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by KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA,

the new
Editor-at-Large for **TOWN &**
COUNTRY TRAVEL.

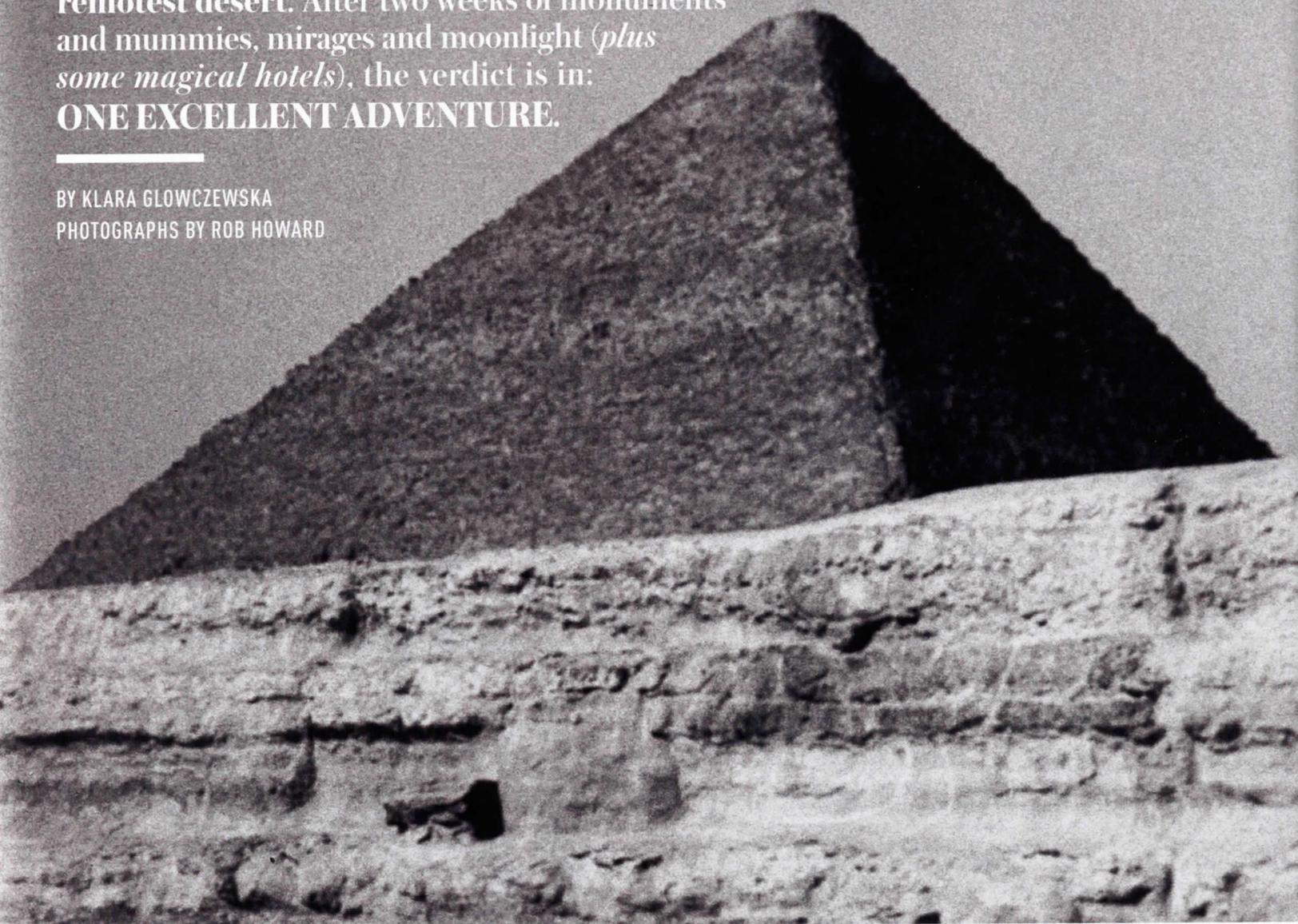
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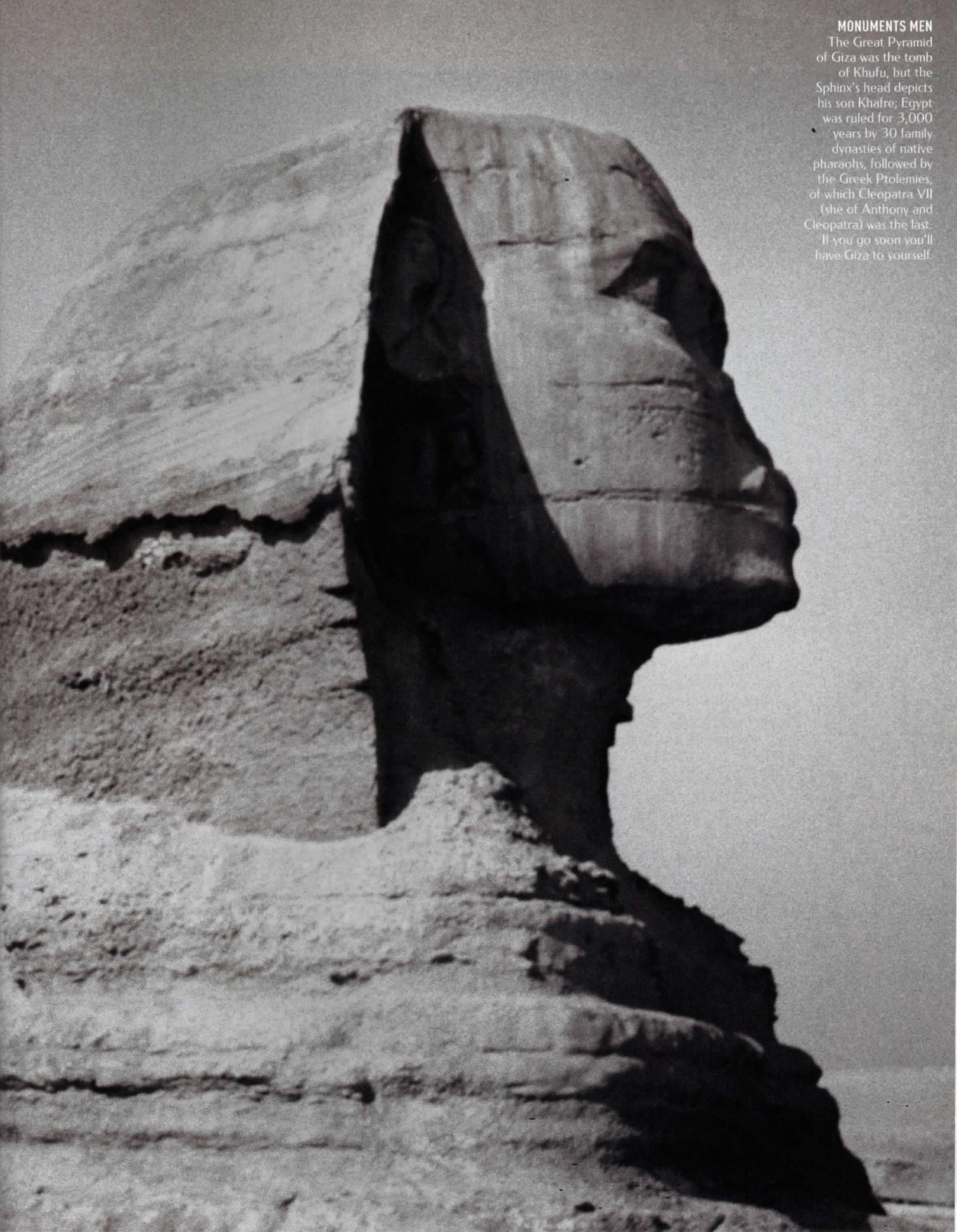


