

## Experiencing the Pyramids

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In the first class cabin on the flight from Kuwait to Cairo I sit next to an extremely distinguished looking man: dark skin, semitic nose, a crown of white hair. He looks self-contained as if he is used to being served. I speculate whether he is a member of one of the ruling families of Kuwait and am afraid to initiate a conversation. Halfway through the flight we begin to talk and he turns out to be a gynecologist from Egypt who, he says, has been to Kuwait to visit his sister. I ask about the place of birth control in Islamic society. He says there is no religious objection, although abortion is considered a sin. However, he thinks abortion should be made legal, is surprised to hear that some states in the United States allow it.

When he hears I am visiting Cairo he is embarrassed for his country. "We are passing through difficult times. Fifty years ago things were much better." I try to reassure him that I am visiting Cairo as much for its glorious past as for its present.

Endless miles of Saudi Arabian desert, both smooth and rocky, slip by below. Then the Red Sea begins, obviously salty because no edge of green vegetation surrounds it on the land. It is as wide as Lake Erie, I judge, where we cross it far below Sinai in order to avoid the Israelis. Then more miles of Egyptian desert. Suddenly we cross a gorgeous five-mile band of green: the Mother Nile and her band of life. It is Luxor and we wheel north.

I have finally been able to obtain a hotel room (second-class hotel) by a thoroughly Middle Eastern method: Hartley Rogers, Associate Provost at MIT, has a brother who practices maritime law in the Middle East; his brother knows the management of International Business Associates in Cairo, an organization that, for a fee, tries to reduce the complication of doing business in Cairo. After much transcontinental telexing, they have found a room and told me there will be a driver and "expediter" at the airport. My new gynecological friend (call him Ahmed) and I have agreed that if I am met we will give him a lift into Cairo where he can have his car delivered to him; if I am not met, we will go together in a taxi.

International Business Associates are efficient; a young man and a policeman are waiting for us as we get off the bus from the airplane and whisk us through various immigration and customs lines in a flash. After a wait for the luggage, we pass out past the inevitable six-deep crowd of dark faces waiting for friends and relatives. We squeeze six into a small Peugeot and start for Cairo.

Kuwait is one of the richest Arab countries; Egypt is one of the poorest; dirt and donkeys are everywhere.

We arrive at my hotel which is clearly second-class. The



rate is announced as 20 Egyptian pounds per night. Ahmed phones for his car and, while waiting, we relax in the sitting room outside my bedroom. Ahmed sends for soft drinks and we talk. It now comes out that he was visiting Kuwait not only to see his sister but also to try to get permission to open a gynecological clinic there. He has been refused but no reason has been given. Earlier he had a similar clinic in Saudi Arabia but had to give it up. He says he could not work with the local leadership: no matter how carefully he did what he thought they expected, they always found a way to make life difficult for him.

I begin to see the Kuwaitis not through the eyes of an honored guest but as an Egyptian provider of services. I later realize that a foreign gynecologist must pose particular problems for the protective sexist male of the Arab world. In spite of all this discouragement, Ahmed is still trying to go to Kuwait. The financial incentives must be great.

Ahmed's car comes, driven by a friend. Ahmed lives in Alexandria and does not know Cairo and is afraid to drive in it. His friend will drive him out of Cairo and then take a cab back. They leave and, for the first time, I feel really alone in the Middle East.

April 15, 1978 (Income Tax day in the U.S.A.!)

Before coming to Egypt I have written to my friend, Professor Luis Alvarez, out at the University of California, Berkeley, asking for aid in locating an informed guide for the pyramids. He suggests his Egyptian colleague, Ali Hassan, formerly Director of Antiquities and, Alvarez thinks, currently Director of the "Cairo Museum." The two became acquainted when Alvarez proposed and assisted in carrying out in the second pyramid (Pyramid of Chphran) an experiment which made use of cosmic rays to try to determine whether there remained an undiscovered chamber in the upper part of the pyramid. (The results were negative.)

This morning I set out to find Ali Hassan. There is no "Cairo Museum," but apparently the Egyptian Antiquities Museum is meant. However, he is not Director of this Museum, although everyone knows him. The lady I talk to does not speak English well, and I cannot recognize where Hassan is said to be at the minute. So I let that contact go and visit the King Tut exhibit. Although some pieces, notably the Golden Mask, are on tour in the United States, the display seems hardly depleted in its magnificence.

Particularly charming is a throne covered in gold on the backrest of which is depicted the King relaxing on a chair being touched on the shoulder gently by the Queen. Over both the sun



sends down its rays. Charming and human. The footstool that goes with the throne depicts on its top bound prisoners of war on whom the King places his feet as he sits in the charming throne. So much for my romantic fantasies about ancient Egypt.

