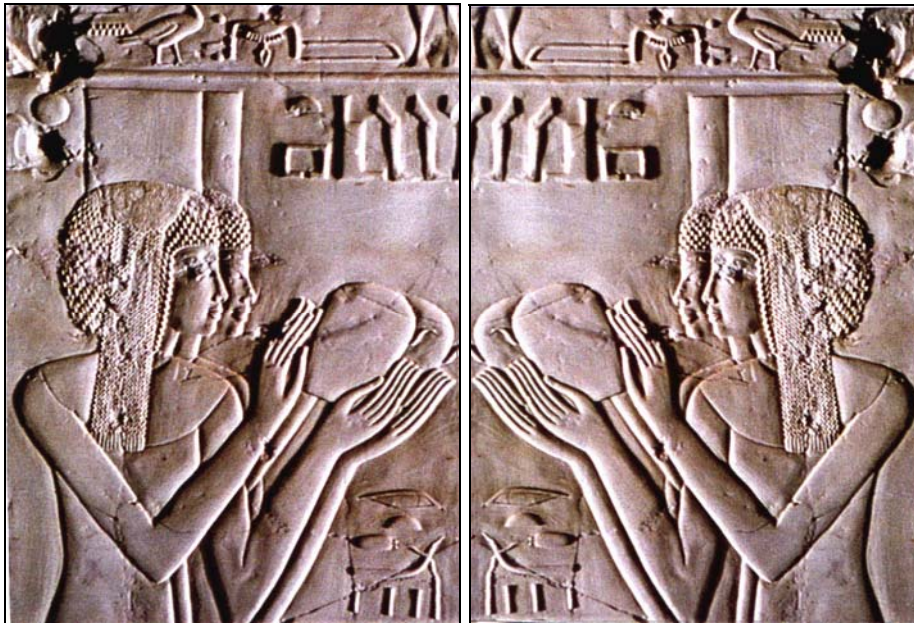


## THEBES

Robert, Caroline, Margie and I stood under the chandelier of Venetian crystal that cascades down from the ceiling of the vast lobby of the Winter Palace Hotel in Luxor, and wished each other happy dreams and sound sleep, something that was not going to be hard to achieve after such an amazing day of sightseeing with our guide ex Admiral Nabil Swelim. What incredible wonders we had seen! Our hearts were full of the well-being of the God Bes.

Before climbing the grand staircase and heading for our room, Margie and I decided to take a stroll in the hotel gardens. We entered the revolving doors that led from the brightly lit lobby out into the warm night air scented with sweet mystery.



*The doors that divide the 'Present from the Past'*

It was as though we had stepped into a time machine, because we were immediately spun back 4,000 years into the Past. We walked out into the night as Ramesses II and Nefertari, crossed the terrace of our Royal Palace to the balustrade and looked down on the palm groves where the flickering flames of tiny palm-oil lamps lit the paths that led to the pleasure pools we had bathed in during the heat of the day.

The slender ink-black palm trees, each topped with a plume of feathery fronds, stood out clearly against the dark navy blue of the night sky that arched over us. The palms stood as 80-foot high ladders joining the Earth to the Heavens. Our eyes climbed up the ladders and out into the star-studded vastness of the sky. Osiris was before us! His waist was girdled with Orion's Belt, his sword hanging down his right thigh. The great red giant star of Betelgeuse blazed at the tip of his mitre crown.

We walked down the steps into the soft warm jasmine-scented air of the night garden. The path led deeper into the palms that stood like sentinels all around us. The flickering candle flames danced along the edges of the paths, bathing the polished alabaster paving in a soft carpet of golden light. The heat of the day had left the flagstones warm to the touch of our bare feet.



*Ramesses II and Nefertari*

The glories of ancient Egypt surrounded us like the protective spirit of the Goddess Nut, who had swallowed the sun Re' that evening and would give birth to it again at dawn. The path guided us past the pools of pleasure, back to the steps that led up to the palace terrace. The warm night air was wrapped around us like the wings of the Goddess Ma'at, mistress of the Divine Order of the Universe.

We stepped back into the revolving doors of the time machine, and were whisked from the scented garden to be reborn again in the Present. Dreams are only dreams, but what a pleasure it is sometimes to dream!

The night had rocked our souls on the waters of the ancient civilisation of Egypt, a civilisation that reached unbelievable sophistication in Thebes 4,000 years ago. *The Genesis of Art is Religion* and never have a people, under the guidance of their rulers, devoted so much energy to both. John Ruskin wrote: *Nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts; the book of their deeds; the book of their words, and the book of their art. Of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.* The art and the architecture created by the Pharaohs of the Two Kingdoms stand as a lasting testament to the glory of ancient Egypt.

## EGYPT

NOVEMBER 1997

DAY ONE

Our flight from London to Cairo was smooth and effortless apart from the fact that I very nearly got everyone to the wrong airport! Robert, Caroline, Margie and I met up at the Berkeley Hotel for lunch. This was a memorable event for me because it was in this very restaurant that I had first met Robert twelve years ago in 1985. I had The Freeland Gallery opened in 1984 on Albermarle Street and Robert had happened to walk past our window and see through the window the Symbolic Sculptures hiding behind the Figurative Sculptures. We drank a toast to that happy event which was the beginning of our great friendship and his collection of my sculptures at Ramiilaj. All this was surely a good omen for a marvellous trip, and that is how it was to work out. Going to Egypt turned out to be the trip of a lifetime for us all.

The aeroplane landed in Cairo after dark. The airport was efficiently run and the Passport Control pretty snappy. We found our luggage and our tour guide led us to a minibus that sped through the midnight traffic of Cairo in a non-stop tag-game of dodging and ducking. Cairo has a permanent population of 17 million but a further 2 million come in each day to look for work. A baby is born ever 27 seconds in Egypt, 10 million per annum!

The diesel fumes mixed with the smell of animal dung filled the streets with a heavy pungent smell. Added to this was the constant blowing of horns and shouts of rage. We had our first glimpse of the mighty Nile as we passed from the East Bank to West, heading for the Mena House Hotel and the Pyramids of Giza. Forty minutes after leaving the airport we arrived at the hotel having passed varied floodlit minarets. We learnt from later daytime forays into the downtown Cairo traffic that this was something of a record!

