

Reflections on Egypt - Cairo -

We were flying over the deep blue Mediterranean watching the many clouds below us dance slowly on the wind. I saw a single boat moving through their shadows on the water. The flight was approaching Africa. Suddenly the shoreline emerged below us and stretched away in the distance. The wide hot desert began. Hills of sand stretched endlessly over the land, seemingly barren of life. Out of the sand, small buildings looked fragile next to the desert. But more and more buildings massed below us in effect to combat the forces of the mighty desert.

We were approaching the fertile Valley of the Lower Nile. The mass of buildings was becoming Cairo, the largest city on the continent. As we dropped lower to the city the faces of the buildings and land came more into focus. Suddenly the airport came into view. After we touched down on the airport we taxied down the

runway. Pools of water supported small marshes with a solitary bird in one. Planes of Sweden and Saudi Arabia stood on the field among the Egyptian aircraft. We slowed down and stopped. It was time to enter new and ancient Egypt.

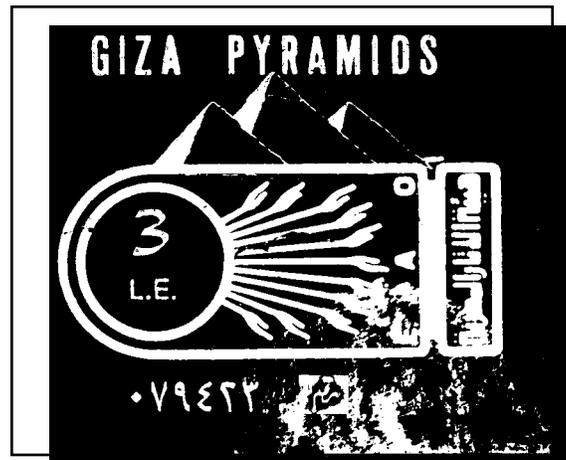
Into a large open cavernous building we were squeezed through customs to a huge open area crowded with people. Some of us spotted our T.W.A. group sign and gathered around the man holding it. After a short while we were led like cattle through a door into a trench lined with strangely clothed people. The dress and dialect of the people introduced us to some of the ways of the land. Through a parking lot we were taken to a bus. I noticed a thin olive-skinned young lady near the front. She was our tour guide. Her name was Lilia. Lilia introduced herself and began a short speech on Cairo and its people. I only half-listened but as she went on I became more interested. Finally the bus started across the parking lot to one of the main roads through Cairo. As we blended in with the motor and ridden traffic I noticed a bedouin woman off to the side of the road leading a flock of sheep to market. We left

her behind quickly as we went into the wild crazy, traffic of Cairo. In front of us cars and trucks darted in and out of the lanes on the road and only honked their horns to signal. On one side of the road people rode horses and donkeys in a slow lane. We learned through Lilia that we were heading across the city to the Holiday Inn Pyramid Hotel on the other side of the city.

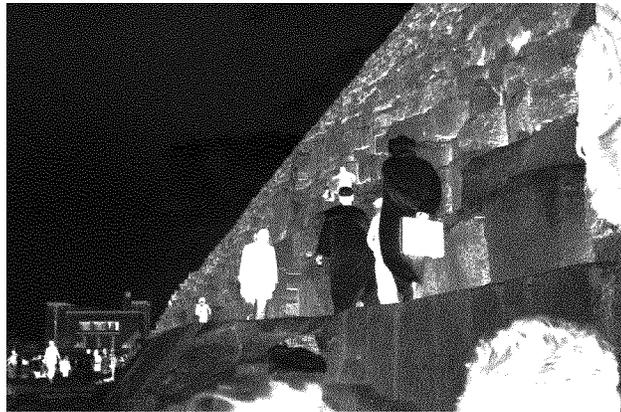
Bob Buzbee

Reflections on Egypt - Great Giza Pyramid -

We were going inside the great pyramid of Cheops, up the hill from the Holiday Inn Pyramid hotel. We rode to the awesome structures in a taxi. On the top we followed the road. On one side of the monument groups of tourist massed around; on the other a steep drop and Cairo spread out below. Our taxi-driver guide stopped not far from a herd of camels on a nearby hill. We got out to stretch our necks and looked up the top



of the tomb. As we walked to the “door” of the monument we saw various groups of people who were gathered in its shadow. There was also a herd of goats wandering over scattered granite rocks near the base of the pyramid. When we reached the tomb we went up stairs cut out of the stones to about the third tier of stones, 35 feet up.



