

Pinch Yourself!

You Really Are in Egypt

Egypt has always been a dream destination for me. When the time finally came for me to book a trip I was lucky enough to discover Ladies on The Go, and even luckier that Sharleen had a trip to Egypt showcased. The trip was the 18-day tour offered by Insight Vacations-Grand Tour of Egypt. By the time we were ready to depart there were seven of us, strangers traveling alone, together!

We departed Canada October 13, 2009 and returned October 31, 2009, choosing to go one day earlier to acclimatize and get over the jet leg. Anyone who has traveled over the big pond knows how demanding this can be and the extra day made a world of difference

Five of us opted for the single supplement, which while more expensive, allowed us to have that small group experience while still maintaining our own space.

I must admit that I had a lot of pre-trip jitters. I was full of questions, concerns and insecurities about traveling so far away from home, to a third world country, on my own. Sharleen could not have made the experience any easier. She was patient, encouraging and incredibly organized. Her travel experience showed and her care and concern for her clients was evident in everything she did, attest to by my frequent phone calls!

Day One and Two

We traveled with British Airways, connecting through Heathrow, and arriving in Cairo around 1:00 AM, the next day. Our hotel was the Fairmont Heliopolis, which I would rate as a 4 star, but more than adequate. The hotel is not located in central Cairo but rather a 10-minute drive from the Cairo airport. It is the ideal location if you are doing the Grand Tour as you begin the tour driving to the Sinai Desert. The location allows you to get an early start and avoid the Cairo traffic. If you are not doing the Grand Tour then a central hotel is a better choice. Note: This hotel is highly air-conditioned and you will be chilled. The rooms however have individual climate controls. The Fairmont has an excellent breakfast buffet with a wide variety of choice. There are 3-4 restaurants to choose from for lunch and dinner but be aware; this is a full smoking hotel. Two of us ate in the downstairs pub and were literally sickened by the thick, odorous smoke. The other restaurants did not pose as much of a problem as they were much better ventilated.

Day Three We departed the hotel around 8:30 AM and began a long 8-hour trek through the Sinai Desert. Driving through the tunnel under the Suez Canal was one of the stated highlights of this portion of the trip however you never actually get to see the Canal. The drive was onerous. The desert stretches on endlessly with nothing but sand, a glimpse now and then of the Red Sea and miles upon miles of garbage!

You do have 2-3 rest stops but our tour guide warned us to only eat food that was packaged. This meant chocolate bars, chips and ice cream! Note: The Fairmont has an excellent breakfast buffet. Take plenty of baggies with you and before you leave the Fairmont pack up enough food for the long trip. Bottled water is plentiful. Insight provides each guest with a liter bottle every day and the rest stops have fridges full of ice-cold bottled water.

We arrived at our hotel, the Morgen Land, around 5:00 PM. At best this hotel is a 2 star but it is clean and serves the purpose of a one-night stay. They have a dinner and breakfast buffet that are adequate but be warned that the dinner buffet does not open until 7:00 PM, so either bring snacks from home or pack some at the Fairmont before you leave Cairo. Note: You will need mosquito repellent in St. Catherine!

Day Four

Two adventurous ladies-on-the-go chose to climb Mount Sinai in the wee hours of the morning. To their credit they made it all the way up, and back again, a scrapped knee being the only injury! The rest of us chose to sleep in before we began our tour of the St. Catherine Monastery. Note:

Before you leave the Morgan Land, once again pack a lunch using one of those baggies you brought along for the trip!

The Monastery in St. Catherine is worth the trip. It is small and crowded but I found it to be very interesting and of course, historical. After a 2-hour stop at the Monastery you begin the long journey back across the Sinai, but this time you are prepared with an assortment of snacks you packed up at the breakfast buffet!

Your journey is another 8-hour travel day to reach the other side of the Red Sea. I was amazed at how polluted Suez City was, with towering smoke stacks pouring an assortment of coloured smoke into the atmosphere. That and the thousands upon thousands of discarded plastic water bottles are certainly eye opening. None-the-less, there is a lot to see from the comfort of your air-conditioned tour bus as you snake your way to the Red Sea resort of Ain Sukhna.

Notes on St. Catherine and Ain Sukhna

The first 2 days of your trip will be long travel days. You will need mosquito repellent for both days but nowhere else in Egypt will this be a problem. The hotels are 2 and 3 star but they are clean, comfortable and have decent buffets. The hotel in Ain Sukhna is the Palmera and it sits right on the Red Sea. Unfortunately we arrived after the sun went down and left very early the next morning so we did not get to see the Red Sea. The hotel was also heavily infested with mosquitoes but this may have been due to the heavy construction surrounding the hotel. The buffet here was one of the best!

