

George and Sharon Maier's 2007 Egypt Trip

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*NOTE: for many of these sites, you may view stories and photos at these websites:
www.touregypt.net or <http://en.wikipedia.org>*

On Tuesday January 20 the Regina Archaeological Society was treated to a fine presentation by members George and Sharon Maier on their 2007 trip to Egypt (see map at <http://www.fantasticegypt.com/images/Map11.jpg>). Our adventurers flew into Cairo then bussed above the Gulf of Suez to the town of Dahab (means gold in Arabic) from where they planned to hike to the summit of Mount Sinai. George notes, "When we headed for bed our plan was to get up in the middle of the night and hike to the summit to watch the sun rise, but later that evening I started to feel sick. We decided the sleep would be better than the cold early morning walk. The next day I felt okay". At the foot of Mount Sinai is St. Catherine's Monastery, which was constructed by the Romans in 542 A.D. and has been in continual operation until the present day. This monastery, built where Moses reportedly received the Ten Commandments, also houses Moses' Well and a special chapel for the Burning Bush. This is the only bush of its kind growing in the Sinai Peninsula.

Returning to Cairo the couple took a bus toward Alexandria, Egypt on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. En route between Cairo and Alexandria they stopped at Wadi El Natrun, Egypt to view and visit Deir al Anba Bishoy (the Coptic monastery of St. Bishoy) originally built between 830 and 848 A.D. Major restoration and remodeling took place around 1330 A.D. Special sections of the monastery are set aside for the St. Bishoy relics as well as those of Paul of Tammura and the body of patriarch Benjamin II (1327-1339 A.D.) who did the restoration of the monastery in the 1330s. Because of constant attacks by the Berbers, who are said to have murdered twelve martyrs here, the monastery is named after St. Anba Bishoy.

Arriving in Alexandria the tour group first stopped at the recently discovered Roman amphitheatre in the Kam El Dikka section of the city. Since the discovery this area has become an archaeological park. When engineers were looking to put down footing for a new building, they discovered the amphitheatre (Odeum) in an ancient lava field. The excavations were undertaken by a team of Polish archaeologists in the mid 1960s and continue to this day. Research has proven that this structure was utilized from the 2nd to the 7th century A.D. and would have seated some 700-800 people. The original structure was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt in 535 A.D. Near the amphitheatre is a large villa from the time of Hadrian, now called "The Villa of Birds" because of the magnificent depictions of many species of birds in mosaic tiles. Found in conjunction with excavations at the amphitheatre, restoration and conservation was completed in 1998 and opened to the public at that time.

The catacombs are a large number of Roman underground tombs, which according to legend, were discovered by a donkey when he fell into a hole in the ground around 1900. The donkey story may be a myth as excavations began here as early as 1892. The catacombs are located in a section of Alexandria, the most heavily populated area of the city, known as Kom-el-Shuqafa

(mounds of shards). The name originated from the mounds of funerary jars left over from the Hellenistic custom of cremation and food containers in which offerings were brought to the dead.

Returning to Cairo our adventurers traveled first to the Salah El Din citadel. The governor of Egypt, Salah El Din, built the citadel in 1183 A.D. on the Moqattam Hills, as a defence against the invading Christian crusaders. After his death in 1193, his nephew Al Kamel rebuilt and reinforced the structure. This was necessitated by neglect caused by Salah El Din, who had left Cairo to fight the crusaders in Syria. By the time he died he had liberated most of Palestine from crusader armies from Britain and France.

Next on the itinerary was a visit to the mosque of Muhammad Ali (sometimes called the Alabaster Mosque) in Cairo. The mosque, built between 1830 and 1848 A.D., was dedicated to Muhammad Ali Pasha's son Tursun Pasha who died in 1816. King Fuad ordered complete restoration of the mosque in 1931 and by King Farouk in 1939. The main building is limestone, but the lowest floor and the forecourt are sheeted in alabaster, hence the alternate name. The body of Muhammad Ali Pasha lies buried in the courtyard of the mosque.

