

EGYPT AGAIN!

The wheels of the aeroplane touched down on the runway and Margie and I were back in Cairo! I could not really believe our luck. Two years before, Robert Hefner III, had taken us to Egypt and now Damon and Sam with their eldest son, Robert, wanted to see the wonders that Nabil had then shown us.

As I have already said Nabil is a fount of knowledge who has unfailing patience in answering questions that he has answered a hundred times before. Together we planned a trip that allowed two days in Cairo and four days in Luxor, the last one of which was Damon's birthday, so had been declared a day of rest leaving only five days to see the wonders of ancient Egypt! We left the aeroplane running and continued to do so for the next five days.

The travel agent met us, took our passports and hurried us through Customs into a waiting van. Being confirmed carry-on luggage flyers, we were soon away out into the Cairo traffic heading across town towards the Mena House Hotel that sits at the foot of the Pyramid of Cheops. Even at midnight it took an hour to cross town, but when looking at new sights, including crossing the Nile, time hurries by and we soon reached the hotel to be met by Nabil. Introductions over, followed by the usual sorting of wrongly assigned rooms, (yes, we were all promised pyramid-facing rooms), we were soon heading for our beds.

But first I had to sit on the windowsill and look out at the Cheops Pyramid once again. Before me lay strata upon strata of limestone blocks climbing to the towering summit. Lit by subtle flood lighting the colour of the stone was quite magical and the night air was so clear that you could see the craters on its sickle edge of the waning moon. Orion's Belt and Betelgeuse filled the space between the pyramid and the moon, while bats swooped back and forth between us and the gum trees in the hotel garden.

Through my binoculars I could see the ugly scar in the side of the pyramid revealing the entrance to the interior. In my imagination I could feel the magnetic force of the great mass of stone pulling me towards it and thought about the tiny sighting-tunnel that allowed the Pharaoh's soul to travel from the King's Chamber out into the heavens and eternity.

There was a faint smell of spice on the breeze that carried the sound of dogs barking up to our window. Someone in the village started a wailing chant in a high-pitched key although it was well after midnight. I turned from the wondrous sight and headed for bed knowing that in four hours I would be woken by the pre-dawn call to prayer coming from the mosque below.

What a moment it is to open one's eyes at dawn and see the pyramid through the hazy light! It is unbelievably enormous, filling the whole view so its size is hard to comprehend on first waking.

Breakfast over, we adjourned to Damon and Sam's suite for a brief lecture by Nabil on the history of ancient Egypt before climbing into the minibus for the short journey up to the pyramid. Our driver, Mr Fish, dropped us off at a vantage point on the plateau behind the Pyramids, so that Nabil could give us an over-all explanation of the plan of Giza. What an astoundingly unique sight it is! Menkaure, the smallest of the pyramids, was closer from here so the trio of colossi all looked the same size. A wall of pyramids entirely filled the horizon before us. It was time for a closer inspection so we climbed into the bus and drove down to the central Pyramid of Khafre.

One of the most impressive things about this pyramid, setting aside the sheer vastness of the edifice, is the levelling of the platform on which it is built. The natural slope of the bedrock is some 20 foot higher to the west than the east, so the builders have cut away dozens of huge 200-ton blocks of stone on the higher side and moved them to the lower one to obtain a level surface. These blocks, that are by no means perfectly square, are tailored to fit together exactly, so that the edges are tight against each other. How this was done is not known and another ancient mystery.



The quarry at the back of the 'Pyramid of Khafre'

We walked east towards the Cheops Pyramid, stopping to visit the Funeral Boat Museum on the way. What a craft! Entering the museum at ground level you first come to the giant rectangular pit cut into the bedrock that housed the dissembled wooden boat. The 140-foot long boat, so elegant in line and volume, now floats above filling the second and third floors of the building. The giant oars slope out from the deck waiting for the oarsmen to pull against the flow of the Nile, because this was a working boat as is proved by its having a clear water-stained plimsoll line! (p 933)

Nabil showed us many things that have no answers, while explaining other things that did, many of which he was the discover. Before heading back towards the minibus, we visited a tomb under one of the small pyramids at the foot of Khafre's colossus that is thought to have belonged to his mother or wife. We had been disappointed to hear that only a limited number of people were allowed to visit the King's Chamber in the Cheops Pyramid, so it would be impossible to see that wonder; however, as we approached the minibus thinking about lunch, we noticed that a queue had formed at the ticket office for the afternoon visit of another 150 lucky people. Because of my experience on our previous visit, I urged that we try for a ticket.

The first tomb we visited had been hot and humid but had been braved by Sam, who was known to be nervous about caves. Would she or wouldn't she try the King's Chamber? Margie refused point blank to go into the tomb, as she had already seen it. Sam bit the bullet and we headed for the entrance to join the other visitors and a scrum of shouting officials arguing about cameras.

The problem was resolved by a freelance guide appearing who said that he would carry our cameras for us. He of course handed them back to us straight away once inside in return for a large tip, which we presumed, he would share with the official at the entrance who was screaming, "No cameras." Oh well, we all have to eat!

Of course during the morning we had talked about the problems of pyramid building laying a two-ton block every two minutes for 23 years! We had all wondered about the labour organisation that would be needed to perform this miracle, and the noise that would have been produced by the hammering, shouting of orders, and the chanting of the crews as they struggled with the huge blocks of stone. Well, we were about to experience the feeling of being a member of a pyramid-building crew.

Our guide was in full throat. "Move on, move on. Hurry, hurry! Go, go! Stop wait, stop wait!" It was unbelievably awful, to the extent that it became funny. Sweating tourists were herded this way and that, bent double, passing in narrow passages. Push, up down, in out. The wonder of the Grand Gallery was completely lost as we scurried about like hamsters. Puffing, we at last arrived at the King's Chamber, posed for an illegal photograph, and left.

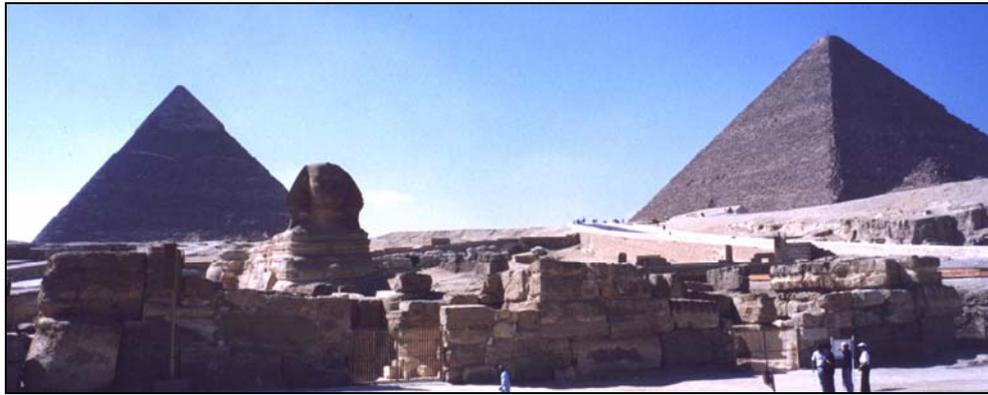
We streamed from the entrance like water from an overflowing dam, thankful to be back in the sunlight and out of the foetid sweaty air. Every experience teaches you something I suppose, and I certainly now had a sense of what it must have been like when the pyramid was being built by the gangs of labourers, although I am sure it would have been better organised then! I felt sorry for the de Laszlos as they would have loved the experience of two years before when we had been left in the chamber alone, but they had at least been there, and were now members of the PBU. The Pyramid Builder's Union!



Nearly all of the capping stone was removed to build Cairo

Our next stop was the Sphinx. We climbed into the van and headed down the road to Khafre's Mortuary Temple. The granite hall of the temple is a wonder of carved blocks fitted to intricate angles. We passed through a doorway where the lintel block has eight sides! Up a now un-roofed passage and out onto the bank beside the 240-foot long and 65-foot high Sphinx, which certainly does

have an enigmatic smile, quite rightly, as it has everyone guessing as to when it was carved and by whom and for what purpose.



A truly majestic scene

The trip to the King's Chamber had stolen our lunch hour, so it was inside the Kentucky Fry for a pit stop and a take-away chicken sandwich to be eaten in the minibus on our journey out to see the Red and the Bent Pyramids.

Refreshed and relieved, we chomped on our sandwiches as we sped along a drainage canal under palms heavy with massive yellow-orange clumps of dates that hung among graceful green fronds. When stripped of the dates the yellow stalks are laid out on the road so that the passing traffic can crush them into next year's supply of brooms for the street sweepers. The combination of the stalks on the road and the palm groves hung with dates is something that deserved the attention of Matisse or Van Gogh, as both men would have been able to do wonderfully evocative paintings of the scene.

