

“Egypt – From Cairo to Mount Sinai”

In September of 1999, I was on my way to Cairo, Egypt to conduct a GIS training class at the Egyptian Institute for Statistics Research. My trip began at 7:15am when I was picked up by Audrie’s Limousine Service. As I climbed into the huge, white “stretch” limo, I wondered if any of the neighbors were watching! On the way to LAX, I felt rather weird, being the only passenger and sitting 15 feet behind the driver. Later, on the Delta Airlines flight to Atlanta, I enjoyed a scrumptious breakfast, Greek frittata and Canadian bacon. Upon arriving in Atlanta, I spent four hours in the Delta Airlines Crown Room lounge awaiting the departure of the SwissAir flight to Zurich. The inbound flight from Frankfurt was two hours late, so by the time I boarded the Zurich flight, I knew there would be no way I could connect with the flight to Cairo. SwissAir rebooked my connecting flight and gave me vouchers for an overnight stay in Zurich. After the delayed takeoff, dinner was served – a fabulous stuffed pork chop, followed by a delicious cheese plate and a chilled glass of “Domaine de Lisghetto Chardonnay” from Corsica. As we crossed the North Atlantic, I reclined into my sleeper seat for a few hours of sleep.

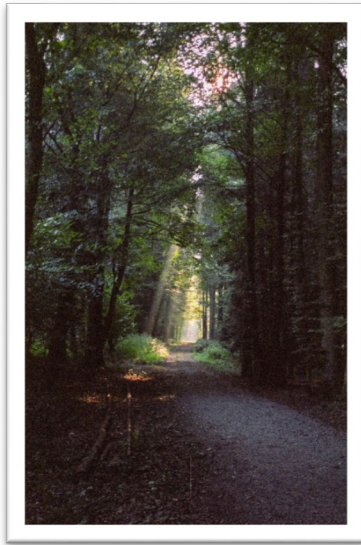
I awoke as we passed over the coast of Normandy and enjoyed a delicious continental breakfast. We landed in Zurich under beautiful blue skies. After checking into the hotel, I took the train from the airport into the city center and spent a few hours in the warm sunshine exploring the old city.



At one point, as I walked along the lakefront, I came upon a classic old Victorian style wooden structure called the “Frauenbad” – a bathing facility for women. Outside, on the floating dock, several women were sunbathing topless under the hot sun! Just a hundred meters further along the lakeshore was a very traditional Biergarten, complete with large grills cooking bratwurst. Huge kegs next to the grills were pouring large liter steins of cold “Hurliman” Swiss beer. As I sat at a table enjoying a cold beer, I watched many elderly couples dancing to traditional German polka music from a small band in one corner of the garden. It was a perfect place to “soak up the local atmosphere” on a lazy, warm late summer afternoon! Back at the hotel that evening, I had one of my favorite German dishes in the “Bayerischerhof Biergarten” – a fabulous plate of Wiener schnitzel and German potato salad, along with a large glass of Paulaner lager from Munich.

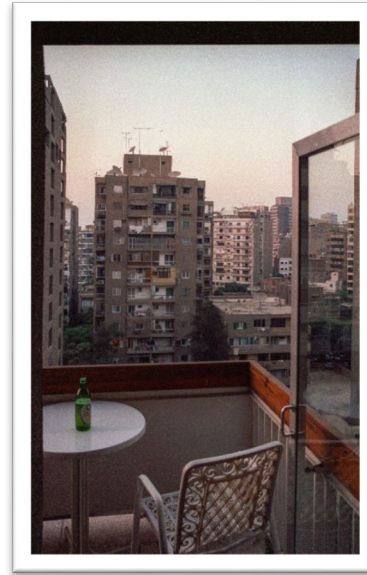
The next morning, I had an early breakfast and then took a long walk among the fields and forests surrounding the small village of Kloten. It was a beautiful morning, with lovely views of corn fields, sunflowers, orchards of apple and pear, and deep green pastures where dairy cows grazed, their huge

bells “clanging” delightfully in the stillness of the morning – broken occasionally by the roar of a huge jet taking off from the airport!



