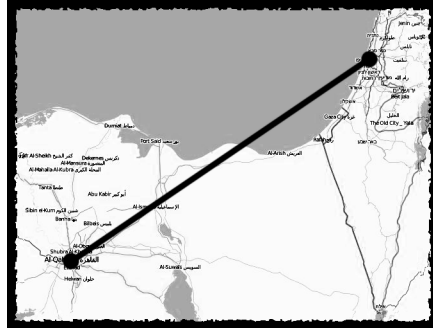


Wander the Rainbow

*A true story of a living liver donation, an epic journey
around the world, and a gay man's search for himself*

David Jedeikin

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Riddle of the Sphinx Cairo

Our flight is delayed. This comes as a surprise as every flight so far has been punctual as a Swiss watch.

This time, it's a plus: my energetic, offbeat seatmate engages me in a chat; Sarah's a project manager who does aid work for the University of New South Wales; she's just completed a stint of economic-aid consulting in the Palestinian Territories, and this delay is the least of her day's ordeal.

"They kept me at the airport for two hours," she says. "They asked me the same questions, over and over. And kept checking my bag."

Apparently, this is typical of what Palestinians endure daily when crossing into Israel under the rubric of security. *Law & Order* has nothing on these guys.

"Are you on some watch list?" I say. Joke: she's an arty-looking Aussie brunette from Sydney with name and demeanor about as menacing as Julia Roberts'. The whole story surprises me—I've long labored under the belief that Israeli security is smart and subtle, cool eyes assessing passengers efficiently with nary a misstep. I suspect it's incidents like this that hurt the country's image in the eyes of the world.

Still, Sarah remains cheery—I'm not sure I would be in this instance—and gives me voluminous advice about spots to visit in Australia. We trade business cards; perhaps our paths will cross again.



And so on to Cairo. *This is it, the big time, baby*: at nearly eighteen million people, my first ever bona-fide developing world megacity. I'm a bit anxious, feeling as if all travel up to this point has been a dress rehearsal for spots like this. As most such metropolises, accommodations come in two flavors: ultra-deluxe and super-cheap (read: shithole). With the former out of my range I bite the bullet and rough it just a bit, booking myself into a widely recommended hostel near Midan Tahrir, right in the heart of town. Better yet, the place provides free airport pickup.

We drive into the city, massive rows of dirty apartment blocks lining the broad expanse of highway. And yet, it's all relatively quiet, the traffic sedate. I soon learn why: I've come during the feast of *Eid al-Adha*, marking the end of the *Hajj* and commemorating Abraham sacrificing a sheep—instead of his son, Isaac—at Mount Moriah where I've just been. This could go either way, visiting a foreign culture during their equivalent of Christmas or Thanksgiving.

The Nubian Hostel is on the second floor of a grimy walk-up on the edge of a pedestrian street. A pair of tiny cats darts into a crawlspace behind the stairway as I hoof it with my backpack. The blue walls, glossy paint on rough stucco, are festooned with colorful yet dusty decorations. My room is private and expansive, but with a tiny window and walls a sickly shade of pink made even less comely by office-style overhead fluorescents. The bathroom—private, at least—is in a metal booth built into the room. The toilet leaks a bit.

After dark the city spectacularly comes to life: the warren of pedestrian streets near my hostel is chock-ablock with *sheesha* cafés and quick-serve eateries. It's dinnertime, but I'm squeamish about street food even though it looks edible enough; I'm determined to dodge the dreaded "Nile Pile," so I make my way to the cluster of high-rise international hotels around the enormous traffic circle of Midan Tahrir. It's abuzz with holidaymaking Egyptians and speeding cars while neon-lit advertising signs watch serenely from the tops of nearby buildings. Negotiating traffic in this city is an adventure that makes Rome seem tame: no traffic lights, vehicles speeding in every direction,

a giant game of dodgeball. Coming from jaywalker-friendly Montréal, I love it. The World Series of urban warfare.

The 1960s-era Nile Hilton feels like those once-chic overseas hotels from some old adventure film: a gaudy gold-and-colored-sphere chandelier hangs in the lobby; a mélange of guests, Western tourists and traditionally garbed Middle Easterners. I enjoy a bite of fairly unadventurous dinner in an outdoor eatery overlooking a lush courtyard: decent, safe, and moderately priced, which suits me fine for now. Maybe later in the trip I'll muster up more courage and chow down on street grub.