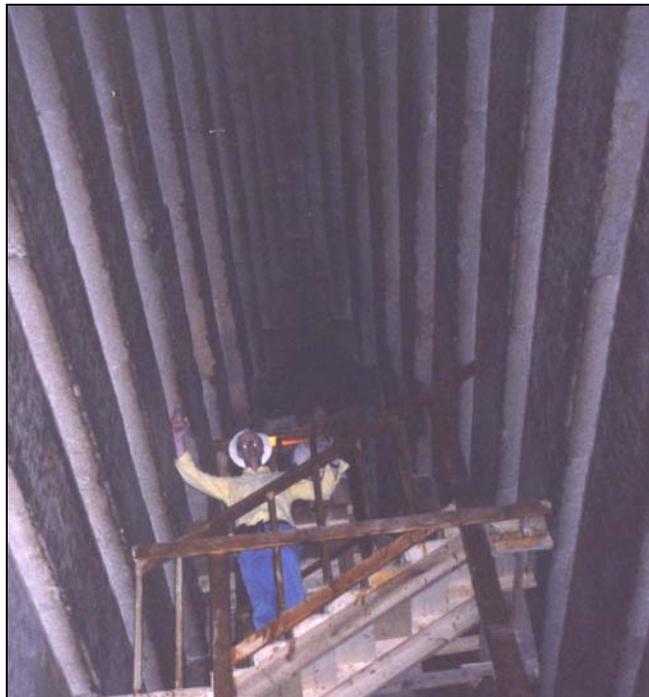
A scene that did bring the van to a sudden halt was one of a pair of horses standing in the canal with only their backs and heads above the slimy blue-green water. Ropes stretched to the owners who were squatting on the bank making it look for all the world as though they were fishing for crocodiles with live horses as bait. Our stop galvanised the owners into claiming a reward for allowing us to photograph this bizarre scene!



Fishing for crocodiles with live horses!

On to the Red pyramid and the earliest example of a true pyramid. It is somewhat squatter than the Giza pyramids, having a base of 722-foot long sides and a height of 325 foot. The Cheops pyramid has a base of 755-foot sides and a height of 482 foot. The angle of 52 degrees of Cheops is the famous line of repose, which is the angle at which grains of sand cease to flow on a slope. The Red pyramid has a slope of about 45 degrees and is therefore deemed to be less elegant. However, it is very beautiful and certainly has its own charm, one of which was that we were the only people there! After a short walk around one side to see the still-intact polished covering, we climbed up to the entrance of the tomb, leaving Margie to talk to Nabil.

The four of us scrambled down the steep 33-degree, 100-foot long entrance passage that ended in a short low corridor and doorway. Still stooping double we passed through into the most beautiful corbelled roofed chamber measuring some 20 foot long and 12 foot wide. The walls rose straight up for 15 foot before the corbelling started in clean precise steps at an angle of about 25 degrees, ending at the apex some 45 foot above our heads. The rectangular room had perfect proportions and the clean-cut granite blocks were precise. The chamber was utterly majestic. In the opposite corner to our entrance door there was another low doorway so, feeling like Alice in Wonderland, we passed through into a second chamber exactly similar to the first. The symmetry of going from one to the next added to the splendour of the architecture. At the end of this chamber was a wooden staircase that zigzagged up to a doorway in the wall just under the start of the corbelled slope of the ceiling. We climbed this and passed through into another corbelled chamber, (which ran at right angles to the first two chambers), where the sarcophagus would have been housed. Unfortunately it had gone and the floor had been ripped to pieces by the treasure seekers. It was disappointing to see such beauty in ruins beneath us, but at least the corbelled ceiling above was still in perfect condition.



The corbelled roof of the 'Red Pyramid'

It was hard to leave this perfection that was all ours to enjoy alone, but it was time to face the steep climb back up the entrance passage on all fours. What a climb! Before we popped out like rabbits back into the sunlight we had discovered muscles that we never knew existed.

Behind the Red pyramid is the Bent one. I had seen photographs of the Bent pyramid in books and always thought that it just didn't look right. The bottom half is like Cheops, 52 degrees, but the top half is at 43 degrees like the Red pyramid. It is a hybrid! However, for years I had unjustly maligned it, because in reality it is beautiful.



The Bent Pyramid

Sam, Margie and I climbed the small crumbling pyramid that sits beside the Bent pyramid. To see Sam, who hates heights, racing to the top, after just having been underground in a triple-chambered cave, was a sight to behold. I wished I had a Gold Medal in my pocket to reward her! Our climb was rewarded by a wonderful view of both the pyramid and out into the sandy reaches of the Western Desert.

Back again into the minibus and the return trip to the Mena House Hotel for a well-earned bath after a hard first day of sightseeing. We had covered a lot of ground in an amazingly short length of time. We all felt rather exhausted and dirty, having only had about four hours' sleep the night before.

The trip back was enhanced by exotic scenes of village life mixed with erratic driving by Mr Fish. In many places it was better not to look ahead but out to the red glow of the setting sun as it flashed at us from between the palm trees as we hurtled along. However, we arrived in one piece and made plans to meet at the swimming pool. Quickly changing we set off down to the refreshing waters to bath like Cleopatra in cooling ass's milk. But not to be! No swimming after sunset. Back we grumped to our rooms for a bath really put out by the bureaucratic waiter who had ordered us off. A whisky in the bath soon repaired the damage, followed by a fantastic dinner, which took so long in coming that the four of us were able to down three bottles of Obelisk wine.

We were finally driven from the room by a group of Cabaret performers pretending to be pharaohs and belly dancers.

Back in the bedroom I sat on the window edge once again looking at the floodlit Cheops Pyramid while listening to the noises of the village below us. Probably for many of the people life had not changed much from the times 5,000 years ago when the Pyramids were built. The people I could see preparing for sleep under blankets on the flat mud roofs of the house below us were looking up at the same night sky as their ancestors and no doubt thinking all the same kind of thoughts as they had then, basically, how they were going to survive the next day!

DAY TWO

Sam and Damon appeared at breakfast looking smug and fresh from a swim in the now open pool. We were gathered at the minibus in front of the hotel on time so Mr Fish set off at speed for the Step pyramid of Saqqara and the vast funeral complex of Djoser that served ancient Memphis. Built in 2,500 BC by the inventive Vizier Imhotep, it is the first monumental structure to be built entirely of carved stone.

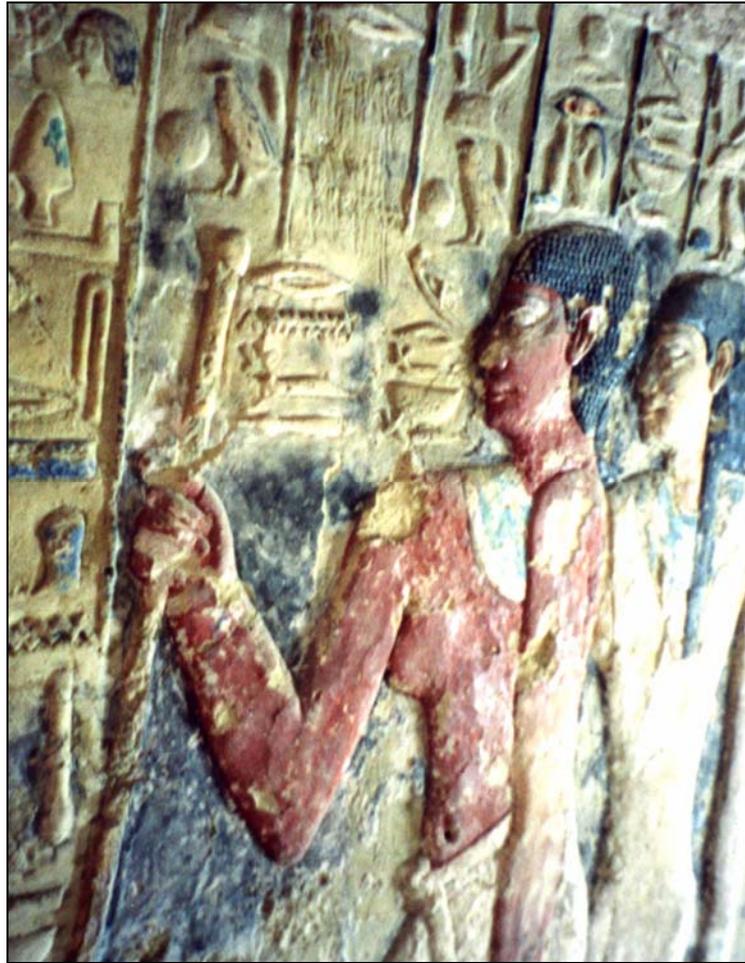
We arrived at the turn-off for Saqqara, but instead of proceeding up to the pyramid we swung right and were soon surrounded by armed policemen in smart white uniforms mounted on camels. Passing through a checkpoint we arrived at a new dig under the control of Professor Karol Mysliwiec of the Polish University of Warsaw. The experts had said that Karol was digging in the wrong place, as there was nothing on the west side of the pyramid so everyone was surprised when he unearthed the 4,300-year-old painted funeral chapel of a vizier, the equivalent of our prime minister.

