



The Land of the Pharaohs

—by David Holland, LS

The statue of Ramesses II at the Karnak Temple

I recently returned from an excellent trip to Egypt organized by Professor Mike Besch, director of the Surveying and Mapping Program at the University of Akron, Ohio. Nine people, mostly surveyors, took part in a magical journey which took us along the Nile to ancient Egypt's most sacred artifacts and surveying history.

Our journey began at the JFK airport in New York City on March 12th. The 11.5-hour, midnight flight brought us to Cairo the following day, at 6:30 pm local time. The long flight and the time difference of more than 7 hours between Cairo and New York, took its toll on our internal clocks. So, we're very happy to see our guide at the airport and, off we went through downtown Cairo to the Pyramisa Hotel in Giza.

Cairo is a sprawling metropolis teeming with people. Out of a total population of 80 million, 20 million reside in metro Cairo! Not surprisingly, it is the largest city in Africa.

In Cairo, it's every man for himself, especially on the roads. There are no "rules of the highway" to instill order, and there definitely are no stop lights or stop signs or pesky speed limit signs. Driving in Cairo is an experience beyond description. Yet, somehow, the city functions, and I saw very few accidents on the jammed roads. The miracle extended to us as well, as we arrived at the hotel in one piece.

Our trip was well planned, and each day we had an itinerary laid out in advance. My goal was to see everything I could see in ten days and avoid the "Pharaoh's Curse" of the gods. In

other words, don't drink any water except bottled water and be careful what you eat. Ultimately I was successful in that regard, but three members of our group were not so lucky.

Bottom line is that Egypt is a third-world country where overpopulation is the norm, poverty is abundant, and hygiene in public places unenforceable. On the other hand, the sights were among the most magnificent in the world.

We started out our first day by visiting with the president of the Egyptian Geographical Society, Prof. Dr. M. S. Abulezz. The society headquarters are in an ancient building in central Cairo housing a museum within a military compound. Soldiers and security personnel were in force everywhere we went.



The meeting with Prof. Abulezz was very informative; we learned about efforts to modernize Cairo—open more aqueducts, deal with sanitation, build new roads—to improve the city inhabitants' life.

After the meeting, we hopped on the bus and headed to the Egyptian Museum which houses the world's richest collection of Pharaonic antiquities, including King Tutankhamen's treasures, and 27 mummies (among them was a mummified crocodile).

Our next stop was the Giza plateau and the three pyramids atop it, widely considered as one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The largest among them was built by King Cheops (IV Dynasty) around 2650 B.C. and is about 480 feet in height. The ancient Egyptians built this and other pyramids to preserve the bodies of their dead kings for the afterlife.

Later we visited the Dahshur pyramids, with the "red pyramid" and the "bent pyramid" attracting considerable interest. The red pyramid is 345 feet in height and was built around 2550 B.C. I entered this pyramid by crawling through a 4.5' x 4.5' tunnel for about 200 feet. I arrived at the first burial chamber and from there climbed a scaffolding platform to the second burial chamber. This chamber was dimly lit and the air in it stifling. I felt claustrophobic after the strenuous climb. However, the experience was well worth it.

We ended our first day by driving out to the Great Sphinx. This legendary statue with a body of lion and a human head is 230 feet long and 66 feet high—and, naturally, quite a sight to behold.

Back in our hotel, we recovered from the day's sightseeing, enjoying a traditional meal and "balmy" dry temperatures of about 80 degrees. A casino was in the hotel so, of course, I had to try my luck at the black jack tables.

The next morning we boarded a plane for Luxor City (ancient Thebes) in upper Egypt, and once there, we transferred to our river boat, the *M/S Nile Story*, for a four-day cruise on the Nile.

The first stop was on the west bank, at the Tomb of Menna also known as the Tomb of the Nobles. Menna was "Scribe of the fields of the lord of the two lands of upper and lower Egypt" and lived during the reign of Tuthmosis IV and his successor Amenhotep III.

The tomb of Menna was built during the New Kingdom's 18th dynasty and is approximately 3400



The Great Sphinx



The Great Pyramid of Cheops



years old. It was during this ancient time that surveying began in Egypt, and this pre-eminent tomb bears witness to its importance in scenes depicted on its walls. Because of annual flooding in the area, surveyors (rope-stretchers) were required to periodically re-measure the land along the Nile and replace any boundary stones carried away by the Nile's waters.

