

Vacation in Egypt 2008-2009

December 29: Greetings From Cairo

Mary and Nora are sleeping in for an hour and I'm in an Internet cafe here in a leafy middle class neighborhood full of African embassies and small private clinics. The directions to the cafe from the hotel were wrong, of course, but I found it eventually. It's quiet here on a small square. Black and white cabs whisper by, slow down to see if I want a ride. A shopkeeper hoses down her patio. All is calm. Except for the screaming from around the corner. It's been going on for 45 minutes. Someone is convulsing? Maybe dead now? on the ground in the courtyard of one of the clinics. The people around her are gathered, a\watching, concerned. Awaiting an ambulance? Conducting an exorcism?. The cafe guy turns up the mournful Arabic singer on the little PA here in the shop. A few minutes later an old lady steps in, with an incense burner and little firecrackers. He gives her a coin. I understand nothing.

Our "3-star" hotel has hot water in the morning and a breezy rooftop bar, which is downright chilly at night. It's only 55 to 70 Fahrenheit this week and I should've brought a light jacket. Breakfast was falafel and baba ganouge and spices and Nescafe. We need to stick to bottled water here but are in good health and have enjoyed all the food we've been offered, like kefta kabobs, assorted spongy breads. We flew via Frankfurt, and were randomly bumped up to business class. We all slept well across the Atlantic and enjoyed the 13 hour layover by going into town to enjoy the Stadel Museum and walk around in the 30 (F) cold. Most shops were closed; Germany still has labor laws, and holidays too, I guess.

After a brief evening flight, we arrived here in Egypt at 4 am. We were met by Said, a driver from a tour company. With surprising swiftness and efficiency we got to the hotel by 5 and slept from 6 to 10. Saturday the 27th was our first full day. We were met by Rania, Mary's friend's sister's assistant, who proceeded to show us around "Islamic Cairo", the old neighborhood which is a warren of tiny streets, enormous medieval mosques, and workshops of all descriptions. Yes, we were shown a lot of handicrafts that we didn't need, sipped tea and bargained over stuff we didn't want, and felt that slightly threatening/overwhelming Middle Eastern hospitality, where an unexpected obligation seems just around the corner. For Mary and I this was all OK, and Mary skillfully drew out the conversations and bought small token items, completing the dance successfully. For Nora, this was all brand new and she found it a little tiring, though she's processed it by now.

Yesterday, Sunday the 28th, Said picked us up and took us to the Pyramids at Giza, Saqqara, and Dashur. Then he drove us back into Cairo and dropped us off for a walk through the Coptic quarter, then a drive-through of the "City of the Dead", a huge cemetery where generations of squatters have developed homes with electricity, water, and even a bus line. Three high points to the day: 1. the thrill of navigating being mounted on horses, bargaining under fake duress, and choosing not to rent, not even "for

friendly price". 2. crawling into the Pyramid at Dashur through a long tiny passageway. The interior was incredibly dank, smelling of decades of fermented animal urine unleavened by oxygen. 3. Said himself, who made us a reasonable offer for the day (300 LE, approx 60 US), took us everywhere he said he would, and didn't try to upsell us anything. He was an engaging conversationalist and told us of his business and marital failures and listened to us praise Obama and ramble on about the intricacies of presidential campaigns and federal employee rights. We all love the Iraqi shoe guy.

It's time for me to get back to the hotel and being our day's exploration of Cairo. Hamdi'allah, SIM cards are cheap so I have a local phone number here: (20)019 9504-9775.

I will write again from Aswan in a couple days, inshallah. They're still all screaming out there and I will have another look.

Dec 31: Aswan, Grounding our culture shock

It's early afternoon of New Year's Eve here in Aswan. We are at the geographical apogee of our journey, as far up the Nile, as deep into Africa, as we will get on this trip. Aswan is one end of the standard Nile cruise; it's three days downriver to Luxor. We're going by train, tomorrow afternoon. Four hours only. It dawned on me today that this is a realllly long vacation. The mechanics of obtaining our daily needs are getting a little easier, although this is largely a matter of changing expectations to fit the circumstances. Forgive please this very rickety keyboard gives us the typos.