As we travelled Nabil had given us some background to the discovery. By studying aerial photographs he had discovered that an enormous dry moat had once surrounded the whole complex of Saqqara. Over thousands of years the moat had filled with sand and disappeared. It was Nabil who had suggested to Karol that he should dig in the moat on the west side of the pyramid.

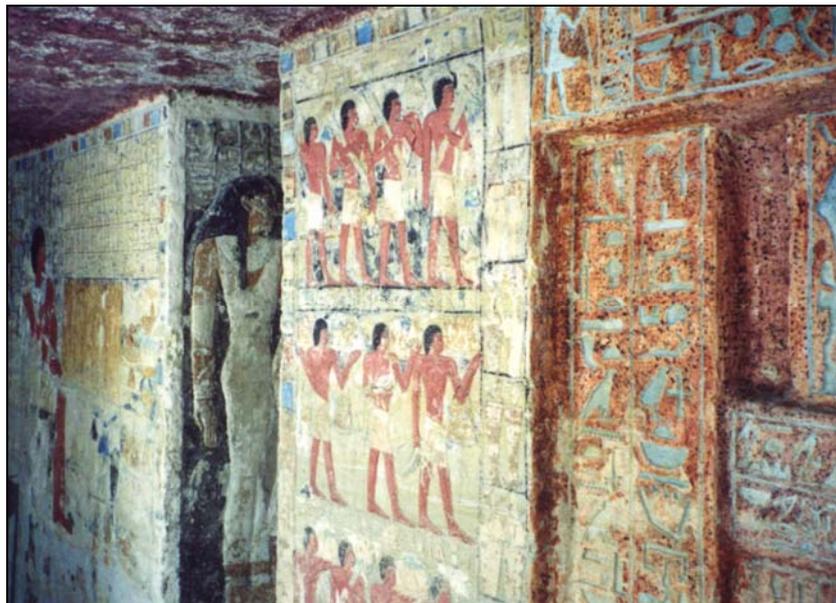
Karol and his small team of experts started to dig and soon exposed a cluster of burials. Slowly and painstakingly the mummies were removed to the museum so Karol could dig deeper. First he found an ancient wall, then an entrance and then the remarkable well-preserved tomb of Vizier Meref-nebef, 'the one who loves his lord' and commonly known as *Fefi*.

Fefi lived in the *fast lane*. On the entrance doorway of his chapel he is depicted with his girlfriend, while his five wives get a small space on an inside wall where they are shown playing harps for their lord and his mistress!

Karol came to meet Nabil and after we were introduced he began to tell us all about what they had found. It was wonderful to listen to his enthusiastic explanation of the discovery. The man's excitement was infectious and by the time he invited us to step inside the chapel we were all full of anticipation. Only one of us would be allowed in at a time because they had to be very careful about controlling the humidity level and we were not to speak when inside because our breath would add moisture to the air. The chapel is 23 foot long by 8 foot wide and an Aladdin's cave of colour. The scenes were either of farmers gathering crops for Fefi's afterlife, or dallying with Meres-ankh, she 'who loves life' while his wives playing their harps. It seemed that things had been pretty good 4,300 years ago for the men!



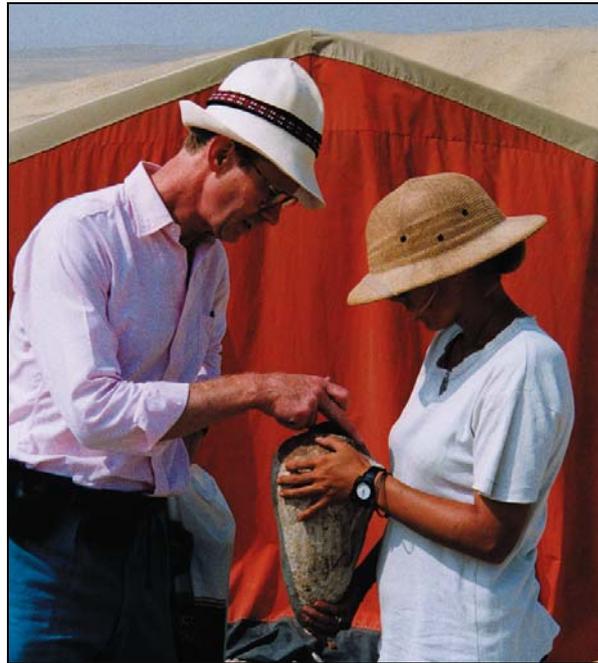
Fefi, 'who loves his lord' and Meres-ankh, 'who loves life'



Inside the chapel of 'Vizier Fefi'

Each of us took turns to go inside the tomb and have a look. The colours of the butterflies, hoopoe birds and the fox were incredibly fresh, and

quite out of this world. It was an amazing experience and all of us were very grateful to Karol for allowing us to be among the first to see such wonders.



'Professor Damon' examining tomb treasures

It was time to go and see the nearby Saqqara pyramid so we drove back past the guards and returned to the main entrance. Nabil showed us the first buildings ever constructed in stone. The whole area is a wonder and to have such a guide made it doubly so.



'Saqqara' and the entrance temple

Back to the hotel to collect our luggage, pay the bill and take one last look at the pyramids before heading out into the Cairo traffic on our way to the museum, which was right across town. We had collected a picnic lunch from the hotel so that we could eat it on the way and not waste any time.

Chomping on hamburgers and sipping Coca Cola, we watched the hordes of pedestrians, cars, buses, bicycles, donkey carts and barrows all struggling to go somewhere for some purpose, amid an unbelievable cacophony of noise. Cairo has an estimated official population of 10,500,000 now, which will increase to 14,400,000 by 2015. Looking out of the window of the minibus would have made one feel more than a little desperate, if it wasn't for the fact that everyone looked so happy!

We crossed the Nile again and arrived at the museum. What a place! Nabil gave us a tour of special things that we had to see, weaving in and out of fabulous art, until we arrived at Tutankhamun's treasures. Here we had to stop and marvel for a while, as the workmanship of the jewellery is beyond belief. Sam broke away to meet her son Robert, who was doing his own thing, while Damon and I went to see the Royal mummies. Margie refused and found other marvels to look at while she waited for us. Nabil had seen them all many times before so had a well-earned rest with his shoes off!

We fell out of the museum and headed for clean washrooms in the Hilton across the street. Thank goodness for American plumbing! In the courtyard of the hotel we found a cool shady spot where we could regroup and, while we decided what we were going to do before catching the aeroplane up to Luxor, Margie and Nabil had their shoes cleaned, at a price!

Damon had been telling Nabil about our son Peter carving a copy of the lion from the Egyptian collection at the British Museum. Nabil said that he thought that they had come from Nubia and that there was one in a park on the other side of the Nile. Would we like to go and find it?

Mr Fish wove his way through the dense evening traffic and we soon arrived at a small park beside the Nile where we found not one but two rather battered lions. It was a lovely peaceful and completely untouristy place with local families and their children having tea in the gardens so we were able to sit and have a well-earned rest and a refreshing drink.



Nabil found a Nubian lion for Damon to lean on

The lions were placed on either side of an ornamental pond, both very weathered from having been buried in the Nile delta silt near Tanis for many years. The pose was exactly the same as the two in the British Museum, front paws crossed, and looking superior. I washed one down with water to show the true colours of the granite. They must have been beautiful in their prime.

A call had come from the girls requesting a visit to a spice market so we climbed into the minibus and headed back into the chaos of traffic. The sun's setting had signalled all those who had not been on the streets during the day to now join them. As we approached the area of the market the traffic got even slower and looking down the side streets we could see that they were full of a heaving mass of humanity. The girls were voted 'out of order' and they would have to make do with the smell of the spices as they drifted in through the open windows. The smell was overpowering in places so they were quite happy, as were the men because we decided that once the girls were let loose on the street we would never be able to find them again! We pushed on out to the airport hotel where we were to meet our pilot.

Our ticket agent in London had booked us on the evening plane from Cairo to Luxor, which meant that we would have two full days in Cairo. Just before leaving London our agent informed us that Egyptian Air had transferred us to the noon flight! By doing this the Egyptians had stolen a complete day from us and there was nothing we could do about it.