Mena House is 'grand'. It used to be a private palace many moons ago, but since then the great and famous had stayed in its rooms: Churchill, Montgomery, Noel Coward, even King Zog of Albania, who apparently always paid his hotel bill in gold bars!

After a nightcap of Egyptian beer, Robert and Caroline disappeared down one corridor behind their porter, while Margie and I followed another to the floor above. Horrors, we were not facing the Pyramids! Off we set again down to the lobby and after some negotiation, we were led back by a very nice manager up to the very top of the hotel, down a mile of corridor to a new bedroom. He apologised for the smallness as it was meant to be only a single, although it had a double bed. As long as it looked out on the Pyramids we would have been content with a sofa! He opened the windows and there across the garden was the Great Pyramid of Khufu.

We were speechless. It is vast, filling the whole horizon. The floodlights gave it a silver-gold glow. We rang Robert to tell him our new room number, and found they were doing exactly the same thing as us, gazing in awe at the last of the Seven Wonders of the World.

## DAY TWO

As always happens when you travel, you awaken wondering where you are. You sense that something isn't quite right with the feeling that you are not in your own bed. I opened one eye and nearly fell on the floor. I was looking straight into a colossal sunlit wall of strata upon strata of steps of a giant staircase that ended in a mountain peak.



*The view from our bed on waking*

We met for breakfast in the coffee shop and were ready to start our great adventure by ten o'clock in the lobby where we were due to meet Doctor Nabil Swelim, a famous Egyptologist, who had started life as a sailor in the Egyptian Navy and risen to the rank of admiral before retiring.

Our contact with Nabil was another one of those extraordinary strokes of luck that make life so astonishingly unpredictable. Robert had attended a meeting in California a few days prior to our trip. Also at the meeting was

Malcolm McKenna, a curator at the New York Museum of Natural History. When Robert mentioned that he was about to go to Egypt to visit the antiquities, Malcolm said that we couldn't go without being guided by Nabil. All straightforward, but how to contact him? We were off in two days!

Robert asked me to try and find Nabil as Malcolm had given him a fax number for Nabil's son. I faxed the number and got a reply giving me the fax number of his father. Another fax and an immediate telephone answer from Nabil. What efficiency! "Could he accompany us as our guide, both in Cairo and Luxor?" "Yes, Harvard University had just postponed their visit." *How lucky can you be, butter side up.* Now, after a fortifying breakfast, it was ten o'clock and time to meet Nabil in the lobby.

Nabil had told me that he was white haired and bearded, and rather too wide! I picked him out of the crowd immediately from the description. He had failed to tell me that he also was a very distinguished-looking gentleman. We all shook hands and retired back into the coffee shop for our first lesson on the complications of Egyptology.

Nabil started to take us through the chronology of the Pharaohs by drawing on the backs of paper placemats. By the time had finished our coffee we were more confused than we had been at the start of the lesson and decided it was time to visit the Pyramids for a hands-on experience.

We drove up the road that led from the hotel to the ticket office below Khufu's pyramid. Our minibus driver was called Mohammed Ali! In the two days that we were in Cairo the grin never left his face, which was typical of all the Egyptians we met as everyone seems to be happy.



***'Khufu' in the foreground with 'Khafre' behind***

We arrived at the foot of Khufu's pyramid. The building blocks seem to be even larger when you touch them. The statistics are staggering! 2,500,000 blocks each weighing over 2½ tons and one placed every two minutes. How did they do it 4,600 years ago? On top of all this, the pyramid is absolutely square on its 755 x 755-foot base, built at a slope of 52 degrees, to a height of 482 feet, although the top 33 feet are now missing. Its volume is approximately

88,000,000 cubic feet. We tried to imagine how it would have looked before its flat polished surface was stolen to build Cairo. We walked along the north face listening to Nabil, passing by the entrance that had been blasted open in the 9th century by Khalil El Maamoon in search of the treasure that he hoped to find buried inside.

We turned the corner and walked down the second side to the south-west corner, all the time being overawed by the immense size of the structure. Now our attention was dragged across to the second giant, the Pyramid of Khafre, son of Khufu. Although not quite as large it is nearly as high, as it is built higher up the plateau. The west side of this pyramid is cut into solid bedrock. Blocks the size of a house and weighing up to 200 tons were moved down to the north-east corner and used to build up the foundation platform for the pyramid. These blocks are cut and shaped to fit together perfectly!

Camel owners were desperate to offer transport so Caroline rode across to the Pyramid of Menkaure. The rest of us took the minibus, grabbing a moment to sit in the shade and quench our thirst from bottles of water.

The third pyramid is much smaller, but just as impressive. The lower course of giant blocks of Aswan granite is almost intact, all beautifully fitted together. The horizontal lines are dead straight, but the vertical ones are staggered and the proverbial razor blade can't fit between the blocks.



***Robert and Nabil examining the proverbial blocks  
that razor blade can't fit between!***

Here we had our first lesson on how many of the monuments of Egypt were never quite finished. One must suppose that the Pharaoh died and his successor was more concerned in starting his own pyramid than completing that of his predecessor. The area around the entrance to the pyramid was as smooth as polished glass. At the edge of the smooth area you can see the various stages of chiselling that were required to achieve this finish.

The camel driver reappeared, and this time Margie climbed aboard the *Ship of the Desert*. We returned safely to the south side of the Great Pyramid to visit the Boat Museum and see a *Ship of the Nile*.

In 1954, all the parts that went to make up the 140-foot long boat were found buried in a covered pit cut into the bedrock along the south side of the Great Pyramid of Khufu. We were told that it took two attempts to put it together correctly, but now stands in all its glory, complete in every detail and housed in a magnificent boat-shed. This is no fancy model but a working boat, as can be plainly seen by the wear on the keel and the gangway made of battered planks. It is an incredibly beautiful vessel, equal in every respect to the Viking boats in Oslo, but 3,000 years older!



