

Foreigners in Egypt, December 09

Ramses II stands astride the motorway from the airport into Cairo, gazing down serenely from his great 11 metre height, one foot ahead of the other, immobile yet ready to run. That's how you cross a Cairo road. The cars move like dodgems, narrowly missing each other, bipping and beeping and tooting, flashing their lights. To cross, stride out into the road decisively, eyeing the oncoming cars with a pharaoh's unwavering gaze. Halt as necessary, one foot forward, at the ready to conquer the next couple of metres. Watch out for men on bicycles weaving through the cars, one hand steadying the hundreds of freshly made pita breads balancing on a wicker platform on their head, the other hand ringing the bell and steering. Proceed across the road one car width at time until the other side is reached. Once there, don't take the footpath, but continue along the road hugging the bumper-to-bumper parked cars. Walk like an Egyptian.

It isn't just crossing the street that's challenging, it's what happens when you get to the other side. For example, after a week in Egypt, when we think we know the ropes, this happens: outside the Egyptian Museum in central Cairo we're about to spring into the six or eight lanes of traffic streaming up and down the road, when a tourist cop stops us and calls over a friendly man to help us cross. 'No, no, we're fine,' we say, wary of the cost of unwanted help. The man helps us anyway. On the other side he grins, shakes hands and says 'No money, no money, I'm a teacher.' We relax and begin to chat. He *is* just being friendly. And then he says 'The restaurant you want isn't open yet'. We hadn't even mentioned a restaurant. It *is* a scam; he's trying to sell us something we don't want. We walk away, unsettled. Long after we've become confident that

we've learned how to walk the streets, we've fallen into this trap. Ten minutes later, while we consult a map, another friendly man comes to our aid: 'Hello! Can I help? ...Your hotel is not that way', he smiles, 'come this way'. Too late, lost up a dark alley, we realise we've fallen for it again. Benny mutters 'twice is farce!'

It took a few days in Egypt before we felt as though we'd learnt how to walk, how to talk.

The first challenge is at Cairo airport. We know we had to pay for an Egyptian visa, but we didn't know how or where. After queuing for the border police to inspect our passports we are sent back to buy visas at the Thomas Cook stand, then we queue all over again. We expect to have to bargain for a taxi, but a friendly young man in the terminal, who introduces himself as Mohammed, indicates the cost to our hotel from a printed list. Then while we wait for the car outside, far from the taxi rank, Mohammed bargains relentlessly for his tip. In the end we agree to give him E£10 – our only small change – which means no tip for the driver. The total cost is twice what the guide book suggests. The taxi driver is friendly and helpful, pointing out Ramses and other sites, praising the green beauty of Australia which he'd seen on tv, apologising for his poor English, all the while manoeuvring his car through the crazy beeping tooting traffic. The cars don't travel in orderly lanes and despite the darkness few have their lights on, using lights only as a signal to augment horns. Our taxi has neither seatbelts nor inside door handles. I sit on the edge of my seat, nails dug into the back of the driver's seat. We dig out one of the US\$5 notes we have for emergencies and tip the driver, grateful to have arrived alive.

We had decided to start easy with a day at the Cairo Marriott, our soft landing. The Marriott subjects us to police and dogs at the gate, sniffing around the taxi and inside the boot, and metal detectors at the door before we are admitted to five-star-hotel-land. We'd booked cheap-ish on the internet, but we quickly agree to pay a higher rate when the young man at check-in offers us meals and non-alcoholic drinks in the hotel for a little extra. 'The hotel is smart' he smiles. It's an easy place to hang around, on an island in the Nile, overlooking green sportsgrounds, red tennis courts and running tracks. We swim in the long hotel pool and have a beer in the vast garden filled with palms, bougainvillea and lilies, pizza and donor kebab bars, a secluded area for women to smoke sheesha – scented tobacco in waterpipes. We watch people come and go: Egyptian men drinking tea, foreigners drinking beer, expats in DJs and ballgowns gliding up the grand stairways to high-ceilinged ballrooms with garishly painted walls and floor-length windows.

