Andrews University

From the Selected Works of Keith Clouten

2009

Egypt Past and Present.pdf

Keith Clouten, Andrews University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/keith-clouten/31/
I’ve always wanted to visit Egypt, a timeless land that gave birth to one of the most ancient civilizations. Given the opportunity to join a Vantage tour during December 2009, Ngaire and I signed up. December is a perfect time to visit Egypt, where winter temperatures are mild and comfortable. The trip was even more enjoyable with the company of eight friends from Canada and the United States, all part of a group of forty nice people from all over North America.

The fourteen-day tour was comprehensive. We visited sites all the way from Alexandria on the Mediterranean to Abu Simbel near Egypt’s southern border with Sudan. Throughout, we had an outstanding tour manager and guide. Hazem is an Egyptologist and a tour guide with nearly twenty years experience. Our trip began with an overnight Egypt Air flight from New York to Cairo.
CHAOTIC CAIRO

What expectations does one have of a densely populated city of 20 million in the Middle East? Previous experience in other cities leads me to expect frightful traffic congestion, mostly sub-standard housing, under-developed infrastructure, pollution, and issues with personal security and safety.

At our briefing session with Hazem on the first night, someone popped the inevitable question: “Is it safe to leave the hotel and go out on the streets?” I’m ready to hear the inevitable answer: No, you must not do that.

“Yes” is Hazem’s response. “Cairo is the safest city in the world. You can go anywhere in this city.”

Is this guy out of his mind? Back in our room, I turn to my trusted Lonely Planet guidebook, which plainly reads: “You can walk almost wherever you like in Cairo, at any time of the day or night.” Well, blow me down! Cairo must be the world’s safest city.

But it’s pretty much all downhill from there. Traffic chaos in Cairo ranks with Beirut which was the worst I’d seen previously. Gridlock gets its meaning from cities like these. A couple of years ago the city fathers introduced traffic lights at some of the busiest intersections, but it was failure. “Green means Go, Red means Go Fast” is the way Hazem described it. Parking is a nightmare, as drivers practice double and even triple parking. The only rule is to leave your gear shift in neutral and don’t leave the handbrake on. American-built automatics are not popular here.
Pollution may be Cairo’s number-one problem. It’s a throw-away culture when it comes to garbage. Throw it anywhere: outside your house, on the street, in the canal, on a vacant lot. So there are heaps of rotting refuse everywhere. It’s particularly bad in the less affluent suburbs where public areas are choked with filth. The city has no garbage pick-up, so it’s left to enterprising people living in the poverty zones to collect and sort through mountains of refuse to make a little income by recycling. Cairo may be the world’s most polluted city. The air quality is not helped by the fact that Egypt’s gasoline is leaded fuel.

But if this is a safe, friendly city, we will enjoy it. A special treat will be a private dinner in the apartment of an upper-middle-class couple in central Cairo.

FOUR NIGHTS IN THE ROUND

“Home” in Cairo is the El Gezira Sofitel, a luxurious round tower of 30 floors on an island in the Nile River. Each balcony room directly overlooks a stretch of the river in the heart of Cairo. Our welcome dinner is a special affair accompanied by traditional music in the Kebabsy Restaurant, one of Gezira’s several eating places. After traditional pocket bread (which we saw being made on the premises) there is a hot plate and traditional desserts.

Money changing should not be a problem in Egypt. Every tourist hotel houses a bank that is open 24 hours, in addition to ATM’s. Getting the paper currency is easy, but there is a shortage of the coins that are essential for important daily needs like paying toilet attendants. A one-pound coin (20 cents) is the right one for that purpose.
PYRAMIDS OF GIZA AND SAKKARA

Pyramids comprise the agenda for our first day in Egypt. For centuries the famous monuments of Giza were engulfed by desert sands. Now they are threatened by the ever-expanding city. The congested road to the pyramids is hedged with drab, gray structures—mostly unfinished apartment blocks, windowless and unoccupied—it makes me think of a war zone. The urban sprawl goes right to the entrance gate for the pyramids. And suddenly we are there, right in the shadow of Cheops, the biggest stone structure on earth, erected a mere 4,500 years ago.

