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TRAVELING IN EGYPT: A PRACTICAL ORIENTATION

I was recently lucky enough to have the chance to travel to Egypt. I was also lucky to be traveling with companions who had been there before, and who shared their tidbits of travel wisdom with me, to help me prepare more fully for the experience. I would like to share that information with you, to help you make your trip more enjoyable.

Please do not let this article deter you from making the journey. If you travel with your eyes and mind wide open, you will have a fun, fascinating, and thought-provoking experience that you will never forget, and always remember fondly.

Part 1: Cultural Adjustments:

Let me state the obvious: Egypt is a foreign country. In my estimation, to US citizens, it is "more" foreign than the countries of Europe. Be prepared for the possibility that you will feel intimidated, disoriented, and very much like a fish out of water. Use this feeling as a positive: new knowledge, new outlooks, new adventures. Even across the cultural divide, remember that the Egyptians want you to feel welcome, and want you to have a good time.

Some of the differences that you may find the most striking are:

- *Time is fluid*

The **most** important thing to remember when you are in Egypt is: You are on what our group lovingly dubbed *Egyptian Standard Time*. Don't be in a hurry. Don't expect punctuality. Relax, *relax*, **relax**.

Egypt is a very hospitable country. People take the time to be with people. There is a lot of social interaction (at both the business and personal level) that no longer occurs in our culture. Enjoy it. Go with the flow. Allow 2-3 times as much time for any activity as you think it ought to take. Stop and smell the roses (well, the cardamon, anyway)!

- *Something in the air*

Egypt is dusty (not surprising in a desert climate). The cities are dusty and smoggy. If you have any respiratory problems, make preparations (such as medication) ahead of time. If you don't have respiratory problems, you may still be uncomfortable, as you will feel like the dust of the ancients has settled in your lungs.

In addition, you will be on an airplane for an extended period of time, and the recirculated air can be of poor quality. You may want to add some over-the-counter cold remedies/decongestants to your travel pharmacy.

- *Something in the water*
Plan on drinking only bottled water, hot beverages, or bottled soft drinks. For planning purposes, bottled water costs about \$1.50 per liter at hotel prices, and you will need at least 1-2 liters per day. You will be umbilically tied to your water bottle; bring something along to carry it around in (backpack or shoulder tote).

Do not eat unpeeled fruits or vegetables. To be really intestinally safe, do not eat uncooked fruits or vegetables.

Whatever, you do, wherever you go, resist the temptation to dip your hand (or any other body part) in the beautiful waters of the Nile. That calm, tranquil surface harbors a quite nasty microorganism.

- *Security*
The tourist industry is a prime driver of the Egyptian economy. Therefore, a lot of effort and expense is taken to assure your security. There are representatives of the Tourist Police at all hotels and major tourist attractions. There are metal detectors at the entrances to all hotels, cruise boats, and museums. If you leave your hotel in a taxi, the hotel has probably taken down the cab number. If you travel on a tour bus, you will have either a civilian or military police escort at all times.
- *About those toilets*
Facilities range from excellent to extremely primitive. Bring a good supply of travel-pack facial tissues, as toilet paper is often at a premium. In addition, expect that there will be rest room attendants waiting to – no, insisting to – assist you. Which brings us to the next topic ...
- *Budget for Baksheesh & other incidental expenses*
The Egyptians have raised tipping to a fine art. Be prepared, and be generous. Add a *baksheesh* allowance into your budget (\$5 /day should be more than sufficient), and hoard those small bills (25 & 50 piastres, one-pound notes). You should expect to be expected to spread a little *baksheesh* everywhere you go. When you checkout of the hotel or cruise boat, you should leave a tip for the housekeeping staff, the wait staff, and the desk staff. These can be placed in marked envelopes and left at the front desk, or you can usually tip the staff directly. (Tipping directly prevents the manager from skimming a percentage off the top.)

Also expect to tip your guides, your drivers, rest room attendants, and those helpful gentlemen at the museums/temples/tombs who turn lights on & off, fan your face, offer additional information, point out interesting photo opportunities, or just add a little color to your surroundings.

What seems a small amount of money to you – 25 or 50 piastres (10-15 cents) can make a world of difference to the person “helping” you. Even if tipping is included in your tour fee, please consider a small contribution to those souls who probably never get much “trickle-down” from those above them.

Baksheesh can take forms other than money on some occasions – perhaps a few ball point pens for the Tourist Police, or a few hard candies for the children that surround any tour bus that stops moving for more than ten seconds.

Another incidental expense is the *Camera Ticket*. Most museums and many antiquity sites charge 5-10 pounds for the privilege of using your still camera. You must plan ahead of time for how many camera tickets to purchase. In addition, many sites which allow still cameras do not allow video cameras, or charge a significantly higher fee for them. The best travel guides list the entrance fees and camera fees for most sites, so that you can budget ahead of time.

- *Dress and Conduct*

Egypt is a predominantly Muslim country. It is polite and respectful to dress conservatively. Long sleeves, long skirts (preferred over pants), and high necklines are recommended (and also help ward off sunburn and mosquitoes).

You do not have to cover your hair for cultural reasons. As our taxi driver explained to us, “Muslim women who pray” cover their hair. However, you may want to cover your hair for personal reasons: To protect it from the dust, and to prevent it from being touched by friendly people who find European hair (especially blond hair) a fascinating curiosity.

