

**North Africa Trip, Egypt Leg**  
**Cairo, Aswan, Esna, Edfu, Luxor, Hurghada, Sharm el-Sheikh**  
**May 28 – June 10, 2006**  
**(Exchange rate: 5.74 Egyptian Pounds for \$1US)**  
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**Sunday, May 28, 2006**

The flight from Morocco to Cairo was a boring 5 ½ hours out of rainy Casablanca. Didn't get nearly as much sleep as I needed but it wasn't bad for seats so tight that they crammed by knees on the Air Egypt flight. The path is pretty direct, over Tunisia, Algeria and the Gulf of Libya and into Egypt. Coming into Cairo in the morning, the incredible vastness of the desert can be seen before descending into smog-ridden Cairo.

When arriving at the airport, I walked right past the taxi and hotel touts and got onto the Lonely Planet described big white bus. I didn't check to see if it was correct but I was supposed to take, just a bus. Walk past the car parking lot and you'll see it.

After riding the bus for a good half hour through an unidentifiable Cairo slum for 50Pt (1/2 Egyptian pound), I had a feeling this was the wrong bus. That feeling was firmed up by a very nice Cairene (someone from Cairo) guy asking me if I knew where I was going. Quickly admitting no, another super nice guy with horribly disfigured hands gave me direction to get off the bus at the next stop and walk to the metro station to get to the Cairo Museum.

Thanking him, I ejected myself from the wrong big white bus and walked into the world of the subway. I knew the Marriot was near the Cairo Museum, a major landmark. After getting that across to the ticket booth buy, I couldn't understand what, after asking twice, station to get off, so I just accepted entry and went along.

Asked a couple guys and they kindly pointed me to the correct train direction and stop. Wow, I had ridden for so far that my subway entry point was 6 stops off the main Lonely Planet Cairo map (and it's big), so I was way south of old Cairo and way off course. That's okay because for another 1.5 LE (Egyptian Pounds), I was brought to where I needed to go.

The front of the Cairo museum looks awfully small; hopefully this famous place with a big attempted robbery in 1996 is more impressive on the inside. Right now the goal is to forge on to the hotel, a mere ½ mile away.

That walking seemed like a good choice at first was only for two reasons – I only had four hours of sleep so I wasn't ready to battle with taxi drivers and it allowed me a chance to stroll the mighty Nile River. It looks really quite big but perhaps not as big as my mind had decided it to be. The Ohio in Louisville, KY and the Salmon in Idaho look much bigger in my mind's eye. I have no way to compare the water flow. The engineer in me speaks.

It was 10am and getting warm when I arrived at the hotel. Plopping down my seemingly lead filled backpack, all 2400 cubic inches of it, I checked into my room without trouble. Went up to shower off my disgusting sweaty self and cleaned up. This had been a long transit.

After getting all gussied up, it was hot enough outside that my pants and socks ended up air drying from a complete washing in two hours. Seizing the opportunity, I washed my other filthy set of clothes (there are only two) and used the rapidly dried set to wander around wit ha bit.

Grabbed a snack to keep the dogs of hunger at bay and set up a taxi driver for tomorrow to see Giza, Saqqara and Memphis for 250LE. I'm sure it's too expensive but I had to do nothing so perhaps it's worth it.

Getting hotter, over 37 degrees C (99 degrees F). I took a dip in the pool to cool off, though the air and sun were hot enough that it was only comfortable in the water looking away from the sun.

The view of the French girls in bikinis wasn't too bad, either. However, they all seemed to smoke, making them instantly unattractive. I thus occupied myself with roasting in the Jacuzzi, steam room and sauna.

Feeling a bit woozy and completely tired (3pm), I grabbed a small snack in the hotel and hit the sack. I was honestly tired enough to sleep until 6pm and then grab my \$3 bag of Bugles, scarf them and brush the teeth and go to be again until 5am the next morning. I was done.

### **Monday, May 29, 2006**

Woke up thrashing around from strange dreams so it was time to get the day started. I'd felt like a slug but getting another cold wasn't attractive so catching up on sleep was a good choice. Got the gear together, received my taxi call and went to meet Ahmed, my 250LE driver. He was a nice older guy, providing all sorts of advice on what to pay for things, negotiate, ignore or watch out for. The first stop was a papyrus museum.

Here you're shown how papyrus is made, the process to get it from plant to paper. I didn't plan on buying anything but a Ramses II scene caught my eye from Justin. They wanted 150LE with hieroglyph names, I took it for 100LE. Should have been 75LE according to Ahmed's advice of 1/2 the price. Also, the quick agreement of the people in the papyrus museum reinforced that. I wasn't sure if the 5x squeeze on prices applies here.

We stopped at ax stable Ahmed recommended and the stable manager of course didn't want to talk price, just get me going. That's okay, I'm not buying anything so I can argue price later. Even with a close stable, it's still a ridiculous distance to the Sphinx and

Pyramids. It costs 40LE to get into the Pyramid area; I didn't pay for the guides to get in, apparently only tourists pay to get into the area.

The Sphinx is not nearly as large as the photos make it out to be. It's still cool, though. I opted to go to the small pyramid behind the third largest to get a good perspective and climb the small pyramid.

Naturally, there's a guide to take you up and then show you a paltry bit of hieroglyphics. I gave him \$2US and he got hot. He said tourists usually give him \$20. Wow, for 12 minutes of showing me around, that's \$100/hour. I'd like to make that! I gave him \$1 and 20LE and left it at that. My young guides seemed a bit surprised but I paid too much already. Based on that, these people must rake in money.

I was out on the Giza plateau at noon, the worst possible time to shoot, plus doing so while riding a horse is quite difficult. The smog didn't help, so I kicked in the polarizer and took what I could get. It was nothing like I'd hoped but on a 2 hour visit, you can't expect much. Before returning to the stable, the guides stop and ask you if you liked the ride. This is the baksheesh cue. These guys were nicer so I gave the main guy \$10 and the walking kid \$4. The walking kid's dialog in Arabic to my guide suggested "You're kidding. That's all he's going to pay?". Ah, ya guys. The guide also asked me to say I only paid \$5 to each of them. It's a money grubbing world.

Back at the stable, a perfume store was shown to me, but I wasn't interested. The guy wanted 200LE for the horse ride and I laughed in his face. I countered 150LE he accepted it too quickly. Ahmed was right, divide their prices by 2. I explained that in America, I can ride a horse for that long for half his price. That ploy seemed to work pretty well. Off to Saqqara to see the oldest large pyramid, Zozer's step pyramid.

On the way in, Ahmed asked for 2LE so the Saqqara gate guard wouldn't find any trouble with our vehicle. They exchanged the money in a handshake pass and we went on. Funny. You buy the tickets to the plateau before getting there and then drive up. My SDSU student ID worked but with a little bit of arguing. By now I was rather hungry, so I swallowed my apple whole, hoping it would hold me over.

Upon walking up to the disinterested guard, I showed my ticket and ran into eight guys standing around the stone entrance to "guide" and hit me up for money. Ignore them like the flies they are. It was an intimidating group but steel the nerves and move through. The Morocco experience helped train me.

The sun beat down relentlessly, with shade only in the entrance complex. Ugh. A hat would be good here, glad I didn't have one or I might have been comfortable. The 0.6L water bottle lasted half way around the pyramid with the final walk facing into the sun.

Although the entrance to the pyramid was closed, there was a pathetic piece of metal blocking the stairs down to the locked gate. Since no one was around, my ploy was to "drop" my water bottle down and I had to retrieve it. I quickly descended the stairs into

the pleasantly cool darkness. A power cable ran down to a switch box and into the locked darkness. I couldn't resist tripping the switch. What's the worst that would happen? The pyramid blows up and falls on me?

Lights came on and the dark hall into the pyramid was illuminated. Very cool. The tunnel was long enough that the end of it was indiscernible from the darkness. Took a few shots and then ran back up the stairs, slipping over the makeshift gate, undetected.

Continuing my way clockwise around the pyramid, I saw that it would be treacherous to climb up this thing because every step held a steep pile of loose rubble. I even heard some stones skittering down the side of the pyramid as a reminder. Each step was angled up about 50 degrees, making an unassisted ascent nearly impossible. It certainly wouldn't be worth it.

There are several interesting structures including the block of stone with two eye ports for the bust of Zozer to look northward to Polaris (North Star) until the gods resurrect him.

This would all be fun but my energy level has crashed, I was out of water and the expensive climb up the small pyramid had made my pathetically weak quads sore presumably from a miniscule lunch and not really enough water as I'd only gone once today. My legs and body were reaping the fool's reward.

Returned to Ahmed who said I took too long but I eyed him and he said it was no problem, we should make it to Memphis museum with plenty of time.