*The Pharaoh's funeral barge*

We walked around to the east side of the Great Pyramid to look at the three small satellite pyramids that stand there. Here Nabil pointed out the foundations of a fourth pyramid that he had recently discovered. All that is left are the foundations and the capping stone. The latter is important as it is a perfect example of how the pointed capping stones of the pyramids were held in place. The masons cut the bottom of the capstone convex, and the top of

the course below as concave. The capstone locks into the course below exactly, so however strong an earthquake should happen to shake the structure, it would stay in place.

Our minds were reeling, our bodies sagging, our feet aching and a rebellion was brewing. The order of retreat was given and Mohammed Ali scooped us up, drove us down the hill back to the hotel where we fell upon frosted glasses of cold beer. Soon energy started to flow back into our bodies and our brains cleared, allowing patient Nabil to continue to fit the pieces of the Egyptian jigsaw puzzle together for us.

Girding our loins we returned to the fray; it was time to visit the Sphinx. The conversation of course had touched on the possible water erosion of the quarried walls beside the Sphinx and behind the hindquarters of the great beast. What were we to think when we saw it for ourselves?



*The 'Sphinx' gazing out over the facilities*

The road from the Pyramids runs down to the Sphinx. Halfway down we jumped out of the minibus and created a traffic jam, which quickly caused a rather sharp argument with a traffic cop that led to much shouting and waving of arms by Mohammed Ali and the policeman.

However, from this point we had a perfect view of the profile of the giant head of the Sphinx, and it is very spectacular. Below the face lie the two great paws that stretch out towards a waste of sandy gravel the size of a football field where rows and rows of buses were regurgitating tourists. Beyond that were the *facilities*, that summed up everything that is wrong with tourist architecture! The look on the Sphinx's face told me that it agrees about the tourist buses and the architecture. From our elevated position we were luckier as we looked at the Sphinx with a backdrop of the Pyramids. What a sight! He is so very superior to us poor mortals.

Shuffling towards the Valley Temple of Khafre was a crocodile of tourists. The building is made of gigantic blocks of polished Aswan granite. The entrance is impressive, the first hallway more so, but then you come to the heart of the temple. Words cannot explain the sophistication of this building. It



is stunning, solid, but incredibly graceful. The pillars are solid blocks of granite some of which weigh over 200 tons. This is where the statue of Pharaoh Khafre, now in the Cairo Museum, was found buried in a pit by the priests so it would not be carted away by the Romans. See p 941.



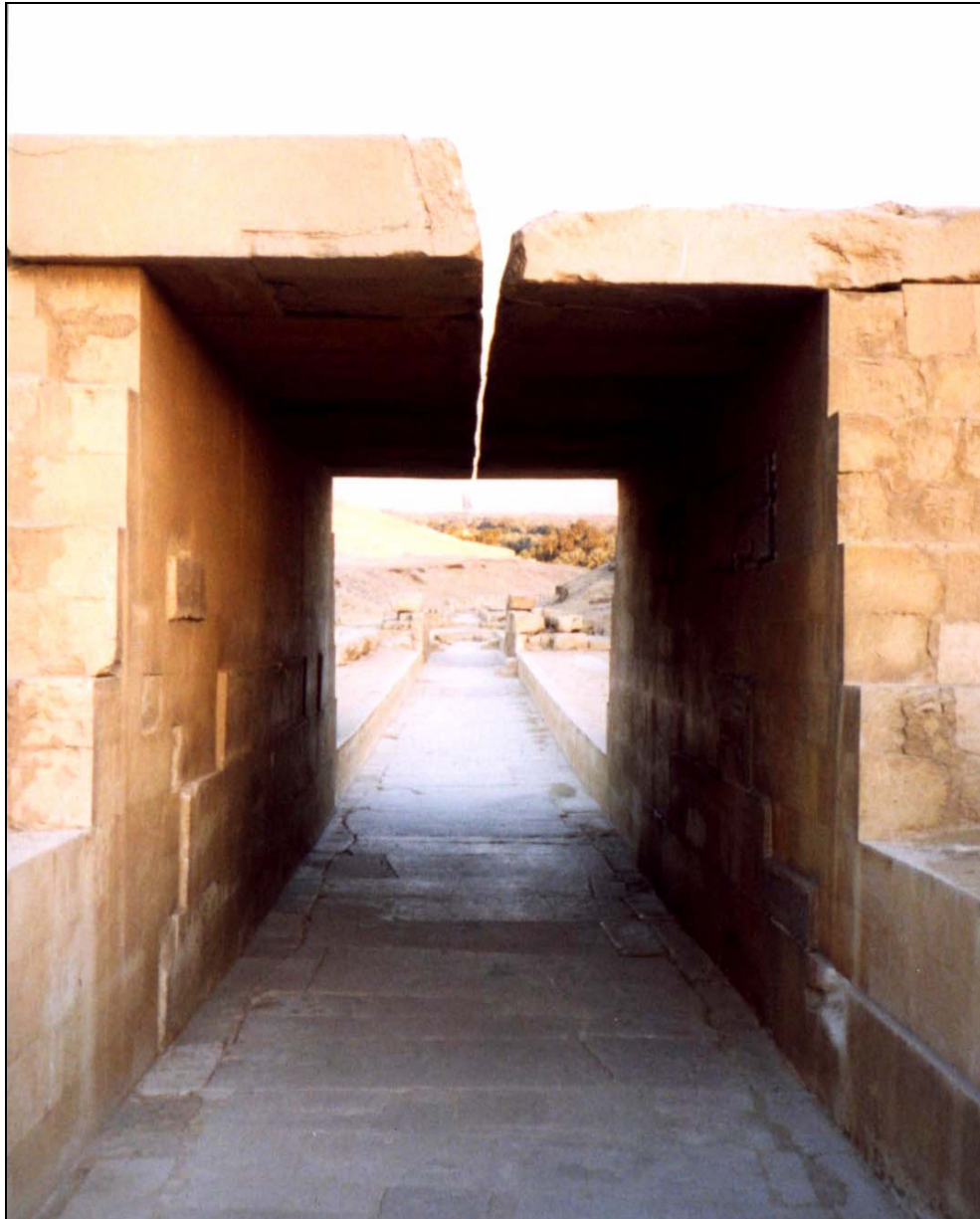
*One block with eight faces*

Only one doorway leads from the temple into a passage that then opens out onto the causeway that goes all the way up to Khafre's pyramid. Now the causeway is open to the sky, but in the Pharaoh's days there was a passage with a corbelled roof that allowed a dead straight two-inch wide ribbon of light to penetrate along the entire length.

