

In contrast to the way up, the way down from the roof is by a long sloping dead-straight passage set inside the outside wall of the temple. It was fun to think about the glorious processions that must have walked this path.

Once outside again Nabil led us to the back of the temple and out towards the East gate that was being restored. To take a photograph of the temple, I climbed up and over several mounds entirely made of pottery shards. There was not a sound to be heard and we had the whole place to ourselves; it was all sheer magic.

While we were waiting for permission to rejoin the convoy back to Luxor, Margie made friends with a couple of peasant girls, one of whom cradled a newborn goat kid called Martha. What the girls really wanted was a *stillo*. Luckily Margie had a complimentary pen from our hotel in her bag to write postcards with, which became a very successful gift!



Girls selling fans but wanting stillos

The journey home was much faster as the siren had disappeared. We sped past the 5,000-year-old landscape, and were soon swimming in the hotel pool, waiting for our omelette and cold beers, and feeling very spoilt.

After a siesta, and fortified by a visit to the terrace bar, we climbed into the minibus and set off for Karnak Sound and Light. Nabil instructed us to hang back and follow the crowd. He was right. Milling around with the mass would have been awful whereas viewed from behind it was magnificent.

We were about the last to arrive, but found a good vantage point where

we could see right over the heads of the crowd in front. The lights went down and the stars twinkled above. Voices spoke to us from the Past (through loudspeakers!) welcoming us to the great Temple of Karnak. Shivers ran up my spine, as golden lights flooded the walls of the great gateway.

We were led forward through the gateway into the first court, as solemn voices told us the story of the glorious history of the Pharaohs. Then into the roofless Hypostyle Hall, its enormous columns reaching up and up into the blackness. It was more than awe-inspiring! We turned left out into another court, and heard more history from the Past. By now the four of us were lagging so far behind that the guards tried to herd us forward through a gateway into the enclosure of the Sacred Lake. At the entrance to the path that led to the stadium at the far end of the lake, a giant granite scarab sat on a plinth. A guard spotted Robert and Margie patting the scarab's head to make a wish. "No No! You have to go round 14 times for good luck!" Next day Nabil told them it was actually a plea for fertility!

Of course this took time so by when the four of us eventually reached the top of the steps of the auditorium the lights were out and the show had begun and the heavenly voices were in full flow. We were ushered by torch light to a block of seats all on our own where we could sit and watched the spotlights hop from one scene to another without being interfered with. The reflections in the Sacred Lake domed by a vault of stars, the rising crescent moon, and the warm breeze, all added to the spectacular scene.

Robert brilliantly suggested that we reverse things and leave first, before the end of the show. This we did, and managed to get right back to the scarab for another pat, before the clapping started! Alone we wandered back to the entrance, where our faithful driver was waiting, but we sent him home to bed, climbed aboard a couple of horse-drawn carriages, and clip-clopped for half an hour down the Corniche along the Nile, past our favourite floodlit Temple of Luxor, back to the hotel, so ending a perfect evening.

Margie's morning tea again arrived in the dark! Today it was the Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, and, for the highlight, the Tomb of Nefertari, for which treat Nabil told us, we had to be there really early to get the tickets and miss the crowds as only so many people were allowed in each day.



Valley of the Kings

The skyline looked like the embalmed corpse of Ramesses II

It was only just light by the time we were standing at the window of the ticket office. We were the queue! Once we had bought our tickets, we set off for the Valley of the Kings. Nabil was very pleased with us because we arrived at the entrance before the guards were awake. The paved way up the valley was still in shadow but the cliff was lit with golden sunlight. The extraordinary thing was that the cliff looked like Ramesses II's mummy in the Cairo museum, the body wrapped in bandages with the gaunt noseless head rested on a pillow of shale. It was very weird and sent a shiver down my spine.

The first tomb we entered was of Ramesses VI. The passage gently led us down into the heart of the mountain. I don't suppose I had any mental image of what to expect, so the scene amazed me. The Egyptian-cotton whiteness of the walls was such a contrast to the brilliance paint colours. The life-size figures of gods greeting the Pharaoh on his arrival in Heaven all looked as though it had all been done yesterday.

Nabil led us through the story of the pictures as we passed down into the tomb proper. Here lay a giant granite sarcophagus in a heap of shattered chaos. It looked as though it had been blown up with gunpowder.

We next went to see the Tomb of Tutankhamun. We had seen the famous treasures that had been recovered from this tomb in the museum in Cairo so were expecting something glorious. Instead we entered a rough-hewn cave that was totally different to the smooth-walled splendour of Ramesses VI. The rooms were tiny! How had they stuffed all those treasures inside? The great golden shrines, that fitted one in the other around the golden sarcophagus like a Russian doll, must have only just fitted into the room.

We then walked higher up into the valley, climbed an iron staircase, and entered into a steep sloping passage that led down to more iron steps. This passage ended in a bridge that spanned a seemingly bottomless pit of a false tomb, built in a vain attempt to fool the robbers. We ducked through a hole in the far wall and emerged in an amazing antechamber.