Finally, it was time to return to the airport for the flight to Cairo. At first, the SwissAir agent said my Delta Airlines frequent flyer upgrade was not valid for flights to Africa, but she would make an exception, since someone else had already put me on the waitlist. So, I found a very comfortable business class seat aboard the new Airbus 330 aircraft. But we were delayed for over an hour due to an inaccurate cargo weight manifest – all the cargo had to be unloaded, weighed again, and reloaded! Once we were finally on our way, cocktails and a delicious lunch was served – grilled lamb medallions and steamed fresh vegetables. My seat mate was a young lady from Antwerp who worked in the textile industry. She would be spending 8 weeks working in Cairo and planned to take a two-week camel trek into the desert of the Sinai Peninsula!

Arriving in Cairo amid the hot, dusty haze of late afternoon, I cleared Customs and Immigration quickly, but it was a massive “mob scene” as I exited the terminal building – typical of Cairo! Almost immediately, a slew of taxi drivers descended upon me, offering their services, the price of which decreased “dramatically” as I walked away! After several minutes, I heard someone calling my name, and as I turned around, I saw Lamis from our Beirut office. Apparently, she had been waiting for more than an hour. We joined Dr. Naggar who would be driving me to the Safir Hotel in his daughter’s car. The trip was so typical of Cairo traffic, constantly bordering on chaos and near panic, with a hefty dose of anxiety mixed in! The experience was compounded by Dr. Naggar’s constant “chatter” with us and his corresponding lack of attention to his driving – not to mention his unfamiliarity with the workings of his daughter’s car! At one point, Lamis suddenly screamed at Dr. Naggar to turn on the headlights, as he narrowly missed hitting two people running across the 4 lanes of speeding traffic! And in the process of trying to find the switch for the headlights, Dr. Naggar managed to turn on the radio, cassette player, and windshield wipers, not to mention the turn signals several times! After several “near misses” and close encounters with pedestrians and surrounding vehicles, the headlights finally came on! Along the way, we passed the most beautiful mosque in Cairo, brilliantly lighted and dramatically silhouetted against the dark black sky above – tall, slim minarets shining like thin white spires. (It would have made a spectacular photo had I not been riding with Dr. Naggar!) After finally arriving at the Safir Hotel, I sat on the small balcony of my room in the warm night air and watched the life of Cairo rushing beneath me as I enjoyed a cold glass of “Stella”, a local Egyptian beer.



The next morning, I decided to “walk” to the Institute for Statistics Research located nearby on the campus of the University of Cairo. (I took my life in my hands as I tried to cross 6 lanes of heavy morning rush hour traffic, but at least there was a “narrow” median in the middle) Meanwhile, the locals seemed to negotiate the heavy traffic with ease – deftly weaving in and out between the moving vehicles like a delicate “dance”! When I finally arrived on the campus, I was offered several cups of thick, dark Arabic coffee as I sat in the Dean’s office awaiting the opening ceremony to begin. After half an hour it began, and I was seated on stage in a large auditorium, along with the Dean, university President, and the Egyptian Minister for Higher Education. After reading a letter from Egyptian President Mubarak, the minister introduced me and suddenly asked me to make some remarks, for which I was totally unprepared! Following the ceremony, I was escorted to the computer lab – two small rooms crammed with new PC’s. A few minutes later, several boxes were delivered, containing what was supposed to be the training materials and GIS software I was to install. But upon opening the boxes, there was NO software to be found! (Luckily, I had brought a copy of it on CD with me, and the installation went well) The training class officially began the next day, with a very interesting group of people from all the surrounding Arabic speaking countries. (I was the only non-Arabic speaker) There were four people from Iraq who had made quite a difficult journey from Baghdad to Amman by car, and then to Cairo by plane. They were very nice people and had brought fresh sweet dates to share with everyone in the class. During the class, several students remarked how “chilly” it was with the air conditioning in the classroom. But I found it quite comfortable, since it was 97 degrees and humid outside. Throughout the day, there was a constant supply of sweets, pastries, and hot water for tea provided by a staff of 3 guys. Their only job was to supply the hot water and keep the table at the rear of the classroom filled with food! Another man was in charge of monitoring the air conditioning, along with an assistant to respond to any issues with the AV equipment. (I counted the number of “support staff” and determined they accounted for a third of the people in the classroom!)