Next our couple boarded a cruise boat for a 12-day trip up and down the Nile River. The vast temple complex of Karnak was the initial port of call. It was built and increased in size over 1,300 years. The major structures are temples honoring the gods Amun (in the center of the complex), Montu (to the north side), and Mut (to the south side). In addition there are 11 other temples to lesser gods and pharaohs and kings. One of the smaller temples is dedicated to the goddess Opet, a protective and nourishing goddess who took the form of a hippopotamus. She also played a major role in joining the king with his Ka (a divine being created with his birth). The name Karnak is a modern one, the original name was Ipet – meaning “the most select (or sacred) place” as well as the temples one of the major features is the obelisk of Queen Hatshepsut who ruled from 1478 to 1458 B.C. It is the second highest obelisk from the ancient world at 97 feet (29.6 meters) high and weighing 320 tons. Connecting the central area to the sacred lake at the southern end of the complex is the Avenue of Rams. Here are a series of ram-headed sphinxes. The outer walls of the buildings in what is called the Great Hypostyle Hall are covered with battle scenes of Seti I (in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria), and those of his son Ramses II (against the Hittites). A huge brick wall surrounds the whole complex of temples.

Our travelers continued on down the Nile to the city of Luxor. Luxor is the modern name for the ancient city (and once Egyptian capital) of Thebes. The temple dedicated to the goddess Opet was constructed by and contains the court of Amenhotep III, who ruled Egypt from 1390 to 1353 B.C. and by Ramses II, whose court is also enclosed, who ruled from 1279 B.C. to his death in 1213 B.C. at the age of 90 years. The third temple within a temple is actually a mosque. The mosque of Abu Haggag sits atop the original Luxor temple, which was built by pharaoh Amenhotep III in the 14th century B.C. Abu Haggag is Luxor's major saint and his mosque center of local religious activities.

North from Luxor our friends traveled to the town of Dendera where they visited and toured the temple of Hathor. This temple was built and rebuilt by old and new kingdom artisans. The Romans and Egyptians built the latest temple between 54 and 20 B.C. under the direction of Ptolemy XII and completion by Cleopatra VII. The temple was built as a tribute to Hathor, the

wife of the god Horus. She was the patron of all earthly love, of all healing, and the feminine source of nourishment. The rear outside wall of the temple has large figures of Cleopatra VII and her son (by Julius Caesar), Caesarion, who was co-regent with his mother as Ptolemy XV. The temple of Hathor also houses the abode of the god Bes who is also known as the dwarf god, because of his diminutive size. His role is as the patron of joy and childbirth.

Our travelers returned to near Luxor on the west bank of the Nile. Here they toured the temple of Hatshepsut. This woman pharaoh was born in 1508 B.C. to Thutmose I and Queen Ahmose. Her reign from 1479 to 1458 B.C. was prosperous and long. Often during this reign she officiated at the religious rights of the temple. With her fleet of five ships she traded with Punt for myrrh and for live frankincense trees as well as human slaves. In addition to these peaceful endeavours, she also conducted military campaigns in Syria, Levant and Nubia. She erected two of the tallest obelisks (one still standing) at Karnak and was responsible for ordering what is known today as the “unfinished obelisk” at its quarrying site at Aswan. Built near the entrance of the Valley of the Kings, her mortuary temple was the masterpiece of her building career. This fifth pharaoh of the 18th dynasty of ancient Egypt passed away at the age of 50 years in 1458 B.C. Modern DNA testing has proven that a mummy found in the back room in the Cairo Museum was indeed that of Hatshepsut.

The next step for our travelers was the Valley of the Kings. For centuries the pharaohs and high nobility had striven to outdo each other in the construction of bigger and more spectacular pyramids. Such opulence led to the profession of grave robbing, a safer venue, as the final resting place was sought. For 500 years (16th century to the 11th century B.C.) a wadi on the west bank of the Nile opposite Thebes (modern day Luxor) was utilized. This Valley of the Kings is, of course, most famous for the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter in 1922. Tut’s tomb, however, was so heavily visited on our friends’ visit that they chose three others. The tomb of Ramses III, who ruled for 31 years and 41 days, from 1195 to 1164 B.C., was the first one they visited. He fathered 10 sons, among which were the next three pharaohs, Ramses IV, V and VI. He lived in very troubled times, in particular during the Trojan War. He survived two assassination attempts, the first instigated by his queen Tiy, and the second, known as the harem conspiracy, was thwarted by his heir Ramses IV. His tomb is familiarly known as the “Tomb of the Harper” because it prominently features a painting of two blind male harpists. Ramses III’s mummy was not found in his tomb but in a cache at Deir el-Bahari.