As we leave the hotel to get the overnight train at Giza station the man on the desk advises us that a taxi will cost £10. The doorman out the front whistles up a taxi, and performs a middleman role, negotiating for us the fabulous fare of £50. We don't understand how the price leapt so magnificently between the desk and the door, but we all smile and shake hands. The taxi trip is a roller-coaster ride, our car surging then crawling, near misses, horns beeping, lights flashing. Benny tells me to shoosh every time I gasp or squeal. When we're at a standstill in a busy narrow shopping strip – sides of meat hanging outside butcher shops, mobile phone shops, dry goods stores, bakers, internet cafes, people crossing as if the cars weren't there – suddenly it's a one-way street. The driver of the car behind us escapes the traffic jam by pulling out into the oncoming lane. A big Mercedes comes down the road

towards him, and the two cars are nose to nose, horns blaring, fists shaking, bumper bars bumping. Neither car can reverse, both have cars following them. Our lane starts to move and we miss the finale. We tip the driver for his bravery.

At Giza station soldiers check our tickets as we get near the entrance. Before we can go onto the crowded platform we have to pass, bags and all, through a wooden arch posing as a metal detector. Everyone beeps as they go through and the soldiers beam and wave us on. A large group of Chinese tourists have taken over the waiting room where they noisily play cards. A dark, dingy, packed train pulls in. There's a ruckus as Egyptians carrying boxes tied with green plastic rope squeeze themselves into it. When the sleeper comes us foreigners gather up our wheeled cases and backpacks and form orderly queues at our prebooked cars. Each car has its own bow-tied attendant, who welcomes us and checks us off on his list. He's plump and cheery, addressing Benny as 'my husband' and me as 'my wife' when he brings us dinner of fried fish, chewy steak, chick peas, rice, cake and an orange. He sells us a bottle of Egyptian wine, which is not enough to make us sleep as the train cracks and croaks down the tracks beside the Nile.

Aswan

In the morning sunshine the train passes through dusty villages hunkered into the barren stony hills at the edge of the fertile Nile strip. We see boys and girls in fresh white clothes walking to school, small trucks zipping by with people in the open back, a girl carrying a tray of pillowy pita bread on her head, a boy chasing a Holstein cow, a man sweeping the dirt road in front of his shop. Narrow irrigation channels divide the green fields. Turbaned farmers in long gowns walk with their donkeys or hand-weed the furrows or loiter under palms. Hay dries in stooks and ibis pick at the ground. When we finally get

off the train at Aswan we negotiate with the taxi drivers who surround us, then drive down the long Corniche (which seems to be the name for every road beside the river) to the Sara Hotel up on the hill. The driver gives his ID to the waiting guard at the gate. We pass through another beeping metal detector, handing our bags to the doorman for checking. 'No bombs?' he grins. He pokes through Benny's bag with interest, and pulls out a packet of biscuits: 'Is this a bomb?' he laughs heartily. While we wait for our room in the cool hotel lobby a single file of exhausted-looking Chinese tourists trudge past us to the lift. They must have been on the six-hour trip through the desert to Abu Simbel, site of one of Ramses' huge monuments, for which convoys of buses depart at 3am. We'd been uncertain about making that voyage until we saw those worn-out people. No Abu Simbel for us.

The hotel is high on the east bank at the south end of Aswan. Our balcony overlooks the river as it curls and swirls through black rocks and green islands, the first cataract that makes navigation up the Nile difficult. Feluccas with their big white sails try to go upriver and motorboats pass them. On the dune in the distant west we can see camels and fishermen and the Aga Khan's mausoleum. To the south the wall of the dam is as high as the surrounding mountains. In the afternoon busloads of tourists are delivered to the hotel to sit in long orderly lines drinking coffee and enjoying the sun go down over the Nile, or so Benny tells me as I curl up in the bed. I'd been sick, throwing up in a restaurant toilet while Benny ate his fried fish dinner and some of mine. We found the restaurant next to McDonalds down on the Corniche, tempted by the wafting barbecue smell. The other customers were businessmen and soldiers. An Egyptian from one of the cruise boats moored outside was brought in to take our order – no one else who worked there spoke English. Benny told me that not only was the fish good, but the tomatoes were the best he'd ever had. I

couldn't eat any of it. I'm sick and I'm sorry: I love sunsets, fried fish *and* tomatoes. I sleep until breakfast, woken on and off during the night by exotic Egyptian music playing at a party somewhere down the hill.