Comic strip hieroglyphs

The walls were white and covered with comic book hieroglyphs that looked as though they had been done with a black parcel pen. The artist must have been a genius! It was like Victorian copperplate handwriting. There were several hundred feet of the six-inch high hieroglyphs around the room.



Serpent spitting Life



Thutmose III: Luxor Museum

A second room contained the beautifully-carved red-granite sarcophagus of Thutmose III, and yet more freehand drawings, spelling out the myth of the ancient religion of Resurrection and the Life Hereafter.

One more royal tomb before we were due to leave for the Workmen's Village. This one housed a unique and enormous sarcophagus, shaped as a royal cartouche. It is quite astounding that the workers were able to get such an enormous object down into the tomb.



Ramesses IV's Tomb

We emerged into a maelstrom of tourists. Busload after busload! And we had had the place to ourselves! Thank God for Nabil and our early starts! Back into our minibus, and off we drove, away from the crowds.

Our next stop was the Workmen's Village. We climbed some steps to a cluster of little ruined houses. From the top we could look down and across the ancient village where all the artisans had lived. The wall stumps of the tiny box houses filled a five-acre walled enclosure. The main street led up the middle of the village to their temple. The workmen walked miles each day along tracks over the hills to the Valleys, north to the Queens, or south to the Kings. The most famous thing about the occupants of this village is that held the first recorded strike in history, because they had not been paid on time!

Above the village is a guarded entrance to two tiny painted tombs. The artists of course had access to all the materials that they were using on the royal tombs, so in their spare time they dug their own burial chambers. The interesting thing is that they did not depict the same scenes that they were painting for the Pharaohs, instead they created a land of milk and honey, where girls washed them with scented oils while they listened to music. You can't blame them! The tombs are vividly painted life-hereafter daydreams.

Back into our minibus again and a chance to take the weight off our feet and rest the brain before arriving at the Valley of the Queens. We were excited because we were now going to see the Tomb of Nefertari, wife and daughter of Ramesses II. The Queen was Queen by right of birth; the King was King only by marriage. All property, including the kingship, was passed through the woman to the husband, so to retain hold of his daughter's inheritance, Ramesses married her. It is believed he married several of his daughters!

This tomb had been closed for five years for restoration by the Getty Foundation and opened to the public again two years ago. Only a few people are allowed in the tomb per day, each for ten minutes. We were ushered into a surprisingly short tunnel that led down into the tomb. Before the descent into the tomb proper, there is an annexe chamber off to the right where there are some of the most exquisitely stunning murals in the world.



Sacred Cattle

One great black bull and seven cows

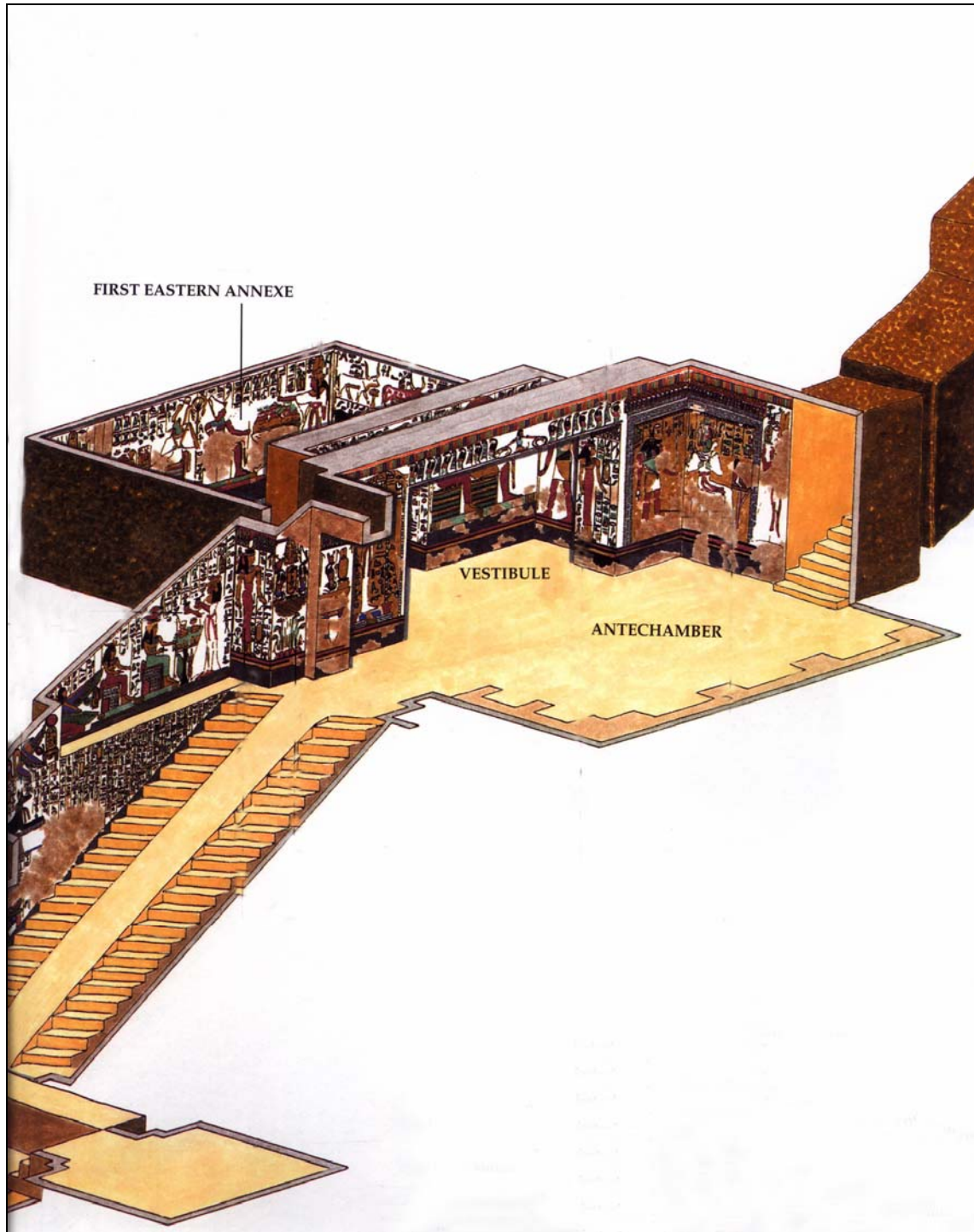
What a scene! The sacred cattle are quite brilliantly painted. All the walls of the tomb are Egyptian-cotton white, the perfect backdrop for showing the incredibly exquisite scenes now before us. Portrait after portrait of the beautiful Queen Nefertari. Nabil told us that nowhere else in Egypt had shading been used on the face like this.



