

I was in Egypt for a training session, and didn't really have time to take extra days for sight-seeing, unfortunately, so I got to see far too little of both Cairo and Alexandria, but still, I felt like I saw so much . . .

We (me, my boss, his wife, and two staff from the Macedonia microfinance program) arrived at the Cairo airport in the wee hours of the morning, along with a vast throng of people returning from the Hajj. The airport was blanketed with pilgrims in flowing, pristinely white garments. It was gorgeous and exotic . . . for about five minutes. Then it became extraordinarily irritating, as the returnees promptly began jockeying to get through customs, shoving and crowding us, and generally utterly ignoring the concept of orderly lines. We finally exited into the receiving area, where even more people were packed into the small reception hall, awaiting the arrival of their friends and family. It was all very overwhelming.

That press of people characterized the entire trip. Cairo and Alexandria are huge cities – Cairo has a population of over 16 million, Alexandria has a population of over 4 million. Alexandria alone has a population twice the size of Macedonia, or twice the size of Belgrade. So it wasn't just huge for me, it was huge for everyone in our group. Everywhere you turn there are people, and more dangerously, cars. The traffic must be seen to be believed. It's everyone for themselves, at the maximum speed possible, and at night, most drivers don't turn on their headlights because they think it conserves the car battery to keep them off. To add to the potential for mayhem, in Alexandria the taxi drivers decorate their dashboards and windshields with an endless variety of toys that dangle, light up, spin, and generally distract and obstruct vision, which are often set off by a luridly colored faux fur dashboard cover.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, chronologically. We had one day to see Cairo before going to Alexandria for the training, so we did the tourist thing and hired a van and a guide. In nine-and-a-half hours, including a stop for lunch and two stops that were primarily designed to sell us something, we saw the Museum of Antiquities, the Citadel and Alabaster Mosque, a papyrus institute (a five minute exhibition on the making of papyrus, and 45 minutes for shopping in the attached gallery and bazaar), the pyramids and the Sphinx at Giza, a perfume shop (5 minutes of watching a glassblower make tiny perfume bottles, and 25 minutes of listening to a perfume oil salesman's pitch), and the main bazaar.

It was such a full day. We zipped around Cairo in our little van, crossing paths with other tourists and being accosted by a succession of merchants, beggars and hustlers. On the way, we got to see quite a bit of the city, which is just massive. Modern roads have been built on overpasses, where you can catch glimpses of the older streets of the city below, where horse-drawn carts creep along, while patchwork black-and-white taxis zip by.

The Alabaster Mosque looms over Cairo from within the Citadel (a fortress built by Saladin in the 12th century, atop the hills overlooking the city). From the shadow of its massive silvery domes, you look out over the densely packed sprawl of downtown Cairo, out over rooftops that seem to sit cheek-to-cheek, all the way to the edge of the

desert, where the pyramids of Giza are drawn dimly through the smog. It's an awesome sight, one of those moments when it seemed I felt the weight of history – not unlike the feeling I had in Split last year, shopping in the stores housed in the ruins of Diocletian's palace, but magnified, because these were The Pyramids I was looking at.



Cairo, though grimy, is green with trees and growth along the Nile, which flows slow and wide through the city. But the greenery ends abruptly before the pyramids. Driving to Giza, surrounded by fertile land, you can see where the desert begins, abruptly – on one side trees, on the other, sand. Suddenly, it becomes clear just how crucial the Nile is to Egypt. You can hear about it from National Geographic a thousand times, but to suddenly see it, to step (well, drive, in our case) across that line really slams the lesson home.

Despite the constant exposure of their images, the pyramids are still breathtaking. They are incredibly, unfathomably huge and old. They sit in the sand like perfect triangular mountains, and it's hard to believe that they were built by human hands – not only because of the size of the structures themselves, but because of the size of the blocks used to build them. The blocks are massive. At ground level, they dwarf the people that crowd around the base of the pyramid. And then you look up, and up, and up into the sun and the bright blue sky to the peak, and you can forget for a moment that you're surrounded by tourists, roving vendors, and camel riders because you're trying to wrap your mind around the idea that people, people with basic tools and technologies, built this monstrous thing.



Its amazing, the amount of energy that the ancient Egyptian nobility invested in death. The pyramid of Khufu (Cheops), the largest at Giza, took 20 years to build. Twenty years, not including the planning involved in choosing the site and mobilizing the resources necessary to begin construction. You see this investment on a smaller, but no less impressive scale in the collection of King Tut's treasures at the Antiquities Museum. The sheer volume of what was recovered from the tomb, considering that Tut was a minor king and that it's likely that the tomb had been plundered sometime in the centuries before it was discovered, is staggering. And then you begin to examine the craftsmanship of the treasures. The artwork, jewelry, sarcophagi, and masks buried with King Tut are so incredibly elaborate, and so finely detailed with inlays and etchings, that they would be breathtaking even if they weren't worked in gold, silver, and gemstones. But they are, and all this expensive and gorgeous work was just buried. It was just incomprehensible to me.