The Corniche road fronting the Nile is party central; families and gangs of youths mill about or ride music-blarney party boats along the river. The waterway is broad and expansive, its blackness reflecting the crazy quilt of pulsating boat lights. I see quite a number of slender young men walking arm-in-arm: this is by no means a gay gesture in these parts, just the way locals express camaraderie. Though looking at a few of them, I begin to wonder...especially the more gregarious packs who wag their heads at me and exclaim "Welcome! Welcome!" Still, I don't try anything: I'm back in the no-fuck zone. Later I hear from other gay travelers how they were repeatedly propositioned by secretive gay locals across the Middle East; no such action for me.



I've got to get rid of this thing, I muse, fingering my Israeli passport. It's *verboten* at some future stops. Researching online, I find a number of DHL offices nearby...but thanks to the holiday, they're shuttered up tight and will stay that way throughout my visit.

On to Plan B: one of the big downtown hotels. I walk back to the Nile to the Semiramis Intercontinental. I approach from the rear, behind service driveways leading to the main road.

"You walk like an Egyptian," a thinly bearded fellow says. I don't think he's making a Bangles reference.

"Where you going?" *Ub-oh*. I've read about this line: it usually means, "I'll show you the way for a not-inconsiderable sum." But I keep it friendly.

"Just the hotel."

“Go that way,” he points. “I’ll show you.” He invites me down a dark driveway. No thanks.

“Nah, I’m just going to go this way,” I motion, pointing at the driveway. At this he gets incensed.

“I’m just trying to help you!” *Right*. I smile and wave him away, but the encounter leaves me a little shaken.

Inside the Semiramis it’s a different story: a newer place than the Nile Hilton, their business center on the second floor is polite, solicitous, and charges about the same to mail a UPS package that I’d pay elsewhere—if anyplace else actually was open.



This museum looks like it belongs in a museum: dusty, richly patinaed display cases are stuffed with carvings, statues, mummies...anything the British, French and other occupiers hadn’t managed to steal. It’s the Egyptian Museum, a low-slung neoclassical beast reclining lazily across Midan Tahrir. Billy Crystal’s right: hieroglyphics really do look like a comic strip about a character named Sphinky.

Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom...what’s astounding about this civilization was its longevity. If Rome was a sprint, an incandescent flash engulfing the Mediterranean—including Egypt itself—for a smattering of centuries, then this country was a marathon, its Pharaonic dominion spanning millennia. The hieroglyphs, the lavish tombs, the inscrutable pyramids—all this flourished when Rome or Athens were mud huts or less, when Jerusalem was a paltry Canaanite settlement, when the Americas and Europe held thin clusters of hunters, gatherers, and cave dwellers.

The Nile’s the reason, but it’s more than just the river *per se*: rains from central Africa would roar down to the sea, causing the waterway to flood. Flooding cycles gifted the lowlands with fertile soil—the only region so blessed amid thousands of miles of arid desert. It was the perfect place for agrarian civilization to take hold, and with civilization came writers, artists, engineers—and pharaohs. The word itself is derived from *per-aa*, “great house.”

The museum isn't the only bit of faded urbanity: Cairo's city center is a pageant of Mediterraneanized nineteenth-century Paris. With the Nile eventually dammed and contained over a century ago, Egypt's rulers went ahead and ordered up a city core in accordance with the latest European fashion. Meanwhile, on the fringes of this "new" city core sprouted upscale residential districts: Zamalek, on one of the river's islands, a blend of more dirty high-rises—some vintage, others not-so-vintage—and shops on its main drag, Sharia 26th of July. It's something of an expat hangout so more establishments are open here than in the city center; for lunch I find a French-themed place that serves a pretty mean Italian-style pizza—call it "European fusion." After a wander of quiet side streets—more crumbling apartment blocks—I hop a cab back to town. I'm probably being overcharged, but refuse to haggle over what I calculate is probably four dollars.