'Nefertari', wife and daughter of 'Ramesses II'

We staggered from one mural to another. They were all utterly sublime. The guard signalled us to relax, and whispered "Fifteen, okay." Around we went again and then back to the cattle. What joy to see such wonderful workmanship. Why had Ramesses commissioned this jewel box for Nefertari? What had made her so special? He must have been devoted to his daughter. If I was able to go back in time, the one person I would want to meet is this woman. She must have been really something!

The sarcophagus chamber was about 35 foot square with the roof supported by four square pillars of bedrock. The walls are painted with four-foot high figures in glorious colours, the male figures painted brown because of working in the fields under the sun, and the females lighter skinned from working inside the houses. The scenes depicted Nefertari being introduced to the gods when she arrives in the Underworld. The whole thing is quite beyond belief. To me this tomb is the equal of any art gallery I have visited.



Nefertari's Tomb

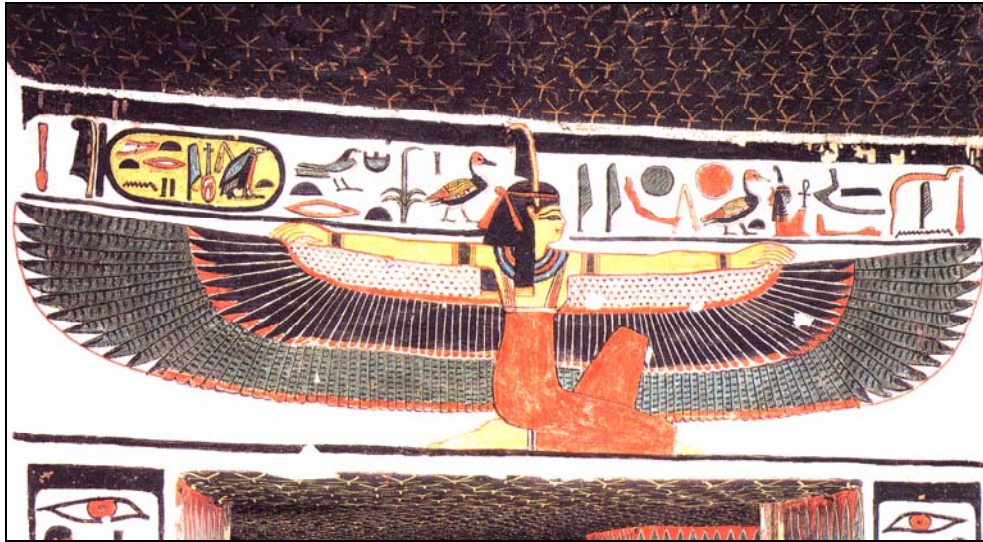
Antechamber, Vestibule and Annexe

When looking at the above plan start from the top right-hand corner and descend into the Antechamber by the entrance ramp, turn right into the Vestibule and pass through the doorway into the Annexe, the Chamber of the Bull and Cows. The other three walls are painted with scenes of Nefertari meeting different gods. Her pleated gown is of the purest sheer white cotton, her hands raised in greeting. Slim and graceful, elegant and serene.