Again, my student ID saved bucks and I spent the last 45 minutes exploring until I was kicked out of Memphis museum. Almost thought my gig was up when I told two guards who wanted to have me pay to take a picture with them (I passed) asked me the value of a Canadian coin given to them. I was playing a Canadian today. I sweated a second and figured I lived there for a week, so I could easily figure it out. It turns out the coin was a Kiddie Land token with Calvin (& Hobbes) on one side of the token and a circus tent on the other. I could have played along with the joke but decided to burn the money grubber and explain that it was only worth \$0.25 but only in special places. He thanked me, I headed to see some other stone statues of Ramses II and I heard him toss the token against a stone. It was worth the 15 minute laugh and it gave me a great idea for future baksheesh payment accepting countries. Hahaha!

The last stop was at an Egyptian carpet school, though it looked more like indentured servitude and labor to me. Got to see how camel, silk and blended carpets are made, creating 4 inches of fuzz on top and then they're cut with scissors to reveal the patterns beneath. I was willing to pay 100LE for a place mat sized blend and they wouldn't go below 120LE. For an Egyptian, the price would have been 70LE. They would have taken \$500US for a 4x6 foot blended carpet. They showed a price of 4995LE and the dude whacked off the 4000LE part for an obvious student (me), reinforcing the divide by 5 principle. Wish I'd asked about the full silk carpets, which are something like 20k-40k LE. Maybe in the future but not right now.

Returned to the hotel and paid Ahmed his 250LE without a request for a tip. I'd hoped not to have that fight and it was nice. The legs were torched, I was sun burned and tired so I grabbed a small dinner. My body was hungry but my stomach only accepted a small amount of food rammed into it. Headed to the pool, Jacuzzi, steam room and sauna to work out the leg soreness to no avail – this was bad. Since I was tired, the bed beckoned and my body and mind submitted to the call of slumber.

## **Tuesday, May 30, 2006**

Got some breakfast to get going then went down to the concierge to make reservations for the Cleopatra hotel in Aswan, seemingly a good choice. Week 3 gut issues have kicked in so I laid in bed for another hour, to try and feel a little better.

By 11am, the intestines stabilized into a state that I could deal with but far from normal. Forced myself to get up and catch a taxi over to the Cairo Museum. These drivers refuse to let me go for anything less than 15LE, quite annoying.

Went through the metal detector, waseled another student ticket with my SDSU ID card, went through the second metal detector and x-ray and discovered no cameras at all are allowed, forcing me to go back out to the garden and drop it in a room with a lady handing out tags. Saw several other expensive cameras in there so I chose that option rather than looping back to the hotel.

The museum is large and the seemingly small front fooled me. Wanting to cut to the chase since I didn't know how long I would feel good, I headed upstairs and to the absolute back of the museum to see the King Tutankhamen exhibition. Now I understand the no camera policy – it would have been a miserable experience had everyone been trying to take pictures of things. Ultimately, it was a good choice on their part.

The head dress and all the accompanying pieces are beautiful, polished and bright for display. You can look inside the mask, too. The entire Tutankhamen exhibit takes up a significant space of the second floor and to think this was a minor king. A big king's tomb contents must have been incredible.

Running painfully low on energy, I plodded back to the museum café for a lunch of a chicken tawook sandwich, blended mango and water. After a while the energy partly came back and I walked through all the halls to at least look at everything. The Old Kingdom stuff was most interesting for its age and size.

Fought to use my SDSU ID to get into the mummy room and got the price down from 75LE to 50LE which, no doubt, the ticket taker kept the difference as the door guard checked the student ID. The ticket guy gave me a wink and said, "Welcome to Egypt". Other than seeing Ramses II (most prolific king) and Tutmosis III (greatest warrior king), that expense was a complete disappointment. I've seen more mummies in San Diego and the Louvre than in the Cairo Museum Mummy Room, though neither of those

exhibitions are nearly as famous as the one in Cairo. Unless you're a mummy freak, spending \$12US to see 9 mummies is a complete waste of money. Could have skipped that altogether and been just as happy if not more so.

Not wanting to hassle with taxis, I opted for the ½ mile walk in the mostly shaded sidewalk of the Nile walk back to the hotel in hopes of getting the guts to settle down and smooth over. They didn't.

Tried relaxing at the pool and Jacuzzi and that did help a bit. Went and got dinner, trying to pack down what I could, not knowing how the food on the train was. The hotel was nice enough to let me do a late checkout, making it much easier on me.

Taxi drivers just don't let it go here. The first wanted 20LE to Ramses II station, I said 10LE and he wouldn't go below 15LE. This ride would cost an Egyptian 4LE. I blew that driver off and tried another driver and ended up with the same result. I capitulated this time.

I left an hour before my train time and it was a good thing. It took 20 minutes by taxi, 15 minutes of wandering and asking strangely nice Egyptians happy to help and another 10 minutes walking through the train station until finding the right platform, number 8, directed to by the overnight train office.

Was very thankful to have paid the \$74US instead of the shared room price of \$54 as it was quite cramped and you never know who you'll get, as I felt bad enough that I wanted to be left alone.

We departed at 8pm, never stopped at the Giza station like the ticket seller guy said would happen, so it was very good to have gone to Ramses II station instead. At 9pm, dinner was served. The first container had breaded fish which I poked to verify the contents and the immediately put it away. The second dish was beef and rice, more inviting. I took small bites of the feed and rice and they both didn't taste right so I skipped on that, drank some water and bided my time until the dude came back to pick up the tray.

When I got on the train, the little porter guy wanted to put my backpack up into storage and I refused. For doing nothing anyway, he held out his hand and hissed "Teeppsss." I almost blew him off and then thought better of it since I was at their mercy and you don't know who know who.

Went to sleep and I did pretty well. The driver of this train sucks, he does real hard stops so all the cars bang into each other. Morocco had much smoother trains.

At about 11:45pm, I woke up and my stomach felt terrible. Went to the toilet, blew out the backside guts something awful and then went back to bed. After five minutes of feeling bad, my stomach felt even worse.

I put my boots back on and proceeded to Ralph up my shoes for several hours, well into the morning. The food had created a worst case traveler's scenario.

### **Wednesday, May 31, 2006**

At about 3am, my body had nothing left to hurl and I finally got to sleep, feeling terrible and somewhat scared that this was going to get worse. I prayed not.

Woke up at 6am feeling wanted but not nauseous, thank the Lord! Even last night I wasn't really nauseous, the stomach just came right out without the usual preliminaries. I flipped from one side to another and drank little sips of water to keep complete dehydration at bay, as it's easy to become dehydrated with diarrhea and vomiting at the same time. Couldn't drink too much, though, since the stomach was still torn up.

At 8:30am, breakfast was served and, hooray, it was all pre-packaged pastries and tea, nothing to kill me there. I couldn't eat them then because I had no appetite and was afraid to force anything down.

Got to Aswan at 9:15am and was only hit up by five hotel touts and four taxi touts, not bad. Funny thing – the hotel touts said 30LE (\$6US) for their hotel and they all had the same beautiful picture card for their hotel. All five of them. Haha, Lonely Planet warned of that. Dragged myself and my food laden (snagged the breakfast goodies and put them in the pack for later use) backpack down to the Cleopatra Hotel (3 star, \$37US), got the different tour information from Mr. Hassen and went to the room.

The air conditioning was full blast and I was happy for it – it's freakin' hot outside and it is only 10am. Drank some water and juice and did my best to choke down the prepackaged croissant. It took an hour to do but my body desperately needed the energy.

After about two hours of lying in the breeze of the room air conditioning and pondering over the options, I went with the 80LE trip to Abu Simbel and the \$140US 2 night cruise to Luxor, covering all the main sights on the way down the Nile. This will keep me entertained for a few days.

Glad the room has air conditioning because downstairs is stiflingly hot and going outside only changes the airflow and not the heat. People in Cairo were right, this place is a roaster. Went back and rested some more – my stomach muscles are sore from last night's unanticipated workout. Desperately wanted to go on the Philae Temple trip but not at the expense of being unable to make the Abu Simbel trip tomorrow morning. I chose to lay around like the pathetic sack I was.

At 5pm, the body felt better enough to take a walk around and find a place to send some "I'm alive" emails. The afternoon is far hotter than the morning and that explains why the Abu Simbel trip leaves at 4am. The building housing the nearest Internet café right up the street was a wreck. It was something taken right out of a bad horror movie. Broken windows, completely dark stairwell, views to things once used 20 years ago and

freely allowed to decay until now. The Internet café was bright and white in an otherwise condemnable building. No problems getting in there for 10LE per hour.