After fighting Corniche traffic I disembark at Garden City, a quiet knot of old mansions canopied by shady trees. Late-model Mercedeses float serenely down winding streets. I snap a photo of one wedding-cake-white home, beautifully restored, only to learn it's an embassy. The guard outside is firm but surprisingly kind.

"Canada?" he says, learning where I'm from. "*Parlez-vous français?*"

He hails from one of the franco-African nations; sadly, linguistic kinship doesn't grant me consideration: he makes me delete the photo of one of the few edifices in this city not coated in grime.



En route to the pyramids. Like the guidebooks say, the Giza complex really does lie right at the edge of the city. But this banal factoid does little to prepare one for the sight of these great structures looming behind a sea of grimy high-rises. They're just *there*, imposing and monstrous, perfectly wrought triangles that just so happen to be four-and-a-half thousand years old. Their geometric perfection is equaled by their tonnage: they're pretty much solid stone inside.

My hostel offers a reasonable car-and-driver option to get to the pyramids; typically it's *caveat emptor* for hotel-based excursions in scam-prevalent Egypt, but this one looks more on the level. My driver, Jamil,

a heavysset middle-aged fellow, brings along his quiet, sweet seven-year-old son, Mustafa, who's off school for the holiday week.

"You should go to the Papyrus Museum before we go to the pyramids," Jamil says. *Okay, sounds good...* though I'm still unaware of the ulterior motive.

Drivers in poorer countries derive commissions from dragging foreign tourists to shops thinly disguised as "museums." This one specializes in papyrus art—the demo of how this ancient proto-paper is made, from crosshatches of wet leaves, is quite interesting, but it's immediately followed by a nonstop sales pitch. *Sorry fellas.* That poster-sized \$500 piece isn't going to fit in my backpack; still, I do find something compelling and small, a painting of the jackal-headed god Anubis holding some Pharaonic dude's hand. Homoerotic subtext? I miss it at first—though I suspect its sellers do as well.

This episode is just the opening salvo in what I term the Great Tout War that must be waged to reach my objective, the pyramids themselves. I make the mistake of offhandedly mentioning to my driver that I might be interested in a camel ride.

"You know," he says, "the pyramids are too crowded. You see nothing. Maybe just a camel ride?"

I'm not quite clear what he's driving at—I want to do both—but I'm still an amateur at this game. He drives me over to camel stables some distance from the Giza complex.

"Three hours, around the complex, full panorama," the fellow running the place says, drawing lines in the sand by the outdoor table where we sit. "625 pounds"—around US\$100. I'm no expert, but this sounds like a lot. I say "no thanks" and get a harangue about how awful the pyramids really are up-close, how they're not worth the admission, and so forth. Finally my driver rescues me and we're off.

"Very bad price! You almost could buy the camel!" Jamil exclaims, though a part of me wonders if he'd be singing the same tune if I went for it. I'd planned for this to be a low-key day like my visit to Petra, but obviously that's not how it works around here.

"Just drop me off at the entrance," I say.

"One more place," he offers. "Right next to the entrance."

Okay, fine. At this place a fellow in a *thawb* insists the camels are top-notch: "This is a *government* stable," he asserts...whatever that

means. This one's not inside the Giza complex either, which means the view will be akin to watching a ballgame from nosebleed seats. No thanks. I tell Jamil and Mustafa I'll be back in a couple of hours. Dodging a bunch more vendors selling tickets that aren't tickets, I buy the real thing from a not-terribly-well-marked booth. Like something out of Willy Wonka the actual ticket is gold-fringed; with it I pass through a security check and enter the pyramid complex on the Giza plateau.

They say most of the vendors and touts have been kicked off the complex proper but there are still loads of them, mostly selling postcards and knickknacks on dusty rugs beside the footpaths. Yet another camel jockey is not so demure: I'm starting to learn that "no thanks" here is just an invitation for more haggling. This fellow chases me for a spell quoting ever-better prices—some of which are actually compelling—but at this point I'm too annoyed to go for it. *What part of fuck off don't you understand?*

Trying to shake these aggravations out of my head, I come upon the Sphinx. Cutesy platitudes about "smaller in real" life fail to capture it fully: this thing is *small*. Since part of it is below ground level, it rises barely a couple of dozen feet. All those pictures of it, shoulder-to-shoulder with a pyramid in the background (including mine—I can't resist perpetuating the illusion) are tricks of perspective as the huge monoliths are some distance away.

