

WEEKEND FT

how to spend it



"MY CAREER MUST BE SLIPPING IF I FOUND TIME TO SIT FOR THIS"

the magical history tour

This was no ordinary trip to Egypt: led by a group of writers with unorthodox views on the origins of the country's relics, and given access to sites normally closed to visitors, Olivia Temple and her fellow travellers embarked on a voyage through time.

NIGHT HAD FALLEN OVER THE Great Pyramid of Cheops, and for the next three hours this forbidding monument was to be our exclusive domain. The pyramid had been closed to visitors for nearly a year, but our group had been given special access.

As I stepped over the portal, I had to battle against mounting claustrophobia. Encouraged by a fellow sufferer, and throwing a cloth over my head before bending double to crawl along the ascending passage, I managed to over-

come the terror. Nothing can prepare you for the vastness of the Grand Gallery as it opens up like a mammoth wound, narrowing as it soars, its limestone sides gleaming. No feeling of reverence swept over us, despite the cathedral-like space – more a sense of our own smallness.

In earlier days, the walls would have been encrusted with bat dung and the air thick with smoke from the burning torches of the guides, but for our visit the interior of the pyramid was well lit, and the clamber to the chambers was

straightforward and bearable. With every step, the purpose of this place became more mysterious. The interior walls were undecorated and unadorned, whereas other pyramids and tombs are highly decorated and colourful.

A massive sarcophagus stood empty and alone in the King's Chamber. We took it in turn to try it out for size. It is almost certain that this pyramid was not built to be a tomb; the sarcophagus is too wide to fit through the passages and must have been placed there early in the con-

struction of the pyramid. Since it has no lid, it can never have had one, for it would have been too big to remove from the chamber.

This was the first of many awe-inspiring experiences which our group encountered during our journey of discovery through the relics of ancient Egypt. I was there as one of the guests in a group of about 40 people led by four writers, Robert Bauval, Graham Hancock, Robert Temple and John West. Our trip began with a week in Cairo,

followed by six nights on a five-star Nile cruise boat from Aswan to Luxor.

These four writers are generally considered to be the leading proponents of serious alternative explanations of the origins of ancient civilisations, particularly ancient Egypt. All four of them, for instance, believe that the Sphinx is much older than the time of its supposed builder, Pharaoh Cheops. Temple believes that it is late Predynastic (about 1,000 years earlier than Cheops); the others believe that it is 7,000 years older. Temple believes that it once sat in a moat filled with water from the harbour which then reached its feet, the quay of which has recently been excavated; the others

think that the water erosion around the Sphinx was caused by prehistoric rain before north Africa developed a dry climate. A constellation of other writers was also present, each contributing their often unorthodox views on the history and symbolism of each site we visited. Our expert Egyptian guides, meanwhile, would gain us access to sites which are normally closed to travellers.

The trip was unique in that it was the first visit to Egypt organised by these "alternative writers" to have been welcomed by Dr Zahi Hawass, the normally ultra-orthodox chief archaeologist of the Giza plateau, who attended and gave a lecture to the group. It was all sympto-

matic of a new Egyptian government policy of befriending fringe Egyptological tendencies in the run-up to the Millennium. Hawass also announced that on New Year's Eve 1999, he intends to have a helicopter place the missing tip on the Great Pyramid, live on international television; the tip will be gold-plated.

Our allotted three hours at the Great Pyramid also included one hour during which the lights inside the pyramid were switched off so that those of us who wanted to soak up the atmosphere or commune with ancient spirits could sit for a period of quiet contemplation. For this, my claustrophobia got the better of me, so I decided to forego the hour of

darkness and instead sat outside to breathe in the history of the place; others in our group chose to spend it meditating in the King's Chamber, while one brave woman lay silently in the subterranean chamber, 350 feet below ground level.

I sat outside the entrance with the inspector of the Great Pyramid and several guards and heard about the work being done by Hawass, who has recently discovered a tomb with its contents intact six miles south of the pyramid. After a while I clambered up a few blocks to look at the original entrance to the pyramid, which is now barred by a locked grill. To my horror, I saw a face peering out at me and two clenched fists



holding the bars. One of our group, fortunately a fit young man with a calm outlook, had been making his way out when the lights were turned out; he had taken a wrong turn and tried to make his exit by clambering up a suffocating shaft like a tarantula. "I think I've come up the wrong way," was his only comment before disappearing into the gloom.