After touring the tomb of Menna, we drove to the Valley of Kings and explored the tombs of Ramesses III, Ramesses IV, and Ramesses VII. The valley is formed of layers of limestone and contains some 60 tombs in all. I also dropped by King Tut's tomb for old times sake. The switch to burying the pharaohs in the valley instead of in pyramids, was intended to safeguard against tomb robbers. In most cases, this precautionary measure did not prove to be effective.

Nonetheless, the tombs in the Valley of Kings were fascinating to explore. Their walls, which the robbers could not steal, are covered with colorful hieroglyphics with sacred text and sophisticated paintings outlining the pharaohs' life. The text was intended to aid the deceased on their journey through the netherworld.

After visiting some more temples (Karnak, Luxor, and Edfu) and the tombs of Luxor, we were ready

to return to our boat for afternoon high tea on the deck and a leisurely journey up the Nile toward Aswan. There are approximately 315 cruise boats plying the Nile, supporting a booming tourist industry at the historical sites along the Nile.

Sitting in my chaise lounge on the upper deck in the late afternoon and watching the fascinating scenes unfold along the river was a wonderful experience. It was something straight out of an Agatha Christie novel. Date palm trees lined each side of the river, and life went on as it had been for thousands of years. Sometimes there would



Egyptian "rope-stretchers" in the Tomb of Menna

be a water buffalo or two, some camels, or cattle and sheep grazing near the river. We would pass by small villages, and each village would have at least one minaret (tall, circular spires), providing a vantage point for look-outs and for the daily calls to the faithful to gather for prayer. The Egyptians are predominantly Sunni Muslims and are required to pray five times a day.

We ended our cruise at Aswan, the city known for the Aswan High Dam which separates Lake Nasser from the Nile and probably is the most beautiful spot on the Nile. Directly opposite Aswan is the Elephantine Island (named after the large rocks on the island resembling elephants and the ancient ivory trade it supported) which



Mickey and I checking out an abandoned monastery

separates the Nile into two channels.

Nearby, cut into the stone descending into the Nile, is a Nilometer dating from the Roman period. On this Nilometer, which consists of steps and scale carved along the steps, the height of the river inundation would be measured and then recorded, so that the proportion of tax to be paid on the land could be adjusted annually.

It was here on the southern tip of the Elephantine Island that our group was transported to the times of the Nilometer—on the backs of the “ships of the desert.” Each of us was assigned a camel and a guide. My camel’s name was Mickey, and he was ready to ride. I vaulted on to

Mickey’s saddle and held on to the wooden horn for dear life, as the camel strode purposefully across the desert leading the pack.

I suspect Mickey’s take on the whole exercise was very self-serving. The quicker he and I arrived at the ancient abandoned monastery one-half mile up the sand dunes, the quicker he would get back to the camel corral for a delicious snack of dried leaves, dates, and grass. In any case, the view from atop Mickey was magnificent, and the cushion on the saddle very comfortable. Most definitely one of the “high” points of the trip!

No one visiting Egypt should leave without paying a visit to its noisy, colorful markets. So, that evening, after frolicking in the desert on “camel back,” we went to the Aswan Bazaar downtown to do some shopping. The exchange rate is 5.45 Egyptian pounds to one dollar. Now that’s my kind of exchange rate! Also, bartering and negotiating is expected and conducted in a manner of a sport. I picked up on this method very quickly and was able to get some fantastic bargains on jewelry for my wife and souvenirs for myself. Later we sat at an outdoor café and had some delicious Turkish coffee and pastries—not a bad way to end the day.

The next morning we toured more of Aswan and the world-famous High Dam which was built in 1960 and, on a clear day, one can gaze across Nasser Lake into the desert. We were not so fortunate as a sirocco (desert sandstorm) had blown through the previous night, and the visibility was poor.

In the afternoon, it was time to say goodbye to Aswan. We boarded a plane and flew back to Cairo for one more day of sightseeing before returning State side. We visited the Sultan Hassan Mosque, Old Cairo, the Abu Serga Church (where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus found asylum during their flight from King Herod), the Citadel of Salah El Din, and the famous Khan El Khalili Bazaar.

That evening we attended a dinner show at the Falafel restaurant. The food was your typical Egyptian ethnic fare, of which I ate sparingly, but the traditional folklore show was more to my liking—lots of colorful costumes and whirling dervishes and belly dancers.

And then it was time to head back to the good old U.S.A. Definitely this was a trip of a lifetime, and I would highly recommend it for anyone who is adventurous enough to fly half-way around the globe to see a totally different culture and life style. ■