

EGYPT III – LUXOR & THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS – PART I

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During the 19th century there was much interest in Egypt and Antiquity which attracted eminent Archaeologists from all over Europe, many of whom were responsible for great work in excavating the Temples and Tombs. Luxor, known in former times as Thebes, and the Valley of the Kings have always been a focal point for much of this excavation and with good reason.

The first time I visit Luxor I arrive by ferryboat, sailing downriver from Aswan, three days on board, stopping off at various sites on the way. I make friends with Theo, a Dutchman, who is a charming companion and proves most useful in warding off the ever persistent attentions of the staff on board!

The ship moors up one night alongside Kom Ombo and in the morning we visit the Temple dedicated to both Sobek, the Crocodile God and Horus, the Falcon-headed One. The dual dedication is unique in Egypt and the exactly symmetrical Temple is split in half lengthways, the left side devoted to Horus and the right to Sobek. It is beautifully situated on the riverside surrounded by sugar cane fields and greenery, one of the prettiest along the Nile and was built during the Ptolemaic Kingdom under Hellenistic Rule within Ancient Egypt. There are two Pylons, two altars, and two Hypostyle halls. In one chamber there are intriguing engravings of surgical instruments on the walls – scalpels, forceps and other medical tools dating back to 150 BC. The wall paintings are full of colour and tell

dramatic stories of the Gods. The Crocodile was a sacred and revered animal, and mummified bodies of crocodiles have been found at the site. Strangely, Kom Ombo is also a Roman Catholic Bishopric, along with Dendara and several other cities along the Nile, and the titles hold to this day – the future Pope John Paul II was Titular Bishop for five years until 1963.

A Pylon in Egyptian architecture is an imposing gateway consisting of two huge flat tapering towers each topped with a cornice on either side of the entrance which has a covered roof about half the height of the towers, said to symbolize the setting sun between two great hills. A Hypostyle Hall is made up of rows of columns or pillars often with a roof resting on them.

Later we sail on to Edfu and moor up near the Temple of Horus, the vengeful son of Isis and Osiris, who with his Falcon head is one of Egypt's best loved Gods. There has been a temple to him on this site since Antiquity (around 3000 BC), though this one was built during Ptolemaic times and is therefore much more recent (about 237BC). It was built as a copy of the architecture of more than a thousand years earlier, thus providing archaeologists with a fine and extremely well preserved example from which to study and learn more of the culture and life of the early Egyptians.

And so we come to Luxor. Arriving by riverboat I am struck by the contrast of the magnificent El Luxor Temple and Karnak on the East Bank of the Nile, and the dry dusty sands of the vast necropolis of the Valleys of the Dead, stretching away into the distance on the West Bank. I have visited Luxor many times over the past twenty years and never cease to wonder at its marvels. It is the heart of Egyptian Antiquity, there are so many outstanding sites here, the glorious Karnak complex, Luxor Temple,

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Carving in Tomb

the Valley of the Kings, the unique Memorial Temple of Hatshepsut, and so much more.

The Winter Palace is a grand old hotel where I have stayed many times. It has all the charm of a Colonial hotel built in the early twentieth century for the flocks of curious visitors from Europe. Alongside the serious archaeologists came many amateurs, some of whom pillaged the sites taking priceless artefacts back to their own countries. Austria today has a large collection, as has Belgium, Britain, Germany, France and Italy.

I like the beautiful stately old rooms, a little fusty, endless carpeted corridors, high ceilings and chandeliers, grand windows with balconies opening onto regal gardens. The first time I come up the grand staircase to the main Lobby to reserve a room, the dear little man behind the desk asks me if I am dressed casual or smart? An odd question! Not being able to see over the counter he comes round to inspect me, wearing a tailcoat sweeping the floor and vastly too large for him. After looking me up and down he says with a big grin:

“Oh yes, madam, *more* than smart!” and after that we are the best of friends!

The hotel has had many illustrious visitors, from Royalty to eminent scientists and writers. Lord Carnavon, the patron and sponsor of British Archaeologist Howard Carter stayed many times and was here in 1922 when Carter made his momentous discovery of the untouched Tomb of Tutankhamun, the Boy King. Not having Internet or mobile phones, Lord Carnavon used the Hotel notice

board to post the latest updates on how the Archaeological dig was progressing, and everybody would rush in every day to see them. Exciting times! In 1937 Agatha Christie wrote her famous mystery “Death on the Nile” while staying here, and many years later the Hotel was the setting for the film of the novel. King Farouk was given State apartments to stay in whenever he wanted, until his exile in 1952, and doubtless Nasser after him.