How did they do it? The Great Pyramid of Cheops (officially Khufu) is the only survivor of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. It soars nearly 500 feet skyward and contains about 2.3 million limestone blocks weighing around two-and-a-half tons each (see below). According to a guidebook which Hazem recommended, the limestone blocks must have been produced at the rate of one every two minutes each day for the 23 years of the Pharaoh’s reign. And the limestone quarries were on the opposite bank of the Nile. Amazing!

There are three pyramids on the Giza plateau, and our first stop is a viewing area where we can see and photograph all three at one time, without visual interference from the surrounding city. Besides a long row of souvenir stalls, there are dozens of camel entrepreneurs pressing visitors to ride their animals. We’ve already had this experience in central Australia, but several from our bus take advantage of the opportunity.

My most amazing experience at Giza is a self-guided tour of the Solar Barque Museum. In 1954 archaeologists unearthed a stone pit next to Cheops pyramid containing more than 1,200 pieces of a boat that was intended to provide transport for the Pharaoh in his afterlife. Engineers have been able to fit all those pieces together and reconstruct the oldest known boat in existence. The shapely craft, complete with oars and ropes, measures 140 feet in length and is made of wonderfully preserved cedar wood that was imported from Lebanon.
One could tell much about the great Sphinx that was built to guard the pyramid tomb of the Pharaoh Khafre, but we’ll skip to our afternoon visit to the vast necropolis of Sakkara, located on the west bank of the Nile close to the site of ancient Memphis, the capital of Egypt’s Old Kingdom. Here, in 1924, archaeologists discovered and unearthed Egypt’s oldest known stone pyramid, the Step Pyramid, constructed for Pharaoh Djoser in 2650 B.C. It is constructed in six steps to a height of almost 200 feet. Although the pyramid itself is off limits, we are able to inspect part of the Djoser’s vast funery complex, including a well-preserved hypostyle hall of 40 pillars.

Some of us get permission to enter the Pyramid of Teti, a pharaoh of the 24th century B.C. The pyramid itself is now little more than a heap of rocks, but the interior is well preserved. Teti’s burial chamber contains a basalt sarcophagus and a ceiling adorned with stars.

While Ngaire and I are absorbed in our surroundings, a couple of enterprising and energetic vendors catch our attention and soon we are both fully robed in traditional Egyptian costume, including head gear, and Ngaire finds herself lifted bodily onto a donkey. After using my camera to shoot a dozen cute pictures of Joseph and Mary on their way to Egypt, the guys ask for their $200 fee. That’s ridiculous, of course, so we finally beat them down to $6, plus one more “for the donkey.” It’s been a long but memorable day.
DAY TRIP TO ALEXANDRIA

An all-day excursion to Alexandria is offered as an optional tour, but an opportunity not be missed by most of the Vantage group. Apart from the monuments surrounding a magnificently preserved Roman amphitheater, there is not much to show for ancient Alexandria. Due to an earthquake long ago, the sea now covers much of the ancient city. The earthquake also toppled the famous Roman lighthouse or Pharos, which was another of the Seven Wonders of the World. We must be content with a stop at the site of an old fort where the great lighthouse once guarded the harbor.

For me, the highlight of the day is a visit to the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a brave attempt to replace the original library of Alexandria, which was the world’s greatest library of ancient times. Ptolemy I established the famous library during the third century B.C., when it housed around 700,000 papyrus scrolls, before it’s destruction or burning sometime during the reign of Julius Caesar. Its replacement has a stunning design, variously described as a giant discus partly embedded in the ground, or as a second sun rising out of the sea. The structure has space for eight million volumes, but the library’s love affair with information technology makes it truly an Egyptian window on the world.

At the eastern end of the city, on a beautiful site overlooking the sea, is the complex that was King Farouk’s extravagant summer palace. The long seaside drive to get there showcases some of the city’s fine buildings and offers fine vistas of the blue Mediterranean. Our lunch is served in the residence of the Queen—or was it Farouk’s harem? The day ends with a horrendous traffic jam as we re-enter Cairo after a three-hour drive from Alexandria.
COPTIC CAIRO

Cairo is a young city by Middle Eastern standards, but two thousand years ago the Romans established a fortress by the Nile, a few miles south of present-day Cairo. They called the place Babylon-in-Egypt, and it soon developed into a small city. In the fourth century it became a stronghold of Eastern Orthodox Christianity with an Egyptian flavor. The Coptic Church still flourishes here in what is now dubbed “Old Cairo.”