A PASSAGE *to* EGYPT

With headlines deterring most travelers, *TWO WOMEN* set off on *A JOURNEY UP THE NILE* and into Egypt's remotest desert. After two weeks of monuments and mummies, mirages and moonlight (*plus some magical hotels*), the verdict is in: **ONE EXCELLENT ADVENTURE.**

BY KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB HOWARD





MONUMENTS MEN

The Great Pyramid of Giza was the tomb of Khufu, but the Sphinx's head depicts his son Khafre; Egypt was ruled for 3,000 years by 30 family dynasties of native pharaohs, followed by the Greek Ptolemies, of which Cleopatra VII (she of Anthony and Cleopatra) was the last. If you go soon you'll have Giza to yourself.

EASY, BREEZY

A felucca outing on the Nile, especially at sunset, is one of Egypt's great eternal pleasures. Nothing beats being out on a small boat on that mythic river, from which even Cairo can seem serene. *Opposite:* Hot mint tea is ubiquitous in Egypt and is served as a gesture of hospitality. Pouring it from on high is an art form.





“NEVER,” WROTE AMELIA EDWARDS, the English writer who traveled the length of Egypt in 1873 with a friend, Lucy Renshawe, “was distant expedition entered upon with less premeditation.” The ladies had set off for a few weeks of sketching in France, where it rained nonstop for a month. Egypt suddenly seemed an excellent place to get some sun.

It might seem surprising that two Victorian-era women would set off so nonchalantly for Egypt, but at the time the wonders of the Nile were a hot topic of conversation in fashionable circles in London, Paris, and New York. Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt had been short-lived (he was booted out by the British three years later), but its cultural and scholarly impact was immense. The 150 savants Napoleon brought with him surveyed the country, cataloged its treasures, and eventually penned the profusely illustrated 37-volume *Déscription de l’Égypte*, jump-starting the world’s obsession with the land of the pharaohs. It deepened further with Jean-François Champollion’s 1822 announcement that he had deciphered the Rosetta Stone: Hieroglyphs could now be read for the first time since a priest of the goddess Isis had carved the last hieroglyphic inscription on a wall of the temple of Philae in Aswan in AD 394—Egyptian paganism’s last gasp.

I’d arrived in Egypt this past March on short notice as nonchalantly as Edwards had, the difference being that when I went, very few others were going, having been scared away by travel warnings

in the aftermath of the army’s ouster of Mohamed Morsi, an Islamist and Egypt’s first democratically elected president. I knew Egypt—I had lived there as a child, traveled there as an adult—and knew, too, that the reality on the ground was usually more nuanced than headlines would suggest. Taking some basic precautions (such as staying away from demonstrations—rare occurrences anyway in what was, until he was formally elected president in June, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s army-controlled Egypt) would be a small price to pay for not having the scrim of tour groups and buses—for experiencing Egypt’s wonders up close and practically in private.

I am, I confess, an Egyptomaniac. I do not collect King Tut kitsch or plates with the rays of the sun god Ra on them, but I do have a boundless appetite for the sights and experiences of the country. I am enthralled by the richness of its inheritance (pharaonic, Persian, Greek, Roman, Arab, Ottoman, French, British), intrigued by the charm and curiously enduring relevance of its myths, enchanted by its ancient art, and riveted by its tumultuous present. As Toby Wilkinson writes in his 2014 *The Nile: A Journey Downriver Through Egypt’s Past and Present*, Egypt today “is the most populous country in the world’s most unstable region. It is the key to Middle East peace, the voice of the Arab world, and the crossroads between Europe and Africa.”

