

2 TRAVELOGUE - HOLY LAND

We touched down at Cairo late in the afternoon and were met by our guide, a tall Egyptian by the name of Hashim, pictured below with a 40 seater bus that



literally allowed all the 16 of us visitors to rattle around inside. Hashim was extremely knowledgeable, and took pride in being Egyptian, although he did tell me his grand-mother was English. He lamented his tall son preferred to be a goalie rather than a basketball player. On the way to the hotel, he guided us past the tomb of the unknown soldier, shown in the picture further below, and even more fascinating, the grandstand in front where Pres Sadat was gunned down in 1981, due mainly to his separate peace treaty with Israel in 1977.



Cairo appeared dusty and dirty, more than Manila, and Hashim explained that it seldom rains. The one similarity I noticed right away was the traffic pattern: just like in EDSA and other major streets in Metro Manila, the Cairo main thoroughfares have no “left turn” at intersections; there were breaks in the island for U-turns. But the vehicles were generally older and more decrepit, with Fiats and Peugeots dating back to the 70’s. Also, very few SUVs were evident.

We drove past the “City of the Dead”

which was like La Loma cemetery but many times bigger, and actually was a city of the living, where people built on top and around the tombs. Hashim said the government recently gave in and added running water and electricity to the area. After all, Egypt is basically a desert, except for a 45 km band straddling the 1000 km Nile, so population density is very high.

We got to the floating restaurant on the Nile (right). As in the rest of the tour, food was plentiful with all sorts of meat and fish, but no bottom feeding crustacean dish, a no-no in both Arab and Jewish custom. The Nile splits into two in a few places as it flows through Cairo, thus forming some islands. This section of the Nile at the restaurant was wide and clean.



After a sumptuous dinner, we were driven to our hotel. Ironically, this turned out to be the best hotel in the tour from the internet perspective, even better than the Israeli hotels.

The taxis have no meters, according to Hashim, and one has to first bargain and agree on a price to almost everything. So when next day, we made a trip to the pyramids, we were wary of the hundreds of vendors and tourist traps that pervaded the area. But alas, we fell victim. After a group picture, we were told to assemble at the bus after half an hour. Lisa and I wandered to the far end



of the pyramid's base and were enticed to have a picture beside a camel, and when I asked how much, the guy said "it's up to you". Surely, I thought, a couple Egyptian pounds would do. Pretty soon, Lisa was on the camel, then me on another, and then these con artists trotted us along farther away so "we can have a good camera shot with the pyramid behind". I got into a shouting argument with them as they wanted us to pay an arm and a leg, but couldn't do much when 10 ft in the air on a camel, and finally we settled for an equivalent of 30 US for the short experience. In all fairness, at

least, we did ride a camel. Some days later, for 25 bucks each, we could have ridden a camel for 3 hours up to Mt Sinai, but that's another story.



There were literally hundreds of buses and thousands of tourists all around the Giza plateau, and our guide hurried us along to another part where the Sphinx sat, sans nose. I didn't quite get what explanation Hashim said about the poor statue's physiognomy, but it was impressive. Picture on left shows it in the background, while two of the pyramids loom behind. There was to

have been a concert right there that night, but the group opted not to attend.



Then it was shopping time. At the shop below, a demo was done on how papyrus was made, explained by the guy to Lisa's right. He was well rehearsed; later I heard him talking in Japanese to another group. Hashim was making the intro. All the rest of the stuff on the walls were paintings and prints on the papyrus paper, ranging in cost from 80 LE (Egyptian pounds), that's about 12 bucks, and upwards. Most of us of course bought; then there was the jewelry on the lower floor.

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