

Egyptian Lullabye

The calendar would remind me that I've been in Egypt for only two weeks, but walking the sand, around all these ancient sites and objects, time moves much slower.

So my first night in Egypt was spent sprawled across my backpacks at the Cairo airport, by design. I would be in Cairo just long enough to avoid getting a room, but not long enough to go out and see anything. So instead of seeing, I was sitting.

Cairo down to Abu Simbel in the morning and I got back out in the sun. The main event in Abu are the twin monuments of Ramses II and Nephretiti and they were just ten minutes down the road, but it was noon, and only the scarabs are out in the high sun. By 4pm the sun was down and I was out, paying the first of many entrance fees in Egypt, and coming face-to-face with human history. The item of note here is that these huge monuments were moved, stone, by stone, to higher ground in 1968 to let the original area flood when the Aswan Dam was put in...seeing the size of the project and how well it all fits together, is really amazing.

Insert Abu Simbel

Late June is definitely "off season" here in Egypt. You can tell this easily...first, at a place like Abu Simbel, you're the only guest...and second, after 20 minutes outside your skin starts looking like Mr. Peanut after the dry-roasting effect. The heat here has a mummifying effect among the living as well. There is dry-mouth, and there is *Egyptian* dry-mouth; totally different thing. Must wear sunscreen...

The intricacies of Egyptian finance must be commented on here. Small "gratuities/bribes/grifts" are required to get general assistance here. "where can I watch the World Cup" may cost you almost 50 cents to find out...there are rarely street signs or other tourists in low season, so you're on your own, carry change. The "tip" is referred to as "Backsheesh" and the grifters that clutter the corners and alleyways looking for it could be considered "backsheesh boys"...Everyone is constantly offering assistance, directions, tea, or a taxi, but they're also leaning into you as well.

So getting from the airport in Abu Simbel, to the hotel cost me 100 Egyptian Pounds (EP). A bit over \$5. A younger version of myself would have scoffed at this and walked the 4.5 kilometers; but this is 2018 and this version didn't "scoff" as much as "cough" as in I coughed up the 100EP and climbed into the cab.

Exiting Abu Simbel the next day was supposed to require a ticket for the local bus and a coordinated effort to get me into town and to be one of only six foreigners allowed to travel with the locals. As I was the only guest at the inn, I thought my chances were good. After a 5am return tour of Abu Simbel, where I paid 300EP (about \$15) to take pictures (again first of many "camera passes"), I was half-way thru my breakfast when I got a call and an offer. The hotel manager said the cabbie from the previous day was offering to drive me personally up to Aswan, about 3hrs (260km) away. I was feeling the "backsheesh" coming...a private car, that far might be \$60...nope...the offer was for 200EP..so to go less than 5k's was 100, but 260k's was 200? I was in...and away I went.

Aswan, the big city up the road, was interesting. The car ride option put me about 5 hours ahead of schedule, and I had notions of trying to find a quick tour to fill my time, but it was hot and the highlight of my afternoon was finding my ancient hotel room at the Yaseen Hotel had not only a fan, but a high-mount air conditioner, which got switched on instantly. A nap, and a foot tour of the local environs, and I was settled into another sheesha and tea house watching more World Cup games..

I spoke with the manager later and arranged for a private driver to take me to Philae island where I would spend the next morning shooting more ruins.

Dinner was the first of many involving chicken shawarma. In Aswan, there were more than a few choices in street food, but those vertical spits of beef and chicken just seem to call my name...and I answered. Here the local favorite was a portable affair set up at the end of a dark and uninviting street. I was sure I had been led astray by the “backsheesh boys” but then I could smell the product, and knew I was home. Set up on the curb, they used the hood of an adjoining car as the assembly area, which added somewhat of an “automotive affect” to the proceedings. But these guys delivered a superior product. I went back the next night, with camera in hand, but they were gone like a desert mirage. I walked thru the market, and found another place, but it was twice the price and of decidedly lesser quality.