The time felt right to go again. My only preparation was calling **Jim Berkeley**, a U.S.-based travel specialist who had arranged a previous visit, and we threw together a plan in a matter of hours: Cairo, Aswan, Luxor, plus a six-day foray deep into Egypt’s Western, a.k.a. Libyan, Desert, where I had never been but about which I harbored plenty of Egyptomaniacal fantasies: dunes, mirages, moonlit desert hot springs, midnights in the oases.

Like Amelia Edwards, I too would travel with a friend, Grey Hirschfeld, who decided, also on impulse, to accompany me (as had **Jim**, who would be our trip impresario). Now, Grey is a France-Italy-Martha’s Vineyard kind of girl. She’d never been anywhere like Egypt, much less unsettled, post-revolutionary



TIPS & TACTICS

CAIRO

STAY

The **Marriott’s** location on Zamalek Island makes it central but slightly removed from the thrum of the city, and you can walk to shops and restaurants. (Some of Cairo’s best are on the island.) When the **Ritz-Carlton** opens, it will be another choice spot, steps from the Cairo Museum. Always reserve a Nile-view room.

EAT

On Zamalek: Tarek (son of Omar) Sharif’s **La Trattoria** serves excellent Italian food and would not look out of place in Tribeca. **Abou el Sid** is hipster Egyptian, popular with expats and upper-class Cairenes—gilt “Louis Farouk” furniture, shishas, a lot of atmosphere. The chic, spare **Left Bank** and **Sequoia**, right on the river, serve Med dishes, draw Cairo’s golden youth and banking set, and have sofas for eating and lounging.

SHOP

On Zamalek: **Azza Fahmy** riffs on ancient designs to create serious modern jewelry in silver and gold (175 C Dr. **Taha Hussein St.**). **Zeinab Khalifa Art Jewelry** sells silver and gold-plated pieces (1A El **Sayed El Bakry St.**). **Al Qahira Egyptian Crafted Art** (6 Bahgat **Ali St.**) and **Turath** (114 26th **July St.**) carry contemporary Egyptian designs—non-tourist-kitsch clothes and decorative home items. **Diwan Bookstore** (159 26th **July St.**)—novels, travel guides, and coffee table books in English, French, German—has a lovely browsing atmosphere and is open till 11 p.m. Downtown: **Atlas Silks**, in el-Khalili bazaar (*Sikket al-Badistan*) has exquisite handmade jackets, robes, and more.

RIDE

Al Sorat Farm, near the pyramids of Abu Sir, owned by American-born Maryanne Stroud Gabbani, has well-cared-for horses and a genial village atmosphere. \$40 for two hours, alsorat.com; msgabbani@gmail.com

Egypt and much less its desert, the realm, according to ancient Egyptian mythology, of Set, the vaguely fox-headed, red-skinned bad-boy god of storms, chaos, and violence, who, Cain-like, killed his brother Osiris and, even worse, chopped him into 14 pieces and scattered them all around. “I read that March is sandstorm season, you know,” Grey proffered, but she was game for fun. Amelia had four months for her adventure. We had 14 days. And there were feluccas to be sailed, stars to be slept under, shishas to be smoked, colonial-era hotels to be reveled in, Arabian horses to be galloped, hot mint teas to be sipped, mummies to be seen, shopping to be done. Grey, as is her talent, pretty much summed it up: “Whoopce!”

ITS TWO MODERN TOWERS NOTwithstanding, the Marriott, on Cairo’s leafy Zamalek Island, just over a bridge from Tahrir Square, is the city’s most historic hotel. Its ornate main building, the original Gezira Palace, was built by Isma’il Pasha, Egypt’s modernizing, Europhiliac 19th-century ruler—“My country is no longer in Africa,” he proclaimed—to house Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, who was arriving in Egypt for the 1869 celebration of the opening of the Suez Canal. Eugénie was whisked away after only four days, but the Marriott’s Garden Terrace remains one of the most peaceful spots for a sunset drink in Cairo.

We could have stayed happily put on our first, jet-lagged afternoon, but we opted for an end-of-day felucca sail on the Nile. The Nile! You are never not aware in Egypt of its mythic status. Its cyclical fertilizing floods gave rise to unparalleled agricultural riches, to the world’s first massive labor force (it was farmers freed from the flooded fields who built the pyramids), and, holding out as they did the possibility of endless renewal, to such radical concepts as resurrection and the afterlife, embodied in myth by the green-skinned, endlessly arising Osiris. But Hapi, the zaftig god of the Nile, represented in temples up and down the river with a soft belly, sometimes breasts, and flowers sprouting goofily from his head, is a friendly and hospitable sort, and we felt comfortable quaffing large cans of Sakara beer as the sun set, the waters darkened, and the lights came on in Cairo.

The boatman’s galabia fluttered around his ankles, the felucca’s white sails spread and shivered in the breeze, and we glided past the dramatic blackened hulk of Hosni Mubarak’s National Democratic Party headquarters, set on fire by Tahrir Square protesters on January 28, 2011, and now a raw and dramatic reminder of the Arab Spring’s democratic dreams. A vision of eternal Egypt against one of embattled Egypt.

At dinner that night at the Left Bank, a trendy riverside restaurant in Zamalek, we saw a new Egypt. The crowd was young and affluent, not the Egypt of newscasts. “As you can see,” a friend and local who took us there observed, “there is no contradiction between being veiled and being fashionable, being veiled and being hot.”

