

# DOUGLAS MISQUITA



IMPRESSIONS  
OF  
EGYPT

# Impressions of Egypt

By

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## FOREWORD

In November of 2010, I visited Egypt. I was fascinated and humbled by its history and culture. This book is about the emotions and impressions that can only be experienced when you bask in the glorious Mediterranean sun in Alexandria, are belittled by the pyramids at Giza, come to terms with the engineering feat of relocating Abu Simbel, appreciate the grandeur of the museum-city of Luxor and relive the romance of the Nile.

My visit influenced the third act of my novel, *Secret of the Scribe*.

# PROLOGUE: THE TEMPLE OF KOM OMBO



The hot Egyptian sun is relentless. Under a perfect blue sky, everything is still: no birds chirping, no insects buzzing. The revered silence is broken by the crunch of my sneakers on pebbles. The pebbles are red, blue, gray, black, brown, yellow. It is a mosaic over the courtyard of Kom Ombo temple.

I am running. My backpack bounces against my spine. The metal clasp of my water flask clinks with each bound. My colourful silk scarf flutters against my ears and my neck. I grip my Canon A495. I stop to snap a picture before setting off on a diagonal sprint. Most of my tour group has returned to the boat that will take us up the Nile. I don't care. I stop again. Click another picture. I'm reviewing the picture when my peripheral vision senses another shot. I turn and admire the columns rising against the sky. I kneel at the well that drops to the nilometer. The Egyptians used it to predict the rate of rising of the River Nile. I spot a narrow channel that funnelled water to a pond that was home to a sacred crocodile, thousands of years ago. The channel has a stone grating to filter water. Only the purest water should caress the tough hide of the crocodile god, Sobek.

To a passer-by I must look crazy; a lanky frame running, pivoting, crouching, kneeling, clicking pictures every few steps.

My excitement has to do with impressions and implications.

Kom Ombo sits on an embankment at a meander of the Nile, fifteen feet above the waterline, thirty feet from the riverbank. Millenia ago, the great crocodile-infested river lapped at the stone steps of the outer courtyard.

A few minutes earlier, our guide dramatically described a scene. Priests would spot the pharaoh's majestic flotilla approaching the temple. They would hasten through secret rooms and trapdoors to a concealed chamber. In the chamber, an ingenious stone horn would amplify their chants and invocations. He indicated that the floor rises while the roof descends so worshippers must bow to the altars. He has made clear the symmetry of the two halves of the temple. In the rear wall, Ma'at holds balanced scales at the axis of symmetry. A hospital behind the temple depicts a woman in childbirth. The engravings in the walls represent medical equipment, many of which are used today. Indentations in the stone floor are a remnant of a board game. Patients could play while they awaited their appointment with the healers.

And then... there are the hieroglyphs and paintings. Imagine walking down a street lined with buildings, trees, parked cars. You are bursting with stories. So, as you walk, you tell your story in pictographs. You paint on the walls, carve into the trees, scratch into parked cars. Then you pull out your palette and your bag of organic dyes and paint a huge mural in vivid blue, yellow, brown, gold, green. That is a humble expression of the hieroglyphs covering the temple. I am dismayed I cannot read the language. I would need months to appreciate the stories, wisdom, mythology, history, science, prayers that are conveyed on the temple.

Adventurers, philosophers, architects and engineers, doctors and caregivers, artists, storytellers, poets, and sculptors experience a bond with this place and the spirits of its ancient occupants.

This is Egypt. There is something for everyone. And we're only scratching at the surface.

# FASCINATION

My fascination with Egypt began with the film, *The Ten Commandments*. It continued in the Tintin and Asterix adventures, *Cigars of the Pharaoh* and *Asterix and Cleopatra*. It was reignited with the film, *The Mummy*. It rose to fictional heights in the adventure novels of Matthew Reilly. It was tempered by the works of Egyptologist and novelist, Christian Jacque. It was portended by hoardings inviting tourists to Egypt and the realisation that my coffee mug was decorated with hieroglyphs and the profile of Nefertiti. It was sealed by an issue of National Geographic featuring Tutankhamen, then a month later by the same channel showcasing the Sphinx at Giza and, a week before departure, by an issue of Lonely Planet featuring Egypt.