We drive to this area this morning and Hazem leads us in a walking tour through some of the narrow, cobbled alleyways where a community of Jews once hid from Christians, and later Christians hid from Muslims. We visit the so-called “Hanging Church”, a seventh century edifice built on top of the Babylon water gate of Roman times. Of special interest is the nearby Coptic Museum that houses a rich collection of Coptic art, textiles, frescoes, and some early manuscripts of Psalms and the Gospels.

A separate trip this afternoon takes us to the great Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in central Cairo. The museum’s vast galleries are overdue for renovation and a face-lift, but with Hazem as guide, we walk through ancient Egyptian history, a 2,500-year journey from the Old Kingdom to the time of Alexander the Great. The highlight, of course, is the Tutankhamen Gallery which houses all those wonderful things discovered in his tomb—everything from the golden throne to the guy’s underwear and baby socks. Weariness makes us pass up a visit to the Mummies Room. (We once walked through a tunnel full of mummies in Mexico).

From Top: Coptic Museum, Cairo; Entrance to the Hanging Church; Altar of the Hanging Church; Cairo Museum of Antiquities.
A DAY’S JOURNEY INTO THE DESERT

Enough of Cairo. Early today we fly south to Upper Egypt, arriving at Aswan by breakfast time. Then, on a bus with an armed soldier on board, we embark on a three-hour drive into the desert. Since the last recorded raindrops occurred here in 1985, there is absolutely nothing to see in the landscape except endless sand and incredible mirages. Finally, though, we reach Abu Simbel, an isolated outpost of humanity near Egypt’s southern boundary with Sudan. Here we will board a cruise boat for a three-day voyage through Lake Nasser, but not until we have explored the amazing temples of Abu Simbel.

Go back to 1300 B.C.—3,300 years ago. Ramses II, the Great, ruled Egypt at that time, and to celebrate his victory over the Nubian people of Upper Egypt, he created several temples alongside the Nile. “Created” is the right word for the Abu Simbel temples, because they were never actually “built”—rather they were carved from the inside of a mountain that overlooked the river. The great temple of Ramses II was fronted with four colossal statues of the pharaoh, standing guard over the Nile like gigantic sentinels.

As time passed, the sands of the desert drifted in, half covering the giant statues and blocking the temple doorway. In 1960, construction began on a new High Dam near Aswan, which when completed would flood the Nile valley all the way upstream to Sudan, drowning a dozen ancient Nubian temples in 200 feet of water. The world responded with multi-national projects to save the temples. In the case of Abu Simbel, this involved cutting two entire temples out of the mountain and re-assembling them on a new site within a new man-made mountain. It was an enormous and amazing undertaking, completed in 1968 before Lake Nasser appeared. It’s a wonder of the modern world.
It is an awesome experience to explore the great temple of Ramses with its many rooms and an inner sanctuary displaying a row of four Egyptian gods. We also visit the nearby rock-cut Temple of Hathor, smaller but similarly decorated with reliefs and frescoes.

While we are inspecting the temples, our baggage is transferred to the cruise ship anchored in a cove nearby. There are no docking facilities here, so after descending eighty steps, we make our way along a narrow dusty path leading to a gangplank. Once on board we find our cabin, then proceed to the dining room to enjoy a late lunch.

![Images of Abu Simbel and the Temple of Queen Nefertari, and a cruise ship at Lake Nassar.](images)

**CRUISING LAKE NASSER**

Construction of the High Dam on the Nile created the largest man-made lake in the world—300 kilometers in length, up to 30 kilometers wide, and a capacity of 157 billion cubic meters of water. For the next two days we will sail nearly the entire length of the lake, with short stops to inspect temples that were salvaged from the shores of the Nile and rebuilt on new sites above the lake waters.

We’re fortunate to be aboard the newest and loveliest cruise boat on Lake Nasser. The *Omar El Khayam* has three decks of nicely appointed staterooms, each with a balcony, and a spacious sun deck, offering ample space for relaxation, and a pool. The boat has a capacity of 160 passengers, but on this cruise we
number only 60, mostly our Vantage group. The dining room presents excellent buffet meals three times a day, and the chef goes out of his way to deliver specially prepared plates to vegetarians. The weather continues sunny and mild, which makes us glad that we chose December for our Egypt experience. Altogether we’re feeling relaxed after the somewhat hectic pace of the past few days.

