

## Egypt – 2011

### Monday 7<sup>th</sup> November

Arriving at Alexandria around 6.00 a.m., we took a full day tour of the city.

Our first stop was at the seafront and the site of the old pharos which is now occupied by a castle.

The city was particularly empty and quiet as this was the third day of the Eid Festival when people stay up late and do not really emerge the next day until noon.

We passed the equestrian statue of Mohammed Ali and stopped at an 18<sup>th</sup> century mosque with particularly fine stone work. It was rather strange to see the forecourt taken over by swings and fairground equipment for children. Our guide told us that the parents went to the mosque whilst the children played outside in this special holiday period.

It was just over nine months from the revolution which started on 25<sup>th</sup> January this year, and we found that much of the normal infrastructure was not operating as usual. Many people were not being paid and others were on strike for two or three times their current salary. As an example, a doctor is earning just over £8,000 a year currently. We were particularly conscious of the huge amount of litter in the streets – however, a later trip along the Corniche revealed that most buildings seemed to have been neglected ever since construction and that dirt and decay seems an accepted part of Egyptian life.

We drove on to the Alexandrian Catacombs which had been used since the second century AD but were only rediscovered in 1900 when a donkey stumbled down a hole and the whole complex became evident.

The catacombs started as a private individual's grave and contained three huge sarcophagi and much elaborate stonework. At least at the early stage, bodies were mummified and there was a pictorial representation of the process above the entrance to the original tombs. Subsequently, burials were in square fronted recesses in the rock.

After leaving the catacombs, we went to the site of the temple of the god Serapis and its remaining column known as "Pompei's Column". This visit was in fact a replacement for the scheduled one to the modern Alexandrian Library where staff, like many others, were on strike.

Although it was early, we then went to lunch. Traffic had now increased and our journey took far longer to reach the restaurant than our guide had anticipated.

After lunch, we spent about an hour at the National Museum in Alexandria. This has exhibits on Islam, the Greek and Roman period, and the Age of the Pharaohs. We found particularly interesting some of the statues and other artefacts retrieved from the harbour. We were told that they had been thrown there in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to prevent large enemy ships from entering the harbour – however they had not bargained on the invaders transferring to smaller ships which could, and did, get through!

The ride to our final stop, was particularly interesting as the heavy traffic meant that we proceeded at less than walking pace and so were able to look in detail at the many people on the streets. We

were struck by their friendly waves and smiles and many of the younger ones wanted their photographs taken.

The 350 acre Montaza Gardens contain a palace occupied previously by King Farouk. On our visit, it also contained thousands of people enjoying picnics, games and conversation. On leaving, we drove to the closed Alexandrian Library that we were to have visited to take photographs of its exterior. Again there were young people who wanted their photos taken and even one group, complete with camera, who wanted to take us!

Throughout our trip we had been accompanied by police vehicles and the armed security officers protected us although there was no question at any time of feeling unsafe.

### **Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> November**

Following an overnight stay in Alexandria, we travelled out to El Alamein on an extended half-day visit. This included stops at a Military Museum, the British and Commonwealth War Cemetery and its equivalent for German and Italian casualties.

As usual, these memorial areas were immaculate. It was interesting to see that the Germans had constructed a fort like building to honour their dead, and the Italians a marble tower like structure.

Apart from an area of salt marshes and industry, the entire 60 or so miles of road from the outskirts of the city to El Alamein is flanked by densely built, gated holiday resorts. Some are of flats of several stories and some of villas. All had been constructed from the desert within the last few years. Clearly there has been plenty of money in the hands of some people for some of the time. Our guide told us that gas and oil are plentiful and are exported to several countries including the UK and Israel. Other income comes from cotton, iron and steel.

On our return journey to the ship, our coach slowed for us to take some photos of a 2<sup>nd</sup> B.C. century temple right next to the road. It is thought that Cleopatra may be buried here and archaeological investigations are currently taking place to discover more.

We arrived back at the ship at shortly after 3.00 p.m. so that there was time to edit photographs and upload a fair few – and also to make up the diary for our time in Alexandria. We left the port at around 5.00 p.m. to make our way to Port Said where we should arrive around 7.00 a.m. in the morning.

### **Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> November**

In fact we were required to meet in the Carousel Lounge at 6.50 a.m. ready to leave on our 3 hour journey to Cairo. We accompanied Ann for Brian did not wish to do this tour.

We were faced with a choice when on the coach – choose the right-hand side of the coach and sit out of the sun or choose the left-hand side and see the Suez Canal. We chose the latter option whilst Ann chose the shade. We did get a few pictures of the Canal and the sun was not always without a cloud in front of it but we were not certain that we had made the right choice.

The first part of our route ran right next to the canal and then moved slightly further from it but still ran parallel to the line that it took. When we reached Ismailiya, we veered south west towards Ramadan city (fairly recent satellite town of Cairo).

Finally we reached Cairo itself and drove through the “City of the Dead” with its many mosques and minarets and with people actually living in the squalid settlements within.

