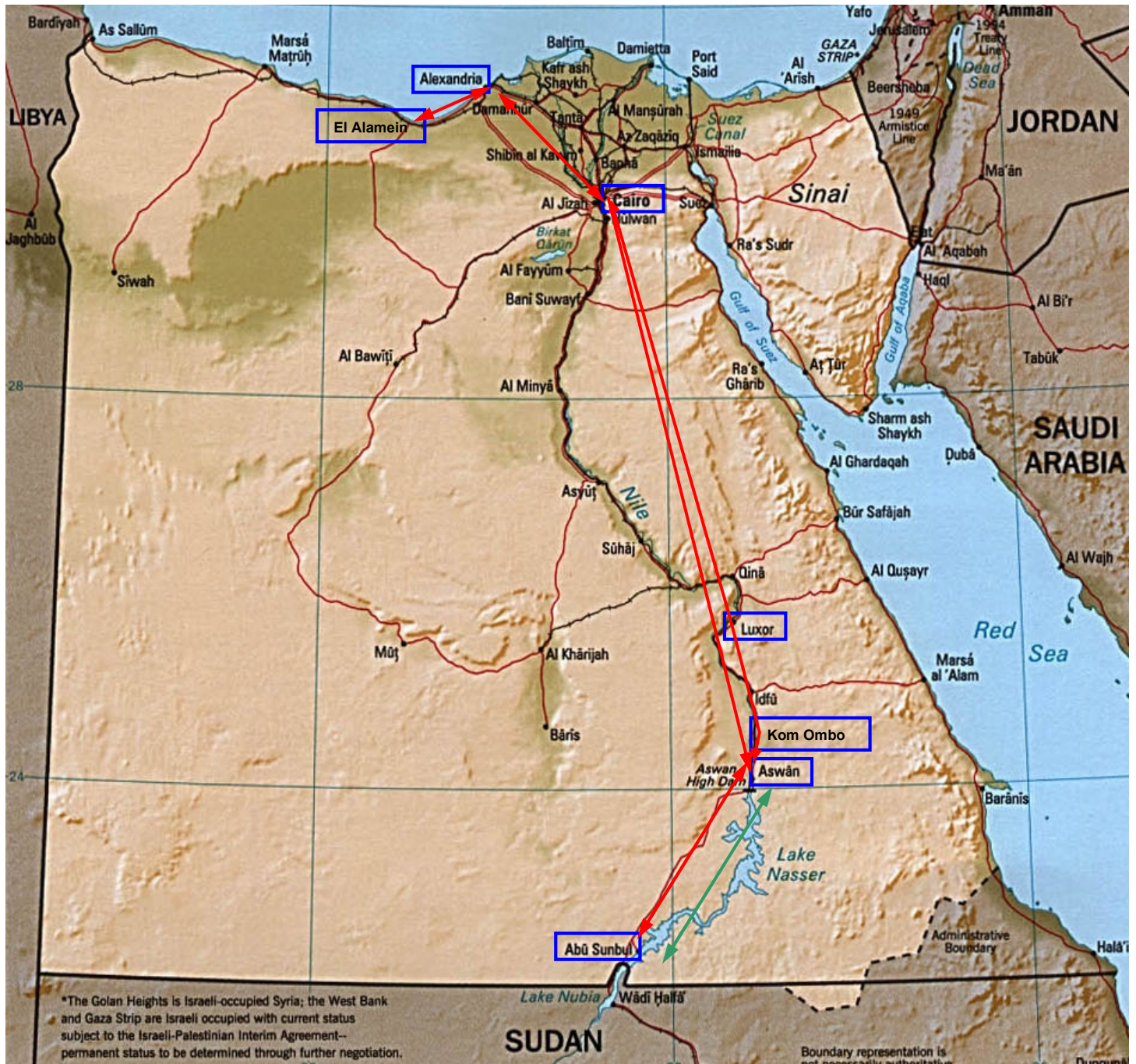


# TRIP TO EGYPT 2005

## ROUTE TAKEN



### Route:

Cairo ---> Aswan (train) ---> Kom Ombo (felucca) ---> Luxor (bus) ---> Cairo (train) ↔ Alexandria (bus)  
 ↓↑  
 Abu Simbel (bus) ↓↑ El Alamein (bus)

## National Flag of Egypt



With the unification of northern and southern Egypt in 3100 BC, Egypt became the first nation-state as we know them today. The flag above is their present flag.