The four nested shrines that contain<sup>ed</sup> the sarcophagus of King Tut are stunning. Covered in gold, the biggest one is about nine feet square and twenty feet deep. The floodlights that illuminate the interiors of the shrines are not lit so I use the pocket flashlight that I have brought from the States to help me explore the pyramids.

My other hope was to take a two-day trip to Luxor where the most magnificent of the tombs are found. After visiting several travel agencies to no avail I take a cab for the pyramids.

The pyramids are there. I bring you word that the pictures you have seen of the pyramids are true. You take a cab to the edge of the suburbs of Giza and there they are. For once the reality exceeds the reputation.

I have been warned by many people of the rapacious guides and importuning camel drivers and small boys. I have learned the Arabic words for "no thank you" (la, shucrain). And tip/bribe (baksheesh). I stop at the tourist bureau on the way up to the plateau and ask how much I should pay for a guide. They say not more than two Egyptian pounds for the three pyramids altogether. As I walk up the sidewalk to the pyramids, various camel drivers, donkey drivers, children and young men offer me their services, but I shook them off.

As I turn from the window where I have bought the fifty Piastres ticket for the pyramids (half an Egyptian pound or about seventy cents), I am smoothly and automatically in the charge of an Arab in green cloak and white headress. I had not exactly decided to have a guide, but suddenly I have one. He assures me I will pay him whatever I feel he deserves: no more. He says I should call him Sam. During the rest of the day Sam teaches me how the system works.

We climb up to Mamun's Tunnel, cut through the pyramid by the first people to find the inner passages. Where the tunnel joins the ascending ramp, there is a locked gate into the ramp that descends from the original opening. I mention my letter from Luis Alvarez about Ali Hassan at which my guide perks up his ears. He says that Ali Hassan used to be his boss.

We climb the ascending ramp, holding on to railings on either side and stooping for the four foot height that opens finally into the grand gallery about thirty feet high with a sloping wall provided by seven tiers of stone jutting out two inches, one closer to the center than the one below. It really is grand, although the view bulbs and reflectors along the gallery do not



provide the illumination to do it justice. Sam shows me the dressing of the stones that line the grand gallery. The joints are perfectly smooth and paper thin along their edges.

We climb to the top of the grand gallery. It is clear that I surprise Sam in several respects. I have brought with me from the States specifically for this purpose a disposable \$1 flashlight which I use to augment the dim lighting in the passages. He also says that in thirty-five years as a guide I have been the first visitor to volunteer the information that the name Cheops appears nowhere in the pyramid itself except in the strain-relieving chambers that lie over the main burial room, painted there in red ocre. With my flashlight he points out the narrow entrance of the passageway leading to these chambers high at the top of the grand gallery.

We pass through the short horizontal tunnel across which originally were five portcullises of stone lowered from above to protect the entrance of the burial chamber.

The chamber itself is immense and resounding, rectangular in shape. The walls are the same black granite with almost invisible joints. There are fittings in the wall for four 25-watt florescent lamps, but only two are lit. Sam shows me the two ventilation holes and the granite sarcophagus, a plain black box made of a single piece of stone without a lid. Next to the sarcophagus are some crude boards nailed together covering a pit in which, Sam claims, the King's treasure was buried. I doubt it, feeling it more likely that thieves simply dug around to see what they could find.

Other visitors come and go but Sam lets me linger. This connoisseur of tourists has chosen me as his project for the entire day. I find this both flattering and frightening.

We return back down through the grand gallery and, at its bottom, enter the horizontal tunnel that leads to the so-called Queen's chamber. Actually, as I understand it, the three major chambers in the pyramid represent three different designs altered in the process of building it. The first one, at the end of the long sloping descending tunnel underground, was the first planned burial chamber. Then, as work progressed, the Queen's chamber was envisioned as the final resting place. Finally, as the pyramid rose higher and Cheops grew richer the large chamber higher up was built.

I learn a lot from Sam, and his facts are mostly correct insofar as I know them. Actually I am more interested in fantasy: anyone can read books on the pyramids at home.



We return to the base of the grand gallery and Sam shows me the boxed-in hole, an entrance to a ragged tunnel that descends to the lower ramp between the original opening and the underground chamber.

We back down the ramp originally plugged with black granite stones, to the padlocked entrance to the original descending shaft. Sam whispers that, with luck and a little baksheesh, we may be able to get the key for the padlock. He strides off and returns with another cloaked figure fumbling with a bunch of keys. I see eleven Egyptian pounds change hands, but do not know what parallel transactions have taken place before or will take place after.

The gate is opened, a time for return agreed upon, I am sworn to secrecy, and the gate is closed behind us and locked.

In some ways this long descending shaft is the most remarkable structure I have seen in the pyramid. Luis Alvarez in his letter to me said that about ten years ago this entrance and tunnel was opened and cleaned for the first time "in several thousand years" under the direction of Ali Hassan. It is about three and a half feet wide and four feet high and runs absolutely straight from the entrance gate at the top in which round holes let in a flood of light, 320 feet downward toward the original burial chamber. We back down the ramp. Sam tells me that priests knelt at the bottom of the ramp and prayed as they looked upward to see the planet Venus through the entrance. I doubt this: Venus would be visible at most for only a few days a year and secrecy would require that the entrance be hidden.

