

EGYPTIAN DIARY

and

THE AMELIA PEABODY EXPEDITION,

2000-2001

Elizabeth Peters

The Amelia Peabody Expedition was organized by Bill and Nancy Petty, of Museum Tours, with whom I had dealt in the past, to my great satisfaction. Despite the unrest in the Middle East, which caused a few cautious souls to cancel, fifty people joined the tour--most of them Egypt buffs and fans of Amelia's. I decided to go out a few weeks early, with friends, Dennis Forbes of KMT and artist Joel Cole, before I joined the Expedition. Here are a few semi-coherent excerpts from the diary I kept as I went.



Dec. 11. It's wonderful to be back in Cairo; makes the grisly ten plus hour flight and the hours of waiting worthwhile. Dennis, Joel, and I arrived late afternoon Cairo time, and were met by Khaled, one of Bill's super-efficient staff, and driven straight to the hotel--though 'straight' isn't an accurate description, considering Cairo traffic. An early dinner and straight to bed, and tomorrow morning I'll be back on schedule with no jet lag. It works.

Dec. 13 . Off to Dahshur today, one of my favorite sites. I had hoped to get into the Bent Pyramid; It's the only one of the major pyramids whose interior I have not visited. The SCA is planning to open it, but when we got there the scaffolding was still up and the entrance was closed. I was not inspired to make an illegal entry, though I'm sure Amelia would have. In her day it wasn't illegal, just dangerous.

The Red Pyramid is open, but I've been there, done that. Not many tourists here, though it is a lovely day. The absence of tourist amenities, a resthouse and souvenir stands, may deter some people. We ambled around the Red--circling pyramids is a tradition with us now--and then headed for the Black Pyramid. It really is an ominous looking structure, having slumped into a sort of tower after the stone casing blocks were removed, exposing the dark mudbrick core. Can't get into it either! I would love to see the subterranean burial chamber, where Amelia and

Emerson were tossed by the Master Criminal, and explore the maze-like passages within (Twelfth Dynasty pyramids, unlike the earlier ones, have very complicated substructures; the tricks and traps didn't stop thieves, though.) It would probably be an impossible job to shore up the collapsing walls and roofs, which were in bad shape even in her day.

Dec. 14. Ramadan is in its last couple of weeks, which makes social engagements complicated; people have to wait until the official announcement of sundown, around five, before they can pitch into an elaborate meal, their first since before dawn. (It's called *iftar*, and one 'takes iftar.') So you don't invite people to dinner at seven. We had an engagement this evening with Mohammed Saleh, the charming and talented former director of the Cairo Museum, who took us to a cafe off in the city somewhere (I have no sense of direction) where we had *shisha* (water pipe) and coffee and plates of sweeties while we discussed a number of things. He offered to show us some of the restorations and behind-the-scenes stuff at the Museum on Saturday. In my usual state of profound confusion I called Khaled and asked him to postpone our trip to Luxor by one day, whereupon he patiently informed me that we weren't due to leave until Sunday anyhow. These senior moments are getting embarrassing.

Dec. 15, Friday. Dinner with Jocelyn this evening at the Oberoi restaurant in the Khan el Khalili. She had fed her family first; says that Ramadan is like cooking Sunday dinner every day, she starts around one p.m.. (Apparently nobody has started a takeout for *iftar*. This expedient would be frowned on, no doubt; I get the impression that the meal must be home cooked, elaborate, and of course prepared by the female.) So we had a good gossip and cruised the Khan, where I bought a few little things.

Dec. 16. Off to Luxor and the Old Winter Palace. The W.P. is no longer Luxor's most elegant hotel--there are several newer, gaudier, five-star hotels. Nor is it the oldest; the Luxor, a favorite haunt of the Emersons, is still in operation. I wouldn't stay anywhere else, though. The corridors are twelve feet wide, the ceilings are eighteen feet high, and it doesn't take much imagination to see the halls and public rooms as much the way they were in the old days. The exterior is exactly the same, and it makes me feel like a Victorian lady archaeologist to walk up the curving stairs and cross the terrace. My suite has a balcony facing the river and I can look straight across toward Deir el Bahri and the Valley of the Kings.