We walked up the causeway and out onto the top of the quarry from which the Sphinx was excavated. There is no doubt that the sides of the quarry are water eroded, but who can tell when this happened? The rock is so crumbly that it is flaking away before one's eyes as the tourists' feet pound it into dust. It is from this crumbling rock that the body of the Sphinx is carved. The head is from a different stratum of very hard rock, which overlays the softer one below. Is the head reworked? Who can tell? I feel that it is because the Sphinx is the only one who knows the answer to the puzzle and is why it wears an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile. To me it doesn't really matter who carved it, or when, the sculpture is a miracle of artistic creativity.

The sky turned a glorious warm pink, then mauve, then purple as the sun set behind the Pyramids. What a magic moment! What a privilege to be there! We were all exhausted, happy, and completely overawed.

We climbed back into the minibus and headed for the hotel. Boy, was it going to be easy to sip a long cold beer! We said goodbye to Nabil after agreeing to meet him at the Cairo Museum at half past eleven the following morning, and headed for the bar. I was right, once we had had a drink our heads stopped reeling and we began to feel normal. The next step was a bath, clean clothes and dinner in the hotel restaurant.



*The Sphinx passage was similar to the one at Saqqara*

We met again at eight o'clock and set off to find a restaurant. All through dinner we talked about what we had seen. Robert and I planned to get up early, walk up to the Great Pyramid and be waiting for the ticket office to open at nine o'clock to be first in the queue to visit the King's Chamber that lies in the heart of the giant structure. The girls were going to take it a little slower, besides Margie had been inside with her brother Michael when she was 20 years old, 43 years ago, and knew that dark narrow passages were involved!

We were just getting ready to leave the restaurant when the lights dimmed and the cabaret show began. It turned out to be a three-part affair. The first performance was by a trio of girls in bikinis and swirling silk, accompanied by Egyptian music. Three men then joined them and the six dancers performed a *Morris Dance*! Each man had a wooden staff which they clashed together in mock battle, followed by pretending to beat the girls, all accompanied by

shouts and wails. The men were getting very overexcited by this stage, to the extent that one of them gave his partner an awful whack across her temple. She reeled for a moment, clutching her head, but remarkably, didn't miss a beat. Was it real or added drama? The girl in question then came back dressed in a flame-red skin-tight dress and performed incredible feats of agility. It was great to watch and if she had been whacked on the head it had certainly not affected her ability to throw her hips around like a whirling dervish. On reaching our room, we turned off the lights and sat looking out on the majestic floodlit pyramid, a much better floorshow. What a way to end the day!

### DAY THREE

I awoke to the stirring view that filled our window. Having touched it the day before somehow made the sight of the Great Pyramid even more amazing. The size took my breath away and now I was to go inside!

We set off up the road towards the pyramid buying entrance tickets on the way. We started down the hewn tunnel that had been mined by Maamoon in the 9th century AD. It was as though we were following the horizontal drive into a gold mine as the walls were the rugged remains of blasting with gunpowder. About 100 foot into the heart of the pyramid we suddenly came to the spot where the miners had hit the polished granite blocks that angled away above our heads. How exciting that moment must have been for them!

A few wooden steps branched up and round the solid smooth granite blocks and then suddenly we were in a long sloping passage, nearly four foot square. The granite blocks we had bypassed had been used to block the bottom of this passage. We started to crab crawl, backs bent double, up the 26-degree slope of the smooth-walled box-shaped 150-foot long shaft. The rough walls of the mined drive were so totally different to this smooth shaft that it added to the sense of stepping into the Past.

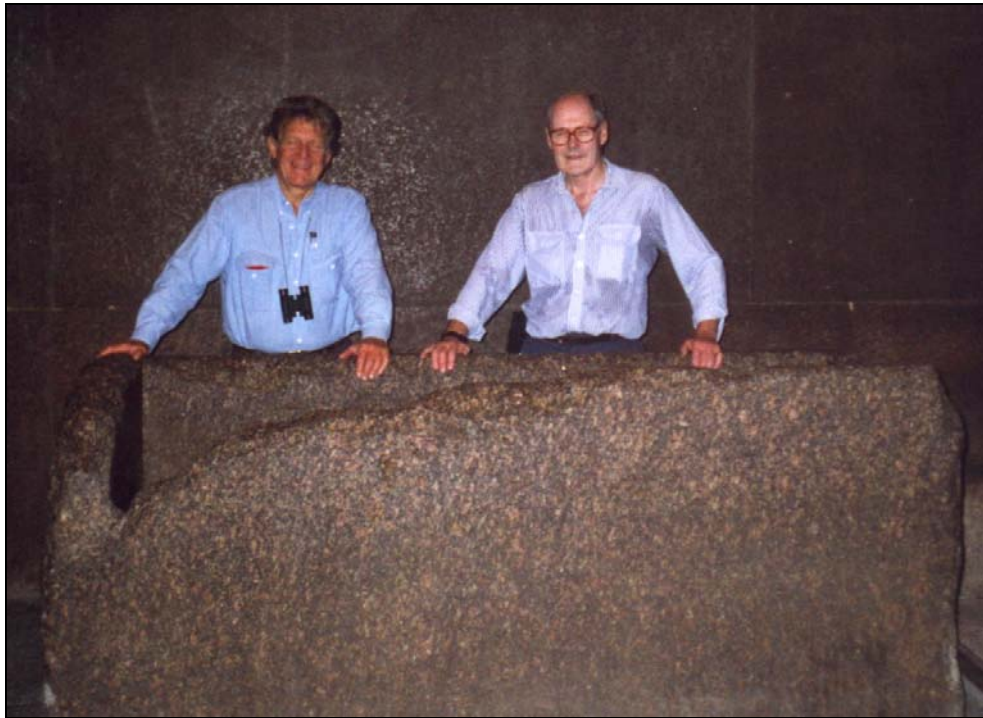
Suddenly we were standing upright in one of the architectural wonders of the world. The Grand Gallery floor continues to slope upwards at the same angle as the blocks of the corbel walls, the courses running parallel with the floor. The effect is to make it look twice as long as it actually is. The gallery is about seven foot wide at the floor level, and soared 28 foot above our heads to the ceiling, where it is only four foot wide. It is an astonishing sight. At the top end is a horizontal four-foot high and wide passage, about 15 foot long. Here the builders had placed three granite portcullises to seal the entrance to the King's Chamber that Maamoon had to blast away. We crab-crawled through this and emerged in the Royal Tomb.