For the next five days, my daily routine rarely varied – awake at 5:30am with the morning call to prayer from the Mosque next door to the hotel, and a quick breakfast before leaving the hotel to walk to “Al Dokki Road” – a very busy main road, supposedly with six lanes. But Egyptian drivers never paid attention to the lanes, preferring to choose their own part of the road!



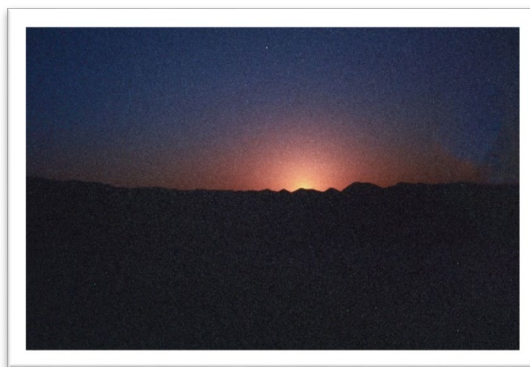
(One day, I was caught halfway across the road and had to stand there in the middle for what seemed like an eternity as cars, trucks, and buses roared past me at 50mph – the “thrill” of visiting Cairo! (I must have looked pretty stupid to the drivers as they rushed past me)

After class each day, I would sit on my small balcony with a cold beer, write some postcards, and update my travel notes as I overlooked the pool. As the sun set, I would head to one of the eight hotel restaurants for dinner, always a treat to try another exotic Arabic dish. One evening, after dinner, I watched the “World’s Strongest Man Competition” on TV. The winner was a huge Afrikaner from South Africa who looked like “The Hulk”! The contest included such challenging events as:

- Pulling two large dump trucks for a quarter mile from a dead start
- Lifting six massive stone boulders of increasing size and weight on to a table chest high
- Throwing kegs full of beer over a 12 foot-high fence

At one point during the competition, a contestant dropped the 160 kg stone (350 lbs) and it broke into several pieces, which created a serious problem for the judges since there was no replacement for the stone. And on another evening, upon returning to the hotel, I encountered a large Egyptian wedding in the lobby – lots of traditional Arabic music, bright lights everywhere, and a long “procession” with many stops for dancing. It was a lot of fun to watch. Then one day, the folks from Iraq brought a wonderful sweet, fragrant fruit “nougat” – a traditional Iraqi dessert that was delicious!

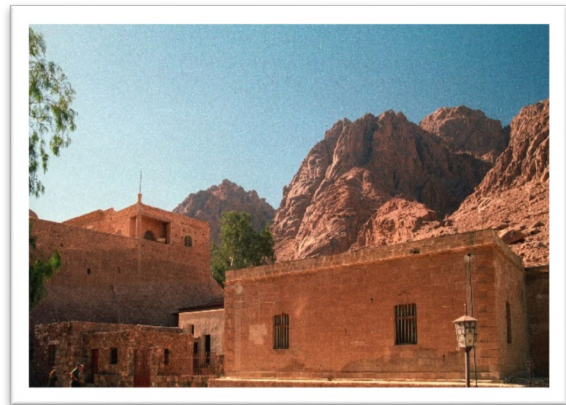
At last, the “weekend” arrived, and I was up at 3:30am to meet my driver for a guided tour to St. Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula. (as it turned out, I was the only passenger) The route took us east of Cairo to a tunnel under the Suez Canal, then south to the monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai (8,625 feet elevation). Just as we exited the tunnel and entered the Sinai Desert, we had a gorgeous view of the sunrise.