Dec 23. I had contacted Debbie, and made arrangements to go into the Western Desert with her and John. Just me. According to her, her inspector said it was okay for me to go--he remembered me from last time, but she refused to tell me what he'd said about me!--but that for the rest of the gang he would require permission from his boss. So on Saturday I hauled myself out of bed and got myself over to the West Bank by 8:30.

The process is somewhat complex. Usually we hire a boat and a car and driver for the West Bank and keep them for the entire stay. So 'The Mubarak' was waiting for me at 20 past eight, its captain up above on the embankment to make sure no other boatman would steal me away. In order to reach the boat you have to go down a series of ramps and steps, then along a cluttered, rusty sort of pier, stepping over coils of rope and various debris. Then the 'captain' puts out the gangplank--a piece of wood about eight inches across, with a few strips of wood nailed across it--at a precarious angle and anchored equally precariously. I do not scruple to grab at any hand

offered me. (Every time I come back from Egypt I think, 'Well, I've done that forty or fifty more times, and I haven't fallen into the Nile yet.') Once in the boat you are standing on the seat, which is about a yard from the floor. I do not descend such gracefully. But I descend, with a little more grabbing.



There were six of us in the Landrover--John and Debbie and me, their inspector, the driver, and a guard. Foreign archaeologists are required to have an Egyptian inspector with them, and the guard is *de rigueur* for those going into remote areas. It's remote, all right; I never know where I am anyhow, but this terrain would baffle most people. There are some roads of sorts, but a good deal of the time one bounces over rocks the size of toasters, up and down slopes and into and out of small wadis. John and Debbie are doing some extraordinary work out here; they've added whole new chapters to parts of Egyptian history, and I'd suffer worse than a sore bum to see some of their sites. However, I did bring along a pillow from the hotel to sit on! Here's an entry scribbled at the time:

"I sit high on the gebel at the Place of Horses--a defile at the top of a steep climb. How I got here I don't know; with great difficulty is the right answer. Remains of crude workmen's huts at the base of one cliff, graffiti over a stretch of the rock face. (The barking dog is cute--Arabic words meaning 'woof woof' come out of its mouth--but its implication isn't so cute, since it represents a watchdog and was scratched there by modern locals who resent archaeologists messing around in their territory.) There are many spirited, if crude, sketches of horses and a prayer to Amon, Lord of the Silent, who saved the writer from drowning. Some so faint, hardly visible to the naked eye--with modern Arabic and older Coptic scribbles on top."

Dec. 24. Christmas Eve. Had a fancy dinner at the restaurant in the Old W.P., having made our reservations a couple of days before. It was all tarted up with electric candles in holly rings on the tables. Lots of cutlery. (I had a knife left over.) Music by a blond, French chanteuse with silver sequins down her front, mostly Beatles and Elton John, except for "Santa Claus is coming

to town," which he did, tacky red suit, very dark face framed (sort of) in strips of dangling cotton wool. From his red bag he presented each guest with a few chocs wrapped in red cellophane. He was adorable. Stumbled off to bed at eleven, having eaten too much and drunk just enough wine.

Dec. 25 . Hard to believe it is Christmas Day, with the shutters wide open and the sun shining on the western cliffs, and palm trees along the corniche. The gardens are bright with flowers-- tall poinsettias, roses, coral vine, jasmine, bougainvillea and other tropical blooms. The Winter Palace has a number of Christmas trees, in front and in the lobbies, nicely decorated ones too. Everyone wishes us Merry Christmas. Ramadan is almost over; nobody seems quite sure whether it's tomorrow or the next day. Lesser Eid, a three day celebration, starts the following day. Happy Ramadan is Ramadan karim. Christmas dinner at Chicago House.

Dec. 26 . I leave for Cairo this p.m. on the third of eight flights I will be taking this trip. The Expedition arrives tomorrow, and I want to be there to greet them. I'm sitting on my balcony, eating breakfast. What a way to live. The western cliffs form what appears to be a single massif directly across from Luxor. Paler paths winding up and across the face, clefts like parallel vertical strokes of a gray pencil. (Will I ever be able to describe it accurately?)

