

Shopping like an Egyptian

by Steve Shelley

You don't find many foreigners shopping in Kardessa. But Kenyans can sniff out a bargain from very far away, even via the internet. Which is how we found ourselves one late afternoon in the distant outskirts of one of Cairo's farthest suburbs right on the edge of the desert. Not that Kardessa's sole main street is a real shopping centre, but it's not a tourist site either. You can browse for 'hookahs' (water pipes) with twenty flavours of tobacco. There are shops selling engraved brass coffee tables and the little cups from which the locals drink Turkish coffee or mint tea. And then there are the dresses, cotton and linen, the whole point of our excursion, shop after shop of them. Long, embroidered, elegant, colourful dresses. If you want to dress like an Egyptian, you had better shop like one, but don't expect to make a fashion statement unless you are planning to join a Bedouin camel caravan.

Shopping in Egypt, it must be said, is a challenge. In a nation full of polite and hospitable people, the exception are the commission agents who sell in shops. There is an urgency in their greeting, designed to halt your tracks. "Where you from?" A black face may elicit "my cousin".

The guesses range from Jamaica to Australia but there are so few tourists from Africa that a nearby country doesn't jump to mind.

"Kenya? Obama!" Unless you walk smartly on, the second stage of the entrapment continues, an attempt to engage you in conversation and get you inside. Now you are their prey and an apparently friendly offer of refreshment is simply part of the plan.

Egyptian shopkeepers are incapable of answering the one question on all shoppers' tongues – "how much?" Pick up an article and you are invited to make an offer. "You know how much? What you want to pay?" Ask the price and the answers will span the spectrum from "How many you want?" to "You see the quality?"

Even when you do elicit a price, the opening offer is so inflated that it makes you get up and walk away in shock. An instant 50% discount may sit you down again but that's where the hard bargaining starts, assuming you have been able to examine the wares and make a choice. That's difficult too. Use your eyes and don't say a word until you are ready to start haggling.

A good negotiator comes across as mean, hard and unemotional. That's the only way to get them down. Many tourists find it less stressful simply to pay up. But you should end up paying less than a third of the original asking price. If you were escorted by a tout or tour guide, their commission will be factored in too. You know you're getting somewhere when the salesman (they are nearly always men) says he will have to consult his boss. In other words his own commission is being nibbled away, along with the profit margin.

It works for you that you are from Africa and speak a language they have never heard of. Compared with the usual patter in Spanish, German or English, that floors them and gives you some small advantage. It also helps to tell them you have to convert everything into shillings, a far weaker currency than the Egyptian pound which changes for around 5.5 to the US dollar.

We honed this technique in the ancient alleyways of Khan El Khalili, Cairo's old bazaar now sanitised and protected by tourist police and barricades to keep cars away. Here you can find an amazing variety of goods hidden away amid a fairy tale maze of minarets and archways – brass incense burners, camel hide jackets, silk carpets, silver and gold jewellery, Ottoman furniture and vast amounts of pseudo-antiquities. It's on everyone's itinerary and the tourists come here in droves. And so they should – Khan El Khalili is pure entertainment, with the occasional bargain thrown in if you are lucky.

Cairo also has its modern malls and ATM cash machines like every capital city and it surely has more mosques per square kilometre than there are catholic convents in Karen. For a country that wears its Islam lightly, religion permeates the landscape like nowhere else. That's what attracts tourists in the first place, of course.

It's a mistake to think of Egypt as ancient. Rather it sits astride a five thousand year historical timeline with a sense of continuity that is breath taking. Ancient and modern sit comfortably alongside each other. The famous pyramids at Giza, for example, attract crowds of local families at weekends and holidays. The kids get to ride camels and horses. Aunts and uncles take snapshots in front of the Sphinx. And everyone ambles happily around as if it's some kind of giant theme park. But there's nothing fake here. The pyramids are a real testimony to clever engineering and a bold scope of work that has barely been matched since 2450 BC when the biggest was built. King Khufu's Great Pyramid is the only survivor of the original seven wonders of the world and it's still top of many modern tourists' lists of things to see before they die.