We travelled on to the Mosque of Mohamed Ali where we went inside and we also looked upon the Citadel of Saladin nearby and were afforded a panoramic view of the city of Cairo from its battlements together with our first sight of the pyramids, hazy in the distance.

Lunch was taken on a luxury boat which took us on a Nile cruise for an hour and a half. The food was good as was the entertainment – a belly dancer and an absolutely fantastic “Whirling Dervish”. Two police launches accompanied our vessel.

After lunch we travelled on to the pyramids themselves – the Great Pyramid of Cheops and that of Chephren with all their mystique but also the hoards of objectionable camel drivers and even the corrupt police who always want a bribe to do something. We found them difficult to shake off. Things were slightly better when we moved on to the valley and the Sphinx. We had encountered many friendly Egyptians however, some wanting their photographs taken as they had in Alexandria. Amongst these was one lady wearing the full black covering but her eyes smiled at us out of her letter-box slit as we took her photo.

As it was still Eid, there were literally thousands of Egyptians at the site of the pyramids and, although it has been illegal for ten years now after several fatalities, there were still many people climbing up the outer face of the pyramids.

Finally, we were taken to the inevitable Papyrus Institute where we were prevailed upon to buy – but without success!

We then reformed our convoy of coaches (together with a back-up vehicle in case one broke down). We had two police trucks also in the convoy and a security officer on each coach – they were really taking no chances! We set off in the gathering gloom and before long it was totally dark.

We arrived back at Port Said at around 8.00 p.m. – it was still bustling with hundreds of people including young children. Many waved at our convoy as we passed through the busy streets. As we alighted from the coach at the port, there were many many people gathered – they seemed to be waiting for us and all were staring at us – it was a bit like being royalty!

We went up to the Lido for our late first-sitting of dinner where they had made a real effort and had laid the tables with cloths and lighted candles. We were pretty exhausted after our 13 hour trip but still managed to stay up for the Trivia Quiz at 10,00 p.m.

#### **Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> November**

Discovery had set off from its mooring at Port Said at the unearthly hour of about 3.30 a.m. and we went out on deck to see the ever-changing scenery from about 7.30 a.m. onwards.

The canal extends for about 117 miles from Port Said to Port Suez, reducing the route from Western Europe to India by almost 5,000 miles. The canal is about 507 feet wide and can admit vessels with a draught of up to 53 feet. It takes about 14 hours usually to pass through but we did it in record time in about 12 hours.

Rameses II (1298 – 1235 BC) had been the first to try to construct a freshwater canal joining Lake Timsah (near present day Ismailia) to the Nile.

Then towards 600 BC, Pharaoh Necho II added a section from Timsah to the Red Sea. Some 120,000 men were said to have died in its construction.

Darius of Persia finished this part and for the first time ships travelled from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean via the Nile. The Roman Emperor Trajan had the canal dredged and renamed after himself. Then it became blocked again by the incessant drift of desert sand until dredged again by the Arab caliph Amr Ibn el-As in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Henri III, Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte all had plans for reopening and improving it but it was left until 1859 when work was begun by the French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps and inaugurated 10 years later by Empress Eugenie of France.

Nearly 100 years later (1956) it was nationalised, then closed from 1967 to 1975 because of Egyptian-Israeli hostilities.

We saw many soldiers and military camps along the banks of the canal as we sailed through it. Many waved at us – and we took several close-up photos of them. We also saw ferries crossing back and forth as they journeyed from Egypt to Sinai and vice versa.

We took photos of Suez City which has recovered well from frequent bombing in the Arab-Israeli wars with green parkland and new beaches.

Port Tawfik is at the end of the canal and there, there is a forlorn-looking pedestal which once formed the base for a statue of canal builder de Lesseps – knocked off after the Anglo-French invasion of 1956.

It was special to be able to travel through both the Panama Canal and the Suez Canal in the same year – and each time on Discovery. A memorable transit in each case.

### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> November**

We had sailed over-night to Sharm el Sheik and this morning had another early start as we left Discovery at 7.00 a.m. for St. Catherine's Monastery. We travelled for nearly 3 hours through the very arid and mountainous scenery of the Sinai peninsular. The absence of vegetation showed us the wonderful shapes of the mountains with their different colours caused by the presence of minerals like copper and iron. Very occasionally we came across a small group of single storey brick buildings which the Bedouin now live in as they increasingly forsake their nomadic lifestyle. Apart from these and the occasional camel, together with a few security check points, the land appeared totally empty.

St. Catherine's Monastery is at 5,035 feet and is believed to stand on the site of the burning bush. It is just below Mount Sinai where Moses is believed to have received the Ten Commandments. It is about 150 miles from Sharm el Sheik and many miles from anywhere. We had nearly 1km to walk in the hot sun to reach the Monastery complex.

A chapel was built here in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and a defensive wall was subsequently erected in 527 to protect it from Bedouin marauders. There is a 6<sup>th</sup> century basilica and a 12<sup>th</sup> century mosque within the walls.

We looked round the chapel and then took photos of the supposed burning bush, still there, complete a fire hydrant nearby!!