Our final day in Cairo (the 29th) was dedicated to the Egyptian Museum. But with a slow start and a long walk from our hotel, it was just a 2 hour visit. The place is more of a catalog or a storehouse than a thematic learning institution. This might work for primary researchers but it's suboptimal for the curious visitor. The animal mummification room was cool, and had some narrative panels. Big animals were eviscerated for preservation by means of a juniper oil (read turpentine) enema. I will never look at paint thinner quite the same way again.

The 29th was our 25th wedding anniversary, and after meeting our new friend Rania, our Stateside friend's sister Barbara, and Barbara's visiting American friend Jerry in front of the Museum, we went for dinner at Felfela, recommended to us by our friends Doug and Ann. It did not disappoint. What struck me though was the relative shortage of public spaces. There are a few street food stands in working class areas, very few since people don't eat out. They're poor. There are expensive and frequently bad restaurants in the expensive hotels. And in between, not very many. It took 45 minutes walking around downtown Cairo near the Museum to find Groppi's cafe where we got a good pastry, OK Turkish coffee, comically indifferent/hostile service, and were grossly overcharged. Whatever. this is Egypt. The Turks couldn't change it, the British couldn't change it, Nasser himself couldn't change it, and I don't expect to.

Tuesday morning we got our nice early flight up to Aswan no problem. A bit of discomfort coming out of the airport to find, basically one cab, at a take it or leave it price that was over twice what Lonely Planet said we could bargain for. I felt personally inadequate, to have spent the plane ride reading "Bangkok 8" rather than studying the guide book. This is familiar culture shock. I've done the planning, to encouraging nods basically, but all the research is mine; if something's not perfect I feel like I either should have had more planning help and/or done a better job. That's just me, Mary and Nora aren't upset. Cause, consequence, culture make me our guide vis a vis the wannabe guides who constantly approach. Commerce is a man's world, at least on the Arab street, and this is just how it is. Aswan is a little different since tourism is a major fraction of the economy here, unlike Cairo or Alex. Women do shop, and Mary negotiated some earrings in the souk this morning. The whole bargaining thing is brand new, and more stressful, for Nora. This is all a training mission for her.

We're at the Memnon Hotel, two tiny rooms with their own bathrooms, USD 30 for both each night. We walked along the riverfront and gawked at the couple of dozen Nile steamers, USD 100 to 500 per person per night. It's almost as cold here in Aswan as it was down in Cairo, about 55 to 65 F. Nonetheless we embarked on a very pleasant one hour felucca (sailboat) ride on the river. Breezes, sunsets, waving sails, ancient monastery on the ridge line above the sandy farther shore. That sort of thing. We paid LE 40 (USD8) per person for the hour, asking price was LE 120 per person. We still overpaid. Our host was soft-spoken and easy to deal with and brought us to a local cafe for tea afterwards, just us, local people and there endless shishas (water pipes). He took off to pray. Mary and Nora took off to find a bathroom. Just me. I looked out across the tiled room, open to the street, open, in the middle, to the sky as well. The tables have been there for decades I'm sure. I watched a prayer music video on the TV (waving trees, scrolling lyrics). Praytime over, somebody flipped the channels, paused briefly at a sexy woman singing (scarless) in Arabic, before settling on WWF wrestling. It's a wonderful world. Our pilot negotiated us a cab to drive us down to the boat landing so we could catch the ferry over to catch the evening sound and light performance at the Temple of Isis, which was relocated to Anglika Island when the Aswan High Dam drowned nearby Philae Island. The cab ride-plus pickup was a ripoff at LE 120; we had no idea how close the place was. So we chose not to follow up with Ahmad today about his offer of a more extensive fellucca tour of the area. The show was beautiful and tasteful, with the audience shepherded through various temples and treated to narrative / dialog by the various deities (Isis, Osiris, Horus, Set and the crew). We came back to town and had an excellent fish dinner before retiring for a good 10 hours sleep. But today Nora is suffering the effects of yesterday's less excellent lunch and is taking it slow. I'm going to go stroll the corniche and entertain offers from drivers; today or tomorrow we want to see the High Dam, linchpin of modern Egypt and proper monument to Nasser, the Soviet Union, and modernity itself.