The burial chamber under the pyramid is a surprise after the finished work above us. It is about fifty feet long and thirty feet wide but only half excavated. The other half is composed of rock outcroppings only partly dug away. In the floor of the "finished" half is a gaping hole that descends twenty-five feet or so. In the wall opposite the entrance is another tunnel with a gate that goes on to end in a blank wall far from this chamber.

Sam relaxes and lights his first cigarette. He hands me his card. Along with some Arabic it says, "MAHMOUD ABDEL GHFAR EL GABRY, CHIEF OF THE PYRAMIDS" and, in the lower left, "P.O. Pyramids" (sic). Marvelous. I'm beginning to be enchanted with this man. What can it possibly mean "chief of the pyramids"? No matter: For one of the few times in my life I am just as happy with illusions as with reality. Once again Sam does not hurry me but smokes contentedly as I clamber over the unfinished part of the cell. (I learn later it is trash from earlier diggings.)

At length we start up the ascending passageway. Sam has told me that he is over sixty and this is hard work for him. When we arrive back at the locked gate, I asked and received permission to continue on up the remaining sixty feet or so to the gated



entrance. I do so and peek out smugly on all the tourists and even the camel drivers who do not know what they are missing.

Back at the gate, Sam whispers to give no more money to the man who lets us out, an instruction which I follow.

We emerge into the daylight and Sam waits while I climb to the original entrance, with its pair of vast inverted v's of stone taking thrust from off the entrance chamber but clearly recessed so as to be covered in the final construction. At the side are some hieroglyphics which Sam says tell us about the visit of Herododotus, who is about as distant in time from us as he was distant in time from the builders of the pyramids. I do not know whether or not to believe this. Sam also says, in passing, that the Cheops Pyramid was never sheathed in smooth white limestone but always had its present ragged appearance. This differs from my information but is worth looking into further.

After a snack in the rest house we walk to the east of the pyramid to visit some of the honeycombs of tombs that surround the pyramids on all sides. We visit the tomb of the chief engineer. Apparently these lesser officials gloried in having pictures and inscriptions on the walls of their tombs, the pleasure which the mighty Pharos apparently forewent.

We visit several of these minor tombs, at each one of which Sam calls the guard from his nearby niche, tips him just the right amount, and jokes with each as we pass in. I am clearly getting more than the quick tour.

We end up at the Sphinx, looking first at the temple that controls the complex surrounding it. This whole complex served the second pyramid that of Chephren, about 1200 feet away.

The Sphinx faces the amphitheater for the sound and light show to be given this evening in English. These shows involve illumination of the pyramids and dramatic verbal and musical evocations of their past. We walk past this amphitheater and to a street of small souvenir and jewelry shops called bazaars. Here stage two is to begin.

We enter the shop of a friend of his who greets us both warmly. We sit down at the counter and Sam sends a boy for a beer. The shopkeeper suggests I might be interested in a gold ring set with a semi-precious stone called Alexandritis, which looks blue in daylight and red under incandescent lights. I am cool to the idea and look around, discovering a gold pendant in the form of the "key of life" (like a cross with a loop as the upper arm). He suggests a plate inlaid with ivory. I say it is too bulky to carry in my baggage. He returns to the ring, suggesting a price of 45 pounds. The beer comes. We have a little and Sam has a lot. I asked the weight of the gold pendant and calculate its price according to Kuwait standards, arriving at



37 pounds. He suggests 55 pounds. I offer 50. He says he does not bargain in his store.

There is a long pause. Sam smokes a cigarette and sends the boy for a second beer. I look around the shop. Sam suggests 52 pounds for the pendant. We all agree and I pay. I say that is the end as I am nearly out of money. We discuss other matters. The beer arrives and Sam consumes it smoking as he does so.

I am enjoying myself.

The shopkeeper returns to the ring, asking me what I am willing to offer. I say I am not interested, and anyway am nearly out of Egyptian pounds and I want to be sure to pay Sam. I look at him significantly. There is a pause. The shopkeeper suggests that he would accept dollars. We all consider the matter. Sam orders a third beer. I wander around the shop again. The shopkeeper suggests the equivalent of 35 Egyptian pounds or \$50. Sam says it is too much, that I trust him. There is another pause. I have a general idea who is going to pay for all that beer.

We finally agree on a price of 43 American dollars. That is more than 30% less than the original price asked in a shop that does not bargain. Who knows what it is really worth?