We then climbed some steps up to a small museum containing many ancient icons and manuscripts dating back as far as the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

As well purchasing a book about the monastery from Bedouin traders, we climbed the nearby rocks and Adrian, who climbed the highest, managed to get an almost iconic picture of the whole Monastery. We then returned to the coaches for a short drive to see a "golden calf" carved into the rock.

Another two hours' drive took us to the coastal resort of Dahab where we had a late lunch in a 5\* hotel right by the water's edge. We took some photos of the hotel and its surroundings before another one hour's drive back to Discovery which was waiting for us at Sharm.

### **Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> November**

We had docked at Safaga after our one-day visit to Jordan and so were now back in Egypt. Today was another very early start for our visit to temples at Dendera and Abydos. Billed as a 2 ½ hour journey the outgoing trip was over three hours and the return 4 ½!

Dendera is relatively near to Luxor and is a temple dedicated to Hathor. It is a largely Greco-Roman building and is one of the best preserved temples in Egypt. There was a temple here dating back to around 2,500BC but the present building is largely Roman. Every surface is covered in incised carvings and these were originally coloured. In the hypostyle hall much of the colour remains. As well as carvings of Hathor (also known as Isis. Our guide explained at some length the stories and symbols of the gods. In particular we were encouraged to spot the signs of the merger of the kingdoms of upper and lower Egypt. In addition she pointed out images of Cleopatra.

We took a journey of about 2 hours to Abydos which is a much older temple set in a complex of many temples. It is dedicated to Seti 1 and dates to around 1300BC and contains a chronological list showing cartouches of most dynastic pharaohs of Egypt from Menes until Ramesses I, Seti's father. One of the remarkable things is that the carvings are in relief, with the background having been cut away.

The journey itself was very interesting. Initially it was through the rugged and arid mountain scenery similar to Sinai but when we had gone 100 miles we came to the area irrigated by the Nile. Here we saw many crops, both food (including much sugar cane) and cotton. Agriculture looked like our medieval strip system. Apparently following Nasser coming to power in 1952 land moved into

private ownership, but with each family owning a small plot. Whether because of this or because of lack of money, there is an absence of machinery. Our guide confirmed that this is the case and that it is not a matter of it being the wrong time of year. We saw very, very few tractors and then not on the fields.

There are many villages and we enjoyed watching life go by. The area is very rural and undeveloped and we saw many donkey carts piled high with sugar cane and other goods. In some villages it was particularly noticeable that the people live close to their animals. Most houses had a donkey or cow or bullock in a walled yard at the front or side of the house.

The return journey proved particularly slow. Since the Revolution that began on 25th January of this year local communities have taken it upon themselves to slow passing traffic by putting in sleeping policemen. In addition the Egyptians follow 2 practices we have seen in other developing countries: not putting on lights at night and not dipping headlights as they approach. These hazards make driving very tedious, as does something we have been used to from Australia. Even on main roads long sections are stripped of any surface in readiness for resurfacing and traffic is slowed to a notional 30kph as it passed over what is just rough ground.

## **Conclusion**

Egypt proved particularly interesting despite a visit only 8 years ago. This was due partly to seeing Alexandria, El Alamein, Suez, Sinai, St Catherine's monastery, Sharm el Sheikh and the temples at Abydos and Dendera (all new to us) but also to the Revolution. The most memorable effects of the Revolution for us seemed to be the immense amount of litter in Alexandria and the genuine welcome from most Egyptians wherever we went. The one exception was the pyramid area where we were pestered incessantly by traders and found ourselves suspicious of the motives of everyone.

We had returned home the next day and within 5 days found ourselves watching the outbreak of new demonstrations in Cairo, and reports of demonstrations and violence in Alexandria and Ismailia, all places we had just been to. Up to 100,000 people in Cairo were demanding that the military relinquish power. There are elections in just a few days but the people claim that the military are altering the constitution to retain the power that they have had for 60 years. Also there is evidence of corruption and torture. These demonstrations have been fired on by the army but as I write there is talk of the military adopting a more conciliatory tone.

Our guides were very hopeful that the January Revolution would lead to real democracy and freedom. They complained of the corruption of the time of Mubarak, who resigned 11<sup>th</sup> February this year. Our own observations were that the country showed signs of wealth and Sinai (and no doubt many other areas contain many natural resources). There is building on a scale that we have not seen anywhere else in our travels of the world. The buildings are mainly endless relatively low rise blocks of flats and quite a number of large and quite flamboyant houses. This was particularly evident west of Alexandria where the blocks stretched for 32km ( a distance our guide gave us – we thought it further). We could not get a clear answer as to ownership of these huge areas of development but were given the impression that it was largely corrupt government officials. What was even more remarkable was that most of these properties in all parts of Egypt appear to have been left only partially finished. Whilst this applied to small houses where owners will build more when they can afford it, this was something totally different.

Our guides spoke of people wanting anything up to 4 times their current rate of pay and being currently on strike until they get it.

Clearly there are high expectations. We just hope that as well as being clear what people are against, the Egyptians will see plainly what they are for.