

DOWN ANCIENT PATHS

HOLY DAYS AND HOLIDAYS IN EGYPT: *Experience an Ancient Christian Coptic Christmas Plus a Deluxe Nile Cruise December 27/2010 – January 10/2011*

This festive journey to Egypt will offer participants a truly unforgettable way to continue celebrating the Christmas season and begin the New Year on a leisurely Nile Cruise. Stepping back in time to a 5,000 year old civilization displayed in perhaps the greatest outdoor museum in the world, we will explore one of the world's oldest expressions of Christianity - the spiritual heritage of the Coptic Church that traces itself back to St. Mark the Evangelist and offers a treasured source of enrichment relatively unknown to Christians in the West. Our itinerary will take us into Coptic Cairo, to the monasteries of Deir El Azab and Deir El Malak near the beautifully scenic Fayoum Oasis, and to the Wadi Natroun, famous for its hermitages and monasteries which originated in the 4th century and had a profound influence on the development of early Christianity.

Egypt is the melting pot of some of the greatest civilizations in the history of the world, some of the surviving monuments of which are to be visited in our travels – the pyramids of Giza (the oldest of the 7 wonders of the ancient world), the mysterious, ever watching, Sphinx; Memphis, the world's first imperial city; and the Valley of the Kings, home of the sumptuously furnished tombs constructed for the kings of the 18th, 19th and 20th dynasties. There is also an opportunity for those who wish to go on a desert excursion to the massive, Walt Disney-like, Pharaonic monuments at Abu Simbel on the shores of Lake Nasser.

Day 1 December 27 - Depart Canada

Day 2 December 28 - Arrive Cairo

Day 3 December 29 - Cairo/ Pelusium/ Tel Basta/ Belbeis/ Mostorod

Today we head east of the Nile Delta to sites visited by the Holy Family in their flight to Egypt. Pelusium (Tell el-Farama) in the Sinai was once the gateway to Eastern Egypt and the most important military fortress along the ancient Horus Military Road. Its Greek name, Pelousion, derives from the term *pelos* meaning mud or silt reflecting its location between two branches of the Nile. It is referred to in Ezekiel 30:15 as Sin. The archeological remains, first excavated in 1910 by the Egyptologist, Jean Cledat, are predominantly Roman. We continue to Tel Basta (Bubastis), home of the popular worshipped cat goddess, Bastet, where according to local tradition, the young Jesus caused water to miraculously spew out of the ground resulting in his family being expelled from the town. At Belbeis, the Holy Family rested in the shade of 'The Virgin Mary's Tree'. We drive on to Mostorod, 'the Bathing Place' where tradition recalls that the Virgin Mary bathed the Christ child and washed his clothes. Last on today's itinerary is The Church of the Virgin Mary in Maadi, south of Cairo, where the Holy Family boarded a boat which carried them up the Nile to southern Egypt. (**Overnite Cairo/Conrad Hotel**)

Day 4 December 30 - Cairo/ Fayoum Oasis/ Karanis

Our morning travels commence with a vista stop at The Citadel (al Qalaa), constructed by Salah ad-Din (Saladin) in 1176 CE as part of his system of fortifications against the Crusaders. It was crowned over 700 years later with the Mosque of Muhammad Ali which was modeled on Istanbul's Sultanahmet Mosque. Situated on a spur of the al Muqattam Hills this impressive symbol of Egypt's Islamic heritage dominates Cairo's (al Qahira) eastern horizon and offers a spectacular, panoramic view of one of the world's most densely populated cities with over 15 million inhabitants. Every day smog-choked Cairo inhales and exhales more than the entire population of Calgary! Unfortunately the pollution generated in the last 200 years threatens monuments which have survived 5000 years!