## My name in hieroglyphics

**Malcolm:**



M

A

L

C

O

L

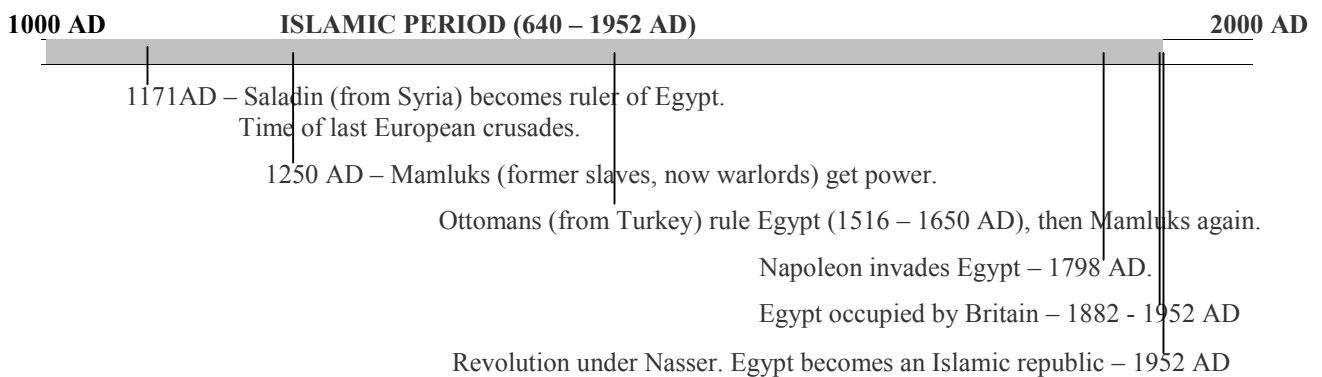
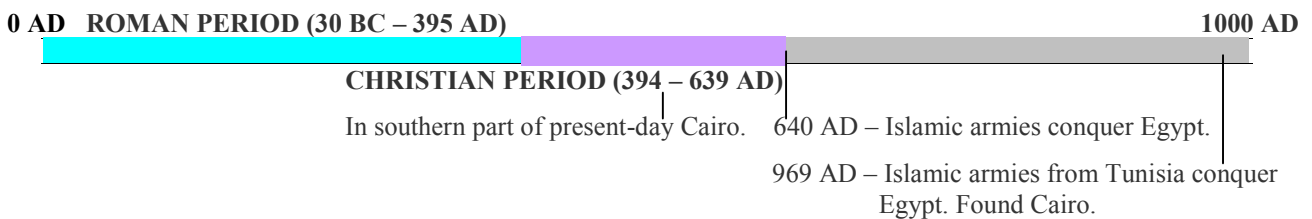
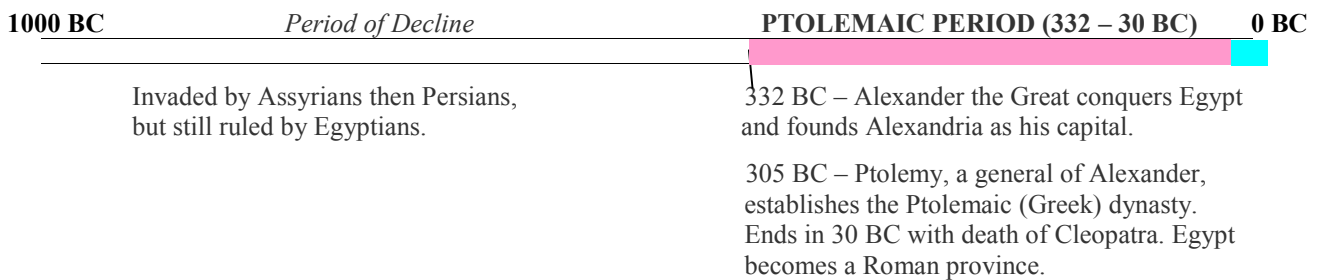
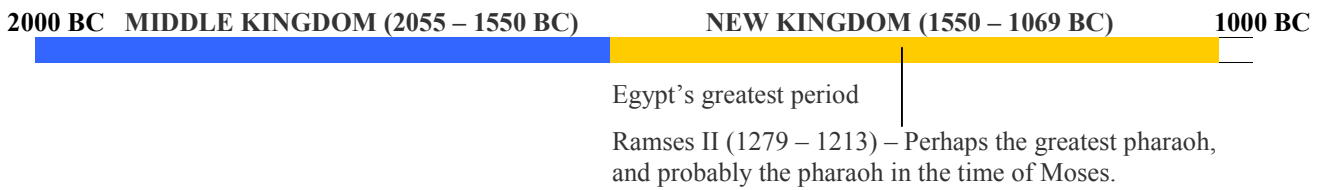
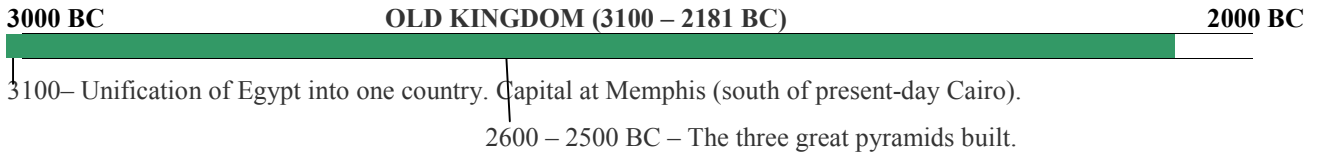
M

Egyptian hieroglyphics was invented in about 3200 BC, just before the establishment of Egypt as a nation-state and disappeared in about 394 AD. Originally they were *pictograms*, where a picture resembling an object or a closely connected idea, e.g. a picture of a man meant ‘man’ (thus a man carrying something meant ‘carrying’). Later, *phonograms* developed in which pictures represented sounds, e.g., an owl represented the sound *m*, because the word for owl had *m* for its principal consonant. This, I think, is where the alphabet came from using hieroglyphs for letters. The hieroglyphs above correspond to the sounds for the letters in my name. Rex cannot be written in hieroglyphics as there is no equivalent letter for ‘x’ (though there are other forms of the alphabet which do include an ‘x’).

# Brief timeline showing major periods in Egyptian history

[Each horizontal line represents 1000 years]

**8000 – 5000 BC.** As the Sahara changes from fertile grassland (savannah) into a desert, people migrate to the Nile Valley, i.e. the strip of fertile land on the banks of the river Nile.





## 1 OVERVIEW OF THE TRIP

I will begin with an overview and continue with the day to day travels in the subsequent letters. Most of the photographs I will be using are not mine but have been downloaded from the Internet. There are a very large number of pictures relating to Egypt on the web.

*Travel to and from Egypt:* I was originally booked on Singapore Airlines but then got a cheaper ticket. Flew Finnair to and from Bangkok, and Egypt Air between Bangkok and Cairo. Finnair uses MD-11s which fly on to Helsinki from Bangkok. The cabin crew from Hong Kong to Bangkok – all female and Finnish – looked more like female guards at a concentration camp! They were big,



**A Finnair MD-11**

wore black gloves, had dour uniforms and did not smile (this latter seeming to be a characteristic of Finnish people) and stood there as if a new batch of prisoners was arriving! Of course, they turned out to be not quite as bad as that. The Egypt Air flight to Cairo was not much to write about either. The plane, a Boeing 777, was very plain inside, was full and left about an hour late (1:30 am) though it arrived almost on time in Cairo (at 6 am). On the



**An Egypt Air Boeing 777**

return leg, it left right on time, was less than half full (so many people were able to get empty 4-seat middle rows to sleep on) but the service was not much. A lot of the little things did not work, such as the TVs occasionally (no seat screens) and lots of the arm-rest controls. Egypt Air is not about to win the “World’s Favourite Airline” award any time soon.