Damon said there is of course always something you can do if you are willing to pay, and told me to ring Nabil and ask him to charter a small aeroplane so we could fly to Luxor in the evening! The man was brilliant and found a plane that would take the six of us at eight o'clock thereby recovering our lost day. Nabil had been an admiral so I was not surprised that he solved the problem! This was the plane that we were now waiting for while we sat beside the hotel pool sipping a cold beer. What a breathtaking day we had had! Imagine if we had lost it to Egyptian Air? We would have missed out on seeing the newly discovered Chapel of Fefi and the *One Who Loves Life*, the Saqqara pyramid, the Cairo Museum, the lions and smelling all those delicious spices!

We were soon called and set off for the terminal. Met by several officials we were hurried past crowds of passengers out onto the runway. No wonder we were being treated like VIPs, as waiting for us was a 60 seater!

The two stewards settled us in, the engines started up and we taxied out and were soon airborne. Nabil in his negotiations had been promised that we would have a VIP meal on the plane, but no champagne as it was a Moslem company. I had a couple of *Robinson's Raspberry Cordial* bottles full of Chianti in my briefcase as a surprise, so I thought we would be all right at a pinch. The real surprise came when we unpacked the VIP meal. It was voted without question the worst meal that we had ever been served on a plane, which is saying something! We have all had a few of those, but this beat the lot by thousands of airmiles! The steward thought it a big joke when we showed him that it was impossible to break the bread roll in half. Thank goodness we had the Christian raspberry cordial from the Italian vineyards!

After much laughter and ribald comment, none of which the stewards understood thank goodness, we arrived at Luxor, where we were met by another agent who guided us out into a minibus past masses of struggling passengers trying to find their luggage dumped in an enormous pile. It was not

until we were on our way to the hotel that we realised that the cursing travellers we had just seen were the ones off the plane we should have been on!



The Winter Palace Hotel, Luxor

I had booked the same suite in the Old Winter Palace that Margie and I had shared with Nabil on our previous trip. Two bedrooms divided by a sitting room all looking out onto the Nile. Margie and I couldn't wait to see Damon and Sam's reaction when they first looked out of their window in the morning to the Valley of the Kings across the river.

After settling into the suite Margie and I just had to walk in the hotel garden before going to bed. We had been looking forward to passing once again through the revolving *time* door out into the warm air and the star-studded night sky. We found that none of the magic had gone. What a wonderful place and so full of memories of our last trip and all the shared laughter. We could not believe that we were here yet again. The tall palm trees mixed with giant tropical date palms was an oasis. We strolled down to the pool and back, passing Damon and Sam on the way also enjoying the night. How fortunate we all were to be here in this, *ob so*, romantic setting full of mystic presence.

Departure next morning was set for nine o'clock so we agreed to meet for an early breakfast. Damon and Sam came into the dining room glowing from a dawn swim. When Nabil arrived he suggested that we drive down the Nile to the Temple of Karnak as our introduction to *Was It*, the ancient Egyptian name for Luxor.

DAY THREE

Karnak, or the Great Temple of Amun-Re, is quite, quite, quite amazing! The gigantic pylons, obelisks, Hypostyle Hall, the sculptured reliefs, traces of painted decoration on the columns, are all beyond description and have to be absorbed with your whole being. Felt, seen, heard, and breathed.

Before we set off to mix with the masses that were milling around like ants beneath the huge construction, Nabil led us to the open-air museum. Here is a collection of pieces of carved masonry that have been found during reconstruction of the pylons. These pieces come from ancient chapels that were on the site of the present pylons, so their walls were used as infill for the new construction. The pieces were collected, sorted and then reassembled as the Red Chapel, the Alabaster Chapel, and the White Chapel. These three buildings far surpass the heavy grandeur of the main temple. They are built on the simplest of ground plans, but have an unsurpassed elegance and beauty.



Long Life Eternally

Tent – Long Ankh – Life Serpent – Eternally

The carvings and hieroglyphs on the stone walls are of the finest quality, both incised (as above) and raised (p1037). The Alabaster Chapel is snowy white with honey veins. Hatshepsut's Red Chapel has walls of warm red granite and doorways of soft grey stone. The White Chapel is of creamy limestone with raised hieroglyphs and is the jewel in the crown. All these things have to be seen to be believed, as their beauty is indescribable. What a privilege it was to be able to walk amongst these treasures all by ourselves!



The White Chapel

When we left the museum we passed the one remaining column in the First Court, a gigantic 82 foot high! You can gauge the size of its capital from the shadow it casts. It has a diameter of over 25 foot across and 32 people can stand within the circumference of its shadow.



Hypostyle column



The 'Sun over the Duck' means 'Son of the Sun', the Pharaoh's title

Time sped by and the sun passed its zenith. Attention was beginning to wane and the hotel swimming pool beckoned. We returned to the minibus, fell upon the bottled water and set off. We were soon by the pool and after staking out two of the terrace tables for lunch by spreading our belongings about, we sank into the cool water. What heaven! After several slow laps our brains started to cool down and we came back down to earth.



The life-saving pool at the 'Winter Palace' Hotel

Lunch and the excellent Egyptian beer left Margie and me feeling decidedly sleepy and fortunately Nabil asked to be excused for a siesta so we quickly followed suit. Before going we set a time for meeting in the lobby to be ready for a sail in a felucca on the Nile to watch the sun go down.

Our captain was waiting for us when we congregated by the front door so we quickly crossed the Corniche and walked down onto the jetty, where we were handed onto a *motor boat*! The mutiny happened spontaneously when we discovered that the captain intended this for our trip. *No way, Hose!*

Admiral Nabil soon put the captain to rights and we transferred to a beautiful *felucca* amid much screaming and yelling of instructions to the crew and jetty attendants. A large tug threw us a rope and we were soon being pulled upstream and across to the West Bank where we picked up a strong breeze that filled the giant sail above us. The tug cast off and the wind took us.



Father and son enjoying a joke on the Nile

Along we skipped in the breeze, catching up with smaller boats and overtaking them, with much banter between the crews. I think Nabil was glad that we did not understand Egyptian! The sun slowly sank towards the horizon, touched the palm tops and then plunged into the nether world swallowed by the Goddess Nut. The captain turned the boat back downstream towards Luxor and Robert popped the cork from a cold bottle of champagne. What a sunset, what a place, and what a company! Nabil proposed a toast of 'long life and happiness' to our friend R III who had initiated the journey.



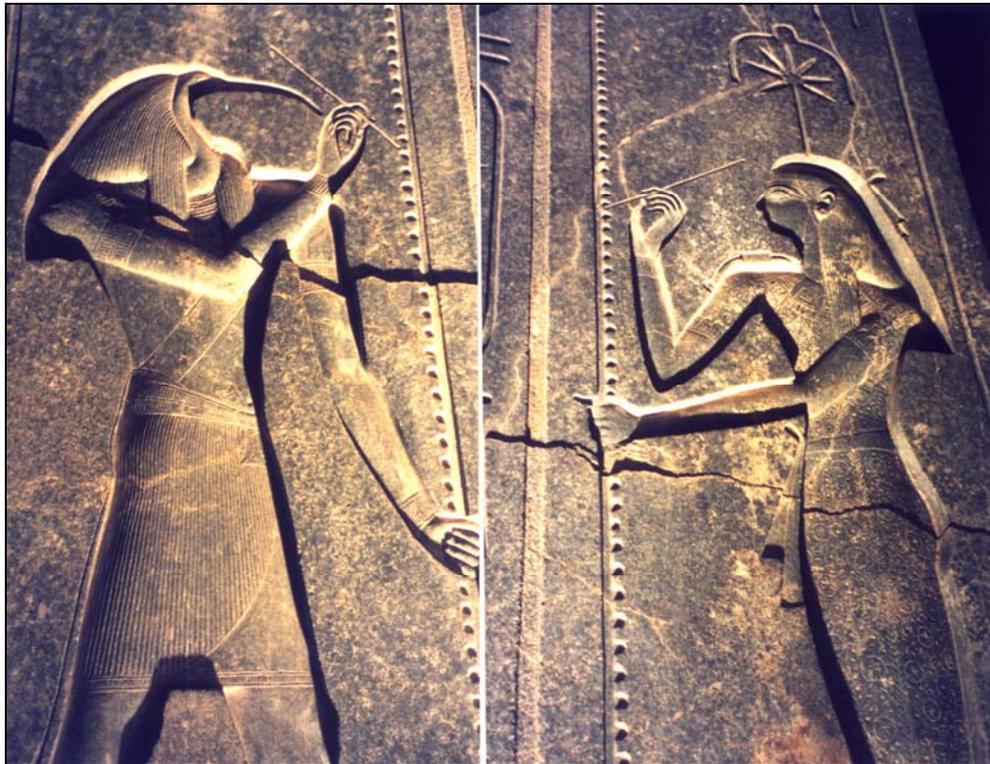
The Temple of Thebes

We were back at the jetty by a quarter to seven, so Nabil suggested that before dinner we should take a stroll in the floodlit Temple of Luxor. We

crossed back over the Corniche and headed for the temple gates that shone like gold in the floodlights. We passed through the gate and approached the pylon entrance. The giant obelisk that stands to the left mourns its twin that was given to the French in 1836 and now stands in the Place de la Concorde. On the walls of the pylon is carved a scene from the battle of Kadesh where Ramesses II fought the Hittites, and signed the first recorded 'Peace Treaty'.

