

A trip to Egypt 2010 by Fred Kelly  
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Fred and Barbara Kelly were in Egypt for 3 weeks in fall of 2010.

Before we headed off to Egypt our adventure started at Dulles airport. At Dulles, a female TSA agent came over to Barbara as she was placing her carry-on items on the conveyor belt. The TSA agent asked Barbara "if she had hips, knees or ankles". Barbara just stared at her in disbelief, gave a once over of her body parts just in case something was truly missing and replied, "I sure as hell have all my body parts!" The TSA agent replied, "Oh I meant do you have any artificial parts that would set the machine off." Wow! We are definitely in the new age of replacement body parts.

When we landed in Cairo, the sweltering 95 degree heat enveloped us as we walked off the plane in long sleeves and winter pants. We exited baggage claim with snow jackets under our arms, wheeling suitcases while looking expectantly for our names on a sign. Once our guide located us, he called our driver and we headed off to our hotel. Once in the van, we were offered ice cold bottled water and we were on our way to battle Cairo's traffic. We learned early on that driving and crossing the street in Cairo is not for the faint of heart. Merging is a polite game of chicken which fortunately our driver won with increasing frequency. There are very few crosswalks or traffic lights. Brakes are just used to park the cars and traffic lanes are just a suggestion. After an hour in congested traffic, on a Sunday afternoon, we arrived at our hotel in downtown Cairo safe and sound. Having traveled for 27 hours straight we needed to rest up - our real tour was to begin the next morning at 9:00am.

Our room had a great side view of the Nile and the traffic congestion on the July 26<sup>th</sup> Bridge. We spent the next five days touring Cairo with a side trip to Alexandria and Fayoum Oasis. The Egyptian Museum Pyramids and Temples were awe inspiring. However, the most startling fact, for me, was the realization that my western classical education which had started in Greece should have started in Egypt. Many of the architectural structural techniques like columns and basilicas found in Egypt predate the Greek civilization. The Egyptian museum, although not organized for self-touring, was worth the visit. Fortunately, our tour guide provided us a through tour of the museum. The portion dedicated to King Tut was spectacular. The

number of artifacts recovered from King Tut's tomb suggests that the Pharaoh's tombs must have been even more spectacular had they not been looted.

Given that we now live in the "internet age", describing each site visited, I believe, has little value since the details of most sites are available on line. I prefer to focus on the highlights and what we found interesting. One interesting tidbit is that whenever we left Cairo on day trips, for example to the Fayoum Oasis, our tour guide checked in with the tourist police who monitored our movements throughout our stay. In Fayoum we were accompanied by an armed tourist police pickup truck with six soldiers inside that led the way. Apparently we were one of the few visitors to that area. In retrospect I should have deleted the Fayoum Oasis in favor of two days in Alexandria. The Bibliotheca in Alexandria is definitely worth a visit, and most of the library's vast collection is searchable on line at [www.bibalex.org](http://www.bibalex.org).

When visiting the Red Pyramid, I coincidentally perhaps, received the ancient "Curse of the Pharaohs" or "King Tut's Trots" for climbing halfway up the Pyramid to the tomb's entrance door. As for Barbara, she sat in the air conditioned van and waved to me as I climbed the pyramid's steps. It was 104 degrees! She's no fool; she bought postcards. Actually I did not go down into the Red Pyramid's tomb because our guide recommended visiting tombs in the "Valley of the Kings" in Luxor instead. In the "Valley of the Kings" you can walk upright into the tombs instead of hunched over as is required in the tombs around Cairo. The "Valley of the Kings" tombs are better preserved, the walkways inside are wide, stairs and inclines have handrails and the drawings on the wall are easy to view because the tombs are well lit. Nevertheless, the Giza Pyramids are spectacular as is the reconstructed sun boat.

Cairo is noisy, the air is polluted, the streets are dirty and sidewalks (if available) are uneven at best so watch where you walk. Outside of the hotel we always carried antiseptic towels for use in the restrooms, before and after meals. Most restrooms do not have soap, paper towels or toilet paper. Restrooms are not as clean as those found in Europe or the US. Be prepared for tipping to use the restrooms even if there are signs that say no tipping required. Apparently poor Egyptians lay claim to specific restrooms to hand out a few sheets of toilet paper for their tip. The typical tip for the restrooms is 1 Egyptian Pound, which is about \$.20 cents. Also

be prepared to tip drivers, guides, porters, housekeeping or anyone that performs a personal service. Before we left, our tour book provided a listing of the tipping expectations. Examples are: Guides \$10 and Drivers \$7 per person, per day; housekeeping \$2 per person, per day; Cruise staff \$25 per person, per cruise; porters \$1 per bag. Our guide book said the following: "In Egypt you may feel everyone is asking for a tip, but tipping is considered by locals to be part of their normal compensation." Be prepared.

From Cairo, we went onto Luxor to visit the various temples, "Valley of the Kings", and "Valley of the Queens" plus lots of temples. Luxor is cleaner and the air is less polluted than Cairo, but the streets and sidewalks match Cairo. In Luxor we stayed at the Winter Palace adjacent to the Nile which is quite ornate and lavish. But the highlight of the Luxor was the visits to the various temples, especially the Karnak Temple aglow at night. True to our tour guide's advice it was easy to visit the tombs in the "Valley of the Kings", except for the throngs of people entering the tombs at the same time. The cruise up the Nile River was smooth and leisurely. We unpacked once and toured the remaining sites from dockside. Note: there are 300 vessels that cruise the Nile, making this adventure trip very popular. One of the downsides is that the vessels belch diesel fumes along the way. However, the fumes are typically only noticeable at locks, bridges and in port.