Walked back and every little store vendor offered spices, naming saffron specifically. Lonely Planet says almost all of it is tinged with saffron and the rest is mixed in with dirt. Haha. Dinner wasn't served at the hotel until 7pm, when I wanted to go to bed for my 3am wake up call, so it was more rest time until then.

Dinner here is simple but nice. Cooked carrots, potatoes with sauce, cooked chicken (but served cold? Maybe I was late arriving at 730pm), salad material of shaved carrots, cut cucumbers and quartered tomatoes along with a platter of cut melon. I ate what I could, a portion of everything. This was the recover or perish meal. It worked quite nicely. Ate with Russians who seemed nice enough but we exchanged little more than nods.

Walking away from the table, my spirit instantly felt better. The energy wasn't there but the step was a little lighter. That's what I need. Went up and prepped for immediate morning departure and hit bed. Again.

### **Thursday, June 1, 2006**

Woke at 2am to find the AC unit had auto shut off and the room had become quite warm. A few button presses and back to sleep. 3am – Alarm time, get up, shower, put on old clothes since it's a sweaty day and get to the lobby to find a boxed breakfast of a few pastries, marmalade, cheese and a boiled egg. Tea was served, jammed down a croissant and the minibus picked me up at 3:45am to meet the city "convoy" at 4am.

The first note that our driver was crazy is that he found it necessary to pass other convoy members inside of town. The second was passing another minibus, floating too close together and blowing off the driver's side mirror of the other van. The escort guy in our van and our driver got out and had a scream fest with the other driver for a minute, then our driver hopped back in, leaving the escort guy to continue the scream fest and then off into the desert we went, with about 12 big busses and 17 min busses.

Convoy is a loose term, it's more like a strung out parade of whacked drivers. The big busses stayed in line but our driver derived particular pleasure from driving in the opposing traffic lane with no headlights on at 60mph over blind hills while passing other just as whacked minibus drivers.

At first everyone timidly chuckled at the obviously unnecessary driver's side mirror removal event, but the attitude quickly turned to that of a white knuckle, sweaty palm, adrenalin rush ride no one had anticipated. You are initially scared, thinking this guy has had it with life and you've one of the unfortunate souls who will join him in his last minutes of life. Then you wonder if the driver has manhood issues and feels it necessary to prove he can get to Abu Simbel the fastest, with the moist points scored for the most dangerous of maneuvers. That seemed more plausible but then anger takes over and you really don't care what the real reason might be, you just wish the driver would be more

reasonable, coming to the point of having the desire to crawl in the front seat and initiate a scream fest and if all else fails, knock the driver unconscious and take over. Realizing the folly of that approach, you move to the final state of acceptance, take a mental/psychological valium and try to get some sleep, since you were stupid enough to sign up for a six hour round trip with a two hour visit to the temple.

The desert sunrise is beautiful, an orange ball of fire rising over the endless wastelands of southern Egypt. That delusion lasts for 10 minutes as you start to feel the sun's heat and mentally project yourself chiseling stone in the sun 3,000 years ago.

My SDSU ID failed me again. Looks like the ISIC card would have been a better choice. Coming around a large dirt dome, you are confronted with the 3 ½ (one crumbled in antiquity) statues of Ramses II seated in front of his temple, once buried and forgotten in sand until rediscovered in 1818 and moved block by block in the 1960's, avoiding drowning by the impending Aswan dam. You can see where the mortar was used to replace the cut stone in a reconstruction. Quite impressive.

Most everyone sits with their tour group, sitting in the sun for a good 40 minutes before being unleashed inside the temple. There is a second temple around on the next hill to explore as well. Photos and video are not allowed inside and there are many harpy men in cloaks and turbans running around inside enforcing this rule. Enjoying the moral dilemma, I took my Kodak digisnap and fired off a few shots (without flash of course) from the hip, hoping for the best until a harpy saw the lens open and told me to close it. Not interesting in testing less than friendly Egyptian rules, I complied. I need a stealthier camera.

It was fascinating wandering inside the two temples carved out of a solid stone mountain, dug several hundred feet with a 60' high ceiling. Quite a planned out project and no room for mistakes since stone can't be glued back together and the entrance is far too small to bring in another statue. Plenty of the stone had the original paint and the reconstruction job on the inside was incredible, remaking the carvings in the mortar where the stone was cut.

Two hours visit time was just about right as the air inside the temple becomes hot from all the people inside and, as you're not supposed to take photos (a few fools used flash and were easily busted), you have your fill after those two hours.

Rather nice considering the time estimates provided for seeing a place in most countries is half as much as I need.

Got back in time not to be the last person, not that it matters since the caravan forms leaving Abu Simbel.

The exact same harrowing ride occurs on the way back but at least it's in the daylight so you can see which can you're going to collide with. You also learn the shoulder is a

valid lane and two minibuses can push an opposing vehicle on the shoulder and not reduce their speed at all.

Back at the Cleopatra hotel, I paid for my room, wolfed down a spaghetti bolognese and hibiscus (national drink of Egypt) drink and left to meet Waleed of [waleedtravel@hotmail.com](mailto:waleedtravel@hotmail.com) to take me to my cruise ship. He explained that Mr. Hassen at the Cleopatra Hotel only made 30LE business on my \$140US trip, a 5% cut. Waleed pitched me a two night stay in Luxor with transport from Esna (which costs 120LE), two nights with breakfast in a three star hotel, transport over two days to all the monuments for 750LE. He initially said 600LE but I didn't make him write it down so I'm not sure but it was a learning experience. It was still okay because it keeps me set for almost three days with transport for \$120US, just not lunch and dinner plus monument fees. And I do no work. Good. He also set me up for the Hurghada Hilton Plaza for \$75US a night rather than the usual room rate of \$160US. Less work again. That puts me to Tuesday morning when I'll have to get to Sharm el-Sheikh and figure it out from there.

The cruise ship, Beau Soliel, is actually a five star, so Mr. Hassen didn't screw me. That was quite nice. The boat is pretty empty, just 17 or so Brits and 5 French. I paid Waleed off after four ATM attempts to find one that would accept my ATM card, Commercial International Bank (CIB) worked – that was a little stressful on short notice. Noticed, too, that Egyptians pay less than half tourists do for taxis no matter what.

We sailed at 4:30pm for Kom Ombo at 7pm to view the temple and have dinner at 8pm. So far, so good but there's a Styrofoam block life vest in my cabin just in case. Keeping my backpack and things tight in case of an unexpected bail out. With the constant 5-10mph headwind, a felucca ride would have sucked, especially since it's close quarters, the beam is only 8-11' wide and you get to stare at people you can't or don't want to communicate with for 3 days, under power rather than sailing.

Got situated, showered and cleaned up a bit before heading to the top deck to do some catch up writing. Let trips like this go for two days and you forget everything that happened.

It was a blast furnace up there so I sat under an awning and watched the Brit kids have a riot in the pool and their parents enjoy the sun. Can't tell who the others are, though.

Got to Kom Ombo at 7pm and dashed off the boat as it was only an hour until dinner time. I ended up buying two tickets stupidly (10LE each) for supposedly the next day. The temple is awesome, something right out of an Egyptian movie. A guard showed me a room with Cleopatra carved and I was automatically obliged to pay him 2LE. So the game goes. Sunset on the temple was great and there was a quarter crescent moon as an added bonus background. It gets dark quickly here, so the light was gone in short order.

Got back to the dock and found my cruise ship missing. Crap! Thinking I had a very long walk ahead of me, I started asking around and found the Beau Soliel had moved a few docks down. Whew!

Ran in to my cabin, showered with the handy soap pump dispensers and got to dinner. Looked to be about 27 people on the boat, though it looks like it could handle 3-4 times that many. Had a small table to myself with several other groups spread around. It was funny to sit there, staring at an unused napkin and place setting directly across from me.

The six person table next to me, as I overheard, seemed to be asking the waiter if I spoke English and they debated who to send over and ask, afraid sending a woman might be construed as being forward and then they thought about sending a man and worried I might be gay and thought it would be forward, too. Hahah! Finally one chap came over and asked if I would like to join them. I did, sat down at the table and said, "Yes, I speak perfect English". I received great laughter as the response. Quite a few Brit families on the cruise up and down the Nile. Had an excellent dinner chat. They invited me to the evening festivities and of course I accepted.

The night's activity was a treasure hunt plus some acting. The teams ended up being men versus women. The men ultimately lost only because the two male judges were seduced by the two pretty French girls doing their best belly dance. Our dressed up guy, Stewart, had an excellent belly for the dance but couldn't ultimately compete on looks. It was a wildly funny time and a good way to pass the evening anyway. These British folks are very nice and fun, retaining their amiable dry sense of humor. The entertainment ultimately ended up being provided by the guests of the boat. Riotous!