The captain is a very congenial guy. He gives us a tour of his ship, including its beautifully appointed executive suites, and takes us up to the bridge. The boat appears to be well equipped, including the latest in radar.

“But we don’t use the radar,” says our captain. “That’s because our pilot here doesn’t know how to use it.” Everyone laughs. He adds, “In fact, he has never had any nautical training, but he has been operating boats on this lake every day for twenty years. And, besides that, we don’t travel at night.”

On the second day of the cruise, we go ashore to inspect temples at two different sites. Getting ashore is half the fun. Since there are no docking facilities of any kind, we board small motorboats which ferry us ashore. Arriving there, two crew members from the ship slide a narrow plank from the boat’s prow to the sandy shore, then they hold an oar alongside the plank as a handrail (previous page). Each temple we visit is unique in some way, and Hazem shares interesting facts from his wealth of knowledge. We are learning to identify temple inscriptions by the accompanying cartouches which always identify the pharaoh involved. We are blessed to have such an experienced Egyptologist as our manager and guide for this trip.

![Temple of Ramses II at Wadi-As-Subua: Avenue of sphynxes, Temple entrance, and camel taxi rank.](image)

**WADI-AS-SUBUA (VALLEY OF THE LIONS)**

It’s the last morning of the cruise. We awake to the crowing of a rooster, and find we are anchored near a rocky point where there are a couple of primitive huts. This place is Wadi As Subua, which in translation means Valley of the Lions.

There are two restored temples here. Our group will visit only one, so Dave Schafer and I decide to hike to the other one on our own. It means getting up early to go ashore with a small Italian group, then hiking along the beach and up a hill to reach the Temple of Dakka. Like all the temples along Lake Nasser, this one was removed block by block from an original site and rebuilt here on a hill above the lake. It’s exciting to explore it on our own, especially to find two wall reliefs of lions that Hazem told us about.
From there, a walk of less than a mile brings us to another impressive temple of Ramses the Great where we meet up with Hazem and our group. On the way there we pass a damaged torso of the pharaoh himself lying abandoned in the sand. The fact that he hasn’t been rescued and placed in a museum somewhere says something about the vast number of ancient monuments and artifacts that still lie buried or undisturbed throughout this ancient land.

Temple of Dakka at Wadi-As-Subua (Valley of Lions). Dave Schafer and I visited this temple on our own.

TEMPLE OF KALABSHA AND ASWAN ARRIVAL

Our lake cruise comes to an end. During dinner last night we docked near the High Dam at Aswan. This morning we board motor launches once more for a trip across the water to Kalabsha where two more rescued temples await our visit. One of them, Beit al-Wali, is yet another edifice of Ramses the Great—this one to commemorate his conquest of the Nubians. Dozens of wall reliefs depict the pharaoh receiving tribute from the defeated Nubians, including exotic birds and animals. There is even a giraffe!

Kalabsha—Kiosk of Qertassi, and the Temple of Mandulis.

Lower right: Inscriptions at Temple of Beit-el-Wali.
After disembarking the cruise ship, we visit the Aswan Papyrus Institute to watch a demonstration of the process of making papyrus, from cutting the reeds through to production of painted scenes on the finished product. From there we take a tour of the impressive High Dam which created Lake Nasser. Besides eliminating the annual Nile flooding, the Dam has opened the possibility of irrigation to make vast tracts of desert blossom with a variety of crops.

Our hotel for a two-night stay at Aswan is the 5-star Movenpick Hotel on a prime site on Elephantine Island, directly opposite the commercial heart of the city. Small ferry boats provide a 24-hour service for guests. For dinner tonight we are transported some distance upriver to feast at a riverside Nubian restaurant. Following dinner there is a show of Nubian music and dancing, finishing with a colorful whirling dervish performance.

