

The Rosetta Stone, djellabas, and cobra origami: life beyond Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 3 weeks 32 to 40

The Rosetta Stone was bound to cause trouble.

As the sparkling Christmas lights came down and falling snow created a siege mentality, our thoughts turned to Egypt and cruising along the Nile.

Until coming to France, we have never organised ourselves onto an organised tour group. A bit of snobbery perhaps, but also there's more of a sense of discovery on your own. However, seeing Marrakech last year partially through French eyes (and stomachs!) had added to the entertainment. So when we got back to Entre-deux-Eaux after this Christmas in Nottingham and New Year in London, John investigated holidays in Egypt, flying from nearby Metz/Nancy airport. We ended up booking with last year's French travel company.

Our cruise ship from Aswan to Luxor and back to Aswan was Cheops III. It was a mass of dark polished wood and dark red carpeting. At quaysides we docked parallel to other parked boats, through which we walked to reach land. The reception areas of these boats were sparkling, marbled and chandeliered. The queue for the ladies (on the return flight) pronounced our boat vastly inferior, and certainly not up to its five star ranking. "It would only be two star at most in France", they agreed. They were also piqued because the crew did not speak very good French (we had found their English much better).

"Why is it that all the non-Arabic signs appear in English instead of French?" our fellow-tourists demanded aggressively of our guide. She diplomatically did not point out that the French army had only occupied Egypt for three years whilst the British hung around for 74 years. In fact the former British presence was never alluded to throughout our tour. Not even when we crossed the first Aswan dam. Our guide instead soothed French sensibilities by bringing up the Rosetta Stone. She reminded them that it was a Frenchman, Champollion, who had realised its significance and who had deciphered it. And he had cleverly managed this without having the original in front of him. The wicked British had attacked the ship on which the Rosetta Stone was being transported to France, ransacking it for antiquities. And having stolen the Stone, the British only allowed the French a copy from which to work.

This diversionary tactic by our guide worked well. Our fellow passengers muttered obscenities about British rapacity. We couldn't help privately wondering whether the initial French possession also qualified as stealing.

The vexed subject of the Rosetta Stone was to crop up later. We were standing on the pretty island of Philae. Well, actually, it wasn't Philae itself, which was one of the sites which was submerged after the creation of the Aswan dams. It was a neighbouring but higher island which had been re-sculpted to resemble Philae. Many of the historic buildings had been re-assembled stone by stone (however defaced) on the new island. And defaced they were. As our borrowed guide book pointedly observed when describing Philae, "It is testimony to the sheer quantity of antiquities in Egypt that through 4000 or more years, with one pharaoh defacing the work of another, Christians defacing the work of

pagans, Muslims defacing the work of Christians and tourists defacing the work of everybody, there still remains so much to be defaced by those who can find the time and excuse for doing so." We had already seen the faces of the Egyptian gods chiselled out by the Christians, the Coptic crosses superimposed on the elegant columns and the incised Greek inscriptions to Bishop Theodoros, who had authorised the destructiveness.

And what did this vandalism have to do with the Rosetta Stone? At the time of resumption of French-tour-group hostilities regarding the Rosetta Stone, we were all standing in the Temple at Philae, beneath a very official-looking French inscription carved into Egyptian art-work and commemorating the victory of General Desaix over the Marmelukes in 1799. Our guide recalled the team of French scholars who accompanied the French Army, and whose action in rescuing the Rosetta Stone led to our understanding of the whole of ancient Egyptian culture (thanks to the brilliant decipherment of hieroglyphics by the Champollion, despite the aforementioned theft by the British).

One of the more thoughtful members of the group, as the mutterings started again about British perfidy, wondered whether each foreign tour group was shown the things that favoured their nation. But it could also be the background of our guide. She revealed between the cigarettes which she chain-smoked and ground out on the historic stones of many a temple floor, that her good French was due to having been privately educated by French Franciscan fathers in Alexandria. She then pointed upwards so we could gaze with pride at the names of French soldiers carved over other antiquities, starting with the name Balzac (though not Honoré de, our guide assured us).

Food was another thing that made a French tour different. When we first received our tour details, we were amused to notice how trips and activities seemed to be planned around regular meal-times. We also hoped that the well-publicised interest of the French in their food would lead to excellent ship's hygiene. With the success of books like "Frenchwomen don't get fat", we also expected well-balanced lean cuisine (Egyptian style). There were a surprising number of hefty women (not to mention men) in the group. On the first day one of them charged into the middle of the queue, stretched out an arm and grabbed five of the oval puffy breads to go with her heaped plate of rice and meat, stuffing one into her mouth before she got back to her table. (We later discovered that she too was a chain smoker and raucous card player. And disguised later on in a turquoise djellaba and heavy eye make-up she was positively fearsome). In fact even the slimmest of women put away enormous quantities of food. And the men were completely unabashed by the repeat trips back to the serving area for seconds and thirds. The quantity of bread stashed away was exceeded only by the quantity of cigarette smoke produced throughout the boat.