The dinner was an excellent five course meal, one of which, oddly, was a fancy presented flaky rolled taco. Hahaha! 17 hours of flying for, though admittedly tasty, rolled tacos for an appetizer. Great brochette meat skewer, soup, veggies, a fruit plate and fancy presented desert with a great idea for candles – cut bell peppers.

Got to bed at 1am and clocked out hard for the full night. This is only the third time I slept fully the whole trip thus far and it's week three. During dinner, I received a call from my pick-up agent that scared me. It was just to tell me the particulars for my arrival to Luxor on the third.

### **Friday, June 2, 2006**

Woke up refreshed and feeling great, thinking it was 3am due to the darkness but the room shades are too good. It was 7am! So much for a second visit to Kom Ombo at sunrise. Glad I hit it yesterday. Got breakfast, a beautiful buffet of pastries, cheese, juice make to order omelets and all the fixings. Several of my table mates were wasted tired and dragged themselves in. They're happy today is a long cruise and relax day. It's a laundry and clean up day for me.

Until we reached Edfu. It only took two hours of cruising. The front desk called me and said we stop for two hours before continuing on to Esna, so this is my chance to go see Horus temple. I ran, grabbed my fortunately charged batteries and reformatted cards and ran to the front desk to ask for directions.

It's too far to walk, so I have to get a horse carriage and go, and not pay more than 25-30LE. Expect a hassle.

The carriage drivers start off at 100LE. I laughed. I say 30LE both ways with one guy while two others tug on my arms. After five minutes of dueling, he agrees and says "okay". I know that means nothing so I spend another minute until I can make him say "30LE both ways."

Three minutes into the ride he says 35LE there and 35LE back. I laugh, tell him he's insane, no deal, keep driving. Time is short and they know you need them.

We get there and I tell him one hour, memorize the carriage number because they all look the same and look for the ticket booth, something you actually have to walk to. The actual temple is 250 yards away from the parking and the entrance to the temple is even farther.

When you walk around it, you are blown away by the sheer size of the structure and artistry. Finally getting there, I ponder over the Lonely Planet for a few seconds and then realize looking at their map will waste all my time so I stuffed it in my waist band and get the camera out and start firing.

The columns and statues are awesome, a little shrine to the Falcon God Horus. A temple harpy invites me over the ropes (for a fee of course) to get a closer look at the inner shrine. Seeing police in view, a bad, dark and grainy picture isn't worth getting arrested over. The harpy was pretty handy with his aluminum reflector in the dark but he didn't like my tip of 2LE and wanted 5LE. I capitulated but realized this is going to cost a small fortune quickly for each act so I cut it to 1LE.

Time was dangerously short so I returned the 0.1 mile to the entrance. It looked different because I rushed in and didn't look at my surroundings, causing me to almost get lost! At last I found the carriage parking lot, ran over to the driver (in 100+ degree heat) and told him to get going.

On the way back, the driver said 30LE for the carriage ride and 10LE baksheesh for the driver. I huffed and ignored him, preparing for a fight. Sure enough (Lonely Planet warns of this), the driver's "buddy" shows up at the dock to see what the argument is about. I say this driver is trying to squeeze me for more. I raise my voice way up and get in his face for kicks, telling him I know how it works here and just walk away for the boat. Raising my voice gives me a headache (in addition to listening to myself in general) but it was fun to test the theory of aggression out. Once on the boat, as I was the lone person out, we were under way in 10 minutes. Nothing like cutting it close!

Another download, recharge cycle for the camera. Showered and went to the Jacuzzi to visit with the Brits for several hours. They are a very nice lot, the entire group really. The French seem to be nice enough, I think they're a university group, but the language

barrier really kept us from mixing at all. We got docked in Esna just ½ mile from the dam lock, closed from June 1 for 45 days for cleaning. Didn't get off the boat, just rested and prepped for dinner.

It was a “dress like an Egyptian” night and I went as a plain street guy, exactly what you'd see an average Egyptian wear on the street. The French lead people went as Caesar and Cleopatra and the rest were dressed from very plain to being belly dancers. Including the children, all very fun.

Dinner was an excellent buffet of chicken, kabobs, vegetables, pastries, fruit and even liver (yum!). All good but my appetite is weak. Spent the time chatting, laughing and comparing the funny differences between our countries. Yes, the Brits use their fork upside down compared to Americans. One of the guys explained that he's on the Isle of Man course on PS2 T.T. racing, a street bike race game. He said he must have been out there when the crews digitized the tracks. All of the Brits knew of Wallace and Grommet like they were the royal family. The Simpsons were totally familiar, too.

We cleaned up and sauntered down into the bar and lounge for an evening of games and entertainment, such as pass the bottle, move the potato between the legs, spoon catch, news paper standing and all sorts of games. That burned up a good two hours, though the sound system was on the fritz. It worked well enough to keep us going, though.

Stayed up and chatted, exchanged emails, enjoyed hibiscus drinks which the Brits generously covered for me. I had to retire at midnight, just when a bunch of boat crashers came from another ship, looking to get away from their cruise. They said they ate the same food every day, their cabins were tiny and a British guy tried to hang himself off the boat using sheets, distraught that his wife left him. He was saved and arrested, as it's against the law in Egypt to do that and they take it quite seriously. They don't pussy foot around like at home.

### **Saturday, June 3, 2006**

Up at a reasonable hour, had breakfast with the Brits, said goodbye to the French and was off. My guide showed up at 8:30am, I left a \$3/day tip with the crew, as that was the customary amount and went on with Jaleed. He seemed very impersonal at first, always busy on the phone, so I half slept on the 45 minute bus ride to Luxor.

I was staying at the Queen's Valley Hotel, the newest (5 months old) three star in the center of the city. Dropped my things and met with Mr. Impersonal to discuss another tour of the Deir el-Medina, the Worker's Tombs and the Ramesseum Temple on the West Bank. The Deir el-Medina temples were sizeable and duly impressive. The female guide was knowledgeable and was able to save me 25LE with a 5LE tip to the ticket guy she knows, just doing business.

The paint on the ceilings and walls is likely a rock colored with a natural binding agent have survived for 3,000 years. Only the ceilings and some of the walls never in the direct sun have beautiful paint.

Next were the two Workers' Tombs. The guards were eating and I had to wait for them to finish eating. They invited me to join them but I wasn't hungry and was annoyed at the delay. In retrospect, the annoyance was dumb but I still didn't have the desire to handle the same good as 14 other guys digging in – didn't want to get sick again.

The tomb guardian stalled another guy and basically made me take pictures in the Workers' Tomb for a 5LE tip. Fine, fine. The paints were beautiful in the first tomb but not so much in the second, lit by cheap fluorescent lights. I tried putting the camera on the floor to squeeze out the sharpest exposure that I could.

We stopped by an alabaster factory to see how the fragile hand-made stuff was created. The factory guy wanted 80LE for a resin piece worth 6LE. I took too long there and annoyed my guide. Oh well.

The last stop was the Ramesseum, a partly destroyed temple had enough still standing to be incredible. I ignored the temple harpy's suggestions to look at things.

On the way out, we stopped at the Colossus of Memnon, huge statues that used to make sounds when the stone warmed up but no longer do so due to modifications in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We only spent 10 minutes there.

I was the only tourist at the Ramesseum as it was plain freakin' hot. Even in the shade! I had to stand in the shade to do anything and my guide stayed back hiding in the shade while I wandered the stone temple. She looked like she was going to pass out. What was left of the temple was cool and the largest stone block in Egypt was there, 1000 tons. Wow!

Back at the hotel, I enjoyed my expensive club sandwich (13LE) and chatted with a travel chica from Chile, on tour through Europe and Egypt, working as a nurse. She told me about the food place around the corner with far better prices. Perfect.

The tour bus picked me up just before 4pm and we made the run for Karnak temple. Stupidly thinking the sun would be lower on the horizon, I left my sun glasses in the room. Dumb. Gad, our tour guide, was entertaining and informative, being playfully serious about the topics he was explaining. He spent 20 minutes touring us and then unleashed us there for half an hour. It wasn't enough time to look around.

Karnak temple is stupendously massive – not a hyperbole, either. It was built over a period of 1,000 years. You can blow half a day there easily just looking at the different things if it were not for the heat. It was fun to see the interplay of light and shadows in the Great Hypostyle Hall, a forest of 134 papyrus-shaped pillars. The whole temple is big enough to hold St. Paul's Cathedral and St. Peter's plus 10 OTHER cathedrals just a

big. Some of the original stone powder paint remains. The place originally had a roof. Just stood there and was a slack jaw gawker for a minute before shooting and videoing the place.