Upon departing from our taxi we had purchased, as my brother John said later that day, a “three-hundred-year-old guide”. He was a survivor of both Cairo and the desert and did indeed seem a bit old. His life seemed written on the many deep lines on his face. He led us through the

robbers' tunnel. The path hewn into the rock was not the original entrance into the tomb. We passed it on our way up the steep tunnel. Glowing electric lights lit our way from the ceiling as we walked up a plank of wood with pieces of wood, placed about a foot apart to step on. There was barely enough room for those going up and those going down to pass. Our guide stopped us in a small enclave and we looked up toward what still lay many feet above us: what the wooden planks on either side of the chamber led to; the sepulcher chamber. He began to speak upon the architecture of this rock structure. He told us that no mortar had been used in the binding together of these massive granite stones. Whereafter he spoke of the long dead owner of this massive structure. He talked next of our short journey ahead to the heart of the pyramid.

We began the steep climb. He stayed behind. Right before we reached the main chamber we saw a smaller one blocked off by a metal grating. Along the wall seemingly evenly spaced air shafts led to the outside. When we entered into the chamber it reminded me of an oversized hand-

ball court. At one end away from the entrance stood the empty sarcophagus. The solemn mood of the chamber did not seem to be bothered by a few Japanese tourist flashing pictures. Unlike earlier tourist we had heard of, we did not try out the size of the empty stone coffin by laying in it. After awhile we started down the rock tunnel leading outside. Along the path, on either side, we grabbed a wooden railing attached to rock. Our guide met us as we passed the enclave. When we came to the door out, our guide introduced us to a keeper-of-the-gate-to-the-pyramid. He seemed satisfied after a number of Egyptian pounds came into his hands. We left our guide, likewise satisfied.

Bob Buzbee

Reflections on Egypt - Essence of Cairo -

After we talked with Lilia in the T.W.A. office in downtown Cairo, we went into the city. Lilia had told us where there was a cloth bazaar and how to get there. Our first priority was to cross one of the main roads through Cairo. We found that it was best to cross in large groups. Cars were less inclined to plow into large groups. We eventually made our way across buses, cars and curbs to the market section of town. A huge sign above us on a building advertised "Sprite". A river of moving people crowded around us on the sidewalk and around parked cars. Suddenly, as we walked down one of the streets, a young man called to us from one of the shops. He inquired about our nationalities. When he found out we were from America he inquired further. Eventually he led us into his family's small display shop of essences. In a small room various large bottles were filled with clear substances on shelves along the walls. He had a small desk in one corner. Along two of the walls were couches. He ex-

plained to us that some of these essences were shipped to France to be diluted with alcohol and made into perfume. Somewhere, miles distant from us in the Nile valley, vast cultivated fields of flowers lay, he said, that the essences were made from. He told us his family also did business in New York. He spent most of the year there. He and my mother talked. I mainly listened. We sat along the wall. He told my mother and I a little about when he first went to New York and got mugged.

Our host and my mother discussed the sale of these essences. They were much stronger than perfume and colognes and their scent lasted longer. Also they didn't hurt some peoples skin as the alcohol in perfume sometimes does. He asked my mother the age and hair color of those for whom she was buying vials of essences for. He had a certain essence or blend for each type, male or female. Another man, a bit older than our host, took some of the bottles off of the shelf and put them on the desk. Then from a box he extracted much smaller bottles. After the variously shaped vials were filled according to what my mother had said and packed in a heavy cardboard box, he gave us free two small boxes of incense and he kissed us both on

the cheek as we left.

We were still searching for the cloth bazaar. A few blocks ahead we found it. Inside a large room, off the sidewalk, long tables were stacked with cloth. Women flocked around the tables while in the center of the tables would be one person. The person in the middle would mark what they wanted then give it back to them so they could pay for it in a booth along a wall before they left. I stood outside while my mom went in to purchase cloth. I watched the stream of people moving by. Soon we were walking back under the giant Sprite bottle to eat lunch at the Cairo Hilton.

