramid quarrying. Facing east acting as a sentinel with the body of a lion, wings of a falcon, and head of a human, it is believed to represent sun god Ra. How the Sphinx lost his nose is a matter of conjecture. One story alleges that Napoleon's troops shot it off with cannon fire in 1798. Another more credible account documented in the fifteenth century by Arab historian Al-Maqrizi, attributes the loss to Sufi Muslims objecting to its idolatry.

After viewing King Tut's funerary mask and equally awe-inspiring sarcophagi laden in gold and precious stones at the Egyptian Museum in the morning, we flew upriver to Luxor (Arabic for "palaces") which sprung from the ancient capital city of Thebes. It was from there we would board the S.S. Sudan for our six-day/five-night Nile River cruise.

Continued on page 17

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### Continuing to Luxor

Above, left; Towering columns at Karnak Temple. Above, right; The Great Pyramid dwarfs people at the bottom left of the frame. A man walks by obelisks and ruins at Karnak Temple.

### Continued from page 16

Launched in 1921, the S.S. Sudan was built as a gift to future King Fouad and later sold to the Thomas Cook & Son company. Agatha Christie was inspired to write the mystery novel *Death on the Nile* while aboard the Sudan in 1933 with her archeologist husband Sir Max Mallowan. The suite Christie stayed in is dedicated to her on the second deck of the ship's starboard prow. Egyptian politician Fouad Serageddin owned the boat from 1950 until 1955 after which she sat derelict. A French company rescued the 18-cabin, five-suite, Sudan in 2000 returning her to service in 2001. With panoramic wraparound windows and classic décor, we stayed in the Queen Victoria Suite at the starboard stern.

From Luxor we'd explore the temples of Karnak and Luxor. In reverence to the deities Amun-Ra, his wife and creation goddess Mut, and moon god Khonsu, Karnak Temple is the largest religious structure ever constructed. Rows of ram statues led us to gem-colored reliefs and inscriptions that circle giant pylons. Obelisks dart upward etched in hieroglyphics. Six colossal statues of Ramses II greet visitors at Luxor Temple's entrance two miles away. Parts of the temple were added by Tutankhamun. In the deepest and most sacred reaches of the temple, a relief in the stone wall shows cattle with bound feet ready for slaughter.

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