

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS IN CAIRO

By Dale Walter, *Maryland '79*

I arrived mid-afternoon in Cairo, ready for an adventure. Although on a business trip, I budgeted a few days to see the key sites. After settling into my room in the Hotel Intercontinental Cairo Semiramis, I was pleased that my room overlooked the Nile. The Egyptian Museum was only a few blocks away, and there were a number of good restaurants in the hotel and nearby.

Since I arrived relatively late in the day, I thought that I would start with a visit to the Khan al-Khalili, the great medieval souk. According to Wikipedia, the Khan al-Khalili is a recent addition to Cairo, only 600 or so years old. My fondest memories of Cairo are in this souk.

After inquiring with the concierge, I hired a cab for my entire stay. I recommend you bargain hard for taxis, camel rides, or any purchase. You'll have fun, and will garner respect from the locals. In this case, I bargained with the cab driver to act as my guide and personal driver. I reckoned (correctly) that he would also steer me towards a family business or two, but I felt that was part of the deal.

Cairo definitely is a city with sixth century streets and 21st century traffic. At times we appeared to be hopelessly deadlocked in traffic, and I wondered whether I would be spending the evening in a taxi rather than my bed at the Intercontinental. My cab driver was knowledgeable about the Cairo streets, often ducking down small alleyways or occasionally on the sidewalk to sidestep the otherwise awful traffic.

The Khan is definitely a place that overwhelms the senses – there is a great cacophony of sound, light, and smells. As I walked down the street, each store vendor beckoned me in English to stop and purchase whatever item they offered. (From my dress and demeanor it was clear I was an American, and to these merchants I was presumably a quick and profitable sale.) Before I made any purchases, I spent about 20

minutes wandering through several streets and alleyways. Almost everything was in sight: perfumes, jewelry, spices, clothing, Persian rugs, and more souvenirs. Food can be found cooking up and down the streets and alleyways of the Khan, whether takeout places or more comfortable sit-down restaurants.

Even though I took my time, I was a man on a mission, looking to buy a small rug. After my reconnaissance, I stopped in one rug dealer's showroom. The proprietor sat me down on a comfortable seat and clapped his hands. A small boy, perhaps eight, showed up with strong Arabian coffee sweetened with copious amounts of sugar. As a small cup was placed in front of me, the proprietor started showing me hundreds of rugs of various colors, designs, and sizes. The atmosphere was magical, with the aroma of coffee filling the showroom. After settling on a particular rug and negotiating a price, I began to worry how I would transport this rather sizable tapestry on the plane. I should not have worried, for he was a full service rug merchant. He expertly folded the approximately 4x6 rug into a package that easily fit in my suitcase.

I turned to my next task, buying two gold Cartouche necklaces, a jewelry piece with one's name written in Egyptian Hieroglyphs. After deciding on a design, the jeweler and I moved to the negotiations phase, again drinking the required sweetened coffee. It may have been the coffee, or the friendly Cairo merchants, but I was beginning to really enjoy shopping, an activity I usually dread in the US.

After buying a few cheap souvenirs for my children, I made my way to my taxi, where my driver was surprised that I was finished so soon. It was 11 pm, and in Cairo the evening lasts well into the early morning hours. Waking up from jet lag later that evening, I found out that it is not unusual for the streets of Cairo to be busy until 4 am.

After a little sleep and a good breakfast, I met my taxi driver who whisked me to Giza for a visit to the Papyrus Institute, where I learned how papyrus paper is made. This was actually a pretty interesting exhibition, full of facts about paper, papyrus, and writing. I culminated the tour buying Egyptian papyrus art reproductions while drinking sweetened strong coffee.

After a quick lunch, I moved on to the Giza Pyramids. The Giza Pyramids and the Sphinx live up to all of the hype, and were a particularly special pilgrimage for this Delta Sig.

I recommend taking a camel ride around the Pyramids, something some travel books recommend not doing. I started my camel ride in the town of Giza, surrounded by green fields of rice. Riding the camel through the streets, we passed under a bridge where it is important for you to duck so low that you are practically kissing the camel. Passing by a cemetery with shallow graves, the smell of rotting corpses and the camel's rocking gait made me wonder if I was going to be able to keep down lunch. We quickly passed by the cemetery and into the desert, soothing my unsettled stomach. My attention was drawn to the front of the pyramids where an Arab traveler was sitting down for lunch—a scene I am sure has been repeated many times during the last several thousand years.

As we drew close to the Great Pyramid, I was impressed at the size of the limestone blocks used in its construction. The huge size of the pyramids unfairly make the Great Sphinx appear small. The Great Sphinx offers its own sense

of majesty, was the face of a man and the body of a lion carved out of the limestone bedrock.

Although I did not have the opportunity, some friends highly recommended the Pyramids Sound and Light Show, which is reportedly a very entertaining evening activity.

Cairo is a cosmopolitan city filled with great restaurants, and I recommend getting out of the hotels and into the streets. The hotel concierge recommended a great Lebanese restaurant, Al Dalouna, in Heliopolis. This restaurant had great Lebanese fare and live music.

My final day off in Cairo was spent at the rather overwhelming Egyptian Museum. The highlight of this museum is the King Tutankhamun exhibit, including his solid gold death mask. I found the two floors of exhibits to be almost too overwhelming and not well organized, particularly when compared to the Egyptian exhibits at the Louvre or the British Museum. Some travel books recommend several visits, which may have been a better strategy.

Cairo was the most interesting place I have ever visited. I was wowed by the Pyramids, enthralled with shopping and enjoyed talking with Egyptians. I am looking forward to returning with my family in the near future.

More details:

<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/papyrusmuseum.htm>

<http://www.cairotourist.com/>

<http://www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg>

<http://wikitravel.org/en/Cairo/Giza>

The Giza Pyramids.