I think that the Temple of Luxor at night-time is one of the greatest vistas of architecture that one could ever see. The columns of the Great Colonnade are supremely majestic. Perhaps because you can walk freely amongst these golden giants I think that the columns of Luxor outreach those of the Parthenon. Whatever it is that makes them so incredibly special, it is utterly awe-inspiring!

We passed through the Colonnade and into the Court of Amenhotep III. What a place! We walked into the court alone, not a tourist in sight, and sat down to absorb the glory of this unbelievable setting. On we strolled towards the Sanctuary of Alexander the Great, built for him by the priests when he conquered Egypt and was made a god.



Two remarkable carvings in the Temple of Thebes

Eventually hunger drove us back through the wonders of the temple and out onto the Corniche and into a horse carriage heading for the hotel. Room service fed us after we had bathed and one very tired group fell into bed with Nabil's words ringing in our ears: "Seven o'clock in the *lobby!*"

DAY FOUR

At 'seven' we were all ready and soon heading to join the convoy that would take us out to Dendera, the Temple of Hathor, the Goddess of Joy, amorous

pursuits and music. *The God Re opened his eyes inside the lotus as it emerged from primordial chaos and his eyes began to weep and droplets fell to the ground where they were transformed into a beautiful woman with cow's ears, Hathor the Great, Mistress of Dendera.*



The Goddess Hathor, the Mistress of Dendera

The convoy split about an hour out of town and we continued on with a police jeep of soldiers, and soon arrived at the gates of the temple. The gate is tall and graceful and passing through you look straight down a paved way to the temple in the background. A massive mudbrick wall encloses the precinct, 90-foot thick at the base, tapering up to 60-foot high and about a mile round. The carvings of the Pharaoh being presented to the gods on the curtains between the pillars of the House of Birth are some of the finest work in Egypt. Each capital is decorated with carvings of different plants. One of the really interesting things about the temple is that it is unfinished so when you go around the back you can see exactly how the work was being done.



One of the most elegant carvings we found in Egypt



Cleopatra presenting Caesar's son to the Gods

We walked around the back of the main temple to see the incised relief of Cleopatra presenting the son she bore Julius Caesar to the God Osiris and then we returned to the main entrance of the temple. Here we marvelled at the painted ceiling of Nut and the beautiful columns topped by capitals of Hathor's head. Through to the inner sanctuary that is in perfect condition except for the ceilings blackened from the Bedouins' campfires. Before the temple was cleared of the sand that half-filled the space, the local residents had lived in this building. Hundreds of years of cooking on fires using animal dung as fuel had deposited a thick layer of soot over the once colourful ceilings. What a glory it must have been in its prime once. (p 948)

On the right is the sanctuary chapel of Nut and on the ceiling is a relief of the goddess bent double swallowing the sun in the evening and giving birth to it again in the morning. As the sun is being born its rays of light fall on the House of Hathor that stands on the Primordial Island between two fig sycamore trees, as it rises from chaos. It is one of the most beautiful carved ceilings in the world. What fun it would be to paint above a bed! (p 949)

Leaving the chapel we turned into the hidden stairway that led to the roof of the temple. The staircase takes seven or eight right-angle bends to get you up onto the roof terrace. One of the wedge-shaped windows on the way up is a gem as the sill is carved with the rays of the sun emanating from a disc.

We climbed on up to the roof and burst out into the sunlight to find in one corner a beautiful miniature Hathor Chapel, a perfect replica of the grand pillared main entrance.

We felt sorry for the bored young guard that kept watch on this area from his one small slither of shade. But he smiled and returned our greeting and we were reassured by his presence and gun after all the troubles.

Before going up onto the roof we had one more treasure to visit. Tucked against the back wall of the Hypostyle Hall is the famous Zodiac Chapel. A central door leads into a chamber, the ceiling split into three sections. On the ceiling above the doorway is Hathor in the form of a beautiful woman in a skin-tight dress. To her right is a copy of the zodiac ceiling, the original being in the Louvre. To the left is a ceiling depicting the Hours. Unfortunately the

ceilings are black with soot from the Arab cooking fires, but what a wonder this all must have been when it was built and what an incredibly sensitive and great people the ancient Egyptians must have been to have planned and executed such great works of art and architecture!



The soot-stained 'Zodiac' ceiling in Dendera

In passing I must mention that I have seen the original ceiling in the Louvre and I am afraid to say the museum cannot be congratulated on their display. They have built a little chapel to fit the ceiling, so now appears cramped as it covers only one third of the original area intended. How much better it would have been if they had reconstructed the whole room and copied Hathor in a 'skin-tight dress' and the Hours as well.

All that remained was for us to climb to the roof. An iron staircase has replaced the ancient stone ones that have been broken off but used to jut out from the back wall of the Hypostyle Hall. We climbed the iron rungs and stepped into an amazing view. From here you can see the whole complex and get a wonderful sense of the vastness of the temple area, the fertile Nile to the East and beyond out into the barren Western Desert.

Back down the iron staircase, past the guard and into the descending passageway. Whereas coming up we had gone round and round, the descending stairs run the full length of the sanctuary in one long gradual slope back down to the Hypostyle Hall. One can easily imagine the processions that must have made the journey because we had seen many of the reliefs in Luxor and Karnak depicting the very same ceremonies. What glorious days!

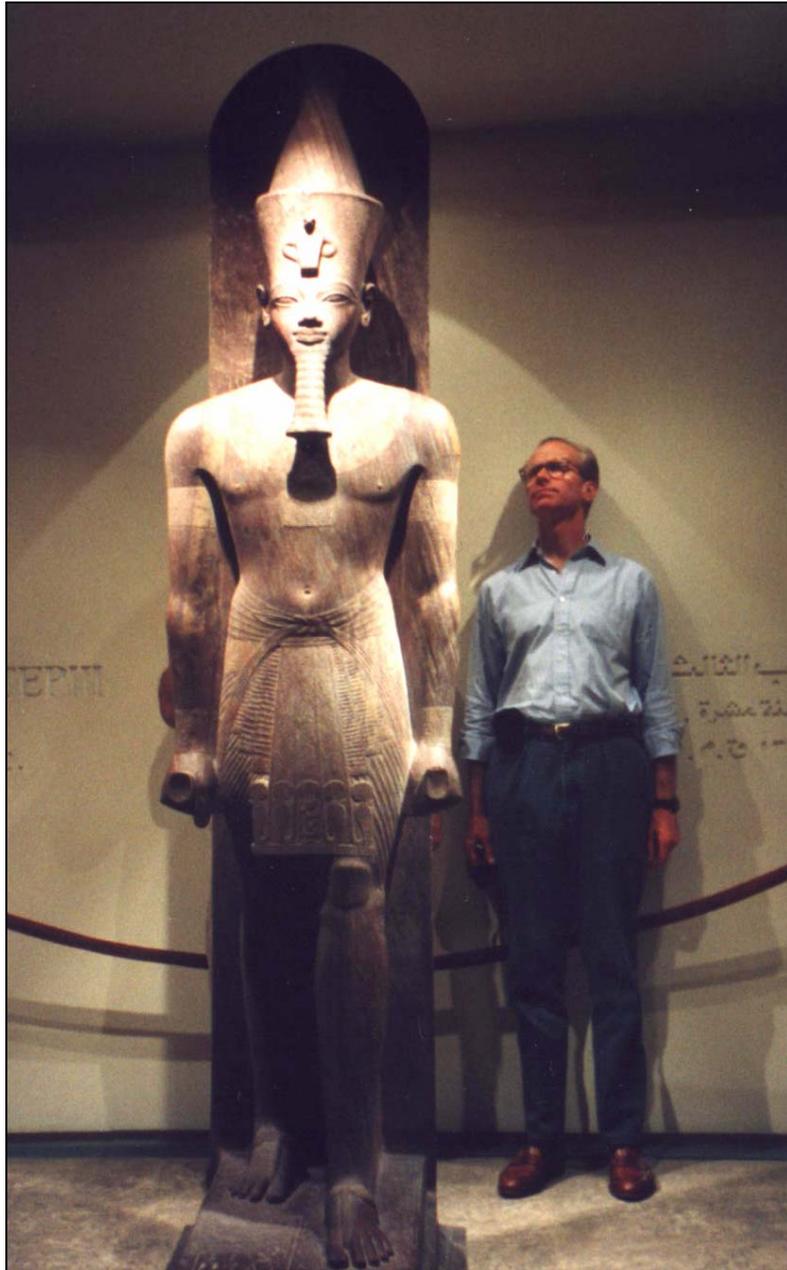
Thankfully at the café outside the temple gate we were served cold bottles of water while we waited for the police to lead us back to Luxor in a convoy. After an uneventful journey home one exhausted but very happy little band of tourists fell into the swimming pool. After a superb repast at the spot that the 'de Laszlo Group' had taken over on the lunch terrace, followed by a well-earned siesta, we assembled again downstairs at five o'clock for a visit to one of the best little museums in the world, the Luxor Museum.



