

## ANCIENT EGYPT

IS GRAND TEMPLES AND TOMBS ALL  
RIGHT, BUT IT'S ALSO THE QUIRKS  
AND PASSIONS OF THE MIGHTY.

**T**he old gentleman is emaciated now and utterly bereft of defenses, yet his air of command is still palpable. He has a lean and haughty look—an aquiline nose, a chin of defiant set. He wears a simple linen wrap, and his arms are crossed in front of his chest, one hand slightly raised in the come-hither gesture of a man used to having others do his bidding. Clearly, this is a man not to be trifled with. Or at least he was, in his time. You see, the man whose face is now inches from my own has been dead for over 3,200 years.

BY PAUL MARTIN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD T. NOWITZ

# INTO AN ANTIQUE LAND





Dwarfed by the colossus of Ancient Egypt—Ramses the Great—children scramble over the 3,200-year-old effigies at Abu Simbel. Depicted life-size, Ramses' queen, Nefertari, stands at her king's knee. *Preceding pages:* The Pyramids at Giza rest under watchful eyes.

In the Royal Mummy Room of Cairo's renowned Egyptian Museum, I gaze through a glass case at the wizened, leathery features of Ramses the Great (Ramses II)—the man who wore the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt for an incredible 67 years (1279-1213 B.C.), one of the world's longest reigns. Here before me is the embodiment of Pharaonic Egypt, the mightiest ruler of all amid a succession of some 30 dynasties that stretched over nearly three millennia.

Slumbering in the mummy room are other kings and queens of Ancient Egypt. It's surprising how vividly the stamp of personality lingers on each face. I see them as the living, breathing people they once were, not rigid figures frozen forever in dusty statues and paintings.



Ramses the Great

what those famous heaps of stone reveal about the people who created them.

Outside on the museum grounds, I stroll past a collection of memorials to the giants of Egyptian archaeology, examining the names etched into the bases of these statues. I pause before the chalky white bust of Selim Bey Hassan. The likeness reveals the wide face and intelligent features of the man who, in the 1920s and '30s, led excavations at Giza and Saqqara, and who wrote the first Egyptian-produced encyclopedia on Ancient Egypt. Turning, I look into the wide, intelligent face of Hassan's 33-year-old great grandson Ihab A. Wagdy, my guide to the wonders of Egypt.

Dressed in khaki shorts, boots, and wide-brimmed hat, Ihab looks the very image of an Egyptologist himself. And so he

## “ACTUALLY WE HAD SEVEN CLEOPATRAS. THE ONE YOU KNOW—ELIZABETH TAYLOR—WAS CLEOPATRA VII.”

Studying Ramses' desiccated lips, I almost expect him to speak at any moment. I've certainly read enough about the old boy to conjure up what he might have to say:

*“Why do you stand there gaping, mortal? Get thee from this chamber and pay homage to the glory of our deeds. Witness those noble things we did build, those monuments of stone that even yet greet the sun god Ra as he traverses the sky each day.”*

Well, sir, that's exactly what I mean to do: pay my respects to Ancient Egypt's Greatest Hits—and in the process find out

should. His studies to qualify as a government-approved guide took four years. A barrel-chested, animated man, Ihab flashes a smile. “Shall we go?” he says in a deep, silken voice reminiscent of Yul Brynner's. “There's much to see.”

“MY FRIENDS CALL ME BOB,” IHAB CONFIDES AS WE SETTLE INTO comfortable armchairs inside the lounge of the *Nile Ritz*, the 165-passenger cruise boat that will carry us up the Nile from Luxor to Aswan then back again. Born in Kuwait, where he



With tourism their lifeblood, vendors at a market in the city of Luxor offer travelers modern amenities and souvenirs of Ancient Egypt.





Life along the Nile flows past guests at Aswan's Old Cataract Hotel, where Agatha Christie began her novel *Death on the Nile*. Across the river, a lateen-sailed felucca (below) docks within view of the domed mausoleum of the Aga Khan, the Islamic leader who died in 1957.

## THE COLORS OF EGYPT: GREEN AND UMBER, THE RAZOR-SHARP LINE BETWEEN FECUNDITY AND DESOLATION

lived for 17 years, Ihab appears to have friends to spare. The crew aboard the *Nile Ritz* all seem to know him, and I trust the man immediately. He speaks often about his 4½-year-old son, Omar, and his young wife, Amani. He frets about Omar growing up without him. "I feel guilty every time I leave home." He calls Cairo nearly every night he's away.