*The group:* Tours with this company begin in Cairo every week and cater for the backpacking clientele. The group I was in was larger than usual with 23 people, mostly in the 20 to 30 age group and most from Australia and New Zealand. There were two girls who had studied at Rangi. I think they would have been a few years behind Leonie. One was a Fijian (or part Fijian) named Kim.

*Travel in Egypt:* Mostly by buses, which were alright but twice on overnight trains. Tourists have special tourist trains with armed soldiers in a compartment behind the engine. I must say I was surprised when the train pulled into the station in Cairo and I saw this gun sticking out from a hole in the reinforced wall of the compartment! As most trains travel overnight, how a soldier could see anything I don’t know. Our group was ‘upgraded’ to first class (compartments) as all the second class seats (normal carriages) were booked out. The trains are very grimy and the



**The 1<sup>st</sup> class compartment I had from Cairo to Aswan**



**Train toilet**

toilets even worse! The window was also so dirty that it was almost impossible to see outside. There are also trains with sleeping compartments and from pictures on the Internet, these seem to be of a much higher standard. Also two nights were spent on a felucca (more about that later).



*Safety in Egypt:* Egypt must be one of the safest places on Earth with little crime. Even single women could walk around anywhere day or night in great safety. I felt perfectly safe everywhere I went, including some very poor areas I would wander in to. The people are very friendly and welcome tourists.

*Security:* This is a different matter altogether. As you know, there have been a number of terrorist attacks. This includes some major incidents as well as a number of smaller attacks. These usually take place in tourist areas. As a result, the government has set up a special Tourist Police and their presence saturates *all* tourist sites, even minor ones. At some sites, there are guards every few metres apart! Most are heavily armed. In addition, on some roads, tourist buses are only allowed to travel in convoys. Not all local tourist people agree with this, claiming that convoys just make it easier for a terrorist to attack and hit a bus. This is probably true!



**Armed tourist policeman**

*Traffic:* Of much greater danger in Egypt is the traffic. On the main roads it screams along at 60 to 80 km/hour with no regard for pedestrians who have to cross the road. It can really be quite terrifying trying to cross such a road. Red lights and pedestrian crossings, where they exist, are usually ignored. Often a pedestrian crossing will go halfway across a road and then disappear. And with petrol at only HK\$2 a litre, many people can afford to use cars. It was also interesting being in a taxi and witnessing drivers and pedestrians, who often abuse each



**Traffic on a bridge in Cairo.  
Imagine having to cross here!**

other. Even demure, covered women will yell at drivers who nearly hit them. And taxi drivers yell at the ‘stupid’ pedestrians for not getting out of the way. As taxis are extremely cheap, I occasionally used them, though it is necessary to haggle on the price before getting in. (Many taxis have meters but none of them actually work!).

*Baksheesh:* This is the word for tipping and it is expected for almost everything and is a part of life in Egypt! It is given for almost all services rendered but unfortunately extends from begging to bribes and is often requested when nothing is done. On the first day of the tour the group is given a list showing tips the tour guide will dispense and how much per person, and then we are asked to pay this amount. There are also additional tips to be given to the tour guide, felucca crew, and tour representatives who meet you from time to time. At the end of the tour, I added up the amount of baksheesh and found it came to about 20% of the tour price, which is not an insignificant amount!

*Traveller's best friend in Egypt:* This must be toilet paper! Toilets, when they can be found, are usually ‘squat’ toilets and most are incredible filthy. Many do not have toilet paper so it is really necessary to take some with you. I took two rolls but used up just one. Hotels and restaurants will have Western toilets often with paper.



*Egypt at a glance:* Egypt has a population of about 75 million. About 95% of these live in the Nile region. Cairo has a population of about 22 million. Arabic is the official language and 90% are Sunni Muslim.

## 2 AN INTRODUCTION TO CAIRO

I arrived in Cairo at about 6 am. The airport terminals do not have any bridges so passengers are taken to and from aircraft by buses. Immigration was simple and rather casual. I was even able to walk in and out of immigration when looking for a bank.

Found banks, but only one would cash travellers' cheques! However, although I arrived alright, my backpack did not arrive! Egypt Air had failed to put it on the 'plane in Bangkok! (And they do not provide any allowance or any compensation for lost luggage, unlike most airlines.)

I eventually got it four days later in Aswan. The tour company is supposed to arrange to meet people at the airport but no-one was there. Made a phone call at an information desk (with my introduction to Egyptian baksheesh which cost US\$1 as I had no Egyptian money at that stage).



**Typical Cairo taxi**

A tour representative arrived at about 9:15 am. Didn't matter too much about this as it was still early in the day. He took me by taxi into town to the hotel where I would spend the night. It must have been the oldest taxi in Cairo, most of which are old, dilapidated Peugeots. Not air-conditioned, of course, filthy, broken seats and with half a window winder which was still able to open and close the window. About halfway into town, a tyre had a puncture so the driver just stopped at a service station and put in some more air.

On arrival at the hotel (indicated by ● on the map), met the tour organiser and sorted out the tour as I was upgrading from a 'hop-on-hop-off' pass to a tour. Just a simple budget hotel, but OK. Had a rest and then set out to explore Cairo.



**Map of Cairo showing main areas.**

To make sense of Cairo, one needs to appreciate that urban Cairo consists of three main parts (as shown on the map):

- *Old Cairo*. This is the area associated with Roman and early Christian times and predates the capital itself. It is also the bastion of Egyptian Christianity (known as Coptic Cairo) and contains many historic churches. The part shown on the map as Fustat is where the first Islamic invaders in 640 AD settled, though nearly all traces of this have been obliterated.
- *Islamic Cairo*. This is where all subsequent Islamic settlement took place. It began with the invaders from Tunisia in 969 AD who set up their capital there. The area was added to and enlarged from then until the 19th Century. It contains many important mosques.
- *Central Cairo*, This is the modern, European Cairo that was built in the late 19th Century. The part shown as 'Garden City' used to be very beautiful but although many of the leafy streets are still there, the area had been built up and buildings are dilapidated.