Some of the hijab-clad girls wore leggings and the extravagant eye makeup of goddesses in ancient Egyptian art. “This is the el-Sisi elite,” my friend commented, “the

DESERT SOLITAIRE
The Great Sand Sea surrounding Siwa oasis has dunes that dreams of Araby are made of. *Opposite:* The fantastical colossi of the White Desert, between the oases of Bahariya and Farafra, are compacted fossilized remains of marine creatures from the Cretaceous period, sculpted by the wind.



HOW WE DID IT

We wanted it all: to see the great repositories of Egyptian antiquities along the Nile (Cairo, Aswan, Luxor) as well as the desert and oases. Expert arrangements were key, and our trip maestro was Jim Berkeley, of **Destinations & Adventures International** (jim@daitravel.com; 800-659-4599). He connected the dots along our 14-day, 2,025-mile journey, plotted above—drivers, guides, hotels, domestic flights—and made sure all went smoothly and safely. \$8,910 per person, excluding international airfare and tips

Map by Haisam Hussein





TIPS & TACTICS

THE WHITE DESERT & BAHARIYA OASIS

LOGISTICS

Desert trips are precisely choreographed and require advance permits, cars, drivers, and guides. (Jim Berkeley will take care of all that.) The White Desert is about 340 miles from Cairo. We camped for a night under the white giants, which I highly recommend. If a morning shower is nonnegotiable, spend the night in Bahariya and do the White Desert on a daytrip (about an hour's drive each way).

STAY

The new Sands Bahariya—dune-colored arches and domes set amid green fields of clover—has large rooms with courtyards and traditional decor, serves good Egyptian fare, and is owned by a former executive of Abercrombie & Kent.

TIPS & TACTICS

SIWA

STAY

The **Adrère Amellal** ecolodge has no marble, air conditioning, or even electricity, but it's likely the most naturally pampering place you'll ever stay. The silence amid the desert vastness is absolute, the food excellent, the staff attentive and graceful, and the torches and candles make up in atmosphere what one loses in convenience. Still, pack a flashlight so you can read at night (your phone and camera batteries can be recharged once a day with a generator). Go for one of the duplex suites with a private roof terrace.

RIDE

The resort has horses that can take you out into the Great Sand Sea (best for competent riders). You should also go out there with a driver in the Toyota Land Cruiser: roller-coaster-like thrills, marine fossils, soaks in hot springs (bring a bathing suit), sunset mint tea.

SHOP

The **Adrère Amellal's** sophisticated shop/gallery of Siwan arts and crafts was closed for lack of visitors when we were there, but it's a must if open. The **Camel Bazaar** in the market in Shali, Siwa's small town, has divine cream-colored wool blankets. The owner, Mahmoud Mahha, will expect you to bargain, but remember: No one here has had much business in a long time, and you'll make out like a bandit no matter what. **Tiny Al Babenshal Organic Shop**, next door, sells delicious and charmingly packaged jams, oils, flavored salts, and other preserves—perfect for gifts and souvenirs.



people who think Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were the devil.”

None of the Egyptians I spoke with during my trip decried Morsi's removal from the presidency by the military. “When the Brotherhood came to power,” Mar-iam el Masri, a London-educated businesswoman, told me vehemently over another dinner at another Zamalek hot spot, the hipstery Abou el Sid, “everyone in Egypt with a brain woke up. They were debating in parliament lowering the marriageable age of girls to 13! And outlawing tutus in the Cairo Opera! While the economy sank. And Morsi wanted to cede part of southern Egypt to Sudan and part of the Sinai to Gaza—the Brotherhood's goal was not a strong Egypt but an Islamist state spread across national borders. They want to go back to the days of the caliphate.” What is the best scenario for Egypt now? She paused. “Sisi is president for four years, focuses on the economy and security, and the political, democratic processes have a chance to develop.”

As Sameh Agha, another Cairene, was giving me tips on the best riverboat nightclubs, I was having a hard time imagining a 21st-century Islamic caliphate taking hold here. “Le Pacha has good sushi,” he said, “and the music is not too loud, so you can focus on talking and drinking. People here love whiskey.”

THE EFFECTS OF EGYPT'S CURRENT headline-commanding travails were on full display early the next morning on the Giza plateau. Here we were, contemplating the apotheosis of pharaonic power—the Great Pyramid of the 4th-dynasty pharaoh Khufu and those of his son Khafre and grandson Menkaure (2589–2500 BC)—and besides us, on the entire magnificent site, Cairo's and Egypt's showstopper, I saw a few Egyptian couples admiring their heritage, maybe five foreign tourists, and one desperate camel tout (the others hadn't even bothered to come out). A gang of skinny dogs was having a vociferous dustup near the paws of the Sphinx.

The pyramids were built by Egyptian peasants, but they were the brainchild of the polymath and architectural superstar of antiquity Imhotep. (We would later see the starter Step Pyramid he designed at Sakkara, near Egypt's ancient capital of Memphis, for the 3rd-dynasty pharaoh Djoser, 2667–2648 BC.) “The pyramids were petrifying the rays of the sun coming down to earth!” Tarek Tewfik, our Egyptologist, exclaimed, not the least bit jaded by familiarity. “Imagine them at the edge of the desert, clad in their original white limestone, with possibly a gold tip.” In uniquely Egyptian symbolism, the

pyramids were associating the pharaohs buried in them indissolubly with the supreme creator and sun god, Ra, metaphorically assuring their resurrection.

It is impossible to fully convey the power of the

It looked as if some *ANCIENT EGYPTIAN* MARTHA STEWART, an *Imhotep of the domestic life*, had waved her wand over *CAIRO'S CHAOS*.

pyramids, even after 46 centuries of wear and tear. The 25-year-old Evelyn Waugh tried as best he could when he took tea in March 1929 on the terrace of the Mena House, the hotel at the foot of Giza's three giants. "It felt odd," he wrote, "to be living in such close quarters with anything quite so famous—it was like having the Prince of Wales at the next table in a restaurant; one kept pretending not to notice, while all the time glancing furtively to see if they were still there." My friend Grey wasn't coy. She got her ultimate paparazzi shot and instantly made it her iPhone wallpaper.

