





# The Corn Flake Traveller in Egypt

I went to Egypt because I wanted to take my little brother somewhere special to celebrate him finishing school and at the same time fuel my growing fascination with ancient civilisations. Armed with only €600 each our 5 week trip began when we arrived in Cairo at the end of June 2010.

After a couple of days acclimatising in the capital we took a tour to see the 'White desert' (the Sahara el Beyda) a place I had become desperate to see since seeing it featured in one of David Attenborough's shows. We took the 8am bus, sleeping most of the way and arriving about 1 o'clock in Bahariya Oasis. We were taken to a cross between a hotel and a campsite, where we were treated to some dry pasta and cucumber for lunch. Then we did what the locals do and stayed out of the sun to escape the heat, before leaving town in a 4x4 at about 4:30pm to go see some desert.

First stop was the 'Black desert', a beautiful area, where we climbed 'Black Mountain' for great views of the valley and the black pointy hills that looked like giant mole hills. From here we entered the White Desert National Park, stopping briefly at Crystal Mountain to see a nice natural arch and some crystalline rocks.

We continued on, looking out the window as the desert turned white, with lots of white chalk deposits on the ground and some huge white rock formations sculpted by the many sandstorms over the centuries. We drove around for a few hours, stopping in a few places for a close up of some of the more striking formations, like the massive white mushrooms jutting out of the ground. On our final stop the drivers/guides set up camp, cooked some dinner and then we sat around appreciating the scenery. This area is stunning and goes straight in to my 'Top Ten' favourite places I've seen on my travels so far, although it's more realistically a Top 50.

We had dinner with a Japanese group, who were over there on a business trip, then we all watched the beautiful sunset as it made silhouettes out of the rock formations we were surrounded by. When darkness had settled a group of desert foxes came to steal the leftovers from our meal, they were cute little things with massive, disproportional ears.

We slept under the stars and due to a lack of artificial light there were huge numbers of stars, the sky was completely full. It was a fantastic moment falling asleep looking up at such a clear night, it was so clear you could easily see the 'Milky Way' looking like a big cloud in the sky.

Next morning I was woken by the Japanese group, not surprisingly taking photos but I couldn't blame them as it was a beautiful sun rise but I dozed off again and got up for real about 7am. It was brilliant waking up slap bang in the middle of the desert, surrounded by amazing



scenery, it put me in a really good mood waking up to a view like that.

We spent the day exploring the area further, then that evening me and my brother went for a walk and met a local farmer. The Egyptian people are so warm and friendly, the farmer was a really kind, sweet guy, who was really enthusiastic about showing us all of his crops and his irrigation system. He gave us a bag full of dates, grapes and a load of fruit I've never seen before, like a green fruit with a red, furry, wispy centre (the part you eat with a really weak taste). He was such a sweet man, I could have spent the whole day with him.

We then independently travelled through the desert to Luxor, jumping from one oasis to another, stopping in Al Qasr Oasis for a night. We opted for the cheapest accommodation we could find, the rooftop of a rest-house that charged us €1.50 each to put some really dirty, stinking mattresses on the floor. This suited us fine as it was nice and cheap, we had plenty of mattresses and we could fall asleep looking at the stars again. The people were again very hospitable and in the morning they brought us breakfast on the roof, which was pretty different from Western breakfasts as we ate pita bread, cheese and some spicy vegetable dishes.

While in town we visited the Muzawaka tombs to see the many tombs filled with mummified sheep and, more interestingly, Romans, it was quite weird but cool seeing some of them still wearing their Roman uniforms. Before leaving the oasis we had a look at the old Islamic part of town with its mud buildings and its 11-12th century mud mosque and a mill. We were sat outside a mosque enjoying some shade from the sun when we were invited into the home of a really nice Policeman, who gave us some lunch and introduced us to his family. There was little verbal communication but we coped and communicated with polite gestures and his children were fascinated by us, which helped by providing entertainment. We ate some nice meat, rice and salad stuff, although God knows what the meat was, I did impressions of chickens and cows as a way of asking what I was eating but I didn't get much response or find out what it was.

We arrived in Luxor a few days later and visited some of the ancient sites nearby. We flew over the Valley of the Kings in a hot-air balloon which was an incredible experience. We were picked up at 4:30am and taken for tea and cake by the river before sailing across to be driven to the launch site. I was a



little nervous about the flight but it felt well organised and professional looking enough for me to think it was safe. There were 8 or 9 balloons in a big field, which they began filling with cold air using huge fans before using the huge burners to add hot air. The basket was attached to the truck while me, my brother and about 15 other tourists jumped inside, then they un-clipped and we were instantly off and floating.

The movement was smooth, the views amazing; you could see the Thebes Necropolis (temples, tombs, statues), the Valley of the Kings with its 60+ tombs and the restored Hatshepsut Temple, built for the first woman to rule Egypt like a pharaoh, an ancient 'Spice Girl'.

We floated over the Nile River, and the pilot took us down to within touching distance of the water, before hitting the burners so that we floated up again. The wind was nice and strong so we travelled a large distance over little villages and farmland then right over Luxor which appeared to be full of mosques.