So, on leaving the hotel, tried to find my way to the banks of the Nile. Got lost at first but eventually got there passing the very fortified UK Embassy on the way. After a long time trying to cross the road, eventually did so and sat down on a riverside bench (between two locals). After a few minutes, a tourist policeman approached me and said “No sitting, no sitting!” One of the locals said to me in halting English “Chairs are for sitting” and I agreed with him and so didn’t budge. As the policeman couldn’t speak English, he left. Later, I realised that he might have spoken to me because the bench was opposite the UK Embassy which could be a terrorist target. If that was



**A nice part of the promenade along the Nile.**



**The Egyptian Museum**

the reason, the policeman did not seem to be concerned about the two locals, just the visitor!! Walked slowly around Central Cairo as far as the Egyptian Museum (see map) then back to the hotel for another rest. In the early evening, I went out again to look for something to eat. I would like to have eaten at local places but reluctant to do so due to the high risk of getting diarrhoea. Eventually found a Pizza Hut so ate there.



**Tutankhamen’s death mask**

At breakfast the second morning at the hotel, all the tour participants met. We all checked out then left for the first day of the tour together. A coach took us to the Egyptian Museum where we spent most of the morning. Very interesting. It has sections focusing on each of the three kingdoms. Of particular interest is all the treasure found in the tomb of Tutankhamen (from early in the New Kingdom). This was the only tomb in the Valley of the Kings (more of that later) that had not been robbed of its treasure. The displays included his death mask, several gold layers of his sarcophagus (but not his mummy which was too fragile to move so is still in its original tomb) and the containers in which his innards were preserved when his body was mummified. (As photography is not allowed in the museum, all the pictures here are from the Internet.)



**A chair used to carry Tutankhamen**

From the museum, we headed to the pyramids of Giza, which is just a few kilometres to the south-west of Cairo, in what used to be just desert but is now the city of Giza. Before seeing the pyramids, we called in at a papyrus shop where they gave a demonstration of how paper is made from papyrus. Then, of course, they tried to sell us papyrus paintings. They also provided us with a glass of very nice cold hibiscus tea which was very nice.



**The papyrus plant**



**A papyrus painting**



### 3 THE PYRAMIDS AT GIZA

From the Papyrus shop, we went to look at the most famous of all the pyramids – the pyramids at Giza. There are three main pyramids, built over a 100-year period in the Old Kingdom about 2500 BC. Pyramids were built before this but were of a simpler design being ‘step’ pyramids that look like large blocks placed on top of each other. Next came pyramids with the steps filled in to give smooth sides and finally the ‘true’ pyramids of which those at Giza were the first. The outsides of the pyramids were



**An early step pyramid**

covered with white limestone so from a distance looked like large mirrors. But over the years most of this was removed for other construction purposes. Only a little remains at the top of the second pyramid. Following the building of these three pyramids, no more large pyramids were built; priorities changed and there was less money available for such construction.

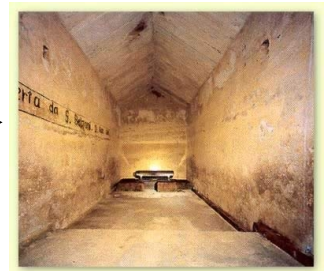
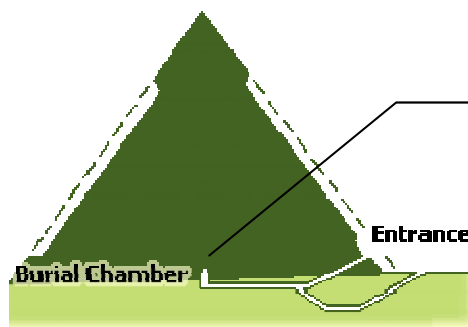


**The pyramids at Giza. The first (and largest) on the right. Second (with limestone cap). Third and smallest on the left. The sphinx is in front of the second pyramid.**

As you know, pyramids are burial sites for the pharaohs. When a pharaoh died, his body was taken by barge along the Nile to a temple on the banks of the river where it was prepared for burial. It was then taken up a causeway to the pyramid and placed in a burial chamber. The burial chamber in the second pyramid is open for viewing. It contains the empty sarcophagus and graffiti on the wall written by the discoverer in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Second pyramid with limestone cap.**



**Burial chamber Note graffiti on wall.**

Next, we went to look at the sphinx, which is located in front of the second pyramid. It has the face of a man and the body of a lion. I must say I was disappointed as it is smaller than I thought and in a terrible state of disrepair. It was originally sculptured from a natural outcrop of rock at that site. Most of the face is missing partly due to erosion over time. But there are a number of stories regarding the rest of the destruction. One, which is not true, is that Napoleon’s soldiers used it as target practice. The true story, according to our tour leader, is that a Muslim cleric defaced it while at the same time taunting the ancient Egyptian gods that although they



**The sphinx**

were many, not one was able to come to the rescue.

From the pyramids, we visited a nearby perfume shop, where a chap talked about and demonstrated different kinds of Egyptian perfumes and pointed out that many of these are sold to the famous perfume companies in Europe. A few of the girls bought some of the perfumes.

Following that, the bus took us to a hotel where we were to wait before heading to the train station for the overnight journey to Aswan. I had something to eat at a nearby McDonald's and bought more bottles of water. Talking about water, a lot of bottled water is consumed. All of it is mineral water obtained from various oases around the country. Thus the water can help to replace some of the minerals lost during sweating (unlike most bottled water in Hong Kong which is all distilled water with no minerals). ....

At this point, I will not continue in chronological order but will talk about the rest of my time in Cairo after returning from the South about six days later. Checked in at a different hotel, on the west side of the Nile (shown as ● on the map of Cairo in the previous letter).

