

Travel: 4 things to know about Egypt before you go there



The allure of ancient Egypt, home to the earliest civilization we can experience, continues to tug across time.

The King Tut exhibition now at L.A.'s California Science Center — more than 150 artifacts from the world's most celebrated Egyptian tomb — offers a jaw-dropping but minuscule preview of what you'll see along the Nile River.

If Tut's treasures have whetted your appetite, or if you've just dreamed of crawling in pyramids, wandering through massive, ornate temples and exploring colorful, ancient tombs here are 4 pieces of advice, gathered during a recent 11-day excursion to the aptly called "cradle of civilization."



1. Is Egypt safe?

This is likely a first concern. My wife and I felt some pre-trip anxiety even though the last violent incident involving tourists came in the previous century. But once there we felt very safe on the ground.

Our tour had a minimum of one armed, but relatively unobtrusive, guard on the buses and Nile riverboat we took. Additionally, the Egyptian government provides supplemental security at the major tourist sites.

Navigating in and around Cairo, our bus was also accompanied by a two-man police car. Ironically, these guys were most useful when getting out of their car to run impromptu traffic breaks to get our party through the city's formidable traffic jams.



Still uncertain? In January, the U.S. Department of State restructured its travel safety ratings to foreign countries into four categories. Egypt is in the second safest category, advising “increased caution.” That same rating currently applies to France, Italy and the U.K.

2. Go on your own or take a tour?

Our bias is to usually travel on our own, considering tours mostly in third-world environments where language and logistics are a factor. Money, as always, is also part of that equation.

The reason for Egypt on your own is that it was an inexpensive trip on the ground. A dollar is currently worth about 18 Egyptian pounds and the greenback goes a long way for lodgings, food and admission costs.

That said, research into the logistics of language, bureaucracy, transit hassles and other challenges led us to believe Egypt could be a frustrating chore to get the most out of. A comprehensive tour – including Cairo's nearby attractions, overnight river cruise along the Nile for stops at, and between, the archaeological hotbeds of Luxor and Aswan – seemed like less of a luxury and more of a necessity.



There are dozens of carriers at various price ranges offering an overlap of big-name sites and a bewildering second-level range of supplemental things to see and do.

Here's a short cut: after plenty of research and input from veteran globe-trotters who have done Egypt, we focused on a tour provider called ***Archaeological Paths***. This company, specializing in tours for English-speakers and, specifically, Americans, is the only one closely aligned with the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.

That was crucial. Not just for the knowledgeable guide in archeology and history who was culturally accessible, but, more importantly, the entry into, and on-the-ground lectures at, significant ancient sites other tours either aren't allowed into or don't understand the value of visiting. The Egypt we saw wasn't a greatest hits jumble, but a tangible, in-depth understanding of the chronology of ancient Egypt and the parallel accomplishments of its civilization.

If this sounds a bit dry and academic, it wasn't remotely. The visuals in Egypt are uniformly spectacular and the tour included some unexpected add-ons. For instance, a rather surreal bonus one day of having tea and conversation in her refined mansion with Mrs. Anwar Sadat, the widow of the former Egyptian leader who shared a Nobel Peace Prize.



3. The 3,000-year-old sandwich

Yes, there are plenty of mummies (we saw one, jaw frozen open for eternity, quite rightfully nicknamed “the Screaming Mummy”). But it's not just people, ancient Egyptians liked to mummify almost everything. Crocodiles, cats, cookies, you name it ... including, in a random display case inside Cairo's extraordinary Egyptian National Museum of Antiquities, a brown-colored bread sandwich from around 1000 BC.



Jam-packed with artifacts from civilization's distant dawn, this museum is equally a showcase of humanity's earliest achievements and earliest curiosities. The place itself is an ancient artifact, a massive 115-year-old-plus time capsule unlike any other on the planet.

With a collection that includes more than 120,000 pieces, the on-display highlights include several hundreds of the 5,000-plus pieces found in Tutankhamen's intact tomb in 1922. The centerpiece, which hasn't traveled to America since the 1970s, is the fabled funerary blue and gold death mask, which you can just wander over and gawk at for as long as you want, there being no line and few people jockeying for position.

Change, however, is on the horizon. Closer to the Giza plateau, with the famed pyramids a couple miles in the background, construction is well under way on a massive new replacement museum – all shiny steel, glass and stone — with 700,000 square feet of space for a high-tech presentation. It is a logical museum-making step, one that will put more of the vast collection of archeological finds on display, yet it made me a bit sad since this museum, opened in the 1920s, will, itself, be relegated to the past.



Oh, and a last word or two more about that ultimate curiosity, the sandwich. It was folded into a pita shape, wrapped with strips of ancient fabric. Was this the first to-go sandwich in human history? Some mysteries of the past remain insoluble.

4. The most fabulous hidden treasure of all

The unforgettable takeaway for me in this country of stunning sights is one that goes unseen by most who journey along the Nile to the Luxor region: the exquisite wall drawings in the Tomb of Nefertari (not to be confused with another ancient queen, Nefertiti).

Located in the relatively unseen Valley of the Queens – about 4 ½ miles away from the far more visited Valley of the Kings, where the comparatively dull resting spot of King Tut is – the Nefertari tomb is only occasionally open, limited to 10-minute visits by small groups and has a no-photography policy strictly enforced by guards in the chambers.



As a result, the rapturous imagery on walls and pillars that chronicle Nefertari's journey to the afterlife are comparatively unseen. They certainly are worth the short drive from the Nile and easy ¼ mile walk along a compressed dirt path.

Nefertari's tomb profits from a technique rarely tried in ancient Egypt tomb drawings: a priming coat of gypsum wash was first applied to the walls. Then, against this white background, color drawings were applied over 5,500 square feet resulting in startlingly brilliant and resonant murals. As one antiquities-jaded visitor of our tour – a somewhat dazed look on his face as he emerged into bright sunlight from the darkened tomb – pronounced: "I have seen the Mona Lisa of Egypt."