What must the Winter Palace have been like in Amelia's day? No taxis, no paved road, but still directly below the terrace paved with ornamental tiles; to the right, the balcony of the Khedival suite; beyond it, the pillars of Luxor Temple and the minaret of the mosque. The British flag would have been flying instead of the red, white and black of Egypt. Tour boats certainly, though perhaps not as many, and the office of Thomas Cook at the end of the curved arcade on the first level, where it has been for over a century.

The newspaper that is delivered most mornings is *The Egyptian Gazette*--gives me a kick to be reading the same paper the Emersons read back in 1914. Admittedly the service is erratic; energetic attendants keep taking things like glasses and laundry lists away, and never bring them back. (In fact most people don't stay longer than a few days; my two week stays throw everybody off base. They look astonished every morning to see me still there.) The plane left an hour and a half late. Arrived at the Mena House Hotel (where Amelia and Emerson and Ramses dined with Howard Carter before the Master Criminal stole Ramses from off the top of the Great Pyramid) at about eight (Giza is a long way from Heliopolis) to find I had been upgraded to the Churchill suite. This place must be seen to be believed. Takes five minutes to walk from the living room to the bedroom, through dining and dressing rooms. The terrace is about the size of my whole downstairs, with the Great Pyramid looming. Bougainvillea in pots, incl the white one I admire. Over the living room couch is a huge circular mirror; the head of the bed is an equally immense gilded sunburst which reaches to the ceiling. All wood is carved, lamps are antique pierced brass, oriental rugs (laid over wall to wall carpeting), also antiques. Bowls of red roses and baby's breath in every room, plus huge arrangements of glads, etc; two plates of sweeties and fancy chocs, fruit bowl. The fittings in the bathrooms (one is really only a powder room) are gilded, swans and stuff. Marble floor and surrounds. I seem to have a personal butler, or so his card describes him. It's pretty heady stuff for a girl who grew up in a small town in the midwest.

Dec. 27. It was very foggy this a.m. Strange how guilty one feels about loafing. I swore I'd take it easy today but it has been something of an effort to stretch out on a lounge chair on the terrace and just lie there. (I think I'm getting the hang of it, though.) I can see the Great Pyramid from where I recline. Twelve noon and it is still foggy, the Great Pyramid remains a featureless silhouette, gray blue against a pale sky. A row of tour busses at its base. There is a yellow canopy over me and birds are flitting in and out. Every room on this side has a balcony, dark carved wood and pleasantly asymmetrical. This is the "Palace," the old part, which must look from the outside much as it did in A's day.

Dec. 28. The Expedition arrived last evening, but I didn't get a chance to greet them since they didn't come into the lobby of the Palace and I was....er...in the bar with several friends who had dropped by.

This a.m. they went to Giza. Reclining on my elegant terrace, I watched the buses roll up the hill, starting before eight. Dozens of them. It was understood that I wouldn't accompany the group on all their trips; by the time I leave Egypt I will have been away for a solid month, and I am forcing myself to take it slow. I am now sitting on a balustrade outside the hotel waiting for Salima and Nick.

Later. A super day. We went to Kerdasa, a suburb a few miles north, noted for its fine weavers. Many shops have been replaced by more modern establishments selling galabeeyahs and the inevitable t-shirts, but we found one place (after making a few minor purchases elsewhere) that was great. The owner had the jolliest laugh. Listening to Salima and him bargain in Arabic was wonderful; at one point she lowered her hand, indicating that the price was too high, whereupon the man instantly squatted. So did Salima. Big whoops of laughter from everybody. He had nice woven stuff, beautiful rugs and some sensationally gaudy gowns and capes. Lots of gold. I like lots of gold. Bought two genuine black dresses like the ones I had seen proper Egyptian ladies wearing--was told later that they are Nubian, but I saw them in Luxor and elsewhere. They have long sleeves and a yoke, embroidered or trimmed, from which the gown hangs, with a flounce at the bottom. Both fit perfectly, since I am the same shape as many Egyptian ladies--round and short. The dresses are old, charming, and probably very dirty.

