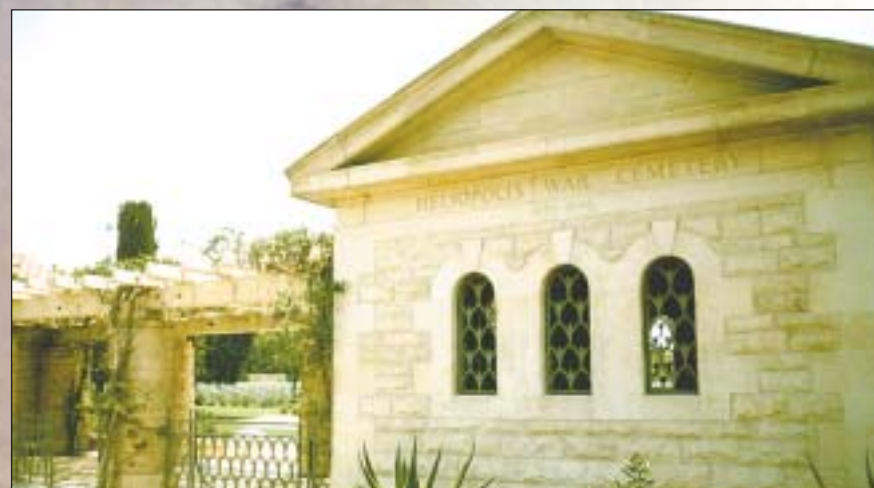




BARREN LAND: Rising from the dry landscape of the Giza desert are the great Egyptian pyramids.

Egypt - a land of heat and memories



IN MEMORIAN: Commonwealth War Cemetery in the suburb of Heliopolis, in Cairo.



THIRSTY? Containers of water are filled daily to help pedestrians cope with the heat.



SAND RIDES: Horseback riding is an ideal way to visit the pyramids.



REMEMBRANCE: The New Zealand War Memorial, to remember soldiers lost in the war.

by Heather Campbell Hapeta

“GO down to the river and turn left,” I tell myself. I’m in a new city, looking for the museum. I’m halfway there before I realise what I’ve said. The river, so casually dismissed as a place on the map, is the Nile. This is Cairo, the ancient city of Babylon, and I’m on a brief stopover, much to the disbelief of the staff at the low-budget hotel.

“You can’t stay for only three days,” Atef tells me, “there are so many things to see and do – pyramids, the sphinx, a felucca ride on the Nile, our museum, the city of the dead, ancient Cairo, coptic Cairo. You have to see them.”

I start on the list with an afternoon in the cool of the museum. Slowly my interest in things Egyptian is stimulated. Although I’m captivated

with Tutankhaman and the wonderful jewellery found in his tomb, I’m more fascinated by the simple little, carved, wooden animals and people that were left inside tombs.

This is an easy city to walk around despite the crazy traffic – drivers call to each other and toot constantly as they vie for position in the crowded streets, three-laned roads always seems to have five lanes of traffic. Noisy horns are public music on city streets, one of the hotel staff tells me.

If you are not happy with walking in the heat and noise try a taxi. Ask at your hotel for the cost of a taxi to and from various places and take a note of them. No local ever asks the taxi driver the price. You merely get out of the cab and pass what you believe is the fair price. No change is given and if you can walk away without being yelled at for

more, you know you have given an appropriate amount. It was most successful for me although I suspect you too will be a little apprehensive at first.

Apart from the museum – which is overloaded with artefacts – what are the highlights? Both inhabited islands, Gezira and Rhoda, are worth exploring. The Manial Palace Museum, built in the early 1900s, is a mixture of all styles of architecture on Rhoda, while on Gezira the Cairo Tower is the place for afternoon tea in the revolving restaurant.

Join the other 20 million people and go shopping – or at least looking at the markets – for a great cross-cultural experience. They are an exciting and different place to be and the Egyptians are happy to have you join them in their lives and activities. I stayed

longer than the original three days.

“Have some shisha.” I’m offered a puff on the water pipe, full of dripping wet honey and apple-flavoured tobacco. Although I suck and suck and suck again on the fancy pipe, it’s not a skill I acquire. They all have turns teaching me the Egyptian form of backgammon and some basic Arabic, but I’m a slow pupil.

A useful term to know is La shukran, which means no thank you. However, they will still know you are a tourist and therefore the multitude of sellers will for some reason think “no” does not mean no to them. You need to accompany the words with your right hand on your heart – hawkers will fall away as if by magic if you use that combination of local words and gestures. However, if you are buying, all prices are negotiable.

The pyramids and sphinx are must-sees. The ancient Greeks considered the pyramids to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and, as such, these old tombs must be one of the world’s earliest tourist sites. I explored the area on horseback with only a guide at a time when most other tourists were absent. Fantastic. Early morning is another great time to see this site right on the outskirts of Cairo.

The River Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt, is always busy. At night activities continue, lights reflect on the dark water and boats – with music playing – cruise around. Families walk along the promenade, women in long dresses hold hands with each other and often the men do the same. It has a bustling, carnival atmosphere and lying in one of the feluccas, looking up at the stars, is magic.

At night I open the double doors to my balcony, on the fifth floor, and lie listening to the unceasing noise of this city. I again wake early in the morning to the sound of the faithful being called to prayer and wonder when I will be fortunate enough to return. As they say – insha alla – god willing.

Papyrus is one of the souvenirs that many travellers leave Egypt with. This ranges from cheap to expensive, from poor quality to excellent hand-painted versions. As with all purchases, ensure that you pay the correct rate for the quality you buy.

Egypt has been the producer of flowers for the perfume industry for many generations.

It is a sensual delight to visit one of the perfume traders and it’s very difficult to leave without a selection of the oils.