January 3rd, Luxor, Where Tourism Began

Four days since I journaled last, and I could get used to it. We brought only cameras this time, no laptops. This means finding an internet cafe to do any online anything. Result, less tweaky hours at Salon.com or LJ or the New York Times, and the pleasure of experiencing places like the "XP" back in Aswan, where the clerk is a young woman with good English and most of the patrons appear to be secondary school and college age women. Not all Egyptian women are locked away at home, though the streets and the souks are overwhelmingly male. Aswan has a bit more of an African flavor from the Nubian population. We'd like to just who has to go around in full covering, since most Egyptians just wear a head scarf.

We've done some serious sightseeing the last few days. Egypt continues to nestle in the iron grip of a European cold wave, and it's as low as 6 C at night. We packed for a California springtime and have had to improvise, for example by me wearing two long sleeve shirts at once. Jan 1, the last day in Aswan, we had a half day tour by cab, featuring the awe-inspiring Aswan High Dam, which is responsible for half the country's electricity and for a large expansion of its farmland in the last 30 years. The Dam was built largely with Soviet help after the World Bank turned down the then-new Nasser government's request for a loan, back in '56. This precipitated the "Suez crisis", whereby Egypt got sovereignty over their canal when Eisenhower sent France and the UK back to their safe European kennel for good, and established detente for the subsequent 30 years. There's a wonderful monument to Soviet-Egyptian friendship at the dam, a huge concrete lotus flower with a gigantic gear ringing round the top, and friezes of industry and agriculture and bas relief of Nasser at the bottom. The planned relief of Khrushchev never was completed since he'd fallen from grace by the time the dam was completed. Pix to follow on Picasa on my return.

New Year's Eve was one part of the trip that completely met expectations. As anticipated, we found a foreigner-oriented hotel on the Nile and paid too much money to have a mediocre buffet with a bunch of European vacationers. As complete strangers, the social expectations were therefore zero. But we had to do *something*, eh? Drinks were abysmal, this is no country for domestic wine, but the entertainment pretty good. At 11 pm, they brought on some Nubian dancers and drummers, who had most of us paid-up revelers line-dancing around the tables. After a confused and shuffly midnight (no countdown) a guy did some Sufi "whirling dervish" dancing, with a fabulously centrifugal costume that's probably use as a hot air balloon on off days. Finally a second-string belly dancer rocked the house (she brought a couple guys up to dance with her) and we all the three of us went home to our pair of icy-cold rooms..

On New Year's Day we proceeded downriver to Luxor on the comfortable but filthy "Spanish train". First class is USD 8 per person but I'd appreciate it if they'd clean the seats and carpet and bathrooms and little airline tray tables once a years an mebbe raise

the fare to USD 9 or something. Next day Nora and I walked all over Luxor while Mary took it easy, and explored the Temple of Karnak (the place, not the man) sans guide. We bargained a ride on a "caleche" (horse'n'buggy), paying about 1/3 of the original request. Bargaining is getting easier: don't let them see your fear or your money, start to walk away when they won't meet the price you insist on, have brief inconclusive negotiations to get price information for the next negotiation. Why do "so-called 3rd world countries" have this system while Europe and the US have fixed prices?, asked Nora. Comes down to the value of personal time, and of course the vastly greater number of transactions we industrial-country residents do in a day. It's a wide world, from driving through the electronic toll-booth all the way to marriage, to each it's proportionate investment of time and quotient of malleability. But I'm still struck by how quickly one goes from near-hostility to cordiality once the bargain is struck.