Who are the Nubians? At Aswan we’re at the historic boundary between Egypt and Nubia. Here the First Cataract of the Nile with its narrow channels and rocky islets used to create an obstacle to navigation. South of here the banks of the Nile were rugged and sandy, with limited space for cultivation. There lived
the Nubians, an African people of dark complexion, who relied on fishing and hunting for their livelihood. Exploitation of Nubia for its gold dates back to the Old Kingdom, but it was the indomitable Ramses the Great who commemorated his victory over the Nubians with inscriptions and reliefs in the temples he created.

The first Aswan dam was built in 1902, but construction of the much bigger High Dam in 1971 forced Nubians to relocate northward. Today Nubian culture and architecture is preserved in several Nubian villages in and around Aswan. Today we set out to visit one of these villages.

It begins with a felucca ride, which is a “must” if you’re visiting Aswan. Each afternoon, when there is a light breeze on the river, dozens of these traditional Egyptian sailing craft zigzag their way from one bank to the other. It’s a peaceful experience to be away from the noise and hassle of the town. Our felucca ride takes us to Kitchener’s Island, the site of Aswan’s beautiful botanical garden, truly a luxurious oasis in the desert of Upper Egypt.

From the gardens we board ferry boats for a trip upriver, through channels of the First Cataract, to the Nubian village. On the sloping western bank of the river, this village of sandy streets has an absence of motor vehicles. People use camels and boats to get around. Two interesting experiences await us here. The first is a visit to a Nubian school where we inspect the poorly equipped classrooms and have a lesson in Arabic letters and numbers. We all get failing grades. Afterwards we are led to the home of a well-to-do Nubian family where we are welcomed and given opportunity to explore the house. I’m fascinated by the strange choice of house pets—several foot-long alligators in a tank, and two tortoises that make their way around the sandy floor of the large covered space where we are served drinks. We are having a cultural experience.
The day is not complete without a visit to a perfume factory with opportunity for lots of sniffing, and then we’re let loose at the Aswan night market to test our resistance to the street vendors of everything Egyptian.

Left: Feluccas on the Nile at Aswan.

**SALVAGE OF A DROWNED TEMPLE**

For long centuries the great Temple of Isis occupied a beautiful island in the Nile a short distance above the First Cataract. Then in 1902 the British built a dam across the river at Aswan, and soon Philae Island was no more. The Isis Temple lay submerged, just the tops of its twin pylons rearing themselves bravely above the water. This historic edifice seemed doomed to permanent destruction in a watery grave.

But salvation came in 1968 with construction of the High Dam and ambitious plans to save Nubian temples along the upper Nile. Why not also try to salvage the Isis Temple? With UNESCO support, an international team took up the project. A coffer dam was built around Philae Island, the water and mud was pumped out, then the temple was cut up into 47,000 blocks so that the entire edifice could be rebuilt on a nearby island, safely above the level of the water.

Today we visit the restored Isis Temple, taking small ferry boats from a launching site upstream from Aswan. We’re impressed with the physical extent of the temple, the long parallel rows of columns, but especially with the sanctuary inscription that depicts the goddess Isis giving birth to Horus, the falcon god. There is quite a legend surrounding that event (pictures next page).

Arrow on the map points to Philae Island where the Isis Temple lay submerged after construction of the first dam in 1902. The temple was salvaged and rebuilt on a nearby island in 1968.
The Isis Temple:
Left and Right: The rebuilt temple — notice the water-mark line on the structures.

Left and Right: Visitors coming ashore at the new Philae Island. Inner sanctuary depicts Isis giving birth to the Falcon god, Horus.

**CRUISING THE NILE**

We are now aboard *Crown Jewel* as we sail down the Nile toward Luxor. This boat is not quite as luxurious as the one on Lake Nasser, but the cabins are comfortable, the dining room buffets are extensive, and the sun deck is a wonderful place to stand or sit and watch Egypt go by. We glide by small villages where families work together on small plots of land, cultivating vegetables and rice, harvesting alfalfa for their cows, or supervising small flocks of goats. Some wave to us as we sail by. Men are out in their small boats, rod-fishing or pulling-in their nets. Clusters of palms along the banks give way to open fields of sugar cane or grazing land for cattle. And always in the background is the desert, the hills of sand.