From the hotel walked to a Metro (underground) station. The trains are similar to the MTR trains in Hong Kong but are not air conditioned so can get quite hot. But they are very cheap – there is a flat fare of



**Two Cairo Metro trains, a new one (left) and an old one (right).**



**The only structure left from Babylon, a tower built in the 2nd century**

only about HK\$ 1. I went to the old (Coptic) area of Cairo, and spent a few hours looking around the churches in the area. Coptic Cairo is the modern name for the oldest part of the city. It consists of a cluster of churches and cemeteries lying on the ruins of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Roman 'Fortress of Babylon.' Two churches of notes are the Hanging church and the Church of St. Sergius. Dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Hanging Church (or "Suspended" church) gets its name as it was built across the top of a gate of the old Roman fortress. The original church was destroyed and rebuilt in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and there has been

expansion and reconstruction ever since.



**The Hanging Church**

The Church of St Sergius is perhaps the most famous in all Egypt. It was founded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and owes its reputation to the widely held belief that the Holy Family took shelter in a cave on this spot during their flight into Egypt to escape King Herod. The church is built over this cave.



**Entering the Church of St Sergius**



## 4 ISLAMIC CAIRO

Day 10 of the trip was spent visiting Islamic Cairo. It was also the day when I had terrible diarrhoea. It began with a buffet breakfast at the hotel. I ate a lot, including raw tomatoes, in spite of the warning to avoid uncooked food. But I thought that hotel food would be all right. Big mistake! I think it was the tomatoes that caused the problem. After breakfast, rested for a while when, for the first of six times that day, the bug hit and had to go to the toilet.

Following that, I headed for the Metro station to get the train to Islamic Cairo. And then it hit again! I was desperate for a toilet – any toilet. I asked a chap who looked as if he could speak English (he could) and he spoke to a station attendant. The upshot of it was that I was conducted to an incredibly dirty squat staff toilet. No toilet paper, but saved by having my own roll!

After exiting at the station nearest to the northern part of Islamic Cairo, I asked a tourist policeman for directions. As he was very helpful I was going to give him a small tip, which he refused to accept! Well, after about a 20-minute walk, arrived at Khan al-Khalili, the famous market area of Islamic Cairo. Spent a while looking around. I had two more diarrhoea attacks while there. Heard a guide speaking to a group in English so asked him if he knew where a toilet was. He pointed to a



A street in Khan al-Khalili



Perfumes and silverware among the many things for sale

restaurant right next to us and said to use that. On entering, a waiter, perhaps noting my expression, just pointed to the toilets, which were clean Western-style ones. I had to visit it again about an hour later. In the photograph above of one street in the market, note the advertisement for Lipton tea. Such ads are everywhere; a lot of tea is consumed in Egypt and I guess most of it is Lipton tea.

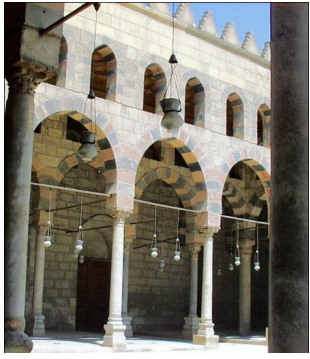
The Islamic capital, set up in 696 AD and named Al-Qahira ('Cairo'), is just north of the market but little evidence of it exists as there has been a lot of reconstruction. Also, I wanted to see a caravanserai (hotel where camels rested and drivers slept) but it was closed. So, decided to head south to visit the Citadel. Was going to walk, even though it was very hot and might take an hour. I was also wearing longs that day, as shorts are less common in Egypt and even less so in Islam. When a man told me the temperature was 37°C (it had spiked on that day), I took a taxi instead. On arrival at the Citadel, had another attack of diarrhoea but fortunately there was a (Western style but filthy) toilet inside it.

The Citadel was for 700 years the strategic stronghold for Cairo, overlooking the city, and easy to defend. It was built in 1176 by the Muslim commander Salah ad-Din (known as



Part of the (Crusader style) wall around the Citadel





**Courtyard at the Mamluk mosque in the Citadel**

Saladin in English), who was inspired by the fortresses of Syria and Palestine used by the armies during the Crusades. The Citadel has been changed over the years and consists of several buildings from different periods. There are several mosques. The oldest remaining was built by the Mamluks (former slaves, remember) with a very nice courtyard. The largest mosque was built by the sultan Mohammed Ali, an Albanian, who grasped power in 1805 after the French had left as is regarded as

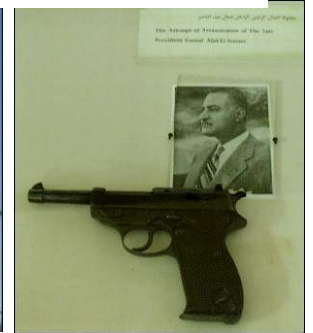


**The 19<sup>th</sup> C Mohammed Ali mosque in the Citadel**

the founder of modern Egypt and who changed the country from a backwater province of the Ottoman Empire to a regional superpower. However, the Mamluk warlords were a threat to him, so he invited about 500 of their leaders to a banquet at the Citadel then had them all killed on the way home! Ali ordered all Mamluk structures in the Citadel to be destroyed but the one Mamluk mosque to survive did so as it was then being used as a stable. Ali also



**Outdoor exhibition of weapons (missiles, planes, tanks) from Egypt's modern wars.**



**The gun used in an assassination attempt on President Nasser.**

built a huge mosque in the Turkish style. The other main buildings include the Military Museum (once the harem palace of Mohammed Ali), which I visited, and the Police Museum, which I didn't visit. From the Police Museum, one gets a good panoramic view of Cairo looking towards the Nile. The main thing that struck me was the dirty appearing brown colour from the mud bricks used to make most of the buildings.