The Obelisks are cool, 80 feet high and at 290 tons each, they were a huge effort to raise up the Tutmosis I obelisks. The inner parts of the temple were more damaged by time or the invaders over the years hiding out, like the Roman Christians who weren't down with the polytheistic systems. Walking the 10<sup>th</sup> of a mile back through the Temple and the spare 100 yards to the ticket booth, individuals in the group met up with Gad.

Luxor temple is a menagerie of things, built over many king's reigns including Alexander the Great, it has its twisted charm. Deep inside the temple, the Barque Shrine of Alexander the Great rests with his image, with his birth-name and his coronation name that had Egyptian meaning. The regular name is drawn by sound only and has no real Egyptian meaning. A temple harpy lured me into checking out a few things, giving me a chance to waste another 10LE. We bickered back and forth for a while I became angered at the waste of time, so I left 1LE with the harpy.

What remains of the Avenue of the Sphinxes is pretty in the sunset light. At one time it ran the 4.5km from Luxor to Karnak. Wow. I spent a good amount of time there and walked back to the hotel right around the corner.

At the Avenue of Sphinx, Gad kept calling out to me for a good minute and he tried all the lines of the junk hawkers (Hello, my friend!, etc) and I become so adept at ignoring people that it took him several attempts before he realized he should say "It is me, Gad", and I finally turned to look. I laughed and apologized. Very funny!

At 5pm, the city of Luxor (ancient Thebes) returns to life as people seem to hide out from the afternoon heat until then. Went up to the roof top pool, ran into the Chilean girl again and hung out for a while. She explained how she gets Egyptians constantly hanging on her shoulder. Traveling as a single woman in this country can be trying at times. We went out to the restaurant around the corner and had a huge 10LE each. I bid her adieu as I had to get up early, as my camera batteries needed charging and chips downloaded and I'd fallen two days behind on my writing.

### **Sunday, June 4, 2006**

Got up late, way late – 7:15am. Didn't know what time the tour was so I jumped out of bed, showered in 2 minutes, grabbed the gear and headed downstairs. No one.... Got a breakfast of a boiled egg, cheese, bread, marmalade, funky cheese and tea. No one. At 8:30am, I had the sense to ask the front desk to call. Outgoing phone problems. <sigh> Someone produced a cell phone and I called Jamel (010 34 59 731) and apparently Gad had stopped by, no one could find me and they left. Maybe during the 2 minute shower? They didn't look very hard since the front desk said they were here at 7:15am, saw no one, and the tour was supposed to be here at 7:30am. Peculiar but not a problem for Jamel as he has tours every hour.

Met an Alaskan couple doing an Airtrek.com round the world tour for \$2,000US. Not too bad a price! They said you had to choose your cities carefully, that was the trick. I told them about the Valley of the Queens Hotel, that it was nice, clean and new. We swapped info and I left. Michael, a Coptic Christian, was my new guide and we were off to the Valley of the Kings.

Funny, I passed the group I was originally supposed to be with. I missed Gad's entertaining personality but not the annoying Canadian girl and I only had five people in my group versus 12. Haha!

We only saw three tombs, Merenptah, Ramses III and Ramses I. They are the prime examples and quite nice with vibrant colors on the walls. Merenptah is a massive one, leading you underground with tomb harpies at both ends to prevent picture taking. There are a few signs at the entrance saying you're supposed to leave your video camera, even. This tomb is purportedly the pharaoh of Moses' time.

Hapsetshut Temple was just awesome. The long staircase and walkway was right out of the movies. This is the same Queen who erected an obelisk at Karnak Temple, originally covered in electrum, a gold/silver alloy.

By now, the sweat was dripping from my forehead even when I was standing in the shade. In the sun it just hurt. And it was noon. I had to walk up to the temple with the guy from Japan since the Brazilian couple hadn't had lunch yet and were dying. We blasted up there, shot away and headed back down.

I've been in saunas that were literally cooler than the air at Hapsetshut temple. There was so much sweat coming off of me that it coated my sunglasses, rendering them useless and blinding me. Even with them off, the sweat dripped into my eyes, making shooting images very difficult, especially since I didn't want to rub my eyes to prevent infection from touching things. I did the collar wipe with some success but it was still a battle.

Queen's Valley was not as extensive as King's Valley but still worth the stop. We saw three tombs for the price of two as the harpies weren't checking tickets.

The poor Japanese guy, Yushihi, got suckered into looking at a hole in the ground and then the harpies demanded money, giving him a hard time. I didn't see that until afterwards when he came out of the tomb looking upset. I started yelling at the tomb harpy, "If you're trying to rob him, I'll call the tourist police over here and we'll settle this right now!" The harpy instantly became sheepish, waving sorry and crawled back into the tomb from where he came. Then I explained in simple English how the Egyptian system works here and how to deal with the touts and hawkers. We then tried his new skills at the vendor booths and he did much better and started smiling again. Told him about the AEON English program in Japan and he said he hoped to afford it one day, so I knew it was prestigious.

Said goodbye to Yushihisa and the Brazilian couple and was dropped off at the hotel.

Grabbed lunch at the hotel, wrote some and went to check out the bus for Hurghada. Apparently a taxi is necessary to get to the bus terminal as it is 14km outside of the city, costing 20LE. You don't buy the tickets in town - you just get picked up at the booth by Luxor Temple in the morning at 8am. It's scary but okay. Came back, downed a liter of water with little effect and went to the roof-top pool.

A memorable experience: hanging on the edge of the pool, watching the froth in my hibiscus drink boil to the top in a swirl of red with a view of Karnak temple in the distance. The sun was setting on the Nile and a CD of Shereen, an excellent Egyptian singer, filled the dusky sunlight with an enchanting voice while I pondered nothing more than the individual bubbles in my beverage make their brief trip through inky darkness to join million of brethren floating on the top, waiting to be whisked away in a refreshing draught of foam.

It's a chore to get a 20LE taxi over to Karnak temple at night. You get to suffer through 55LE worth of bad dialog for an hour and a half only to return by 20LE taxi. It was cool to be in the temple at night with the lights playing on the millennia old columns but for the cost, you have to question it. The last 25 minutes of dialog over the pool was laughable at best, awful at worst.

Had the guys at the hotel buy me a Shereen CD for 50LE and have it delivered by stealth at midnight. Just ask and you can get someone to buy just about anything for you here.

### **Monday, June 5, 2006**

I bought another hematite bracelet and a backup after losing the one in Morocco in the desert. Also bought four canopic jars from a guy on the Corniche, overlooking the Nile. The poor guy pleaded with me that he needed the money, started at 200LE for the set and fell quickly to 100LE. From there he dropped by 10's and 5's to 50LE for the four. Once vendors revert to small movements, you know they're close to their bottom price.

Ate the traditional breakfast with tea and sugar and was off to the bus station.

Took a slow taxi to the bus terminal in the middle of no where. It was a little stressful because the guy spoke no English (and I no Arabic) so I couldn't explain, without using the dictionary, to go faster. Didn't want him trying to read while driving, though. Somehow it all worked, got me there and I bought the 27LE ticket to Hurghada.

Sitting in the terminal right now half way to Hurghada after a bus change, watching a guy sort through trash in a stake bed with bare feet and hands.

It was 5.5 hours to Hurghada in a big cruiser bus without air conditioning. When the window was open, the air coming in was hot even at 50 miles per hour. A few people felt compelled to smoke and add to the enjoyment. Met a Canadian father and son travel

team doing the one week blow through Egypt tour. They seemed to be able to deduce that we were having a bus change at the trash station in the middle of who knows where. They were handy to talk to.

Wandering the desert here for 40 years must have really sucked. Saw one tree the entire trip with a family hiding in the shade. There is nothing but broken rock and dusty sand for hours on end. This is truly a country of desolation and wastelands.

Arrived in Hurghada at 3pm and a rather courteous taxi and hotel tout got my attention. He said 15LE to the Hilton Plaza (arranged by my friend [waleedtravel@hotmail.com](mailto:waleedtravel@hotmail.com)), I countered 10LE and they went with it. These two were unemployed and trying to raise cash. They offered a glass bottom boat ride for \$15 for snorkeling. Perfect. I accepted. They also helped set up the ferry ride to Sharm el-Sheikh for 250LE. Gah, the price has gone way up from the 180LE described in Lonely Planet. The ferry doesn't run on Wednesday, so I go tomorrow or never since I have to be in Sharm el-Sheikh Thursday only to turn around and catch a nine hour bus ride back to Cairo. That would be stupid.

Dropped the things at the Hilton. Noted that my 3 day old pants were looking a bit gray so it's laundry time. Blech. Rode with Ali back to the Cleopatra hotel, had a hibiscus drink and cheese sandwich since I've only had a Luna bar for lunch and I didn't want to ride on a boat with an empty stomach.