We stood upright and found ourselves in a polished granite box that was completely empty apart from the lidless sarcophagus that lay along the far end wall and some three foot out from it. The walls, floor and ceiling are made of huge polished monolithic blocks of granite. I measured the room as twelve paces long and six wide. What a feat of engineering!

A woman was seated on the floor cross-legged with her back to the sarcophagus, meditating. A guard was crouching beside her. It looked as though the woman had fainted and he was tending to her, but as she had a mat with her, she had obviously planned her stay. We talked in whispers. Other tourists were leaning with backs to the walls, eyes shut and a girl was resting her forehead against the smooth granite wall.

A group of Japanese came in and filled the room so we went back out of

the tiny doorway to have another look down the Grand Gallery and to examine the portcullises. When the Japanese left we returned and found ourselves alone in the Chamber with the guard. We went to examine the sarcophagus, a quite amazing object, cut from a block of granite, polished on the inside and out. Around the top it looked as though the edges had been chewed by a dog, they were so mutilated. The guard offered to take a photograph of us both standing behind it. We rested our hands on the chewed edge and the flash went off. It was at that moment that I realised that something very odd was happening to me as it felt as though the sarcophagus was vibrating under my fingers!



***"It's vibrating!"***

Note how wet my shirt looks!

"It's vibrating," I said. "No it's not," Robert replied. I put my hands on the wall behind me. "The walls are vibrating as well." I walked over to one of the side walls and put my hand on it and found it was also vibrating. I touched the floor and it was vibrating. I went to stand in the centre of the room and now I was aware of the vibrations coming up through my rubber-soled shoes!

"The whole bloody place is vibrating Robert. Can't you feel it?" He replied, "No, and it can't. Think of the physics, it's impossible." I turned to a hippie girl who had joined us in the Chamber. "Can you feel the vibrations?" I asked. "Oh yes," she said. Robert grinned and we shook hands as we stood in the middle of the Chamber and left the matter there. If the room was not vibrating then I was and it was time to leave before I fell to pieces!

A fan is set into the mouth of the tiny shaft that enabled the pharaoh's spirit to escape to the heavens outside. Instead now the fan draws blessed fresh air into the Chamber, humming away like a refrigerator. Could the electrical motor be transferring its vibration to the whole Chamber? Was that what I was feeling? The closest I can get to giving you a sense of what I was experiencing is to suggest that you hum "mmmmm" with your lips closed. After doing this

for several seconds I can feel the “mmmmm” in my fingertips! Robert said that the Chamber was not vibrating, I was, and that started me thinking about the temple in Malta which Margie and I had visited 15 years before.

In those days I was using a Super-8 movie camera. In one of the roofless temples, which are said to be older than the Pyramids, I had tried to film from a side altar, but found when I raised the camera to my eye I couldn't hold it steady because I was vibrating like an aspen leaf. I stepped off the spot and the vibration stopped. I stepped back on the spot and started to vibrate again. It was a very odd feeling! Margie thought she could feel something but wasn't sure. I certainly felt it and found it impossible to film from that spot.

Was I feeling the same thing in the Chamber of the Great Pyramid? Robert teased me for the rest of the trip by asking, “Vibrating again, John?” whenever we were both stunned by what we were looking at!

It was time to go. We were due to collect the girls and drive into Cairo to visit the Museum of Antiquities with Nabil. The traffic was quite horrendous and as we approached the Nile at a snail's pace, it got worse. The streets were jammed with every form of transport that has ever been invented. On top of that it seemed that whoever wasn't in a car was trying to cross the road, all 19 million of them!

The gardens of the museum were seething with people who had come in the giant fleet of buses that filled the car park outside the gates. I thought about the terrorist attack three weeks before that had left some tourists dead and reckoned the odds of our being bombed were similar to my chances of my winning the lottery, so gave up worrying.

Nabil arrived and we followed him into the museum. Starting from pre-historic times he introduced us to the wonders of Ancient Egypt. Nabil showed us treasures from each age with many little behind-the-scene things that made the artisans come to life.

For instance a 2,600 BC sarcophagus with half the lid still attached to the bottom because the workmen, who had let the saw get off line, had broken the lid in their efforts to correct the cut. It was the practice not to saw the lid off the bottom of the sarcophagus until it arrived at the tomb to avoid breakage during transport, or prevent it being stolen!

Guided by Nabil we wandered on past treasure after treasure, somehow missing the crowds. Wonderful models of peasant life and the first clocks that recorded the hours of the day by using dripping water. Musical instruments and chairs you would love to sit in, doze off, and dream. It was like walking through a wonderland.

We arrived at the glories of Tutankhamun's tomb that included his folding camp bed and underpants! His 'Golden Mask' is quite beyond belief and one of the greatest achievements that artisans have ever achieved, almost to the extent that you can't really absorb its majesty it is so perfect.

The sheer excellence of the craftsmanship of the artisans who created the unbelievably fine jewellery leaves one gasping. After discovering the tomb in 1922 Howard Carter wrote, *At first, I could see nothing. The flame of the candle flickered as hot air was released from the chamber. Then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, shape gradually began to emerge: strange creatures, statues, and then, everywhere, shining gold. For a few seconds – which must have seemed like an eternity to my companions – I was speechless.* Anyone looking at the treasures today is also left speechless.