Aswan at sunset, viewed from Movenpick Hotel. The *Crown Jewel* for the river trip from Aswan to Luxor.
Our first stop today is Kom Ombo, where we go ashore to see a temple with dual dedication to Horus and Sobek, the local crocodile deity. The dual dedication is reflected in the perfectly symmetrical plan of the temple, including twin entrances and two hypostyle halls. But the most unusual thing about this temple are inscriptions in an outer corridor depicting hospital facilities that include birthing stools, an array of surgical instruments, and the oldest known medical prescription.

Alongside this temple is a working Nilometer. This deep stone well has a pipe connection from the river. Nilometers were designed to measure precisely the rise and fall of the Nile as a way of predicting the fortunes of the annual harvest. It enabled the temple priest to determine how much tax the people should pay. A high-water level meant a good harvest and higher taxes.

Late in the afternoon we dock at the town of Edfu which for centuries was the cult center of the falcon god Horus. A short bus ride brings us to the well-preserved Temple of Horus. We see two or three falcon statues, but the most interesting thing is the inner sanctuary where a polished granite shrine and model boat remain from the third century B.C. Another unique feature, which I have not seen in other temples, is a small chamber which was a library for storing temple manuscripts. It’s no competition with the ancient library of Alexandria, but this one was a bit older.

Late tonight we pass through the busy river locks near Esna. Cruise boats sometimes have to line up for three hours to get the green light. We will wake up at Luxor in the morning.
BALLOON BOY

This is my first adventure in a hot-air balloon. Before sunrise, sixteen of us from the Vantage group are boated across the river from Luxor to the western bank, where we board a couple of vans for a short drive to the launching ground. Our multi-colored balloon is already tugging at the ropes as we climb into the basket with our pilot. Moments later we are airborne, drifting over the countryside at the mercy of the prevailing air currents. Peering down into the primitive adobe houses and shelters as we glide over them, I take some pictures, then I look westward where the desert mountains rise steeply. Hidden within those mountains are the valleys that conceal the ancient tombs of Egypt’s kings and queens.

During 45 minutes aloft we’ve drifted several miles north-eastward from our starting point, so our pilot begins searching for a suitable place to touch down. As we slowly drift to a landing in an empty lot next to a road, hoards of children invade us from every direction. They want baksheesh from these wealthy foreigners, but our guide warns us “Don’t give them anything.” We watch as the team of men from the launching site struggle to deflate our colorful balloon and when that’s done, everyone joins together in a rousing song-and-dance routine to celebrate our safe return to mother earth. We’ve enjoyed another Egyptian experience.

ROYAL TOMBS

Luxor made world news in November 1997 when six gunmen, disguised as police, entered the funery temple of Queen Hatshepsut and shot or hacked to death 70 people, most of them tourists. Terrorism in Egypt has been a problem for decades, but since that horrific event in the Valley of the Queens, the government of Egypt has beefed up security for all travelers in the country, and especially in Upper Egypt. We are glad for that protection.

Modern Luxor is the site of ancient Thebes, the capital of Egypt for more than a thousand years. Having decided that building pyramids was a costly and laborious business, the later pharaohs decided to dig themselves tombs instead. They chose a valley within the mountains west of Thebes, now known as the Valley of the Kings, for their burial places. Archaeologists have discovered 63 royal tombs in the valley and its surrounding ridges, but that number is increasing year by year as new discoveries are made.
When found, most of the tombs are empty, grave robbers having long since removed everything of value. The notable exception, of course, was the tomb of Tutankhamen. When Egyptologist Howard Carter found his tomb in 1923, he was overwhelmed with the fabulous treasures stored there. One of the most recent discoveries is the Tomb of the Sons of Ramses II. It is an enormous complex of more than 125 chambers and corridors—but what else would you expect of Ramses the Great!

During our visit to the Valley of the Kings this morning, we have time to see three tombs, each one unique in some way. The tomb of Set I (1200 BC) is particularly beautiful, its walls and inner chamber decorated with painted relief scenes that are remarkably preserved.