The water here is amazing, all shades of blue. The glass bottom boat pilot had been doing this his whole life and tossed in a little bread to attract the fish and gave me some.

The fins fit perfectly, the mask pretty close but the regular snorkel sucked and required regular clearing due to a leak. But, for 20 minutes of use in the Red Sea at Hurghada, I lived. It was supposed to be a one hour glass bottom viewing and a half hour snorkel, but it ended up being just over an hour trip total. That was okay, I had other things I needed to do anyway.

Saw a colorful guitar fish, endless reef fish, trigger fish and the topper were the little jelly fish. The boat guy said the jellies were harmless so of course I couldn't resist poking them gently. They have the surface feeling of a wet gummy bear with the resilience of the egg white of a boiled egg without the yoke inside. They had a subtle iridescent blue-purple color, quite pretty really!

Checked out Ali's hotel, walked 10 minutes back to the Hilton and showered with my level 8 dirty clothes, the worst before getting a disgusting biological substance on them. Changed, downloaded and prepped for dinner.

Walked all the way to the north end of the Cornish, a 15 minute walk from the Hilton plaza, the restaurant at the Aquarium, spending 68LE instead of 100LE for a big seafood platter.

What a bust. It was crappy. There were 4 shrimp, 30 count size, 4 calamari, the size of French fries, a hand sized crab with a tiny bit of meat in the shoulder and a pile of fries. It was so disappointing that I made friends with a cat, handing her a portion of the meal to keep me company and avoid being disparaged at the long walk for this poor meal. I could have just walked across the street from the Hilton and ate, but oh no, I had to try and find a feast in a tourist town.

I consoled myself with an ice cream sandwich on the way back.

## **Tuesday, June 6, 2006**

Woke up at 5:30am, 15 minutes before the alarm but woke up pleasantly, probably from the wind gusting 25mph outside. Got the Hilton breakfast box and the trip from Waleed ([waleedtravel@hotmail.com](mailto:waleedtravel@hotmail.com)) was complete. Waleed even called last night to the hotel to check and see if everything went well. That letter full of 300LE and Arabic writing on it saved me \$110US, working like a charm.

Caught a taxi to the port. The taxi driver kept saying 20 Euro instead of 20LE. I laughed at him, said 40LE and I argued to 20LE while we were driving the whole way there. He was a greedy dog because it wasn't that far.

The ferry station is fun. I got to the gate and the guard showed me back to a ticket booth to "check in". I even asked an American couple and they said you just need a ticket and passport. They walked through the gates without trouble. However, I didn't notice the magical piece of paper stapled to their tickets. Jerks. I had to get back into line and cram my way to the other check in booth where you get this paper. It wasn't a big deal, just have to learn the system and sometimes people don't tell you the real version.

You have to drop any sizeable luggage on a cart, even my backpack. You don't have a choice. I pulled out the cameras and Turtle of Stealth (where I keep my passport, tickets and cash) and boarded the ferry.

It's a very nice craft and it transports cars. It costs 250LE for each person, not a small sum at all. The old Lonely Planet said 180LE. One Indian guy crossing the country drove up the most loaded bike I'd even seen.

I felt a little bad on the way over with an occasional roller wave, high winds and a fairly empty stomach, plus being an idiot and choosing to sit on the sunny side so I roasted – blech. Wish sleep would have grabbed me but not with that heat.

The ride was two hours, not the 90 minutes quoted. Take note. The luggage cart is taken to the taxi area – you have to walk a long ways there. Make sure to watch that your bag doesn't walk away from you.

Ran into a British & Mexican couple again. I caught a mini bus into town for 10LE to Na'ama Bay while they had the misfortune of taking a ride with an unscrupulous taxi

driver for 40LE and not even providing correct change. I guess that's pretty common, even when they do have correct change available but it's a fight every time. Taxi drivers here seem to be an extra scummy lot. The minibus experience was far better.

The couple and I walked together the long ways to the hotel area. The previous taxi drop off area was closed after the bombings happened in 2005. We walked to the Sanafir hotel but they were full but were charging 75 Euros (\$109US), four times what the Lonely Planet quotes. I guess once you get into the Lonely Planet, hotels up their rates because people will book with them. Greedy dogs. The couple struck out for the Sinai Star Peninsula hotel while I tried the internet to check on rates. The Marriot Resort showed available rooms in the \$125US range so I finally broke down and went to them. Walking to the hotel, I was suckered into a perfume shop to check out their wares and wasted 15 minutes in there.

The sun beats you down here and the air is hot to breath. It's fun carrying a 35 pound backpack. Dripping sweat is sexy.

It's a long walk to the Marriot Beach Side Resort. There is a mountain side resort as well. Choose wisely. Got a room for \$140US, then whined and grunted a bit and got the bed and breakfast deal for \$125US per night. Much better. It's expensive as heck but was way less stress before doing the long trek back home.

Thought about resting but with only two days to explore the region, there is no rest for this traveler. The concierge and guest relations didn't set up tours but have binders with different companies to choose from. Called the Explorers headquartered at the Ocean Bay Hotel for a Mt. Sinai/St. Katherine trip for 24GPB (\$42US). (Later I discovered Sun and Fun tours did the same tour, comparable price with fewer people and your guide actually accompanies you up the mountain). They seemed nice enough but I had to get over to the office immediately as they need 24 hours to set up everything. I grabbed cash and passport copies and walked the 0.6 miles over there, passing right through the area of the 2005 bombing at the taxi stand. Was super impressed by Sameh, the tour setup guy. He laughed when I told hem about another quoted trip price, which included seeing the Colored Canyon as well as Mt. Sinai and St. Katherine Monastery. He said you'd be driving all day. My tour leaves Wednesday at 10:45pm (!) and returns Thursday around 1pm. The summit of Mt. Sinai is supposed to be 0-4 degrees C at sunrise this time of year at 2,400m high. (Later discovered it to be about 20 deg C/68 deg F).

While walking back to the hotel along the main road, I was punked by two Egyptian tourist security guards for my water. Was walking fairly far away from them and they started talking to me. Should have ignored them and played Japanese but I was stupid to start saying hello to people. Big mistake. They requested most of my water and I wasn't going to drink out of the bottle after that. If I were with a group, that never would have happened. Egyptians aren't Moroccans and I've not really seen this done here. At first they thought I was Egyptian and they gave me the third degree – where I was from, where I was going and staying and such. They said, “When you go to the main road,

walk through here, okay?" Yea, sure guys. You'll never see me again. I'll use the regular tourist routes from now on.

It was the first time I felt concerned that they were going to squeeze me for money next. At that point it would have been time to call the police chief and watch what happens, especially in a super tourist area like Sharm el-Sheikh. It was easy just to play cool and give a little honey to these two flies.

Bought some more water, two 1.5 liter bottles for 6LE at a place outside the hotel, better than the 8LE for one at the Marriott. Hid out for a while and pondered the Cairo return options. Desperately didn't want to do a nine hour bus ride back, roasting in there with the possibility of breakdown, raising the time stress level to the roof. Lonely Planet says there are flights for 370LE back to Cairo but the concierge said 750LE (\$130US). At 38% inflation (it was 40%) in the country plus oil prices, it's plausible the price has gone up that much.

The hotel ATM, Bank of Egypt, doesn't work with the Washington Mutual ATM card so I started walking. In front of the Rosetta Hotel is a Commercial International Bank (CIB) that has worked 100% of the time with my ATM card while in Egypt. Many ATMs don't seem to work with a Washington Mutual card here. I hated pulling out 1,300LE under a street light right on the main street in plain sight but the choices were limited. I immediately headed back to the hotel in the near 40 degree C (104 deg F) at 9pm. Walked in the roadway island to avoid more police flies, though most have been friendly and helpful. Had the concierge get the plane ticket for me on Friday, 10:30am for Cairo. You have to give them a day or two to set this up.

Felt like a weakling for flying rather than bussing back but it raises the confidence of success and not missing my flight back to Morocco is critical.

Had the buffet dinner here. It was American night. The food was great at moderate prices. Buffet was 124LE, 7-up was 10LE, all with a 10% tax and a 12% service charge for 168LE total, my most expensive meal on the whole trip thus far. Gah. No more of that. It was good but resort and hotel prices are a killer here. Did some writing and hit bed.

### **Wednesday, June 7, 2006**

Slept for as long as tolerable considering tonight's 10:45pm departure. Enjoyed the breakfast and packed down what the stomach would allow – not much.