Egypt grows on you. It seduces you with fiction and fact until you have an urge to visit. Yet, all you have read cannot prepare you for the experience.

# ALEXANDRIA

As my flight descends, I see the Nile delta slipping underbelly, a patchwork of farmlands and blocks of low buildings. The airport is small and humble compared to Cairo international. It is a preparatory step: I am entering a different time and place. This is not urbanization. This is history, culture, beliefs, intellectualism, wars, and a confluence of influences.

We are whisked from immigration to the Alexandrian Library. As I stand in the library's hallowed halls, buffered from the main reading space by soundproof glass, I swallow in awe. A million books open to the public, linked via the Internet to other large libraries of the world. The library is three separate structures: the library proper; an observatory that emerges from the courtyard as a brown hemisphere behind a bust of Alexander the Great; a conference hall. The curving white walls of the building are inscribed with all known languages of the world. It is an architectural metaphor for uniting the world. I note the word *naukri*. In Hindi, it means service and is a fitting summary of the mission of the library: To Serve All Humanity.



The drive to the Quatbay citadel, built over the ruins of the Pharos lighthouse, takes us to the sea front. The yellowing brick walls of the citadel rise under a cloudy sky and a fluttering Egyptian flag. More interesting are the hawkers selling trinkets, statuettes of Egyptian gods, showpiece conches and starfish shells. Nearby, at the tip of a promontory, several anglers wait patiently for a tug on their lines.

The Mediterranean Sea is a sparkling blue expanse as far as the eye can see. The roads are lined with electric lanterns on ornate lamp stands. The sun shines through cotton-puff clouds. I see distinct sunrays. They look exactly like how I drew them in kindergarten.

At the Alexandrian National Museum, I find it ironic that swords and weapons are inscribed with prayers. I see my first mummy in a room known as the Tomb and amphorae – until then I'd seen them in Asterix comics.



In the evening, as we drive away from the Presidential palace, a waning sun sets the sky aflame and casts a halo upon the clouds. In that profound moment, I want to kneel with hands raised and experience God in that light.

Our hotel is The Azur Mediterranean with a private beach. French windows access the beach, diaphanous curtains billow in the sea breeze.

In the morning, I leave Adidas treads in the sand as I walk to the water line. Waves tumble toward the beach and pull back. A lone sea gull sits atop the breakers, its chest puffed with pride.



# GIZA



The journey to Cairo is picturesque. We pass trucks laden with tomatoes and pears. Tracts of desert and farmland sweep past the big windows. We enter Giza and I spot it. There are things that need pomp and a drum roll to draw attention. The structure I behold does not need this. I have trouble accepting its dimensions. In the smog, it looms like the largest triangular shadow in the world. It is visible from every turn the bus makes.

The Great Pyramid.

But I will have to wait to see it. Today, we visit a papyrus 'factory' where we have our first encounter with Egyptian salesmanship. The air is rife with rapid-fire bargains. New deals flow like quicksilver. "Only for you"; "One free if you buy this"; "Discounted if you buy this". And after a sale, "Buy a bigger one and you'll get the ones you already bought free and the big one at a discount." Everybody walks out with a clutch of papyri, proud of having cinched an 'exclusive' deal. If only we knew!

Next is a perfume factory. It is a heady tour of aromas. The claims of the medicinal properties of the essence are outrageous. We are informed that several essences are the secret ingredient in CK, Hugo Boss, Nina Ricci. Pretty Arab girls materialise to entice the dithering male buyer. In the basement an artisan enthralls us as he blows a beautiful essence holder into



shape. The climax of his act is a burst of fine glass ribbons. We applaud with glee.

That evening, we attend a sound and light show at the Giza plateau. The history of the pyramids is recounted with green, yellow, amber laser projections to accompanying music. The pyramids are fleetingly illuminated by spotlights. They appear momentarily – tantalizingly – before fading into the indigo night.