Along the way to St. Catherine's we passed through several police checkpoints, and I couldn't help noticing that the driver had brought along a stash of newspapers and magazines from Cairo that he handed out to the policemen. (perhaps it's why we had no delays at the checkpoints!) Meanwhile, the deeper we drove into the desert, the landscape slowly became more barren, with jagged mountains on the horizon. Once in a while, we passed a small oasis of date palms, in sharp contrast to the surrounding barren desert.



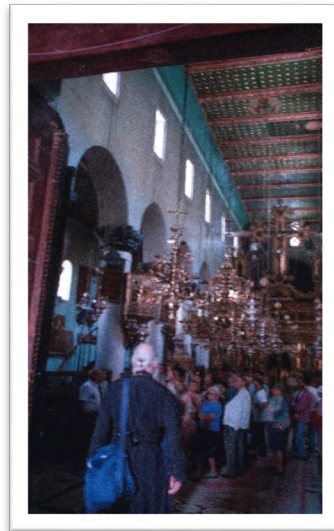
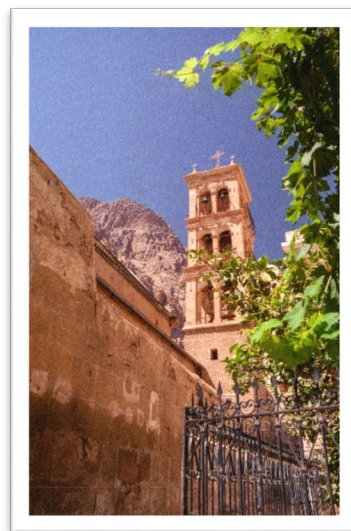
At last, after several hours, Mount Sinai and St Catherine's Monastery came into view. The monastery is situated in a deep, narrow rocky canyon at the foot of the mountains. By order of Emperor Justinian I, the monastery was built between the years 548 and 565 by Eastern Orthodox monks and contains the world's oldest continually operating library.

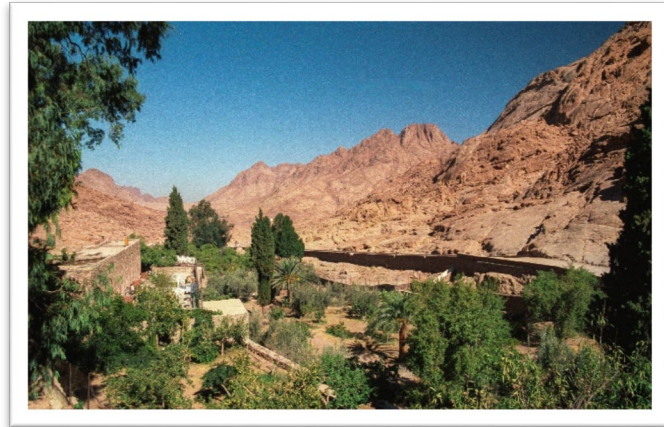


It is situated near the site where Moses supposedly saw the "burning bush". A living bush still exists in the garden of the monastery and is purportedly to be the one seen by Moses. (most likely a modern myth to lure tourists to the monastery!) However, the monastery does have a copy of the ancient "Ashtiname of Mohammad" manuscript, in which the Islamic prophet is claimed to have bestowed his protection upon the monastery. The chapel also contains the best collection of early icons in the world, as well as numerous irreplaceable works of art and ancient mosaics.