We got back to the hotel and collected Mary for another ramble; the LE 1 (18 cents) ferry to the other side of the Nile. It's jammed full of young louts, moms, kids, vendors, grumpy old men and tourists, belching and groaning, yes, but not leaking. After a dusty gauntlet of vendors we walked a couple blocks to a cafe where we enjoyed Turkish coffee and tea for 1/2 hours as the light faded and cars and animals kept the air nice and dusty. Did I mention the dust and exhaust? Then back across the river for a longish walk in search of a restaurant which turned out to be booked solid for the evening. But along the way we spent 12 hours in beauty supply store, where Mary got some facial mud and the 18 year old shop assistant served us tea and interviewed me about where do I think the economy is going, and why. He has just declared his independence from his family and wants to be a tour guide. Further down the crowded shopping street, a couple of young men saw us looking indecisive and guided us to a local restaurant where we ate a mixture of pasta, rice, onions, and tomato sauce for under a dollar a piece served to us by a man wearing a "Hebrew Calendar 1977" T-shirt. Gaza seems very far away. The food was OK but we skipped the tap water and later Mary and I rehydrated at the King's Head which is a decent replica of an Asian expat bar. Replica I say since I don't think there's a lot of expats. Mainly tourists. One timers. Anyway our GI's upper and lower are all fine, and yes we do eat the salad.

Today was a day of conventional touring. We got a 1/2 day van tour of the monuments on the West Side of the river: Valley of the Kings, Queen Hatshepsut's temple, and more. Very informative and photogenic, followed by lunch at the rooftop poolside bar at the hotel during the afternoon's one hour of passable warmth. And now we're in a quiet internet cafe as night begins to fall, with mournful Cairopop in the background, and the occasional clapping of hooves between the car horns and the prayer calls from the mosques. We'll be here in Luxor for 3 more days before heading down to Alexandria. This bit is designed to be the vacation within the vacation. Kings Head again tonight I suspect. Or Murphy's.

And this keyboard's making typos, and curbstones don't know where to quit, and the keyboard's making typos, and the cars front eyes are swollen shut, yest the keyboard's making typos,

yes the keyboard's making typos, not me, not me, not me, not me, not me.

January 4, Luxor: Whose History Is It, Anyway?

It's late evening of Sunday January 4th, here in Luxor. Far away from here, in Gaza they're at it again, but that's a long way down the river and across the forty-year desert. We spent the warmer half of the morning roaming the Luxor Temple. This magnificent monument fills the center of town like a for-profit zocalo; the colonnades are lit by night and are easily seen from the railroad station when one arrives, or from across the river. This time we resolved to hire a on-site guide of whatever provenance for whatever we could negotiate, but two problems: no wannabe guides (!!), and our carriage ride to the monument unexpectedly exhausted all of our small money. We have only 50 and 100 pounders (USD 10 or 20), and most Egyptians don't have change for small purchases made with small bills. So, no 1-pound baksheesh to the handsome tourist police whose main source of income consists of pointing out perfectly obvious photo ops and flattering the ladies. The temple, like nearby Karnak, has older sanctums that go back to the Middle Kingdom, 3,500 years ago, and more recent, larger colonnades and plazas from more recent eras, down to the Romans. There's even a telltale archway in the middle. There are the endless carved hieroglyphics, with the same sets of animals, yet there are other surfaces that resemble frescoes, not carving.

The temple is below contemporary ground level, and it had to be excavated and restored over the last hundred or more years. I like seeing parts of walls restored to their ancient heights, some parts left missing, some broken blocks with gaps filled in with modern cement, and others in neat rows on the ground, being cataloged for the open air museum projected for 2010 or so. Smack in the middle of the Luxor Temple compound is a 15 Century mosque, with beautiful smooth white marble walls, a tall, proud, fully functional minaret and a balcony full of waving kids. At the north end, where an urban removal project one day will restore an avenue of sphinxes clear up to Karnak, 2km away, is a decrepit mosque, perhaps destined for demolition as well. The grand entrance to the temple is flanked on each side by three huge statues of Pharaoh Ramses. One is in Cairo, two are nearly gone, three remain. And on each side, a huge obelisk. One remains, and one was hauled back to Paris as a trophy by Napoleon's army. Before they were routed, that is. Theft? I overheard some British tourists complaining that "they" (Luxor residents) won't let the 15th Century mosque be torn down as part of the grand plan to restore the two mile "avenue of sphinxes" to Karnak. Sounds bloody pompous to me, who lives here, after all?