Leaving behind the congestion of the city, we head towards the Fayoum Oasis (120 km west of Cairo), a lush paradise in prehistoric times famed for its abundance of fruits and vegetables, fragrant flowers and archaeological remains from Ptolemaic and Roman times. It is claimed that the realistic, Greek mummy portraits discovered here in 1888 are the world's first true life portraits. The ruins of Karanis (30 km north of Fayoum) are dated from the Ptolemaic, Coptic and early Arab periods. In the town are two temples for the worship of the crocodile god, Sobek, Roman graves and a bath. **(Overnite Fayoum/Auberg Fayoum)**

Day 5 December 31 – Fayoum/ Deir Al Azab/ Deir Al Malak

Today's focus is on Egypt's ancient Christian heritage currently undergoing renewal. Monasticism was established in the Fayoum region in the 5th and 6th centuries when 35 monasteries flourished. Two of these monastic sites now have resident monks and are undergoing expansion. The Monastery of Deir Al Azab (also known as the Monastery of St. Mercurius) is 8 km south of Fayoum. It is called the Monastery of St. Abram after the sainted Bishop of Fayoum (1829-1914 CE) who is remembered as a friend of the poor. The monastery contains his remains, an old and new church, and a Coptic museum.

The Monastery of Deir Al Malak, dedicated to the Archangel Gabriel, is our second destination. It is located on the Naklun Mountain 16 km south of Fayoum and dates to the 6th or 7th centuries (or perhaps earlier) and was restored at the outset of the 20th century. Archaeologists discovered more than 1,000 manuscripts on site written in Greek, Coptic and Arabic. After centuries of decay the monastery is presently undergoing a revival and the Church of St. Gabriel has become a modern pilgrimage destination for Coptic Christians. The annual festival in this monastery commemorates the occasion when Jacob sought shade in the hollow in the mountain where the monastery sits. Tonite we celebrate our way into the New Year at the Auberg Fayoum. **(Overnite/Auberg Fayoum)**

Day 6 January 1 - New Year's Day... and you're in Egypt! Fly Cairo to Luxor/ Begin 4-night Nile Cruise

We return to Cairo this morning to catch our flight to Luxor, the starting point of our 4 night Nile cruise from which we will watch the millennia go by. Our boat belongs to the Domina Prestige Emilio Cruise Line. The area comprising the present-day town of Luxor and the site of Karnack corresponds to ancient Thebes, the capital of Egypt during the New Kingdom. The civilizational highlights today are the Temples of Karnack and Luxor. The immense, Karnack Temple complex, 2.5 km north of Luxor, was one of the largest and most magnificent religious centres in the ancient world. It has 2,000 years of history. Every Pharaoh of any renown, enlarged, restored or destroyed part of the complex as an expression of his devotion to the deity Amun. It is referred to by Egyptians as 'Ipet-Isut' ('The Most Perfect of Places') and will most certainly overwhelm any visitor with its breathtaking grandeur. The Luxor Temple, known in antiquity as the 'Harem of the South', was dedicated to the Egyptian trinity of Amun, Mut and Khonsu. It was connected to the Temple of Karnack by a 3 km processional Avenue of the Sphinxes. The walls are adorned with some of Egypt's best preserved carvings since much of the Temple was buried in sand until excavations began in 1885. **(Overnite on Cruise Boat)**

Day 7 January 2 - Luxor/ Valley of the Kings/ Hatshepsut Temple/ Habu Temple/ Colossi of Memnon/ Sail to Edfu

This morning we follow the Path of the Pharaohs into the Valley of the Kings, the Necropolis of Thebes, where Howard Carter discovered King Tut's tomb in 1922. Here the mummies of the Pharaohs rested in peace ensuring that they would have a happy afterlife well-sustained with provisions from this life. Featured among the many royal tombs (some 80 tombs have been discovered to date) are those of Ramses VI and Ramses III with their splendid wall paintings. The spectacular Mortuary Temple of Queen Hatshepsut (Deir Al Bahari) in the Valley of the Queens, is dramatically situated against the stark cliffs of the Theban hills and rises from the plain in a series of imposing terraces. Of special interest to us is the Punt Colonnade which depicts in stunning, colored reliefs the Queen's expedition to Punt (most likely Somalia) in quest of myrrh trees, ebony, ivory and spices.

