

Trip Review



The Sphinx and Great Pyramid of King Khufu

Ancient Wonders of Egypt (with a Short Excursion to Jordan)

A JOURNEYS Trip Review

By Deborah Webster

For years, I've dreamed of visiting the fabled rose city of Petra, the ancient capital of the Nabataeans, so how is it that this trip review is primarily about Egypt? Well, it started with an alumni association mailing from my alma mater for a trip to Egypt's major sites. While the itinerary piqued my interest (the Middle East having been on my wish list since a brief visit to Istanbul a decade ago), I didn't want to travel with a large group, and I wasn't sure I wanted to put together my own itinerary for a first-time trip to Egypt. And of course I didn't want to get that close to Petra without seeing it! A phone conversation with Will Weber led me to this trip, which was a week in Egypt and four spectacular days in Jordan. If ancient sights and monuments, spectacular scenery, an active schedule, and bustling Middle Eastern societies intrigue, then this may be a trip for you.

The Itinerary

My husband and I spent a week in Egypt, including a couple of days in Cairo, including excursions to Memphis, Saqqara, and Giza, then five days/four nights on a Nile river boat (sailing from Aswan to Luxor), then we flew to Amman for a too-short four days and three nights in Jordan.

The Group

My husband and I knew that the Egypt portion of our trip would include up to eight tourists, but we were the only people signed up for the trip up until close to departure time. We learned just before leaving that we'd be joined by an academic couple (architecture professionals) from New York City for our week in Egypt. It was great to venture out around Cairo with the two of them and our local guide, Asa (and she was great). In Jordan, it was just my husband and me with our local driver, who also was a great local guide.

The Sights

Cairo was an amazing assault on the senses, particularly after about 25 hours in transit, from the omnipresent smog and congestion on the city streets to the amazing variety of sights and sounds everywhere we went. The streets are full of cars, busses, bicycles (with riders carrying impossibly bulky loads on their heads), entire families on motorcycles, and the occasional horse or donkey pulling a small cart overloaded with vegetables or other goods. Adding to the exotic atmosphere was the glut of mosques and the five-times-daily calls to prayer that permeated the city from before dawn to after dusk. And the contrasts! Imagine seeing camel drivers or women clad head to toe in hijab, chatting away on cell phones – it's quite an eyeful.

Cairo and Environs

Our initial itinerary had us doing city sightseeing on Sunday, which initially concerned me because we'd miss out on some sights (such as Khan el-Khalili, a superb huge market, known in the Middle East as a souq, on a busy day). Happily, though, our knowledgeable and accommodating guide, Asa, and her driver suggested flipping our Sunday and Monday itineraries, so we were soon on our way to Memphis, Saqqara (both about an hour south of the city), and Giza. Our historical understanding was improved by the order in which we visited the sights (oldest first, moving through the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms), and the drive from Cairo to Memphis and Saqqara was fascinating for the ever-more-rural views along the road of farms, vendors with mule-pulled wagons, and kids fishing in the canal that paralleled the road. And seeing the Step Pyramid of Zoser was a



With Lance and Irma (right) at Zoser Step Pyramid in Saqqara

While driving back to Cairo, our new friends (Lance and Irma) and we were struck by recurring glimpses of the Giza pyramids from our ride through the city. At our lunch stop, we were overwhelmed by the sight of the looming pyramids practically right outside our front door! The other oddity is how the urban sprawl of Cairo has reached right up to the base of the pyramids; on the site, we could see the dense city to the east and the seemingly endless desert to the west. Wow!

Being on the Giza plateau is overwhelming. The pyramids are so massive that you crank your neck way back to see them, and you can't even get them fully in the camera's viewfinder for photos. Although we didn't have tickets to enter the one pyramid that is open on a very limited basis (the Great Pyramid of Khufu, the largest and



On the Giza plateau with the pyramids looming behind us

oldest in Egypt), we greatly enjoyed our time on the site, which included going to an area probably a mile away (where the views actually were better).

We also made a stop at the enigmatic Sphinx. Again, wow! If you have the time, try to schedule a slot to take in the evening sound and light show at the Sphinx. We were told that, although perhaps somewhat touristy, seeing the Sphinx and pyramids lit at nighttime is impressive.

Monday was a very long day of sightseeing in Cairo. I wish we'd had two days instead of one, but we'd booked an activity-packed "power tour," so who was I to whine about it? We started early at Saladin's 12th century Citadel (a fortress built as a defense against Crusaders) and the alabaster Mosque of Mohammad Ali (built within the Citadel compound much more recently, ~1830-1848). The high location and view from atop a large hill near the heart of Old Cairo were inspiring.

