

Land of the Pharaoh

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There's a young man in the news who has been getting a lot of press lately. You might think I'm talking about some Hollywood star, but I'm actually talking about King Tut, the boy Pharaoh of Egypt. In the last few months, the media has reported on the real cause of his death, how his face actually looked and all the work going into bringing the King Tut exhibit to the US. He'll even be coming to the Ft. Lauderdale Art Museum in December.

So, in light of all the focus on King Tut, it made me reflect back on the many trips I've made to Egypt and to all the times I've seen his treasures in the Egyptian Museum and seen his small tomb on the banks of the Nile. I've led so many tours to Egypt that I often take it for granted now, but I shouldn't since it's a land of endless treasures and an experience not to be missed.

As soon as your plane touches down in Egypt you know you have entered another world – especially when you head out through the chaotic traffic of Cairo to your hotel. I always stay at the luxurious Mena House in Giza because it's beyond the intense hustle and bustle of the city and it's also directly across the street from the pyramids. The Mena House was once a Sultan's hunting lodge that's been added on to, while still retaining its regal charm.

From this base you can explore all three of the main pyramids and the Sphinx, as well as taking camel or horseback rides into the desert. There's a sound and light show nightly to attend as well as some good shopping in the area. If you have a group and want to set up a private prayer and meditation time in the Great Pyramid as I have always done, you must get permission and pay dearly for the privilege – but it is amazing.

I'd also suggest you take time to drive through the countryside to see the ancient Egyptian capital of Memphis, to visit some of the outlying pyramids like Dahshur and spend time at my favorite site, Sakkara. This is a temple site whose main attraction is the impressive step pyramid built by King Zoser. This pyramid is the oldest one in all of Egypt and it's history just sings to me every time I am there. There are also many burial sites at Sakkara with a fascinating one you can go into. A beautiful sarcophagus was just found at Sakkara and reported on by the media as well. Heading back to Giza people often like to shop at the rug, papyrus and perfume factories and try their hand at bargaining. Before leaving Cairo try to visit the Egyptian Museum, a mosque or two the legendary bazaar and Old Cairo if you have time.

After seeing Cairo you'll probably want to head south to visit Luxor or Aswan. You can tour each city as a day trip, an overnight trip or as I like to do it as part of a deluxe Nile Cruise. You'll sleep on board your ship for a 3, 4 or 5 night cruise and you'll get off to tour the temples as you sail along the Nile. There are hundreds of boats to choose from depending on your price range. All the ones I've been on have seemed magical and luxurious to me. Each cruise has three sumptuous meals a day, a pool, bar, sometimes mini-suites, an attentive staff, music, a costume party, games and often a belly dancer for evening entertainment.

You can begin your Nile cruise in either Luxor or Aswan and you'll see all the same sights, just in reverse order. If you start a 3 night cruise in Aswan, you'll want to take a small boat to the lovely Temple of Philae, dedicated to Isis. It sits in the middle of the Nile now, due to flooding from the modern dam (which you can also visit). Aswan is famous for its Nubian people, its rich spice markets and is the gateway to the Temple of Abu Simbel. This is a very impressive temple that was raised inch by inch to preserve it from rising waters once the dam was created. The day tour includes a short flight and is costly, but I recommend it. When you're back in Aswan try a felucca sailboat ride on the Nile and it'll probably be one of the most peaceful hours you'll spend in all of Egypt.

When you sail from Aswan the next day, you'll pass the lush greenery of the Nile, where boys fish just as they did thousands of years ago and where camels graze right up to the edges of the desert. It's really lovely! Later you'll arrive at Kom Ombo, so that you can tour this large temple dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile God. Afterwards you'll sail at night so that you wake up at Edfu, where horse drawn carriages will take you to the fascinating Temple of Edfu, dedicated to the God Horus. After touring it you'll head back to the boat for lunch and then sail to Esna where you go through the Nile River locks.

When you wake up in the morning you'll be in the charming riverside city of Luxor. Most likely you'll take a small boat across the river so you can visit the Colossi of Memnon, Queen Hatshepsut's temple (the only female Pharaoh) and the Valley of the Kings and Queens. Here you'll climb down into the colorful burial chambers of the pharaohs and it's an experience not to be missed. This is where you can also visit King Tut's tomb. Then you'll head back for a late lunch and take in the magnificent temples of Luxor and Karnak. I actually like to stay longer in Luxor so you can spend more time at the sites and maybe take in the Karnak sound and light show and the Luxor museum. From Luxor you might want to visit the temple of Dendera or Abydos, though this is hard to arrange. You can even head across the desert to climb Mt. Sinai or snorkel in the Red Sea at the resort town of Sharm El Sheikh.

Tourism is very important to the Egyptians and so the guides, hotels and tour companies are extremely professional and security is of the highest priority. As a group we have often had policemen on our buses for extra protection and when we drive from one area to another we sometimes have a police escort. I'm told that the American and British governments demand this of the Egyptians and it is supposed to be enforced for any group larger than two people. As for me I've never had a bad experience in Egypt, but I am of course cautious and try to make wise decisions.

So having been besieged by images of King Tut over the last few months, I decided it was time to write about my experiences in Egypt and to urge you to think about going there sometime. If it seems too far, at least try to get to Ft. Lauderdale in December and see the superstar getting all the press these days – King Tut.