I go out that first afternoon to wander the great complex of Karnak, taking a short caleche ride to the entrance. It really is the *crème de la crème* of the Ancient World, proclaiming the glory of the Pharaohs at the height of their power and their devotion to Amun, the patron god of Thebes, and it is filled with shrines, sanctuaries, temples and inner temples,

halls and pylons. I roam alone amongst the ancient stones, I don’t want a guide yet – just to observe and absorb. A grand avenue lined with statues of Ram-headed Sphinxes on both sides leads the way through the Pylon to the first Hypostyle hall.

This mighty colonnaded Hypostyle Hall has 134 columns leading to many chambers and at the heart of the complex is the splendid Temple of Amun-Ra. Construction was begun before the reign of Rameses II, the great builder though he was responsible for the main buildings and it was added to over the next 2000 years by each following dynasty, during Ptolemaic, Hellenistic, Muslim and Christian periods. There are huge Colossi of Amun and his wife Mut with their son Khonsu, and two massive Obelisks 29 metres high, one given by Queen Hatshepsut. I circle the Column of the Scarab for luck in love!

Then I walk back to the main Temple of Luxor, a stone’s throw from the hotel. An Avenue of Sphinxes stretches from Karnak to Luxor Temple, and over twenty years I have witnessed the gradual unearthing of this extraordinary line of statues right into the heart of the city. Houses shops and churches have been demolished during the excavation but it will be a truly magnificent sight, over two kilometres long, when completed. The giant Pylon of the Temple is 24 metres high, leading to many halls and sanctuaries as at Karnak. Alexander the Great built a temple within the Temple in 332BC and declared himself Pharaoh of Egypt. The Romans also built a small Christian church inside. When the city declined the Temple became covered in sand and debris, and the Muslims arriving in 1400AD

built a Mosque on top. Now that the Temple has been uncovered, the Mosque, which has been restored, finds itself on higher ground than the rest of the Temple!

One day Theo and I take the river cruise to Dendara, another Temple complex. We have breakfast at 6am then board the boat for the 60 kilometre ride downstream. It is a beautiful sunny morning, the sun rising behind Luxor Temple as we leave, cool but with a warm breeze. The scenery is agricultural with the dry desert mountains rising sharply up behind Palm trees and thick vegetation along the banks. Nothing seems to have changed since the time of the Pharaohs. We get to Qena at 11am and transfer to a bus for a short ride over the Nile to Dendara which is built right up against the Desert Belt.

Surrounded by a huge thick mud-brick wall (no rain here at all – ever) several metres wide, it is a massive Greco-Roman Temple, around 2000 years old. Cleopatra, the last Queen of Egypt, is depicted here with her son by Julius Caesar, and her love affair with Marc Antony recorded for all time. The Temple is dedicated to Hathor, the Goddess of Love, Motherhood and Fertility and she is depicted wearing cow's ears, the role of mother so often embodied in the image of a cow. The signs of the Zodiac are painted on the ceiling in a Lunar calendar circle. It is intriguing that the Zodiac we know today found its way here having been invented in Babylon around 1000BC, so many cultures merging. The year is divided into 36 weeks of 10 days each and the remaining 5 or 6 days were spent in Feasting! A novel idea for metric system lovers. And

three seasons, Flood, Planting and Harvest, makes perfect sense for a largely agricultural people. The Ankh looks like a key but is not – it is the symbol of Life, the Knot in the umbilical cord. There is a large Birthing House, as often in Temples, but this was a special one to be born in, with a statue of the Goddess Hathor in a sitting position which is how babies were delivered.

It is very hot now and good to get back on board for lunch. There is great excitement as one of the sailors dives overboard and nets a big fish, a good 3 feet long and we all hang over the side with the rest of the crew to applaud and cheer loudly!

In my next piece about Luxor we travel to the West Bank and the Valleys of the Dead, a barren land so different to the sophisticated and cultivated East Bank. But before that, let me leave my readers with one more image of the splendours of Karnak.

One evening I go to the *Son et Lumiere* at Karnak which is stunning, a superb production with great music and using the gravelly voice of Omar Sharif – of course! – and John Hurt and Emma Thompson. Coloured lights flicker and illuminate the Temple as the stories unfold, narrated in rich resounding voices. A spectacular show, bringing to life and light the history that has marched through the ages amongst these hallowed stones.

Strolling slowly back through the majestic columns, silent witnesses to the glory of an incredible Kingdom, I can quite happily imagine myself as a noble and gracious Queen of Egypt! □