**View of Cairo from the Citadel**

After leaving the Citadel, I haggled with a taxi driver who offered to take me to another mosque, wait for me, and then take me to central Cairo. This mosque, built entirely of mud brick, was constructed about 878 AD by Ibn Tulan, a governor sent from Baghdad to rule Egypt. This mosque is free to enter and there were only about six visitors when I was there. As I was about to take off my shoes to enter the mosque, a pair of tie-on shoe covers was offered instead in exchange for a small offering. In contrast to other mosques, this one has a very large courtyard and a minaret ascended from the *outside*, which I didn't climb but think I could have.



**Courtyard of the Ibn Tulan mosque**

From the centre of Cairo, I returned to the hotel to take more diarrhoea medicine, though did not have any more attacks (that day!).

This day ended my main time in Cairo. The next day I headed north to Alexandria. But in the next episode, I return to talk about the trip along the Nile Valley.

## 5 ASWAN AND THE FELUCCAS

At the end of the day visiting the Egyptian Museum and the pyramids at Giza, we took the overnight train from Cairo to Aswan (see map again). Aswan is Egypt's southern-most city.



The GoBus breakfast box

The train left about 11 pm which was late. It arrived at noon, two hours late. Not much of a sleep on the train. GoBus provided each of us with a box breakfast to eat on the train. On arrival, we were taken straight to the hotel, which turned out to be the nicest on the trip with a great view out the window across the Nile.



In the 1960s, a giant dam (the Aswan High Dam) was built across the Nile near Aswan to control the annual floods and to generate hydroelectricity. (The British had built a smaller 'lower' dam in 1902 but it was unable to control the floods.) In the process, the dam created Lake Nasser, the largest artificial lake in the world. Aswan is home to a large Nubian community, many having settled there after being displaced by the lake. (Ancient Nubia overlapped present-day south of Egypt and the northern part of the Sudan.)



The Nile at Aswan



A motor launch takes visitors to the Temple of Philae complex



The main temple at the Temple of Philae



One of the smaller temples at the Temple of Philae complex

In the afternoon, we visited the Temple of Philae complex built



A souq in Aswan

on an island, but not the original island. Because of rising waters of the lake would have submerged it, it was moved stone by stone and reassembled on another island and landscaped to look like the original. It was built mainly in the Ptolemaic period (332-330 BC) but has been added to over the years. It consists of a number of temples built for the worship of several Egyptian gods.





**The Coptic Cathedral in Aswan**

Other sites of note in Aswan are the souq (market) and a large Coptic cathedral. In the evening, we all went to have a Nubian dinner (though I can't remember what it consisted of except that some kind of rice was a main dish).

Although the hotel was nice, not much time was spent in it as at 2:30 am the next morning, everybody was awoken to take a bus to visit the two temples at Abu Simbel. Because of security, buses had to travel in a convoy. The hotel let us borrow pillows, which enabled me to get a reasonable sleep for the 2½ hour or

so journey, arriving just before sunrise. The temples were hewn out of rock in a cliff face early in the time of the New Kingdom by Ramses II. Like the temple of Philae, they were also rescued from the rising waters; the temples, and in fact, the whole cliff it were cut into blocks and reassembled 65 metres above its original position. Although the main temple was supposedly built the temple to honour an Egyptian deity, it seems to have been more to honour Ramses II himself. (During his 67-year reign, he built many statues and temples in his own honour!) The pictures below give some idea of the two temples. On the outside are four large statues of Ramses with more in the temple inside. The motif in picture 3 is on the walls and is common in Egyptian temples; it shows the victorious pharaoh holding the head of his defeated enemies whom he is about to slay.



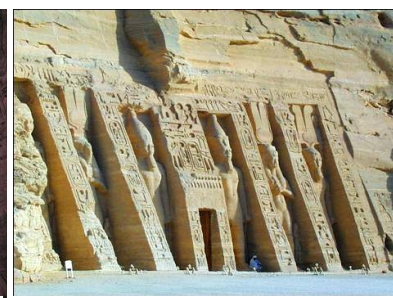
**1 The main temple with the four statues of Ramses II**



**2 Inside the main temple with more statues of Ramses II**



**3 Ramses II about to slay captured enemy soldiers**



**4 The temple built for Queen Nefertari**

Nearby is another temple dedicated to an Egyptian goddess, but dedicated to his favourite wife, Nefertari (picture 4). But again, Rameses himself dominates, with statues of Nefertari alternating with those of him on the outside of the temple.

After a couple of hours at Abu Simbel, took the bus back to Aswan, this time not in a convoy, but with an armed guard. However, had there been any attack on the bus, I doubt that the guard would have been much use! On arrival, we had a rest then prepared to set off for the trip down the Nile on the feluccas in the early afternoon.

Because there were 24 people, two feluccas were used. The trip was from Aswan to a place called Kom Ombo, a distance of just 45 km. Although the distance is not great, nearly two days are needed to get there as there is little wind



**One of our two feluccas on the Nile**



and sometimes no wind, so the feluccas do not go fast. Each felucca has a Nubian crew of three who provide all the meals. The food is simple and basic but there is plenty of it. The deck is strewn with cushions and rugs and luggage is placed below the deck. At night we sleep on the cushioned deck. There is also a canopy to provide shade and protection from the heat. There are no toilets on the feluccas so you have to wait until the captain makes a stop (which must be terrible for someone with diarrhoea!). And even then, there are no toilets on the banks so you have to find a free spot amongst the bodily remains of all who have been there before! I only needed a poo once, Occasionally the boats stop for swimming in the Nile. The river is reasonable clean and quite cool – very pleasant for swimming.



**Swimming in the Nile. The person in the circle is me actually swimming!**



**Our two feluccas on the morning of the second day**

It was dark when we stopped for the first night. Sailing feluccas is not allowed at night, mainly to prevent them being hit by the many tourist cruisers that sail between Aswan and Luxor (and vice versa). (These cruisers used to sail between Aswan and Cairo, but for security reasons are now restricted to between Aswan and Luxor.) The Indian chap and I climbed the sand dunes on the bank and watched the moon rise. (It was almost a full moon. Had I been in Egypt two weeks later, it would have been the time for the new moon and the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, a good time apparently to visit the country.) We also ran into the Nubian crew from a third felucca (not our group) who spoke quite good English and we had quite a long and interesting chat with them. For part of the first night I slept on top of my (sheet) sleeping bag but crawled inside later as it became cooler.



