

# Travelogue: Egypt

*Excerpt from the Nile website, comparing the travel of two women, myself and Florence Nightengale, 150 years apart! and other parts of Egypt.*

## **INTRODUCTION** (Florence Nightengale, 1849)

In 1849, Florence Nightengale, a 29 – year – old English woman sailed down the Nile. It was a time just before the building of the Aswan Dam, the founding of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and the waves of tourists who later followed in search of Egyptian antiquities and experience.

It was also 5 years before this woman would become a legend, a time of personal anguish and conflict over whether to dare dedicate her life to the care of the sick and follow a spiritual calling. Why such a dilemma? Because this was the era in which nurses were only known for promiscuity and drunkenness, and no one in her family could relate to her desire. It was precisely this concept of hospitals and organized care that was so alien to the people of the time, and yet, it was entirely hers to discover.

Florence used the trip to help resolve the personal struggle raging inside her, and to formulate what would become her life`s contribution.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 1849, a journey down the Nile was considered a romantic one. Most Egyptians had never seen a white woman before, there in the land of the Arabian nights. She was invited to travel with friends and in a boat originally set aside for an Egyptian hareem, a fact that appealed to the exotic in all of them. Called a dahabieh, it was the first boat to get as far as it did along the Nile, shooting down rapids in the southern part of Egypt as well as past temples still widely unexplored. The journey was to cover 750 miles, from Cairo to Ipsamboul (Abu Simbel) and would take approximately 3 months.

Florence was happy enough to accept what it was like to be living on the Nile and writing but her preference was often to disembark

and wander the desert by herself, explore villages, and ride across open plains, becoming "the wild ass of the wilderness" as she referred to herself. She was not what others might surmise: either sedentary or snobbish. As a foreigner too, it was very likely she enjoyed more privileges than she would have ever had at home.

Around this time, Mehemet Ali and later his sons ruled the country. The father was a man who would as soon order a murder as eat his breakfast, according to Florence, as it did not spoil his appetite, while Ibrahim, the first ruling son, very much preferred the idea as it increased his zest for the meal. The glorious golden and purple vault of heaven hung over this land of spirit where good and evil seemed to wrestle side by side. And so, Florence's journey begins.

## **INTRODUCTION** (Ellen Lichtig, 1997)

I took to travelling the Nile almost 150 years after Florence made her voyage, in the fall of 1997. A woman in my early 40's, I was not motivated by the hope of resolving any particular dilemma, save to come through the experience in one piece and enjoy the adventure.

Egypt is a country that can both scare and intrigue. It was scary for me because I knew I was entering it just 2 days after a tour bus of foreigners just outside of the Cairo Egyptian museum had been bombed, and intrigued because it was known to be a land of spiritual knowledge. It also had the river that encouraged so much natural life around it, so many interesting tales and so much community, things I don't think many of us living on the coasts really come to know.

I told myself I would document my travels, and be the stronger for it. Sure, I would join the many others before me, visiting the Nile on felucca, then follow the major towns on the shore up to Cairo and later, the Sinai as well.

The trip lasted one month, a length of time I was repeatedly told was "too long" to visit Egypt.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 1997, Hosni Mubarek, an acclaimed moderate, was Egypt's ruling president who faced, among other troubles, rising Muslim fundamentalism, a development which had become a thorn even in

his side. As a country clearly dependent on tourism with little other developed industry aside from agricultural products, this internal terrorism didn't seem welcomed by anyone who wasn't either raging or a fundamentalist. Rather it only made life harder for the vast numbers of people who made Egypt their home.

Aside from the Aswan Dam and the High Dam which gives Egypt control over its most acknowledged historically "wild element", the Nile waters, there is little else a foreigner might decide is controlled. Services are erratic, weather is often depressingly humid, and a smoothly functioning infrastructure to resolve civic (hey, even tourist) problems a far away dream.