The Great Pyramid was little more than a spit away from our accommodation in Cairo, the Mena House Oberoi Hotel. A private house until 1972, it now has a massive extension and facilities galore: swimming pool, golf course, seven restaurants, a casino and the inevitable conference hall. Most impressive of all, though, is the fact that at dawn, the Great Pyramid looms up through the mist like a dark sentinel only a few hundred yards away.

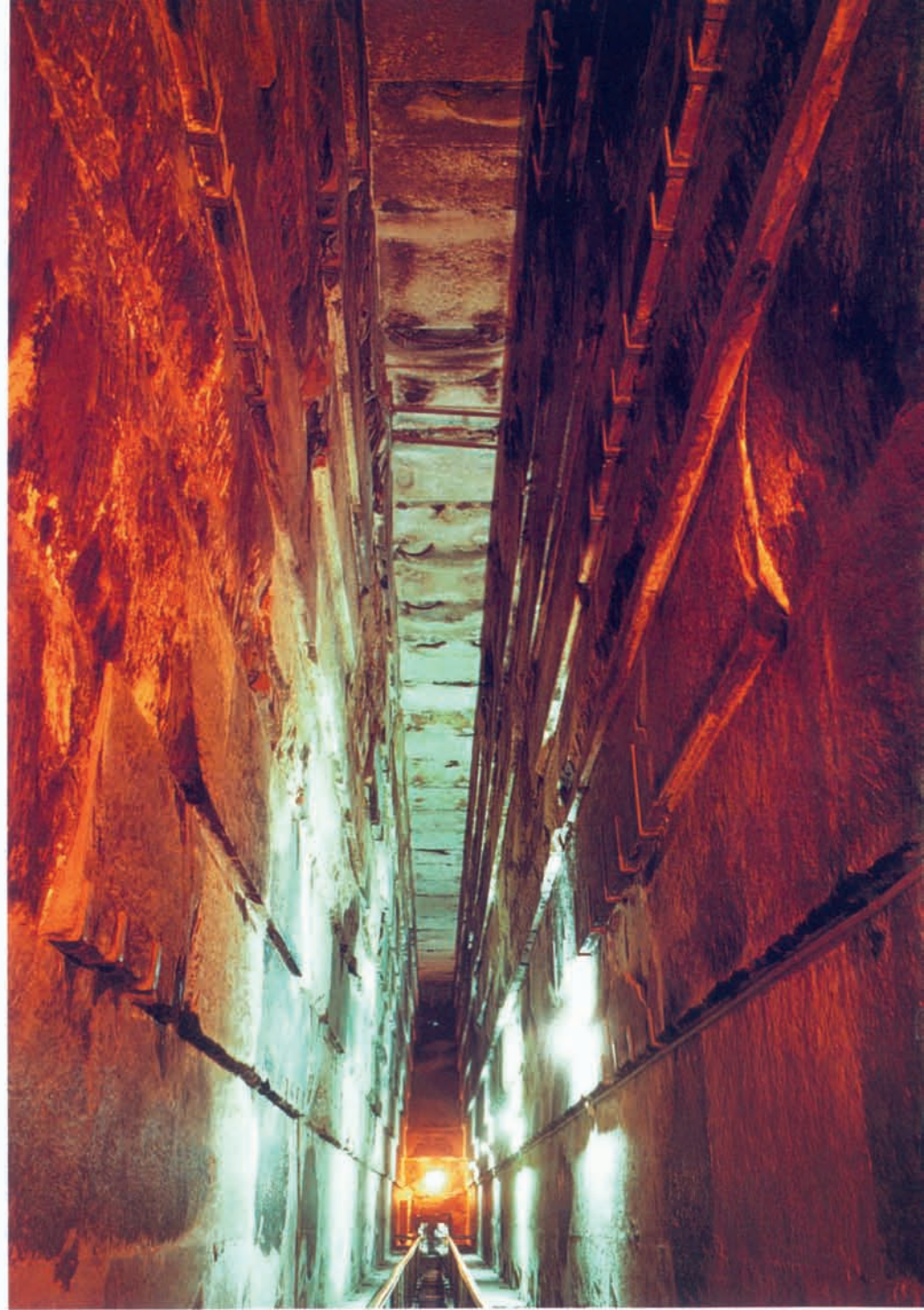
There is some uncertainty surrounding public access to the main Giza pyramids in the future. There is talk about access to the pyramid interiors being granted only to groups such as ours, with special permits and fees. In any case, certain parts of the interiors, such as the subterranean chamber of the Great Pyramid, have generally been accessible only to such groups.