**On board. Me holding some lime juice. Dates in green basin.**

At one point on the second day, we stopped for another swim. The Indian chap and I then collected (with permission) a lot of dates from palm trees and also some limes. The tour leader made lime juice with these and others he had collected. Not many people ate the dates which were a bit bitter but still the crews were happy to have them. (You can see some of the dates in the green plastic basin in the picture on the left.) After dinner on the second night, the two crews lit a bonfire, dressed in traditional Nubian clothes and

sang and danced around the fire. By the time everybody woke up the next morning, the feluccas had already been sailing for a while and were arriving at Kom Ombo. Travelling down the Nile on the feluccas was great fun and two days is about right; much more and it might get a bit boring.



**Bonfire and entertainment by crews**

## 6 LUXOR AND THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS

After disembarking from the feluccas at Kom Ombo, we visited a temple there built in the Ptolemaic period. Part of this temple is dedicated to the crocodile god and several mummified crocodiles are on display. The temple also has about six 'clinics' for different kinds of problems showing that by Ptolemaic times, a fairly good medical system in place for all the people. We then travelled north towards Luxor. A lot of sugar cane is grown in this area. About halfway to Luxor, we visited the temple at Edfu, which is a surprisingly well-preserved temple, again from the Ptolemaic period.

Luxor is not a pretty city like Aswan. But, like Aswan, it is a terminus for the tourist cruisers that ply the river. Luxor has some of the most important historical sites in the country, including the Valley of the Kings where most of the pharaohs from the New Kingdom were buried. The old name for the area is Thebes and this, rather than Memphis, was the capital of Egypt in the period of the New Kingdom.

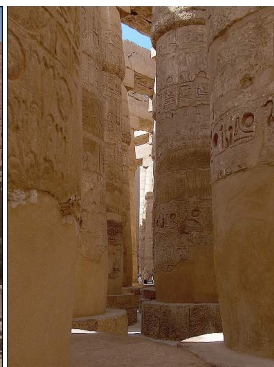


**Tourist cruisers at the banks of the Nile in Luxor**

One famous temple in Luxor itself is the Karnak temple, dedicated to Amun, king of the gods. Originally begun in the Middle Kingdom (one of the few places of importance associated with this period) but added to and changed over the centuries by pharaoh after pharaoh (especially Ramses II), all seeking to make their mark. The temple was buried under sand for more than 1000 years until it was excavated in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. The pictures below show some of the things that can be seen in this temple.



**The Karnak temple. A row of sphinxes led from the Nile to the entrance of the temple.**



**An enormous hall supported by gigantic columns**



**A statue of Ramses II with one of his daughters at his feet**



**A large sacred lake where priests purified themselves before performing rituals in the temple**

The next morning we set off for the Valley of the Kings. This situated on the *west* bank of the Nile. In ancient times, they lived on the east bank so they could see the rising sun and were buried on the west bank as that is where the sun sets. One of the first sites seen is the house of Howard Carter, the man who discovered many of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, including that of Tutankhamun (in 1922). By digging their tombs deep into the hills, the pharaohs hoped to prevent robbers stealing the priceless possessions buried with them. It was an unsuccessful strategy as every tomb, except three, were raided, some not long after the pharaohs were buried there. Sixty-two tombs have been discovered, with Tutankhamun's



being the last. Most of it's treasures were not discovered by robbers as the tomb had been build under that if another pharaoh, though some of them have been stolen. Tutankhamun's treasures have been moved to the Egyptian Museum but his mummified bodied is still there in its gilded coffin, the only body remaining in the tombs. Of all the tombs, only a few are open at any one time. Anywy, trying to see them all would just be confusing. Those in our group actually visited just two tombs – those of Tutankhamun and Ramses IX (pharaoh near the end of the New Kingdom). The valley is very hot, extremely dry and when you get away from the crowds, eerily quiet.



**Part of the dry, treeless Valley of the Kings**



**The entrance to the tomb of Ramses IX**



**The burial chamber in the tomb of Tutankhamun with his body in the coffin**

From the Valley of the Kings, we went to another to a nearby area where there is a temple buily by the only queen on the New Kingdom, Queen Hatshepsut built at the foot of a sheer limestone cliff-face. It was here, in 1997, that a terrorist attack took place, with more than 70 tourits and guides being killed. At the time, security was very, very lax and there was only one guard at the temple, unlike now. Also, the hillsides were covered with squatter villages which may have provided sanctuary for the terrosits. After the attack, the whole village was cleared.



**The Queen Hatshensut temple from two different angles**



**Paintings on a wall at the temple**

There are other sites on the West bank to be seen but some of them are closed. Among these is the famous Valley of the Queens, which holds the tombs of many royal wives and children. The most famous is the tomb of Queen Nefertari, the favourite wife of Ramses II, mentioned earlier for the temple at Abu Simbel.

That evening, took the overnight train back to Cairo.



## 7 ALEXANDRIA

From Cairo, travelled north to Alexandria. Left the Cairo hotel early for the three-hour trip. A lot of desert but also a lot of agriculture using an extensive irrigation system with water from the Nile. Couldn't help noticing a large number of dome-shaped structures with small holes in them. Turns out that they are pigeon houses. Pigeons are a very popular part of the diet in Egypt, and the birds are usually prepared with stuffing placed inside them.

Arrived in Alexandria and was dropped off in the centre of town on the waterfront. As this was not a tour, I had to find accommodation myself, which took some time. An elderly man, whose job seemed to be to introduce people like me to hotels, happened to be there when the bus arrived so he took me to several hotels, most of which were rather grotty. Most buildings in this part of Alexandria are European/French but are very run-down. Also, the lifts in the buildings all seemed to be the original 19<sup>th</sup> C lifts. Eventually took a hotel overlooking a square with a good though indirect view of the harbour. For lunch, ate the breakfast box provided by the Cairo hotel as I had to leave before the restaurant opened. The box included raw tomatoes, which I again ate, and consequently suffered from diarrhoea later that day, though it was not as bad as the previous day in Cairo.