Secondly our friends visited the tomb of Ramses IX who ruled Egypt for 17 years, from 1147-1130 B.C. This tomb is noted for its still very vibrant colours and beautiful reliefs. The mummy of this pharaoh, like his predecessors, was found in a cache at Deir el-Bahari and not in his tomb. The third tomb to be visited was that of Thutmose III, the stepson of Queen Hatshepsut, who reigned for 54 years from 1504-1450 B.C. He is noted in legend for having destroyed all sculptures and paintings of his stepmother Hatshepsut when he assumed his position as king in 1504 B.C.

Next our young adventurers traveled to view the Colossi of Memnon, which stand on the Theban Necropolis that have stood here for the last 3,400 years. The giant statues, each measuring 60 feet (18 meters) in height and each weighing an estimated 700 tons, were constructed by pharaoh

Amenhotep III, in his own image, during his rule from 1386 to 1349 B.C. During his lifetime he was worshipped as a god and had a huge complex mortuary and memorial temple across the Nile River from Thebes. Beside the legs of the giant statues were those of his wife Tiy and mother Mutemwiya. The northernmost of the figures was hit by an earthquake in 27 B.C. and was broken in half. Following the break it became world famous as the “vocal memnon” because of the singing or whistling noise produced. On reconstruction, in 199 A.D. by Roman emperor Septimus Severus, the singing ceased.

The group continued on to Edfu on the west bank of the Nile to the temple of Horus. A tribute to the falcon-headed god Horus, the temple was begun in 237 B.C. by Ptolemy III and completed in 57 B.C. by Ptolemy V. The inside sanctuary is surrounded by chapels, each of which honors the various gods associated with the temple. They are to Min, for the robes and linens of Horus. The next one is to Osiris and his tomb; next the chamber of Horus where he keeps his ceremonial barge. The next chapel is to Khonsu (the lunar god) and Hathor, the goddess wife of Horus. Continuing on we have the throne of the god Re, a chapel to Mebitor (the lioness goddess), the chapel of spread wings, and a chapel to the new year. After paganism was outlawed in 391 A.D. by the Christian Roman Empire, the site lay buried in sand until excavated by Auguste Mariette in the 1860s. It is preserved today because of the protection of the sand.

We now continue with our RAS members to the town of Aswan and to the Aswan High Dam, an unsuccessful attempt made to control and regulate the flooding of the Nile by Ibnal-Haytham in the 1000s. British engineer Sir William Wilcox constructed a dam between 1889 and 1902 but this was found to be inadequate so the dam had to be raised from 1907-1912 and again in 1929-1933. The USA and Britain proposed to build a larger dam some four miles upriver and planning began in 1954. The \$270 million deal fell through in 1956. In 1958 the Soviet Union stepped in, funded the project and provided the heavy equipment to do the job. Construction began in 1960 and was completed on July 21, 1970. The reservoir raised concerns among archaeologists and under UNESCO sites were to be surveyed and excavated starting in 1960, and 24 monuments (such as Abu Simbel) were to be moved to higher ground out of harms way. Our travelers, while still in the Aswan area, visited the ancient granite quarries to view the unfinished obelisk of Aswan. The obelisk was used as a cosmic antenna, a direct line from the gods above to the mortals below; they were important fixtures in ancient Egyptian life. A defective one would never do, so when this one cracked during manufacture it was abandoned. Had it been completed and erected it would have been the largest one ever. Its total height would have been 41.75 meters (137 feet) and would have weighed approximately 1,200 tons.

Our friends then flew to Abu Simbel, the complex of temples started around 1244 B.C. until 1224 B.C. The purpose for Ramses II constructing these giant temples was to impress and to force religion on their southern neighbours, the Nubians. As time went by the complex became covered with sand and it was not rediscovered until done so by J.L. Burckhardt (Swiss) and Giovanni Beltoni (Italian) in 1813-1817. The Great Temple, built around 1265 B.C. was constructed to the honour of gods Amen-Re, Ptah, and Ra-Harakhty as well as to the deified Ramses II himself. The façade of the temple has four giant (20 meters high) statues of the pharaoh. Coming only up to the knees of the seated statues are figures of his wife Nefertari, Mut-tuy the queen mother, his first two sons and first six daughters. A temple, known as the small temple, was constructed just northwest of the temple of Ramses and dedicated to the

goddess Hathor and to Ramses' chief wife Nefertari. The entire complex can be enjoyed today because UNESCO and others saved it from the rising waters of Lake Nasser when a dam was constructed on the Nile River at Aswan. The salvage work, from 1964 to 1968, cost \$40 million US. The entire complex was cut into blocks, averaging 20 tons each. These were removed to higher ground and reassembled.

