

# Middle East Meanders: Part 4

## Cairo and the Pyramids

by Mike Rycroft, EE Publishers

A two-day visit to Cairo and its surrounds had been tagged on to the end of our Middle East meanders and formed an interesting contrast to what we had become accustomed to. Cairo from the air is not an inviting prospect, with many blocks of seemingly unfinished apartments surrounded by a brown haze of desert dust. We were warned against drinking tap water and instructed on which bottled brands are safe. Many of the buildings next to the roads appeared derelict, with flat rooftops cluttered with junk and, in some cases, with tethered goats.

Our first stop was the Egyptian Museum, an encounter with artefacts from Egypt's remote past. We viewed the detail that goes into mummy cases, which showed the development of skill in pottery and metal work of the ancient Egyptians, plus various hieroglyphic inscriptions. Hieroglyphics is a strange alphabet. I would have thought that a civilisation that possessed the advanced science that the ancient Egyptians were alleged to have had, would have developed a less



limited means of communication. Of course it is possible that hieroglyphics was used only for recording specific events, and another language was used for regular communication.

Being a religious tour group, we had the advantage of visiting a site that most tourists do not get to see: the Church of St. Simon the tanner, also known as the Cave Church of Zabaleen. The church is located in a natural cave in the Mokattam Mountain in southeastern Cairo, and can accommodate 20 000 people. At high seasons, like Easter and Christmas, up to 70 000 people attend services in various churches in the area.

The location of the church, above "Garbage City" does not exactly make it an attraction that many tourists would like to visit. To get to it, one has to travel through the narrow odorous roads of the city, which seems to be an inhabited landfill. Garbage collection in Cairo is done by foreign firms which dump the garbage in landfills and there is no certainty about who owns the garbage. The tour guide said that Cairo was







houses who dilute them with alcohol and other additives to produce world famous brands. We visited the showrooms of one of the major producers and were introduced to some of the basic ingredients of the likes of Chanel No. 5 and Poisson. One of the male fragrances was named "Omar Khyam", after a dissolute playboy from Persia. Egyptian leather is used by many of the fashion houses of Europe.

Papyrus was the first writing material which could be manufactured from plant material, and was developed several thousand years ago, with samples still intact today. The process of manufacturing papyrus has been redeveloped and adapted to modern methods to shorten the time to produce the material which is used as a support for artwork. We visited a papyrus studio and were shown the process of production as well as a huge selection of art which resulted in more shopping.

And finally, the pyramids. Tours included a visit to the museum at Memphis, the step pyramid at Sakkara, the pyramid of Cheops and its associated Sphinx. The pyramids are located in the desert sands. The transition between desert plateau and fertile land is dramatic and occurs suddenly, a road basically divides the desert plateau from the fertile farmland. A quote from Omar Khyam comes to mind: "Come with me along

some strip of herbage strown, which just divides the desert from the sown".

Maybe it was due to weariness after a long tour, perhaps information overload or the impression of so many magnificent church and religious buildings, but the pyramids did not impress me. Neither did the Sphinx. In spite of all that has been written about the pyramids, their mathematical relationships, the stellar and astronomical significance, the engineering feats of their construction, and their relationship to ancient Egyptian religious beliefs, the pyramids remain a grubby pile of stones in a harsh desert environment. Many pyramids have been engulfed by desert sand, and are surrounded by aggressive souvenir vendors and camel ride operators.

Each stone is said to weigh several tonnes and not all are the same size. Construction remains a mystery, and we were presented with several hard-to-believe methods: one was rolling logs under the stones, second was that there were wheels attached to the stones, and third was that block and tackle were fixed to wooden wedges inserted in the holes in the side of the stones which were then carried. Alternative theories include that the pyramids were built by an earlier



not that filthy before the foreign firms took over the garbage removal and management. I wonder why they don't use the waste to generate electricity.

The day's tour ended with a ride on a *felucca*, a traditional sailboat, over a short stretch of the Nile. This was followed by peak hour Cairo traffic which was shocking, as roads are crowded all day, there are no lane markings and there seems to be no traffic rules.

The hotel was a sumptuous affair with a huge foyer, but had fallen into disrepair. My room featured a complicated set of light switches which I couldn't figure out and which proceeded to switch various lights on and off at 03h00 in the morning, I eventually found the master switch and turned the whole room off.

The final day was devoted to both Egypt's past and its present. The past consisting of antiquities, mainly pyramids; and present consisting of commerce, interestingly enough, perfume, papyrus, and leather goods. By this time we had become accustomed to the Egyptian greeting gesture, which involves rubbing the thumb and the forefinger together in the face of the person you are greeting.

I learned that Egypt produces about 75% of the essential oils used in the world perfume trade. These oils are sold to fashion



race who had the technology to move and lift the stones. An American sculptor is rumoured to have rediscovered this technology but did not pass it on before his demise. The second theory holds that the structures were built by a race of giants, the Nephilim mentioned in the Bible, and a final theory is that the stones were not quarried but cast on site as an ancient form of concrete. Microscopic examination of the blocks apparently reveals a crystalline structure more consistent with that of concrete than of the local stone. In my opinion, the base stones of one of the pyramids we visited look more cast than quarried.

Egypt is not the only Middle Eastern country to have pyramids. Sudan, to the south, has more pyramids than Egypt.

Our flight home was on Egypt Air, and there were some concerns because an Egypt Air flight from Paris to Cairo had crashed into the Mediterranean during our visit, and sabotage or terrorism was suspected. This could have accounted for the fact that the flight was half full, which made for a comfortable trip home.

The tour was an enjoyable combination of religious pilgrimage, tourist holiday visit, general shopping expedition and all-round fun.