Cairo has such a rich history, including its religious and ethnic history, having been home to Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and part of various empires, including Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine. From the Citadel, we proceeded to the heart of Old Cairo, where we visited the fascinating 9th century Coptic Orthodox Church of St. George (built atop old Babylon and 1st century Roman fortifications), all bedecked for Coptic Christmas on January 7, and the Ben Ezra Synagogue. The Nile once flowed right past this compact



Coptic Orthodox Church of St. George

area, and lore has it that the baby Moses was found hidden in the river reeds behind the synagogue and that the holy family (Mary, Joseph, and Jesus) hid in a cave beneath a church adjacent to the synagogue site during their flight into Egypt. And all of this touring was before lunch!



Outside the Mosque of Mohammad Ali

Next, after a quick refueling lunch, we visited the Khan el-Khalili souq (including tea at the atmospheric 200-year-old Fishawi's coffeehouse and bargaining for trinkets).

Late in the day, we had a fantastic, but too-short visit to the Egyptian Museum, where we saw many of the treasures that had been removed from sites we'd visited in the last couple of days, as well as treasures recovered from sites yet to be seen on our Nile trip. The museum warrants at least 2-3 hours, as it contains the world's largest collection of Pharaonic antiquities (including the remains of many famous pharaohs, Ramses III among them), and many treasures from King Tutankhamun's tomb (discovered mostly intact, unlike more other pharaohs' tombs). We did the best we could with our limited time before the museum closed, and then dragged ourselves back for an early dinner and some sleep before the next phase of our Egyptian odyssey, our Nile cruise. (We were glad we hadn't agreed to stop at a carpet factory as our guide had suggested!)

Nile River Cruise and Sights

After a very early start for our flight from Cairo to Aswan, we arrived at the ship docks midmorning before our room was ready, so we took the opportunity to explore downtown Aswan and its souq. My husband and I enjoy visiting markets on our travels around the world for their colors, sights, scents, and sounds, and the Aswan market didn't disappoint. Unlike the Cairo market, the Aswan market in the



In the Khan el-Khalili souq



morning was alive with food and spice vendors, and we had a great time poking around, tasting spices from vendors eager to sell their wares, haggling over trinkets, and buying several liters of water (cheaper than buying water on the riverboat).



Exotic herbs and spices

By midday, we were able to get into our stateroom on Movenpick's Royal Lotus riverboat and unpack our things. While the riverboat carries about 120 guests, only 36 people were booked on our trip, so we got to meet most of the guests (very few of whom were European or American – most were Egyptians, Indians, Pakistanis, or expats living in Cairo who were on a little getaway).

After lunch, our group enjoyed a trip on the Nile aboard a felucca, a traditional Nubian-captained canvas sailboat. Late afternoon and evening after dinner were ours to enjoy, either in Aswan town or recuperating a bit from running around Cairo.

The next day, another early morning, we took a boat to Philae Island and the Temple of Isis. Although getting up



Our Nubian felucca captain, dressed in the traditional white robes of his profession

early can be hard after several hard days of touring, missing the crowds makes it all worthwhile. The ruins on the island date from about 400 BC through the next 500 years and are extensive, varied, and starkly beautiful. After that, it was onward to Aswan's High

Dam, a massive structure that supposedly contains about 18 times the amount of material used in the great pyramid of Khufu in Giza (and that was something like 2.3 million limestone blocks weighing 2.5 tons apiece!). We also visited the Unfinished Obelisk, remarkable for its huge size, and, at 2.3 million pounds, the heaviest single piece of stone the Egyptians had ever fashioned. Too bad a flaw was discovered when the piece was almost complete!



Movenpick's Royal Lotus, our home for the next four days



Left: UNESCO moved the Temple of Isis to this location to save it from flooding caused by the Aswan High Dam. Middle: View from Aswan's High Dam (built 1960-1971) of Lake Nasser, the world's largest artificial lake. Right: View of a dahabiyya (the way to travel!)

After lunch, we left Aswan for an afternoon sail down the Nile northward toward Luxor. It was a lovely, warm day, excellent for relaxing on the well-appointed sun deck and watching life on the Nile (fishermen, villages, and a few other tourist boats) as we motored along.

In the late afternoon, we arrived at the riverside temple, Kom-Ombo, impressive for its location, all the hieroglyphs and colors that remain, and its rugged beauty in the late afternoon sun. The temple is unique in



Egypt for its dual dedication to the crocodile god, Sobek, and the falcon god, Horus. Here are just a couple of the many photos we shot while there.

At dawn the next day, we were off to visit the Temple of Edfu, dedicated to the god Horus, again a strategy to avoid busloads of crowds arriving later in the day. This is the largest and most completely preserved temple in Egypt, and by this time, we were all getting pretty well-versed in picking up on some of the hieroglyph messages and imagery, so it was rewarding to poke around the site on our own after getting the overview from our guide.