The next morning, my excitement is palpable. We collect our visitor passes at the entrance to Giza plateau. Smog obscures the pyramids, but I sense their presence. They have been waiting for eons... for me.



Behemoths. Steeped in history and fiction with incredulous explanations of their real purpose. Much of the stone is crumbling. What makes these featureless structures the awe of generations of humans? They dominate the land like otherworldly sentinels watching over puny humans. The silence is eerie. It feels as if they have cast a spell over the plateau. They were built four thousand years ago. The methods of their construction are debated. I realise slavery alone cannot produce this. Beliefs can. The pyramids testify to a belief that convinced a kingdom to build for twenty-three years. The royal treasuries were almost bankrupted with these projects.

The pyramids connect us to the Pharos Lighthouse, the Gardens of Babylon, the Temple of Zeus, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes

and the Temple of Artemis. They have outlived those six wonders of the ancient world. They will outlive us.

We disembark the coach at a vantage point. Locals offer camel rides. As we wait for the weather to clear and the pyramids to open to visitors, I watch the camels follow a looping trail, amongst the dunes.

We have tickets for Khafre's pyramid but it is closed for restoration. Instead, I descend into Menkaure's pyramid. It is the smallest. A three-foot-square tunnel penetrates the pyramid at a steep angle. At the end is a disappointingly bare, tiny gated room. Even then, when I emerge, wonder is etched on my face.

Imagine the millions of people who have looked upon these rising interlocking stones. Imagine these stones have looked back at them. The air, sounds, clothes, languages were different. These stones have seen it all. They have united the world in a way no human can. If stones could talk, what would they tell us?

On the other side of the plain is the Sphinx. It seems smaller than I imagined but is impressive. Tourists chatter and mill about, struggling for that perfect photograph. The story of the Sphinx is carved in stone, clutched between its massive paws. The panorama of the Sphinx guarding the pyramids teases the limit of the human eye's viewing angle. I find a spot where it appears that the Sphinx is peering at me. Its gaze sends a tingle up my spine.

Our guide calls us. I ask for a minute and race to the Great Pyramid a final time. I cannot crane my neck enough to appreciate its entirety. The sun appears to be positioned upon its capstone. I fumble with my camera settings and manage a photo. Frustratingly, its sensors are overwhelmed by the glare of the sun. Time's up; I walk away.

The Sphinx eyes the departure of our bus for a bit. Then it doesn't. As if our departure is deemed insignificant. I may never see the pyramids and the Sphinx again, but they are etched into my memory forever.

# CAIRO

Hollywood portrays mummies breaking out of sarcophagi, terrorising people. Reality check: no mummy can shoulder the immense weight of a sarcophagus lid. I reach to touch the sarcophagus, then pause. I imagine my fingers crushed to pulp if the wooden plugs holding the lid up give way.

The Cairo Museum houses around 120,000 artefacts. An entire wing is dedicated to the boy king Tutankhamen. Chariots, weapons, jewellery, canopic jars, statuettes, beds, thrones, linen. If King Tut has enough to fill a museum wing, how much space would the treasures of Khufu, Khafre or Ramesses II need? The air-conditioned room with King Tutankhamen's intricate sarcophagus holds people in silent observation. An intriguing display is of coffins that fit into one another like Matryoshka dolls. The smallest contains the sarcophagus and death mask of the king. The set of coffins is covered with prayers in gold filigree. It's a pity photography isn't permitted. I could spend hours taking pictures of this room.

The Khan-E-Khalili market is a welcome change from the day's itinerary. It is a quaint marketplace where bargains begin at half price and plummet to the floor. Papyri for an Indian nuclear family and friends for EGP 10 or less. And what we paid at the 'factory'! Police make an appearance and unlicensed carts scatter into the shadows. The police making a show of looking everywhere... but at the unlicensed carts. *We didn't see any hawkers.* When the police leave, the carts reappear and the bargaining resumes. We are soon accustomed to hearing "India!" and "Amitabh Bachchan" or "Shah Rukh Khan" followed by a few lines of a Bollywood song. We confound the Egyptians when we joke, "We don't like Shah Rukh Khan". Having exhausted their knowledge of Indian cinema, they retreat in frustration. One shopkeeper calls out saying I look Egyptian and he looks Indian. At one point I hear, "Indian, Egyptian same. Only look, no buy. No money, no honey." We laugh and carry on.