It remains a moot point whether the pyramids were religious in nature. They were accurately orientated towards the cardinal points and to certain revered stars such as Sirius which heralded the annual rising of waters of the Nile on which the country's agriculture depended. And without doubt, they were the focal points of rites and rituals which saw the royal procession carried in a ceremonial boat from the east side of the Nile across to the west where the pyramids lie. For the Egyptians to miss a ceremony or fail to please their gods was to risk doom and disaster on the people. But there are no inscriptions in these the biggest of the pyramids, nor was any body ever found within them.

At nearby Saqqara, a 20km drive along the edge of the desert, several less well preserved pyramids are located and these provide a different perspective on the ancient world. Inside the pyramid of Unas are the first examples of the written spells and charms designed to ensure the immortality of the king. These so-called pyramid texts are amongst the earliest examples of writing in the world. The origin of the language, the hieroglyphic alphabet and the texts themselves is unknown. They appear to have sprung into use fully formed but from where no-one knows.

The kings of the old kingdom had their capital at Memphis just outside modern Cairo. A thousand years later, the kings of the new kingdom had moved six hundred kilometres up the Nile to Luxor. You can take an overnight train nowadays and experience a dramatic time shift from the hustle and bustle of Giza to the more placid but barely less ancient sights and sounds of the capital that used to be called Thebes. The town of Luxor is built around the temple of Amun which dates to 1400 BC. Here again is that enigmatic evidence of continuity. At the back of the temple's inner sanctum is a Byzantine Christian shrine, and within the temple complex is a more modern mosque. Religions evolved, each succeeding sect taking over aspects of the old and layering on their own beliefs and practices.

A few kilometres away is the yet greater temple complex of Karnak built in celebration of the victories of the all-conquering king Rameses II. Listed amongst the world's greatest buildings, you can wander for hours in awe at the vast columns still adorned with painted decoration more than three thousand years old. Connected by an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes to a now dry dock, the Karnak temple is just one part of an enormous complex which encompasses the temple of Queen Hatshepsut under the pink limestone cliffs of Deir el Bahari and the enigmatic and secretive Valley of the Kings, all on the other side of the river.

Propitiating their gods and ensuring a place in the afterlife seems to have been the primary occupation of the kings and queens of old. But the tombs and temples record too how these monuments fulfilled a much broader role in daily life. The temples served as the banks, shopping malls, hospitals and universities of their day, providing a focal point for the economic and social activity of the city. As for the tombs, their treasures removed to museums all over the world, they now form a theme park of the dead, overrun by tourists and accessed by electric shuttle trains.

Nowadays the Nile keeps within its banks and the temples are marooned far from its water. This is due to the Aswan High Dam built by Russian engineers in 1960. We cruised on a 75-room floating hotel upstream via more temples at Edfu and Kom Ombo to get to Aswan. There are nearly 300 boat-hotels stationed in Upper Egypt, far more than terrestrial hotels.

The dam and its associated turbines keep the entire country as well as some of its neighbours comfortably supplied with water and electricity. Power is cheap still in Egypt. Petrol sells for less than 20/- a litre. The rising of the dam waters threatened to submerge several important ancient monuments but UNESCO mobilised an enormous rescue effort during the sixties and seventies and the temples of Abu Simbel was reconstructed at a higher level. The island temple of Isis at Philae was taken apart stone by stone and put back together on a more elevated nearby island where it now stands.

Philae shows again how successive faiths made their mark. Hieroglyphs have been scratched out and the blackened ceilings show even now how the emerging Christian sects of the first few centuries of our current era set fire to these magnificent buildings. Romans and Greeks before them had happily left the temples intact, perhaps adding a statue or colonnade. Christians carved their own symbols into the pillars, crosses with symmetrically curved arms quite unlike the stark shape which became the norm later on. Egypt was one of the major centres of early Christianity until its Coptic version of the faith was renounced by the Roman emperor Constantine who finally cemented an approved doctrine of Christianity some four hundred years after the death of Jesus, coincidentally sounding the death knell for the old Egyptian civilisation.