Wind surf rigs and a laser are available for rent here. Very cool! Want to snorkel, though. The guts seem to be stable now, though things can change quickly here. Since the Imodium supply is at 2 pills left, I'm praying that's get me through. Plus, in the heat, Imodium doesn't work as well. Na'ama, the Brit cruise guide tour goddess, gave me the name of a more effective drug here. (\*\*\*\*\*) The problem with Imodium and other similar drugs is they disrupt your body getting rid of what is bothering it. Also, those

drugs upset the normal operation of things. However, they work in a pinch but not for a long term solution. Hope not to need it.

The spirit is doing well, especially now that the fixed departure clock is ticking. The trip time is running short and there is still much to do, including snorkeling, a trip into the Sinai Peninsula and then flying home. Several times during this month I have felt bad enough to have thoughts of aborting the trip but knowing those feelings will pass is good. Doing this solo is much more difficult when you're feeling bad because there's no one to pick you up when you're down. Been educational thus far.

Went down to the beach (am at the Marriott Beach Resort), rented snorkel gear and headed out into the ocean. The water seems cool for the first few seconds and then is wonderfully warm, like tepid bath water. Swam out a way and found a rock pile allowing me to stare at fish and coral as long as my heart was content to. Looked around every so often in hopes of avoiding any sharks that would make a Red Sea lunch out of me.

With the sun high overhead, the change of getting roasted was high, so I headed back and enjoyed an expensive chicken tawook sandwich, no where near as good as the street vendor in Cairo and five times as expensive but good enough. That's the death of coming to a European vacation destination.

Made sure to lay around for a good hour before catching the 40LE snorkel boat ride from Sun and Fun over to the Near Garden in Na'ama Bay, a very popular destination for good reason. Had pondered renting a kayak and heading over here but there is a decent breeze which would have impeded progress. Also, it was at least half an hour kayak ride just to the near garden and I wasn't motivated for two hours of kayaking when tonight held a crazy schedule.

The ride out to the Near Garden was fine, passing the closed Sofitel Hotel. The guys weren't kidding when they said it was a very long walk over difficult terrain to the Near Garden. All of the sudden the 40LE boat ride with the 30LE snorkel gear didn't seem so bad.

The reef was awesome, had tons of fish, gorgeous coral, everything one would expect. Several of the boat passengers had been here before so this was not a new experience for them. Seeing and knowing that the Far Garden is supposed to be that much better makes me long to go there but that's not possible this trip. One of the girls accidentally bumped her leg against some coral and her skin developed welts like that of poison oak. The guide and boat dude had some salve to help reduce the swelling and itching.

Got an early supper at Parmaganio's. The service was great but the particular dish was bland. Knowing what's to happen tonight, so I rammed the dish down to the dismay of my stomach. From there, brushed the teeth and prepped everything to leave tonight and went to bed at 6pm.

Didn't get much sleep at all but needed the rest. The wake up call came right on time, so I grabbed everything and headed over to the lobby. Don't forget the passport! Grabbed the pre-ordered breakfast box and waited for my man. Apparently Sun and Fun has this tour, too. It would have been convenient to go with that company as the guide says with the small three person group the entire way up the mountain. You must bring your passport because at checkpoint 6, the visa and passport are checked, no exceptions.

Had a pack of 20-something Londoner kids and one Polish girl with the group.

You arrive at 1:30am to St. Katherine's monastery and are passed off to a government required Bedouin guide. A group of four came solo here and had serious trouble because they didn't have an arranged guide. Beware! The kid-Londoners were a smoking, out of shape lot, save one guy and the Polish girl.

About 20 minutes into the walk, one London girl hurled, as she was so worked up about things that the strenuous hike did her in. Poor thing. That must've sucked. She could have taken a camel ride but I don't think she would have made it ultimately anyway. Another girl who blabbed a bunch about the trip was grossly out of shape and smoking since 14, so she was constantly hyperventilating. She never made it to the peak. Another group had a girl sitting by the edge of the trail half an hour into it, blubbering and crying something unintelligible, able to walk but had psyched herself out. The lesson in all of this was to get a good group or forge on your own once you're there. Geeze, what a bunch of sacks my group was, complaining that they felt terrible and out of break, though they were smoking at every chance they got.

### **Thursday, June 8, 2006**

It's a three hour hike to the top of Mt. Sinai (Mt. Moses as it's locally called) and very strenuous. The one Luna bar I brought was a salvation. Laughingly, the Polish girl was swearing most of the way up, not wishing to miss sunrise due to everyone else falling apart. We were there in plenty of time but it was still funny. The last 370 stairs at the top are a killer, heading up a rocky buttress. Don't underestimate this hike.

Sunrise was through a dusty horizon, keeping the sun muted for several minutes. It rises quickly here, nearer the equator. The light playing on the far mountain peaks was more interesting than the actual sunrise. A group of Japanese Christians singing hymns in the distance made the experience that much more memorable on the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest mountain here, the first being restricted due to it being a military installation. It was funny because on the way up, everyone was fascinated by my hiking headlamp. Guess they're not that popular over here yet.

Headed down the 3,750 stairs constructed by a monk in the 6<sup>th</sup> century as a form of penance, strenuous all the way down. Best views going down are via the stairs, though. On the way down, the British and Polish girls related how they felt as though they had "prostitute" branded on their foreheads wandering around Egypt, as Lonely Planet had

warned. Based on their rough experience, they were amazed I was traveling alone. I did point out that being a guy saves me from all those entertaining experiences.

Took a short look around St. Katherine's Monastery. Her thumb bone on display is too large for a large woman of that era but it serves its purpose. The Burning Bush enclosure is interesting but you can't see anything. There are no photographs allowed inside the church, of course. The inside was beautiful if not a bit cluttered from all the hanging lamps.

Caught a taxi back to the bus as it's a long walk in the hot sun and my young Brit crew was wasted. Admittedly, my eyes were burning from lack of sleep and I was starving before the three hour ride back to Na'ama Bay. Had an uncomfortable sleep and leg numbing experience on the ride back. Had a full seat to myself but it was only big enough to sleep a child; it's too small to get any effective sleep.

Dropped the things in the room and headed over to Parmaganio's for lunch for a second try and had a much tastier meal. Said goodbye to the guys there and headed back to the room for a few hours nap.

I was moving so slowly that the bottoms of my boots were wearing off more quickly from my feet dragging. Have a blasted blister on my right heel that's not gone away in two weeks, due to no shoe changes and not perfectly clean socks.

After a few hours of sleep, things were feeling better. Went down to the local shop and bought some snacks for tomorrow. Also was able to get a shot of that Egyptian couple that works at the store. The owner said 20LE, I laughed and he dropped it. They humored me. Terrible shooting conditions but I got the shots I wanted. The couple was bashful being so young but it worked okay, though I couldn't get them to step far enough forward to get the background totally blurred but it worked. This is where the \$1,000 85mm f1.4 lens comes in handy. Oh well.

It was Italian night at the hotel buffet and I sucked up the 165LE cost since my legs weren't interested in walking the mile and a half for food. The resorts on this end are freakin' far from the main bay shopping area. It's a blessing and a curse all in one tidy package.

The meal was very tasty, though I didn't eat a lot because the stomach hasn't allowed or had American portions for the past month. Still getting used to having paltry breakfasts and I think it'll take two or three more weeks to get used to this eating style.

Shot some emails off for 40LE at the hotel, again not interested in walking a mile to save 20LE (\$2.50) just to do that. Being lazy is getting expensive.

Went down to the beach at sunset and enjoyed the views. There were a few people out, providing solitude otherwise difficult to find here. Sharm el-Shiekh is not the real Egypt as you don't see one guy in the traditional Egyptian clothing here. And, everything is

four times more expensive than elsewhere. Glad it's only a few days here, otherwise it's bankruptcy city in Sharm el-Sheikh.

Charged up the batteries, cleared things and hit bed for a 6:30am wake up call. That will give me enough time for breakfast and a leisurely morning before the 9am shuttle to the airport for a 10:30am flight.

### **Friday, June 9, 2006**

Woke up and headed to the breakfast buffet to cram in the food and get things moving since the guts were feeling a bit off. Nothing bad, just not dialed in. Enjoyed an omelet and French toast along with the perfect set of dates.

Dropped off the snorkel gear surreptitiously, avoiding paying for an extra day and allowing the flexibility of an early morning session since Sun and Fun doesn't start up until well past 9am.

Shot video of the fish swimming around, looking like an aquarium but better. Used the powder on the floating deck to trick them into thinking they were being fed. It's not illegal to do that and effective. Using bread is illegal here. Seeing the time was running short, I hit the shower, adjusted the gear and went to check out and wait for the shuttle. 2,700LE for three nights. Owch. Don't regret this one, though.