It was back to the boat for a trip up the Nile. The first stop was at the village of Kom Ombo where our travelers viewed the temple of Sobek, the crocodile god. It is however a double temple, being also the temple of Haroeris, the falcon god. This Greco-Roman temple started by Ptolemy VI in the 2nd century B.C. and completed by Roman emperor Augustus about 30 B.C. Actual work on the site was done by the army, as Kom Ombo was once an elephant training ground for the Ptolemaic army. Within the temple are many images of Roman emperor Tiberius. Also, many rooms contained mummified crocodiles in honor of Sobek. George notes, "This spot is where the Nile-o-meter was. It measured the level of the Nile so the taxes could be set to how well the crops would do".

Arriving back in Cairo the first trip out was to Sakkara to view the mortuary complex associated with the step pyramid of King Zoser. This well-known king, of the third dynasty, was known by other names such as Djoser and Netjerikhet, among others. He ruled Egypt from 2635 to 2610 B.C. and is noted for his military and mining expeditions for copper and turquoise into the Sinai Peninsula. He is also credited with extending his country's borders to Elephantine at the first cataract on the Nile. Early in his reign, Zoser commissioned his famous adviser, high priest and architect Imhotep (2650-2600 B.C.) to build this, the world's first pyramid. Found during excavations by the antiquities service in 1924-25 was the oldest known life-sized limestone statue. It is a seated figure of Zoser (Djoser) that now is to be seen in the Cairo museum. A plaster copy stands in place of the original at Sakkara.

One does not travel to Egypt and fail to visit the Great Pyramid and other pyramids at Giza. Our favorite travelers, George and Sharon, were no different and took a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the only surviving examples of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It is thought that the Great Pyramid was built between 2580 and 2560 B.C. for King Khufu (Cheops in Greek) who ruled 2583-2506 B.C. His pyramid was the tallest structure in the world for 3,800 years. The companion pyramids in the complex consist of three small pyramids for Khufu's wives. About 200 meters to the southwest of the Great Pyramid is the slightly smaller one of Khafre, one of Khufu's successors. Still another 200 meters to the southwest is located the pyramid of Menkaure, the successor to Khafre. A very important find was made here in 1954, a pit containing a 45-meter long ship made of cedar, discovered within the complex. It had been ceremonially broken into 650 parts made up of 1,224 pieces. This ship has since been reconstructed and displayed on site. Within the complex associated with the Great Pyramid sits a huge statue of a reclining lion with a human head. This is the famous Great Sphinx of Giza. The body is 72.5 meters long and it is 20.2 meters high. The ears of the head are in excess of one meter in length and the missing nose would have been 1.5 meters long. It is believed that Khafre's workers made the lion body and shaped the head of their king some 4,500 years ago. Khafre's name is also mentioned on the Dream Stele that is located between the lion's paws. Tuthmosis IV (1425-1417 B.C.) placed the stele there with the story of his uncovering the sphinx that was covered in sand, for a promise to the then young prince of a kingship.

The last look at Egypt was taken when George and Sharon did a walkabout in old (Islamic) Cairo, a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. To close this little item I have chosen a few words from world traveler Klaus Freisinger (Austria) who writes in July 2005, “Today it is the largest city of both Africa and the Arab countries, but it doesn’t figure prominently in most people’s travel plans. That’s partly understandable, since the place is incredibly crowded, dirty, smoggy and an insult to your senses in general. However, you can get used to that (really!) and the place has at least two things to offer that have to be seen by everybody – the pyramids, which are not that far outside Cairo, and the Egyptian Museum, one of the greatest museums I have ever seen. Other sights like the Khan al-Khalili Bazaar and the Ottoman Fortress are interesting as well, but similar to other places in different Arab countries. Hotels and restaurants are usually very good, so if you can hold your breath for a while, there is no reason not to go to Cairo”.

(Note: Spellings of gods, kings, queens, cities and sites vary depending on reference sources).