On the Corniche, boat captains encourage us to take their boat upriver, downriver, around the islands, anywhere. 'I am Nubian!' some say, as if to explain that we have an obligation to take their boat. We have no idea how much we should pay, and little change below £E200 notes, which reduces our bargaining power. So we book a trip around Elephantine Island with the hotel, thinking it will be a straightforward all-inclusive price that will save us from haggling. The manager kindly drives us down to the river, telling us that he used to be a teacher, that the train never comes on time, and that we should tip the boatman if we are happy. 'That's how it is here', he explains, 'these people in Egypt expect a tip if their service is good.' He helpfully leaves our bags at a hotel near the station and asks us to put in a good word for the hotel on Trip Advisor, before taking us to meet the boat captain to whom he hands over our fee. We wave goodbye. After admission charges and tips, that little boat trip costs us a lot more than we'd bargained for. At the beautiful, leafy botanic garden called Kitchener Island we pay entrance fee and then we're captured by a gardener who shows us coffee, lemons, almonds, oranges, basil and many other plants, and who picks a piece of palm tree as a gift I can plant at home. Tip: E£20. At the empty museums on Elephantine Island we pay entrance fee then we're passed from one unwanted guide to another, three in all, who rush us through, pointing out marriage contracts and fertility symbols and ancient toiletry items. Tip: E£20 each. By the time we get to the archaeological site on the southern tip of the island we feel fleeced, but at the gate we have no choice but to accept another guide.

The huge site has evidence of civilisations going back more than 4000 years. The ground is littered with shards of pottery. Egyptians in turbans and long gowns cart barrows of dirt and the guide waves to the German archeologist several hundred centuries lower down in the ruins, but there is no one else around. The site is overlooked by a Nubian village – for millennia, while the rulers came and went, Nubians have lived here and on nearby islands, some of which were drowned by the Aswan Dam. The guide takes us down a steep stairway to the river. It's marked with hieroglyphic, Roman, Greek, Turkish and Arabic measuring marks, up to a height of 18 metres. The rulers used these marks as tax ready reckoners: the higher the flood, the higher the taxes. The guide shows us Nubian temples, Pharonic baths and birthing rooms and other features from the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, Greek and Ptolemaic stelae, Coptic churches and Roman kitchens. He demonstrates the complex draining systems, for catching blood, around the sacrificial altars, and proudly proclaims that the sacrifices were never human. The sun is high and the site is hot and shadeless, and the guide is limping. Our £E20 tip seems small compensation for showing us so much, but our only alternative is E£200, which is just too much. Afterwards we acquire some more small change by having mint tea at a garden cafe on the Corniche, where a family picnics – a man with two wives, the younger fully veiled, and three little girls.

At the station where we catch the Luxor train we pass through the obligatory metal detector. 'No bombs?' the tourist police joke. A man grabs our bags before we even know he's there and carries them onto the train. We're armed for the small tip. On the train a young couple from the US or Hong Kong, or perhaps both, ask if we know the real price of the train tickets. Henry and Angela complain that they are exhausted by being asked to buy something, to take a taxi or carriage ride or boat trip, to tip, to give a little baksheesh. 'We've been travelling

independently for four months, through Vietnam, China, Turkey, and nowhere prepared us for Egypt! We hate it here!' they explode. 'We got lost in Islamic Cairo and every direction we turned someone was trying to sell us something. In the end we got a guide. Our first guide, after four months! Egypt is too hard,' they shake their heads. We share our story of feeling fleeced on Elephantine Island. Angela exclaims: 'We didn't even get to Elephantine Island! There was not enough wind. We had to row the felucca ourselves! And still we had to pay! And then we had to tip!' Benny and Henry laugh at the idea of going from Aswan to Luxor by felucca. 'Just too slow,' Benny says. 'It'd be rowing all the way!' Henry giggles. The main difficulty with being a foreigner in Egypt, we agree, is not knowing when or how much to pay, not having small denomination notes, always having to fend off someone selling something. 'We're giving up, we're going to Damascus,' Henry says. 'We hear that it's possible to drive in Syria. We'll hire a car. We'll be independent.'