We skipped tea at the Mena House and instead went into the belly of Khufu's pyramid, the last standing of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Fighting claustrophobia on the steep, narrow passage up (at least I was; Grey, indomitable, was forging ahead in front of me), we marveled, once we'd reached the majestically ceiled King's Chamber, where an empty pink-granite sarcophagus still stands, at the astonishing skill of the ancient engineers. They had figured out exactly how to space the nine 50-ton granite slabs above our heads so as to prevent the entire 6 million-ton pyramid, for 3,800 years the world's tallest man-made structure, from crashing down on us.

There are two narrow shafts leading from the walls of the King's Chamber to the outside, whose function is believed to have been ritualistic: The pharaoh's ka, or spirit, could travel freely along them between his mummified body and the heavens. Like the ka, I needed out.

BESIDES, IT WAS TIME FOR MY Lawrence of Arabia moment. I'd arranged for an afternoon ride at a private farm near the complex of pyramids in Abu Sir: Arabian horse breeding has been a hobby of the Egyptian elite since the days of Muhammad Ali, Egypt's first Ottoman ruler (1805–1848), who brought back war mares as prizes from campaigns on the Arabian Peninsula, and today Egyptians and expats ride some of their progeny in the sands of the Giza plateau.

"Let's go, you know, uncontrolled," my guide casually suggested, as we emerged from the lush farmland greenery onto the sand. The demarcation line between green

and not, as always in Egypt, was startling in its sharpness—fertility and barrenness, life and death, East and West, good and evil. I leaned slightly forward and up in the stirrups and just let my horse have his head and fly. Marzouk, as he was called—"good fortune" in Arabic—was part Arabian and born to do this. "Fun" doesn't begin to describe it.

Our gallop ended atop a small rise, and as I slowly turned Marzouk around in a circle to calm him, I saw the pyramids of Giza, Sakkara, Dahshur, and Abu Sir scattered all around me at varying distances in the desert, as on a giant's pale hand. And to think that the pharaohs buried here, as well as their wives, siblings, children, babies, courtiers, scribes, pets, had all been mummified, a 70-day process necessary for the contentment of the spirit in the afterlife. Everyone in ancient

Egypt, it seems, had the right to a crack at eternity, an early democratic impulse in action. And all who could afford it were buried, whether in pyramids or mastabas or deep shaft graves, with detailed, beautifully illustrated instructions inscribed on coffins and tomb walls from The Book of the Dead, written by priests to help the deceased along the difficult road to the afterlife, presided over by Osiris. He had been miraculously reconstituted after Set's attack by his devoted wife, Isis (who even managed to have a son, Horus, with the archetypal mummy), but mere mortals needed this passport to heaven.

On the way back into Cairo we snacked on juicy, freshly picked dates from a basket in the back seat of the car, jumping out occasionally to snap photos of sidewalk vendors showing off the fruits of Egypt's rich Nilotic soil: large mounds of gorgeous melons, limes, oranges, cabbages, all without exception masterfully arranged into perfect pyramids, as if some ancient Egyptian Martha Stewart, an Imhotep of the domestic life, had waved her wand over Cairo's chaos.

“YOU WILL BE TRAVELING PART-way with an armed guard. It's safe here, but it is considered necessary for your nationality. You are the first Americans in the desert in three years.” It was our third morning in Egypt, and Diaa Shawki, our desert guide, was explaining to us the drill for the first leg of our expedition into the Western Desert, as the Egyptian portion of the Libyan Desert is called. The trip thus far? Grey was, I'd venture, ecstatic: "I saw Ramses! I bought gold jewelry! Woo-hoo!" My feeling exactly. And now the adventure was really beginning.

We had seen the army out in force near Tahrir Square the day before—some 40 tanks stationed in a formidable line outside the Cairo Museum, at once protection for the treasures inside and a demonstration deterrent. (We'd gone to view the spectacular collection and the mummies of pharaonic A-listers.) And we were about to see a lot more of it. Advance police-issued permits are required for travel along the single two-lane blacktop connecting Egypt's oases, and those documents are examined at myriad desert military checkpoints.

"Surprise!" said Jim, ever the travel genie, as we headed out on that day's 340-mile drive. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 118]

TIPS & TACTICS

ASWAN

STAY

Sofitel's **Old Cataract Hotel** is one of the main reasons to come to Aswan—the setting, the views, the history (*everyone* slept here). You have a difficult decision: a room in the historic main building, which drips with atmosphere, or in the new tower, from which the views of the Nile, feluccas, and Elephantine Island may be even more spectacular.

EAT

The breakfast buffet is a treat and includes such Egyptian specialties as galette-like breakfast pies, and ful, mashed and cumin-spiced fava beans eaten for breakfast (or anytime) in villages and cities up and down the Nile. Book one dinner at the Old Cataract's historic, formal **1902 Restaurant**, in whose majestic domed room a scene from Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* was filmed. For a local experience (although local always means no alcohol) and good Egyptian home cooking, have your guide take you to **El Masry**, in Aswan's bazaar.

VISIT

Aswan is the jumping-off point for **Abu Simbel**, Ramses II's magnificent temple 145 miles south, near Sudan. Our flight was canceled (not enough travelers), but go if you can.