Left: Temple of Kom-Ombo, attractive in the late afternoon sun.. Middle: Hieroglyph shows Sobek (crocodile, above) and Horus (falcon, below). Right: Sanctuary and the shrine that once housed the gold cult statue of Horus (~350 BC)

Luxor!



Colorful lanterns at Luxor's souq

After a busy morning in Edfu, we spent a leisurely afternoon motoring down the Nile, watching the sights, descending the locks at Esna, and, at sunset with the Luxor Temple aglow on the east bank of the Nile, arriving at last in Luxor. We could hardly wait to see the city, so we ate our riverboat dinner quickly and set out for the Luxor Temple, which was so beautiful at night all lit up, with its pink granite obelisk and the 14th century mosque within its grounds – amazing! We poked around the city a bit, stopping by the souq, which was pretty lively at night, to bargain for more Egyptian cotton scarves and enjoy some tea.

The next morning was the earliest wake-up call yet, but it was so worthwhile. We began with a quick predawn boat ride across the Nile to the west bank and a quick bus ride up to the Valleys of the Kings (where we were able to walk into several tombs of the rulers of Egyptian dynasties, all surprisingly colorful and well preserved); the Temple of Hatshepsut which, although she was a female ruler (and regarded by Egyptologists as the most successful pharaoh), was also in the Valley of Kings; the Colossi of Memnon; and a few other sites before crossing the river to our boat, grabbing lunch, and then spending the afternoon visiting the Karnak and Luxor Temple complexes. The Karnak complex is simply overwhelming in size and number of features – taken in its entirety, it's the largest religious site in the world. Although Luxor was interesting during the day, I felt that the nighttime visit was more atmospheric.

This photo shows part of the Avenue of Sphinxes which originally connected the temples of Luxor and Karnak (almost two miles apart). Excavations are ongoing to restore the full length of the Avenue, but from what we



could see, they have a lot of work yet to do!

So, although we felt that it had been much more than a week (in terms of the sights we'd crammed in), and we were looking forward to going to Jordan, we wished that we'd had another several days in Egypt, both in some of the places we visited (Cairo and Luxor in particular), but also



we wished we'd had time to incorporate visits to Alexandria and a desert oasis (probably Siwa, from what our fellow travelers told us).
Onward to Jordan (via Cairo)

... I love this photo of the Giza pyramids as we approached Cairo (HUGE, even from this sky-high vantage point).



Jordan

We arrived late in the day in Jordan and started our sightseeing early the next day with our driver and guide, Mansour. We only had four days and three nights, and it was just my husband and me, but we loved our time in country and made the most of it. Jordan, at least what we saw of it, felt much cleaner, more modern, culturally more sophisticated (or at least more Westernized), but less rich in its ancient treasures. What we did see, though, was stunning, and surprisingly (to us) tied to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious histories.

Amman and Jerash

We went to the modern (1989) King Abdullah mosque, one of the few mosques we were permitted to enter, then on to the Citadel, the highest point in Amman and home to everything from 2nd century Roman ruins to the 8th



Bounty of fruit in Amman marketplace

century Muslim Umayyad Palace ruins to the small National Archaeological Museum. The museum contained some amazing artifacts, including some of the Old Testament of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found just in 1952 at the ancient settlement of Khirbet Qumran (on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea in what is now the West Bank) – wow! After the Citadel and a look around the 2nd century Roman theater in the heart of town, we poked around Amman's markets.

Learning that we enjoy markets and local foods, Mansour took us to his favorite vendors and haunts, buying us cups of delicious date juice, delicious sweet snacks called kunafa (a mild ricotta-like cheese, combined with orange blossom water and other pastry ingredients, drizzled with a sweet syrup, sprinkled with ground pistachios, and served hot), and other interesting Jordanian foods. This continued later in the trip, when in Petra and Madaba, where Mansour arranged for his friends to prepare delicious local dishes for us. These and other food adventures were a lot of fun and an important part of getting to know Jordan.

Petra

We arrived at Petra around midday, grabbed lunch, and spent most of the afternoon there. Although we'd heard that spending time very early or late in the day was best for dramatic colors and photography, we found plenty of fantastic photo ops anyway. There is a ton of walking at the sight, and one could easily take 2-3 days to see all the sights in Petra. The walk through the narrow Siq was as dramatic as we'd anticipated, and that first glimpse of the Treasury (à la "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade") was fantastic and memorable. One of the many striking aspects of Petra is that it was lost or forgotten for so long, from sometime in the Middle Ages until 1812, when Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, posing as an Arab, persuaded his Bedouin guide to take him to

the fabled site.