Luxor

In Luxor, once the great city of Thebes, we stay in a village on the west bank, a short ferry trip across the river from the main city. At the station taxi drivers offer to take us to the hotel for tremendous sums, a half-hour long-way round drive by road. We know better than to say yes; we know the hotel is a short ferry trip across the Nile, but we don't know how far it is to the ferry. We agree to take a taxi to the ferry stop, Benny too often having walked miles with me while I assure him the place we are looking for is just around the next corner. We get prices from two taxi drivers and take the lower. After the strained business of agreeing on a price, the taxi drivers are invariably friendly and helpful. This driver explains that the crowds of soldiers and police waiting to catch the Cairo train had accompanied President Mubarek on a visit to Luxor, where he

presided over official openings. As we drive around a pile of rubble several blocks long the driver describes how streets and houses and shops had been knocked down as part of the mayor's attempt to recreate the 3km long phalanx of sphinxes that once joined Luxor and Karnak temples. 'They care only for the tourists', he says, a lament we hear again and again in Luxor. At the riverbank we say *lah, shukran* (no, thankyou) to one boat captain after another as they try to entice us onto their boats: 'Where are you from? Boat to the other side only £5! The ferry won't go for 35 minutes!' We joke with them, pointing out that the ferries are shuttling back and forth frequently. On the other side it's a short walk to the lovely little Gezira hotel. (Gezira means island – on the Nile the word is as common as Corniche.) Dinner in its rooftop restaurant – beer, soup, fish or chicken or kebabs with dips and bread and salad and vegetables and a delicious cake and coffee – costs little more than a couple of beers at the Marriott.

In the evening we go out to buy water and stroll through the village. A man with a big shotgun loiters outside the small shop that sells bottled water. At the coffee shop, young men and old smoke water pipes, play board games, watch the football on tv, look at or talk on their mobile phones. A handsome young man in a long gown with a scarf around his neck asks if he could practise English with us. Abdul tells us he's a college student, studying English and 'our wonderful history'. The college also teaches German, French, Chinese and several other languages. Abdul had intended to follow in his father's footsteps and become a taxi driver, he says, until the car skidded out of control and the big balloon came out – Benny says 'airbag?' – and his leg was badly injured. The college qualification will enable him to become an official guide. He animatedly practices telling the story of the newly discovered ancient sex god. We compliment him on his lovely English, which is colloquial and beautifully accented, and he

invites us to his village to drink tea. We're too tired and want to sleep, so we shake hands and wish him well. No money is exchanged. We feel good. We're getting the hang of being foreigners in Egypt! We're doing ok! We sleep well.

The next morning while we eat breakfast on the sunny rooftop overlooking the Nile and Luxor temple a regular visitor from Wales tells us how much we should pay for taxis. Out on the street, near the man with the shotgun, we confidently negotiate a taxi fare to the site of pharaohs' tombs. We get the go-between's opening bid down from E£100 to our opener of E£50 (£10 more than the going rate), for which our driver, Tayeb, will take us to the Valley of Kings, wait while we look, and bring us home. Along the way Tayeb points out the new police station and the ridiculous requirement to put on seatbelts when passing by, despite it being well known that Egypt is too hot for seatbelts. He explains that until recently there were brightly painted houses built onto the front of the ancient nobles' tombs on the hillside. The government knocked down the houses and removed their inhabitants to a distant village. 'They only care about the tourists', he complains. We stop to take a photo in front of the Colossi of Memnon, two 1000-ton stone statues that had been the gateposts of a vast temple, and a favorite spot for visitors during Ptolemaic times. There were already many coaches in the car park when we get to the huge tourist complex of the Valley of Kings. Tayeb explains that we aren't allowed to take cameras inside, and that we should leave ours with him, which we do.