It gets quieter heading up the path to the granddaddy of them all, the Great Pyramid of Khufu. Up close these structures have jagged, craggy surfaces, but that's merely the product of age and vandalism: once upon a time the pyramids were encased in polished limestone; what we see today merely is the inner layer. The scale is spellbinding: each block is several feet square, almost as large as one of the camels waiting at the base. The scene is captivating enough for a photo, and this triggers the next round of the Tout War.

A boy of maybe thirteen, curly hair and a white hoodie, hurries up. I indicate I'm not interested in a ride, but he insists on posing for my pictures with *keffiyeh* and whip in hand.

"You have to take picture! Free! Free!" he keeps shouting. He tries to fit me with the *keffiyeh* and the whip.

“No thanks,” I say again, though it’s almost futile. I wave him away—but not so fast. He stops me, rubbing his fingers together.

“*Baksheesh.*” A tip. I tell him I have no small change so he offers to change a bill of mine. I hand it to him...and he smiles, spirits it away, and dashes off.

Doing the math, I realize I’ve been swindled out of maybe two dollars, and yet somehow this breaks my mental camel’s back. The voraciousness at which I’ve been pursued and accosted, again and again...it’s almost an insult to the great monuments. *Does it really have to be this way?* I try the whole “put yourself in their shoes” exercise and come up blank: the circumstances that spawn such behavior lie beyond my grasp. Egypt is the poorest country I’ve visited, and these folks seem almost *angry* about it—vengeful, I’d say—when confronting tourists who to them must seem impossibly wealthy. It’s sobering: however dysfunctional our society—or my modest life—may seem, it doesn’t amount to a hill of beans, in Bogart parlance, when measured against this place.



Visitors are allowed inside the pyramids, a privilege that may not last much longer. It’s a tricky climb up a narrow, steep stairway-cum-ladder to the tomb at the top. An echo of what I saw in Jerusalem: the great stone blocks rise at an angle for hundreds of feet, perfectly shaped and fitted and, as my uncle said, accurate by millimeters. Those extraterrestrials again.

The king’s chamber at the top is little more than an empty room; the treasures within have long since been looted or placed in museums. Light filters in through shafts leading diagonally upward to the outside. Apparently the pharaoh at first wanted to be buried underground, but then later chose this room with a view to spend eternity.

Circling the pyramid on the outside, I pass the two other monuments in the place, the Pyramids of Khafre and Menkaure. The latter structure, smallest of the three, bears a gouge in its side from an attempted dismantling in the twelfth century; hard though it may seem to believe, for many generations the Muslim rulers of Egypt frowned upon these structures and anything related to ancient Egypt: too

pagan. Though coming here back then must have been easier; probably no scrum of touts.

I find a way to leave them and most everyone behind by climbing the sandy heights of the plateau behind the pyramids. At the top of the ridge, in the distance, lies a cluster of tourists, camels, vendors, and the rest. But between them and the pyramids...nothing. This stretch of the plateau is as forlorn and empty as it has been for millennia; I get sand in my hiking sandals as I plod upward. In the shimmering calm of the desert, the press of civilization recedes into insignificance.



I meet Jamil and Mustapha back at the entrance and we drive south, to Memphis, toward the step pyramid of Saqqara. The two-lane road parallels a water channel running from the Nile that renders the place an oasis. But while the parkland outside the Saqqara complex is a paradise of fluffy palms, the village en route is the real Egypt: squalor, dirt, almost more dispiriting than the townships of the Cape Flats on the other end of the continent. The muddy brown channel is polluted with trash; unfinished, rundown structures lie alongside. Still, people make do: women carry buckets of water on their heads; kids and old men ride donkeys along the side of the road.

A lunch of kebabs and freshly baked pita at a shady outdoor eatery is followed by one last bit of salesmanship: this time it's a "rug museum." The fellow here shows me one carpet after another in spite of my protestations that none of these will fit in my pack.

"If you have a magic carpet, I'll buy it," I tell him. *Maybe now he'll shut up.* He laughs and keeps right on selling.