We dined with a family of four from St Etienne, beyond Lyons. They were extremely friendly. They soon let us know (at our first meal) that the coffee was undrinkable (it was), the white cheese foul (saltier than any French) and the Egyptian rosé wine not up to French standards despite the supervision from Bordeaux (according to the label). They left anything that had an unfamiliar flavour, and got another plate filled with more acceptable food.

Pudding reminded us of children's parties and we rather enjoyed it. But our dining companions were puzzled by the platters of jelly (usually red or yellow), blancmange (likewise usually pink or yellow), fruit mousses, and small squares of sweet sponge cake. They usually restricted themselves to more recognisable fresh oranges, bananas, or melon. The only "foreign" food they mentioned liking was Chinese; how did they survive last year in Morocco? Fortunately the tour company doesn't go to Greece or Turkey.

By far the best meal was on "Egyptian Night". We thoroughly enjoyed the spicier shish kebabs and the honey pastries but the others on our table weren't impressed. The only drawback was that we were expected to be disguised in djellabas for the evening. There was a costume shop on board, and also a rowing boat had hooked itself on to Cheops III the night before whilst we were waiting to go through the lock at Esna. There had been a lot of shouting till the lounge windows on Cheops' fourth floor were opened. Then the men in the rowing boat began to toss up plastic bags of clothes to the lounge passengers above. Dresses and robes were unwrapped and held up. Shouted bargaining commenced. Payment was thrown back down in the empty plastic bags. As a result of these purchases, a few of the men achieved rather stunning Lawrence of Arabia looks if they were tall and tanned, and there was a very dodgy looking oil sheikh. All the (mainly Moslem) women we saw in the streets were in black or dark-coloured outer robes. But many of the female passengers (and disconcertingly one man) looked like something from an imagined harem, with bejewelled scarlet and gold head-dresses and skimpy bodices and body hugging fabrics. If reproached for our conspicuous lack of yashmak and tea-towel disguise, I was prepared to declare that I was an Edwardian lady landscape artist (long cream skirt and white high necked blouse) and that John was a Cheops waiter (black trousers and white shirt).

Ah well, back to the sights and splendours! We knew that the Valley of the Kings could never look quite like the television image we had from seeing archaeologist John Rohmer standing alone in the deserted remains of the tomb workers' village. There were still robed men with scarves over their mouths, scratching in the sand outside the kings' tombs, excavating more workers' houses, and passing chains of buckets to whitened lorries. But we weren't prepared for the dense files of visitors inside the kings' tombs, shuffling up and down between the painted walls of the tombs, disconsolate at being forbidden to use their cameras, and with tomb guardians clapping their hands to keep the files shuffling. Hard to focus on any details. It all felt unreal. To compensate for not seeing much, our fellow passengers returned to the coach laden with shards of rock covered with this year's tomb paintings and lucky cat and scarab repro grave goods. A more picturesque view was of the blue and scarlet hot air balloons drifting over the Valley in the early morning haze.

The days when we broke free of the processions of air-conditioned coaches were more fun. Like the day in Aswan when we "should" have been viewing the wonders of the High Dam and sailing en masse in feluccas. We strolled up the esplanade, boarded a local ferry boat for a few pence to cross the Nile, and took camels across a stretch of desert to a ruined Coptic monastery. It had cells for 300 monks and dormitories for several hundred pilgrims as well as church, stables, bakeries and workshops before Saladin destroyed it. Traces of

wall paintings remained, though the saints' faces had been defaced and names cut into the plaster. We wandered round the deserted, windswept walls and cells till more camels and riders arrived.

We made our way back across the desert, and climbed up to the tombs of nobles and governors cut around 4000 years ago into the rock face high above the Nile. And there in the midst of them were the walls a tiny Coptic church whose paintings were much better preserved than those of the monastery. No mention of them in our guide books. Was it a fake? Although the tombs were very crude compared with the royal ones in the valleys of the Kings and Queens, it was more fun to scramble around them and the view was spectacular (indeed, the Aga Khan chose an adjacent site as the most beautiful spot in the world for his mausoleum).

