

Mystical, Magical Cairo

By DOMINICK and SUSAN MERLE

CAIRO--On a cue from an Egyptian tourism official, the colossal pyramids were illuminated against the night sky and the lavish outdoor banquet officially began.

Tourists at Giza Pyramids



Now that is an extremely tough act to follow. And it served as our opening night in this 5,000-year-old land of mystery, often referred to as the cradle of civilization.

The banquet heralded a Mediterranean travel show and the tourism chief granted special permission for the pyramids to be

illuminated. When the «switch» was thrown, it was unquestionably one of those rare electrifying moments. In the pitch darkness, I had no idea how close I would be dining to those world wonders.

There were about 1,000 guests at the banquet, most of them government officials and tourism

industry wheelers and dealers. I joined a group of about 30 international travel writers, who were simply told we would be going to an outdoor dinner. We had no idea who our next door «neighbors» would be.

So when the lights went on, we were dumbfounded by the sight of the pyramids so near. It almost felt sacrilegious that we should be eating at a time like this, even though it was a banquet.

Not so with the Egyptians and other guests from this part of the

Entrance to Egyptian Museum

world. They hardly looked up from their plates. It had nothing to do with their manners, but the three pyramids and sphinx are old-hat to them. Many pass them routinely going to and from work, or on a night on the town.

Just a few years ago, there was an empty stretch of land between the city and the pyramids. But Cairo has grown so fast that the pyramids have now joined the city. Ask anyone, including some city officials, what the population of Cairo is and the answers will range



Historic performance at travel show



from 15 to 20 million. Who keeps score when thousands more arrive daily and construct a house or building wherever there is space, and worry about the permits later?

«It may look like some of the buildings are still under construction, but people have been living in them for years,» one tour guide told me. «They make them look unfinished to keep the tax people away.»

Whatever the population, Cairo is and has been for centuries the largest city in all of Africa. And judging by the number of cranes

overhead while I was there, even during this global downturn, there is no catching it now.

Yet both God and Allah know that although Cairo is one of the most fascinating cities in the world, it is not a pretty city. It awakes each morning in bad need of a bath, covered with the wind-swept desert sands. Debris whirls about everywhere. Color it dirt brown.

Ah, but at night, Cairo becomes a beautiful woman. Lights from the cruise ships on the Nile serve as her diamonds. In the dark, the debris has been cosmetically removed. Tomorrow, and the day

after, this beast-into-beauty transformation will continue, and the newcomers will continue to arrive by the thousands.

What brings them? That has been a mystery that has spanned the centuries.

«The greatest city seen upon the earth,» wrote British traveller and historian William Lithgow way back in 1614.

«I know of no place where everything changes as much as it does here, and nothing is ever changed,» said American historian Henry Adams in 1898.

And if William and Henry were still around today, they would probably not change one word, for despite its dirt and grime and utter chaos, Cairo can still capture your heart.

The pyramids are obviously its crown jewels and the most important tourist site in all of Egypt. Ask anyone in the world to list the five things they would most like to see and the pyramids just might top that list.

Actually, there are almost 100 pyramids scattered throughout



Ladies baking bread



Souk Kahn El-Khali

Egypt, but none as colossal, as mysterious or as well known as the three on the west bank of the Nile facing Cairo. Erected under the reigns of Kings Cheops, Chepren and Mycerinus and guarded by the mysterious sphinx, they are considered one of the original seven wonders of the world.

We returned to visit them the morning after the banquet and they were much more impressive in the light of day. There were a few souvenir shacks in the shadow of the pyramids, and a hawker did convince me to take a camel ride

around the Great Pyramid (why not?), but these touches of commercialism did not mar the moment.

The next morning found us in Old Cairo where we visited Al Moallaqa (The Suspended Church), built on the remains of the Roman fortress of Babylon at the turn of the 4th Century. It contains a wood carving representing Christ entering Jerusalem. We also stopped at the Church of St. Sergius, a 5th Century basilica built over a crypt where the Holy Family is believed to have stayed during their flight to Egypt.

The famed Alabaster Mosque



Then it was on to tour a number of mosques throughout Islamic Cairo including the Blue Mosque, so named because of the splendid blue mosaic on its walls: the towering Alabaster Mosque, one of the city's most prominent landmarks noted by its huge domes and soaring minarets, and the Mosque of Sultan Hassan,, a masterpiece of Mamluk architecture containing bronze doors inlaid with gold and silver.

We spent much of our final day browsing through the Khan El-Khali souk, a bazaar that has remained largely unchanged since the 14th Century. Much of the bounty of the mysterious East can be found here--rare spices, perfumes, gold and silver, copperware, leatherwork and fine Egyptian cottons. Bargain with a smile for the best prices.

If you're looking for something a bit more bizarre, drop by the Souk al Gemal. That translates to Camel Market. Yes, you can buy one of them on the spot, although I have no idea how you'd get it past customs.

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IF YOU GO...

Visas are required. Check with your nearest Egyptian Consulate or travel agent.

Bring light cottons, perhaps a jacket and sweater if you're visiting between November and March as mornings and late evenings can be cool at that time of year.

Dress casually but conservatively. Women should avoid wearing shorts, but wear light slacks instead, especially if you plan to visit any mosques. You'll be unceremoniously wrapped in a blanket if you show up in shorts. And of course, bring comfortable walking shoes

We flew Egypt Air from Montreal.

Service charges are included at practically all restaurants, but a little something extra is customary if the service was in fact good.

If you hail a cab on the street, establish the rate before getting in. You could find yourself passing the pyramids a few times.