TIPS & TACTICS

LUXOR

STAY

Although in need of updating, Sofitel's **Winter Palace**, on the east bank of the Nile facing the river and the desert hills, has enormous charm, and one almost wishes it could stay as is. We skipped the elevator just to walk—no, ascend and descend—the grand central staircase to our rooms. Your other option, when tourism returns, is the lovely **Al Moudira**, the only hotel on the west bank in Luxor, set amid fields of sugarcane. No Nile views, but proximity to rural Egyptian life and the Valleys of the Kings and Queens.

EAT, SHOP, ETC.

Alas, we weren't in Luxor long enough to eat anywhere other than the Winter Palace, or inspect its bazaars and shops. Schedule three days here if you can—for antiquities, activities, the great **Luxor Museum**, and just sitting and looking at the Nile.

REACH FOR THE SKY

The Karnak Temple Complex, in Luxor, was designed to track the passage of the sun across the heavens. If you feel like an insect among the 134 columns of Hypostyle Hall, built by pharaonic heavyweights Seti I and his son Ramses II, a drink at the Winter Palace's bar will restore your sense of self.

A Passage to Egypt

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 88] “We’re camping tonight!” It was a brilliant change of plan:

We would get to experience in an immediate way not only one of the largest deserts on earth, but also one of the world’s last frontiers. As late as the 1970s parts of the Western Desert were still unsurveyed and unmapped. “Just don’t wander off,” Diaa said. In addition to having been the desert expert on such films as *The English Patient*, he also routinely rescues people who get lost. “I’ve had about 35 cases in the last 10 years.”

The Libyan Desert starts at the Nile (the pyramids near Cairo are technically in it) and then rolls out of Egypt in two directions: west into Libya and south into Sudan. And then it just keeps going. It is one of the hottest and most arid of all the great deserts (luckily this was March), and, counter-intuitively, exceptionally rich in marine fossils, of fish, shells, mangrove roots—even, at last count, more than 400 whales. One ancient Egyptian creation myth has it that all was water until Ra brought forth land, and indeed parts of this desert, if not all of it, were once the bottom of a vast ocean that started to recede about 6 million years ago. In Egypt the desert is dotted with a handful of historically significant oases, like little green bits of the chopped-up Osiris: Al Kharga, Dakhlah, Farafra, Bahariya, Siwa. Depressions in the desert floor bursting with freshwater springs and wells, they were all stops on age-old caravan routes and sites of pharaonic, Roman, and British military garrisons. We would be visiting the last three.

OUR ARMED GUARD peeled off at the first desert rest stop, his presence seemingly largely pro forma. A bit farther we screeched to a halt to help a stranded car, little kids sitting by the roadside—a flat tire in a place you definitely don’t want one. Set’s handiwork. “An elaborate hijacking scheme,” Grey quipped, sotto voce. “We are all brothers in the desert,” said our driver, as he gave them one of our two spares.

After five hours the desert suddenly acquired swaths of what looked like snow. We were approaching that day’s destination, White Desert National Park, a 1,162-square-mile depression between the Bahariya and Farafra oases. Our 4x4 swerved west and, after some fancy off-roading, the car

slaloming in the sand, we arrived at our campsite: six large tents pitched amid a surreal, Arctic-like landscape. As the sun set and the moon rose, we wandered around it like sleepwalkers, cameras brandished dementedly in each hand. Rearing up from the flat desert floor all around us and stretching as far as the eye could see was a gigantic, three-dimensional pure-white Rorschach test: 30-foot-high mushrooms; brontosaurus frozen in midstep; slobbering, cyclops-like monsters; immense eggs poised on improbably slender supports; a chicken; a snake. And most arresting of all, monumental Mount Rushmore-like human heads, necks straining upward, noses either nobly aquiline or grotesquely lopped off, mouths closed or agape, as if they had all been rendered speechless, transfixed by something astounding up there in the black, star-studded sky.

The white stuff out of which they are formed, Diaa explained, writing chemical formulas in my notebook, is calcium carbonate—fish bones from the Cretaceous period, accumulated and compressed over the eons and, as the ocean here receded and dried up, sculpted by the wind into these phantasmagoric shapes. When we touched them, the stuff came off on our hands like flour; ghostly traces of creatures that had been alive 136 million years ago.

We got our first moonlit desert hot spring bath in Farafra that night—85-degree water gushing powerfully into a sandy-bottom stone pool—and then, nicely poached, sat in the sand until midnight around a fire, conversation fueled by shot-size glasses of Egypt’s ubiquitous mint tea, strong and sweet, the white giants, nature’s wacky versions of pharaonic granite colossi staring serenely into eternity, surrounding us like sentinels.

It was time for sleep. “I’ll show you a mirage tomorrow,” Diaa called out as I headed to my tent. “It’s refracted light. You can take a picture.” (I would.) I could hear the talk around the fire going on softly into the night, all in Arabic now that the Americans had gone to bed. We would be up soon to see the dawn.

“**T**HIS TRIP JUST HAS TOO many highlights!” Grey exclaimed in mock exasperation. We stopped for a night in Bahariya (at the lovely but totally empty Sands hotel) to see the “Golden Mummies”—more than 200 of them, discovered in 1996 (there may be as many as 10,000) and dating from

Greco-Roman times, when native, Greek, and Roman merchants—grown rich on the oases’ exports of wine, olives, and grain to feed the Roman empire—could afford to have the wrappings of their mummified dead painted with gold. It is striking how amenable non-native Egyptians have been over the millennia to adopting Egypt’s distinctive beliefs and practices: mummification, afterlife, pharaonic divinity. When Alexander the Great arrived here in 332 BC, on his way to conquer the world, he trekked from the Mediterranean port of Paraetionium, now called Mersa Matruh, 200 miles south across the desert to Siwa just to have its famous oracle proclaim him to be the son of Amun-Ra, Egypt’s god of gods (a later amalgam of both Ra and Zeus), and thus fit to be pharaoh. Siwa was our next destination, too.