### *Tutankhamun's Golden Mask*

We were flagging after an hour and a half, but rebellion was avoided by our suddenly arriving at the exit. However, there was one more thing to see, the Royal Mummies! We entered the darkened chamber that has all the atmosphere of a Holy Shrine as no talking is allowed and the cases were so low we were forced to bow our heads to the Pharaohs of Egypt as they lay in their sealed glass boxes. It was these men who had built the amazing monuments thousands of years ago. We came to the famous visage of Ramesses II, lying there in his last resting place, aged 92. Not a pretty sight!

My lasting memory of the museum though is the magnificent sculpture of Khafre that had been discovered buried in the Valley Temple beside the Sphinx. What a sculpture! On our trip we saw many sculptures, but this is the one that sticks in my mind. What an imposing man he must have been!



***Pharaoh Khafre***  
*Undoubtedly my favourite sculpture in Egypt*

We fell into the Hilton Hotel's cafeteria for restrooms followed by lunch. What a morning! Inside the Great Pyramid, Tutankhamun's mask, Khafre's grand sculpture as well as meeting Ramesses II in person!

Mohammed Ali was looking worried because we had taken too long over our meal. We should have left 15 minutes ago for the Step Pyramid of Saqqara. Would we make it through the traffic? The streets may have seemed crowded on the way into town, but now they were packed solid. Mohammed Ali resorted to Cairo's back streets. Side alleys, markets, school pick-ups, it was like squeezing through a tin of sardines. The steering wheel was pummelled mercilessly, while orders were shouted out of the window and cars were forced to back up to ease the gridlock. Suddenly we popped out of the traffic like a champagne cork and were careering down the wrong side of the road alongside a canal full of stagnant green water.

Faster and faster we went as the traffic thinned. We arrived at the gates of the Stepped Pyramid at 3.58, two minutes before closing time. A tourist policeman stood in our way and with great satisfaction yelled, "Closed!" Nabil leapt from the van, dived into the office and returned with four tickets. We drove on up to the Step Pyramid of Saqqara, the funeral complex of Djoser.



*The first pillared hall in the world built out of rock*

Nabil ushered us through the entrance into the first pillared hall ever built. Then down to the chapels where we saw the first staircase ever built. The solid stone doors into the hall are part of the building so can never be shut. Round the corner into a vast sunlit court as large as a football ground. There at the end was the Step Pyramid, the first ever built. Three original ideas in one place!

The man in charge was Imhotep and his name is recognised by architects as being one of the Greats. He was also a doctor of medicine and literature as well as being an administrator. We climbed up a stone stairway to the top of the beautiful 33-foot high buttressed walls that surround the 37-acre enclosure. It is really something to wonder at as this is the oldest monumental structure in the world to be built entirely of stone.





### *The 'Step Pyramid' of Saqqara*

We crossed the dry moat that Nabil had discovered a few years earlier and walked towards a small pyramid. Margie saw a fox running across the desert horizon silhouetted against the glow of the evening sky. It paused to look at us and then climbed into the jumble of blocks. Moments later we saw a little face and pointed ears poking out from the top of a pyramid! We turned and followed a beautiful causeway that ran straight down to the flood plains of the Nile. Originally this mile-long road was covered with a corbel roof that allowed an inch-wide ribbon of light to penetrate its entire length. See page 936.

The rays of the setting sun cast long deep purple shadows across the pale yellow sand. What a beautiful evening! Back to the hotel for an early night, as next morning we were to fly to Thebes to visit the Temples of Luxor and Karnak and the Valley of the Kings.

### DAY FOUR

The flight to Luxor was uneventful. As we flew south heading upstream along the Nile we left the smog and chaos of Cairo behind us. Nabil had flown ahead on the earlier flight and would meet us at the Winter Palace Hotel. We were met and directed to a minibus that would be ours for the next three days. A fast trip into town, turn left at the Nile and we arrived at the palatial hotel.

The Winter Palace is one of those fine old hotels that were built a century ago for the Victorian tourists. Wide flanking staircases curved up to a terrace where a grand portico shaded a grander front door attended by a red-coated guard wearing a saucy red fez. The vast lobby reached to the sky supporting two enormous Venetian chandeliers. The concierge greeted us warmly, helped us fill in the required forms, checked the passports and then handed Robert and me two keys each. "Two keys?" I queried. Robert grinned and said, "I think we have a presidential suite each!"

We followed the porters up the dual-carriageway staircase to the first floor. The passageway was wide enough for two buses to pass. Consultation between the porters and we parted company, Robert heading south while we set off northwards. On and on we walked, obediently following the red fez. We turned towards the river and stopped at a door with two numbers on it! Fez

opened the door and we followed him inside. We passed a marble bathroom large enough to play squash in and stepped into an enormous bedroom with a 12-foot high ceiling. Fez opened the giant windows and we looked out on the Nile below and across to the Theban mountains and the 'Valley of the Kings'.



*The view from our sitting room in the Winter Palace Hotel*

Fez then opened another door, and said, "This is the sitting room." The last time Margie and I had a sitting room was on our honeymoon nearly 40 years ago! Fez opened another set of windows that also looked onto the Nile.

Fez then opened yet another door, and said, "This is your second bedroom." It was even larger than the first one, with another marble bathroom. Laughing hysterically we settled for No. 2, Room 252.

I rang reception and asked to be put through to Nabil's room in the modern wing of the hotel and asked him if he was settled into his room. "Yes, everything is fine." "Well, what about moving to our spare room, so we can all be in the same part of the hotel, as well as save Robert some money!"

We had all agreed to meet at the pool in the gardens for a swim before lunch. We arrived to find Robert and Caroline ensconced at a restaurant table by the Mediterranean-blue waters of the swimming pool. We changed and slipped into the water, having ordered a light lunch and some cold beers.

The Luxor Museum opened at four o'clock. We planned to meet in the lobby after a siesta and then ride in a horse carriage down to the museum. We met refreshed and set off at a fast clip-clop down to the tree-lined boulevard. The museum houses one of the finest collections of ancient Egyptian sculptures in the world, some of which had only been discovered in 1989 buried in the Temple of Luxor. One of these was the beautiful sculpture of Amenhotep III.

On the main floor there is a polished red granite bust of Senusert III that Nabil considered to be one of the finest sculptures in Egypt. When looking up at his regal visage you know that you are gazing upon the face of a ruler who was in complete command of his people and ruled as a Living God.