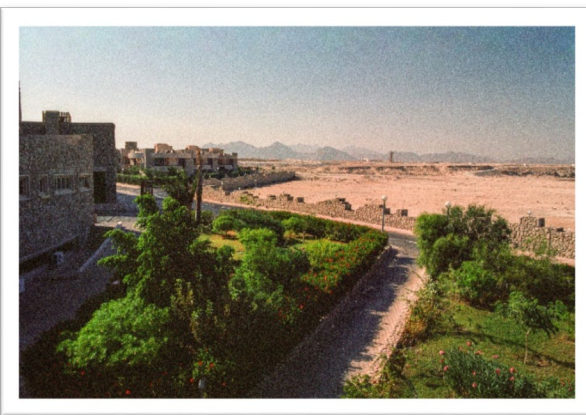


As we parked and walked up the long path to the monastery, there was a sign saying it was closed on Fridays (today was Friday), contrary to what I had been told by the tour company in Cairo! But luckily, I was able to “sneak” in with an Italian religious group who had obtained special permission. I was thankful to be able to tour the monastery and chapel, even though I understood nothing of the narration by the Italian tour guide. As I explored the grounds and gardens surrounding the centuries old stone buildings, the views were spectacular against the backdrop of barren mountains and deep blue sky!





Reluctantly, the time came to leave St Catherine's and head south toward the resort town of Sharm el Sheikh on the Red Sea. Along the way, we gave a ride to a couple of young East Germans who were unaware that the public bus service had ended in August. After a couple of hours, we finally reached Sharm el Sheikh where we stopped for lunch at the new Conrad Hilton International Resort on the Red Sea coast. I as sat outside on the patio, the views of the clear blue waters of the Red Sea and the rocky coast of Saudi Arabia beyond were spectacular.



I could have stayed there all day, but eventually it was time to make our way back to Cairo. It was a very long drive from the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula north to the Suez Canal and the city of Cairo. We made a stop for fuel at a petrol station/truck stop that was undergoing modernization. However, the toilet was among the worst I've seen anywhere outside of China! (and to add insult to injury, I was

expected to “pay” for the privilege of using it!) The “hole” in the floor was so gross that I was reluctant to step anywhere near it, even in my tough hiking boots! It was abundantly clear that “modernization” hadn’t reached the toilet yet and might never. Later in the evening, we made a brief stop in a tiny village to buy some cold ice cream from the “Restaurant for Friends”.

Over the course of several more hours, we encountered several more police checkpoints before approaching the bright lights of Cairo. (I knew we were close to the city when the color of the beautiful half-moon suddenly changed from brilliant white to dull orange!) At long last, we finally arrived back at the Safir Hotel, just a few minutes before midnight. Both the driver and I were totally exhausted – but it had been a memorable day exploring an incredible part of the world that few people ever see.

Meanwhile, a large wedding party continued to celebrate in the hotel lobby until 4:00am!

The next morning, I received a fax from Esri saying that Faye was finally able to change my flights to leave Cairo on Monday, two days earlier than my original itinerary – and, she was able to get me confirmed seats in Business Class all the way back to Los Angeles! That evening, I was invited to have dinner with Dr Naggar and Lamis. They were to pick me up at the hotel by 7:30pm – they arrived just before 9:00pm, as a result of heavy traffic, as well as the Egyptian concept of “time”. Dr Naggar drove us to the posh neighborhood of Zamalek, situated on a large island in the middle of the Nile River. (Luckily, he had mastered the controls of his daughter’s car and we had bright headlights all the way) Dr Naggar had booked a table in a very nice Italian restaurant located among several other restaurants and bars on a huge riverboat that once sailed the waters of the Nile between Cairo and Aswan. It was a beautiful, lavish vessel named “La Pacha”. Our table by the window afforded us a gorgeous view across the river, with brilliant, colorful lights from thousands of neon signs in downtown Cairo reflected in the water. As we enjoyed a fantastic dinner, several small boats passed by carrying parties on board, often complete with a belly dancer. In respect to Dr Naggar being a devout Muslim, Lamis and I decided not to order wine with dinner – instead choosing to enjoy a very tasty fresh lemon juice drink. By the time I got back to the hotel, it was almost midnight, so typical of Egyptian dinners. (And, there was another wedding party in the hotel lobby) I concluded that the Safir Hotel must be very popular for weddings!