Husband and wife

The man is brown because he works in the sun!

Sam and her son, Robert, set off on foot to the museum while the rest of us collapsed into a horse and carriage. Robert was quietly hatching a plan of getting us all out of the comfortable hotel into an ethnic Egyptian café with spicy food and he and Sam were going to find one. We arrived at the museum and Nabil started to tell us about all the wonders that surrounded us. Some of the sculptures here are without doubt of the finest quality in Egypt and most of it was discovered quite recently buried in ground surrounded by the great colonnade of Amenhotep III in the Temple of Luxor, presumably hidden from the looting Romans.



Damon measuring up to a Pharaoh

Robert and Sam arrived as we were about to leave the museum, announcing that they had booked a table for us at a downtown dive. Margie and I begged-off as I didn't think my tummy was quite up to an ethnic meal, so we waved goodbye to the four brave hearts, hailed a passing carriage and trotted back to the hotel for a whisky and a bath.

That evening the hotel had a buffet by the pool under the stars, so we wandered down and had a peaceful meal listening to Dean Martin singing nostalgic songs from our youth. For some reason his melodious voice really suited the setting of palm trees and floodlit pool. It was all very calming and a relaxing place to sit and talk about the events of the day and what we had seen. Dinner was followed by a stroll around the jasmine-scented gardens. What more could anyone ask for in life we wondered, and counted our lucky stars. It was all a very long way from sheep farming in the Ninety Mile Desert!

DAY FIVE

Thursday didn't dawn until we had reached the Valley of the Kings! Nabil had ordered a very early start indeed so that we would be at the head of the queue when the ticket office opened. He also planned to have finished our tour of the Valley of the Kings before the first tourist bus arrived!

We crossed over the river bridge and drove out across the flood plains of the Nile. The cool morning was mystical as a smoky mist from the farmers cooking fires filled the air. We arrived at the ticket office, but was abit miffed to find we were not the first in the queue!

Our van was parked beside the tourist shops but as we were so early we were not pestered as they still hadn't opened! We would have to run the gauntlet on the way out. We climbed into a little motorised train for the quarter-mile journey up to the old entrance of the valley. *Smile you are in Luxor* was painted along the side of our carriage. I could imagine the tourists appreciating that in the noonday sun as they struggled through football-type crowds. For us a lovely pink glow was slowly spreading over the cliffs of the valley as the sun crested the horizon in the East.



Only if you're there before the invasion!

Our first port of call was the Tomb of Ramesses VI, which he had usurped from Ramesses V. We walked through the entrance into a wonderful wide creamy-white corridor that sloped gently downhill towards the chamber of the sarcophagus. On the wall was painted the journey the Pharaoh would take on his passage to the Underworld and Eternal Life. Nabil pointed out salient features as we inched down the corridor; Osiris, Isis, Nut, and all the other gods were represented as they welcomed the Pharaoh into his tomb. The colours were magnificent even though a little faded.

We arrived at the sarcophagus to see it lying smashed by the tomb robbers; giant pieces tumbled together. How did the priests get it into the chamber when it was whole? However, as Ramesses VI had pinched the tomb and removed the sarcophagus of his ancestor Ramesses V, I personally thought he had got what he deserved.

We left and proceeded up the valley to Ramesses I's Tomb that is much smaller, because he ruled for only a short time so didn't have time to prepare a more lavish abode. The painting on the ceiling and walls depicting the Pharaoh in the presence of the Divinities with extracts from the Book of Gates makes this tomb very special.

Next we went into the famous Tutankhamun Tomb discovered by Carter in 1922. The tailings from the mining of Ramesses VI's Tomb had

completely covered the entrance of this tomb, which is why it survived hidden and intact, unrobbed. The rooms are tiny and when we thought of all the treasures we had seen in the Cairo Museum we couldn't believe just how the priest had managed to get everything into such a tiny space.

Our last tomb to visit was tucked high up on the cliff at the end of the valley. We climbed the iron staircase up the cliff and arrived at the entrance of the Tomb of Thutmose III. The original entrance to the tomb had been down a gully to the right which meant that the sarcophagus would have had to be lowered from the top of the cliff, an incredibly daunting task to imagine.

Passing through the present entrance we came out into a large rectangular chamber with two supporting pillars in the middle cut from bedrock. The walls look like a lined school exercise book and are filled with beautiful hieroglyphic script done in the simplest of form. The little figures are in black ink, with a few in red, and so totally different to anything we had seen before it was spectacular. On one of the central columns is a famous scene, the fig sycamore tree, Eternal Giver of Life, with breasts on its limbs giving suckle to the Pharaoh.

In one corner of this chamber are some steps going down into the room that houses the sarcophagus. This chamber has rounded corners and is the shape of the royal cartouche. The sarcophagus that had been lowered down the cliff is also carved out of magnificent red granite and has great beauty. The tomb was extremely stuffy so we were glad to rejoin Nabil at the foot of the staircase again before starting back down the valley. We were met by the first train load of people on their way up! *Smile your in Luxor!*



The minibus whisked us away from the hordes and took us to the Valley of the Queens. Here we were to see what Nabil considers to be one of the gems of ancient Egypt, the carved reliefs of Kheruef, the steward of Queen Tiyi. No one knows what the relationship was between these two people, but the man must have been very close to the Queen to afford such a tomb. Whatever the relationship, Kheruef was a lover of art and beauty. We turned off the road that led up to the famous Temple of Hatshepsut and bumped over a dirt track that ran between deep holes in the ground, all ancient looted tombs. Drive into one of those and it would be curtains, so no wonder the driver was looking more than a little apprehensive.

We were met by a smiling toothless man who led us down into the hole, through a doorway into a passage that ended in a grill. Not very impressive, but then you look at the walls! The carved hieroglyphs are of the highest quality, all being raised rather than incised. The limestone is of the purest kind, which is what makes it possible to do such superb carving.

Through the grill we could see the pillars cut from the bedrock, which had once supported the roof of the chamber. Only one is complete so the tomb was never finished. Either Kheruef died before the Queen or she died and he lost his job and patron. No one will ever know.

Nabil led the way back and to the right of the doorway. Our toothless, friendly Egyptian tomb-guardian directed sunlight with the aid of a board covered with aluminium foil onto a ten-foot high wall to reveal a beautifully-carved scene of Kheruef being presented to the gods. The purity of line was staggering. We had seen nothing as fine in the Cairo Museum.

Next Nabil led us to the opposite passage. Having seen this wall before, we waited to hear the gasps from Damon and Sam. Here in carved relief is a line of exquisite dancing girls following the slaves carrying the sacred ointments to anoint the dead. The whole wall is a treasure. There is not a blemish or a line too many. The gracefulness of the figures is pure innocence.



Tomb of Kheruef – steward of Queen Tiye

Opposite the wall is a bench cut in the rock where we could sit and wonder at the sheer beauty of the scene that equals the Luca della Robbia and Donatello children in the Duomo Museum in Florence. We just sat and looked and looked. Whoever Kheruef was he was certainly a man of taste! I believe that this wall is one of the greatest examples of art that exists in the world. I thought of those artists who had sat exactly where I was sitting all those years ago. They also would have taken a break for lunch and sat back to admire and plan their next move as they chewed on their sandwiches!

Alas we had to move and so we did, intoxicated by the beauty we had been so privileged to see. Before leaving we had a look at Hatshepsut's temple through binoculars and mourned for the poor people who had lost their lives in the massacre two years previously, murdered by the cowardly Islamic fundamentalists.

In the top pocket of my shirt were five small tickets that were burning a hole in my chest. It was time to visit the jewel in the crown, the Tomb of Nefertari. I really could not believe I was going to see again what must surely be one of the great *Wonders of the Art World*. The sun beat down on the white limestone track that led up the Valley of the Queens, bouncing a blinding light back into our eyes. You could not imagine a more inhospitable place and yet I knew that just under the ground was a cool paradise of colourful calm, *an oasis of the afterlife*.