Robert announced he had a surprise for us all. We left the museum, crossed the Corniche and climbed down the bank to the Nile to find a felucca was waiting for us and as the sun was setting we pulled out into the river. The hotel had delivered champagne, so, with glasses raised, we drank to RA and the sunset, and blessed our lucky star, the sun.



### *Our lucky star, the Sun*

For a while the captain pulled on a huge oar to help our progress against the flow of the river. Fortunately a tug pulled out from the bank, threw us a rope and after the tow was made secure with a fair bit of drama, which nearly cost our captain his foot, we set off up the river. We were then released and turned to sail down the Nile again, north with the flow. The sun had gone but the light was magical, a mauve pink fading to a soft purple behind ink-black palms that turned to dark navy blue as we glided back towards the loom Luxor. There are moments in your life when you have to pinch yourself to make sure that you are alive, as when sipping champagne with a loved one and dear friends on the Nile as you sail into the sunset.

We stepped back onto the shore and came back to earth. Before we had time to come to our senses completely, Nabil had us back into a horse carriage, and we headed for the Temple of Luxor. As we trotted down the road we passed the giant spellbinding floodlit temple. The golden stones of the columns radiated power, but were majestically graceful and perfectly balanced. The symmetry of the structure is an architectural triumph.

We walked down the avenue of Sphinxes into the forecourt and stood before the giant pylon gateway that leads into the temple. On either side of the entrance are two colossal granite sculptures of our friend Ramesses II. On the left is one of the original obelisks, its mate having been nabbed by the French for the Place de la Concorde! We walked through the entrance into the great colonnaded court to find that the five of us had the whole complex to ourselves. The majesty of the columns filled us with awe. We slowly walked along a corridor of fourteen columns that gave one the feeling that they were holding up the night sky.

We stepped out into the second court, surrounded by another colonnade of beautiful columns each carved as a cluster of reeds. We crossed and entered the sanctuary of the God Amon built for Alexander the Great, whom the priests of Luxor had ordained a god. I made Robert Alexander pose for a quick photocall under the relief of Alexander's cartouche! Back through the temple we wandered, struck dumb with admiration. It is quite impossible for me to express the grandeur of what we saw. Everyone has to go to see and feel this wonder for themselves. What a privilege to be there and what a blessing to have the place to ourselves on a warm summer evening!

Drinking in the glory we strolled back to the entrance and emerged once again before the pylons and the orphaned obelisk. An avenue of sphinxes disappeared into the night heading towards Karnak, one and a half miles away, a sphinx every ten feet on both sides! We climbed back into the horse carriage and headed for our home in the Winter Palace.

Robert and Caroline headed north for their suite while Nabil, Margie and I hiked south to our apartment. We ordered dinner from room service and fell into our baths. Half an hour later our meal arrived in the sitting room and we sat down to ginger shrimps, grilled prawns, and roast veal. What a day and wouldn't we sleep well! Tomorrow's plan was for an armed-escort convoy bound for the Temple of Dendera that meant a five o'clock wake-up call!

## DAY FIVE

It was still dark when Margie's tea arrived. As we sorted ourselves out for the day ahead the Theban Mountains slowly turned from mauve to pink across the Nile to the West. We met at the appointed hour, piled into our minibus and set off for the convoy rendezvous where we joined a queue of buses. Much to our relief Nabil assured us that the others were all going to the Red Sea and that we would have the temple to ourselves.

A black jeep arrived with rifle ports in the armoured windows. Out jumped a bunch of young men all carrying automatic rifles with revolvers jammed into their belts. Why no uniforms?

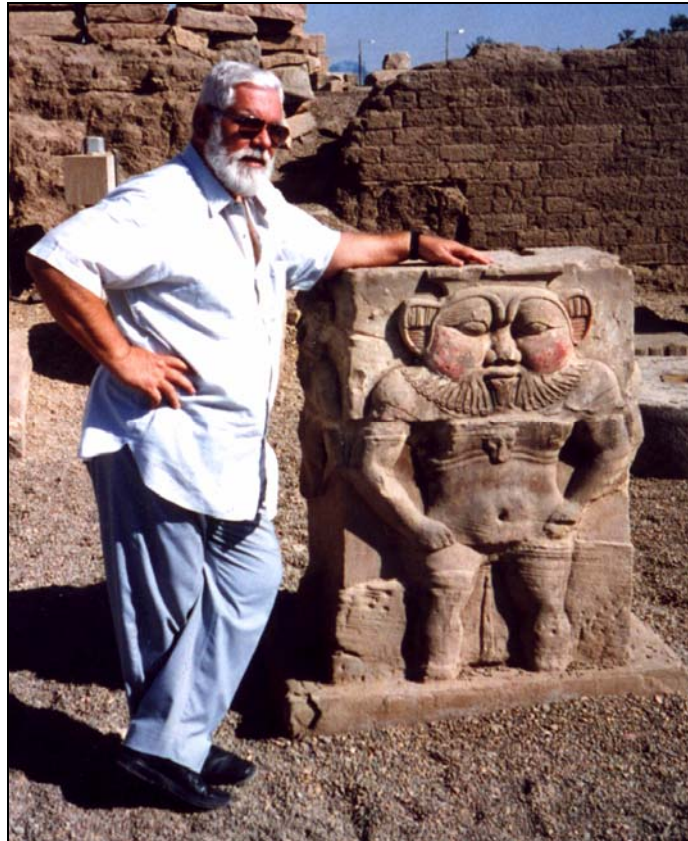
We set off on the dot of Egyptian eight and as we did so our escort turned on the sirens. Robert grinned, "Just to let the Fundamentalists know we're coming!" Soon we were speeding down the side of a canal with sirens howling whenever we passed a camel or donkey, or a beat-up old tractor pulling a cart. We sped through villages of mud bricks, past fields of sugar cane, vegetables, and sorghum, interspersed with bare plots where the peasants were swinging hoes to clear the weeds. Water is still raised in leather buckets with shaduf cranes from the canals to irrigate the fields. The scene can't have changed for thousands of years, apart from the wail of the sirens. In 45 minutes we arrived at a roadblock where we parted company with the Red Sea convoy. Ten minutes later we reached Hathor's Temple of Dendera.