No Blackmore holiday is complete without several trips to markets or souks. And Aswan was ideal, apart from the sheer fatigue of haggling. John's quest was for saffron and a plain white Egyptian cotton shirt. All I fancied were some little clay Nubian figures of shepherds and men on camels for a Christmas crib. The traders had other ideas and were determined to sell us djellabas and statuettes. And, as most tourists wore trainers or sandals, my dust-encrusted leather boots were an obvious target for everyone with a shoe-cleaning kit. As dusk fell the processions of jingling horse-drawn calèches laden with German tourists became a hazard. Both John and a spice seller were knocked flying and bruised by one of the calèches.

After a sniffing and tasting John ruled out all "Egyptian saffron." This was stacked high on every herb and spice stall and cost less than a Euro for 100g. Our herbal back home later identified this as safflower, or dyer's, fake or bastard saffron, good for dyeing silk or mixing with talcum to make rouge. At another stall, after continuing to press for "real saffron", small plastic boxes of Spanish saffron were produced. These seemed rather old and expensive. After discussion at another a pack of aromatic Iranian saffron finally appeared from the recesses and, after protracted haggling, a purchase of 20g at about 100 times the price per gram of the bastard saffron was finally agreed.

We also haggled successfully for a few gifts. But John was less successful with a shirt, as cartouches and hieroglyphics were standard on all pockets, and no tailor could be found with plain pockets. Instead we bought a tablecloth - an unplanned purchase - right at the end of our shopping trip, having explained to the stall-holder that we were too exhausted to haggle any more and just wanted to know his final final "last price" which we would either accept or walk away. Oh yes, and I never assembled a set of little clay figures the same size, but did find a tiny clay crib scene that I liked. The stall-holder smiled and showed me a Coptic cross tattooed on his wrist (I did cynically wonder whether he had Muslim symbol on his other wrist).

So it was back to the boat to pack up our clothes and acquired treasures, before departing during the night for a last day in Cairo. We also prepared an envelope with gratuity for our ingratiating cabin attendant, who had nevertheless entertained us daily with artworks. We would enter our cabin agog to see how he had folded our dull green bedspreads. Would it be cobras,

crocodiles, mummies or bows? One of the groups had also collected for their monuments guide, but our group had felt less affection for our chain-smoking, rather long-winded guide, (despite her pro-French stance). She had to be phoned on her mobile one day, mid-explanation of the Temple of Luxor carvings, as our group was in danger of missing lunch! And she had already made sizeable commissions at the papyrus and gold shops we'd been forced into - not to mention the personalised gold cartouches printed on T-shirts!

Arriving in Cairo, the pyramids and the sphinx looked just as they do on photos, and again it all felt a bit unreal. But we spent an interesting afternoon in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, which still feels like an Edwardian museum with its old floor-to-ceiling dusty wooden showcases and tiny (if at all) labels, often not indicating provenance. Surely it would only take a student a year or so to label everything (assuming the museum catalogues exist); and at least all the labels could all be turned the right way up! Fortunately the gold and jewels (or paste) of Tutankhamun and Tanis were displayed against dark walls in better lit glass cases - did we see some of those the same cases at the Tutankhamun exhibition at the British Museum in 1972? We spent three happy hours at the Museum and later in the Museum shop I bought myself a little hippo, a reminder of various hippos I'd looked for in temple wall carvings. And finally, as is only proper when concluding a French tour, we went into the gardens and paid our respects at the tomb and statue of Auguste Mariette, the Frenchman responsible for the museum's creation.

However, the Cairo experience isn't quite over. I omitted to describe the restaurant lunch our tour group had near the pyramids. When we returned, in response to a friend who e-mailed:

Glad you enjoyed the Nile trip and looking forward to sampling Johns Egyptian culinary delights. As I type I suspect he is rustling up a mouth-watering menu consisting of camels milk and papyrus soup, roast camels hump en crouete followed by chocolate pyramids in a Nile water coulis!!!!

John had to reply:

Are you sure?? Had camel dung fritters the other day and I was struck down with "Pharaoh's revenge" yesterday - on the road to recovery with the help of the pills we took with us.

So here we are, back in Entre-deux-Eaux with our happy memories and John's dodgy stomach.

The colourful birds were glad to see us returning to replenish their feeders with seed. Before leaving in cold and snowy weather John had filled all our bird feeders and included one of the wooden tit nesting boxes for an extra supply; just like tomb robbers, desperate woodpeckers have pecked much of the outside away trying to get at the contents. Unfortunately the gales and hail have done their best to dismantle the beautiful bird feeder that Nicola had made in the shape and colours of our farmhouse. And even more unfortunately, just down the road Pierre Laine is shooting any small birds he sees anywhere near his chickens' grain.

Outside the snow is falling and we are watching the fields and hills turning white again.