Nabil took us straight to the tomb entrance and we descended the 18 steps to the doorway. Margie and I waited to let the others pass through the doorway into the first chamber, so we could watch their faces. We was not disappointed! The contrast of outside to inside is quite unbelievable! The walls are bright with painted colour on a pure cotton-white background.

The text in the first chamber reads, *Hereditary noblewoman; great of favours; possessor of charm, sweetness, and love; the King's great wife; mistress of the two lands, Nefertari, beloved of Ma'at, revered of Osiris*. What a woman this must have been to be so rewarded by her father with such a tomb 3,000 years ago! A beautifully-painted grey heron stalks along the wall frieze and the roof is painted a black blue and studded with golden stars.

A doorway on the right leads to a small antechamber where the paintings of the gods are in even better condition (p 958). Dressed in a translucent white cotton dress Nefertari is led by the hand of Hathor, both women incredibly beautiful. No other ancient Egyptian paintings yet found have used shading on the faces of the portraits. There is a blush on Nefertari's cheek and lines on her throat. Her finger and toenails are painted white, and in one case there is a tattoo on her arm to ward off the *Evil Eye*.

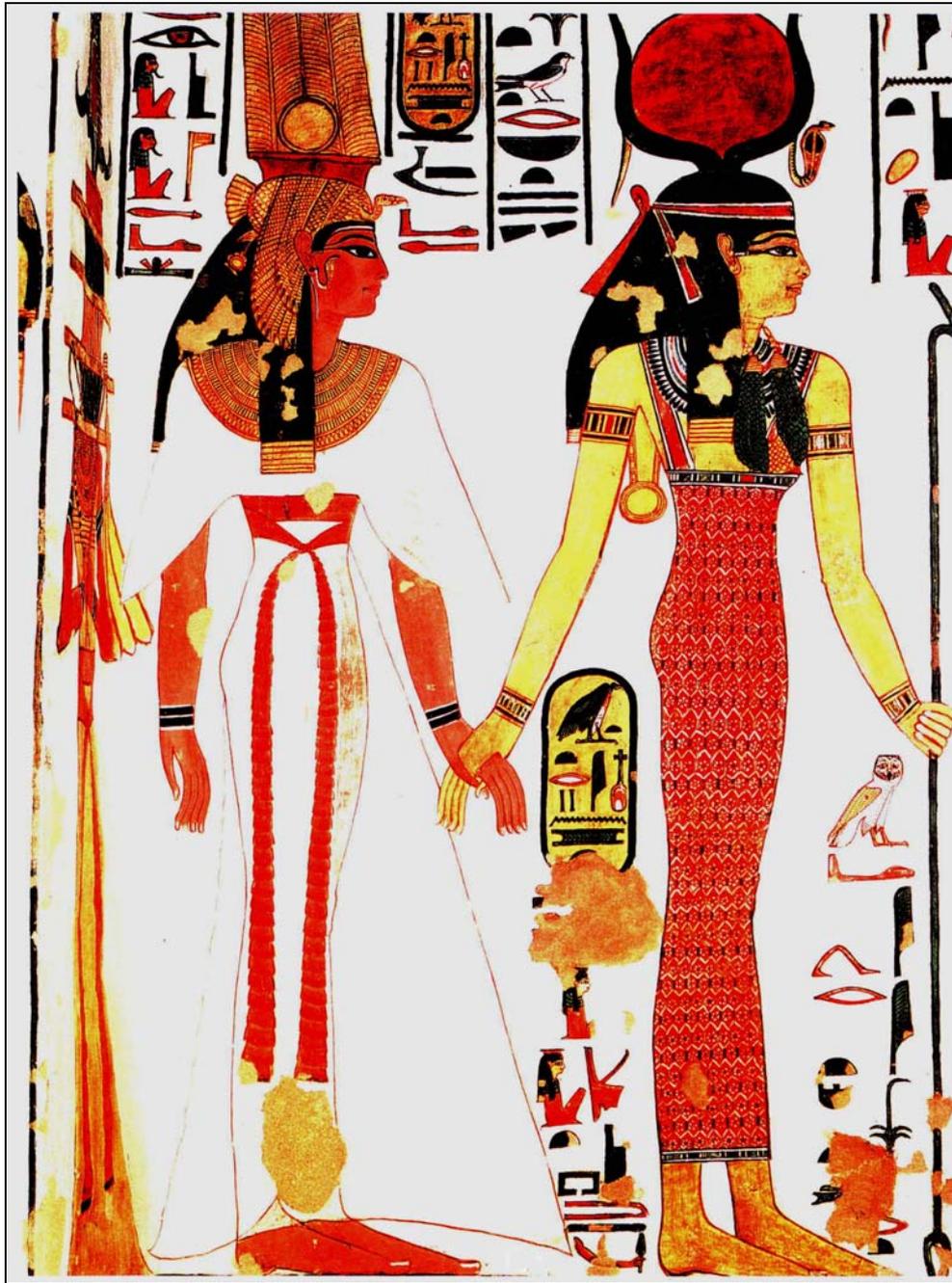
Straight ahead is a short passage doorway leading into another chamber. Here you stop and hold your breath. To the right is the most wonderful panel of cattle, seven cows and a great black bull, all making an address to Nefertari. The colouring is staggering (p 961). Other walls have scenes of Nefertari giving linen to Ptah, as well as great offering of meat, bread, and fruit.

Returning to the first chamber you turn right to the descending ramp that leads down into the sarcophagus room. The side walls have superb paintings of Ma'at, Hathor, and Serket. Above the door, painted across the lintel of the lower chamber, is a magnificent painting of Ma'at, Goddess of the Divine Order of the Universe, her wings outstretched as she welcomes Nefertari to the Underworld (p 960). We stood and looked and looked.

Passing under the lintel you come into the main chamber, 32 foot wide and 25 long. To support the ceiling of the tomb the miners left four columns of bedrock wide enough for full-length double portraits. One of these shows Isis holding an Ankh to Nefertari's nose to give her the *Breath of Life*.

Around the outside wall are painted the Guardians of the Tomb. Unfortunately they didn't do a very good job as when their tomb was discovered in 1904 the robbers had already struck. All they left was her shoes! But the paintings are more than enough. Visiting the Tomb of Nefertari, the

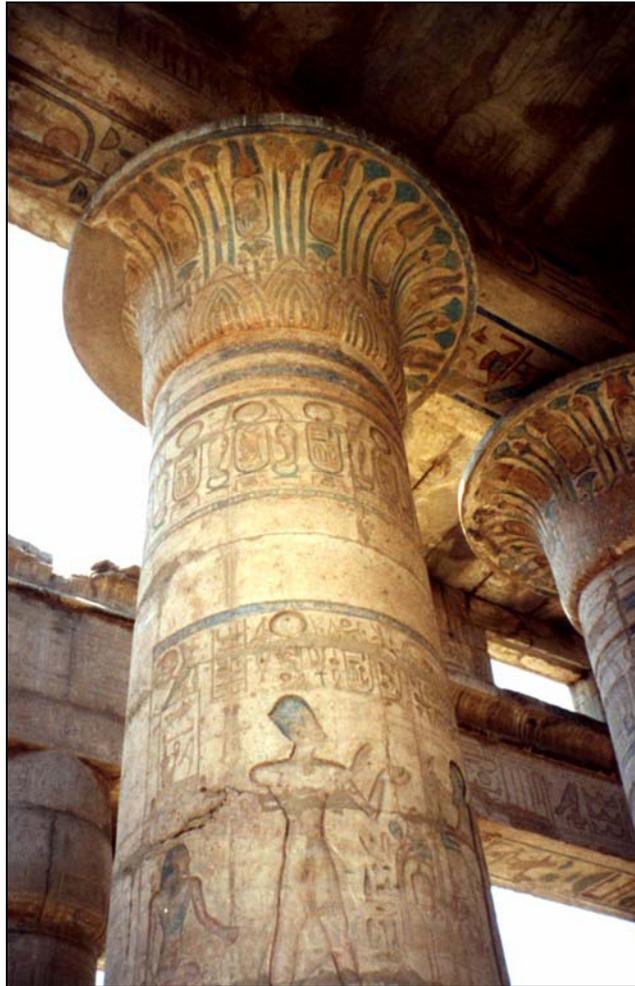
favourite daughter of Ramesses the Great, is an experience never to be forgotten, and one that will last for the Eternity of Shen (p 962).