Inside the complex young boys and men try to sell us booklets and trinkets and scarab beetles and sphinxes and paintings on papyrus and we say *lah, shukran* a thousand times. The boys run away up the hillsides when the antiquities police pass by, and then slide back down and continue selling. Prices for their 'Valley of Kings' booklets range from E£80 to E£1, although £1

is really only a tease to open a discussion in the hope of a sale at a much higher price. We venture up a side path away from the crush of tourists to see the tomb of Thutmosis IV, and are quickly picked up by a friendly man: 'Where from? Australians very good. No money, no money!' He waves us into the tomb, which we see alone with the guardian who shows us highlights: painted silver stars on the blue roof and brightly patterned dresses on the goddess Hathor on the walls, a breast poking out of one dress, and deep down inside the tomb, far inside the mountain, the solid stone sarcophagus as big as a car. When we climb back into the bright sunshine the man who likes Australians is waiting for us. 'I'll show you a secret path. Come this way.' We refuse. He argues. Eventually we give him money to leave us alone. He yells angrily: 'you are not real Australians!' Shaken, we latch onto a tour group to see another tomb, safe in security of the crowd, but it lacks atmosphere with such a crush of people. We decide to go to the empty-looking tomb of Ramses IV, which is supposed to be sensational, and which requires an extra fee. Inside the entrance a man wearing a dark turban and a two-day growth hisses 'no fee, no official ticket', and requires £50 from us, miming a zip across his mouth to emphasise that we should tell no one as he slides the money into his pocket. Further down the gloomy entrance another turbaned man waits. We imagine a never-ending row of these men, each one extracting our money and demanding our silence. When we back out the first man scowls at us as if we've robbed him of his livelihood as he hands our money back. We're scam weary. We want to go home.

Back at the carpark Tayeb is nowhere to be seen. It's midday and hot, and everywhere we turn someone's trying to sell us something. I imagine the authorities sniggering as I complain that the taxi driver went off with our camera: 'Really? You gave your camera to a stranger?' I wonder if we can hitch a

ride back to town with a tour bus. And then Tayeb drives up the road, smiling and waving, gives us back our camera and takes us home. In our little street we exchange smiles with the women who sit on the doorsteps while we wait for a young boy with a donkey and a cart loaded with maize to pass by. He's delivering feed for backyard donkeys and cows to our neighbours. After lunch we lay on the bed in our cool room, listening to the screech of the donkey next door and the clink of balls on the pool table in the garden below, resting up in preparation for our next excursion. We are *sort of* getting the hang of being foreigners in Egypt.

Luxor Temple opens with giant pylons engraved with the exploits of Ramses. Huge golden columns that glow in the evening light. A rose pink obelisk. Images I've seen a hundred times in books and on tv. Luxor is alive with history, layers and layers of it. A 14th century mosque towers over the Great Court of Ramses II. In an inner temple, we can see the smiling faces of 3rd century Roman functionaries who recorded their presence by frescoing over the ancient stone engravings. In the next, more sacrosanct, temple Alexander the Great had proclaimed his presence by striding across the walls in pharaoh costume: 'Look how the true Egyptian pharaohs always bend to the gods. Look how Alexander never bends!' the guides tut-tutted to their charges in English and French and Chinese, pointing out the difference between the Egyptians and the foreigner.

Karnak Temple is even more immense and impressive. Komi, a charming boat captain we'd befriended, is going to take us down the river to Karnak Temple and to bring us back. In the morning when we come out of the Gezira, his brother waits for us instead; Komi has toothache. His equally charming brother lets Benny drive the boat. We alight at the same ghat from which the gods departed in processions to Luxor Temple in

ancient times, but us modern mortals have to go round the back to the bus park entrance.

At the ticket office we decide to pay extra for an official guide, a small ancient Egyptian man by the name of Michael who tells us that his granddaughters are the light of his life. The three of us set off for the temple in tiny slow steps. People stream around us and into the temple while we totter along with Micheal. Benny and I are full of misgivings. Our first paid guide, and we probably won't even get inside the 2 sq km temple complex before our time is up. But Micheal was just being efficient, never wasting a step or a word that wasn't necessary to our understanding of the temple and its builders. He explains how north-south axis of the temple represented the Nile and the east-west axis the passage of the sun, the two forces of life in ancient Egypt. He stops at the best positions for taking photographs. He delights in the spicy tidbits. Thutmose III built a wall around the magnificent obelisk built by his stepmother/half sister Hatshepsut so as to erase her from history; he had not been game to destroy it in case he offended the sun-god Ra. Ramses II ordered his stone engravers to cut deep into the columns and walls, so that his name might never be erased. Michael shows us where the early Christians hacked out the faces of false gods and cut the bodies away from a three-god sculpture to create the shape of a cross. He describes how the hypostyle hall of 134 closely packed columns had once been brightly painted and roofed with cedar from Lebanon. He knew where the brightest paint remained and which stone came from Aswan and which from even further south, transported up the Nile over the rocky cataracts, and which obelisks and mighty sculptures had been stolen and now lived in London, Berlin, Paris, New York. And finally, bringing us back to the present, he explains that while the Nile's flow is now controlled by the mighty Aswan Dam, without the silt that came with the floods the soil is less fertile and salt is