Day Five

Another early morning departure and another long drive but this time it really felt like you were in Egypt. I guess that is what it feels like when you acclimatize! Today we got to see Cairo for the first time as we made our way to Alexandria. One of the first things to strike you about Cairo is the heavy air pollution. The city is blanketed by a yellow haze, which made seeing the pyramids a challenge. As well, you have not experienced traffic until you experience Cairo!

The drive to Alexandria was pleasant and there was a lot more to see than the drive through the desert. The rest stops were more "westernized" and there was a wider selection of snacks to choose from, although by now you have a wide variety of your own because you have filled up another one of those baggies.

One stop along the way was the war museum and cemetery in El-Alamein. I found this to be an interesting stop and both our tour guide and the guides at the museum provided plenty of history. After El-Alamein we continued our drive to Alexandria. Alexandria is located right on the Mediterranean Sea. A beautiful breeze blows away the smog and keeps the city significantly cooler than Cairo. Driving into the city was especially delightful. It is a busy port city and the traffic kept our attention! Words cannot describe the traffic in Egypt-you just have to experience it.

Alexandria is a bustling city with lots to see and it fast became one of my favourite cities. We made our way to the Hotel Helnan Palestine-a terrific 5 star hotel right on the sea. The best part, a 2-day rest stop!

Day Six

Today was a full day in Alexandria. Alexandria is a city built on top of most of the ancient ruins. As a result, not many ruins exist today for one to visit. It is a problem both city and federal officials grapple with. How do you excavate ancient ruins without displacing city residents and businesses? We started with an early morning city tour and then made our way to the Roman catacombs. From there we went to the amphitheatre and then off to the city museum. Along the way we stopped at the sight that was once the Great Lighthouse of Alexandria. None of the

original ruins remain today but a magnificent white stoned fortress sits in its place. It was a great day to people watch and to try and take in some of the ambiance of Egypt. Back at the hotel we had a few hours of free time. Most of us chose to have lunch by the harbour. Some were brave enough to dawn bathing suites and swim in the Mediterranean! I spent a quiet hour on my balcony overlooking the Mediterranean just relaxing and taking in the sights.

Dinner was the scheduled Highlight dinner at the old palace right next door to our hotel. It was a magnificent place and deserving of its 5 star rating. However, the dinner was to be missed! Great pains were taken to cater to western tourists and the food was a choice of chicken, pasta and beef with fries and little else. They had heard that tourists were warned not to eat any fruit they hadn't peeled themselves so they served an unpeeled banana on a side plate for desert. Note: You have no free time in Alexandria so think about skipping the highlight dinner and instead explore the city and find a local restaurant to indulge your senses.

Day Seven

Day seven was the return trip to Cairo. Along the way we stopped at a Christian Monastery. It was an incredible old sanctuary with a lot of history. We had roughly a 2-hour stop with a full tour.

We then drove straight through to Cairo for our 2-night stay at the Cairo Marriott, a luxury 5-star hotel in the heart of the city. The traffic as we approached Cairo was bumper to bumper but the journey was exciting none-the-less. So much to see, hear and experience. The smog was as heavy as it had been our first time through and the grime build up on all of the buildings was striking. In Egypt, property taxes are not payable unless your dwelling is completely finished. As a result you see buildings that are not fully constructed, with the re-bar sticking out. Add to that the fact everyone has a satellite dish and the spectacle is both amusing and interesting.

The evening was a sound and light show at the pyramids in Giza. Reviews were mixed but most felt it was worthwhile.

Day Eight

Today was the full Cairo sightseeing tour. It was an amazing city with so much history and culture. My one regret is that we didn't have a lot of free time to explore on our own. Note: If exploring a city on your own is important consider adding an extra day or two at the end of your trip.

The Citadel of Salah El Din and Mohammed Ali's great mosque were two wonderful sights. At the mosque you can rent booties for about 40 cents if you don't want to take your shoes off. Long pants and long sleeves are the norm but women were not required to cover their heads. The final stop was the Cairo Museum. You need a full day to truly see all of it but we made the best of the time we had. Back at the Marriott we had free time for dinner. Most of us chose to eat at the hotel but a few did venture out to experience Cairo on their own. Frankly, I didn't venture out because I was afraid to cross the street with all of that traffic!