We encountered only two other cars on the 260-mile journey from Bahariya, but we passed 20 military checkpoints—the desert on total security lockdown. The young machine gun-toting soldiers were stern at first, but they flashed smiles once they’d scrutinized our papers. “Welcome to Egypt, Americans!”

Parked near each checkpoint was a truck with an enormous radar dish on its roof pointed west toward Libya, the direction we were headed. Trouble has always come from there. Currently, I was told, it takes the form of Islamic militants and smugglers moving Libya’s stockpile of arms across the desert to Gaza, Syria, Pakistan, and points beyond. It took us six hours and 20 minutes to get to Siwa. “It would have been only five if we’d just barreled through, guns blazing, à la *Mad Max*,” said Grey. (As Herodotus observed after his sojourn in Egypt, circa 450 BC, “He who travels in the desert is changed forever.” Grey seemed to have left France, Italy, and Martha’s Vineyard far behind.)

Siwa, with its own distinctive Berber language and culture, was a dream. It is Egypt’s remotest oasis (just 30 miles from the Libyan border) and its most enchanted, a lush tropical garden of date palms and olive trees, dirt roads and donkey carts, and more than 200 freshwater springs whose waters seem alive with incessantly rising tiny bubbles. Soaking there is like having a bath in champagne. (No wonder the most famous of all is called Cleopatra’s Bath. Even if Egypt’s last ruler before Roman subjugation might not have bathed there—call me skeptical—she would surely have liked it.) Surrounding it all is the Great Sand Sea—the dunes of every Arabian

fantasy—and rising above everything are the ruins of the temple of Amun-Ra, the Mountain of the Dead (tombs of Siwa's rich, going back to Greco-Roman times), the melting-sandcastle-like 8th-century mosque (still in use), and the photogenic ruins of a 12th-century desert fortress.

But there was a more recently built wonder that we had also come to see: the *Adrère Amellal* ("white mountain" in Siwi), the most remarkable and remote hotel not just in Egypt but possibly the world. The project of Cairo environmentalist and aesthete Mounir Neamatallah, the *Adrère Amellal* was built in 2002 into the side of an escarpment beside a salt lake, *Birket Siwa*, using only traditional Siwan techniques and building materials, an amalgam of rock salt, clay, and occasionally seashells called *kershef*. It has no electricity; the grounds are romantically lit every night by torches and the palatial rooms and suites by candles. The magnificent dunes of the Great Sand Sea are visible just beyond the lake, the food is startlingly good (the creation of a young chef from Aswan with superb produce at his disposal), and dinners are served under the stars or in private salt-encrusted, jewel-like chambers. "If you were staying 14 days," the affable blue-eyed Siwi resort manager, Mohamed el Sherif, told us, "you would have dinner in a different place every night, even if there were other guests here. But no one comes since the revolution." Mohamed shrugged and smiled. "It has always been quiet here, you know—we have palms, we have dates..." I almost wept.

Sure, we visited the sights. And I spied on the ceiling of the 200 BC tomb of a handsome, curly-haired half-Greek man, Si Amun, my favorite tomb painting of the entire trip: a naked, slim-hipped, full-breasted, blue-skinned goddess of the sky, Nut, arms and legs fully outstretched, swallowing the red, winged ball of the sun at dusk and giving birth to it at dawn. And we shopped in the market in town: suitcases full of soft, thick wool blankets, a Siwan specialty.

But mostly our routine during our allotted three days was this: We woke up purposefully before sunrise to try to capture on camera the purity of the early desert light—clear, cloudless bands of pink and orange. (Grey invariably beat me to it.) We gorged on hibiscus flower jam for breakfast and tucked into stuffed eggplant or spinach *soufflé* or risotto with peas and dill for lunch, followed by a dessert of orange slices topped

with caramelized sugar and orange rind. We floated for hours in the salt lake, which makes you as buoyant as, but is so much bluer than, the Dead Sea. We washed off the salt in the *Adrère Amellal's* large, date-palm-encircled pool, itself built around an ancient natural spring. We napped in the bathhouse/spa, built of translucent bricks of salt (I once caught Grey licking the wall). We hunted for marine fossils in the Great Sand Sea, finding many shells and sand dollars, and one giant fish. "What kind of fish is that?" I asked our driver, Abdullah. "Big fish."

After a three-course dinner each evening in one of the resort's *Aladdin's Cave* dining rooms, we followed the torches set in the sand to our rooms, where we had a choice of sleeping in either of two enormous beds—under a roof or under the stars. On my last night in the desert I chose the latter. But I don't think I slept at all, transfixed as I was by the huge moon hanging low over the lake, its reflection like a highway to heaven on the black water.

WE WERE READY for some pampering after the 16-hour relay race to reach our next stop, Aswan, from Siwa in one day, by car northeast to the Mediterranean coast (Alexander the Great's route in reverse) and from there to Cairo, where we caught a late night flight south. Built where the Nile narrows, squeezed between high banks and the rapids called the First Cataract, Aswan was always a frontier town, Egypt's garrisoned southern gateway—Nubia, a.k.a. Sudan, lay just beyond. It was the last bastion of pharaonic religion, centered in the powerful cult of Isis-worship at the temple of Philae, the last to be Christianized, and the last part of Egypt to be conquered by the Arabs in the 7th century AD. Early travelers came here less for antiquities, of which there are relatively few, than for its tranquil, "Nice of the Nile" beauty.