Upon boarding the plane and hearing a man explain the virtues of each of his four wives, I knew that I would have my own waters to navigate, whether I was on the Nile or not. And so, my own trip begins.

Other Parts of Egypt

## **RIVER LIFE**

The Nile was amazing! Yes, I had a wicked cold, got contaminated by all the foods, fought the heat and had to win battles against an army of flies deterred only by my trusty spray of deet. But here I was, spending 3 days on a river where my only responsibility was to make sure I relieved myself (thank god for ziplock baggies) without spoiling our felucca. What do you do in an environment like this? Nothing. Your thoughts move as quietly as the river, you slow down, you watch the ever-changing shoreline, and you think of the simple life. Our guide didn't have much; and he worked hard to maneuver us through windy moments at midnite and windless moments during the day, yet he had this: a sense of serenity and a gracious hospitality. It was green and lush, full of small and not so small animals roaming, quiet farmers doing their every day thing, kids riding donkeys, and enough room for making plans about what one was put in the world for and where one could fit next. He was the captain of his own ship, and we, in these moments, captain of ours.

As I float along the Nile, I feel myself a part of many worlds. This pastoral one of long ago and the one my thoughts create for me now. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to realize all this is not some dream sequence that had been privately shown to me and me alone but actually part of Egypt`s enduring and ever present landscape. Here is a shepherd, a lush and fertile valley, and cattle, a scene so simple that it washes ashore into consciousness my own roots. I think of my immediate family, then the family I grew up with and then, families of others, all the way back to an imagined one from the bible, that of Moses, and the very first nomadic women. These were the shores of many others too, but for me, finally out IN the land of Egypt, my first and only personally felt tie to the ancient times.

## **ASWAN**

Aswan is a bustling marketplace. It has people pouring in from the outlying areas, all the wares you might expect, and is of a scale that you can take in. (unlike Khani – Khali, the marketplace in old Cairo, which is pretty much swamped with tourists). I had an interesting experience when I was in the marketplace. I found myself feeling sick and needed to take a rest. One man said, "Yes, I`ld like to help you", and promptly led me into his store. I got this distinct impression: the fact that I was feeling sick wasn`t the point for him for he started right in on his sales. Insistent to rest, I left the shop and went across the street.

Another gentleman came forth but this time offered me some tea, found a cushion on which I could sit, and went to find some aspirin I might be willing to take. Moments later, the first man came storming across the street, and demanded why I had not stayed in his shop. "Isn`t it obvious?" I responded. "The customer service is better over here." It had barely occurred to him, this mixing of female and "customer", an experience which would later repeat itself.

A second story was told to me at this point. This shopkeeper started to describe his interesting experiences selling to foreigners. He told me how one day he haggled for a particularly long time with a gentleman from England who had offered him some money for a painting done in relief. The shopkeeper and he went back and forth, a tiring episode for the seller because he was having a particularly

bad month, hardly making any sales. "No more than 300" the foreigner finally pronounced. At the end of the negotiation, desperate for money, the shopkeeper told me he finally relented. "O.K." he said. "It`s yours for 300, a price that barely covered his costs." With good form nevertheless, he thanked the gentlemen.

Shortly thereafter, immersed in his private feelings of despondency, he was slow to realize what had actually happened. The Englishman had been bargaining in dollars; he in pounds. He nearly fainted; through this transaction, he recorded the best month ever, at a time when he thought nothing could ever get worse.

## **ABU SIMBEL**

It is hard to relay to anyone who has not been there what is so special about Abu Simbel. Cryptic shapes inside the temples repeat themselves, huge statues of the same man (giving new meaning to a leader who is "full of himself") form a colonnade around the front, the place is often swirling in sand, and beyond it, there's not a thing in sight. Yet, millions come to visit the temple.