When the bargaining was completed the jolly chap wound round me a lovely woven scarf I had rejected--a present. (This is often done.) I thought the overall price was dirt cheap, but I suppose it represented a good day's take. Foreign tourists don't come here often. They were intrigued by my interest in the genooin dresses. One middle-aged lady in a similar frock and a close-fitting black headcloth (I haven't seen a face veil since I got here, but all except "mod" city ladies wear the headcloth) darted out and came back with another--maybe she took it out of her closet, or her mother's.

Then on to Abu Roash, for a day that combined frivolity (shopping) and Egyptology in exactly the right balance. The site is about five miles north of Giza, the northernmost of the pyramid sites. We bounced off into the desert, along bumpy tracks, back and forth and around and around. If I were only sixty again we could have taken a shorter route, climbing up the escarpment, but my dear buddies didn't want to send me home in a cast or with terminal shortness of breath, so we finally found ourselves on top, right at the base of the pyramid. I had

never been here before. The archaeologists (French-Swiss) weren't working, so we had the place to ourselves. The pyramid, of which most is gone, belonged to Djedefre, Khufu's son and successor. Why he moved here nobody knows; theories of dynastic infighting and religious differences are only speculation. Maybe he just liked the view. Or didn't want to put his little bitty pyramid next to dad's great monument.

It's very high up and a long way from the river. The causeway, whose line can be seen, but of which nothing remains, must have been very long and steep. Went halfway down the shaft to the burial chamber, which now lies open and exposed, since the greater part of the superstructure has been quarried away. Had I been sixty again I'd have gone all the way down, but it was steep and a bit slippery from there on.

We walked round the structure and then I managed to get to the top, with a lot of help from my friends. We had a picnic lunch atop the "pyramid" and then headed back, since I had to clean up for my first meeting with the Expedition members, drinks and dinner at one of the Mena House's excellent restaurants. I went round from table to table, trying to say a few words to everyone. It will take me awhile to get to know them all, though there were a few old friends among them.

Dec. 31. I am fading, Egypt, fading. I am back in Luxor, but can't remember how I got here. I must have arrived yesterday. When I got to the dear old Winter Palace I found Dennis and Joel awaiting me, as well as Bill and Nancy--who were wondering if I'd get there in time to make my second appearance at five that evening. I made it. Bill does things very elegantly; the reception was in the lovely old Victorian "tearoom" of the Winter Palace, where I circulated some more and had nice chats with people. Dinner in the fancy restaurant.

Dec. 31--New Year's Eve. Dennis and Joel and I were to meet Petty and the group at Deir el Bahri at 1. We left the hotel about ten and took the ferry across. I like the ferry--it's more than a bit grubby and more than a bit crowded, but there are no eight inch gangplanks!

Stopped by Medinet Habu, where the Epigraphic Survey works. The manager of the restaurant across the street from the temple is an old buddy; we've had many a cup of tea and coke and several good meals there. He insisted on giving us a farewell cup of tea. Then we went on to Deir el Medina, where the boys started up the long slope to the path that leads to the Valley of the Kings. It's steep, but not precipitous--just too long. Steps have been built, but everybody says they are harder on the legs than just climbing. Some day I may make it, but I am saving myself for the Expedition.

Ali, our driver, and I went on to Deir el Bahri, after a brief stop at the Bedouin shop near the colossi. It's owned by Ali's daddy. Everybody on the West Bank is related to everybody else. After browsing a bit, on to Deir el Bahri, where I visited the restroom (some day I must write an article on Egyptian toilets). It's in a building that was the old Cook's rest house; I do hope they will restore it one day, since It's a historic building and was well known to Amelia and Emerson.

Before long Ali let out a shout and pointed, and there they were, descending after the hike across the hill. The walk takes about an hour. Coming down looks trickier than going up, if not as hard on the lungs. Certain slopes are fairly steep, with only pebbles and debris underfoot.