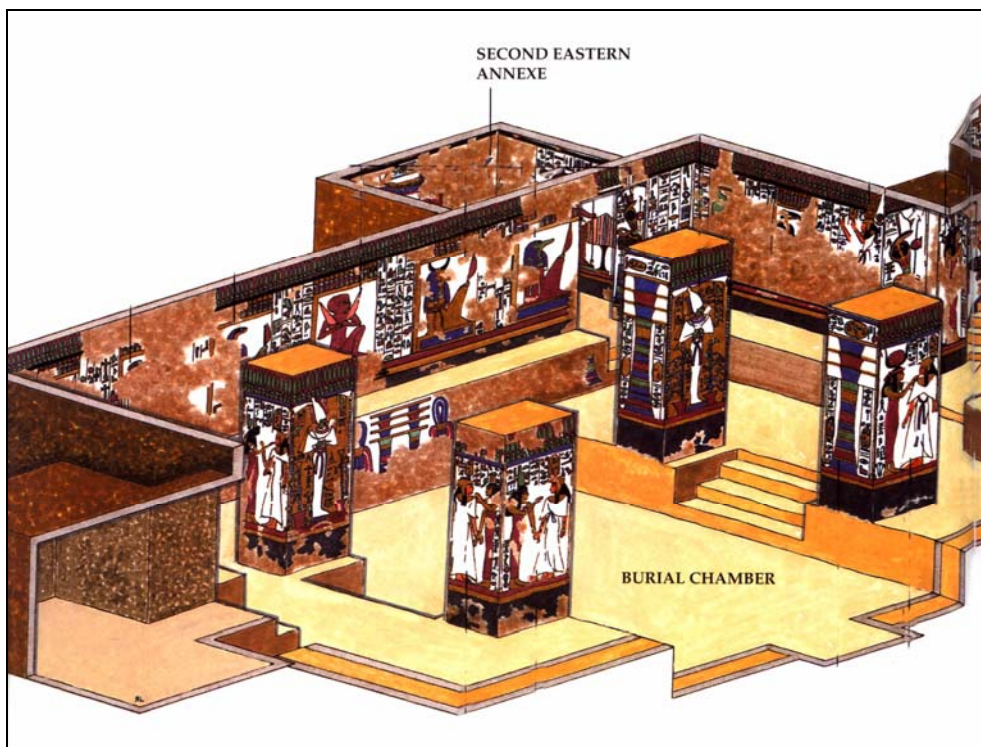
The shading on the beautiful face of 'Nefertari' is unique in Egypt

Return to the Antechamber and turn right. The twin stairway descends to the second level, a ramp separating the steps. Presumably the ramp was used to slide the sarcophagus down to the main tomb. Above the doorway is painted a beautiful image of the winged Goddess Ma'at who was there to carry Nefertari's soul to the heavens. It is the most exceptional painting and I have had a five-foot long copy of it framed to hang above my bedhead! I see it every night and morning and it reminds me of the wonders we saw in the tomb, as well as message of a peaceful death.



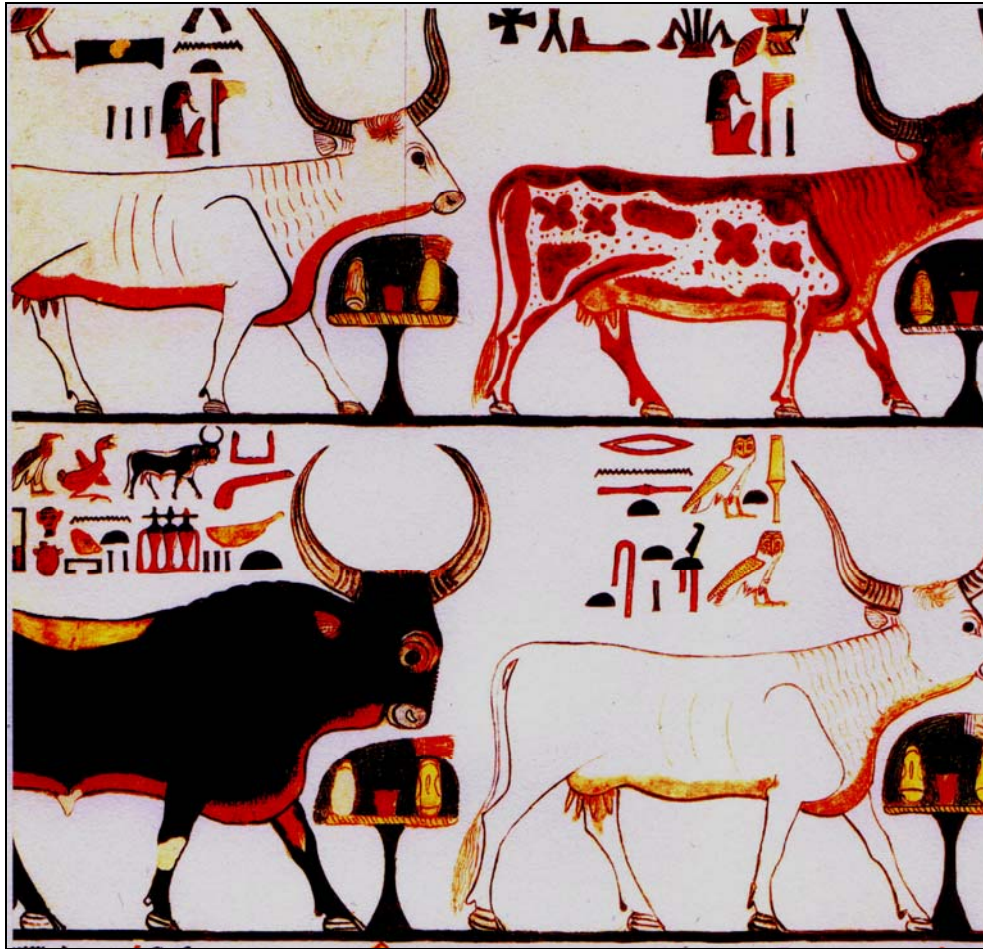
'Ma'at' above the entrance door of Nefertari's Tomb