**A pigeon house**



**View from hotel in Alexandria**



**Alexandria tram**

Later that afternoon, got tickets to El Alamein and back to Cairo. Had to go to the bus stations which were a long way from the centre of town, but the taxi only cost LE5 (HK\$7). Only got one-way tickets to El Alamein and couldn't understand why they would not issue return tickets. I was to find out the reason when I got to El Alamein the next day!! Decided to take a tram back to town. Got the correct tram, which cost only 25 p (about HK 35 cents!). Again, very run down and dilapidated.

It was cool at night, quite a bit cooler than Cairo. The hotel, like most hotels including expensive ones, did not have air-conditioning, just fans. The next morning, after an early (continental) breakfast at the hotel, took a taxi to the bus station for the 9 am coach to El Alamein, which is about 100 km to the west of Alexandria. Passed many large ponds producing salt by the evaporation of sea water. Also, a large number of resort/holiday villages between Alexandria along the coast, though many seemed empty or incomplete.



**A large salt pond**

At about 10:40 am the coach suddenly stopped at the side of the highway for me to get off. This was El Alamein!! Only a few buildings there. Followed the signposts and soon came to the Commonwealth WWII cemetery for the soldiers who died at the battle of El Alamein between British (and commonwealth) forces and Italian and German forces. The battle began



### Views of the Commonwealth war cemetery at El Alamein

on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1942 (almost exactly halfway through WWII) and lasted 11 days with the Axis forces being defeated. This was the first victory British forces had had and was a turning point in WWII. As Churchill later said: “Before El Alamein, we never had a victory; after El Alamein we never had a defeat.” Spent one to two hours there. The cemetery contains the graves of about 7400 soldiers (about 1300 from Australia, 1100 from New Zealand, even 1 from the Seychelles!) and walls are inscribed with the names of about 8000 others whose bodies were never found (mainly airmen). I noticed that the soldiers were a bit older than I have seen at other war cemeteries with some being in their 40’s. I also noticed that almost all the headstones I saw, except those for New Zealanders, have epitaphs or inscriptions on them; don’t know the reasons for that. As I was about to leave the cemetery, I heard an American voice and it turned out that he was a senior US military officer from a contingent carrying out training exercises nearby. He told me that the commander of the US Marines in Iraq had also visited the cemetery the day before.

Following the visit to the cemetery, I walked to the war museum at the other side of the town, all of about 300 metres! (My tour book had given me the impression it was several miles away). The museum has five sections, one each for British, German, Italian and Egyptian forces, and one overall. Also has a number of vehicles outside; I think most of these are wrecks retrieved from the desert and given a coat of paint.

Well, after that I had to find my way back to Alexandria as my ticket had been only one-way, remember? I thought there would be a bus station in the village. But with only about 6 buildings in total, a bus station was not one of them. A chap at the museum said just to stand on the highway and flag down buses as they passed. I tried this for coaches, but it turned out to be useless; all the drivers would do was to wave or flash their lights and continue on at about 120 kph! Then I understood why the bus company had only given me a one-way ticket. Just as I was wondering what do to do, such as hitch-hiking, the problem was solved! Buses, in the form of small mini-vans with 15 seats ply the route and pick up people standing on the roadside. As I was the first passenger, I at first thought it was some kind local who had stopped to give me a ride but after it started filling up, realised it was a bus. Noted too that the driver would only do up his seatbelt (and get front seat passengers to do likewise) when approaching police checkpoints). The bus didn’t do all the way into Alexandria but stopped at



**Remains of a Spitfire on display outside the El Alamein war museum**



**A shady roadside spot at El Alamein where I sat while waiting for a bus**



a bus station in the outskirts. So, had to take a taxi. Told the driver to take me to “downtown” but this was a mistake as “Downtown” turned out to be the name of a nearby shopping centre! Had to pay the LE5 as we had already agreed on the price, then had to pay another LE5 to get to the real downtown!

On the third day in Alexandria, set out on foot to visit some of the historical sites in the city itself. As Alexandria was founded by Alexander in 332 BC, no sites date before this. Only visited two – one called “Pompey’s Pillar” and nearby catacombs. But getting there turned out to be very difficult. Got completely lost in the maze of small streets and ended up wandering around some very poor districts. Kept asking for directions, and while most people seemed to know where the places were, their directions did not always turn out to be very accurate. At one point, I ended up at a sheep and goat market – probably the first tourist ever to do so!



**The animal market near Pompey’s pillar**

Eventually got to Pompey’s pillar, built about 297 AD by the Romans and is all that remains of a third century BC temple to which it was added. (It is called ‘Pompey’s’ pillar as medieval travellers thought, incorrectly, that the Roman general Pompey was buried here.) Nearby are catacombs, dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and the largest Greek-Roman burial site in Egypt. They are reached via a spiral staircase encircling a shaft down which bodies of the dead were lowered. There are over 300 small chambers for bodies as well as a large banquet hall where people gathered to pay their respects.



**Pompey’s Pillar**

After visiting these places, waited for a tram and headed back towards the hotel, again with some difficulty. At times, because of traffic and hawkers, it would have been quicker to walk than remain in the tram.



**A large burial chamber in the catacombs at Alexandria**



**A mural in the catacombs – a mix of Egyptian, Greek and Roman styles**

Back at the hotel, had a rest.

According to my travel, the famous hotel next door (and I suppose the hotel I was in too) is reputed to be on the site where Cleopatra committed suicide after her Egyptian fleet was defeated by the Romans! (But a documentary I saw claims that she was murdered by the Romans and did not commit suicide). Later, sat by the seaside; watched as a guy swam out to sea with a fishing net.

The next morning, I returned to Cairo by coach, arriving about midday. At 7:30 pm, I was picked up by a GoBus representative and taken to the airport. Arrived back in Hong Kong all right, this time *with* my luggage.

THE END