

Maeona Mendelson on “Christmas in Cairo”

We didn't expect so much Christmas festivity when we arrived in Cairo. Hotel lobbies were filled with poinsettias, lavishly decorated trees and Christmas caroling every evening. Christmas night for local youth meant dancing all night - especially in the Buddha Bar in our hotel. It was, after all, to Egypt, that Mary and Joseph fled.

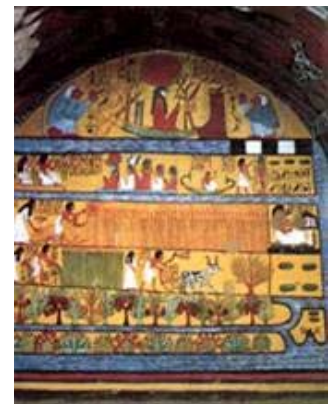


This year holy days for Muslims and Christians were celebrated in close proximity. Although the only evidence for tourists of the Eid-Al-Adha were the animal hides for sale on the streets, families were remembering Abraham's faith and willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac through an animal sacrifice, family feast and gathering.



Everyday was gorgeous with 75°F weather and blue, cloudless skies. This was obviously the right time of year to visit. Although the evenings on the Nile were cool and sometimes windy, we enjoyed the leisurely pace of watching rural life along the river's edge.

I've wanted to visit Egypt for years and to concentrate on viewing the art and architecture of Pharaonic Egypt. We were warned of the crowds and chose a private guide with Kensington Tours. The crowds were only oppressive at Giza. Each site along the Nile is under restoration and we found the visitor centers and tram systems were very efficient especially at the Valley of the Kings.



Our favorite tombs were in the Valley of the Artisans and the Valley of the Nobles. The colors of the wall decorations were brilliant, especially the blues, reds and ochre. The figures were much more animated than I imagined and a testament to an appreciation for domestic life and family intimacy.

We spent two days at the Cairo Museum. Our guide took us to old friends from our art texts – King Chefredjeh with the beautiful falcon Horus wrapped around his neck, the seated scribe from Sakkara, and of course, the bounty from the tomb of King Tutankhamen. A major surprise was to see the sculpture of Akhenaton for the description in texts hardly captures the grotesqueness of the figures with



their heavy features, swollen bellies and breasts. Unlike the Kuan-Yin that captures the feminine within the masculine to evoke a sense of universal compassion, the combined male and female attributes were less than ideal. I am not sure what was intended.

Only when I visited Giza did I feel a profound sense of sadness – “mono no aware”. I didn’t realize the buses were practically parked at the base of the pyramids. Still, after the shock, nothing could take away from the grandeur of these amazing structures.



Luxor Temple at Night