We continue to the Madinat Habu, the grand mortuary temple of Ramses III (1184-53 BCE), the last great, classical Pharaonic temple ever to be built in Egypt. It copied the Ramesseum of his ancestor Ramses II (perhaps the Pharaoh of the Israelite exodus). Mudbrick reminders of the Coptic town which covered the enclosed site until the 19th century are still to be seen. Last on our day's itinerary are the Colossi of Memnon (locally known as 'Timthileen') who sit on the flat desert plain of the West Bank as they stare across fields of sugar cane seemingly oblivious to the passing of time. They are two, 18 meters high, enthroned statues of Amenhotep III which originally served as sentries for his mortuary temple. One of them made a sound at dawn that the Greeks interpreted as the lament of the Homeric hero, Memnon. Late this afternoon we begin the idyllic highlight of this *Down Ancient Paths* venture, a 4-night cruise of the tranquil waters of the Nile, as we sail to Edfu. **(Overnite on Cruise Boat)**

Day 8 January 3 - Edfu/ Sail to Kom Ombo/ Sail to Aswan

This morning, having docked at Edfu which is almost halfway between Luxor and Aswan, we disembark to visit the Temple of Horus, the best preserved of all Egyptian temples. Its walls are completely covered with hieroglyphic texts which constitute a magnificent library. According to Egyptian, sacred tradition, the falcon god, Horus, fought a violent battle here with his uncle Seth who had killed Horus' father, Osiris. The latter, who aroused the jealousy of his murderous brother, had instructed the Egyptians about life, worship and the growing of corn. The temple of Horus, buried under sand for nearly two millennia, is Egypt's largest and best preserved Ptolemaic temple. The roof offers glorious views of the Nile and surrounding fields. The staircase walls leading to the roof are decorated with scenes from the New Year festival which was celebrated in temples all over Egypt. To the southwest of the temple are the remains of Horus' alleged birth house.

Our cruise continues in the afternoon to Kom Ombo, 40 km north of Aswan, home for many Nubians who were dislocated by the creation of Lake Nasser, the largest artificial lake in the world. The town's beautiful, totally symmetrical temple on the east bank of the Nile, has two sections dedicated to two gods – the left to the falcon god Haroeris (Horus the Elder) and the right to Sobek, the local crocodile god. Many of the columns feature the lotus or lily of Upper Egypt and the papyrus of the Upper Delta. There is also a nearby crocodile necropolis. We sail on to Aswan. **(Overnite on Cruise Boat)**

Day 9 January 4 – Aswan/ Phylae Temple/ Unfinished Obelisque/ High Dam

Aswan, which the Greeks called Syene, is Egypt's southernmost city at the First Cataract on the Nile, 215 km south of Luxor. Once the largest trading centre in the Nile Valley, it sits picturesquely where the Nile is squeezed between the Eastern Desert and the Sahara. The photography here is postcard quality with the best views of Aswan and the Nile coming in the subdued light of the late afternoon. The landscape contrasts are striking. In its cultural ambience the city is in fact more Nubian and Sudanese than Egyptian. Since ancient times, as a frontier city, Aswan has been Egypt's gateway to Nubia, also known as the Land of Cush, and Africa.

The Phylae Temple, which we will visit, is set on an island between the Old and High Dams. Celebrated for its beauty by travelers and artists and dedicated to the prominent deities, Isis and Osiris, it was one of Egypt's most important cult centres for over 8 centuries up to 550 CE. Originally the temple stood on the island of Phylae (the 'Island from the Time of Re') but between 1975 and 1980 it was painstakingly dismantled and relocated by UNESCO to nearby Agilkia Island to escape being completely submerged by the rising waters behind the newly built High Dam. The hidden jewels of this temple are the reliefs illustrating the legend of Isis and Osiris in the Osiris Room on the upper floor. Get your baksheesh ready in order to see them!!

South of Aswan near the Fatimid Cemetery, are the granite quarries already famous during the Old Kingdom. In one of them is a gigantic obelisk which dates to the New Kingdom period. It has been estimated that had it been completed its weight would have been approximately 1.8 million kg (1,197 tons) and stood 41 meters (41 ft) high. The quarrying of the obelisk was abandoned after a flaw was discovered in the stone. Original chisel marks can still be seen in the rock around the obelisk.

