

## The Leong Family's Egyptian Adventure

(by Bob Leong and Family)

After missing our connecting flight out of JFK and having to spend two nights at the airport hotel, we finally arrived in Cairo on Day 4 of our itinerary. To our astonishment, our luggage had arrived the day prior with the previous travelers!



This was the day we were supposed to go to the pyramids, but we arrived too late. Luckily, there were scheduled free times so we could, and would, reschedule our visits to the Cairo museum and the Great Pyramids of Giza. Our tour to the museum was rescheduled for Thursday (Day 6), and the Pyramids were rescheduled for the Friday after our cruise on The Nile (Day 14 of 15!).

The water in Egypt can make you sick, but we had packed some bottled water so we were good for the night. The hotel had a 24-hour bank that actually stays open with a

bank teller! We had our first dinner in Egypt at the hotel; not bad and not too pricey. It was weird having a meal and not having anything to drink, but we didn't want to pay \$3.00 for a can of soda!

Wednesday (Day 5) was a free day, or one could go on an optional tour to Alexandria. We chose to stay in Cairo, and hired a taxi to go to the Khan-Kalili Bazaar. The cab driver told us it probably wouldn't be open until later due to it being the Islamic New Year holiday, so he offered to give us a tour of the city, take us to the bazaar, and bring us back to the hotel — all for 100 Egyptian pounds, which is about \$20. It would have cost us 30 Egyptian pounds each way just to go to the bazaar. We opted for the tour, which was nice because he brought us to some of the sites that were included in another optional tour that we weren't going on. We saw the famed hanging church and the Citadel. He took us to a couple of small shopping areas before taking us to the bazaar. The thing about Egypt is that you don't pay your driver until you're home, so when the taxi dropped us at the bazaar the driver gave us a card to call him when we were ready to leave.



We shopped around for a couple of hours...you really need to bargain with the vendors, or you'll pay way too much. A vendor wanted 65 Egyptian pounds for a t-shirt, but we had just paid 25 Egyptian pounds for one outside the bazaar. We told him we didn't want to pay any more than 20 Egyptian pounds. He thought we were kidding, so we started to leave, and he agreed to our price. As we walked more into the center of the bazaar, we found that we might have been able to get shirts even cheaper...or it was just

a ploy to get you into shop. The vendors in the center were quoting \$1 for each t-shirt which would be a little more than 5 Egyptian pounds. It's hard to tell, because when we were looking for child size t-shirts we had a hard time getting them for about \$2 each. I still don't know how low we could have gotten the shirts.

The Khan-Kalili Bazaar is so large that you really have to pay attention to where you are. You can easily get lost there. We had to locate a vendor with a mobile phone in order to call our driver back. Luckily, there was a nice vendor who helped us. The driver took us back to the hotel. Not bad for about a 4-hour trip; we ended up tipping him 20 Egyptian pounds although tipping wasn't necessary. All tolled, it amounted to \$8 each.

After getting sandwiches for a late lunch at the hotel bakery, there was still time to kill. A couple of us went to try our luck at the hotel casino.

Thursday morning, we returned to the casino since housekeeping needed to make up the rooms. The casino was all US dollars: table games and some slot machines. We played slots. A couple of us each won over \$100! We decided that housekeeping had had enough time to make up the rooms, so we went back to relax.

The Cairo museum tour was that afternoon. We saw King Tutankhamen's sarcophagus and mummy casing along with the famous mask. The museum has a lot of King Tut's treasures. There's also a royal mummy museum as a special exhibit within the Cairo museum, but we decided not to go in it and save our money for the tombs at the Valley of the Kings. After the tour of the museum, we headed back to the hotel to pack since we were headed to Luxor the next morning to catch the ship to cruise The Nile.

We left the Cairo Marriott and caught a short flight to Luxor. We arrived at the boat, but the cabins aren't ready for us and won't be for about an hour. We decided to walk into town to get more local currency. It was a good 15-20 minute walk. It was weird because Friday and Saturday are their weekend. Fortunately for us, we just needed the ATM, and that was readily available. All along the way, there were horse carriages trying to pick us up. We were warned not to take them as the driver would quote \$1, but might let you off somewhere that wasn't so easy to get back to the ship. We just kept walking. We came across a kiosk that sold soda, so we bought a few bottles. Instead of giving change in Egyptian pounds, the vendor gave us a bottle of water! By the time we returned to the ship, our cabins were available. We went to our cabins to settle in before lunch.



After lunch, it's off to Karnak Temple (very impressive!) and back to the ship for dinner. At sunset, chanting was amplified throughout the city of Luxor. There must have been a party going on, too, because it was noisy all night long, into the wee hours of the next morning!



