

PYRAMIDS

Treasures and Traffic

Derick McGroarty sees them all in Cairo

From my Hilton Hotel room I looked at the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square, Cairo; but crossing the road appeared hazardous, and a car taking three times as long was relatively safer!

A good place to start sightseeing, the museum sets the historical scene with a wealth of Pharaonic, Islamic and Byzantine treasures. The Hall of Mummies is a realistic display of the achievement of 3,000 years or more of preservation of once great kings. Even teeth and hair are recognisable. Most popular the Tutankhamun corridor and galleries show to full advantage the 1,700 items found by Howard Carter in the young King's tomb. Marvel at the way it all fitted together from the gold plated outer case the size of a garage to the solid gold coffin, fabulous mask, jewelled throne and much, much more. I have always been thrilled by the story but to actually see the seemingly endless collection in pristine condition was the highlight of my visit.

At sunset I could see the silhouettes of the distant pyramids, a preview of my next day's trip. Although Cairo suburbs now extend to the edge of the Giza area there is no doubt that here, abruptly, the desert begins and the vast geometric shapes retain an isolated grandeur in

natural surroundings. The pyramids can appear smaller than expected; that is until you stand along side and realise the immense size of the individual stone blocks which give a "staircase" effect rising almost 500 feet. Climbing outside is strictly forbidden but it is possible to climb inside to the centre of the pyramid. The passage is well lit and the upward slope is not difficult. There is really very little to see. But you stand in the burial chamber where King Khufu was laid to rest about 2,550 BC.

Dominant on a hill top, visible throughout Cairo, the Citadel is a massive crusader style fortress. Although parts date from Saladin (1200) the main Mosque of Mohammed Ali is 19th century. Rest on the huge carpet which covers the floor taking in the ornate architecture and sweeping circles of lights.

Your shoes are quite safe outside!

Inside my Muslim guide told me much about Islamic history and culture. It was Ramadan and I admired her devotion to prayer

at appropriate times.

In the alleyways of the Khan Khalili bazaar traders are smiling, friendly and enjoy bartering prices. You are unlikely to come off best but be firm. Decide if you really do want to buy an item, and how much it is worth to you. Offer less than that amount and never go beyond your own valuation. Move to the next street and start again with another dealer. After sunset is an atmospheric time with a chance to experience local life and colour close at hand. Agree a fixed rate for a taxi from your hotel, time for shopping, and pick up for return. Don't worry you may not spot your driver at the agreed time. He will certainly find you! When the sun sets the streets fill with people, eating, drinking mint tea, talking and enjoying themselves.

Surprising, in a predominantly Muslim city are the Coptic Christian Churches. St. Sargius Church, restored in 1171, has an early history with a crypt allegedly built on the site where the Holy Family rested during their flight into ➤

الإهرامات.

Pyramids.



Calm of the courtyard.

حالة هدوء .



Sphinx .

أبو الهول.

Egypt. Close by, the modern appearance of the "hanging" church belies an interior which dates to before Christ linking the Babylon fortress built by Trajan (98 BC). There are more than 100 icons. Some date from the 8th century but the majority are 15th century, carved in ebony and ivory and in an excellent state of preservation.

Cairo has much else including parks, gardens, a century old zoo and a 600 foot tower with a restaurant and open gallery with a panoramic view.

The National Express coach service from my home town to the Heathrow terminal was convenient and the Egypt Air Airbus a comfortable flight of less than five hours to Cairo.

The Berlitz pocket guide to Egypt was a convenient and useful companion. ■

Egyptian Tourist Office : Tel: 020 7 493 5282