It should be sobering to think that Egypt's culture and civilisation had endured largely unchanged under successive waves of colonisation for three and a half thousand years but was annihilated in a mere two centuries first by Christians and then by Islam.

We shopped for spices, indigo and kohl in Aswan's intriguing market before taking the train a thousand kilometres back to Cairo. Here our next port of call was a Coptic church with service in full swing. The chanting from the inner sanctuary, the smokey incense and the sunrays beaming through the east window could all have been two thousand years old but it was now. They could also have been seen and heard in much the same way in the neighbouring Ben Ezra synagogue, though Egypt's few remaining Jews keep a rather low profile these days. The synagogue shows signs of Islamic architecture and has Christian features as well as a resting place for the scrolls of the Torah. In the same complex is the so-called Hanging Church, a memorial to the supposed hiding place of Mary and Joseph when they fled Herod's threat to kill firstborn boys.

If you are confused by the abundance of religious influences, be ready for more. The Christian Church of St Sergius is also dedicated to St Bacchus (echoes of wining and dining in the Grecian era) but is now called Abu Serga.

And then there are the mosques. When Islam commenced its expansion out of Arabia following the death of Mohammed in 632 AD, Egypt soon fell into the Muslim sphere of influence and the old religions slid into obscurity. The most visible minarets in Cairo are those of the Turkish style Mohammed Ali mosque which dominates the skyline alongside the tenth century citadel of Saladin, parts of which are reckoned to have been constructed with surplus limestone blocks filched from the site of the pyramids. A thousand years old – that's new on the scale of things here.

Our final burst of shopping led us variously to a perfume shop, a place where they make papyrus and paint your name in hieroglyphics while you wait and a carpet weaving factory. But by now we knew the rules of the game and finally came away with some modest bargains. Shopping in Egypt may not be for the faint hearted but any trip there cannot be less than a lifetime adventure.

Travel tips

We booked through Let's Go Travel who offer a very affordable seven day 'Magical Egypt' package covering all the major sites. SilverRose (0722 755196) offers tailored packages dealing direct with local tour guides.

Kenya Airways and Egyptair fly daily to Cairo. Egyptair has more convenient timings and may be a little cheaper.

Visas are required by all and can be obtained in Nairobi from the embassy in Othaya Road. You need proof of booking, copies of air tickets and itinerary, yellow fever certificate and the ready cash.

All major currencies are freely exchangeable and many establishments will take dollars, euros or pounds. Banks give better exchange rates than hotels or bureaux.

It can be quite chilly in winter (November to February) and decidedly hot in summer (June to October). December and January are the busiest months. Mid season works best.

Food is good and interesting, typical eastern Mediterranean (similar to Lebanese or Greek) with lots of lentils, chick peas, pasta and potato dishes. Beer and wine are only available in tourist establishments. Egyptian cabernet is modestly palatable and Saqqara beer is perfectly drinkable.

The overnight sleeper train is quite comfortable, an experience not unlike the Mombasa railway. First class cabins sleep two and steward service is friendly and attentive.

Tour guides are licensed and highly trained. Egyptians in general have been conditioned to welcome tourists and the only real hassle are the shop sellers. But tips ('bakshish') can add substantially to your budget. Porters, doormen, toilet cleaners, everyone seems to expect LE5 (five Egyptian pounds, about a dollar) simply for breathing. Your guide and driver will expect rather more as many of them are not salaried and survive only on commissions and tips. But they earn them.

Armed tourist police are everywhere but are not obtrusive. They've also been trained and are even sometimes polite. But they record every movement that foreigners make. Don't let it bug you.