"So," says Ihab, "let me give you 5,000 years of Egyptian history"—a chuckle wells up from somewhere near his belt buckle—"in 20 minutes."

Outside the windows of the *Nile Ritz*, scenes lifted directly out of Bible times slide by: mud-brick villages populated by free-range children, chickens, and goats...fellahin in caf-tans and turbans...diminutive donkeys pattering along with dainty steps...groves of date palms, their swooping trunks wrinkled like elephant hide...fields bristling with shiny green stalks of sugarcane...little brown tepees of drying sesame.



Ihab lights yet another in a chain of Marlboro Lights and wields it like a smoldering baton. "It was King Narmer who established Ancient Egypt's First Dynasty. He united Upper and Lower Egypt around 3100 B.C. You know about Upper and Lower Egypt, don't you? Lower Egypt is the Nile Delta, and Upper Egypt is the river valley. Easy to remember," Ihab dead-pans: "Lower Egypt"—he points to the ceiling—"up north; Upper Egypt"—he points to the floor—"down south."

Ihab sketches a baffling sequence of dynastic periods—Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period, New Kingdom, Late Dynastic Period. To further complicate things, after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, around 330 B.C., there followed another 2,300 years of foreign rule. (See chronology, page tk.)

Just as AEO (Ancient Egypt Overload) begins to set in, Ihab relates some facts I can grasp: "The biggest pyramids were built



during the Old Kingdom (circa 2680-2160 B.C.), but the New Kingdom (circa 1567-1085 B.C.) was really the golden era of Pharaonic times. Most of the ancient Egyptians that people have heard of lived in this period: Queen Hatshepsut, Tuthmosis III, Akhenaten, Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, Ramses II.”

“Where did Cleopatra fit in?”

“Actually, we had seven Cleopatras, but they came later. The one you know—Elizabeth Taylor—she was Cleopatra VII.”

The sun is setting when Ihab finishes his story. We move outside onto the boat’s covered rear deck, ordering cold Stella beers and settling into white wicker chairs alongside the starboard rail. Out on the river, the lateen sails of feluccas cast gracefully canted silhouettes against the reddening sky. Clouds have formed over the distant ridges that mark the boundary of the Nile Valley. We look out at the timeless, verdant banks

earlier king, Akhenaten) were destined to end up under 200 feet of water unless something was done.

Standing on the rocky, dusty plateau at Abu Simbel, Ihab gestures broadly. “Everything you see here”—the sweep of his arm takes in the massive sandstone facade of the Great Temple, with its four 66-foot-tall seated figures of Ramses II, as well as the smaller Temple of Hathor, where Ramses II and Nefertari are depicted along with the goddess of love and joy—“all of this was cut from the solid rock down below and raised up here, 65 meters higher.”

That deconstruction/reconstruction took four years, from 1964 to 1968, and was barely completed before the old temple sites were flooded by the lake’s rising waters. “The United States and UNESCO assisted in the project,” says Ihab. “In appreciation, Egypt gave the U.S. the Temple of Dendur.”

## KARNAK: A RECORD OF CENTURIES OF BATTLES, INTRIGUES, LOVES, AND DEATHS

stretching toward those dry brown hills. “The gift of the Nile,” says Ihab, “that’s what the ancients called this country.”

Flying into Cairo, I’d seen graphic evidence of the truth of that adage: the thin green corridor that is the Nile Valley—a mere 7.5 percent of Egypt’s land—wending through the surrounding deserts. Those are the colors of Egypt: green and umber, the razor-sharp line between fecundity and desolation. For the ancient Egyptians, with their fixation on the afterlife, their very land was a symbol of life’s tenuousness, hedged about by the limitless expanse of death.

Rain begins to stipple the dark, glossy surface of the river. “Rain is a rarity—and a blessing—in Upper Egypt,” Ihab observes. “This is a good omen.”

**T**he steady chugging of the *Nile Ritz*’s diesels has given way to a 737’s roar on a 20-minute flight south from Aswan. Our EgyptAir jetliner soars above the shimmering vastness of Lake Nasser, a 300-mile blue scrawl on the weathered parchment of Nubia, hard by the Sudanese frontier. In the 1960s, the rising waters of Lake Nasser—created by the Aswan High Dam—threatened one of Egypt’s finest monuments, the Great Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. Built 3,200 years ago alongside the Nile, the temple of Ramses II and a smaller temple nearby that celebrated his queen, Nefertari (“The Most Beautiful One,” not to be confused with Nefertiti, “The Beautiful One Is Come,” wife of an

I’d seen the Temple of Dendur in New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, but it was far outshone by this, Ramses the Great’s massive tribute to himself. Inside the Great Temple a hallway with eight 30-foot-tall statues of Osiris, god of the dead, leads to the inner sanctuary, where Ramses II sits flanked by a triad of gods.