rising, spoiling land and the ancient stone monuments that the tourists come to see. We finish up at the sacred pool where the priests bathed several times daily (and which made the Marriott pool look like a sorry backyard job). We tip Michael and say goodbye at the giant scarab statue from which good luck might be gained if you walk around it seven times then make a wish. Long lines of Chinese tourists spiral round and round. By the time we leave Karnak it's busy with coachloads of tourists up from the Red Sea beaches, some of the young women shocking in singlets and short shorts and strappy sandals. Down at the ghat Komi's brother is waiting to take us home down the Nile.

In the afternoon Benny takes to bed with a fever. I go out alone to watch the sunset and buy sweet flaky bread and pastries from the bakery, and bananas, oranges and plump fresh dates from the greengrocer. Young and middle-aged men approach me one after the other, cheerfully, charmingly, trying to encourage me to take a trip on their boat. They're fun to talk with, mostly persistent but not pushy about getting my business, always happy to chat about anything. With one man or another I watch coachloads of tourists being brought to boats to see the sunset over the Nile. The river police (money police, the boat captains call them) chase after the boats in a rubber ducky, getting head counts so they can extract tax from the boatmen. So many people harvesting tourist money for a living. It seems the way of the Nile, of Luxor. It's been an open-air museum for millennia. The boatmen's fathers' fathers' fathers must have propositioned camp followers of Alexander's army with just the same charm, the same smiles, in the same spots, overlooking the temples and the tombs. As far as they are concerned, their job is to offer the boat ride or the taxi or the horse carriage or the scarab beetle or the 'arafat' scarf, and ours is to pay for it. And most also like to share stories and get answers to questions. Like the young man who asked us to

explain a text message that concluded 'Me neither'. Despite his good English, he had not encountered this term before and was baffled by it. We had a lot of fun discussing ways in which it could be used. He happily decided the reply was positive, then rushed off to try to charm a single young woman who refused to speak to or even look at him. She walked hunched in, as if muttering 'I hate this place'. You might as well chat, I thought, you'll have more fun.

Early on our last morning in Luxor we visit Hatshepsut's exquisite red sandstone temple, a streamlined contrast to all the hulking Great columns and pylons built by Ramses II. It blends into the sharply rising mountain at the west extreme of the east-west axis that runs through Karnak temple. Touché, Hatshepsut; she's one of my favorite pharaohs. Hundreds of schoolchildren arrive on buses in the mid-morning, the girls heralding their presence with squeals and peals of laughter. They encircle Benny, wearing bright headscarves, big sunglasses and tight jeans, asking him questions in English, sharing their answers, giggling with one another. A man without a uniform saunters among us with a sub-machine gun. The wall paintings – giraffes, elephants, apes, baboons and birds brought back from the expedition to Punt, tables laden high with food, Hatshepsut pregnant – are still vibrant reds, yellows and blues after 3500 years.

The colours are even richer in wall paintings in the empty tombs of the nobles. Bunches of purple grapes adorn the ceiling of one, another tells stories of farming, quarrying, tax collecting, banquets, musicians and dancers. The guardian shows us the long narrow tomb by positioning a mirror against a rock outside the doorway, then capturing the reflected sun on a foil-covered piece of cardboard. He speaks to us mostly in French nouns. He points to a woman in sheer tight clothing with a group of musicians, gleefully calling her the disco

dancer. The tall-masted boats on the walls look the same as the feluccas on the river, although in the paintings the boats had many rowers, bringing to mind the plight of the young Americans in Aswan. There is only us and the guardian in this tomb that was dreamed up and planned and built by a rich man thousands of years ago. Egypt is amazing. It's fabulous to be in this place that I've known about since primary school, and to see how very narrow is the fertile strip of the Nile and how vast the sandy deserts that flank it. It's not just the ancientness of the temples and tombs that lets you feel history, it's treading in the footsteps of millions.