Shuttle to the airport from Marriott Beach in Sharm is free, about the only free thing in Egypt. No trouble at the airport since it's a domestic flight. Getting into the boarding hall, your bags are x-rayed twice and the metal detector is set to go off with boots. Once inside, a departure screen shows the current flight boarding but that's ignored by everyone.

Everyone pays attention to the guy yelling out the next flight over the intercom. It's funny, here when you're patted down as a man they do it police style and fell your pockets, much more direct than in America.

Only sat a half hour and the flight was called. Everyone crowds up, only the visa stamp is checked, not the picture portion of your passport and you board a bus to the plane, riding over and walking up stairs to get inside. Got an exit row so it was extra spacious, thank goodness. It was an hour flight and I was back in Cairo.

Wasn't regretting skipping the 9 hour bus ride, looking at the wasteland of desert from the plane. Did see the southern Suez Canal at the end of the Gulf of Suez on the Red Sea. It hangs a right out of the gulf and then doglegs left to the north.

No taxi touts at the domestic Cairo terminal. This time walked out of the airport and to the bus terminal, more intelligently asked which but was 356; it's a green CTA (not white like Lonely Planet says), double checked against the Arabic numbers (symbols) and told the driver to stop at the Cairo Museum. 2LE and no hassle. Love it!

Dropped just beside the museum and went under the street to the Nile Cornish. After having spent two weeks in the roasting south and Sinai peninsula, the air in Cairo was completely cool and pleasant. It's still a dingy gray city coated in a thick smog blanket, but at least today you can see a fair distance. Walked the half mile again under shade trees along the Nile and hit the hotel.

Dropped the things and walked over to Baraka, a corner food place on El Brazil Street, around the corner and down the street from the Marriott. Had to have another excellent beef fahita (sic) sandwich. Very tasty, blazing hot and 8LE with drink, the way it should be. Went over to the cheap internet place only to find it closed, to my dismay. Asked around a bit and it must be their off day. Will have to use the one at the hotel for ten times the cost.

Changed and went down to the pool to lounge around for an hour before grabbing a bite to eat, doing some evening shots and hit bed as the wake up call is set for 4:45am.

For those shots, I walked across the river to the east side (side of the living, the west side of the Nile is the side of the dead) and strolled along the Cornish, capturing images of people fishing, hanging out and chatting. This area is also quite popular with young couples all over the place.

Did get a pleasant shot of a couple watching the sunset, overlooking the river. How idyllic. Walked for quite a ways, toward the Nile Hilton and found an empty park bench to sit at.

A few minutes passed and then an older gentleman took the other end of the bench to rest and do the same thing I was – watch the river flow by. He then got my attention and showed me his meat slices and pita bread, broke it in half and directed me to eat. Even though I was quite full, I accepted his hospitality without reservation, thanking him profusely and enjoying half of his evening meal. Even though he spoke no English and I no Arabic, I did learn his name is Goram. That was good enough. It was pleasant to have my last evening meal as a shared one with a stranger on the Nile.

Had wanted to go over to Giza and catch the sound and light show at the pyramids to capture images of the Sphinx and pyramids lit up at night (113LE driver from the hotel to Giza, probably a 40LE taxi ride) but the lateness of the event was a killer. And I would have missed out on the sharing of a meal with Goram. Am infinitely happier that I had a chance to share a meal with a Cairo resident rather than being packed in a group of tourists, jockeying for position at Giza. Would have made the same choice knowing the outcome in a moment. It was good to meet another nice Egyptian.

Interestingly, Egyptian use the same lines all across the country. They say, "Hello." You respond in kind. "Where are you from?" I usually responded "America" as long as it seemed safe enough and I wasn't in a bad looking neighborhood or in an empty place. Then, every response, to the last person, is always "Welcome." In a very sincere tone. It

doesn't matter if the person was a taxi or hotel tout, just a regular street guy or someone I asked directions of. Sure masks you feel right at home if you can get past the absolute din of the city and the gritty look of things. Egyptian people have been the friendliest and welcoming people I've met on the entire planet; that now includes five continents.

Bid Goram farewell and thanked him for the meal and headed back to the hotel. Took some traffic motion shots on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Bridge, headed toward Zamalek where the hotel is located.

Got to bed but had a difficult time getting to sleep as I still had the crazy Mt. Sinai trip schedule still in me.

### **Saturday, June 10, 2006**

The wake up call of 4:45am came a little too early for me. Showered, threw on dirty clothes (not that the ones in my backpack were much cleaner) and headed down for the breakfast buffet.

Wanted to pack a bunch of food away but the stomach protested, declaring the eating style to now be un-American and for me to accept it. It's going to be a long ride to Casablanca. Checked out and got the 110LE limo service (a Dewoo sedan) to the airport so there was no stress about transport there. Everyone keeps asking me where the rest of my luggage is. I feel like I'm carrying too much and my bag is too big. It's funny the difference in perspective. On the ride to the airport, I saw two broken down taxis on a fairly empty roadway and thanked the Lord that I'd chosen this transportation.

The airport wasn't exciting and easily found the Royal Air Maroc counter. Here, all the desks seem to be the same and only a video monitor above the clerks differentiates the company, unlike in the US where each company has a dedicated counter.

The immigration and visa stamp looks like a postage stamp, though it has some ultraviolet inking because the immigration officer checked it several times; a bit disconcerting but it all seemed to work out. Bought US dollars again from my Egyptian Pounds but kept a few small bills. The buy/sell difference here is small, 5.77 to 5.74 or so. Much better in the States where it was 5.8 buy and 5.2 sell. Rip-off.

Here I sit in the airport café, waiting for my flight to Morocco, then only one day there and then the plane ride home. It will be strange going back to Morocco, riding the train into Casablanca and turning around the next morning and heading to the airport again.

Egypt has been quite an experience, especially going at it alone and figuring out things as I went. That technique shocked most I ran into except those doing the same thing. People selling things here are aggressive but good salesmen. Divide their price by five and go up from there. People are friendly and helpful, many times going out of their way, completely foreign to me compared to the big cities in the States and Western

Europe. It's not really that bad at home but the culture is so different that if someone can't help you, they'll usually pull over someone who can.

Off to the airport I go. Bought the 110LE ride rather than battling with taxis and the hotel limo isn't likely to break down as it's a brand new car at the Rawas limo service. Writing this because we passed two broken down taxis on the way to the airport and saw several in the city.

The immigration/customs check-in gauntlet was easy and fast, virtually no slow down at all so I had about an hour to kill and write. After sitting around and writing, it passed quickly.

Had a spacious aisle exit row, very nice. The pouting, out of control two year old brat in the seat in front of me needed a few layers of duct tape to improve the airplane ride. Nothing a couple foam earplugs wouldn't fix. Didn't sleep as much as I wanted, just couldn't find a comfortable position, even with the middle seat empty. The food on Royal Air Maroc was excellent again with a tasty omelet and good pastries. Hopefully the flight tomorrow is just as good...

## **Epilogue**

Sitting here editing this journal for most errors, I think back to the time I spent in North Africa, running through Morocco and Egypt. Egypt has more famous sights than Morocco does but I found Morocco to be more fun. The food in Egypt is no where near as good and the food on the train was particularly lethal. The Lonely Planet was indispensable for this trip but it would have been good to have the latest edition released shortly after I left for Africa. The updated prices and notes would have reduced some of the sticker shock, compensating for the 30-40% inflation Egypt is experiencing.

The total trip cost to both countries was just over \$5,000, Egypt costing \$2,000. Egypt was a cheaper because I flew from Casablanca, saving \$700 compared to a San Diego to Cairo flight. There were no real outlandish expenses save the Marriott in Sharm el-Sheikh, though that hotel was \$50US cheaper than the Hyatt in Casablanca so I didn't feel so bad. Also, staying there was the center of action and that's my preferred location in any city. Staying far outside to save a few Egyptian Pounds only to waste my time traveling back and forth every morning isn't worth it. I do that every work day back home.

Egyptian people have been the friendliest and nicest I have met in the entire world, five continents included. Granted, they have their hotel and taxi touts, people look to scam you but the average, every day city resident seems to go out of their way to help you. And if they don't speak English (in my case), the person you ask will find someone who does speak your language (they speak many) to help and direct you. Sometimes you will be lost and people will ask if you need help, not expecting any baksheesh or tips, just being friendly. Coming from a big city, this was surprising in another foreign big city.

Lessons:

Beware of eating meals that aren't served blazing hot and cooked in front of you, especially on the train

Be more aggressive in negotiating prices

Scream fests are effective at getting people to stop trying to scam you but don't become emotional or take it hard

There are one or two things I missed in Egypt but there isn't a compelling need to return there just for those things. If the opportunity arises in the future to go, I will. But, there are so many other places in the world that going back as a basic photo gathering trip would not be worth it.

END OF TRIP REPORT