The 3.6 km long Aswan High Dam is a technological wonder. It is the pride of Egypt and one of the greatest accomplishments of hydraulic engineering in the 20th century. It took 11 years to build and enormously altered the entire environment of the Nile Valley in both positive and negative ways. Unfortunately no photography is allowed here. As the light begins to fade, our day concludes with a leisurely felucca ride on the Nile around 'Kitchener's Island', now converted into a botanical paradise.
(Overnite on Cruise Boat)

Day 10 January 5 - Abu Simbel Option or Free Day in Aswan/ Fly to Aswan

Today is a day of choices. You may either take an early morning bus ride to see the spectacular Abu Simbel temple complexes on the shores of Lake Nasser, experiencing a desert sunrise en route or you can enjoy a free day in Aswan. (We will discuss the many interesting things to do in Aswan.) The great Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel, which took 20 years to build, and the Temple of Hathor and Nefertari are world renowned Nubian sites, spectacular survivors of UNESCO's campaign to save Egypt's treasures from the waters of Lake Nasser. [NOTE: The added cost for the Abu Simbel trip is \$200 USD which must be paid at the time of registration.] **(Overnite Cairo/Conrad Hotel)**

Day 11 January 6 – Cairo/ Coptic Cairo/Memphis/ Cheops Pyramids/ Sphinx/ Coptic Christmas Eve Service

Cairo deserves months to savor its cultural treasures but this day will give you an in-depth exposure to the ancient Christian soul of Cairo. In the morning we stroll the streets of 'Old Cairo' (also known as Babylon) one of the oldest inhabited parts of the city which provides a fascinating link between Egypt's Pharaonic and Islamic civilizations. Some Roman fortifications have survived but of most interest to us are the narrow lanes lined with early churches and Egypt's oldest synagogue. The 'Hanging Church' (al Muallaqa), built on top of one of the Roman bastions dates to the 7th century and features a wooden Ark-like ceiling and a carved marble pulpit supported by 12 pillars representing the 12 Apostles. Hanging near the entrance is the beautiful 10th century icon of Virgin and Child. The nearby 11th century, Church of St. Barbara, dedicated to the saint who was beaten to death by her father for trying to convert him to Christianity, is one of Egypt's finest and largest churches. Though the Jewish community has long departed from Cairo, the Ben Ezra Synagogue has been restored to its former glory. According to Jews it marks the site where the prophet Jeremiah preached in the 6th century BCE. According to Coptic Christians it is the place where the baby Moses was found in a basket. The fascinating Coptic Museum, (we have time just to see the highlights), contains Christian symbols which have evolved from Pharaonic ones and notably, some texts of the Gnostic Gospels discovered in 1945.

This afternoon is given to the monuments which have awed millions of visitors to Egypt, admiring the achievements of a civilization which by the 3rd millennium BCE had already attained a remarkable level

of technological skill. First we drive to Memphis, 47 km south of Cairo, which was founded around 3100 BCE. It was the capital of Egypt during the Old Kingdom and most of the Pharaonic era. The Greek traveller/historian, Herodotus, called it a 'prosperous city and a cosmopolitan centre'. A herculean statue of the reclining Ramses II lies in a small open air museum in the village of Mit Rahina which holds all that remains of Memphis.

The most extraordinary of the Giza Pyramids is the Pyramid of Khufu whom the Greeks called Cheops. It was built over 20 years by 20,000 to 30,000 workmen who assembled the 2,500,000 stones (each weighing an average of 2.5 tons) which were needed to erect this colossal structure. The mysterious Great Sphinx continues to evoke the curiosity of all who gaze upon it. Theories abound (including the suggestion of extraterrestrials!) as to who built it and when. Its lion's body and human head were sculpted out of limestone. The Sphinx, as a symbol of the Pharaohs, guards the royal necropolis of Giza. A dream stele rests between the Sphinx's forepaws, placed there by Tuthmosis IV of the 18th dynasty who first cleared the monument of sand.