We tried to land in a couple of fields but ran out of room and had to float up again to look

for an area with more space. The landing turned out to be pretty smooth; one bounce and a little dragging along the ground then we could stop standing in our landing poses. The total flight time was 45 – 50 minutes, the day before they only flew for 30 minutes so it was a blessing we were delayed by a day. We were given a free T-shirt and a certificate and then dropped back at our hotel in time to throw down some breakfast and get to the train station.

It was so hot again that day, 44- 45°C and we could see people slowly cooking it was so hot in 2nd class but luckily for us a nice guy working on the train moved us into 1st class with its air conditioned cabins. This was great at first but funnily enough we were freezing 30 minutes later. We travelled South to Aswan for a couple of nights, this was as far south as we would go and from where we visited some ruins before jumping on a felucca (an Egyptian boat) to sail North along the Nile, back towards Luxor.

We shared the journey with 2 couples, a nice German couple and a slightly stranger Canadian-Aussie pair. The captain of the

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two crew members was called 'Captain Cool' and they were all great people, very friendly and spoke good English. The scenery was beautiful, which we enjoyed as we floated down the river, stopping in a couple of places to swim. I ended up paying captain Cool £75 to take a taxi back to Aswan to buy me one of the all-in-one suits/desert outfits that the local men wear, in an attempt to fit in with the locals. He came back with a nice blue outfit but I preferred his and we almost swapped my blue one for his nice thin cotton one (mine was thicker and not as expensive, but his was old and full of holes). I tried it on but while taking it off I accidentally ripped it, there was silence for a few seconds then he just laughed, which allowed the whole boat to laugh, it was a very funny moment but better when you are there. I offered him my new outfit but he wouldn't take it, insisting I keep it as a nice souvenir of Egypt, such nice people the Egyptians.

It was interesting to see how important the Nile is to Egypt, I'd always heard people say it's the life blood of the country and travelling through you could see how the vast majority of the population lives close to the Nile and uses its water to grow food. We fell asleep looking at the stars again and there was a lovely breeze, which we really needed in the intense heat.

The boat dropped us South of Luxor from where we spent a couple of days continuing North, stopping only to see the ruins at Karnak Temple before the mother of all ruins, the pyramids at Giza.

Karnak was fantastic, with detailed carvings and plenty of obelisks and for me this temple was more impressive than the infamous Valley of the Kings. It's actually more than just a temple, more of an area which took 1300 years to complete, a really cool area, full of obelisks, statues, carved artwork and cool hieroglyphs, everything you'd want from an Egyptian historic site. We

walked around for a couple of hours, around the huge pillars and hieroglyphic walls, having to take intermittent rests in the shade as it must have been 44- 45°C again. After the visit we went back to enjoy our nice big ceiling fan, cold bottles of water and relax away from the mid-summer heat.

After a week in Dahab relaxing and diving in the Red Sea we went back to the capital. We were picked up from Cairo by a taxi at 8am and the driver showed us around the Giza Plateau and the Dashur Necropolis. First was the Giza plateau with the famous sphinx and 8 pyramids, the 3 big famous ones and 5 smaller ones.

We spent a couple of hours walking around thinking 'I thought they'd be bigger' but having seen many documentaries on these pyramids I knew how complex the structures really are, especially considering the accuracy of the chambers inside the 'Great Pyramid'.

We walked around admiring the structures, I was impressed by the flatness of the building blocks and remain suspicious about who made them and why? I'm not convinced they are tombs at all. I've heard theories that suggest they are older than the academic world suggests and that they were built by an advanced civilization which existed over 10,000 years ago. Well there are plenty of structures around the



world that we cannot recreate today so it's not crazy to think they were more advanced. It's also not just the Pyramids but many sites exist around the world, such as Baalbek with its huge 1000 ton blocks or Pumapunku in Peru with rocks that look like puzzle pieces.

Seeing the amount of weathering on the sphinx was interesting, especially it's backside where there are serious water erosion marks, rain basically, rain that would have had to last for a prolonged period of time. This is a significant observation as there hasn't been significant rainfall for 8 or 9000 years, I don't know but maybe there's something to what these researchers say.

I chose the plateau to eat my Egyptian Corn Flakes and it turned out to be one of my favourite bowls of flakes from around the world due to the feeling of being amongst such immense structures that have been there for thousands of years. I also got to share some with the sphinx.

Visiting the Dashur necropolis, with its 'Bent' and Red Pyramids was equally cool. We stopped at the Red one, the largest of the three at Dashur and also the third largest in Egypt. We climbed up some steps on the North side, to the entrance of a passage which was 3ft in height and 4ft wide,



sloping down at 27° for 200 feet to a short horizontal passage leading into a chamber. There were 3 chambers with stepped roofs 40 – 50ft high, there was a real atmosphere which was similar to when you enter a church. It was a great experience and one that has left me absolutely convinced that these pyramids were not tombs but had a much more practical use.

After another week in Alexandria I returned to the U.K to earn some more money and plan another trip. I go into more detail about my time in Egypt in chapter 8 of my e-book "The Adventures of a Hard-Up, Diabetic Traveller with a Corn Flake Problem" and you can read about my other backpacking and cycling trips. For more photos you can visit my blog or my facebook page.