One morning, we saw how strictly access to the monuments is controlled. We had permission to make an out-of-hours visit to the Sphinx, that mysterious man/woman/lion/pharaoh/guardian/dog. We arrived at the pyramids at 5.30am. As we waited for our permit to be produced, a car drew up and five people got out. One of them was Michael Jackson, an incongruous figure in his sparkling jacket and sunglasses, shuffling nervously and tugging a strand of hair over his face. He was told to come back at 8am when the gates opened.

The Sphinx, freshly restored and free of its 10-year scaffolding cage, baffles with its magnificent size and aura of "keeper of the secrets". The head which is too small for the body, the massive paws, the tiny doorway under the tail, the gaze towards the sunrise: it must have been a strange sight in Ptolemy's day, when only the head reared up out of the sand.

Ironically, it is only in recent years that local schools have started to teach children about ancient Egypt and the extraordinary legacy of its 76 pharaohs. At the Cairo Museum, we saw bundles of children painstakingly drawing the

Clockwise from top left: meditating in the King's Chamber, Great Pyramid; the awesome gallery of the Great Pyramid; five of the writers at Elephantine Island, left to right: John West, Yuri Stoyanov, Colin Wilson, Robert Bauval, Robert Temple.



columns and cornices of marble and stone which once graced the desert sands. Our own lessons in Egyptology included a trip to star-gaze at the foot of the Great Pyramid and its companions, Chephren and Mycerinus.

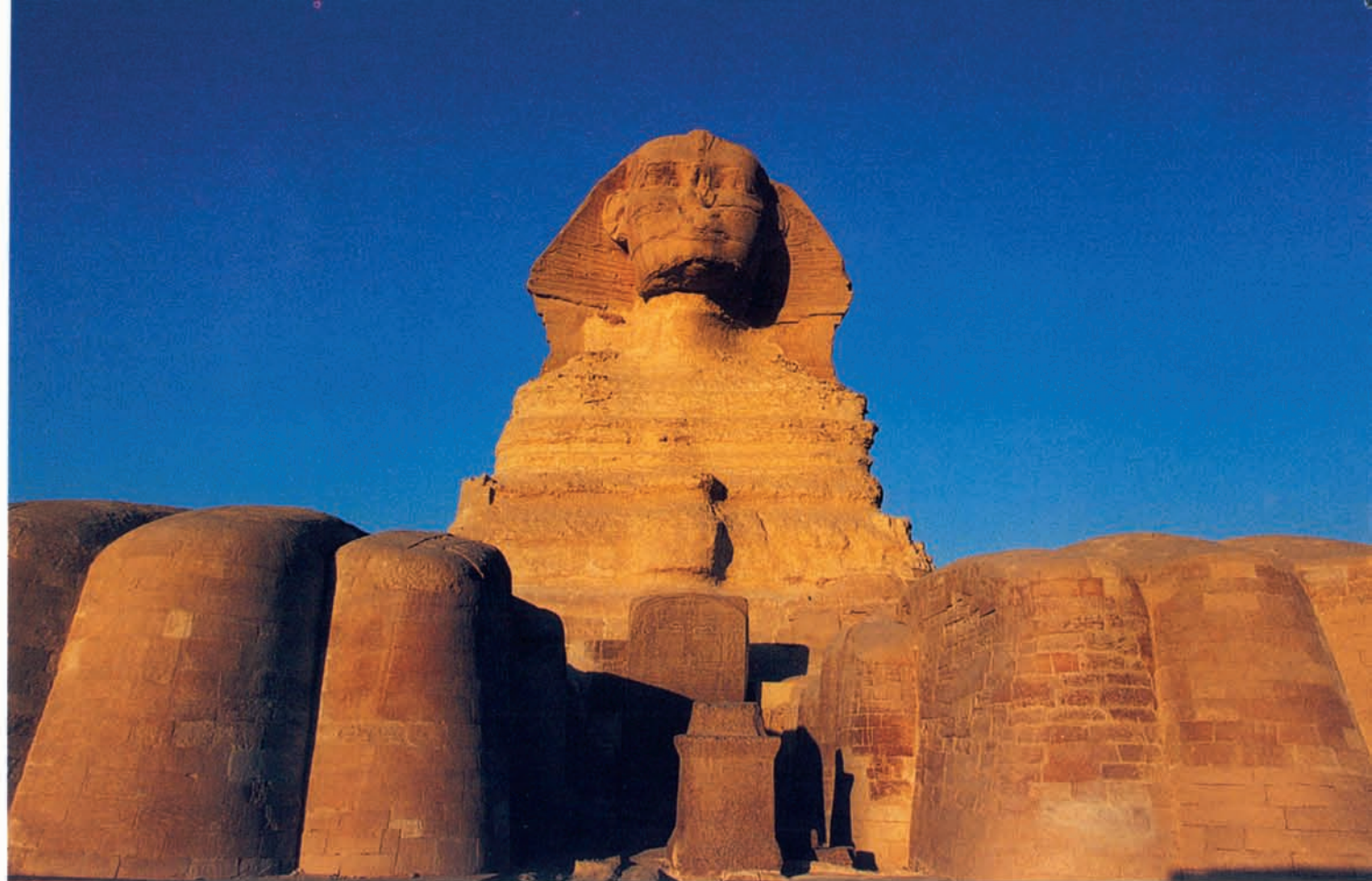
Temple, whose book, *The Sirius Mystery*, was the first to point out patterns on the ground which were star maps, and Robert Bauval, whose theory focuses on the pyramids being aligned in the same pattern as the stars which form the belt of Orion, pointed out the stars in question, which sparked oblig-