When the main Burial Chamber was discovered it was found to be completely empty; even the sarcophagus had gone. One tiny fragment of gold leaf was all that was recovered. Was it the priests or thieves who completely emptied the room? However, for our great good fortune, they had not been able to remove the most valuable thing, the paintings. Nefertari's Tomb is the Egyptian Sistine Chapel. What a privilege to have seen them both.



Nefertari's Burial Chamber

On returning to the Antechamber again I just had to nip through to the Annexe to have one last look at the bull with his cows. I can feel his big red eye staring at me, daring me to touch his cows.



The sacred cows followed by a black bull

We stumbled back out into the brilliant sunshine. When we had come back to earth, Nabil said "Now I shall show you something even better." Better! Surely nothing could be better!

Once again back into the minibus and off into the barren landscape bumping along a dirt track that wound in and out of grave diggings. Nabil guided the driver (who was completely lost) this way and that, until we came to an exceptionally large excavation. Following Nabil we climbed down steps into a hole, which turned out to be a room carved from solid rock, although the ceiling had partly fallen in. Here we were met by two Arab men dressed in their long grey nightshirts, guardians of the ancient crypts.

The tomb we were about to visit was originally intended for Kheruef, a servant of Queen Tie, wife of Amenhotep III. Somehow or other he had access to the best workmen in the valley, because although this man was not of royal blood, the tomb was designed with royal splendour. Beautiful fluted columns supported the roof that remained, and the carvings on the walls are the finest quality yet discovered in Egypt although everything was unfinished! The carvings of Kheruef himself had purposely been hacked from the walls. All we could see of him was one perfect foot!

Luckily for us the hieroglyphs are still there, being the best and most detailed we had yet seen, and carved from the hardest limestone. They are in an immaculate state, as though they had been done yesterday.



Shen the Tadpole
The symbol of the resurrection of life after death

Nabil led us into a dark side passage. The guard in the doorway held a mirror to the sun, directing the rays down the passage, and along the wall. The beam of sunlight lit two panels of beautiful life-size girls. One panel was of dancers, with hair flowing over their shoulders, the other of long-fingered maidens carrying bottles of perfume and jars of unction. Their faces were exquisite. It was exotic, a paradise on earth. The figures had all the beauty of Luca della Robbia's children in the Duomo Museum of Florence.



Some of the finest carvings of hieroglyphs ever found



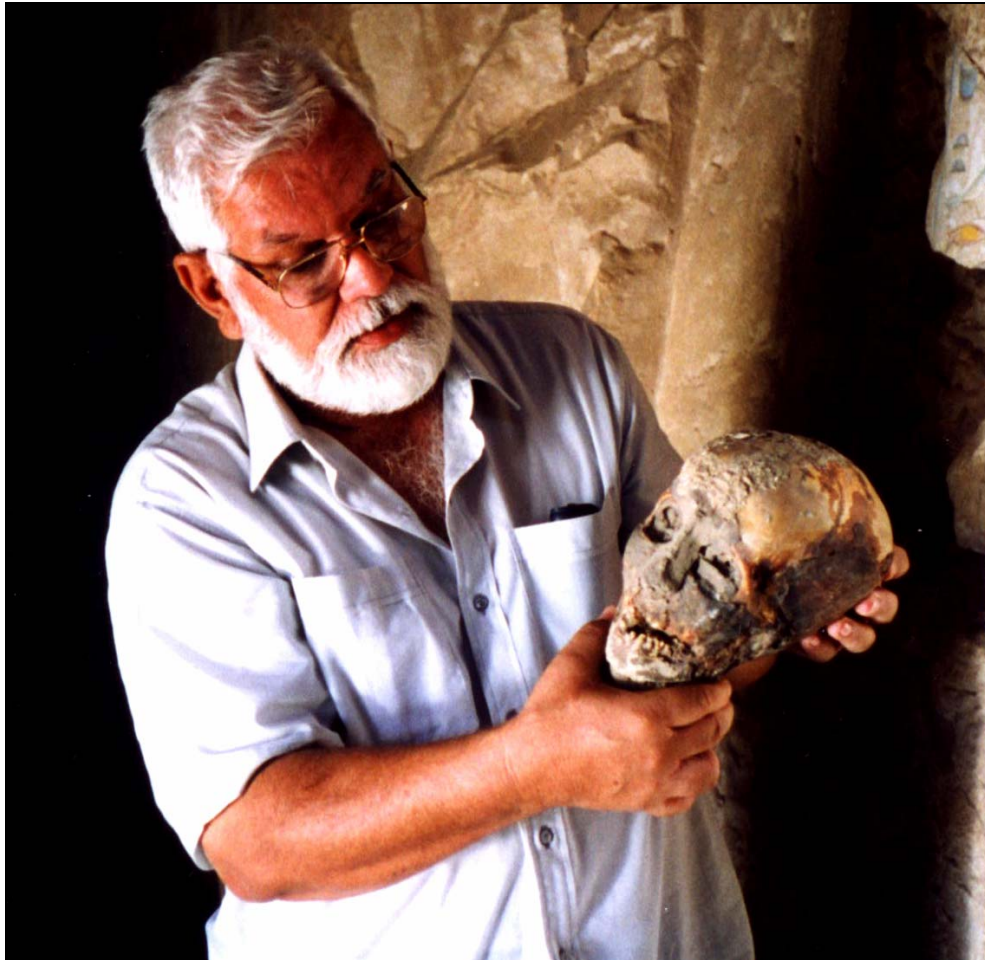
Dancing girls showing their navels and carrying scent bottles