Ihab and I cross the plateau from the Great Temple to the Temple of Hathor. Six 33-foot-tall statues form a rank across the facade.

“Look carefully at these,” says Ihab. “How many appear to be the figure of a woman?”

I have to admit I’m not sure.

“Even though the temple was built for Nefertari, four of these statues are of Ramses II.”

Well, I suppose a man might develop a 66-foot-tall ego if he were worshiped as a god while he was alive, as Ramses II was. I scrutinize the expression on the statues before me. The artists who carved these images would have known better than to convey some shrinking violet. There was the same lofty look I’d seen back in Cairo, the force of Ramses’ personality intact.

Ihab takes a drag from the cigarette wedged between his beefy fingers. “Ramses II was a relentless creator. He built temples and obelisks throughout his kingdom. He even carved his name on temples that other pharaohs built. And he kept busy at home, too,” Ihab adds with a laugh. “He had no less than 200 sons and daughters. We’ll see where he was buried at Luxor—Thebes, as it was known when it was the capital of the New Kingdom.”

The sun has dipped below the western horizon beyond



“The ancients called this the ‘Flower of Egypt,’” the author’s guide said of Karnak, the 250-acre religious complex that flourished in the city of Thebes (today’s Luxor). Visitors wander among the 134 hieroglyph-covered columns of the great hypostyle hall, the world’s largest columnar structure.



Luxor as I wander through a disorienting labyrinth of courtyards, statues, obelisks, temples, and columned halls. This is Karnak, the most important religious center of the New Kingdom. Overhead, stars wheel above these ancient ruins as they have on the more than 1.4 million previous nights since the complex was begun, in the time of 12th-Dynasty pharaoh Sesostri I (circa 1965-1920 B.C.).

Karnak is one of modern-day Luxor's top tourist attractions—which is why I find myself amid a crowd of several hundred other English-speakers. We are experiencing Karnak's famous sound and light show, a 90-minute narrated tour that will be repeated this same evening in several other languages. Lights dance on columns and temples as music soars and the voices of pharaohs boom through the complex. Still, it takes daylight to fully reveal Karnak's magnificence.

**T**he heat is already intense when Ihab and I arrive at 8:30 in the morning. We move between pools of shade or take cover beneath Ihab's bright yellow umbrella. Folded, the umbrella makes an excellent pointer to aid Ihab's running commentary. "Amun here was the god of Thebes," he says, pointing to one of the hieroglyphs that cover every available surface. "This figure with the head of a lioness is Mut, Amun's wife. Over here is Khons, their son. These are the main gods that Karnak honors."

Built in stages over a period of some 1,500 years, Karnak grew into a 250-acre religious complex, a giant canvas upon which successive pharaohs added their individual designs, a record of centuries of battles, intrigues, loves, and deaths. We pause before a towering granite obelisk. "Queen Hatshepsut erected this," says Ihab, "the tallest obelisk in Egypt, almost a hundred feet high."

The obelisk appears to be constructed of two different colors of stone, the top portion a slightly darker shade. Ihab assures me that it's one solid piece. "Queen Hatshepsut's stepson, Tuthmosis III, hated the queen because he thought she'd usurped his throne. When he became pharaoh, he had a wall built around the obelisk to hide the hieroglyphs that described her accomplishments. He couldn't cover the top portion though because it was dedicated to Amun, so for centuries that part of the obelisk was more exposed to the elements."

"Pretty contentious lot," I note.

"Tuthmosis took his revenge on Queen Hatshepsut by having every reference to her removed wherever he found it, even from her own mortuary temple."

An architectural masterpiece, the Temple of Hatshepsut flows organically from rocky cliffs on the Nile's west bank across from the city of Luxor. Although Tuthmosis hacked out



## SHE HAD THE DEMEANOR OF A RULER WHO'D BROUGHT PEACE AND PLENTY TO HER LAND.

Hatshepsut's image here, other likenesses survive. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I'd seen a sculpture of the queen as a comely young woman with a gentle smile. She had the demeanor of a ruler who'd brought peace and plenty to her land—as she did for 20 years.