We leave the shop and Sam suggests that we go to a perfume store. I say I'm nearly out of money and anyway would rather give what I have to him. I suggest lunch. He hesitates, hails a cab, and settles back for the short ride to the restaurant he has chosen. It turns out to be on the pyramid road just below the Mena House. He is greeted warmly by the waiters. He asks if I like fish and I say yes. He suggests I put myself in his hands. I do so. He talks rapidly to the waiter who brings out a large fresh fish. Sam inspects and accepts it. It goes back into the kitchen, followed by Sam who emerges to announce that he has paid the cook half a pound so that it will be perfectly baked.

Some homos comes together with salad. Sam sends the salad back for a more pungent dressing. It is delicious. Sam recommends that I eat homos and salad "to open up your appetite." He touches his fingers to his lips in anticipation of the fish.

I am enchanted with the man. He is perfect. Inspired. An artist. If illusion is added to reality, he delivers as much as the best actor. More; for his is a solo performance to a solo audience to whose moods and expectations he must respond minute by minute. I am willing to pay any price to see the rest of his performance. And probably I shall.

The fish comes and is delicious. During the course of the meal Sam has smoked constantly and downed several more beers.



Sam suggests we wash our hands and faces which we do, attended by a small boy with towels whom Sam tips. Back at the table we have Turkish coffee. Sam receives and pays the bill.

The afternoon is wearing on and Sam suggests we get back to the pyramids. He offers the opinion that the third pyramid is the most interesting and implies we can pass up the second one. I insist that we see both. Earlier I had told him that I wished to finish the day by climbing the Cheops Pyramid. He suggests the third pyramid instead. I insist on the first. In all things he is accommodating to my wishes.

Without my being aware of the transition (something like Alice in Wonderland) there are three in the back seat and two in the front of the cab.

We arrive at the third pyramid and Sam shows it to me. (More on this when I tell of my next visit there.) While we are in the bowels of the pyramid, Sam suggests that his friend in the cab who is waiting outside would be a superb guide for my announced trip to Saqqara, I wish I had expressed concerning the following day. I ask a reasonable price and he suggests 20 pounds for car, driver and his friend.

When we emerge from the pyramid, Sam's friend hands me a card that says at the top "CANDY, TAWFIK R. FAYED, Tourist Guide No. 11, Diploma of Archaeology." I hand Candy a 10 pound deposit and we agree he will pick me up at 9:00 in the morning at my hotel.

We all drive back to the second pyramid which Sam shows me. Then we climb back in the taxi and are dropped near the southwest corner of the Cheops Pyramid which Sam says is best to climb this time of day.

Sam and I get out of the taxi and stroll in a leisurely manner toward the corner of the pyramid. The time has come to settle up. I express my appreciation for all Sam has taught me. I am sincere: not only has he shown me tombs I would never have found and features of the pyramid I would not have noticed, but, equally important, he has taught me The System. Not the system for getting the most for the absolutely cheapest price, which takes a fine sense and a lifetime of practice such as he has had. Rather, the system for a tourist to obtain what he wants at a price the tourist is willing to pay for whatever means most to him. And the pyramids mean a great deal to me.

Sam says that his expenses during the day have been "at least" 35 pounds, a figure at least 10 pounds too high not counting kickbacks. I pay willingly.

We then move on to his fee, which he says he will leave "entirely up to you." I give him 20 pounds (\$30), a figure I later am



surprised to learn is greater than the monthly salary of a low-level government clerk. At any event it is ten times what the Tourist Bureau suggested early in the morning.

As a kind of reverse baksheesh, Sam offers to "take care of" the guard at the corner of the pyramid. We approach the corner and the guard greets him warmly. Sam takes me to the edge of the pyramid and shows me how to begin, suggesting that I pause every few steps to relax and enjoy the view. I start clambering over the three-foot high blocks. He calls after me that we will meet after the sound and light show in the bazaar where I bought the jewelry. I agree. I climb some more. He and the guard wave gaily. Sam repeats his suggestion that I meet him after the show and makes me promise to do so. I climb farther, out of his hearing. He waves his arms, reminding me of my promise, and sits chatting with the guard for ten or fifteen minutes.

When I am about halfway up the pyramid, Sam strides off down the road towards the Sphinx. He is a man perfectly suited to his profession. I salute him.

For two weeks prior to leaving MIT, I climbed the stairway up its only skyscraper, the Green Building, about 22 floors or half the height of the Great Pyramid. Toward the end of this time I could climb it twice in a row without exhaustion.

The Great Pyramid itself requires a rather different set of muscles. About half of the blocks have footholds or cleaved surfaces on which one can step; the rest involve clambering up over the full block height of three and a half or so feet. The blocks are irregular and every tier requires a separate decision. By now it is quarter of six or so and the sun is sinking toward the horizon of the western desert. The view of Chepren is magnificent. My heart is singing.

At the top of the pyramid I can see a tripod structure with a vertical pole through the middle, the top of which apparently marks the original apex.

At length I arrive at the top and pause, panting, my heart beating at nearly the book value of 140 beats per minute appropriate to my age and condition.

