

**Have you ever yearned to see the timeless wonders of ancient Egypt: the Great Pyramids, the Sphinx, Abu Simbel, King Tut's golden funerary mask?**



On my recent two-week "trip of a lifetime" to Egypt I saw these and many other wonders of civilization's greatest empire. Better still, my tour group was often accompanied by one of the world's most renowned Egyptologists, Dr. Zahi Hawass. Sponsored by the *Archaeological Paths* Tour Company in conjunction with Dr. Hawass, our tour group visited, walked and climbed all of the usual tourist sites and many others they never see.

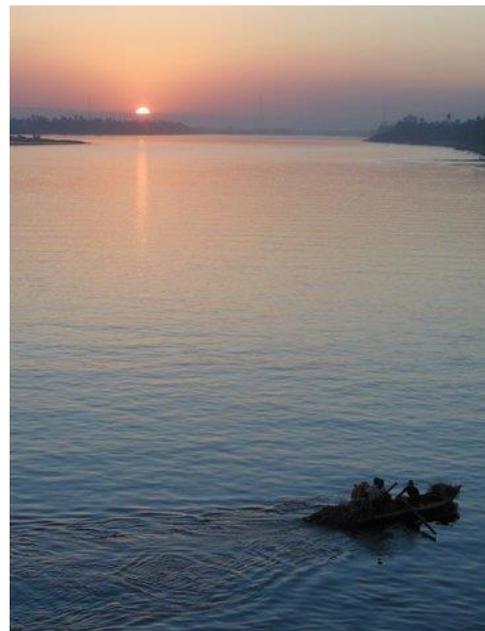
I arrived in Cairo on Nov. 9 and was met by Art, the tour representative who guided several of us easily through customs. We were soon checked into the luxurious Mena House Hotel less than .4 miles from the Giza pyramid. This edifice remains the greatest engineering construction on the planet and has been so for 4,500 years!

At the hotel I met my roommate, Gavin Moore M.D., from South Africa. I soon realized he was a walking Egyptian encyclopedia. How lucky could I get?

On our first full day we visited Saqqara, a short drive from Cairo, where the pyramid evolution unfolded. The Pharaoh Djoser is considered the initiator of monumental stone architecture, a role he shared with his son and chief architect Imhotep, c.2680 BC. His step pyramid constructed for the first time of stone achieved a measure of endurance while lacking the beauty and symmetry of shape that would follow. Later in the tour we would visit Dashur where the Bent and the Red pyramids reside, predecessors to those at Giza.

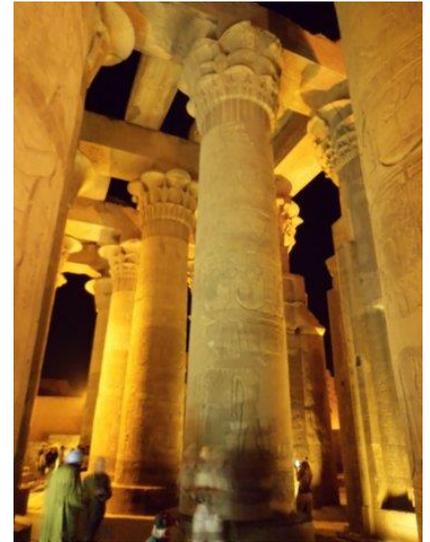
The wonders of ancient Egypt span five millennia and line both the east and west banks of the Nile. Our second day we flew south to Luxor where we would board our Nile cruise ship, our floating hotel for eight days until we returned to Cairo. The Nile provided the perfect people mover and was instrumental in maintaining a cohesive society.

Our first afternoon in Luxor we visited the stupendous Temple of Karnak, the largest religious complex in the world. Detailing the wonders of Karnak requires a book in itself and there are many from which to choose. The place is gargantuan.



For me the next morning was extra special. Up before sunrise, a quick boat across the Nile and my fellows and I climbed aboard a hot air balloon. We floated gently over the gorgeous Temple of Hatshepsut, the Colossi of Memnon, and skirted the royal Valley of the Kings whose cliffside tombs supplanted the pyramid as the Pharaoh's final resting place. We saw the sun burst over the valley in an appropriate morning salute to the gods.

Back on the ground we now set foot in the sacred valley. Hatshepsut's Temple, the illustrious female pharaoh's unique funerary complex, came first before entering the adjacent valley where Tut and company had tried in vain to foil unscrupulous tomb robbers of the past. We visited several elaborately decorated tombs and even descended to view the much publicized but relatively insignificant resting place of Tutankhamun whose mummy remains in situ.



We sailed south to visit Edfu Temple, the Temple of Isis (formerly Philae), Kom Ombo, the massive unfinished obelisk, and ported at the city of Aswan. We strolled over the Aswan Dam, essential to Egypt's energy needs, whose construction created the largest manmade lake in the world, Lake Nasser.

We bussed further south past the Nile cataract to arrive at the incomparable site of Abu Simbel. Cut into sections and moved from below to avoid the rising waters of the lake, the project entailed worldwide support in the late '60's. Ramses the Great outdid himself here and ensured that his megalomaniac image would be seen and revered for all time.

Back in Luxor, with the special permission of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities, we met Dr. Hawass at the Luxor Temple entrance and toured the lighted temple complex after hours. The size of the columns and subsequent shadows provided its own mystic experience.

The next day was devoted to specialized tours we had chosen individually in advance of our arrival. I chose to visit what Dr. Hawass called the most magnificent tomb in the Valley of the Kings ? The tomb of Seti I. This tomb is never open to tourists and I found it literally breathtaking! It is the largest tomb in the entire valley and is decorated from start to finish.



We flew back to Cairo the next morning for another memorable event. As the sun rose behind us our group met Dr. Hawass between the paws of the great Sphinx. A TV crew was filming a documentary and Dr. Hawass, the consummate promoter and showman, was at his finest. We listened with rapt attention as we circled the great man/beast and thought again just how fortunate we were.

We finally arrived at the Egyptian Everest and entered the great pyramid of Khufu. Only three of us opted to descend the steep passage laboriously carved into the bedrock to the original burial room. Next we ascended to the inaccurately labeled Queen's chamber (actually the second potential burial room), before the final climb up the grand gallery to the stone sarcophagus of the great Pharaoh. Though all artifacts had been stolen in antiquity, it did not diminish the experience of standing in the very heart of Egyptian history.

That evening we attended a final lecture and dinner with Dr. Hawass who amiably stood with us for individual photos which I will proudly display in my home.

Our final day we visited the Cairo museum and later I elected to see the Sound and Light show at the pyramid complex. I arrived late to our final group dinner after having shared a life experience never to be forgotten.



**I have run out of superlatives, but I would like to leave you with several thoughts.**

- Egypt is safe to visit.
- This article barely scratches the surface of our tour's activities. Visit ([www.archaeologicalpaths.com](http://www.archaeologicalpaths.com)) for future scheduled trips.
- The pyramids were not built by slaves. They were constructed by an incalculable co-operative effort by an amazing people who were determined to open a pathway to the gods.