Travel and Adventure: Egypt - look beyond the pyramids

by Fred J. Eckert

"How could I have been so foolish as to have missed this until now?" I said to myself over and over one day while 785 miles south of Cairo visiting Abu Simbel, near the Egypt-Sudan border in an area where the ancient Egypt of the Pharaohs once stood looking out toward the ancient Kingdom of Nubia.

GREAT SPHINX - The Great Sphinx is 66 feet high and 190 feet long with the face-of-a-man and body-of-a-lion. It guards the pyramids at the Giza Plateau outside Cairo. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert.
TEMPLE WALL - Abercrombie & Kent trips always include a professional Egyptologist who brings history to life by explaining meanings of wall sketches and hieroglyphics, such as the meaning of this scene at the Temple of Karnak in Luxor. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert.
CAMEL PATROL - An Egyptian police officer stands watch atop his camel at the pyramids. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. TEMPLE OF RAMSES - At the Great Temple of Abu Simbel, also known as the Temple of Ramses, four gigantic figures of Egyptâ€™s longest reigning Pharaoh tower 66 feet high. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert.
NILE RIVER CRUISE - Abercrombie & Kentâ€™s fully air-conditioned Nile River boats are floating five-star boutique hotels. Shown here is Sun Boat IV, which features 36 spacious cabins and four suites. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. I was on an Abercrombie & Kent trip to this fascinating land. As I looked up at four colossal sandstone statutes of the great Egyptian King Ramses II seated upon his throne wearing his huge double crown signifying reign over both Upper and Lower Egypt, I felt the same way I felt the first time I gazed upon such wonders as the pyramids, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal or the effigies of Easter Island.

I had been to Egypt twice before, but only to Cairo to see the pyramids and tour the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities. Now I realize that is just not enough. To truly appreciate Egypt you have to look beyond the pyramids.

The four gigantic figures of Egypt's longest reigning pharaoh tower 66 feet high and are set against a 108-feet-high facade recessed into the side of a cliff - an absolutely incredible work of ancient Egyptian art that rivals the pyramids. Not many steps away, a smaller temple is flanked by six 35-foot-high alternating states of Ramses II and his favorite wife Queen Nefertari portrayed as the goddess Hathor.

Both the larger Temple of Ramses II and the smaller Temple of Queen Nefertari were erected in the 13th century, B.C., to impress and intimidate visitors traveling from southern Africa with this stunning display of the grandeur of Egypt and the greatness of Ramses II.

Later abandoned, they remained buried for centuries until discovered in 1813 by a Swiss explorer who noticed their heads sticking above the sand.

Our tour had begun, as most visits to Egypt do, in Cairo, where, of course, we visited the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities and the pyramids as well as the museum containing the funerary boat of the Pharaoh Cheops. Cheops' nearby pyramid is the largest of the three pyramids on the Giza Plateau, the other two being the pyramids of Chephren and Mycerinus. It is always an awesome feeling to stand and look at the pyramids and the Great Sphinx, the 66-foot-high, 190-foot-long statue with the face of a man (a pharaoh perhaps?) and body of a lion that guards the pyramids.

From Cairo we flew 420 miles south to Luxor, the land of Thebes, capital of the New Kingdom. Here succeeding pharaohs built two great temples along the east bank of the Nile.

The Temple of Luxor is compact compared with the Temple of Karnak which is just under two miles away. Luxor is entered through a facade marked by giant statues of the Pharaoh who built its first pylon - Ramses II. The two temples are linked by a path flanked on each side with a row of sphinxes.

Karnak, not only more sprawling but also more convoluted, is best known for its Great Hypostyle Hall, with 137 gigantic columns and a footprint bigger than the area of Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral.

Nearby, on the west bank of the Nile we visited the Valley of the Kings (best known for the early 1900s discovery there of the more than 3,000-year-old tomb of Tutankhamen) plus the Valley of the Queens. These tombs were carved deep into hard rock in these valleys by rulers and nobility who preferred that to pyramids. Also in this area the magnificent Temple of Hatshepsut, ancient Egypt's only female pharaoh, stands in a great amphitheater at the foot of a sheer limestone cliff and the Colossi of Memnon, two faceless 60-foot-high enthroned statues of Pharaoh Amenhotep III, one of which the ancient Greeks and Romans believed emitted a singing sound each dawn.

CRUISING ON THE NILE

Interesting as monuments and ruins of the ancient world may be, there is also much to be said for the amenities of the modern. Abercrombie & Kent's Egypt trips show you some the best of way back then while making sure you experience some of the finest of right now.

How nice it was, upon returning from a great ancient site, to step aboard an A&K owned fully air-conditioned Nile boat and sail on to our next destination in a sort of floating five-star boutique hotel.

My cabin on Sun Boat IV - the ship has 36 cabins plus four suites - was unusually spacious, with full-width floor-to-ceiling windows, a decent-sized ensuite bathroom and a very comfortable bed. It was nicely decorated and included a color satellite TV, a CD player and a direct-dial international telephone. Internet access was available onboard as well.

This beautifully refurbished ship, superbly furnished and decorated in contemporary style with Art Deco influence, has a chic lounge area and bar, a well-equipped gym, a good library, a small pool, two very spacious sun decks and a very comfortable restaurant featuring picture windows so you can take in the scenery while dining.

Activities onboard included a slide presentation by our professional Egyptologist guide, an authentic Egyptian folklore performance and a party for which we were each provided a souvenir galabeya, the traditional Egyptian outfit, to wear.

The food - a wide selection of American, Continental, international and Egyptian - and the service were, as has always been the case on any A&K trip I have experienced, outstanding.

Between the Luxor area and Aswan we stopped along the Nile to visit three remarkable sites.

At Edfu we toured the Temple of Horus, the falcon god. At Kom Ombo we visited a Greek-Roman temple in which one half is dedicated to Horus The Elder, or Haroeris, a falcon god combined with a god of light whose eyes were the sun and the moon, while the other half is dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek. In the Aswan area, we toured the magnificent Philae Temple, site of an especially beautiful temple shrine honoring the greatest of Egyptian goddess, Isis.

Wherever we visited, our egyptologist guide brought history to life by carefully explaining the significance of wall etchings and deciphering for us many of the things written in hieroglyphics.

A WONDERFUL WAY TO EXPERIENCE EGYPT

Sometimes during the trip I'd sit on the deck of Sun Boat IV, sipping coffee in the morning or having afternoon tea, pondering the wonders I had seen thus far and soaking up views of the Nile. I'd watch distinctively Egyptian small sailboats called feluccas sail by carrying people or materials or even animals, or watch a lone farmer toil his small plot in the fertile soil near the shore of the great river. I would also see a youngster, sometime a couple of them together, riding along a shore path on a donkey, swishing a palm branch against its side, making it move along faster - scenes surely no different from what I would have seen had I been there centuries earlier.

And as I took it all in, I kept saying to myself: What a wonderful way to experience Egypt.

IF YOU GO

For information regarding Abercrombie & Kent's tours of Egypt click on www.abercrombiekent.com. You can also e-mail questions to info@abercrombiekent.com or call 800-554-7094.

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