Lying between Cheops and the setting sun, for nearly a kilometer, are the pit burial places under houselike structures called mastabas, closed to the public; a veritable city of the dead. The top of Chephran is about level with the height of Cheops, although it is smaller, because it is built on higher ground. From one corner of the square top one can see, beyond Chephran, one edge of the third pyramid, Mycerinus. Off to the east are the three small pyramids below Cheops and three wedge-shaped excavations that housed boats for the voyage of



the king's soul. I pinch myself repeatedly to be sure I am really here.

Toiling up the northeast corner of the pyramid, with his camera bag banging against his legs, comes a fellow American. Later it turns out that he is a fuss budget government geologist named G. W. (Bill) Leo. He has been visiting Lebanon (or is it Jordan?) at the request of that government. Although he has had the foresight to use the return trip for stopovers in Cairo and Paris, the pyramids do not inspire him to lofty thoughts. Rather he worries about his lost sunglasses and fiddles with the camera making a "Lawrence of Arabia" shot of the setting sun.

We chat amicably (in my state of mind I can get along with anyone), swapping practical information on survival in Cairo. We agree to attend the light and sound show, which will begin in about an hour.

We descend the northwest corner of the pyramid that has been suggested to him by a young man who earlier had tried to charge him to take care of the policeman at the northeast corner. Bill had declined with thanks, but had agreed to mail a letter in the States for the young man who was having difficulty reaching someone in Texas. Sure enough he is waiting at the bottom with his letter, which he seals and hands to Bill. We start around the pyramid, the young man tagging along clearly seeking some way to provide a service for pay but not knowing exactly how to manage it.

At the southwest corner we stroll through an automobile roadblock. Several uniformed men there step forward as if to charge admission but, intimidated by the three of us, allow us to pass without hindrance.

We stroll on towards the Sphinx. It is now completely dark, but Bill takes several time exposures, claiming he has nothing to lose with his Plus-X film.

The boy invites us to have a drink at his house, which is in the nearby village. I have had enough baksheesh for one day and walk on ahead while Bill says his goodbyes.

Bill and I are reunited in the seats for the sound and light show, where I share a litre-and-a-half bottle of water that I have bought to counteract the dehydration of the day.

The lighting for the sound and light show is magnificent. An effect I had not anticipated was the back lighting of the pyramids in white light, with the haze providing them with a streaked halo. The sound track is full of pathetic fallacy, the Sphinx recounting all the sights through history that she has seen. (She or he--what gender do you attach to a being with the face of a man, the hair of a woman, and the body of



a lion?) One promising section deals with the emotional tone surrounding the death of a great pharaoh, but details and continuity are lacking.

After the show I check in the bazaar for Sam but he is not there. We drive back to the Nile Hilton and have supper together.

I have discovered that the 20 pounds a day I am paying at my hotel is exorbitant compared with other prices. The swankiest hotel, the Meridien, charges 27 pounds a day for a private air-conditioned room with bath and all its supporting facilities. The Shepherds hotel charges 15 pounds. Bill is paying 5 pounds at a perfectly adequate second-class hotel. Since he is leaving the next morning on the same plane that I will take two days later, I accompany him back to the hotel and contract for his room the following morning. We say goodbye and I stroll back to my hotel down the Nile. I have now learned to fend off the various commercial propositions and am enjoying myself immensely.

Some tourist notes. Cairo is clearly a poor city with dirt everywhere. But it has variety and a kind of scruffy exuberance that I find enjoyable after the self-conscious seriousness of Kuwait. The traffic volume is about the same in both places, but Cairo cars are smaller, older, smokier, and louder. Cairo drivers use their horns a great deal, as if announcing "here I am." They calculate tolerances much more narrowly than Kuwait drivers, making crossing the street a genuine adventure. End of tourist notes.

I arrive back at my hotel and request, for the record, how much I am paying. They say 20 pounds. I ask if that is per night or for four nights. They say laughingly it is per night. I announce I am leaving the next morning and that they should be ashamed of themselves for charging more than a luxury hotel for their accommodations. I continue that I have found a hotel for 1/4 of their price and they say prices are set by the Tourist Bureau. I say if so they are breaking the law and they can expect me to leave in the morning.

It has taken me 30 hours and about \$120 to learn the system in Cairo. A bargain.

April 16, 1978

I awake, as usual, to the braying of donkeys. These animals pull a variety of carts and also carry individual riders with and without additional loads. Two sad looking donkeys in front of my hotel are hitched to a garbage wagon. I get dressed and packed for the move to the new hotel and wait for Candy the tour guide to arrive with his driver, expecting them to take me to the other hotel.



I open the window and lean out over the balcony watching the street scene below. Two policemen are controlling traffic, one by cooperating with those who wish to park, the other one by handing out tickets. The street is filled with people of an immense variety of size, shape, color, affluence and dress.