Bob Buzbee

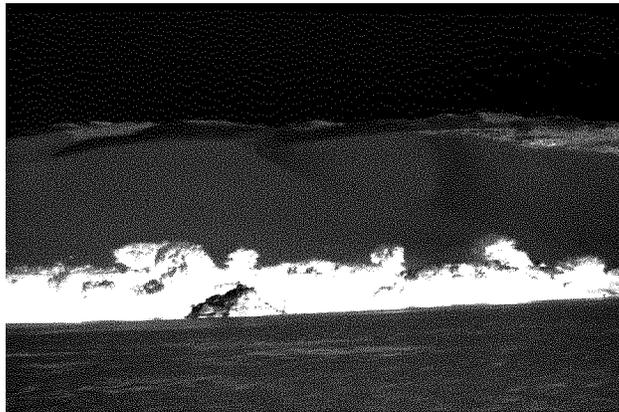
Reflections on Egypt - Aswan -

Leaving Cairo on the train we watched the lights along the rails. Here and there we saw fires lit, crowded around by people. Once in a while we passed by open and empty markets throughout the city. After about half an hour we were still traveling through Cairo. Finally the lights became more scattered and we left the city. Now only the dark desert and the river Nile loomed outside our windows.

The next morning the train stopped along side a canal of the Nile in a small town. Outside our windows we saw the village life passing down one of the main streets of the town. Horse drawn covered carts pulled the bourgeois around in their businesses and a few cars and trucks sped by. My brother and I were served breakfast in our small chamber on the train. We folded our beds back into the wall and sat down on a long couch against the wall. After eating we put our small cabin back in order. Eventually we learned through various translations of French,

Arabic, and English over the microphone in our room that there had been an accident on the tracks up ahead. At least we had eaten. Also we learned that our destination, Aswan, was still five hours ahead.

Eventually Lilia led our group out of the train to wait for a promised bus. We walked around the train to the street entrance to the station. The station looked similar to the train stations in America. We sprawled over the stone steps in front of it and waited. I took a few pictures of the Islamic round metal tower across from us on the corner. It soared above the rest of the buildings near it. It called for prayer from its speakers at the top five





times a day. Originally someone had shouted from the top to do the same.

Enterprising children sold some sort of food in rolled up cones made of newspaper in front of us. Carts and cars sped by us in the hot sun. Suddenly our bus came and it was air-conditioned. We made our way out of town toward Aswan. The road followed along the Nile, as had the train tracks. We went along a thin fertile strip of land by the Nile by small groves of midget banana trees and through sandy villages. Usually on one side would be the fertile strip, then on the other would be rocks and sand as far as the eye could see. Some of the towns were made up of rock dwellings on the desert floor, while

others were perched above it on rocky hills. The traffic on the road was mostly horse-drawn. Sometimes through irrigation, larger tracts of land had been sewn with what looked like hay, bundles of which were being loaded on a cart on a small rail system. Then we saw along the way six or seven carts which were hooked together. I never saw what pulled these. For five hours we went through this contrasting landscape. All during this time we had occasionally seen English signs on the roadside telling us the distance to Aswan in kilometers. Finally, only one more to go and we would be in the city.

Before entering the town, we went through a road block. The soldiers sitting in the shade just smiled as our bus went around it. Aswan was beginning to look like an important city. It even had traffic lights.

Before 1960 it had just been a very old quarry town. The great pyramids had been made from granite from here, by floating the granite blocks on boats down the Nile. In 1960 the Soviet Union had begun a dam on the river near Aswan,

now called the Aswan Dam. In 1970 when the dam was finished the Egyptians had thanked them, then told them to leave. Ever since Aswan has been growing.

A glimpse of the Nile showed us its wide expanse. A few barges were tied along it. Our bus stopped along side the river. Our boat was waiting, docked below. Before we went down to it we were taken to large sailboats to sail on the Nile. Each boat held twelve people. Across the river, hills of rock and sand looked down on us. We pushed off of the bank and sailed toward a marble temple perched on a steep hill overlooking the Nile. Only the clicking of our cameras broke the quiet spell of the river as silently we sailed.