There are three terraces at Deir el Bahri, Hatshepsut's lovely temple. The lower two are open to the public, but the third is still being reconstructed. Bill had gotten permission for some of us to swagger past the barrier and go up all the way. They have done a lot since I was there two years ago--more of the Osiride colossi of Hatshepsut in place, some of the paving laid, some of the little shrines nicely cleaned. Much Egyptological gossip, then we went down and found Ali and dropped Bill and Nancy at the *taftish* (checkpoint) before stopping at the shop, where I bought a few little things.

I was a mess by then, hair all over the place, but managed to tidy up before Dennis and Joel arrived for our last sunset ritual--watching the sun go down from my balcony while sipping various beverages. They went away to dress and I slipped into my extravagant, ostentatious, beaded robe from "Miss Egypt", in which I daresay I looked rather like a Japanese pagoda, but who cares. The boys called for me, elegant in tux and dark suit, and we swept down the grand staircase of the Old Winter Palace in fine style. Cab to Chicago House, drinks, dinner, etc. Almost all of us stuck it out till midnight, when we put on funny hats and blew horns and everybody kissed everybody. It was farewell for this year as well as New Year's.

Jan. 1, 2001. Slept in, and did I need it, while the group went to the West Bank, good for them. No, I tell a lie. It was Luxor Museum and a free afternoon. Dennis and Joel left this morning but I did not see them off. Prolonged goodbyes are foolish. Went shopping with a couple of friends from Chicago House; I only bought a camel's hair shawl, and some amulets for my "book covers" chain--Sobek, Set (so he looks like Anubis, I can call him Set if I want), Sekhmet and Horus. Then kisses and "see you this summer" and I cleaned up a bit and went to Sabri's lecture.

I've known Sabri el-Aziz slightly for years; have spent many boring hours sitting in his office at the *taftish*. A formal call at the *taftish* is part of the ritual when one arrives in Luxor; we had made ours a few days earlier, on Sabri's successor as Director of the West Bank sites; he'd been bumped up since then, to be in charge of all the Upper Egyptian sites.

So I greeted Sabri with an Egyptian kiss, (a chaste salute on each cheek), which almost made him faint with surprise. He's fairly tall and thin, with receding hair and regular features and charming manners. He gave us a slide show "tour" which lasted exactly the proper time, though he had been late because of an appointment with some big shots from the SCA. His English is delightful, larded with favorite words that give it flavor. "Guys," for one. "These guys" who built the tombs and "other guys" who are archaeologists. He was funny, witty and very informative. Began and ended with a moving statement that the monuments are the heritage of the entire world, not just Egypt. He is in charge of all the monuments of Upper Egypt, and he makes about \$7000 a year.

Jan. 2. One of the reasons why Luxor feels like my home town is that I keep running into old friends. Yesterday it was Bob B; he was coming into the hotel as I was leaving it, both of us on our way to different places, so he and his wife and I agreed to have dinner this evening.

It's misty tonight. The western cliffs are almost invisible behind a cloud, and the sun was white before it sank behind said cloud bank, with no pyrotechnical display. Now the lights are coming on along the west bank, including two lonely stars that mark the location of the guard posts high on the hill. Must be a lonely job--and a cursed long climb. What a contrast below, in the twilight. A tourist steamer heads south, lit up like a multi level parking lot (these boats really are awfully homely.) Half a dozen feluccas, with their graceful triangular sails, glide by, and the little motor boats chug back and forth. They are gay with bright paint and (rather grubby) cushions and funny insignia.

Tour busses whiz past (well, they go fairly slowly, in fact, the traffic on the corniche includes bicycles, taxis, and carriages); two caleches filled with Egyptians singing and chanting and beating a drum; the muezzin's "Allahu Akhbar." I do so love this place. This is the last night in Luxor for this trip.

Jan. 3. Had a good time with the B's last evening; they came to my room at six, with a bottle of wine. Rather than call room service, who had stolen the glasses again, I washed my tooth glasses. Off to Assuan today. Darling Khaled got me on a later flight; the others leave the hotel at 7:30. From now on it's going to be grim; from Luxor to Cairo at 10 p.m., after the cruise, and then that grisly 1:30 a.m. flight home. All in all I have eight flights on this trip. Have I mentioned that before?