About 9:20 a.m. a small mini tour bus drives up and the driver and the ticketing officer exchange loud words. There is a knock at my bedroom door and there stands Candy. I announce that he is taking me to a new hotel. He says there are a few others going with us and we will put my bags in the back of the bus. I say that I was expecting him and a driver and me, period, and that he is to refund my ten pounds, which he does and disappears.

I take my bags by cab to the new hotel, check in, and decide to spend the day, this time alone, at the pyramids. I walk to Thomas Cook down the street and arrange for a driver and guide to go to Saqqara tomorrow. Then on to the British museum and a review of the King Tut exhibit. It is as magnificent as before.

My eye is caught by three small female statues with outstretched arms surrounding the shrine containing (ugh) the visera, lungs, heart, and liver (?) of the dead king. Each statue has a head turned slightly to the right, an unusually nonrectilinear figure in Egyptian art. Each of them is slightly different, but all look regal and sad. The flashlight reveals that the eyes shine as if filled with tears. My eyes too fill with tears; of all the art I see in Egypt, these gentle figures are the most engaging.

Then on to the pyramids by cab. I carry no camera and no note paper: I wish to experience the pyramids without photographic rectangles in mind or the written word. I will spend enough time in each one so that, later, when I close my eyes I can see each important space.

My pocket is full of dollar bills and my mind full of determination. I buy the ticket, shrug off the offers of aid, and give the attendant at the entrance to each pyramid a dollar bill to leave me alone.

I spend about two hours in Cheops. In the King's chamber one of the two remaining lights has gone off, leaving a 25-watt florescent light to illuminate the vast black-walled space. I stroll back and forth, squat in the corner, sniff the airvent openings, and watch the tourists. I was right to avoid the camera: about half the men spend the whole time fiddling with the apparatus and positioning their families. One or two women keep their noses buried in guidebooks in order to find out what they are supposed to see.



Most of the Arab guides are full of misinformation. They stand in the middle of the King's chamber and intone that "we are now directly under the peak of the pyramid" (wrong). Several of them do not take their guests into the so-called Queen's chamber ("There is nothing back there you want to see.") in order to get outside and take on a new group. Many of the visitors are equally daffy. At the bottom of the Grand Gallery I meet a pair of Japanese Americans who demand, waving toward the top of the gallery, "Is there anything up there?"

"Yes, there is a large room made of black stone."

"But is there anything up there?"

"What do you mean, ghosts?"

"No, any mummies?"

"No mummies but there is a large coffin made of stone."

"Well, then, there's no need for us to go up there."

So they take pictures of each other and leave. So I return to the King's Chamber in their place.

Periods of crowding are interspersed with long periods of silence. During one of these I raise the rough boards in the



corner next to the sarcophagus and climb down into the hole. It is disappointingly shallow. During another interlude I lie down in the sarcophagus, cross my arms, stare at the ceiling, and try to think the thoughts of a dead pharaoh. It smells as if I am lying in a dried-out urinal. Which I am.

At the top of the grand gallery, just at the horizontal entrance to the passageway leading to the King's chamber I discover a small pair of doors smaller than kitchen cabinet doors. They are unlocked. While no one is watching I dodge into them and turn on my flashlight. A tunnel leads upward to the right and I follow it for about 25 feet to a dead end. Fresh air is coming from somewhere. Raising my flashlight I realize that this is the exit for the airvent that descends into the King's chamber. It is a square tunnel about six inches on an edge extending out of sight at an upward slant. The tunnel has been dug out under the bottom edge of this airvent. It is not straight as shown in the books but consists of eight or ten foot sections that jog in a sweeping manner toward the chamber. I return here more than once during the day and finally yield to the juvenile impulse to scratch my initials and the year on the exposed inner surface of the vent. The only other name, undated, is that of "J. Dean." (John Dean? James Dean?)

I emerge from Cheops ringing wet because of the oppressive atmosphere, and dirty. My scruffy appearance protects me somewhat from commercial offers, and I proceed to have a Pepsi Cola in the resthouse. Because I started at noon, thanks to Candy, only a couple hours remain before closing time. I walk next to the third pyramid, Mycerinus, give the attendant a dollar, and descend.

The layout of the burial chamber shows some indecision or change of plans on the part of the builders. The chambers are hollowed out of solid rock. A low chamber has a vaulted barrel ceiling, and is lined with black stone. An auxiliary room has six stalls in it, apparently for the six daughters of the king. Both of these rooms are reached by a staircase descending from what must have been an earlier planned king's chamber.