After Tuthmosis finally succeeded Hatshepsut, he proved himself a powerful warrior king. He failed mightily, though, in blotting out the memory of his strong-willed stepmother, regarded by some as history's first great woman.

Just over the ridge from Hatshepsut's temple lies a sun-blasted defile where no life prospers—a fitting place to inter the dead. Here, in the Valley of the Kings, more than 60 tombs of New Kingdom pharaohs and other royalty have been excavated, including that of Ramses the Great. Just past that burial site, Ihab and I crunch up the gravel pathway leading to the tomb of Ramses VI, recently reopened after restorations.

A long, downward-sloping corridor leads to the burial chamber. Scenes from the *Book of the Dead* and other ceremonial texts cover the corridor's walls and ceiling. The subject

may be death, but the colors are lively—bright red, yellow, and blue against a pale plaster background. Everything looks as if it could have been painted yesterday.

"This tomb was built by Ramses V," says Ihab, "but Ramses VI took it over, evicting his predecessor and thus saving himself the trouble and expense of building his own tomb."

The burial chamber seems huge. Here, too, brightly painted hieroglyphs cover the walls and the lofty vaulted ceiling. I think about such beautiful artwork hidden by the dark silence of centuries.

Actually, many of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings were broken into shortly after their owners were buried. So prevalent were grave robberies that the pharaohs' loyal retainers often spirited away their masters' remains for reinterment in secret graves. Ramses III was shuttled around to three different graves! In 1881, archaeologists discovered a communal grave containing the bodies of 40 pharaohs, including the

The mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut, near Luxor, commemorates Egypt's first female pharaoh. A 1997 terrorist attack here shattered the temple's sanctity.

remains of Tuthmosis III and Ramses the Great.

As we emerge from the tomb of Ramses VI, Ihab points to the entrance to another tomb directly below us. "That's Tutankhamun's tomb. When Ramses VI's tomb was excavated, the rubble ended up on top of Tutankhamun's burial site, hiding it completely. That's one reason his tomb wasn't found until 1922."

The discovery of "King Tut's Tomb" by British Egyptologist Howard Carter has entered the realm of legend, a mystery story highlighted by unprecedented riches and the famous "curse of the pharaoh." I'd seen the golden hoard that was taken from the tomb when I was in Cairo (see "Treasures of the Egyptian Museum," page tk). It's a staggering display—room after room filled with everything from the precious (a solid gold coffin) to the mundane (Tutankhamun's linen underwear). The most tantalizing aspect of this cache is the fact that Tutankhamun was a relatively minor pharaoh, dying when he was only 18, after ruling for just nine years. If such



# Treasures of the Egyptian Museum

*A celebration of daily life and the afterlife*

**T**he tombs and temples of Ancient Egypt are like a great banquet," observes my guide, Ihab, "and the Egyptian Museum is dessert."

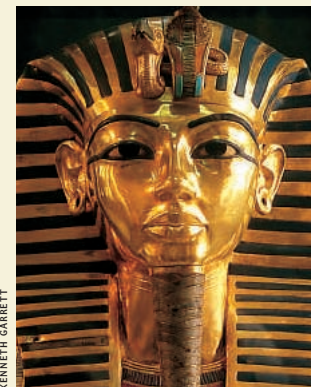
Step inside this sprawling brown edifice in central Cairo and you'll understand his statement. Displayed on two floors are the finest artifacts yet discovered from Ancient Egypt, some 100,000 items.

No high-tech showplace, the museum seems more like a cavernous attic, every nook and cranny crammed with wonders. In an alcove on the ground floor, a chunk of carved stone sits propped in a corner, a fragment of the Sphinx's missing beard. "The rest of the beard is in the British Museum," notes Ihab. "We're trying to get it back, since it helped support the weight of the Sphinx's head."

Not far away are seated statues of the Old Kingdom's Prince Rahotep and Princess Nofret, whose inlaid glass eyes render them eerily lifelike. "When workmen opened Rahotep's tomb," says Ihab, "the light from their oil lamps reflected from the statues' eyes. The terrified workmen threw down their lamps and rushed outside, shouting, 'We found two still alive!'"

The treasures of Tutankhamun dominate the upper floor of the Egyptian Museum. The surfeit of gold in these rooms will leave you gaping—jewelry of every description, multiple gold coffins, golden chariots fit for a pharaoh to ride into eternity. Nearly as interesting are the objects of daily life interred with the boy-king: his canes, fan, beds, chairs, and games.