A boy who sold us shirts catches up with us to return a USD 20 (instead of EGP 20) bill that my elderly companion paid. In halting English, he tells the tourist she reminds him of his mother. This display of honesty in a street where dishonesty is allegedly the norm leaves us with a warm feeling.

# ASWAN



The train to Aswan is overbooked. The tour operator puts me on a late flight instead. I check into my room. My head hits the pillow and I'm in dreamland.

The next morning, I discover my room is a suite with a wraparound balcony! I am rewarded with a romantic sight, straight out of an Agatha Christie novel. The Nile meanders past my hotel. White-sailed feluccas drift on its waters. There's a Coptic church and the pockmarked mound of a pigeon house on the near bank. On the opposite bank, perched atop a hill, is a mosque.

I enjoy a delectable breakfast of Arabian pastries by the pool before re-joining the tour. The M/S Mirage I is moored to the pier. An hour later we are sailing toward Aswan dam and Lake Nasser. Controversies rage about the benefits of the dam and its impact on the ecology. Eighteen monuments and temples were relocated to save them from being submerged in the lake. That's how vast Lake Nasser is. Standing on the dam's causeway, it's hard to imagine dry, uninviting desert is barely a kilometre away!

The sweltering desert climate is taking its toll on our group when we arrive at the site of the Unfinished Obelisk. The air is dry and still. We climb to the top of the granite quarry. Our guide points but I take a few moments to perceive it. The obelisk is on its side, like a stone missile. A jagged crack has besmirched a face which is why it was abandoned. How was a block so

massive transported to the Nile and then upstream to Luxor? A wooden walkway criss-crosses the obelisk for better views. The wood creaks underfoot as I descend the quarry. Boulders provide shade from the sun. A solitary tourism police officer in a white uniform bakes inside a guard outpost. Colourful shops line the exit of the quarry, on the way back to the coach.

Our guide cautions us that the journey to Abu Simbel will be exhausting. A few decide to skip the torment. I ration my water and prepare for adventure.

# ABU SIMBEL

Abu Simbel is 290 kilometres into the desert. Who knows what could befall us? The government permits public convoys at the break of dawn and private convoys of two coaches. An armed policeman climbs aboard. I recall in 1997 there was a terrorist attack at Queen Hatshepsut's Mortuary. The presence of the armed man in the bus implies the possibility of danger. I'm bubbling with excitement.



The three-and-a-half-hour journey is breath-taking. The desert comes alive in swathes of gold, red, brown, orange, black, grey, white sand. The terrain rises in waves, crests in dunes, curls like snakes. Black buttes like marching armies jut out of the desert. Cone shaped rocks stand away from other rocks, as if to emphasize their superior form. Mirages of slender, silver lakes make for an imaginative postcard.



At a rest stop, we clamber out. I skip to the roadside to take a picture through a discarded truck tire. I skip back and am nearly runover by a speeding car that materialises out of nowhere. It *whooshes* by, the driver screaming an obscenity at my recklessness. I had no indication of its arrival. The sound of its approach was swallowed by the vast desert.

I still tingle with dread at what could have been as I write this and thank Heaven for intervening.

The drive continues. We pass a cement channel brimming with sparkling blue water and then a depression in the desert that is an escape canal for



overflow. We overtake a truck crammed with camels while our guide runs us through the dynasties of Egypt.

At Abu Simbel Visitor Centre I behold a scene out of *The Lord of the Rings*. In the dusk, the sunken mountain tops brim with mystery and adventure. My exhilaration builds as we walk toward the hill to which the temple has been relocated. The terrain rises and dips. I see inscriptions in the rock face. I round a bend and my jaw drops.



Four colossal statues of Ramesses II root me to the spot. A flood of words assails me. Magnificent. Royal. Sacred. Towering. Awe-inspiring. Fearful. I dare say the temple at Abu Simbel overshadows the pyramids of Giza. Ramesses II built this temple in his likeness to terrify invaders at the southern borders of his kingdom. It immortalises his victory in the Battle of the Hittites. He built it to honour the cult of his invented trinity and deify himself.