In Assuan, later. On the homeward stretch and glad of it, though I seem to have gotten a slight second wind lately, partly because I haven't done much except sit around, and partly because I am looking forward to spending more time with the Expedition. I will be on the boat with them from Assuan to Luxor, and then we have one more day in Cairo before flying out. Yest. had lunch with some of the ladies from the tour and then wandered over to the arcade by Abouti's to look for a slip. (I lost mine in Cairo, don't ask how.) No luck of course.

Abouti's is the best bookstore in Luxor for Egyptological stuff, but its selection of fiction is pretty limited. Have seen my French editions at two places in Luxor, plus one German. None of the English. Transitions are a pain--packing, looking for missing articles, cashing travellers' checks, paying bills, tipping everybody. The first part of the trip was fine--I even got a smile and a handshake from the grumpy guy at the bank. It isn't surprising that he is grumpy; some of his customers are rude and unreasonable. He'd been very nice since the time during Ramadan when I walked in to find him reading from the Koran; I immediately stepped back and told him to finish his chapter or whatever, that I could wait. I was rewarded when he asked if I would like him to read aloud. It was beautiful--sung rather than read, in a sonorous baritone. He had studied to be a muezzin.

I'm getting to know Luxor airport (excuse me, International Airport--there are direct flights from Gatwick in England) only too well. The plane was on time, meaning it left only half an hour late. (U.S. lines don't do any better.) You're barely up before you come down; flying time is only about twenty minutes. There was an interminable wait for baggage, so by the time I got to the boat Khaled and Bill had been waiting some time and were becoming agitated. I suppose losing ME would be a black mark.

They are very nice to me. The suite isn't much, a tiny sitting room and bedroom and no whirlpool!--but it's the best the boat offers. There are some lovely old Turkoman rugs and a TV (can't get anything on it), and everything is spotlessly clean. Even Amelia would approve. This boat, like many others here, belongs to the Queen Nabila line. We're right up against the dock, but the boats are lined up side by side as usual, two or three deep, and from my plate glass window I can see--another set of identical windows. For about ten minutes I had a lovely view of the river while one boat pulled away, but another one promptly took its place.

Jan. 4. Most of the gang went to Abu Simbel this morning. They had to get up at four-thirty. Need I say I did not go with them? (Been there.) Shopped the suk with Bill and Nancy instead. Suk is more authentic than Luxor, but I fear the good local handicrafts are fading out, to be replaced by t-shirts and junk. Bought spices and three embroidered pillowcases, not nearly as nice as the ones at Luxor just last year. Work is cruder, colors gaudier.

After lunch (the food is fatteningly good and hard to resist) we took feluccas to Elephantine Island. More damned wobbly eight-inch gangplanks! The old museum, once the home of the engineer who designed the first dam, looks odd with its Victorian trim and wide veranda. We visited it a couple of years ago, poor shabby neglected place, and the curator was pathetically grateful for company. So I didn't go in. Most of the good stuff has been removed to the new Assuan Museum. Wish I could say something sensible about the excavations, which were closed to visitors last time I was here; they are extensive and fascinating, but it was a maze to me. There's no guidebook and the only publications are in obscure (to me) German professional journals.

Jan. 5. (Friday). Went to the Assuan Museum alone; I had never seen it. On entering whom should I see but John and Debbie, John all bandaged and battered from an accident--a truck ahead of them turned a corner too fast and dumped a boulder on the front of the Landrover, shattering the window and more. You see trucks like that on the road all the time, overloaded and without tailgates; It's a miracle more people aren't injured. (Maybe they are.) I love these serendipitous encounters; they only happen to me in Egypt!

It's a splendid museum, beautiful architecture, objects well displayed, and John and Debbie were wonderful guides.

We went back to town about eleven and found a place on the corniche--lower level, actually on the water. They had lunch and I kerke dah (a deep red, sweet, ice cold drink made from stewed hibiscus blossoms. Resisted the urge to purchase the blossoms in the suk this year - in Egypt it is delicious, when I make it at home it tastes awful!) The boat was to sail at 12:30. I figured I might have some difficulty finding it, since I had been warned it would be moved, preparatory to sailing. I was right, but we did find it eventually. John and Debbie saw me to the gangplank of the innermost boat (docked where ours had been this morning) where we met a couple of other people from the tour, who greeted me and I them with shouts of joy. We had to go through three boats to reach ours; they tie them up so that the lobbies adjoin, and it's kind of interesting to see what other boats are like.