When our ship arrived at the first lock, vendors came along side of the ship and began pitching up Arab costumes to passengers on the sun deck (3 stories up), while the vessel waited its turn to use the lock. The vendors know the cruise ships have one formal night where the cruise staff ask passengers to dress in Arab costumes for dinner. The vendors had great pitching arms as the costumes flew directly to their potential customer. The customers and vendors threw the various costumes back and forth until the customer was satisfied with a pattern. Once a costume was selected price negotiations began in earnest. Eventually the price was negotiated and the money was thrown back to the vendor in the costume's empty plastic bag. The selling process was exciting to watch because multiple costumes were flying back and forth with multiple vendors while multiple price negotiations were underway. Once the vessel was cleared to enter the lock, the vendors swarmed the vessel behind us.

Once in port, the vessels tie up next to each other (door to door). At night you have a view into someone else's cabin, but this docking process allows passengers to exit through the attached vessels to get to the dock. Since it did not rain at all during our entire trip the cruise along the Nile was delightful. We relaxed between tours on the top sun deck and actually did go into the pool and spa one day and one evening. Afternoon tea was a real treat during the Nile cruise. I am sure I have those calories on me somewhere.

At Edfu we boarded horse drawn carriages to visit and return from the temple of Horus. The horse drawn carriage was a great novelty, different and exciting. You never know what to expect in Egypt on a tour. In Aswan in addition to visiting the dam we rode a Felucca sailing vessel around Kitchener's Island. The sailing was peaceful and smooth, but boarding the Felucca was a challenge. It turned out that several tours arrived at the boarding port at the same time. To avoid the congestion our tour guide scurried from boat to boat looking for an uncommitted Felucca. Once the guide found the appropriate Felucca we scurried out to the assigned vessel. The scurrying entailed boarding and de-boarding various sailing vessels tied to each other to arrive at our Felucca. However, the advantage of the scurrying was that we were the first Felucca to sail since our vessel was on the outside and had to move first before the others could move. Our tour guide had a plan and a strategy that worked perfectly. We actually spent more time on the water than the other tours. The Feluccas that were more filled than ours were attractive to boys plying the waters on surf boards who came alongside the Felucca's offering to sing or begging for money. There were only four boys "surfing" that day so the return on invested time must be small. Our Felucca was left alone.

From Aswan we went onto Abu Simbel to view the site that was rescued from being submerged beneath the waters of Lake Nasser. The scale of the rescue required moving and reconstructing the building on a man-made mountain – almost incredible. From Abu Simbel we flew back to Cairo where we said good bye to our Egyptologist tour guide for our onward trip to a vacation in Sharm el Sheikh.

We had the same tour guide, Ahmed Bekheit, for our entire 14 day tour that included Cairo, Luxor, the Nile Cruise, Aswan and Abu Simbel so we got to know each other relatively well. Ahmed is married, his wife worked for Egypt Air and they have a twin boy and girl. He has a Master's degree in

Egyptology from Cairo University and leads tours in English, Spanish and Italian. He explained many of the Egyptians customs and through his eyes we gained a better appreciation of the Egyptian people. The picture Ahmed painted is that of a peaceful populace with an educated middle class yearning for jobs that are commensurate with their education and for real democracy. As a real job example, our tour van driver has a bachelor degree from Cairo University but has not been able to find a suitable job. Egyptian men typically get married later in life because they are expected to have a house for his spouse. There are no 30 year mortgages - all houses have to be paid for in cash. This caused many homes and apartment buildings though out Egypt to be incomplete. The family adds rooms and floors as money becomes available. It is not uncommon to see apartment stairs going to nowhere and steel reinforcing rod sticking out of apartment buildings waiting for concrete pillars and a new floor to be added. Ahmed considered himself to be a moderate Egyptian trying to raise a family as best he can. As a tour guide he needed to make his annual salary from late September to early May. He earns very little during the hot summer months. During the off months, Ahmed typically goes to school to learn either another language or more Egyptology. We learned more about the Egyptians people from his demeanor and his frank, calm, detailed explanations of the issues facing Egypt. Ahmed was an outstanding tour guide.

Going to Sharm el Sheikh was recommended by a colleague as a way to see a different side of Egypt. Based on his recommendation we added five days to our trip and were happy we did. The beaches were beautiful, all sorts of water sports and tours were available, but we just chilled out and relaxed. The hotels line the beach, but between the beach and the hotels is a paved stone walkway that leads to the city – locally called the boardwalk. As the boardwalk passed the hotel strip, restaurants line the boardwalk and in the city the boardwalk is lined with shops and restaurants. The entire city area is lit up at night and the air is festive as vacationer's party the night away. Sharm el Sheikh was the cleanest city we visited in Egypt. The area around the hotels and the boardwalk was spotless, the streets were clean and the air was fresh. What a difference compared to Cairo and Luxor. We only took two tours while in Sharm el Sheikh one to the Ras Mohammed National park for snorkeling that included a visit with a Bedouin family to talk about life in the desert. The reefs in the Red Sea were spectacular. Our last tour was to St Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai as a fitting end to a great visit to Egypt.

If anyone would like more details about our Egyptian tour and vacation feel free to contact me. I sincerely hope that Egyptians will realize their dreams of a government worthy of their passion and an economic system that will yield jobs commiserate with their education and ambitions.