

a Tower of Babel, as if all nations are there. Getting around is easy as a lot of English is spoken and the locals are very helpful and obliging

“My tour group started off with the Cairo Museum, the new Coptic Museum and the Coptic church in the old Christian quarter. Tutankhamen’s funeral mask in the Cairo Museum was amazing – I was mesmerised by it. Cairo is a huge, modern, dusty city with masses of traffic and humanity. Crossing the road is a mission, as they drive on the right side of the road. You just have to walk across slowly and let the cars dodge you. When I was there, people were very upset that the price of petrol had just risen to 30 cents a litre! There is a sense of poverty, but they have a nation that is so rich in history. Behind the buildings, you can see pyramids rising up in the heat haze. It’s unreal! The markets in Cairo were so interesting. There were gorgeous spices – really tempting for an ex-chef, but of course, I couldn’t take anything back.”

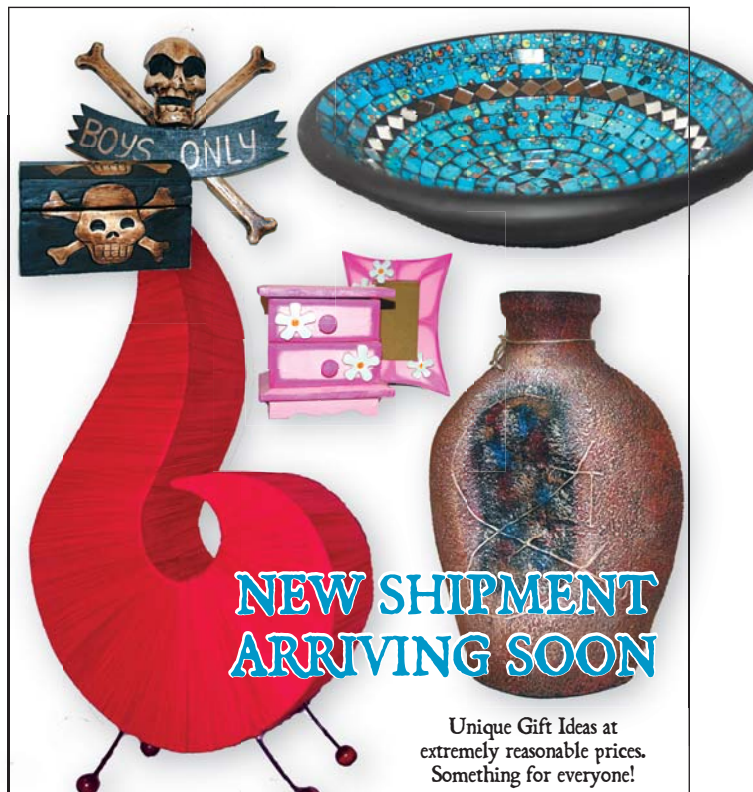
The Great Pyramid and the Sphinx may well be the most photographed monuments in the world, but to actually be there, camel-and-all is a unique experience for every visitor. From Cairo to Aswan was a 16 hour overnight train trip to see the magnificent temples of Ramses 11 at Abu Simbel, saved from immersion when the High Dam was constructed. Ramses 11 is traditionally regarded as the greatest and longest ruling of all the pharaohs, taking the throne in 1279BC. His mummy is now in the Cairo Museum. The smaller of the two temples is dedicated to his wife Queen Nefertari and the Goddess Hathor. Allen’s tour was part of thirty buses convoyed to the temple on the Sudanese border, with military escorts. Guards have accompanied tours since raids on tourists several years ago.

“We had three hours to take everything in before starting a three day cruise on the Nile from Aswan to Luxor, in one of the dozens of riverboats - the degree of opulence depending on the price. Boats moor together and passengers walk through them all until they come to their craft. The cruise was a great way to watch everyday life on the banks of the Nile, stop at temples along the way and go back to the boat to cool down with air conditioned cabins.

“The first temple stop was the Temple of Philae dedicated to the Goddess Isis, where we saw a Night Light show. We were given the history of the place and gods and goddesses in story form, very entertaining along with the lighting effects. They were visually stunning on the temple walls. The next temple was Kom Ombo built to the gods Sobek and Haroeris, followed by the Temple of Edfu, built to the god Horus. This is a temple of immense proportions, with huge soaring columns. The Luxor Temple of Karnak was just awe-inspiring, the largest man-made site in the world covering 65 acres, containing many temples. We saw three tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Luxor – it was amazing, but incredibly hot there.

“An overview to encapsulate Egypt” was how Allen describes his 55 minute flight at dawn from Luxor in a hot air balloon. “It was exhilarating and cool floating over the Valley of the Queens. There were 30 passengers in the basket in a fleet of 15 balloons and we could see how the green around the Nile just stops and the rest is barren desert. The Nile really is the lifeblood of Egypt.”

From Luxor, it was another overnight train journey back to Cairo, before leaving the desert heat of the ancient world for rainy New Zealand.



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