Hathor in a red dress welcoming Nefertari in a white one

Our time was up and others were waiting, and we had one last call to make, the Ramesseum, or Mortuary Temple of Ramesses II, the father and husband of Nefertari, to see the remains of the largest sculpture that has ever been carved from a single block of granite. Damon gave us a moving rendering of “My name is Ozymandias: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (p 966)

Most of the Ramesseum has been pillaged for building material over the centuries. However, there are some magnificent columns still left in the Hypostyle Hall, still retaining the original paint on the capitals.



The pillars of the 'Ramesseum' still hold original paint

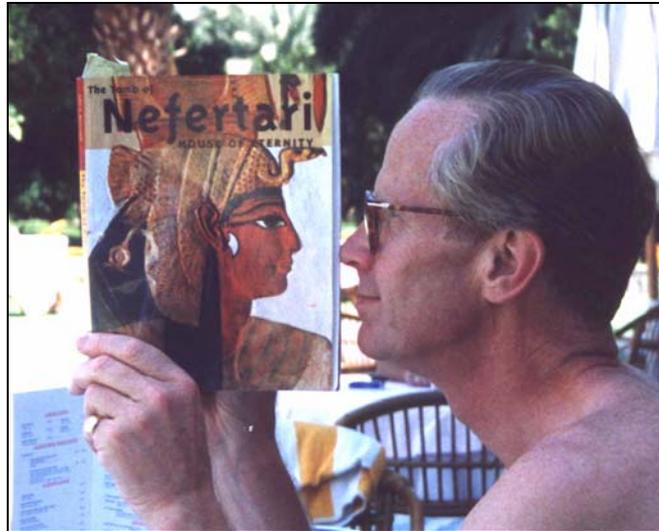
Estimates vary as to the weight of the sculpture, but Nabil said that he thought it must have been around 1,000 tons. When erect the sculpture was 69 foot high, now it is broken and lying in pieces, brought to earth. However, standing between the colossal feet, or leaning on its man-sized hands, leaves one with an incredible impression of the sheer size (p 962). It was noon and we had been sightseeing for six hours. It was time to head for the pool.

On the way home though we made a very quick stop to have a look at the Colossi of Memnon, just to give Damon and Sam an idea of what the Ramesses colossus would have been like. We pulled off the road and walked down to the sculptures that are carved from several blocks of quartzite. The Colossi are simply enormous, and yet our boy Ramesses II was bigger and carved from one single block of granite! Our brains had ceased to function and accept the facts so we headed for a cold beer.

We were nearly there when a shout of "Stop" brought the minibus to a sudden halt. A baby camel was tethered beside the road and out jumped Robert to take a photograph. The next thing we knew was it seemed that he had bought a camel, as Robert's grinning face and the puzzled baby camel were jammed against the bus window, along with a tribe of children all shouting for *bak.sheesh*. From the delightful squeals I guess we handed over too much, but if

you have good fortune in life and don't share it, then you don't deserve to have it, and we had certainly had more than our fair share that day.

Never had the swimming pool been better or the cold beer more refreshing. While Damon caught up with a little serious study the rest of us retired for a well-earned siesta.



Damon at work!

We met on the terrace to watch the sun go down before going to have an excellent meal in the grand dining room of the Winter Palace Hotel and celebrate another glorious day. Tomorrow was Damon's birthday and we were allowed to sleep in. Breakfast was set for eight o'clock! But first we couldn't resist a stroll around the garden to enjoy the smell of the jasmine and the calm of the palm trees under a warm starlit night. I thought if Paradise is like this I might be tempted to become a believer!

Damon's Birthday – Friday, October 8th, 1999

Sam, Margie, and Robert decided to go shopping in the bazaar for spices, trousers, and waistcoats! Damon, Nabil, and I took the van back to the open-air museum at Karnak for one last look. We wandered around the grounds looking at the carving and then returned to see the White Chapel just once more. We marvelled at the Hypostyle Hall columns and Nabil showed us some breathtaking incised carving of our friend Ramesses II. After a couple of hours it seemed even hotter than usual so we decided to carry on our discussions by the hotel pool with a cold beer. I think we were *touristed out*. For five days we had been on the run and seen so many magnificent things that we were all left breathless just thinking about it.

The swim was heaven and the lunch and beer as good as always. The waiters had set up our camp for us without our asking. They had become our friends. The siesta revitalised the parts missed by the beer and food, so we rose refreshed and ready for the *Birthday Party*. Sam had been making secret arrangements with the concierge and Damon had booked the felucca for five o'clock. We gathered in the hall, crossed the Corniche, and boarded the *Katrine*, manned by Captain Said Mohamed Aliy and his trusted crew of two children.

We cast off and were towed over to the West Bank again so we could catch the evening breeze and headed upstream at a spanking pace, as there was quite a good wind.



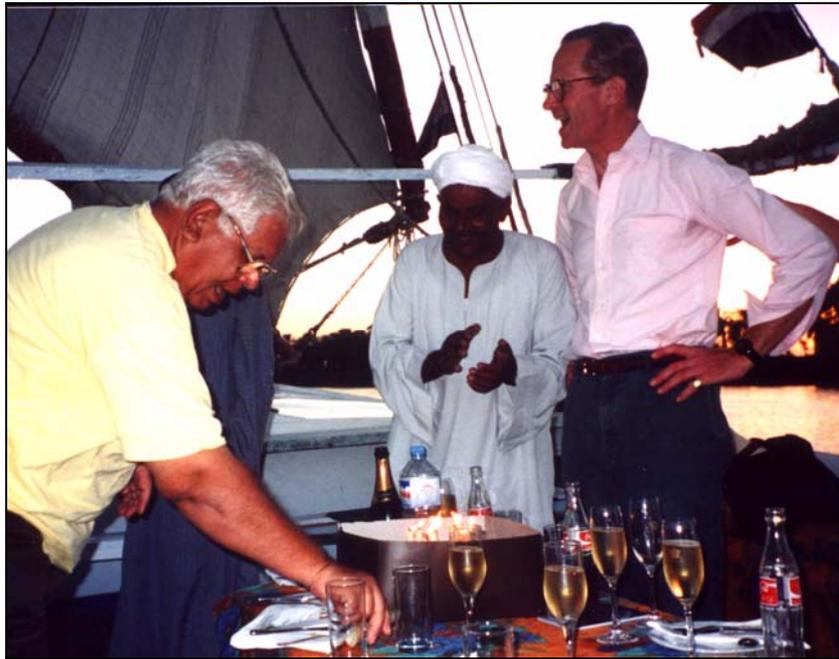
Setting off up the Nile



Testing the water temperature

As the sun set, the secret box containing the cake was withdrawn from beneath the gunwale, together with a bag of candles which brought forth peals of laughter as they were each six inches high and an inch across! Nabil

managed to get ten stuck into the cake and alight, although they completely ruined the white icing sugar decorations!



Admiral Nabil, Captain Mohamed and Damon



Happy Birthday!

Happy Birthday was sung in English and Egyptian making a good cocktail of song with Captain Mohamed's clapping providing a rhythmical background. The *blowing out* went off very well, twice, as a repeat performance was needed for the cameras. Robert popped the champagne cork and wished his father health, happiness and many more years to come, to which we all drank. One of

the Arab boys produced an Arab drum and started up a good disco beat, accompanied by us all singing, with Nabil joining in on the low notes. Sam and Damon had a half-hearted attempt to dance to the beat, but soon gave up. I don't think any of us, especially the crew, will ever forget that evening.

While all this was going on the sun obligingly set in a glorious show, allowing the stars to appear for our homeward journey aided by the second bottle. We arrived back in very quick time, running with both a good breeze and the flow of the Nile. With amazing skill the boatmen turned the felucca as we approached the jetty, gently swinging in alongside, bow upstream. The way the crew managed such a large vessel was a delight to watch.



Robert at the helm

As soon as we had arrived in our rooms we rang room service and ordered dinner, then retired to bath and pack. Our trip was nearly over. The flight next morning was at five, which to Robert's horror meant a four o'clock call. He couldn't believe it and said that he had never been up that early! I wonder what time in the morning he had been born!

Clean and packed we settled to an excellent meal in our sitting room, washed down with Obelisk and went to bed. Moments later the alarm went off and there was a knock on the door by a little man with a big table stacked with tea, coffee, and bread. We were all in the bus on time even though the concierge was terribly worried that we were stealing one of their keys!

In Cairo we said our goodbyes to Nabil. He had made our trip a joy, and had been incredibly patient as time after time he was asked the same question about what happened when, and who went where. We were soon speeding down the runway bound for London. I felt the wheels go up and closed my eyes. What a trip we had had. Sitting back in my seat thinking about all we had done left me glowing inside.

I am sorry if this second visit to ancient Egypt has been a little repetitive but, *Oh, what a place to visit with friends and what treasures we had seen!*