The temple is dedicated to Fertility, Child Birth, and the Resurrection of Life as the Nile floodwaters subsided. *Re opened his eyes inside the lotus as it emerged from the primordial chaos and his eyes began to weep and droplets fell to the ground: they were transformed into a beautiful woman who was named Gold of the Gods, Hathor the Great, Mistress of Dendera.* And so Hathor was born.

The vast compound is encompassed by mudbrick walls, 90 foot wide at the base and 45 foot high. We entered through the great gateway, which like the pylons of the Temple of Luxor, were marked by the vertical grooves made by women praying for pregnancy.

Along the east-facing wall of the House of Birth are four beautiful stone curtains, one exquisitely carved with a relief of Hathor breast-feeding Cleopatra. The carving on this temple is superb although in many cases unfinished, yet another example of work abandoned in midstream.

We went to meet Bes, the dwarf God of Well-being, and the Patron Saint of Childbirth. He is seen in a small temple to the right of the gateway, called the House of Birth. Any resemblance to Nabil is purely coincidental!

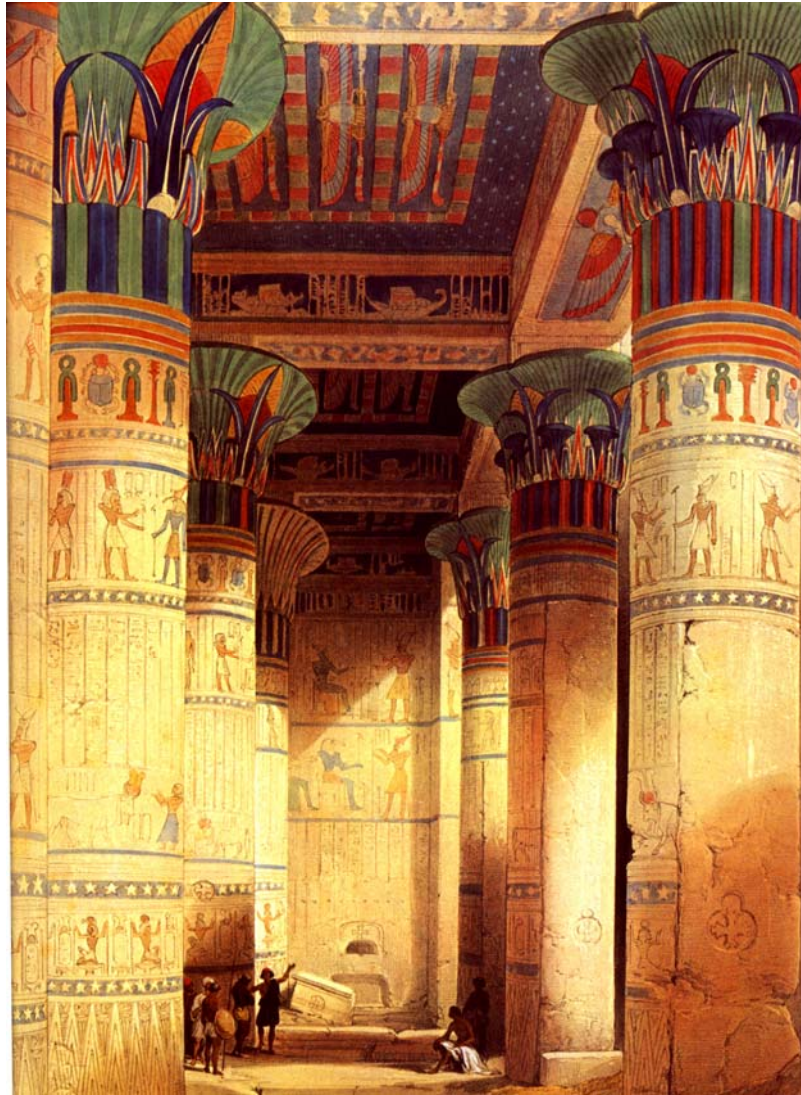


*Admiral Professor Nabil and 'Bes'*



*Hathor breast-feeding Cleopatra*

We walked up to the Hypostyle Hall. The supporting columns hold a painted roof of immense weight, on which the reds and blues still looked remarkably fresh. The capitals are carved with four faces of Hathor. It is utterly breathtaking. Having seen David Robert's watercolour paintings done in 1840 of other temples, I could more readily comprehend the magnificent glory that it must have been in the past.



*David Roberts, 1840*

It amazes me to see how much our tastes have changed. The colours in Dendera are the same as those used on the west façade of the medieval cathedrals like Wells in Somerset and the façade of the Acropolis in Greek times, both painted with bright colours, blood reds and azure blues. What a wonder they must have looked compared to the muted stone of today!

We left the Hypostyle Hall and entered a court with the lovely name of New Year and the Pure Place. We mounted the sacred anticlockwise staircase and visited a series of chapels. One of these had a painted ceiling relief of the Goddess Nut swallowing the sun at night and giving birth to it again at dawn. It was a beautifully depicted scene and I thought how great it would be to paint one day on a large wall somewhere, in very bright David Robert's colours.



*Goddess Nut*

We continued to climb and crossed the roof of the *Sanctuary* to more steps, iron this time, replacing the stone ones that had broken away from the side of the wall. We climbed these and found ourselves on the immense flat roof of the *Hypostyle Hall* with a breathtaking view out over the vast compound that lay at our feet. The *House of Birth* to the north and the *Sacred Lake* to the west surrounded by desert. On the waters of the Sacred Lake 365 tiny boats, each containing a candle, would float during the festival, marking the resurrection of Osiris. What a glorious sight that must have been!



*The sacred pool of Dendera*



*House of Birth*

We were reluctant to start our descent. On the way down we visited the last chapel where we saw a copy of the famous Zodiac ceiling that is now held for safe keeping in the Louvre! We went to Paris to see the refurbished Zodiac ceiling a year after our trip to Egypt, where it is painted as in the past.



*The Zodiac ceiling in the Louvre*