We were told there were five miles of tunnels stacked full of mummies. The guard produced a head and gave it to Nabil to inspect. Not for me thank you! Imagine how holding an embalmed head might make me vibrate! I turned and looked at the wall again instead, quite content to examine the beautifully carved girls rather than such a grim relic.



Dancing girls carrying scent bottles

We tipped the guards and climbed from the tomb and headed down the dirt track. We looked up the main road to the funeral Temple of Hapshetsut. Should we go and see it? Hundreds of tourists milled about the forecourt in front of the temple and the car park was packed with buses. After all our privacy we could not summon up the courage so turned and made good our escape to the Ramesseum, the Mortuary of Ramesses II, Patron of the Arts, the builder of Queen Nefertari's tomb.



Nabil studying an embalmed head

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

One week after our visit a group of Muslim fundamentalists dressed in security police uniforms opened fire from the cover of the surrounding hills on a crowd of tourists in the Court of Queen Hatshepsut's funeral temple, killing more than 60 innocent men, women, and children, while wounding many more. Those who were wounded and could not escape were slaughtered by these maniacs who descended on them with knives. It was a terrible massacre and amongst those slaughtered were a grandmother, her daughter, and her granddaughter aged five, all from the same British family. How sad that the temples of Egypt, that were raised to honour the glories of the greatest civilisation in the history of Mankind, are now home to the actions of barbarians!

The Ramesseum Temple is designed on the same lines as Karnak, but small in comparison, in all but one respect. It is the home of the largest statue ever carved in ancient Egypt, our old friend Ramesses II. It was carved from a single free-standing 1,000-ton block of Aswan granite. Now it is lying broken and his blank eyes gaze at the scorching sun. How the mighty King has fallen but what treasures he gave us when he lived!



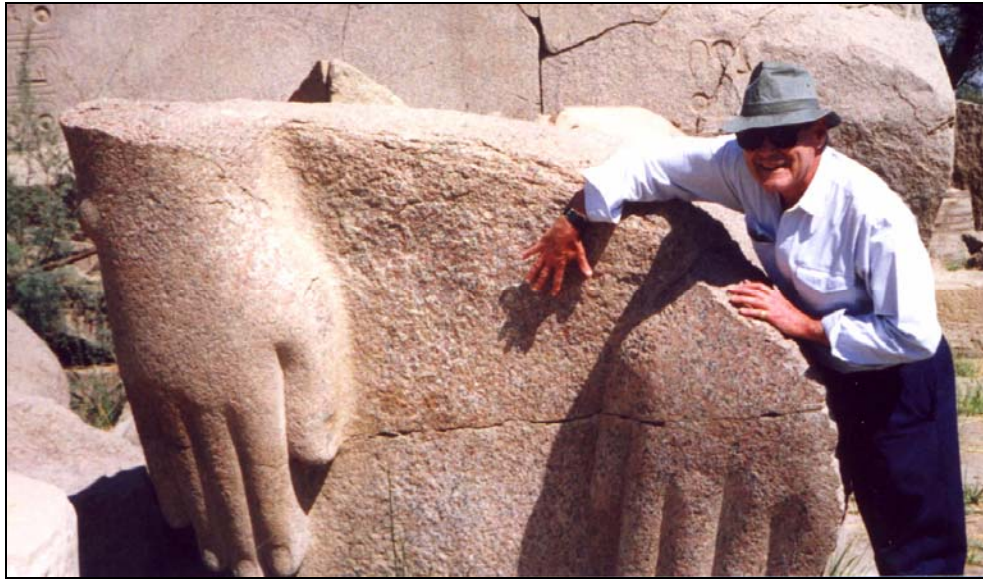
The fallen sculpture of Ramesses II

I met a traveller from an antique land who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown, and wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, tell that its sculptor well those passions read which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed: And on the pedestal these words appear: My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away.