ingly. There was also an engrossing lecture, one of several over the two-week period, by Graham Hancock, the author whose quest for lost civilisations has taken him all over the world. He showed slides of an underwater rock formation near Japan which he believes is a sunken building complex, surviving, as he thinks Egypt did, from a civilisation wiped out by a great flood.

Hawass showed slides and told of his latest findings on the Giza plateau, and a splendidly enthusiastic lecturer in Egyptology, Bassam El Shammaa, expounded his theory about a second sphinx which he believes is still hidden under the sand. Temple then discussed his updated book about Sirius and the ancient Egyptian knowledge of that star system.

Cairo, meanwhile, brought us back to earth with a shock: traffic, pollution, undernourished horses and donkeys pulling crates of eggs and gas cylinders. On one of our expeditions to this teeming metropolis we inched across the city to the oldest bazaar in the Arab world where a television film crew had set up in a smoky coffee house to film interviews for an American television documentary with Hawass and three of the writers,

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Hancock, Bauval and West. The narrow alleys were thick with the sweet but choking smoke of hookah pipes, no longer exclusively the domain of men.

Driving back in a taxi to the hotel, Bauval, who was born in Alexandria and has lived in Egypt for some years, took us on a circuitous route to get a view across the city as the sun went down. The skyline was spiked with minarets and domed ice cream dollops of mosques; at the rubbish tips, the *zabaleen*, people who scratch a living by picking over debris, were busy burrowing into the mounds. Plumes of smoke coiled over the city in the pink evening light.

After our week in Cairo, we took a short flight to Aswan where the Nile cruiser, the *Sonesta Sun Goddess*, was waiting. We were given the presidential cabin, which has its own private deck at the fore of the cruiser. In the lobby, a



From top: the newly restored Sphinx; the Nile and its fertile plain; Mustapha, the busker who treated the group to a rendition of *Waltzing Matilda*.

tureen of hot flannels scented with rosewater refreshed us as our luggage was taken to our cabins. Sun loungers, tubs of pink oleander and canvas awnings stretched across one end of the deck transformed it into a floating garden party.

Then a dusk visit to Elephantine Island, half an hour up the river in a motorboat, lights twinkling under scattered stars. Out of nowhere, a tiny boy in a nutshell boat attached himself to a tyre on the side of ours, and sang a medley of songs in English, culminating in *Waltzing Matilda*. Here, elephant shaped rocks grazing for eternity straddled the substrata of Pharaonic foundations like layers of cake. Mud brick walls of the

Jewish city fringed the island. The beaky linen sails of *feluccas* stitched their way smoothly across the water. This is the land of the Nubians, ebony skinned and regal, whose song it was that so inspired the composer Saint-Saëns, as he drifted in one of these boats at the turn of the century, that he scratched the notes he heard on his starched cuff. They were to become the theme of the second movement of his Fifth Piano Concerto.

The Nubian market at Aswan should not be missed, especially in the company of John West, who can take you to the amber shop where jewellery can be made up for you as you wait, in the time it takes to reheel a shoe.