I've gotten to know most of the people by now and have chatted with most, though I will never get everybody's name straight; I'm hopeless about names. This is a great bunch. Phil and Kathe came back from shopping with a bottle of gin for me. That's what you get when you expose your vices and complain aloud (there is no gin at the bar of the boat.) It's Egyptian gin and probably quite vile, but what a sweet thought. (N.B.: I brought it down to the bar next night and made everybody sample it. Tasted like grappa or anisette! After I had swilled some down someone told me I shouldn't have because sanitation is questionable; but I figured 90 proof alcohol would kill most everything.)

Lunch on the upper deck, then departure. I do like sailing. The weather is perfect, sunny and not too windy. My window faces east; there's not much village life, only lots and lots of palms, with the golden brown hills behind. Road and railroad on this bank from Hammadi south; sometimes they run close to the river, so you can see a car or a train.

Jan. 6. We arrived at Edfu last night and tied up, if that is the phrase. Bill had the gang off the boat at 7 a.m. to see the temple. I watched them complacently through a slit in my curtains as they got into carriages. It's a bustling, busy scene, across the street shops display the conventional tourist stuff, galabeeyahs and those gaudy sequined shifts, shawls and scarves. Racks of Baraka bottles, coke and soft drinks; a cafe with plastic chairs of red and yellow. The occupants of an apartment building across the street have hung their bedding and clothes out to air, over the edge of the balconies. Two elegant old wrought-iron Victorian style lamp posts flank the top of the stairs that lead up to the street from the waterfront. The steps are crumbling and uneven, and sometimes, depending on where the boat docks, you have to pick your way over broken concrete and stones to reach the steps.

It's all part of the Egypt experience....

Bill has certainly kept the gang busy. When they aren't rushing around at odd hours seeing sites, they are being entertained. The first night at Aswan it was Nubian dancing--a lot of horseplay (pun--part of it was two guys in a horse suit) but some was quite splendid and the drums and tambourines were expertly played. For one song a little old gent in a turban strode in and tootled on a pipe along with the drums.

Part of the fun is dragging the tourists up to dance--I'm sure the locals find it very funny--and I finally got dragged up too and made, I am sure, a perfect idiot of myself, but I got lots of applause. I wore my Nubian lady's black dress with a deep ruffle around the hem. Everybody was supposed to wear Egyptian garb, and some of the outfits were great. These people are really good sports, they'll try anything.

Next night was Victorian night, in honor of Amelia, and I made an exhibition of myself again trying to waltz with Phil. Stepped all over his feet. The dear person whirled most of the women round the floor to Strauss waltzes. None of the other men danced, poor shy things. Last night was Bill's mystery, featuring stolen antiquities and a gold dagger and a corpse on the bed in the spare room. Bill was very funny as Lord Carnivore, in plus fours and Holmes hat, stick, and huge calabash pipe. Everybody entered into it with great good spirits, but we didn't solve the mystery because we were having such a good time we failed to notice the suspects sneaking out of

the room at important moments. There are a few other groups on the boat--French and Spanish, I think--who must think we are mad. We take over the saloon every night and carry on outrageously. There is a lot of talent in this bunch. They sing, they dance, they write skits and perform them, all with an engaging lack of inhibition.

Some of these nice people have brought books all the way from the states for me to sign. Others packed voluminous fancy garments--Victorian gowns and Edwardian blouses and extravagant hats--so they could participate in the various entertainments. People get confidential in such surroundings and I've heard more than once that a particular book "helped me through a bad time." I'm so pleased if that is true. I just wrote the way I felt, not with any aim in mind except entertainment, but it makes me feel great to hear such comments.