Percy Bysshe Shelley



Ramesses II's right foot with Nabil, R III, Caroline, Margie and JR



Comparing hands with Ramesses



*Carving stone today in the same way as 4,000 years ago
(Note the shadow and Ramesses lying in the background)*

On the way home we stopped to look at the Colossi of Memnon that stand alone in a field by the road. The solid granite statue of Ramesses would have been the same size as these two giants that are made from many separate blocks. The sheer scale on which the Pharaohs worked, staggers the mind.



Colossi of Memnon

After a swim, lunch and a siesta, we made another visit to the Luxor Museum. What treasures and what a delight to have Nabil at our side explaining, sorting and generally nursing us through such a complicated tangle of information! How privileged we had been to have such a charming man as our guide.



Caroline and Robert, two special people with their halos!

What a time we had in Luxor and what a superb hotel! Robert gave us a grand dinner on our last night in the Winter Palace Hotel in the 1869 Restaurant named for the year that the Suez Canal was completed. What a jolly evening and an early one, as tomorrow at dawn we were to fly in a *hot air balloon*. Up to then we had been drinking a wine called Pharaoh but on this night we discovered a superior one called Obelisk!

It was after this dinner that Margie and I walked in the gardens under the stars and I had my Theban fantasy of stepping into a time machine and being whisked back to ancient Egypt. That day we had visited Nefertari's Tomb and the colossus of Ramesses II. One must daydream now and again!

In the morning Margie's tea arrived even earlier than usual! We were raring to go when they collected us for the trip across the Nile by boat to meet the van that would take us to the base of the Theban Mountains. To test the wind direction the American captain let go a toy balloon, which disappeared towards the mountains and the desert beyond.

While the big balloon was being prepared Margie and I walked off down the track between the sugar-cane fields. Old men on donkeys passed us and disappear into the dawn light. We grabbed the opportunity and disappeared into the cane field. Safety first! We arrived back to find everything was nearly ready and some ten minutes later we had *lift off*. "Up, up and away!"



Flood plains of the Nile on the West Bank

Taking off in a hot-air balloon is always a thrill. You seem to just float clear of Mother Earth as though the strings of gravity have been cut. We climbed to a couple of hundred feet and immediately started to go the opposite way that the test balloon had gone. It had headed for the mountains, but we were heading straight for the Nile! It looked more like a wet breakfast in the river rather than a dry one in the desert.

Threading our way through the electric wires hung between giant pylons, we zigzagged for an hour over the cane fields and mudbrick villages, watched peasants working in the fields and had a glorious view of the mountains all shining in the dawn glow.



"We can't land in the Nile!"



"We're going to land in the Nile!"

It was an amazing one-hour flight because it gave us an understanding of the vast flood plains of the Nile and the incredible fertility that the river silt provides. No wonder such a magnificent civilisation could flourish here 5,000 years ago. The productivity of the land was so great and growth so fast, that a vast army of labourers was able to plant and harvest two crops every growing season and still be free to work in the quarries, on transport and building sites, as well as all the other jobs required that went into achieving such great and lasting monuments. The complex job of organising the logistics and controlling the labour force had been undertaken by the royal vizier, while the Pharaoh's job was to protect his people from invaders with a mighty army, maintain law and order, administer justice, and keep the peace of the land. It really was an incredible achievement.

Just before we reached the Nile the captain landed in the backyard of a farmer's home, much to the delight of the children, and us!



"We dropped in for tea on the banks of the Nile!"

We had been promised a champagne, smoked-salmon and scrambled-egg breakfast in the desert, but we were now only yards from the riverbank! Off we set yet again in a bus and headed for the edge of the desert where tables had been set up, laden with food and surrounded by chairs.

I decided that with the way my insides were feeling it would be wiser to take a walk in the desert than eat so I set off towards the hills. Within half an hour I had climbed up to the top of the nearest hump where I was completely surrounded by diggings. They were everywhere, hundreds and hundreds of graves, all plundered! However, the stillness was immense and it all smelt a bit like the Australian desert and was blissfully quiet. Having filled my senses with the serenity of the place I started back to join the others for a cup of coffee as I could see they were packing up.

It had been a lovely walk with an added adventure of meeting a wizen old man in a nightshirt miles from anywhere. My first thought was that I was a long way from help but the man hailed me as a friend and approached holding out his hand. Instead of shaking hands as I thought he intended, he opened his fingers to show me a beautifully carved fragment of a limestone bracelet. He was a grave robber! I decided the best thing to do was to buy it as he needed the money; besides it really was an authentic object and would make a perfect *thank-you* present for Robert for bringing us on a trip of a lifetime.

Back to the hotel to wash, pack and consolidate all the luggage, before we set off for a daylight tour of Karnak, which was to be our last great antiquity. We presented our tickets to the tourist policeman and went in. "Stop, four not five," the ticket man called out. Nabil explained that he was a guide. "Papers!" A look of disappointment came over his face as he read the documents Nabil produced proving that he was not only a guide but an admiral!