Abu Simbel is my first encounter with Egyptian painting and temple inscriptions. The scenes of a battle and of Ramesses offering enemies and fruits to several gods are vividly rendered. Starry skies adorn the ceiling. Slow motion sequences are depicted by blurring the rock carvings. In the sanctum, is the statue of Ramesses II with Ra-Harakhty, Amun and Ptah. On the 22nd of October and February, the sun's rays enter the doorway between the colossal statues outside, shoot down the nave, to illuminate Ramesses II, Ra-Harakhty, and Amun. Ptah is relegated to darkness. Even now, concealed lights reproduce the desired effect. A short distance away, is the temple

honouring Nefertari, Ramesses II's favourite Nubian wife. The engravings and paintings in her temple have feminine themes of love and fertility.

As evening falls, the complex is bathed in the glow of a setting sun peeping over a ridgeline. Electric lights turn on. The yellow points of light are strung out like a necklace along the lake front.

The return to Aswan is in pitch black darkness, broken only by the twin beams of the coach headlamps. In the heavens, is a feast for the eyes: hundreds of stars, twinkling like diamonds. I fully appreciate the description, "star-studded". How under privileged we are to be denied this beauty in our cities. In dazzling clarity, I discern constellations. So bright and clear. So near. I am blessed to have witnessed this.

# PHILAE TEMPLE, LAKE NASSER



The next day is an excursion to the Philae Temple. It has been relocated to an island from the depths of the artificial lake. The pylons of a dam employed to drain water around the submerged temple are visible nearby. Before the relocation, people would sail into the perennially flooded temple. We cross in a chugging motorboat. A Nubian with a cigarette dangling from his lips mans the tiller. Philae looks like a temple-fortress looming above the boat as we near the island. Solitary herons stand on rocky outcrops, posing for my camera. Our boat docks at a small pier and we climb stairs to the temple.

In the courtyard, our guide uses members from our tour group to enact the story of how Seth, evil son of Ra, dismembered his brother Osiris into 42 pieces, spreading them over the 42 nomes of Egypt to prevent Osiris' wife, Isis from recovering them. Yet, Isis resurrected Osiris who chose to rule the underworld. Isis conceived Horus (portrayed by yours truly) to battle Seth to avenge Osiris. Philae was built by the Ptolemy pharaohs to honour Isis's her role in the triumph of good over evil. It shows Egyptian beliefs were respected during the reign of Greek-pharaohs. The ruins of a VIP lounge for visiting dignitaries stands to one side of Philae.

To my disappointment, Christian crusaders have desecrated the inscriptions and faces of the 'pagan' gods and have built a church inside Philae. Coptic crosses are engraved in some walls.

With a shudder of diesel engines, the Mirage I cruises north. Cattle and camel graze along the banks of the Nile. Feluccas sail past, the boatmen bare white grins. Children scamper on the banks and wave at me. Their joyous calls carry across the water. I wave back. They leap with glee.

At eleven in the morning, we stop at Kom Ombo, where somebody observes that none of the paintings show camels. We derive that the camel was imported into Egypt much later.

# EDFU

At six in the evening, we dock at Edfu and horse-drawn carriages take us to the temple of the falcon god, Horus. It is the longest horse carriage ride I have undertaken and the jolt over speed breakers seems to be borne easier than a car. A horse carriage streaks past, driven by a Japanese tourist reliving a John Wayne moment. Another carriage overtakes us, the driver shouting "Ferrari, Ferrari".

The city of Edfu is in ruins around the temple. Dwelling places are built into the mud mounds surrounding the temple. Edfu honours Horus's victorious battle against Seth. The battle is elaborately portrayed in paintings, inscriptions and engravings on the walls and columns.