The Saqqara complex, home of the step pyramids, is much quieter. It has the feel of a dress rehearsal for Giza: these pyramids are stair-stepped, as engineers were still learning how to build in true pyramidal form, limestone blocks bearing weight at an angle. Mustapha asks if he can tag along and I'm happy to indulge: we evade one elderly tout, cane in hand, who insists on showing us around the intricately hieroglyphed tombs. Instead we sneak photographs—they aren't allowed, but my camera snaps them without flash—and pose like characters in the paintings. Walk like an Egyptian indeed.



I'm still squeamish about street food. On advice of guides both printed and online, I'm not even drinking local tap water, at least not without purification. Luckily I packed in my James Bond gadget kit a mini-water purifier, a high-tech "mixed-oxidant" device no larger than a stack of pencils. It doesn't do much to improve the taste of Cairo tap water, however, so I stick to the admittedly wasteful practice of water bottles. For dinner, I try one of the big boats moored in the middle of the Nile that cater to Western tourists and upscale Egyptians. The heavy hand of America is once more apparent—the place sports a Chili's, which I give a miss in favor of something more local. Again, freshly baked pita. I could get used to this.

After the pharaohs came the Muslims and the Copts, each of whom set up shop at opposite ends of the sprawling city. I walk the mile or so east of the city center to Islamic Cairo; although the streets become narrower and less clean, I don't feel unsafe. For all my tales of would-be scams and swindles, Egypt has very little actual robbery or violent crime: it's a tight-knit culture and thievery is met with ostracism. Consequently, I'm left alone as I wander the narrow alleyways by the Khan el-Khalili, the old Islamic market. Again due to the holiday, the streets are quiet and many shops are shut; still, I find the experience almost more captivating for its tranquility; yesterday Jamil told me that Eid is a family-time sort of holiday. Consequently I see almost exclusively locals here on the streets; the odd pale-skinned Westerner sticks out like a sore thumb.

I turn off here and there onto small laneways where children dart about; from a second-floor window, an activity performed the world over: a woman hangs laundry on a clothesline above the street. Most of us in the West would probably find living here unbearable, the grime and dirt deal-breakers. Still, I find the walkable density to be as welcoming as any medieval quarter back in Europe.

Passing by soaring minarets of various mosques, I reach the Citadel, the sprawling complex built by Saladin. I then bridge the distance between this place and the even-older Coptic sector on a bit of modernity, the Cairo Metro. The only subway in Africa, it seems

well-run but heavily used: like the rest of the city, it's dirty and crowded.

The Copts are one of the Middle East's many minorities; they're also the oldest sect of Christianity, dating back to 42 AD—not long after the blood of Christ was dry on the crucifix, it seems. The tiny quarter boasts a number of churches that are completely unlike any in Europe: rounded stone towers and domes that anticipate the minarets of later eras. The intricate floral-styled interior paintings and carvings are equally distinctive: this is early Byzantine architecture and I'm not the only one to be fooled by its resemblance to Islamic over Western flourishes. Even the Crusaders persecuted the Copts, not realizing that they were religious kin. Outgoing U.S. President Bush wasn't the first to say, "I thought they was all Muslims."



It's a splendid evening, my last in the city, as I ascend Cairo Tower. It's a 1960s Nasser-era construct built to showcase the nation's prowess, something of an Islamic Space Needle. The white concrete weave of the exterior is eye-catching, but somebody didn't do their homework on capacity control: a single tiny elevator is the only means of access, which means long lines on both ascent and descent. The views at the top are superb and sweeping: Cairo has precious little in the way of skyscrapers; the few it does have are mostly luxury hotels huddled around the Nile.

I stare out at the monstrous city, a liquid expanse of lights stretching to the horizon, and ponder the paradox: on the one hand, the cafés, street life, and urban chemistry make it one of the most exciting places on Earth—in many respects, it could be London, Paris or New York with a cultural and climatic twist. And yet...it's hobbled, a great beast weakened by time and circumstance. Economically the country has been stagnant for decades, with many residents complaining that resurgent religious extremism threatens to de-cosmopolitanize the city. I hope not. It feels as if Cairo is just lying in wait for Egypt to rise again, so it may once more take its place as one of the great centers of the world.