A band of Egyptian minstrels was being filmed at the temple entrance and really set the scene for what was to follow. First we examined the pylon gateway and again found rough walls unfinished. On either side of the entrance and set into the walls were slots made for four flag poles, a reminder that the oldest of all religious symbols were banners flying from poles.



The entrance to 'Karnak' with welcoming minstrel band



The majestic Sphinxes at the entrance of Karnak

Passing through the gateway we could see on the right the mighty mudbrick ramps still in place against the walls up which the builders had pulled the blocks to the top of the pylons. I could imagine the work gangs labouring up them and it made me feel quite weak at the knees!

We crossed the first court and followed Nabil to the left towards the open-air museum, where he showed us the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut. This is a small chapel that is being reconstructed from the stones found within one of the pylons when they were doing some repaired. The carvings are beautiful and the granite a lovely pink. It is being rebuilt like a jigsaw puzzle.

Next we came to a beautiful single-room white alabaster chapel, which also had been found buried in the pylons. It is exquisite! The owls carved on the front door portico are so delicate that you can see the rings around their half-closed eyes. Then Nabil led us to the White Chapel of Senwosret III. This must be one of the great architectural gems of the world.



White Chapel

The White Chapel is in the same class as the Samanid in Bukhara, another pearl, but that was only built in AD 907. This treasure was built in the 12th Dynasty, 2000-1800 BC! We sat spellbound for half an hour beside this example of amazing architectural harmony. The light was perfect and showed the unimaginably skilfully executed hieroglyphs to perfection on the golden glow of the walls. Both the Samanid and the White Chapel have something in common, they had both survived because they had been buried!



White Chapel reliefs are exquisitely carved

Back again to the second pylon of the Temple of Karnak, where Nabil showed us a mark way above our heads that recorded the height the flood had reached. What a problem the builders would have had with their foundations, as the earth swelled and rose up to three feet during the Nile's inundation.

We stood surrounded by the great columns of the Hypostyle Hall. The shadow of one of the capitals fell on the ground at our feet. Over 30 people can stand in this circle of shade! The columns are quite breathtaking. We had seen them at night during the Sound and Light show and had been overawed, but now we could see the detail of carving that went all the way to the top.



The pillars of the 'Hypostyle Hall' are 82 foot high

We passed on towards the Court of the Obelisks. What a beautiful creation the obelisk is! The twin ones here were erected by Hatshepsut. They soar into the sky. One side was lit by the sunlight casting deep black shadows in the hieroglyphs. I am so glad the one souvenir that I allowed myself to buy was an obelisk. It will always remind me of all the wonderful experiences of our incredible time in Karnak and Luxor.



Twin obelisks of Karnak



We walked away from Karnak exhausted and drained of superlatives

A quick clean up in the hotel and then down to the lobby to meet Captain Said of the *La Vida*, ready for Robert's *surprise*. The hotel had packed lunch boxes of smoked-salmon and chicken sandwiches for us, and a couple of bottles of Obelisk were tempting us from a bag packed with ice. We walked over the road, down to the jetty and boarded our felucca. Our crew consisted of the captain's two sons, one a teenager and the other a little boy of about eight, who was soon using one of Margie's pens on his English alphabet!

The wind was in our favour and we made good speed up river. Lunch was unpacked, and bottles opened. We were in heaven. What a feeling to be sailing on the Nile with a good breeze and we were fairly humming along. Five very happy people stretched out along cushions. I dozed off after lunch and dreamt again about coming back as Ramesses II in the next life. What a wonderful time he and Nefertari must have had!



'La Vida' moored on the banks of an island in the middle of the Nile

It took well over an hour to sail to an island upstream. Here we disembarked to stretch our legs and fortunately there were some tall Moses reeds to disappear behind, men first to check the privacy. Screams of laughter accompanied the girls' foray when they spied three water buffalo swimming towards them as they were being herded downstream by their young master. The animals had decided to have a rest from swimming as they passed the island and had tried to join the girls behind the reeds! The situation was saved by the boy leaping ashore from his tiny boat, shooing the beasts back into the river and then rowing like mad to head them towards the far bank, where a soccer match was being played, the ball often ending up in the Nile.

The sun was starting to set so we called Robert back from where he was sketching the scene from a sand bar and experimenting with the Angle of Repose of the Pyramids, the magic 52 degrees. We said goodbye to the pied kingfisher family that had been entertaining us with their acrobatic hovering and diving as they fished a small pond trapped on the island. We pushed off and sailed into the sunset like all true 'travelogue adventurers'. As the sun hit the earth, a flaming red path reached out across the Nile to our felucca, just as two fishermen rowed their tiny boat through the fiery causeway.



RA's Sun Boat

Captain Said turned the boat and we gently sailed north with the flow of the river back to Luxor. Our return journey to England had started. Spending our last hours in Egypt sailing on the Nile had been the perfect way of ending one of the happiest and most fascinating times of our lives.