![Valley of the Kings (left) and the Colossi of Memnon, 1400 BC (right)](image)

**ENORMOUS TEMPLES**

This afternoon we visit the twin temples of Karnak and Luxor. To describe Karnak is to use adjectives like gigantic, monolithic and colossal. Spread over two square kilometers, and constructed over a period of nearly 1500 years, building commenced during the Middle Kingdom around 2000 B.C. Much of the site is in ruins, but still relatively intact is the huge Temple of Amun, the largest religious structure ever built. Its hypostyle hall is a forest of 143 giant papyrus shaped columns that boggle the mind and the eye (see below). This hall alone covers enough space to contain both St. Peter’s in Rome and London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral. Records show that the priests of this great temple employed 81,000 people and owned 83 ships.
Having recovered from that exposure, we are shown the Obelisk of Queen Hatshepsut, a mammoth column 97 feet high and carved from a single block of limestone. It dates from 1500 B.C., and is the tallest obelisk in Egypt.

Two miles away from Karnak is the impressive Temple of Luxor, built by two pharaohs, Amenhotep III and the inevitable Ramses II. Connecting the two great temples of Karnak and Luxor is an avenue of sphinxes, which is now in the process of being uncovered and restored. By the time we arrive at the Luxor Temple, it is dusk and we have the awesome experience of walking through its halls under floodlight. We have seen amazing things today.

Today Ngaire and I celebrate our 48th wedding anniversary. We had our pictures taken at Karnak, and tonight there is a song-and-dance during dinner, along with enough cake to share with several of our Vantage friends. This is also Friday evening. Tomorrow morning we fly to Cairo, and our little group of ten have arranged to visit the Seventh-day Adventist Nile Union Academy during the afternoon.

Our flight from Luxor had a late departure this morning. (Hazem’s advice: “If you’ve time to spare, Go Egypt Air.”) It’s already noon when we arrive at Cairo airport and meet Ranya, a pleasant young lady who works for the Adventist church office in Egypt. She has arranged a comfortable rental van to transport all of us to the campus of Nile Union Academy which used to be rural but is now surrounded by the tentacles of the city. The distance from the airport is not great, but traffic congestion and holes in the road delay our arrival for the outdoor fellowship lunch which the Academy faculty and staff have prepared for us.

It’s a delight to meet teachers and staff who are here from America, Australia, Sudan, and several Middle East countries. We are warmly welcomed, well fed, then taken on a tour of the campus. This boarding
secondary school has less than 150 students from all over Egypt and Sudan. The school farm includes a citrus grove and fields of alfalfa and other crops including garlic. Produce is used by the school and also sold in nearby markets. We give an envelope of donations to the school before Ranya accompanies us to the Cairo hotel where Vantage will have a farewell dinner. Today’s visit to Nile Union Academy has provided a refreshing and blessed climax to our Egypt tour. (Below: Our group, and Academy staff).

POST-TOUR SYNDROME

A Vantage tour is a “no worries” affair. The program managers and guides attend to every need along the way, and if there are occasional hiccups, they are dealt with quickly and efficiently. Having been treated so professionally and thoroughly, we are unprepared for what awaits us when we arrive in America.

Our Egypt Air flight from Cairo to New York is comfortable enough, with an on-time arrival at JFK Airport. We know they’ve had a couple of days of heavy snow in New York, but things look OK as we touch down, and we practically walk straight through immigration.

The first sign of something amiss is the slow arrival of baggage. The baggage system acts like it has constipation and just manages to squeeze out half a dozen bags every five minutes or so. Finally, after about an hour, we have everything and proceed through customs to the place where you re-send your
bags to your final destination. That’s when they tell us that all flights have been canceled and we’re sent us upstairs to long lines at the re-booking counters.

After three hours, moving 12 inches every 10 minutes, we reach an agent who says she can get us on a flight to Dallas on Christmas Eve, four days from now. We react with dismay, so the kind lady goes back to keyboarding and finally comes up with stand-by on a Delta flight to Atlanta tomorrow morning and a late afternoon connection from there to Dallas. We must look old, tired and haggard, because she ignores policy and gives us vouchers for overnight accommodation and meals at the Airport Hilton. She also advises having our bags checked through to Dallas right now, so we won’t have that hassle in the morning. We’ll miss our pajamas, but that’s OK.

It all works out very well, so we consider ourselves blessed. Not everyone from the Vantage group experienced that good fortune. Some rented cars to drive home, some changed airlines, others found their own accommodation in New York for one or two nights, but I believe everyone got home to celebrate Christmas. There surely is nothing like home at the end of a journey.

The map of Egypt was drawn and produced by the United Nations Cartographic Section.