I wonder if there is any mystery about Mycerinus that I can investigate. Over the entrance to the upper burial chamber is a rectangular hole of similar dimensions leading back into the rock. I look around for a way to reach this upper tunnel and spy a ladder lying conveniently beside it. No one is around, and I put the ladder against the wall and climb into the tunnel. It goes horizontally into the rock a few tens of feet and then turns upward. Some large boulders lie on the upward incline and I scramble over them, the flashlight pointing the way. The finished portion of the tunnel suddenly ends and a rabbit warren of rough-hewn apertures begin, apparently the work of thieves. I clamber up an eight-foot vertical column, scramble over some broken shards, and continue along a twisted path to a dead end.



¶ As I lie there, I realize that, almost for the first time in my life, no other soul on earth knows where I am. If I should fall and be knocked unconscious it might be weeks before anyone would find me. I am totally, utterly--and deliciously--alone.

¶ Retracing the path I try a second tunnel, also ending in a blind wall. Back to the starting point and a glance at a third alternative. It looks hard and dangerous and I am fearful of being discovered, so bump my head in retracing the steps down the finished tunnel. The ladder is still there. No one is about.

Later I read that this upper tunnel leads nowhere because it is part of an earlier design which sloped up to the surface when the pyramid was planned either to be smaller or displaced from its present position. Apparently the thieves took this to mean that a treasure lay beyond its termination.

I spend another half hour alone in this set of chambers. No one comes down to check and no visitors apparently find this pyramid worth their attention. I have some doubts about the adequacy of supervision by the Egyptian Bureau of Antiquities. I could be using a jackhammer down here for all anyone would know.

I emerge from the third pyramid and head back to the second. At the entrance are sitting a group of cloaked figures and a small boy, passing the time of day. I hand the guard my dollar and announce loudly that, in 45 minutes when I emerge, I will pay one American dollar for a Pepsi Cola. This is four times the going rate and I presume will be effective in obtaining it.

The second pyramid is the one in which Luis Alvarez and his Egyptian colleagues installed equipment to detect cosmic rays. Since the only known rooms are underneath the pyramid, the possibility exists that some undiscovered chambers lie within the pyramid itself, as they do in Cheops. By using spark chambers to detect the direction and intensity of cosmic rays entering the lower chamber from various directions and comparing these with what is expected if the pyramid is solid, it might be possible to locate directions in which the intensity is greater than anticipated. This might mean that a chamber exists and the stone which would otherwise fill it is not there to absorb the cosmic rays from that direction. My understanding is that they have concluded that no such chambers exist.

The layout of chambers under the second pyramid is three-dimensional and difficult to describe in words. As usual one can presume that various multiple exits and entrances were originally devised to fool thieves and, as usual, they have been without success in this intention. The largest chamber contains a sarcophagus and lid. Along the wall facing the entrance in large black letters surrounded by a box is the inscription "Scoperta da G Belzoni 2 Mar 1818." This is called the Belzoni chamber. The elegant letters of this sign have inspired unique lettering of later visitors, mostly from the 19th century. For once the graffiti seem worth preserving.



Several times during my stay in the second pyramid the chambers reverberate in a dull sub-sonic manner. I decide that it is a resonance of the tunnels set off by jets taking off from Cairo airport. How strange!

I emerge with a group of tourists to discover that the small boy has ready not just one bottle of Pepsi Cola but an entire case. I buy one for \$1 and drink it. The watchman asks for some contribution since he has kept the pyramid open for me. (It is not yet closing time even now.) I give him some coins but refuse \$1. I buy a second Pepsi Cola for a dollar. The men sitting there and I swap single words and phrases in each other's language.

By now it is 5:00 p.m. and the insides of the pyramids are closed to tourists. We now begin the exploration of the outsides. Since this is now not a regular activity, my new sense of bribery will be tested.

I walk back to the third pyramid and, approaching the guard who is still there, hand him \$2 and ask for permission to climb up to the gaping hole above the entrance and, later, to climb to the top of the pyramid. He pauses and I hand him another dollar. He asks for a fourth, "for the policeman." He gets it. He tells me to climb up to the gash above the entrance and then return, then to go around to the other side to climb the pyramid. He calls after me not to tell anyone about our arrangement. I wave assent.

The gash proves a disappointment. There is a hole leading from it into the pyramid which the guard has called an airvent. Instead it is clearly a thieves tunnel, but it is covered with a grating so I cannot get into it. Perhaps it connects with those that I failed to explore from below.

Returning to the ground I walk around the pyramid and start up the east side. This pyramid is much more crumbled than Cheops and the footing is unsure. It is otherwise an easy climb and the view an interesting one. To the east stretches the remains of a ramp that may have connected with the Nile. At the foot of the pyramid the ramp broadens into the ruins of a temple which I decide to investigate on my descent. As I stand there an Arab-clad figure on the temple side waves and shouts to me. I move to the other side of the rectangular area at the top hoping he will go away, but when I return he waves and shouts again. A pox on him. I decide to descend the western side to avoid him. The crumbled gravel slopes toward the edge of each block and slips underfoot. For the first time I am genuinely fearful of falling. However, with care the bottom is reached without accident and I walk to the north where I have seen a squatting figure selling Pepsi Colas out of an ice-filled bucket. I buy two of them from him for an American dollar; a bargain. There is now some danger that I will go into sugar shock as a result of the five Pepsi Colas so far this afternoon.