Day Nine

Today we departed Cairo for Luxor by Egypt Air. Now Egypt Air is an experience as well. Safety is not an issue nor is comfort. But when you get your boarding pass you don't know whose name will be on it. They just hand them out! Next, seating is considered "free" seating. So it's first come first serve, grab any old seat that is available. Not the most orderly way to board an aircraft.

The trip to Luxor takes about 2 hours and the airport at Luxor was very new and modern. The washrooms were actually fit to be used! Next we boarded our bus for the short trip to our boat-MS Giselle. She was an older boat but well maintained, clean, comfortable and had large, palatial staterooms. The food aboard the MS Giselle was very good. You had 3 buffets a day with free seating. Dress was casual. Food selection was varied with plenty of choice. At lunch and dinner each passenger got a one-liter bottle of water. The crew aboard the ship was friendly and

efficient. Laundry services were reasonable and fast. Tipping was only allowed at the end of the cruise. This was a bonus!

Days Ten to Fifteen

The next six days were spent cruising the Nile. It was one of those moments in life where you had to pinch yourself. Here I am, on a cruise boat, sailing the Nile. It was surreal at first. It was what I imagined when I imagined Egypt!

The routine on board was pretty simple. After breakfast we had our morning tour and then returned to the ship for lunch. Around 4:00 PM we set out for our afternoon tour and then returned to the ship for dinner. Evenings were free time.

Some notes to ponder:

Wear a hat. No question about it, it gets hot and the sun is intense in the Aswan Valley. Although it gets hot it is a dry heat and there is little if any humidity.

Mosquitoes and other insects are not a problem. You won't need repellent here.

The sun is intense so use sunscreen.

Drink plenty of water, which isn't a problem to find. Bottled water is everywhere and you get 3 free bottles a day. You get one at lunch, one at dinner and one when you board the bus each morning.

Dress is casual although few women wore shorts other than on the boat. Capris were the norm. Short sleeves and sleeveless are fine in this region. Travel light and consider having your laundry done on the ship. It is very reasonable.

ATMs are everywhere so if you need cash let your tour guide know and he will make sure the bus driver makes a pit stop.

Touring the Nile

Cruising down the Nile is a relaxing and memorable experience. Life along the Nile hasn't changed much in hundreds of years. Mud hut farms and dwellings dot the landscape. All along the Nile you see fishermen with their small boats, casting nets and dragging them in, over and over. Children (mostly boys) swim and play in the Nile while farmers work the fields in the background. There are many stops along the way. The Temple of Hathor in Dendra, Karnak Temple, Temple of Luxor, the Temple of Horus at Edfu and the Temple of Sobek at Kom Ombo, to name a few. The Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens are amazing displays of ancient Egypt. Markets are at every stop so beware of the vendors and learn to say no, politely! Bakeesh means tip and you will hear it a lot.

An optional tour is the day trip to Abu Simbel. The trip costs around \$260 US but is well worth it. You fly from Aswan to Abu Simbel and from there take a short bus ride to the Temple of Rameses II. If a day trip to Abu Simbel is not in your plans there is plenty to do while docked in Aswan. Take a city tour or visit the Nubian museum. If you feel tempted out, relax for the afternoon on board the ship and enjoy the quiet while taking in the experience of being on the Nile. The ship does not sail at night so you are free to venture out on your own. For security, military personnel boarded our ship each night while we were docked.

Day Sixteen

After returning to Luxor we flew directly back to Cairo for a two night stay at the Marriott. The first evening was free time but the reality was that by the time we got to the hotel and checked in there wasn't a lot of time to plan much of anything. Some used the time to explore the market in Cairo; others took the Nile dinner cruise. Most of us opted to eat at the hotel and just relax.

This is the most free time you will get in Cairo so if you are not extending your stay do take advantage of the time and get out to explore the city on your own. I wasn't feeling too well and

decided to stay close to the hotel but later regretted not going out to visit the Grand Bazaar in Cairo. As much as I enjoyed the Marriot, and I did enjoy the Marriott, I did not use my free time to go out and eat locally. Those that did had great tales to tell!

Day Seventeen

The day began with a visit to the pyramids of Giza. A magnificent sight and everything you imagined it would be. Although being claustrophobic I chose not to go into the pyramids! After exploring the pyramids we then had the opportunity to ride a camel. Nothing can prepare you for the experience! It was, thankfully, a short ride with a photo opportunity. We ended our journey with a stop in Memphis and another museum visit. Here the skies opened up and it poured for about 20 minutes. Our tour guide thanked the ladies from Vancouver for bringing the much needed, and rarely seen, rain.