Tonite is another memorable highlight of our journey. We return to 'Old Cairo' where our day started to attend a Christmas Eve service at the 5th Century Church of St. Sergius. Here one can see a flight of steps descending to an older crypt where the Holy Family is said to have rested during their exile in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-14). **(Overnite Cairo/Conrad Hotel)**

Day 12 January 7 – Cairo/ Wadi al Natrun Monasteries of St. Macarius and St. Bishoy/ Monastery of St. Mena/ Alexandria

The monasteries of Wadi al Natrun, accessed via the modern Desert Highway to Alexandria, commemorate the Holy Family's journey through the area. They have also played a pivotal role in the life of Egypt's Coptic Church as its popes have invariably been elected from these monastic communities. The name Wadi (valley) and Natrun (natron) refers to the extensive quantities of sodium hydroxide obtained from the lakes in ancient times for the purposes of mummification and by the later Romans for glassware.

The monasteries of St. Macarius and St. Bishoy were born in the flowering of desert spirituality in the Wadi al Natrun during the 4th and 5th centuries when many hermits chose this desert depression as a venue for seeking purity of heart in solitude and silence. Over the centuries both monasteries have undergone numerous destructions and restorations and at the present time are experiencing a monastic renaissance. Many educated Copts have chosen to retreat here as an expression of their devotion to God.

The Monastery of St. Menas, 63 km southwest of Alexandria, is named after a 3rd century, Alexandrian-born Roman soldier tortured to death for his Christian beliefs. The current monastery, built in 1959 on the ruins of a much older basilica, is a revered site for pilgrims, especially on November 11, St. Mena's Day. The archaeological exploration of the original monastery is ongoing. Our final destination is Alexandria, Egypt's second largest city, situated on the Mediterranean. **(Overnite Alexandria/Hilton Plaza)**

Day 13 January 8 – Alexandria

Today we engage Alexandria, Egypt's most elegant city, a popular tourist destination and haven for natives seeking its seaside breezes as a reprieve from Cairo's oppressive summer heat. Founded in 332 BCE by Alexander the Great, Alexandria was the world's first cosmopolitan city. The Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, who visited the city in 59 BCE, described it as extending for 7 km and having a population of more than 300,000, an enormous number by ancient standards. Following the Arab conquest in 641 CE the city's wealth and cultural prominence slowly declined. A measure of its former prestige returned in the 19th century.

There is much to see here. The city has a distinguished place in the intellectual history of the world. We'll begin with a tour of the highlights of the Graeco-Roman Museum if it is open. Qaitbay Fort is built on the island of Pharos where once stood the world-famous lighthouse, one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world, now beneath the sea. The ruins of the Temple of Serapis, a syncretic divinity, contain the erroneously named Pompey's Pillar made of striking red, Aswan granite. The Catacombs of Kom al-Shuqafa, a vast burial site which dates from the 2nd century, reveal an intriguing fusion of Pharaonic and Hellenistic artistic motifs which testify to the city's illustrious past as a meeting point of civilizations. The Library of Alexandria, with holdings of more than 700,000 papyrus scrolls representing all branches of human knowledge, was once the unrivalled centre of learning in the ancient world. Tragically it was destroyed in mysterious circumstances. The library has however, found new life in the architecturally grand, modern Library of Alexandria which was inaugurated in 2000 and has a capacity of 8,000,000 volumes.

We'll also take time to reflect on the ancient Christian heritage of Alexandria with a visit to the Church of St. Mark named after the early Christian evangelist/martyr who brought Christianity to Alexandria in the first century and also authored the 2nd Gospel.

(Overnite Alexandria/Hilton Plaza)

Day 14 January 9 – El Alamein/ Cairo

Before returning to Cairo we'll drive to El Alamein, about 100 km west of Alexandria. In 1942 it was the site of a bloody, 12-day conflict in World War II which decided the outcome of the North African Campaign. Italian and German forces commanded by Field Marshall Edwin Rommel were pitted against British and Commonwealth troops under General Bernard Montgomery. In what emerged as a decisive, Allied victory, 68,500 soldiers lost their lives. The compact museum with its interesting outdoor and indoor displays of weaponry and artifacts of the conflict recalls the horrific brutality of the battle which still lives on in the memories of local inhabitants. The pathos of war will be felt keenly here.

Time permitting, upon our arrival back in Cairo we'll visit the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities.

(Overnite Cairo/Conrad Hotel)

Day 15 January 10 – Return to Canada

If you are seriously interested in participating in this *Down Ancient Paths* venture and would like to receive an information packet when it is ready, contact:

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