Around 5:00 AM, we heard amplified chanting once again. Apparently, Islamic faith prays at sunrise, midday, and sunset (or more!). You can hear the chanting everyday and everywhere within the city.

Saturday (Day 8) was a long walking day. First, it was off to the Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens. The Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens are the burial places for the royal families, although only the kings are in the Valley of the Kings. The only female in the Valley of the Kings was Hatshepsut who is depicted as a male king in many sculptures. After visiting the Valleys all morning, it was back to the ship for lunch before another tour to Luxor Temple. A lot of the people we traveled with weren't going to tour Luxor Temple — they felt that once you've seen a temple, you've seen them all. The walking was over unpaved or uneven pavement. It was hard on the legs, and a lot of the travelers are seniors. It's amazing how the sculptures and carvings have lasted all these years. Even when you look up, you wonder "Is it safe to be standing underneath all this?" By the end of the tour, the sun was setting, and we went back to the ship for dinner.



After dinner, the ship management arranged a surprise for all the passengers — a horse carriage ride around Luxor! Almost everyone took advantage of this treat, although there were a few who didn't because they thought it was too cold. It actually turned out to be a reasonably pleasant evening and not too cold. Just our luck...we passed Luxor Temple with the lights on; we took just one picture, and then just as we took another, the lights went out! Well, at least we got one decent photo!

It's now Sunday (Day 9), the first sailing day on The Nile. It's a relaxing day on the ship, so we took advantage of it as some of us were starting to feel like we were coming down with "a bug". Many passengers were starting to get sick. We tried to stave off infection by drinking EmergenC (similar to Airborne) every day.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are sailing and temple visit days. At every temple, there were aggressive vendors selling their wares; it was just like coming off a Disneyland ride and exiting through the store, except that you were hassled to buy something every step of the way. Sometimes, you'd be lucky and get near someone who would buffer your path; otherwise, we would just ignore the vendors, and they would eventually leave us alone. If you pay no interest, it's not worth their time.

The temples weren't always the same; they told different stories. Yes, there were carvings in each, and they even looked alike, but if you looked closely there were differences. It was just amazing that most of them were still standing, which makes one wonder how much longer will they remain standing, especially when other parts of the temples have already fallen.



Thursday (Day 13) is spent all day sailing The Nile, back to Luxor. Just after we passed the lock at Esna and entered lower Egypt, the ship got stuck on a sandbar for over an hour. No one was exactly sure what happened; did we get stuck on a sandbar, or did something break off the ship that sent us off-course? We heard someone say that they needed to weld a part on, but we're not sure whether it fell off or broke off when we hit the sandbar. Just another unexpected thrill!

We finally arrived in Luxor and received our instructions for our flight back to Cairo the next morning. Once we got back to Cairo, those of us who had been delayed at JFK at the start of the trip (i.e., 15 people) went to see the Great Pyramids, just 20 minutes outside of Cairo, in Giza. It was amazing and yet sad at the same time. The farmers want to own land so badly that they divided up their fields and built unsafe buildings. The intent is to eventually have all family members live in the same house, so the buildings weren't finished. When the next generation is ready to live alone, they are expected to build on top of what is already there. Expansion has grown so far that civilization is now right up to the entrance of the Pyramids. The Pyramids could be seen for miles away on the freeway. We tried to take pictures of the largest pyramid, but it was so vast that we couldn't get the entire structure in the picture (see photo). After a short camel ride, we rushed over to see the sphinx, but the security guard wouldn't let us in because they were closing for the weekend. The program director and the tour

security guard finally convinced him to let us inside the main gate, but we were unable to get in closer through a second gate, which lets you inside the valley of the sphinx. The program director took us to the back using a shortcut over boulders. The sphinx was narrower than we thought, but still huge. As we left the parking area, we made a quick shopping stop at the Hard Rock Café (there wasn't any food there, just a merchandise store) which was right outside the sphinx area.



Saturday, January 19 (Day 15)...time to return home. We had an early flight back to JFK and then a couple of hours in between flights. The Egypt flight took off late but still got us to JFK with an hour and a half to spare until our connection to SFO. We had to go through Immigration, pick up our checked baggage, and go through customs. Once past customs, we had to recheck our bags to SFO. There was an inter-connection area where we could turn in our checked baggage which was already checked in (i.e., tagged). We proceeded to the domestic terminal to catch our connection. It's amazing how fast an hour and a half goes by when you're moving through an airport! By the time we got to the next terminal, it was already time to board the plane. 12 hours from Cairo to NY and another 6 hours from NY to SFO; that's too long to be sitting down!

Maybe it was a blessing in disguise to be delayed on our outbound flight...

Overall, it was an amazing and fascinating trip. We hope, one day, that you too will be able to experience the wonder of Egypt!