About the Food

I had a lot of questions regarding the food on the trip. But food is not something you need to worry about, as I discovered. All of your pre-paid meals are buffets meals with plenty of choice. You will have a wide variety of breads, soups, pasta, vegetables, meats and fish to choose from. All of the buffets provide a wide selection of desserts too! The only meal I would consider skipping was the highlight meal in Alexandria, which was not really a highlight at all. Skipping the meal would allow you to do a little sightseeing on your own and perhaps grab a bite to eat in a local restaurant. And take snacks for the first 4-5 days! Don't forget the baggies.

What to Wear

When I was planning my trip I had no idea what to pack. The internet is full of information, some of it contradictory.

The only place women needed to cover their arms was when visiting Mohammed Ali's mosque in Cairo. Even there we were not required to cover our heads.

Our trip was in October and we didn't need a coat or sweater. Well, other than inside the hotels that had high air conditioning on all the time.

So pack capris, slacks, jeans, skirts or dresses. You will want a sweater for those inside moments. Short sleeve and sleeveless are fine. Bring a bathing suite as all of the hotels have pools. The on board pool is nothing more than a wading pool but it got a lot of use. There is an opportunity to take a dip in the Mediterranean while in Alexandria. Take comfortable walking shoes and perhaps sandals for walking around on board the ship. Don't forget the hat! There is one theme dinner on board the ship but if you are inclined to participate you can buy something on the cheap in one of the markets. Having laundry done on board helps you pack light.

Health and Safety

Egypt is located in an area of the world where trouble can happen. It is also a third world country. Never once did I feel unsafe. Security is tight with metal detectors at the entrance of most hotels. On board the ship at night military personnel boarded the ship for our safety. The people of Egypt were friendly and helpful. I didn't experience any problems being a women traveling to a Muslim country. Our tour guide took our comfort and safety personally and he was always available to help.

Health wise be smart. Don't drink the tap water, as bottled water is abundant. Take Imodium or a similar anti-diarrhea product with you, as you will probably get hit with mummy tummy at some point. For the most part it is mild and easily controlled. Make sure all of your vaccinations are up to date before you go. Pack a small first aid kit with insect repellent, after bite care, bandages, antiseptic wipes, antibiotic cream, antihistamines, headache relief and hand sanitizer. It is also recommended that you take with you an antibiotic such as Cipro in case you do catch a bacterial infection.

Money Matters

You need a Visa to enter Egypt but you purchase one upon arrival at Cairo. It costs about \$20-\$25 US but they will take any currency, even Canadian.

ATMs are plentiful so you don't need to travel with large sums of money. Just remember there is a higher fee for withdrawals out of country.

Take some Egyptian currency with you. The equivalent of \$200-\$300 CAD is fine. The exchange rate is actually better in Egypt, including at the hotels, as they desperately want foreign currency. Take the rest of your cash in Canadian funds if you don't want to rely upon ATMs. You don't need to convert into US cash. You may also want a few British Pounds for your layovers in Heathrow. VISA is accepted almost everywhere but some merchants charge you a fee for using the credit card. This is really their merchant fee that they charge back to you.

About Insight Vacations

This was my first trip with Insight and it won't be my last. I was impressed with everything about them. They have a great web site that has a member's forum. If you have a question chances are that someone else has asked it on the forum and has received numerous replies. Hotel selection was first rate, with the exception of St. Catherine, which was best available. Hotels were ideally situated with a 5 star rating. Our tour bus was new, clean and washroom equipped. The tour guide was knowledgeable and informative. You pay more for Insight but to me it was well worth the price.

Final Thoughts

The Grand Tour of Egypt was everything I had hoped it would be. As a single woman traveling alone I found safety in numbers with Ladies on The Go. Although the first few days of the trip were long with a lot of riding on the bus they were worth it if you wanted to climb Mount Sinai or see St. Catherine and Alexandria. I loved Alexandria and wish I had more time there to explore. I also enjoyed Cairo and likewise wish I had more free time there. Do consider adding a day or two to your trip to explore Cairo. You may also want to consider adding on a Jordan pre or post extension.

If Egypt is a destination on your bucket list then jump at the chance to travel with Ladies on The Go and join in. You won't regret your decision. If Sharleen is highlighting an Insight tour then I highly recommend it. You will experience Egypt up close and personal, in all of her splendor and glory.

If you can afford it consider the single supplement. Unless you have a travel companion you know you are compatible with it really is the best way to enjoy the trip.

However you choose to go, just go!

Until next time,

Joanne