I suppose the antiquarians' response is that there is no continuous title to archaeological treasures that are part of some common human legacy. I try to be suspicious of high-minded calls upon poor people to give up their rights for some universal good. I haven't met any universal people, after all. I personally revel in Stalin's epithet, "rootless cosmopolite", but that's because the term bridges my own ethnicity to my bleu-state love of travel and multilingual puns. I imagine some of those British tourists having my own

reactions to Egypt: it's dusty and inches thick in litter. Sidewalks, stairwells, streets tend to fill with bits of paper, plastic and brick, and in tourist zones, the fecal dust from all the cute horsies wafts amid the lighter bits of desert that ride the breeze. Is this society, arguably the heir of half a dozen defeated empires and depleted lands, a suitable guardian of anything? Has this place had a prayer since, since, well *Nasser*? Compare that with the fine universal values of, just who exactly? Napoleon, Wellington, I grope my way back to a nuanced cultural relativism as I near the bottom of my nightly Stella. OK, Arab-flavored Islam asks women to cover their hair, but the Pharaohs had three different types of castration, required for different jobs around the temple. See Norman Mailer's "Ancient Evenings" or Christian Jacq's "Ramses" for more. Oh and another thing, the first medical use of chloroform, briefly used as an anesthetic in the 1840's, was for field euthanasia of wounded soldiers in Napoleon's Syrian and Egyptian campaigns in 1798/1799. Officers no longer needed to use their pistols. Progress? By whom, and since when? The temple complex is multicultural in the best way, by accrual rather than by design. Archaeologists from Chicago, architects from Cairo, rogue palm trees that no one dares prune, and Islamic builders from the Mameluke empire have all contributed. And this messy complexity is good enough for me. The grand solution is that grand solutions, Pharaonic or UNESCO-nian, are when sufficiently aged under silt and chipped, burnished and graffiti'd by many hands. In other words, make mine a cathedral that's half bazaar.

It's tough out there for a sphinx.

January 7, Alexandria: It's About the Oxygen, Stupid

We are all delighted to be in Alexandria. For half a millennium its famed library was the Google of the ancient world, and after a millennium or so warming the bench of world cities, following a Christian bookburning, the Fatimid caliphate, and neglect by the Mamelukes, it became a devastatingly charming dashing raffish faux-European on the Med during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Tears at the departure of its Greek, Italian, and Jewish communities in the 1950's caused her makeup to run but today she's franchised up her once-crumbling hotels and applied a little franchise face powder and a masque of retailing to her downtown, which has boulevards for laugh lines and a cornice on the Mediterranean that grins ear to ear, into a blessed sea breeze.

We arrived last night by plane from Luxor. Five days there were intended to provide a slow spell in mid-vacation, and they did. Mary and Nora each took major days off for serious napping. Nonetheless we did all the needed monuments including Valley of the Kings, Temple of Karnak, and the Luxor Museum. A surgically swift shopping trip and bargaining training mission to the souq was marred only by your 'umble narrator's seduction by a Nubian. CD sales guy, that is. Luxor is known for having the most persistent and obnoxious salesfolk in Touristdom, and the unseasonably low flow of financially anxious First Worlders doesn't make things any better. A quick smile and a relentless walking pace are needed to repel the constant offers from caleches (carriage)

