

PORT SAID AND THE PYRAMIDS

Our first view of Port Said is early in the morning of the 21st of October. The temperature is in the mid 20's centigrade and climbs throughout the day.

We have a tour planned today which will take us to Cairo, visiting the museum there, and onwards to a lunch in a 5* hotel before visiting the pyramids.

When we disembark we are met by dozens of street sellers who give us plastic bags and then want us to pay for them! We have experienced this before, but now it seems easier to avoid them. Perhaps it is something to do with our past experiences, or maybe even the Travelscope "Guest Lecturer" badges that we wear at all times keep them at bay!



Our tour starts from the quayside in Port Said, which seems as dismal as Durban. The buildings are around 10 stories high and are dilapidated with peeling painted walls, and lines of washing hanging out of multiple balconies. The roofs are littered with satellite dishes.

There are six coaches of Van Gogh passengers today who are booked on the pyramids excursions. We are told that we need to travel in convoy with a police escort until we are out of the town of Port Said. We notice police guards every hundred yards or so, and there are checkpoints everywhere. Police stop traffic in every side street in order for the convoy to pass unhindered.

Out in the suburbs the high rise buildings give way to single storey, concrete buildings with flat roofs. These are all insulated with various materials including reeds, twigs, rubble and tyres. Underfed animals are tethered outside and small parcels of land outside support crops such as cotton, potatoes and rice. The edges of the fields are raised a few inches, to hold in the irrigated water inside.

Out in the desert between Port Said and Cairo we see many military camps on the side of the road with their tents and tanks.

After three hours we finally drive into the city of Cairo, which is a unique and busy place. The traffic is impatient, there are many tooting horns, and five lines of traffic seem to squeeze themselves into the three lanes provided. The cars are nearly all old and battered and we suspect that they would not pass a UK style MOT.



In contrast to the desert all around us, large companies maintain a green exterior by constantly watering their gardens. The central reservation of the motorway is also watered regularly.

We spend around one hour queuing in the coach to be dropped off by the Cairo museum. The museum itself is on three floors and very busy. Here we see the many artefacts recovered from the Valley of the Kings, including Tutankhamen's death mask.

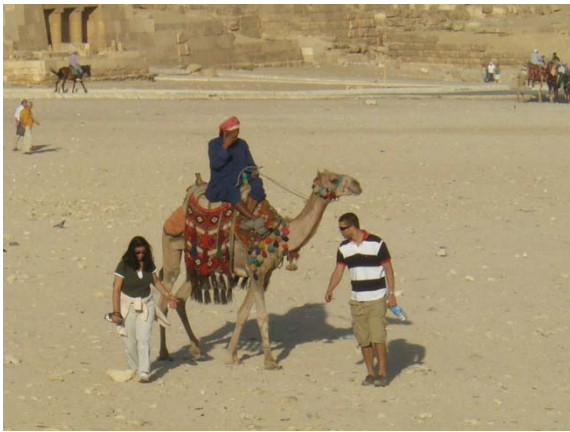


After the museum, we are taken to a local five star hotel where we have a buffet lunch. We were not impressed, our food on the Van Gogh is much better than this. We can see the pyramids from the hotel car park and are surprised that they are so close to civilisation, we thought that they were out in the desert.

A short coach drive takes us to the central car park by the Great Pyramid of Kheops. We are surprised to find that the pyramids, although smooth and triangular from a distance, are made of blocks that get gradually smaller towards the tops of the structures. Visitors used to be able to climb up the largest pyramid but it is forbidden now for safety reasons.



We can see a polished stone covering near the top of the second pyramid. Archaeologists believe that all the pyramids would have had this layer of white stone originally.



When we get off the coach we are met by dozens of "street sellers", many on camels. We have been told not to photograph these people and on no account to accept a ride on any of the camels. Apparently, the cost of getting off the camel is much higher than the cost of getting on! In the distance we see tourists on both horses and camels, perhaps they have not got the money to

pay to dismount and they will land up in Libya!

Our coach driver then takes us to a viewpoint where we can see all three major pyramids, and then on to a further car park where we can walk to see the Sphinx. The sun is low in the sky now and behind the Sphinx, so we can only take silhouetted pictures.



The next stop on this long trip is to a papyrus factory, where we are shown how this paper is made (and obviously given the opportunity to buy!)

On a general note, this country is steeped with history, and maintains its traditions well. However, it was interesting to see how some modern trends have crept in. The all covering female dress has subtly changed, and it was not uncommon to see younger females, remaining covered, with long western style denim skirts down to the ground, and some even with slits in the side from top to bottom.