Philae ruins are on an island, so my driver dropped me at the pier. In Egypt the art of the negotiation is crucial. Not knowing how much there was to shoot, I was thinking two hours would be enough. I had to grease the driver another 50EP to get that two hours, and just assumed these naval negotiators wouldn't care how long I was there...no, they cared. There are about fifty identical boats, all in rough shape, to take you out in a short loop to the island. To maximize personal wealth, your pilot stays on the island and waits. My logic had fewer guys going only one direction, but whatever. They all promised to wait 1hr for 200EP (remember, I got a private driver to cover 250kms for this back down the road). Of course I wanted what couldn't be delivered; a longer tour for the same price. After three unsuccessful attempts, I looked around and noted that there about 48 boats waiting, no takers, so I just opined, loudly that it was odd that everyone would rather sit and make NO MONEY rather than change the pattern. And somehow this worked. I ended up with a 90 minute tour for that same 200EP.

Philae was wonderful. Walls covered in carvings, statutes, pillars...this was Egypt to me.

I went to the train station where a well placed 20EP, put into the palm of the ticket fixer got me a first class seat on the train to Luxor and away I went.

Luxor, Valley of the Kings, Karnak, Luxor Temple. Staying at the Bob Marley Peace Hostel only seemed right. They offered a tour of the west bank of the Nile, on the cheap and I was all over it. They packed up about a dozen foreign faces into a van the next morning and off we went. Valley of Kings, Valley of Queens and a few other stops that defy my recollection. It was hot, but the next level of hot; out of the frying pan and into the fire hot...but I was not alone, so we all suffered...In the Valley of the Kings, you get to “pick 3” tombs to enter. This I can recall; Ramses III, Ramses VI and Merenptah. I had originally planned on several trips to “collect all the kings” in these groups of three, but it's surprising how quickly your plans change as you become mummified under the Egyptian sun...three tombs was plenty.

Another night, and more shawarma...but a McDonald's shake for dessert. It was over dessert that I ran into my first American tourist and somehow we hopped a horse carriage and ended up in a bar at the swankier side of town...this too was a dessert of sorts.

The next day was spent touring Karnak and a lengthy period where head met pillow. I was not adjusting to the heat well and thought I should rest in the AC to slow the "Mr Peanut" effect. I did manage to get to the train station and booked the sleeper car from Luxor to Cairo which I was pretty excited about. My last day in Luxor was spent at Luxor Temple, and hanging out with some Aussies who had just come from Jordan, my next stop...we fell into a little snack shop next to the McDonalds that had great air conditioning and a shawarma pizza...

I boarded the train for Cairo at 11pm and away I went. The private sleeper car was easy enough to find, but while I had not delusions of grandeur, I expected more. This was NOT the Orient Express. Each car had an attendant, and ours quickly became known as "Backsheesh Bob"... it was amazing to see him do so many things essentially with one hand...because the other one was in your pocket, looking for a little "something" for his every effort. It was a little oppressive.

But all train rides do end, and pulling into Cairo was more than welcome. My hostel was a short cab ride away and my life in Cairo began. There were many things to see, the Egypt Museum, the markets, "music street" and then the Pyramids and points west... Over five days, I saw and shot it all.

I'm glad I started down in Abu Simbel and ended here in Cairo. The big city, with all it's hustle and bustle, would have been tough to leave, heading south.

The Egyptian "way" seems fueled by caffeine and nicotine. The sheesha pipes are everywhere, as are cigarettes. For a city of 30 million people, Cairo somehow seems to have the space.. I was probably most impressed with the Egyptian Museum here. So many artifacts just plopped down in a massive building, like a mad collector on a shopping spree. Many had ancient paper tags still on them, written 50 years ago or more, ready to fall off...there's rumor that a new, bigger museum is being built out in Giza, but for now, this is probably the greatest archeological museum in the world..

As I enter my third month of travel, the gear is pretty broken in. I've lost a few things along the way, and have yet to find trinkets worthy...though I'm supposed to find a hat (still looking). No pretzels in Egypt, but lots of Pringles.

So as I pack for the airport, I give Egypt two thumbs up...come for the pyramids, eat the shawarma and by all means, come in January, so you don't get dry-roasted like I did...