and fellucca (sailboat) drivers. Same thing for the shopkeepers whose utterly monotonous merchandise, including scarves, alabaster scarabs, banana-leaf papyri never cease to bore me. The magic expression, in Arabic is "la, shokran", which means "no, thank you" and usually works. But after the second or third exchange of "'excuse me'. 'no thank you'" fails to resolve, or results in literal,, as opposed to figurative, sleeve-tugging, I resort to silence. In fact, having gone through a couple days of riding the friendly banter, I found myself slipping into sullen silence. Empathy is counter-productive, it wastes my time and does not enlighten the other party. These folks don't care about the state of MY budget or whatever shopping I've finished, and their repartee is purely functional: create a sense of obligation and wear the poor mark down to some sort of useless purchase. The only cultural exchange is about my money, which I try to exchange for value. I'm more about the silence than the smile lately, takes less energy on my part. I suspect I'm going through an extremely predictable set of reactions, leavened only slightly by my slight knowledge of Arabic. A least I've not yet used the magic British incantation: "bugger off!!".

But Alex, glowing acrylic pearl of the Mahgreb garland, is different. Foreign tourism is only about .001 per cent of the place, and even the hotels and planes are full of Egyptians. Our jet arrived at the tiny cylindrical 1940's, art Deco air terminal, and I was transported, back to my earliest childhood memories of air travel, through the 1940's art Deco air terminals of Philadelphia, Newark, and Jacksonville Florida. A polyglot dispatcher intercepted us beneath the dim fluorescents in the parking lot and guided us into a wheezing cab, and wheezing driver, who delivered us via cracked overpasses, between oncoming unlit trucks, to the Windsor Palace. This hundred year old hotel was allegedly rehabbed some years ago but needs some plumbing and electrical work. But the ornate plaster, rococo furniture, polished hardwoods and ironwork are all doing fine. An old fashioned open elevator brought us to our room, and brings me back to the terrified fascination I felt as a four year old in the open elevator at my grandmother's apartment in West Philly. The hotel, and its neighbors recall of my first experience of Paris when I was 9 years old. My family relocated to Brussels for a year and stayed for 2 nights in a fancy hotel in France, where breakfast consisted of funny crescent-shaped rolls and pancakes and bacon were unknown.

The absence of dust and presence of multiple non-Pharonic histories has put all of us back on our game. We quickly found a cabbie with almost no English but a knack for wordless hospitality, who took us to the Roman catacombs, the Turkish fort, and the Greco-Roman theater. It's cool but not cold, breezy not windy, sunny but not oppressive. Women wear scarves at their option, and even walk around with male companions. We had pizza and pastries at the Trianon Cafe, where Herb Alpert on the PA kept almost breaking into Edith Piaf. The sore throats and sniffles have fled. Nobody needed a nap today. We are going to extend our stay here. Cairo can wait.

January 10: Me Revoici, Le Caire

It's January 10th, a sparkling clear day here in Doqqi, Cairo. I'm at a slightly posher Internet cafe from the one where I wrote my first email of this vacation. This is

undoubtedly the last, if it even gets sent today. Perhaps it'll wind up as an afterword, for once Mary joins us here, we'll go jump on the subway for a couple more hours of touring. We'll meet up with our new friend Barbara for dinner and get her expat's perspective on life as an unattached American woman, teaching in a bilingual school, just as the violence in Gaza threatens to grow past a routine news item and into a source of personal stress for foreigners. At 3am local time we'll be picked up for our flights home. It'll be "guten tag, Lufthansa", and "ma-salema el'Misir". I'll be happy to re-establish my exercise routines. I'm curious and anxious to see what's been happening on my job. I've done no work email on this trip, but most of my colleagues remain "in touch with the office" while vacationing and I admit to feeling some pressure to do so as well in these troubled times.

While the Gaza warfare is hundreds of miles away and offers no personal threat, Egyptians are starting to get angry. We went out for a walk on Thursday the 8th, our final evening in Alexandria, and encountered a small demonstration on a narrow shopping street. We just saw a street demo against Mubarak and the US a few minutes ago while walking around after dinner. We don't have the language skills to know exactly what they were saying but they were definitely pissed off and not especially Islamic (women w/o head scarves). They were burning stuff. Lots of people: sympathetic? cops? were videoing them with their cell phones. We stood among the many spectators and took a couple of pictures. No one spoke to us, but no one made us feel unwelcome either. Back in Cairo last night we had dinner at an upscale Lebanese restaurant with Rania, Barbara's colleague. She told us that her driver advised against going into downtown Cairo that day due to traffic snarls from (legal) demonstrations outside the headquarters of the lawyer's association.