Which is what we were doing. No trip to Egypt is for me complete without a stay at the terra-cotta and white pile of the Old Cataract hotel, built in 1900 to accommodate Europe's and America's traveling elite as it ventured up the Nile and needed a gilded refuge at the end of each hot and sandy day. "The food, the Nile in the background, the desert behind. It can't get better than this," said Grey over lunch. We were accumulating superlatives like beads on a string as we

sat hypnotized by a felucca making its slow, graceful way past the granite outcroppings and gargantuan rocks just below the hotel's garden and pool. Aga Khan III, a frequent guest, was so enamored that he is buried in a mausoleum on the west bank facing the OC (as we aficionados call it).

We visited the northern quarries. Pink granite from here was floated downstream toward Cairo throughout the times of the pharaohs to make statues and sarcophagi and embellish temples and pyramids. The "unfinished obelisk," still attached to the bedrock on one side and lying there like a beached whale, would have been, had it not been abandoned because of a fatal crack, the heaviest single piece of stone the Egyptians ever fashioned. "The workers were probably very sad," said Tarek, our Egyptologist. "And very happy."

In Philae, where we were the only visitors other than a group of four Koreans, we felt the way Amelia Edwards must have when she described its special charm: "One forgets for the moment that anything has changed... If a procession of white-robed priests bearing aloft the veiled ark of the God were to come sweeping round between the palms and the pylons—we should not think it strange." There was, as always, another side to our splendid solitude. "Ladies!" a *calèche* driver on the Aswan Corniche shouted, sprinting after us one afternoon after we'd firmly declined his services—Grey and I had ventured out for a walk beyond our gilded refuge. "It will cost you 10 Egyptian pounds (\$1.50) for a ride back to the Old Cataract. We have no business. I need to feed the horse, and I have a family." We hopped on and of course gave him many times his asking price. He was a supporter of neither Morsi nor Sisi. "When Mubarak was president, we could at least make a living."

WHEN THOMAS Cook & Son launched in 1870 a regular tourist steamer service on the Nile, inaugurating a more populist and time-efficient way to experience Egypt, its excursionists, in the words of one contemporary writer, spent their three days in Luxor (a.k.a. ancient Thebes, where the capital of Egypt was moved from Memphis in 1500 BC), "in a debauch of sightseeing from the backs of willing asses." Luxor was our last stop. We had run out

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of time, a most un-Egyptian thing, and had a night and a day left for what is inarguably the world's largest open-air museum. A debauch of sightseeing doesn't begin to describe what we did.

There was Karnak, at 1.6 square miles the ancient world's largest religious complex, where Amun-Ra was said to have actually lived on earth and where the priests, according to New Kingdom records, employed 81,000 people and owned 421,000 head of cattle, 65 cities, 83 ships, and 683,000 acres of agricultural land. We did it in an hour. Luxor Temple, also on the east bank, is considered Amun-Ra's harem and is to me the most beautiful temple of all, lit up in the evening like a dream of ancient Egypt. It got an hour and a half—we could barely tear ourselves away. There was much more: the exquisite, unfinished tomb of a noble, Ramose; the uncannily modern-looking mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, the visionary female pharaoh; those of Ramses II and Amenhotep III, he of the so-called Colossi of Memnon. We'd barely scratched the surface.

Grey was getting teary as we left the 1907 Winter Palace hotel—one night in a place we both would have happily stayed a few weeks, an atmospheric, warm-yellow Victorian confection (Howard Carter lived here when he discovered and excavated the tomb of Tutankhamen), with views out front of the Nile and the dramatically austere Theban Hills, where the sun sets and the pharaohs and queens are buried, and out back, toward the east, of a large, lushly green, oasis-like garden and pool, filled with birdsong.

"I told you, Grey," Jim said. "Egypt is like Italy. You need at least three trips to see it properly."

Flying back to Cairo late that afternoon, we drove to dinner after a debauch of another kind: more shopping (and shishas) in the Khan el Khalili souk. Passing Tahrir Square and the Cairo Museum, we emerged onto the Nile Corniche, Cairo's once elegant and now tatty riverside boulevard. The sun had begun to sink—a giant orange ball playing peekaboo behind the buildings and palm trees. Grey was clicking away—the Nile! The sun! Our last evening in Egypt! With the car stopped momentarily in traffic, I looked to the west, and this is what I saw: the giant letters "RA" silhouetted in black against the sun's disk, the rest of some company's logo obscured by a palm tree. We went off to have a final toast to paganism, which perhaps isn't dead after all, to Egypt's renewal, and to endless returns. •

SHOPPING & CREDIT INFORMATION

CONTENTS

PAGE 6 Balenciaga, balenciaga.com; Chanel, 800-550-0005; Frescobol Carioca, frescobolcarioca.com. Gurhan, Neiman Marcus, Beverly Hills, 310-550-5900; Hermès, 212-751-3181; Ledbury, ledbury.com; Louis Vuitton, louisvuitton.com.

GLOBAL CURRENCY

PAGE 44 Clockwise from far left: David Yurman rose gold ring (price on request); Coomi coin ring with diamonds (\$10,000), and coin bracelet with diamonds (\$30,000); 1884 Collection white gold and diamond ring (\$3,700); Coomi coin bracelet (\$2,900), and silver coin and diamond ring (\$9,800); David Yurman yellow gold and silver ring (\$895); 1884 Collection rose gold and diamond ring (\$3,700); Coomi coin ring with pavé diamonds (\$4,800). Coomi, Saks Fifth Avenue, NYC, 212-753-4000; David Yurman, davidyurman.com; 1884 Collection, Neiman Marcus, Boca Raton, 561-417-5151.

THE PLACES THEY GO

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