The museum's upper floor also houses the Royal Mummy Room, with the remains of Ramses the Great and other pharaohs. Visitors must purchase a separate ticket to view the royal mummies, but no one should pass up the chance to look into the faces of these once-mighty rulers—an experience that lends a human dimension to the distant world of Ancient Egypt. —P.M.



Tutankhamun's funerary mask

treasures were interred with him, what untold wealth the tombs of the mighty pharaohs must have held.

King Tut's tomb is unspectacular today, since nearly all of its contents now reside in the Egyptian Museum. But Tutankhamun is still here. He rests inside a case of gilded wood, which bears the image of the boy-king. He wears the same haunting expression made famous by the gem-inlaid golden funerary mask on display in Cairo.

Looking into that noble face, I can't help wondering what Tutankhamun was like when he was alive. I know that he was witness to unsurpassed beauty—the serene loveliness of Nefertiti, wife of his predecessor and father-in-law, Akhenaten. And it's possible that in his short life Tutankhamun also found love. He married a daughter of Nefertiti and Akhenaten, a girl named Ankhesenamun. When Howard Carter entered Tutankhamun's tomb, which had lain undisturbed for 32 centuries, he was dazzled by the riches that he saw. The object that moved him most, however, was a small wreath of dried-up flowers, the parting gift of someone who'd cared very deeply for the boy-king.

**W**hile the vast treasures of Tutankhamun represent the center piece of the Egyptian Museum, one of the collection's most intriguing artifacts is a scarred and cracked three-inch-high ivory statuette—the only known image of the Old Kingdom pharaoh Cheops. It's a miniscule likeness for a man immortalized by the largest stone edifice in the world, the Great Pyramid of Giza.

The morning Ihab and I arrive at Giza, on the southwestern outskirts of Cairo, a scene is playing out reminiscent of the days when the Great Pyramid was built, around 2550 B.C. A small army of tourists scrambles around the site, just as an army of workers once occupied this arid plateau. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that it took ten years to build the track along which the 2.3 million stone blocks for the Great Pyramid were hauled from the Nile to the tomb site, and another ten years to erect the pyramid. "The work went on in...monthly shifts," Herodotus wrote, "100,000 men in a shift."

When the work was done, what had been created was an exquisitely symmetrical structure approaching 50 stories high—one of the greatest engineering feats of all time. It is



Ancient Egypt looms large in modern life: On the outskirts of Cairo, children at Mena House Oberoi Hotel play within sight of the Pyramids.

hard to imagine the staggering costs involved. Herodotus recorded that 1,600 talents (46 tons) of silver were spent just on horseradish, onion, and garlic to feed the workers.

Sharing the Giza plateau with the Great Pyramid are pyramids belonging to Cheops's son, Chephren, and a later pharaoh, Mycerinus. Mycerinus's pyramid is considerably smaller than the other two. At first glance, the tomb of Chephren looks larger than that of Cheops.

"Chephren couldn't actually build a pyramid that was bigger than his father's," says Ihab, "so he got around that by building his on higher ground so it would appear to be taller."

Visitors who can tolerate confined spaces can climb into the heart of the Great Pyramid, all the way to Cheops's burial chamber. The pharaoh's body is no longer inside, although his spirit seems to linger, held within the stones for over 4,500 years, just as it still resides within that little ivory figurine of the king, with its tiny, grimacing face.

Ihab and I end our stay at Giza with a visit to that eternal enigma, the Sphinx. Built to watch over King Chephren's tomb, the colossal sculpture with a lion's body and the head of a man epitomizes all that draws us to Ancient Egypt—the mystery, the artistry, the links to civilization's beginnings and to man's preoccupation with the brevity of life and the uncharted territory beyond.

"The ancient Egyptians were searching for eternity," says Ihab, "and they found it. Think about it—because of them, universities today are teaching Egyptology. Tourists are coming here. My job is due to those ancient people. Magazines continue to publish articles about them. They *have* achieved eternity."

*Managing editor PAUL MARTIN talks about one of his greatest surprises in Egypt on page TK. Rockville, Maryland, freelancer RICHARD NOWITZ was the Society of American Travel Writers Photographer of the Year in 1996.*

**"THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS WERE SEARCHING FOR ETERNITY," SAYS IHAB, "AND THEY FOUND IT."**