At the same time as world events shadow our "holiday in the sun", or dust anyway, I've been reading a novel "Birds of Amber", by Ibrahim Abdel Maguid, which is set in Alexandria in 1956 and '57. Through the eyes of several working class young people from housing projects and traditional neighborhoods, the author chronicles the fear and pride that Egyptian experienced around the nationalization of the Canal in 1956, and the subsequent tripartite aggression by Britain, France, and Israel. What followed was not so pretty. The large foreign populations of Alexandria left, due to "Egyptianization" of their businesses, or just plain fear. The Nasser government started rounding up real or suspected communists and their middle-class sympathizers. The young protagonists see their world getting inexplicably smaller, and more frightening.

Alexandria was certainly the highlight of this vacation for me. Dare I say it, I'm all Pharaoh'ed out. The new library is indeed an architectural gem, with its overarching roof that modulates solar light like an array of eyes, and its stone frieze, emblazoned with letters from every alphabet. But while the shelves could hold 8 million books, they only have 650,000 right now. We eavesdropped on a guide who explained to her charges that the multilingual inscriptions outside are "only letters, not words", as if phrases like "Peace on Earth" or "Allah is great" would have been too controversial. And nothing in the library and its museums explained how the place was funded or who designed it. I hope it was an Egyptian architect, or maybe some collegial input from Greece would

have been good. But not a word about provenance. So whodunit? USAID? The Saudis? David Geffen? I'll have to research that later. We had a fine four hour visit, including a high-tech but culturally vapid "Culturama" show that was full of typos, and a brilliant exhibit on city history including maps and photos of architecture. Apparently the Futurist poet Marinetti, to whom is attributed "when I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver" was a son of the Alexandria Italian community. I guess he got bored, though. Coincidentally a brief rain ended before we exited the museum. We had a greasy but delicious and inexpensive lunch at the decrepit filth-encrusted Cafe de la Paix, right on the malecon, er, corniche. We stayed outside to avoid the ubiquitous sheesha (waterpipe) smoke that fills Egyptian cafes. After an aimless walk we passed a couple of hours in a movie, that was a local remake of the "Sound of Music" plot with a charismatic actress and a lot of pratfall humor and Bollywood-lite dance routines. Inane? Yes, but the worn out theater and the families and teens enjoying themselves were a welcome contrast to the earnest solemnities of museum-o-grad, the "historisches archipelago" of "humanity's" heritage set in a matrix of real, hungry, aspiring, sometimes un-cultured, sexist, sports-watching, watch-selling, cab-driving, baksheesh-ing humanity.

Our final day in Alexandria was leisurely, with one more museum, a jewelry purchase, a lingerie purchase, a pastry purchase, and the afternoon train to Cairo. The Delta countryside reminded me again that rectangular brick and reinforced concrete are probably the norm for construction around the world even though rectangles and multiple floors once shouted "new" to me when I was a kid. These days, the whole world seems to have rebar sticking out.

There are places I've visited that resonate with my memories or aspirations, countries and cities whose vibrancy fuels my own or whose energy is so powerful as to change my perspectives. Then, there's Egypt. It's hard to imagine what could bring me back here. Not that it hasn't been fun; our time here has been challenging enough to be interesting, and our family decision-making worked out pretty well. Life here was never so overwhelming as to be frightening, and among the 3 of us there's been only one small case of GI discomfort. The trip has been long enough, though, and peering into the giant gulf between tourist and expat, and that further void of incomprehension beyond that, is enough for now. My UC Berkeley Extension Mandarin III class starts Tuesday. A bientot, mes amis.