We saw the two larger pyramids, but not the smaller third one. A section of the second pyramid was open, so we paid our 10 Egyptian pounds (about \$2.50) and stepped into a long line of tourists doubling over to squeeze through the low doorway at the base of the pyramid. It was the beginning of a long, claustrophobic descent down a steeply sloping passage, warm and airless and smelling of old sweat, and the backside of the person in front of me was all that I could see. The passage finally opened into a short hallway where the ceiling was, thankfully, high enough to allow me to straighten up. But all too soon it led to another long, low-ceiling passage – this time going up. This one led to a large room where an older man pointed at a low stone platform and a few other things and shouted in “tourist” English, repeating a few phrases over and over:

“Old entrance!” “New entrance!” “King!” and then put his hand out for payment. It got to be a standing joke that if you took too deep a breath, someone would demand 5 pounds because you were using oxygen.



We saw the Sphinx last. As we approached it from the east side, coming down from the pyramids, I was disappointed. It was much smaller than I had pictured it, and where it sits, the land slopes down from the pyramids, which makes it seem even shorter. Then we circled around to face it from the front, and saw the Sphinx, centered perfectly in the middle of the line of pyramids as they receded in size into the distance. The ancient Egyptians clearly had a potent sense of drama to accompany their architectural skills. The scene was so perfect it seemed alien – these gorgeously geometric structures rising out of the barren desert landscape, reflecting each other perfectly, fronted by the enigmatic face and elegantly crouched body of the Sphinx.

The next day, we got on the train to Alexandria. It was a very pleasant trip. The afternoon sun bathed the landscape in warm gold deepening slowly to the rich tones of sunset. The train runs through lands irrigated by the Nile, so there was plenty to observe – there is no “empty” land along the Nile between Cairo and Alexandria. There is plenty of distance between the two cities, but we never passed through an area that I would describe as rural. There just isn’t enough land and water to allow people to sprawl out.

Alexandria is strung out along the Mediterranean coast, and the waterfront area of the city is very modern and expensive-looking. A wide highway runs the length of the shore, allowing traffic to fly from one end of the city to the other. The hotel where we stayed was situated in such a way that every room had at least a snippet of a view of the sea – a gorgeous view to wake up to in the mornings.

One evening, I set off in search of an internet cafe, and decided that I would probably have more luck finding one if I got out of the waterfront area, which is, naturally, the high-rent district. It didn't take me long to get thoroughly lost. Back in the narrower streets of the city, the scene is grimier, livelier, and much more colorful. People pack the streets, dodging between cars under vivid neon signs in flowing Arabic script. It was hectic, and it took me awhile to get myself found again, but I really enjoyed it.

I got back to the hotel just in time for dinner. One of the staff members from the Egypt office took us to his favorite restaurant. The food was great, and afterwards we wandered a bit through the streets downtown. Our host suggested we go to a "nearby" cafe, "Just 15 minutes away" he assured us. Fifteen minutes later, it was "very close, only 10 more minutes," and then he stopped to ask for directions. Fortunately, it was a gorgeous night for walking, and our host was good-natured enough not to mind the teasing he got about his sense of direction.

We got to do very little sightseeing in Alexandria, but we did end the training early one afternoon to pay a visit to the Library. Nerd that I am, I found it very exciting. We'd driven past the building several times, and found the architecture very interesting. It's a large, pale semi-circular building (meant to suggest the rising sun, as we found out during our tour), with a small hemisphere in front that houses the planetarium. At night, the facade of the building is softly lit, and the planetarium is ringed with concentric blueish-purple neon lights, giving it a space-age look. Inside, the library is huge, with expansive spaces for study and research, and a large display of gorgeous ancient illuminated Arabic manuscripts. It also houses a replica of the Rosetta Stone. It will house a collection of over 4 million books and other publications in multiple languages. It's intended to be a center for regional and international study and learning.



That's about it for Egypt. It seems like it's been ages since I was there. Look for more dispatches soon about my other travels this spring.

25 May 2002

In local news, Skopje is enjoying a lovely late spring. Because there was so much snow this winter, and so much rain earlier this year, this spring has been incredibly lush. The roses are thriving, and the short rains we've had recently have left the air perfumed with the scent of roses and honeysuckle. The sidewalk cafes are full, and there has been plenty of sunshine to enjoy. On the political front, things are much calmer than they were this time last year. Tensions may not be gone, but they're much lower than they were last spring.

In personal news, I'm working with my boss to plan the handover of my position to a local staff member. The process should be complete by the end of September. So I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do next. I'm not ready to go back to the US yet. I don't foresee another position opening up for me, so I'm checking out other potential jobs. I'm also thinking about grad school, although I haven't figured out where I would want to go or what I want to study. I'll keep you posted as things evolve.