Women talking or laughing loudly in public is frowned upon. This behavior may attract unwanted attention, as you might be considered a “shady lady”.

- *Getting Around*

Leave the driving to a resident expert – tour bus, taxi, or metro. If you are considering renting a car yourself, you should realize that lanes, traffic lights, turn signals, one-way streets, and headlights are all optional to Egyptian drivers. Anything goes!

If you are going to walk to your destination, you may find that the streets are usually in better repair than the sidewalks. As for crossing the street – just do it! Crosswalks are infrequent. Jaywalking is accepted. Egyptian drivers expect to be dodging pedestrians – although you may get into some interesting games of chicken, you are relatively safe.

Part 2: Goals:

Resist the tendency to try to do everything in one trip. Unless you are a seasoned traveler, going abroad – especially to a country with a completely different culture – is overwhelming. Set yourself a very few goals for a successful trip, and then do your best to meet them. Remember, your traveling companions have goals, too, and you may have to compromise to make sure that everyone has a memorable adventure.

Although those of you on organized tours may not be able to follow this advice, plan no more than one or two accomplishments per day. My biggest regrets from my trip were the sites that I

did not get to explore fully. I found it much more fulfilling to do a few activities thoroughly, instead of many activities briefly.

Decide what is important to you and plan your trip accordingly. For example:

- *Costuming*
If your goal is to have a custom-made costume, you will require multiple fittings with your couturier. The time you spend in these appointments will be time away from your sightseeing activities. Expect your fitting to start one-half to one hour after the scheduled time. (Of course, you have to be there on time just in case ...)
- *Shopping*
If your goal is to shop until you drop, remember that you can't just pop in, buy an item, and pop out. Many merchants, such as those I dealt with in the *Khan El Khalili* bazaar, do not get down to business until the social amenities have been met. Expect to drink a lot of tea or soft drinks. (For those of you who are decaffeinated, two wonderful hot beverages similar to herbal tea are *helba* and *yonsoon*.) It is discourteous to refuse a beverage. Remember, if you're in a hurry, you're in the wrong country.

It also takes time and patience to bargain over price if you are dealing with a non-fixed-price merchant. How do you decide if bargaining is in order? Try it and see what happens. Decide what you are willing to pay for an item, and be willing to walk off if your price isn't met.

Minimize shopping for your family and friends. It is your trip. Worrying about pleasing other people will limit your personal enjoyment.

- *Sightseeing*
Do not over-plan your trip or your day. Unless you are traveling alone, *you will not be in control*.

Part 3: Preparation:

A little planning ahead can make all the difference in the world in comfort and convenience.

- *Luggage*
You are allowed two suitcases and at least one carryon bag for international flights. Purchase the largest allowable carryon. Try to find suitcases that will nest – that way you only have one suitcase to deal with on the trip over.
- *Packing*
Pack all of your clothes and necessities into the carryon. Leave the suitcases empty to hold all of your souvenirs and treasures on the return home. Pack light, pack for comfort, and pack for wash & wear. You don't need to impress anyone with your fashion sense, but you will want to wash all of the dust out of your clothes.

Don't pack anything you aren't willing to lose, have stolen, or leave behind in Egypt (in case you need more room in your luggage for your newly-purchased treasures).

- *Toiletries*

Do not expect to find all of the little amenities provided with US hotels, such as shampoo, conditioner, moisturizer, tissues, shower caps, and washcloths. Take what you need with you. Don't be stingy with the shampoo – you will be washing your hair a lot, and shampoo can double as a detergent for your dusty clothes.

Good things to bring along are travel-pack tissues, hand wipes, and mosquito repellent.

- *Pharmacy*

There are two common health concerns to watch out for on your trip: upper respiratory infections, and intestinal upsets. You may want to pack your favorite over-the-counter cold symptom remedy, and a generous supply of chewable Pepto-Bismol tablets.

If you do develop the dreaded intestinal “flu”, the advice from my experienced friends is: Let nature take its course. At the first sign of trouble, start chewing those Pepto tablets, and follow the recommended dosage until the trouble passes. Make sure you take plenty of fluids, too, to replace the ones you're losing.

- *Phone Cards*

Your usual phone cards and calling cards may not be usable in a foreign country. Check before you depart.

You may not be able to make international calls from the phone in your room. You may be required to use the phone kiosks near the hotel operator, and pay for your calls as you make them.

- *Charge Cards*

Some credit card companies flag out-of-country purchases. Contact your card company before you leave, and make sure that they will not refuse your international charges.

- *Giveaways*

Bring along a few low-cost items to give away to friendly and helpful citizens. Refer to “*Budget for Baksheesh*” in Part 1 for suggestions.

- *Language*

Learn a few courtesy phrases before you arrive, such as: *yes, no, hello, goodbye, thank you, I'm sorry*. It will also be helpful to be able to count from one to ten.

- *Diary*

You will be bombarded with new experiences and new information every day of your trip. Keep a small diary of your itinerary, impressions, and experiences. It will help you sort out your adventures when you return home.

Returning Home

If possible, allow yourself some breathing room when you return home. Don't expect to be back in the work/home-life groove the very next day. Give yourself time to re-adjust to your time zone, assimilate all of your new experiences, and reconnect to your family and friends. Travel, especially foreign travel, is stressful, and you will need time to recover. Put your recovery time in your plan from the beginning, and you will be much more relaxed during and after your trip.