Around us, black-draped women glided past as we strolled among the purple mounds of hibiscus flowers (which, when soaked, produce a fragrant drink called *karkade*), vivid blue indigo powder, figs, dates, tiny lemon-flavoured bananas, dusty grapes and aubergines: we were mesmerised by the subtle palette and interplay of light and colour.

Most mornings we were woken at 5.30 to board a bus to take us to sites before the arrival of the sun and the tourists: sites such as Philae, the Ptolemaic Temple of Isis, moved stone by stone from its original island when the High Aswan Dam threatened to put it under water in the 1960s and, nearby, the eerie Island of Silence, where we spent some minutes in silent contemplation. We also sailed to Kom Ombo, beautifully situated on a bend in the Nile, where the crocodile-headed deity Sobek reigned.

We were taken by horse-drawn carriage to Edfu, the Temple dedicated to Horus, son of Osiris, which is the best preserved temple of the ancient world to be found anywhere. The sheer size of the reliefs and colonnades was daunting, the vivid glimpses of original colour, lapis and ochre, breathtaking. Back on the

At the amber shop in Aswan's Nubian market, jewellery can be made up for you in the time it takes to reheel a shoe.



boat, we had a cocktail of lectures to attend from the writing fraternity. Colin Wilson talked about his many books and his friendship with Robert

Graves. We heard of poltergeists in Pontefract which leave little wet patches behind "like a small cat pee", and of the left brain/right brain theory and how animals are so "right brained", that is intuitive, that "they can see the whole universe". Michael Baigent spoke one evening on the deck, unravelling his detective work summarised in his book *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*.

The Bulgarian writer Yuri Stoyanov, who is based at the Warburg Institute in London, spoke about the Hermetic tradition, a wisdom which claims to have its origins in the beliefs and practices of the Egyptian priests; and Temple described methods of foretelling the future used by the ancients.

Meanwhile, on the banks of the Nile, mud brick villages clustered under date palms and water buffalo cooled themselves among blankets of water hyacinth. We watched women washing clothes in the shallow water, baking bread in clay ovens and collecting water in conical clay pots identical to the ones used by ancient Egyptians. White Nile herons searched ponderously for fish. We saw fishermen beating the water to lure fish into their nets and pelicans sunbathing, wings akimbo, their heads turning in unison to watch us as we passed. In the far distance, mountains like unbleached calico stretched behind a stage set and minarets punctuated the hazy sky.

One excursion took us to the Valley of the Kings and we found ourselves in what must be one of the most desiccated and desolate places on earth. The only living things are the swallows and ravens whose shadows are etched on bleached cliffs. Below ground are the heavens on earth to which the ancients were so sure they would return after death. Here, the

Amid the ruins of the ancient city of Thebes at Karnak is the temple of Amun, where the columns in the magnificent hall of pillars, etched with hieroglyphs, tower skywards.

blueness of the skies has barely faded and the heavens are studded with hundreds of stars.

For our last expedition we were taken with an armed escort by bus to Abydos, rising at 5am to drive 90 miles to the north of Luxor; and to Karnak, with its rows of ram-headed sphinxes and magnificent hall of pillars whose columns tower skywards like striding giants, and Dendera with its towering gate and surrounding mud brick wall. At Luxor, whose temple we visited at night, we turned to look back down the majestic avenue of sphinxes only when we had reached the end. By then, our dreams were full of hieroglyphs and cartouches and towering animal-headed deities.

In two weeks, I was taken back as close as anyone can get to how Egyptian life was three-and-a-half thousand years ago and gained a fuller understanding of the foundations of western civilisation. And my dreams are still streaked with flashes of ancient Egypt. ☞

PYRAMID SELLING

Olivia Temple travelled with Quest Travel, PO Box 269, Pyramids, Giza, Egypt (001-202 3863799). A typical Quest tour is split into two weeks: one week in the Cairo/Giza region, the other on a Nile cruise in upper Egypt. Clients can travel for one or two weeks. One week in the Cairo/Giza region costs £790 per person, sharing a double room, with a supplement for single occupancy of £240. A week's Nile cruise is £470, with a single occupancy supplement of £250. Prices do not include air fares. Return fares from London to Cairo with British Airways (0345-222 111) start from £380, and from £274 with EgyptAir (0171-437 6309). For the two-week trip, a round trip from London-Cairo-Luxor-Cairo-London with EgyptAir is £360. Quest has a special one-week tour with 12 authors as host-speakers from April 22-30. Another Stars & Signs tour, as described in this article and with a similar line-up of authors and academics, is being planned for November.