Edfu is remarkably well preserved. Despite Christian occupation it isn't defaced like Philae. The ceiling is black from the soot of cooking so many years ago. On one side of the temple, a stairway rises, like a soaring falcon. On the other side, a spiral stairway descends like a falcon swooping-down. Egyptologists have deciphered the meaning of the stairwells from hieroglyphs. Ancient Egyptians have left enough to keep generations busy. I imagine them smirking at us from their afterlife.

In the sanctum is a wooden barque — a drab substitute for the original ornate gold barque. In a narrow side courtyard, I find myself between the sloping temple walls and a sheer perimeter wall. The Battle is presented in full detail from the hunt for Seth to the victory. By sequentially diminishing the hippopotamus avatar of Seth, the Egyptian storytellers ingeniously depict Horus' triumph.

The evening is spent in revelry aboard the Mirage. We play *Passing Bottles*, *Dressing up a Mummy* (in fresh toilet-paper rolls), *Grouping by Numbers* and *Tabolla* — a game of lots. Most hilarious is a potato race. Contestants must nudge a foil-wrapped potato with another potato dangling from their belt. Everybody is in splits at the hip-thrusts, swinging derrieres, and contorted expressions as participants coax potatoes over the finish line.

# FROM UPPER TO LOWER EGYPT

The Esna lock is a breather from the overdose of temples. At 4:30 am I emerge on the sundeck to watch as our boat slides into the lock connecting Upper and Lower Egypt. The southern gates are sealed and the water is drained. When we entered the lock, the control cabin was abreast of the boat's sundeck. Now it is twenty feet above our heads. The mast of the Mirage sinks below the bridge that spans the northern side of the lock. Then the northern gates open and the Mirage sails under the bridge into Lower Egypt.



# LUXOR, EAST BANK

The next morning, we arrive at Luxor. With the largest collection of monuments in the world Luxor is an open-air museum. To date, roadworks and construction workers stumble on remnants from the ancient dynasties.

Karnak temple covers 62 acres, the equivalent of ten average European cathedrals. It was under construction for one thousand years and is still incomplete. A football-field sized courtyard lined with palms stretches from the Nile to the temple. In ancient times the Nile covered this space. Barques sailed into a harbour in the temple during the festival of Opeth. The Egyptian influence is evident in the larger and thicker pylons as compared to the smaller pylons of the Greek-period temples. There are ten pylons and the temple is in an L-shape. Two rows of ram-headed sphinxes channel visitors to an inner courtyard. The earthen scaffolding and ramps to build the largest pylons are still inside the temple. Past the forward pylons is the largest Hypostyle Hall in the world. The outer columns are surmounted with papyri blossoming in sunlight that enters through an opening in the ceiling. The inner columns are surmounted with closed papyri because they are outside the sunlight. The walls are adorned with inscriptions and depictions of worship and conquests, proclamations of the supremacy of the pharaoh, of the unity of Upper and Lower Egypt. Carvings of Asian and African slaves have meticulous detail to features like lips, and hair.

As I traverse the ruins, I'm disappointed with tourists who touch and rub the structures. It is our duty to refrain from eroding history. In another courtyard is a sacred lake and a scarab beetle sculpture. 50 revolutions of the scarab will make your wishes come true. Tourists circle the Scarab – chattering, counting the rounds. I dislike their frivolous treatment of a sacred belief. Clearly, I'm in a dark mood.

Luxor temple is separated from the Nile by a promenade, the Corniche. The property is exposed to traffic and pedestrians on all sides. The Avenue of the Sphinxes leads to the gate. There is a mosque atop Luxor temple. The builders were unaware the temple lay beneath. One of the obelisks from outside the gate is now in Paris. Within the sanctum are remnants of Christian paintings. They have been cleaned away for the most part to reveal the Egyptian artwork beneath.



In an alley is the god of fertility with black smudges over his engorged member. Women of the time would touch the penis believing the gesture would bless them with a healthy pregnancy. A chamber in the temple depicts a story similar to the Annunciation! Here, a pharaoh is conceived by Ra under a Spell of Creativity cast by Knuum, the God of Creation. I have read how Christianity borrowed from older traditions but to see proof... It is a memory I will ponder for a long time.