Some come, as I did, from the town of Aswan, leaving at 3:30 a.m. weathering the heat, muslim prayer music, desert sands, and flat tires to get there before it closes at 10:00 a.m. Others (Florence as a matter of fact) came by boat. She was someone who instinctively felt its allure, and said "You feel the power of leaving the boat and running up to the temple at any hour of the day or night, without a whole escort at your heels; the silence, stillness, and freedom of it were what we shall never have again." Of course, she visited Abu Simbel before the swarms of tourists, with almost no one there, through an avalanche of sand, which kept the statues in front almost completely hidden. To her, and many after her, it was (is) a quiet mystery.

A few facts about the place. Ramses II was known to be an outstanding warrior who ruled for over 66 years. It is to him (and to Ra, the sun god) that the temple is dedicated, and to whom the exploits on the walls are attributed. However little is known of him. His wife, Nefertari, has her own temple that Ramses built for her, called the Temple of Hathor whom Nefertari revered.

People have different opinions of Ramses, and Abu Simbel. Florence came to see him as representative of the calm soul, pointing out the look of intense spiritual repose on the faces of the figures inside. "To us, toil and excitement and restless anxiety are so familiar. To Greeks, intellectual activity. To the Egyptians, this calm." Also, she noted that in image after image, Ramses offered truth to the gods, a quality which benefits others, not just yourself. He was his own leader, out in front, taking risks. Finally, she saw here the beauty of a soul; though not a feature was anatomically correct, the whole effect was expressive of spiritual grandeur, and perhaps because no sounds could reach her there, she felt a holy, sensible progression of time.

Others took Ramses for a vain and arrogant man who hungered vainly for immortality. He seats himself among the greatest gods, worships himself, builds the temple so that twice a year, the sun shines directly on him amongst these mythological giants, and keeps the longest rule in Egyptian history. He removes all traces of his elder brother from existence and writes: "The universal lord magnified me". He takes 110 wives, reports his personal valour, overlooking his own bad generalship on the temple walls, etc. You get the picture.

The temple itself was carved from sandstone, out of an existing cliff. Then, because of the building of the dam which would have flooded it, it had to be moved. Because of this 52,000 people lost their homes and way of living. Still it was to be a national treasure. Four proposals were put forth, one of which was to have it become an underwater museum. It wasn't accepted because preservation was such an important concern, and people didn't trust the current technology. So, Abu Simbel was moved to higher ground, funded by UNESCO and completed in 1966. Though the tomb was robbed, Ramses' mummy can still be seen in the Egyptian museum in Cairo and his temple, after 33 centuries, is still weathering well.

## **LUXOR**

Luxor is known as the City of the Dead. It has kept the remains of Egyptian's earliest in what is named the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. It is also where the recent mass shooting of foreigners took place, in the fall of 1997.

The ancient Egyptians said, "To speak of the dead is to make them live again." True enough. Few other countries can tell us as much about the daily life of its earliest people as Luxor can. Their ideals were made known by way of their gods described on the walls of all the tombs. Though they were intensely respectful of these gods, the ancient people embraced the most matter of fact reality possible—the magnified attributes of animals, for instance, with their best senses exaggerated. Florence commented "You see a nation so spiritualised that death was to them more interesting than life, and it didn't differ from life much either. Life was so small a fragment of the whole."

Luxor means palace. To sit amongst its columns, one can feel this idea of a palace. It is open to the sky, and lined with trees and lights. At night, it feels joyful as well as a bit serene. One can sit here and think. Across the way is the Avenue of the Sphinxes, hundreds of statues in two rows, commanding, cool.

I saw the temple of Hatshepsut here, one of the first female pharaohs, and the tomb of Nefertari, a goddess whose temple colors are brilliant even to this day. I ate pigeon for my first and last time. I soaked in the sun, really soaked. I heard the dramatic opera Aida, two hundred voices in a private hall. It was an eye – opening place to be in this place where death and the idea of transformation was so revered. But like all experiences in Egypt, you feel the paradox. Life and death so closely interwoven was perhaps too awesome a reminder. I didn't exactly regret it when the time reminded me it was my turn to leave.