Our boats docked in a palm tree shaded bay. We stepped onto a sandy beach and walked around small sand dunes to a trail leading up. Near the start of the path merchants sold trinkets. Most of us avoided them and continued on. As the path led us higher I noticed sand dunes off to one side shifting with the wind along the face of the boulder. When we reached the top the marble structure was very impressive. It was a square building with

a huge dome on top. The whole building was made of marble. We had to take off our shoes before entering. Inside were meticulously made marble tables and alters. In the corners of the ceiling, concave recesses had been crafted instead of sharp edges. One of our guides told us that the temple had been built about 25 years ago in recognition of the faith of the Shite Moslems. It had been built by contributions from the followers of a local traveling "Holy Man". Below us, closer to the Nile stood the architect's house, whose widow still lived in some during the year.

I carried my sandals on the way down and went barefoot until reboarding the

sailboat. After we had all loaded our boats, the men set sail toward a large island planted with a lush garden. After we docked and got off off the boat, our steersman informed us he would pick us up on the other side of the island. We went up rock steps to the main path through the garden. Tall palms and other kinds of trees lined the path. Our guide told us who had begun this garden and gathered the various specimens of trees and plants together. We followed him through the grove breathing the very fragrant air. One boy was selling bags of locally grown peanuts. I eventually bought two bags. Down on the other side of the island our boats were waiting. We boarded and sailed in the dusk back to our floating hotel. Tomorrow we would see the Aswan dam and part of Lake Nasser formed by it.

In the morning for breakfast we had croissant rolls, hot tea and a sweet red juice made from berries; almost the same as every other morning. I was getting tired of cold rolls every morning.

Soon we were heading up the stone stairs to our bus. The bus went through

the city. Street vendors and long robed men on horses and donkeys carrying their produce to market caught our attention on the road. Sometimes we saw children playing beyond the road by sandy houses. And sometimes instead of traffic lights policemen would direct us through the intersections. Eventually we approached the outskirts of town and left the skyscrapers behind. Suddenly on our right we noticed what looked like a modern apartment building. Our guide informed us that it had been built and used to house the Soviet engineers and workers who had worked on the dam. It still lay a few miles further. When we came within sight of the dam we noticed armed soldiers in fenced off installations near it. The dam was made up of built-up mounds of earth against a long concrete buttress. The bus stopped near the middle of it in a parking lot. We jumped off of the bus to view the massive structure. On one side Lake Nasser began, on the other hydroelectric generators stood. The lake was more impressive than the dam. But the dam reaped different benefits than the lake. Ten generators had been built by the Soviets, yet only three were in use. The crocodiles were all gone from the



Lower Nile because of it. Now the yearly build-up of silt along the fertile Lower Nile was gone. Future engineers would try to remedy the situation . This time though, they would be British and American.

Bob Buzbee

Reflections on Egypt - Obelisk -

We were sitting around the airport waiting in Luxor to fly to Cairo. I got up to stretch my legs. I carried my heavy black soapstone obelisk with me. Beforehand I had purchased it in the Valley of The Kings and hadn't had time to pack it. Lilia looked towards me and inquired about it. I told her it was heavy and handed it to her. She turned it around and felt the designs on each side. I watched her. She looked up and handed it back to me. I smiled and continued on.

Suddenly over the speaker came our flight number. We massed to go through the gate to the runway. The guard, who was armed with a submachine gun, grinned as he handled my obelisk, when we went through security. We walked across the runway to our plane. After I found my seat I was surprised to be next to two business men. They were discussing, in German, something from the newspaper one of them had. I situated my obelisk between the seats so it wouldn't

be jarred. I sat back and got out my small socialistic survey of some western writers, which I had bought at a trinket shop where I had extracted it from under Spanish western novels. It had been printed in England, ten years before I was born. Suddenly the conversation of the gentleman stopped. The one sitting next to me asked in English where I had purchased my obelisk. I told him where and that I thought it was soapstone. He seemed satisfied and turned back to his newspaper. Soon we would be in Cairo for the last time..

Bob Buzbee



Buzbees on the Road - Egypt