There are a lot of options for getting into and around the Petra sight, but for anyone interested in a good amount of walking, skip the horse ride (maybe half a mile) from the entrance to the Siq, pass up the bone-jarring carriage ride through the Siq, and walk the Siq instead (about a mile). Then, once in the site, walk as much of it as you can. I walked probably three miles while my husband walked at least five or six miles, including some scrabbling up carved cliffside steps. (Camels and small, overburdened burros are available for the weary, but walking gives a much better sense of the scope of the site.) The Treasury is probably the most dramatic of the ruins, and certainly the most iconic, but the many tombs, the cliffs, and the astounding variety of colors in the rock lend to the overall majesty and mystery of the location.



Left: At its narrowest, the Siq is only about 10' wide, with walls that range between 300-600' high. Middle: The Treasury, above, built between ~100 BC and 200 AD). Right: Urn Tomb, most distinctive of the Royal Tombs, built ~70 AD.

After a fulfilling, but exhausting day at Petra, we were taken to our hotel, the charming Beit Zaman, to rest up before our big night out for mansaf. The hotel is located on the site of an authentic 19th century village in nearby Wadi Musa, and it's absolutely charming with its old stone village buildings nestled among vineyards, olive trees, and small courtyards. And the views are exceptional! After resting and cleaning up, we were driven by our trusty guide, Mansour, to our mansaf feast.

Originally a Bedouin dish, mansaf, made of lamb cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt (called jameed) and served with rice, has been adopted as the national dish of Jordan. The lamb is cooked in a broth made with jameed, fresh goat's milk yogurt, and spices, served on a large platter with a layer of flatbread, topped with rice, garnished with roasted almonds and pine nuts, parsley, and topped with a hearty layer of the jameed/yogurt sauce. Mansaf is served on special occasions such as weddings and births, or to honor a guest, and on major holidays. It's traditionally eaten collectively from a large platter in the Bedouin style, sitting around the platter with the left hand behind the back and using the right hand instead of utensils. We hardly put a dent in the huge dish, but loved every bite, and were pretty sure that the kitchen staff ate quite well that night! (The restaurant is usually open just for lunch, but the owner arranged for us to have a private mansaf feast that evening – a real treat.)



Mansaf – you'd better come hungry

Kings Highway Sights and the Dead Sea

On our last day in Jordan, we spent the day driving up the Kings Highway on a slow meander toward the Dead Sea and, eventually, the airport. We visited the towns of Shobak and Kerak, both locations of Crusader castles,



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now in ruins, but quite interesting to tour after reading histories of the crusades, in particular the exploits of Richard I (the Lionheart), King Baldwin IV, and Saladin (among others). Along the way, we stopped to look at two of Jordan's ecotourism sites run by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) – Dana Biosphere Reserve and the Mujib Nature Reserve, which abuts the Dead Sea, and both of which feature hiking, camping, hot springs, birding, and other outdoor activities. Jordan has made an impressive investment in its natural infrastructure.

Among our activities that day were visits to Mt. Nebo (where Moses is said to have seen the Promised Land), Madaba, Tafila, and other cities and sights well known to Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. Madaba is known as the "City of Mosaics," and the Greek Orthodox Basilica of St. George contains the Madaba Mosaic Map, an index map of the entire region. It dates from the 6th century, contains more than two million pieces of colored stone, and depicts terrain, villages, and towns in Palestine and the Nile Delta, including Jerusalem and many other holy sites. The mosaic map even shows fish heading upstream away from the salty Dead Sea.



We also stopped at a resort on the Dead Sea for a dip, a must-do if you're in the area, but something (at least to us) we were glad to be done with too. It's the lowest point on earth (at 1,385 feet below sea level) and, at more than 33% salinity, more a place where you bob around rather than swim. (Almost) best of all is getting a freshwater shower to wash off all that crusty saltiness. But, crusty or not, you've gotta do it.



Bobbing about in the Dead Sea

Mansour continued to indulge our market interests with a visit to Madaba's spice market, where he helped us pick up a bag of zaatar, a wonderful blend of thyme, oregano, toasted sesame seeds, salt, and other spices commonly used on flat bread and heated with a little olive oil drizzled on it for a tasty breakfast snack. He also took us to a grocery store to find jameed (the dried Bedouin yogurt used as the basis for the dish, mansaf, which we enjoyed in

Petra). Finally, we ended up at a small restaurant in Madaba where we enjoyed sajieh (a local Madaba dish, shown below).

So, with pleasantly-full tummies, a stash of overly full digital camera memory sticks, and a bigger stash of spices, foods, and scarves, we prepared to head home. We'll long enjoy our memories of all the wonderful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, history, hospitable and generous people, and other aspects of Egyptian and Jordanian culture. As we said our goodbyes to Mansour and boarded our flight in Amman, we were already wondering when and how we might find our way back again to this fantastic part of the world.



Sajieh (chicken, lam, onion, and flat bread, delivered over a bowl of hot, smoking charcoal pieces)