Several of them have done Amelia tributes during our amateur talent hours; one, a Gilbert and Sullivan takeoff, got huge cheers (esp. from me) and I hope I get a copy of it, as I requested. Another time a bunch of them got together and did a "sound and light" performance, with friends in the audience shining flashlights, and deep voices intoning "Emerson! Peabody!" from the shadows. It was marvelous. I laughed till I cried. The gang is divided into three groups for purposes of site-visits, each under the supervision of Bill or a cohort. Leaders of all such groups carry signs or umbrellas or something, as a rallying point; Bill's people carried signs reading 'Ramses,' 'Amelia' or 'Emerson.' I love it.

Last day. I think I've managed to chat privately with everybody, including the very shy ones. Also gave two talks--'conversations,' rather. The second one had to be postponed, for a rather interesting reason; I was preceded by a talk by the four guides, two handsome, intelligent guys and their pretty, intelligent wives, discussing Islam. The group was immensely responsive, curious, and open-minded, and it was going so well that when Bill interrupted to introduce me, I stood up and said I thought it would be a pity to stop the discussion. I would talk another time, whenever they wanted. So it went on for over an hour, and was continued next morning, on deck. One would like to think, wistfully, that a few lines of sympathy and communication have been opened. My talks were the usual, all about the books.

The locks at Esna are the big sticking point for boats travelling between Aswan and Luxor; low water levels and congestion make it impossible to schedule arrivals at Luxor. We got through late at night, and were in Luxor next a.m.. After some strolling and (guess what) shopping, we left for the airport to catch a ten p.m. flight. Arrived in Cairo about eleven but didn't get out of the airport for a long time; they are very touchy about security, esp. for large groups on busses and we had to sit while they collected an escort, or swept the surrounding streets, or something. Nice room at the Nile Hilton--my usual--balcony on two sides, overlooking the river.

I was wakened next a.m. at 9:30 by a call from Salima and made a date to meet her at the Museum after noon. Accompanied by a few chosen souls, I inspected the animal mummies room, which is Salima's specialty, and then started looking for her office--where I had been a number of times. Could I find the damned place? Of course not. A knowledgeable guard finally set me straight, and we spent a few minutes looking at some fun things, including several of the royal mummies that are awaiting their fancy new cases, and then wandered the museum for a while looking at some of my favorites. The back entrance of the hotel is just across the street from the Museum; very handy.

Salima came by for a final drink and put me together--repacking bags, collecting scattered objects--and then I got on the bus with the gang for dinner and a visit to the Khan el Khalili before we caught the plane at, oh, god, one thirty a.m.. I love the Khan el Khalili. It may not look exactly as it did when Amelia went there, but it's close enough for me. I almost always get lost, but that's part of the fun; one is never in the slightest danger and there's always some amiable soul around who will respond to pleas for directions. Elia, Mahmud's pretty wife, went with me this time. Maybe she was taking no chances on losing me at the last minute! We found a shop.... Enough about my extravagance.

One of the gals had brought a whole suitcase full of cat food, which she distributed; the Khan is full of cats, all hungry, all lean. There was one touching moment when someone offered food to a kitten curled up on a cushion outside one shop. The owner began chirping--'kitty kitty' is not how one calls cats in Egypt--and 'his' cats came running, and we fed them all. He thanked us with enormous grace. 'I must feed my children first,' he said. Went straight to the heart. Unlike dogs, which are unclean, cats are favored--did not the Prophet allow his cat to sleep on his sleeve?--but they just can't afford to feed them all, much less neuter them. So far as I know there is no spay-neuter clinic in Cairo; but I wouldn't be surprised if one got started. OUR group was discussing it later and they include some determined folk.

After an excellent dinner at a hotel in the Khan, and a lot of sentimental speeches, we were off to the airport and an interminable wait; plane left on time, though, and I collapsed and dozed till NY. The usual delay getting bags, no problem with customs--and the first sight I saw when I emerged was Kristen's beaming face, the second Tim's beaming face. They put me in the car, which they had driven up early that morning, and took me home.

Epilogue. I wish I could describe in detail just how enjoyable this trip was for me. I've never met a nicer group of people--unfailingly courteous, thoughtful, intelligent, interested, and full of gusto. I hope to keep in touch with all of them.