

By David Schoenberg

Having just returned from a 10 day tour of Egypt on the Ya'lla Tours, "New Beginnings" educational trip for travel agents I wanted to share my experiences. The trip was designed to show North American travel agents and journalists what it is like to travel in Egypt after the revolution of January 25, 2011.

23 travel agents from all over the US arrived in Cairo on May 6, 2011 to begin our tour. As some of the agents arrived early on the 6th we ventured out of our hotel, the Hyatt Cairo in the late afternoon to explore by foot. We walked along the Nile, north to the "Lovers Bridge" where we saw beautiful views of the Nile and many Egyptians going about their daily lives. Since Fridays are part of the Egyptian weekend there were many young people out walking with friends and family admiring the beautiful scenery, taking pictures, and enjoying the comfortable temperatures that followed us throughout our journey. After a brief shopping stop we made our way to Tahrir Square where the revolution began on January 25. The square was busy with traffic as it always is with taxis buses, and pedestrians. It was loud with car horns honking and the sounds of voices around the square. There were 5 organized groups in different parts of the square who were all gathered peacefully. Some held flags while others held signs. Some groups were heard speaking their message (in Arabic) while others just marched silently around the square displaying their signs and flags. All groups were making their opinions heard through peaceful gatherings. Although we did not know what cause they were all representing, they did so without violence and without confrontation.



Tahrir Square on May 6, 2011

The next morning our tour began with many of the usual Egyptian sites visited during the next 2 days in Cairo. We visited the Pyramids and Sphinx at Giza and the Step Pyramid at Sakkara. We shopped at the Khan el Khalili Markets and toured the Mohammad Ali Mosque. The Egyptian Museum rounded out our time in Cairo and it was off to Luxor and points south.

After a few days in the Cairo area there was one thing that seemed different from my previous trip to Egypt some 12 years ago. The tourist sites were virtually empty. No crowds at the Pyramids, no lines anywhere, no tourists bumping into you in the Egyptian Museum. It was as if we were on a private visit to some of the most spectacular sites in the world. Imagine you were in Disneyland and the park was only open for your group of 25 people and there were no lines, no crowds, but the rides were all open, the concessions were open, the park was fully staffed and secure. What would you pay for that type of experience? Now think about being the only tourists at the Great Pyramids of Giza. What would you pay to experience your own private tour of the one of the Ancient Seven Wonders of the World? For me it was priceless.



Are they open for business?

Our tour continued in Luxor where we went to the Karnak Temple, the Valley of the Kings, and the Temple of Hatshepsut. Here in Luxor we actually began to see a few tour groups. There were about a dozen tour busses parked at the Karnak Temple when we arrived which is certainly more than we saw in two full days of touring in Cairo. However, when I asked our guide what the parking lot looked like prior

to the revolution he said to imagine about 200 busses rather than the twelve we encountered. Since Karnak is the largest temple ever built, the few groups that were touring it at the same time were hardly noticeable. Again it felt like we had the place to ourselves. The few groups that we did encounter were from Russia and the UK. No sign of any American tourists yet.

We continued our tour though Upper Egypt on the Nile cruise vessel, Sonesta St George. A luxurious 5 star boat that was sailing at 50% occupancy during our 4 night cruise. As this was my first Nile Cruise I was anxious to experience the difference in touring Egypt by boat instead of land. Well, it works. The cruise will give you enough time to relax between ports that you actually feel like you are on an exotic vacation with some very well timed stops along the way. You really get a nice mix of touring and relaxing which helps deal with the warm sunny days. Think Palm Springs rather than Miami in the summer. Touring a temple made entirely of stone can be taxing on the body when things heat up in Egypt so I highly recommend using the cruise to help balance the time between the two. The other guests aboard the Sonesta St George were mainly from the UK with not an American tourist in site.

The cruise continued toward Aswan with occasional stops along the way for visits to the Temple of Horus, the Temple of Sobek, and other interesting sites. We even had our own personal shopping mall pull up to the boat while we were cruising to sell their locally made trinkets, clothing, and souvenirs. If you couldn't find what you were looking for in the onboard shop you could certainly find it from these mobile vendors.



The shopping mall comes to you

On arrival in the city of Aswan we were treated to a ride in a traditional Egyptian sailboat called a felucca which took us to some of the most ancient sites in Egypt. We then boarded our air conditioned motor coach for the trip south to Abu Simbel to visit the incredible Temples of Ramses II and Nefertari. Upon arrival we were the ONLY bus at Abu Simbel. Again, we had the whole place to ourselves! The temples at Abu Simbel are spectacular and well worth the 3 hour drive. One could choose to fly instead of drive but the air schedule is such that you would not have enough time to see the temples. Upon return that evening, all in our group agreed that the drive was more than worth it.



Quiet afternoon at Abu Simbel

Our trip continued back to Cairo via air where we gathered at the Fairmont Nile City Hotel for a full day seminar put on by Ya'lla Tours President Ronen Paldi. The seminar was titled "Tourism in Egypt in the New Era, the Challenges and Opportunities". In addition to learning how to sell Egypt in a post revolution period we all had an opportunity to speak with two young women who were instrumental in helping to organize the revolution of January 25. They spoke about the days after the revolution in Tahrir Square as they witnessed a nation come together with a single goal of removing the current government from power and making Egypt a better place for all who live there. Their mission for peaceful change continues as new elections will be held in September. Most Egyptians are happy with the recent developments and look forward to better things ahead.



Discussing the revolution

One thing I failed to mention is safety while traveling in Egypt in a post revolution period. The reason I have not talked about security is that it was never an issue for our group. Egypt is more secure now than any time in recent history. The Egyptian people are reliant upon tourism for over 30% of their economy so it is in their best interest to make tourist safety their number one priority. All tourist sites had a large number of Tourist Police visible. Roads that lead to these sites all have police checkpoints that allow them to monitor who can visit these sites. We also had an extra level of security as all Ya'lla Tour groups in Egypt are accompanied by an armed guard who rides with us from beginning to end.

At the end of our journey, all of the travel agents in our group felt confident in sending their clients to Egypt. No one expressed any doubt that Egypt is ready to accept tourists and provide a safe and secure environment. If you do send your clients to Egypt it is very important to use a tour company that is experienced in Egypt. Ya'lla Tours has their own ground operations in Egypt and is in daily communication with them from the US. I strongly recommend that you use a tour company that has expertise and experience in this part of the world. Things are not perfect in Egypt but where in the world can you go with a 100% guarantee of perfection? Look at your local newspaper and TV news and tell me that things are perfect where you live. I doubt it. Now is the time to visit Egypt. No crowds, no lines, and a safe and secure environment awaits you. If you don't believe me then feel free to speak to one of the travel agents from around the US who experienced Egypt with me. Email me at david@yallatours.com