On Sunday morning, I checked out of the Safir Hotel, amidst a couple of large tour groups as they rushed to board their tour buses. The cashier tried to charge me for another six beers and two bottles of water from the minibar, which hadn’t been refilled since I used them on the second day. After some discussion that failed to resolve the issue, I complained to the hotel manager that I had called housekeeping unsuccessfully three times to refill the minibar. So, I had given up and ordered beer and water from room service each day instead! Apologies were profuse, and as I left the hotel, I saw the hotel manager scolding one of the staff. It was the last day of the class and the students were very appreciative of the training, especially the four people from Iraq. And to celebrate the closing ceremony of the class, they gave all of us a delicious traditional sweet made from very thick black grape syrup combined with walnuts and exotic, fragrant Arabic spices. It was fantastic! (for people who must find ways to survive on a monthly salary of \$5.00, it was an extremely generous act on their part) After Dr Naggar gave a short closing speech, I thanked the class for their patience and hard work. Then we all posed for a class photo in front of the Institute before Dr Naggar drove me to the Sheraton Hotel in Heliopolis near the airport. The journey through the Cairo rush hour traffic was a series of “near collisions” as he drove so incredibly slow almost coming to a stop at times – all the time gesturing, talking, and looking at me, rather than the road!

Finally, we arrived at the Sheraton Hotel, a huge, beautiful hotel with every amenity one could possibly want – a lovely place to stay, even for just one night! In the massive lobby was a spectacular replica of the mythical boat that transports the Egyptian Sun God “Ra” through the sky every day. It was beautifully adorned in black, gold, and bright hues of blue, red, and yellow – magnificent! Later in the evening, I joined Sherif, an associate from the local Esri office, for dinner in the hotel’s Italian restaurant – Greek salad, grilled chicken in fresh lemon sauce, and a tall, chilled glass of fresh mango juice. Sherif

was fascinated by the stories of my trip to St Catherine's Monastery since he had never been to the Sinai Peninsula. After dinner, I packed my bags in preparation for an early morning flight.

The next morning, I took the hotel shuttle bus to the airport, and as soon as I stepped off the bus, an Egyptian porter grabbed my bags before they even touched the ground! (porters were hanging around in the early morning shadows like "vultures" eagerly waiting to "swoop" down upon the hapless passengers arriving by shuttle bus or taxi!) The porter who had grabbed my bags wanted a \$20.00 tip, but when I said that I would carry my own bags for that price, he eagerly accepted the 20 Egyptian Pound note (\$5.00) I pulled out of my pocket. Then another porter suddenly made his move to help with the bags and immediately demanded a tip for having lifted one bag on to the luggage trolley – to which I replied, "you'll have to negotiate that with your colleague, not me"! Eventually I was able to check in for the SwissAir flight to Zurich and was pleased when the ticket agent waived the \$100 change fee, being that I was a Delta Airlines Platinum member. The four-hour flight on board the new A330 aircraft was very nice, despite being a full flight. Landing among the dark heavy grey clouds and light rain in Zurich was a stark contrast to the abundant sunshine in Egypt. I spent a couple of hours in the SwissAir Business Class lounge, writing my travel notes and enjoying a cold glass of Swiss beer. The final leg of my journey was aboard a Delta Airlines 767 to Atlanta and on to Los Angeles. My seat in the new Business Elite cabin was very comfortable, even as we encountered some rough air over the coast of Ireland. Shortly afterwards though, lunch was served – penne pasta with portobello mushrooms, diced new potatoes, and parmesan cheese. The chilled glass of "Marlborough Sound Sauvignon Blanc" from New Zealand's South Island was a perfect pairing. Several hours later and a couple of movies, we arrived in Atlanta on time. I spent an hour in the Crown Room lounge before boarding the flight to LAX. A delicious dinner of roasted duck in ginger and garlic sauce was served as we crossed over west Texas, toward a brilliant sunset in Arizona. Audrie's Limousine Service was waiting for me at LAX, and as I relaxed in the back of the car, I reflected upon the amazing places I had seen and the wonderful people I had met – the experiences of which I recorded in my travel notes. I hope you have enjoyed the trip with me!

Photo Gallery