At the foot of the incline that faces the second pyramid is a small



girl sitting expectantly behind an open ice chest. To her left are about 50 cases of Pepsi Cola. Could I have missed them on my previous visit? Or has the rumor that crazy Americans are paying a dollar a bottle caused so massive a movement of the System? As so often during these few days, I prefer a mixture of fantasy and reality to further investigation.

I walk on to to the southwest corner of Cheops, say to the guard that I would like to climb the pyramid and pass a dollar bill into his hand. He nods assent and I start for the corner. A real bargain. As I climb the first block there is a shout from behind. This guard and another one approach me. They ask me what I am doing. I repeat my desire. The other guard smiles and rubs his thumb against his forefingers. I give them each another dollar. They hesitate. I look into my pocket saying "one more for each." They nod assent, I deliver, and I begin the climb. Still a bargain.

As I climb I consider the Egyptian system (or lack of system) for managing the pyramids. The passages are dirty, the lighting is terrible, the guides are full of mis-information, the fees depend on your gullibility. Many westerners would consider the system of bribes or tips to be despicable. However, they do deliver the genuine article: there are no pyramids to match anywhere else. Also I find the bribe system to be gentle and worldly-wise. Our reflexes are wrong for this part of the world. If you are accosted in Central Park you expect to be robbed or worse. In Egypt a friendly or even persistent interest can be satisfied for a few coins for services rendered and a firm "no" usually turns away the importuner.

I think about what Walt Disney Enterprises would do with the pyramids. A good cleaning and dramatic and thorough lighting. Uniformed female guides. A poured concrete "orientation" pavillion with exhibits and a wrap-around film or slide presentation of the history of the pyramids. Seventy-five dollars per person (more than I paid the first day). And because of the liability laws, it really would be prohibited to climb the pyramids.

I prefer the Egyptian system.

The night is colder this time when I arrive at the top and the wind whistles in the tripod indicating the original apex. A sun worshiper is there ahead of me, and we tacitly agree to say nothing to each other as we watch the view. The silence is broken by staccato horn blasts from the traffic Giza.

Two Arab-speaking youths appear, throw stones off the top watching intently as they drop, argue and chatter, whistle shrilly at their friends below, and descend out of sight. The sun slips down behind the clouds, reappears below them, and disappears into the desert. Overhead is a half moon which has grown from an Arab crescent during my time in Kuwait. I am pleased to understand why a half moon must always be overhead at sunset.



Simultaneous with the disappearance of the sun one can hear from the minorettes in Giza the Moslem call to prayers, the same call that disturbed my sleep on the first night in Kuwait.

It grows darker. Below men are uncovering the searchlights that illuminate the pyramid during the sound and light show. For a minute I have the wild idea of staying on top until the show begins and using these lights to descend but decide it will be too long a wait and too dangerous a chance.

After a final look around I start down, walk down past the Sphinx, and perch on the wall looking back at the three pyramids silhouetted against the evening sky. Venus sets behind Mycerinus. A few donkey and horse boys pass me and solicit business, but it is late in the day and their hearts are not in it, and I brush them off easily.

Walking over to an open doorway in the tombs beside the road, I switch on my flashlight and enter to discover a pit four feet on an edge and fifty feet deep without protection. It takes a specialized set of survival skills for children in Giza to reach adulthood.

Soon the light and sound show will begin, this night in French. I decide to wait and see the lighting once again. But I am thirsty, so I walk back toward the shops. I hesitate near one and am accosted by a youth. I ask for Stella beer, the local favorite. I am told it is not available here but Abdul is sent off to fetch some for one pound a bottle. I am offered a bench and relax. An eight-year old and I exchange information about each other in a variety of languages and sounds. The owner's wife comes with his two-month old son which he shows me proudly and smothers with whiskery kisses. A two-year old child appears in sequence with a series of toys made of junk and is given instruction in their use which he ignores. Abdul appears with beer and I pay him a dollar for fetching it, a pound to the owner and assorted coins to those who stand by. I walk with a bottle of beer toward the parking lot and am accosted by a guard. A shout from the shop allows me to pass.

The lighting is magnificent as before, and the show sounds better in French, a naturally heroic language. However, after a few minutes, I find it an anticlimax and stroll back to locate a taxi. He agrees to take me into town for two pounds. A boy who thinks he has helped me find a taxi thinks I owe him some money. I give him a few coins but he wishes more. He asks for the flashlight and I refuse. He holds his hand on the door and I offer to shut his fingers as I close the door. He is very persistent but, as usual, firmness wins out and we start home.

This driver is unusually fast and handy with the horn and emergencies appear every few seconds.

I am utterly content.