The rest of the day is spent relaxing on the sundeck exchanging anecdotes and singing. After dinner we watch a belly dance performance. The artiste coaxes an Indian and Japanese to join her. Their attempts to emulate her is a sight to behold. I appreciate the Tanoura, a Sufi folk dance, better. A male dancer garbed in voluminous multi-coloured skirts spins dizzyingly. His skirts unfold and rise and fall in a mesmerising display of colours and patterns.

When the performances are over, contemporary music kicks in. Everybody retires to their rooms much to the dismay of the bartender. As the lounge empties itself out, I take to the floor and lose myself in musical abandon.

# LUXOR, WEST BANK

The Valley of the Kings is nestled in a ravine in the sun-baked desert. Here are the tombs of Ramses II, Tuthmosis IV and Tutankhamen. The tombs may be sealed without intimation for restoration. Within a week, the same tomb may not be open on all days. Photography is prohibited.

A model replica in the visitor's centre shows a 3D layout of the excavated tombs. Spindly tunnels bore into the mountains, terminating in halls and burial chambers.

In the valley, the heat is oppressive. Several rest stops overflow with tanned and weary tourists. Nearby, excavators toil under the watchful eye of a supervisor sitting in the shade of an umbrella.

Inside the tombs it is stuffy. One line of visitors enters while another departs, shoulder-to-shoulder. The tombs reverberate with a babble of languages. Although I do not understand them, I interpret the tone of excitement and awe. The tunnel walls are decorated with paintings. Most have retained their colour. The burial halls are huge and adorned with murals. After crouch-walking in the tunnel, I can stand upright. Our brief visit is insufficient to appreciate the tombs. The portals of some tombs are impossibly high and once inside, the tunnels dips at a sharp angle toward the heart of the mountain. Often there is an intermediate hall beyond which, a second tunnel descends to the bowels of the earth. Compared to the tombs, the desert seems to be air conditioned! Imagine the inhospitable working conditions; the exhausting body contortions to bore tunnels with unmechanized tools; the debilitating heat; the skill of the artisans; the labour employed to transport treasures inside. And then to seal it up and ensure its location remains secret. At what human cost?

We stop at an alabaster factory for a glib pottery and sculpting demonstration. We learn the difference between real and fake alabaster.

On the other side of the Valley of the Kings is the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut. It is embraced by the mountain. In the crescent arms of the mountain lie forbidding cave mouths. These are where priests and nobility are buried.



The temple is majestic and different in that it lacks pylons. Three terraces rise like immense steps into the mountain side. The terraces were gardens of



exotic plants from Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt. Today, the stumps of only two trees survive. The terraces are supported by columns and connected by a central ramp. From a distance, it appears that the columns are holding up the mountain face. The columns are dotted

with inscriptions and each level is adorned with paintings. Ceremonial bearded statues of the Queen on the columns were defaced by a vengeful relative. Hatshepsut is built on the same axis as Karnak temple. From the uppermost terrace, I have a view across the Nile to the Karnak temple.

We stop fleetingly at the ruins of the Colossus of Memnon – two towering stone statues sitting in a field staring across the landscape with non-existent faces. I am the only tourist who disembarks for photos.



I am lost in thought as our coach returns to the boat. Today, Egypt is a shadow of its ancient splendour. Yet, the monuments of the ancients provide for today's economy through tourism. 4000 years into the future, their investments provide for their beloved nation and immortalise them in the minds of millions around the world.

# EPILOGUE: SUNSET

Our sojourn of eight days through Egypt is at end. We unwind at a resort on Kings Island. It is a safari lodge with an infinity pool that spills into the Nile and a sunset jetty. I join two photographers on the pier to catch the sunset. The clock ticks as it has for millennia toward the sunset hour. The sun is a fiery orb, the sky is a deep orange, and the sunlight reflects blindingly off the Nile.



Beholding the sunset, I comprehend why the ancient Egyptians raised the sun to godhood. I have an inkling of how the darkness relates to phases of the afterlife. I see how the reappearance of Ra in the sky symbolises the conquest of light over dark, of good over evil.

Truly, the soul is rejuvenated by the beauty of the rising sun.

**THE END**