

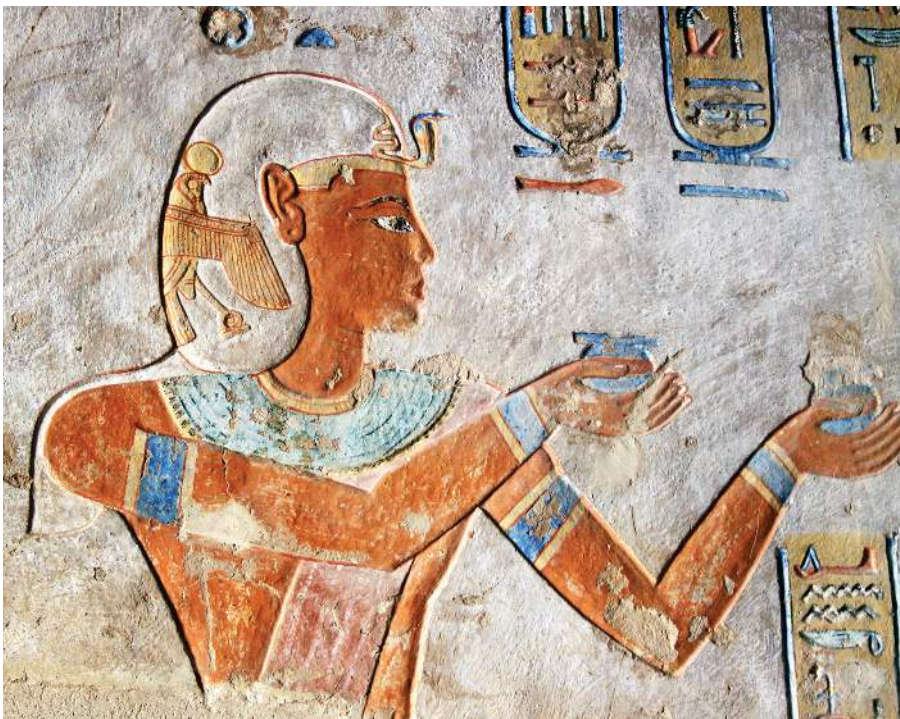
Abydos, Dendera, and Valley of the Kings



PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

An Epic adventure

Above, left; A gateway outside Dendera Temple. Above, right; Drying tomatoes in Luxor. Bottom, left; A stone engraving on a temple wall. Middle, left; Artwork at the Valley of the Kings.



Dave Gibson Egypt

Sailing north to Qena before docking for the night, in the morning we would visit Abydos and Dendera Temples on the east side of the Nile. Fewer tourists see these sites since they are off the usual river cruise itineraries. Abydos Temple is dedicated to fertility and resurrection god Osiris. Protector of women, Egyptian goddess Hathor is revered at Dendera Temple.

A police escort was deemed necessary. Sirens blared from two motorcycles followed by a Toyota pickup with two machine gun-toting soldiers in its bed, us and a couple from Switzerland in a minivan, and two busloads of French people from the S.S. Sudan. Traffic halted as we made our way through town and across a bridge spanning the river. It felt like a funeral procession only the funeral was going to be ours! Apparently, without an escort, a roadblock might have been set up somewhere along the way and we sightseers would be relieved of our cameras, credit cards, and money with a few hostages taken for good measure. I became more comfortable with the arrangement after an hour of not being shot at on the way to the city of al-Balyana and Abydos.

Perhaps 15 miles from the temple, in a different jurisdiction, our first escort was replaced by another armed escort all the way to the site and back. It read in bold letters on their vehicle "Tourist Insurance." At 8:30 a.m., children were walking to school, donkey-driven carts carrying crops headed toward the market, and people went about their daily affairs.

The most striking thing different about Abydos Temple is that its roof is still intact – giving a feeling of what it used to be like and making it among the best-preserved temples in Egypt. Built by the pharaoh Seti I, it is known for its Abydos King List that chronicles the order of the pharaohs from Menes in 3,200 B.C. through Seti's father Ramses I in 1,300 B.C. In one of the decorative tombs, Ramses I is depicted making an offering to Osiris. Faces in some of the other tombs were vandalized by Coptic

Christians during the Christian Era. Soot from Bedouins' cooking fires obscures the paintings on the ceilings of a few of the rooms. One of those ceilings is being restored, now revealing brilliant artwork that looks as if it were painted yesterday.

Dendera is another temple where the roof is still there and the artwork within marvelously preserved. What is left today was built from sandstone between the years 116 B.C. and 34 to worship falcon-headed sky god Hathor. Influences from Egyptian, Greek, and Roman rulers are evident; Roman Caesars Augustus, Tiberius, and Nero are shown making offerings to the gods. Stairways through narrow hieroglyphic-lined passages lead to chambers in the basement. The backgrounds of the intricate bas-reliefs on the ceiling in the Great Vestibule are executed in a vibrant light blue. The signs of the zodiac are of particular interest.

Sailing from Qena back to Luxor the night before, we disembarked from our ship to explore the Valley of the Kings. Like tree roots descending into the earth, 70 rock-cut tombs of pharaohs and nobles that lived from 1539-1075 B.C. are found at the subterranean necropolis. Ramses I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, IX, and X were interred there. The passageway leading to King Seti I's burial chamber is 450 feet long and 200 feet deep. The entrances are unassuming. Almost all of the tombs were looted long ago. Their walls and ceilings are the treasure bursting of colorful paintings displaying the usual deities, pharaohs, and hieroglyphs.

One scene shows chained prisoners with their heads cut off. A representation of the crocodile god Sobek accompanies the deceased into the afterlife. The applied paint is made of pigment, egg whites, and honey, and still in remarkable condition considering it is over 2000 years old. The artists used sunlight and mirrors to illuminate the surfaces of the different chambers while working. The riches of King Tut's tomb were discovered by British Egyptologist Howard Carter in 1922; the young king's mummy rests at the bottom.

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Taking in the sights

Top, left; A woman looks out from the entrance at Dendera Temple. Top, right; A well-preserved painting from the Valley of the Queens. Middle, right; A decorative storefront. Bottom, right; Ceiling reliefs at Dendera Temple were restored in 1982. Bottom, left; Alabaster vases are made the same way they were thousands of years ago.

PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

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A few stands sell food and souvenirs, but the most profitable business in the area seems to be the “pay to pee” setup. Except at a bar on Bourbon Street in New Orleans where you had to buy a drink in order to use their restroom and once in Mexico, it was an alien concept to me. Paying a dollar to the attendant the first time, I later learned from my guide Muhamad that the “going” rate is two pees for a buck. Down the road local workers sift through the dirt of ruins and alabaster vases for sale are crafted traditionally. We stopped to buy some bread at the market while women across the street spread tomatoes out on tarps to be dried in the sun.

Adjacent to the Valley of the Kings is the Valley of the Queens. In ancient

times called Ta-Set-Neferu (The Place of Beauty), it contains 110 tombs of pharaohs’ wives, children, and royals. Ramses the Great’s first principal wife Nefertari’s tomb is one of the largest and most impressive. Beloved and highly educated, she knew how to read and write hieroglyphs and acted as a diplomat. One painting shows her wearing Greek earrings that would have been received as a gift from a foreign dignitary.

That afternoon my dad and I paddled up the Nile taking in the architecture and farmers working the fields with their animals. During dinner we passed through Esna Lock gaining eight meters in elevation on our way to Edfu and the Temple of Horus.

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