Cairo

When we get back to Cairo we easily negotiate with a taxi driver to take us out to the pyramids and then to our hotel in Downtown. It's Friday, a holiday, and our taxi driver Mahmoud speeds down the near-empty road. The pyramids look like they do in the zillions of pictures I've seen, but bigger. Lots of Egyptians are having a day out at the pyramids, which provide a rare open area in the southern suburbs of Cairo. Mothers carry picnic baskets. Young couples flirt. Kids climb the lesser pyramids and are chased off by the tourist police. We say *lah, shukran* to the camel drivers and horsemen and souvenir sellers. Tour buses drive right up to the base of the pyramids, in an attempt to shield their passengers from the attentions of salesmen. Our taxi driver drinks tea down in the stables while he waits. We find him there easily.

The next morning we walk to Islamic Cairo, crossing the streets with panache, bargaining for perfume and mother-of-pearl inlaid boxes and camel-leather pouffes in the souk, meeting a stall holder who greets us with 'G'day mate, I'm-flat-out-like-a-lizard-drinking' in a perfect Aussie accent. We learn that there are toilets everywhere, if you ask, once going

two stories up a tiny circular staircase to someone's home, and tipping, of course, for the service. On the way back we buy fresh tomatoes from a corner shop and barbecued sweet potato from a cart and fried fish from a fish bar for our lunch, and eat it in the rooftop garden of the French-speaking Hotel Osiris, which occupies the top floor of a 12-storey mall in Downtown. That garden, with its big mud-brick bbq/oven, is an oasis amongst the rubbish-heaped rooftops surrounding it. Prayercalls from a hundred mosques float across the rooftop garden, and even though I enjoy the exotic, evocative sound I wonder why secular states let the mullahs have loudspeakers. In the afternoon in the Egyptian Museum we wander among treasures and gold and jewels until I feel like my new little inlaid box is not special at all. We see thousand-year-old ropes that could have been made yesterday and tools that we'd seen farmers use on the plots by the Nile. At night we lie in bed and listen to the rumble of cars and the tooting of horns – cars talking to each other, as Benny calls it.

On our last day we take the underground train down to old Cairo, a pretty walled area of Coptic churches and Roman ruins exposed by deep excavations. In the shady gardens groups of teenagers tease each other and young couples held hands. We drink our last couple of cardamom-flavoured Turkish coffee in the dappled shade. After a week in Egypt Cairo seems easy enough.

When Mahmoud dropped us off after the trip to the pyramids we'd offered him a good price to pick us up and take us to the airport. At the appointed time we wait on the streets with our bags. Mahmoud doesn't show. Cairo is a big city after all. He's probably sitting among the horses in Giza, waiting for tourists. We get anxious. Benny hails one cab after another on the street and each refuses to go to the airport. I try to get the little lift to take me back up to the hotel to phone for a cab, but the lift

won't come. Eventually Benny convinces a taxi driver to take us to the airport, negotiating the price with the help of an English-speaking passerby. Near the airport the driver drives past all the 'exit to Terminal 3' signs even though we keep saying 'Terminal 3, we want terminal 3'. We panic a little, but he is local, he must know his way around. At Terminal 1, the driver follows signs to find *Hall 3*, which only takes Arrivals. We're driving in circles. There's clearly been building work since our driver was here last. He's lost. He starts to panic a little. No one will help him when he stops to ask directions; everyone is rude to him. He begins to get angry. So do we. We're offended on his behalf. We speak softly, encouragingly. We have to go back and start over. We're leaning on the back of his seat, reading the signs, pointing out directions. We're getting close when he sees another sign to Hall 3 and turns around and goes the wrong way. We're patient in a panicky way, we explain again, we're giving directions, we're getting late. The driver grows more miserable by the minute. When we finally arrive at Terminal 3 we're all very relieved. We smile and shake hands. We give the driver a big tip. We've managed to pay more for a taxi back to the airport than the one we took in from the airport on our first day. We don't care. We wouldn't have seen anything of Egypt without the taxi drivers and boatmen, the official and unofficial guides, the guardians and the stallholders in the souks and even the touts. They were our hosts. They made Egypt fun.

sandra meredith
10 jan 10