

Exploring Egypt

For both Keith and me, it has been a long term ambition in life to visit Egypt. But it's a country that comes with challenges, and we've sat patiently waiting for the right time to go. Keith has kept his eye on the **Foreign office updates** for years as we've discussed whether, when the time is right, we should do a Nile cruise or something more adventurous. We've priced up Jules Verne cruises, trailfinder adventures and chatted to anyone who has been about their experiences. So when Keith announced to me just a couple of months ago that he'd found a way for us to go, THIS summer, I couldn't believe my ears.

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I did not expect our Egypt adventure to become achievable by booking a **TUI all inclusive package holiday**. But it turns out that was our way in.

We booked a 5 Star Adults only All Inclusive in Sharm El Sheik (Iberotel Palace). Although Sharm wasn't necessarily a resort we were interested in visiting, we were excited about the snorkelling opportunities, and the fact its said to be a bit quieter than the other popular resort of Hurgarda. It seemed like a decent base.

We flew from Stansted on Sunday 14th Aug- despite the media hysteria around airport chaos, our experience was positive- but it was enhanced by us pre purchasing Fast

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Track tickets and the premium lounge, both of which were super.



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Our Tui flight to Sharm was fine, at just 4 hours 40 mins it was nothing compared to the long hauls we've already done this year and before we knew it we were being dropped off at the hotel, where they had kept open the Buffett for our flight. A funny moment occurred though when every single male had to get escorted to the staff room to

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change into trousers for dinner. Men have to wear trousers for dinner (but not breakfast or lunch) but ladies can wear what they please.



Monday was spent chilling around the pool and on the beach, acclimatising to the 40 degree heat. It was more manageable on the

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beach with a slight sea breeze, but we coped well by the pool bar too. We ate in the Al a Carte Italian which was delicious – particularly the sea bass. Sadly the middle eastern al a carte was only open 1 night- and it coincided with our Luxor day trip.



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We enjoyed a pre dinner walk into the Old Town market and the extremely beautiful mosque. As we were both wearing trousers, and I took a shawl for my head and arms, we were allowed inside to have a look. It smelt of beautiful incense and we were shown the upstairs area too.

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Tuesday arrived and our first excursion of the week, a day trip to the Ras Muhammad National Park for a some snorkelling on the Coral Reef. The snorkelling was just terrific. We had 3 snorkelling stops and each one got better and better. The current was strong on the first one, but the guides were great at keeping us safe- and also hijacked my go pro

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a couple of times to free dive to get some cracking videos for us.

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Our evening was spent recovering from a tiring but terrific day. The trip was booked through Tui at our welcome meeting and despite not being our first choice (we had originally booked one through trip advisor which got cancelled a couple of days before) ended up being far superior as it offered 3 x 45 mins snorkelling and a lovely and not over packed boat.

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Wednesday – Our day trip to Luxor.

We were picked up at 6.30am and driven to the airport where we were guided through to domestic departures. We had pre purchased our E Visas in advance through

<https://www.visa2egypt.gov.eg/eVisa>,

however it was possible to get them on the day in the airport. Visitors to Sharm don't need a visa, it's only when you venture out that Visas become necessary.

Our flight to Luxor was on a smallish propeller plane operated by Air Cairo/Egypt Air, and on arrival we were met by LT, our local guide and Egyptologist and an armed policeman who stayed by our sides the whole time.

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Our first stop was the temple of Karnak. Considered one of the most impressive in the world, it literally took our breaths away. The size of the remaining columns, the detail of the intricate drawings carved into the stone, the remaining colour dating 4000 years, the whole site was just awesome.

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After our Karnak visit we had lunch at a hotel on the Nile before being taken across the Nile on a boat ride to save an hour+ journey by road. It was really exciting to have a boat trip on the Nile, and we got great views of Luxor City.



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Next up was a visit to the Valley of The Kings. Our excitement levels were through the roof at this point! The journey into the valley was dramatic and we decided to pay an additional fee to visit the tomb of Tutenkamen. We visited 4 tombs, all slightly different in condition; one was really deep into the valley and had a steep walk down, one

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was very colourful with lots of original paint-work still remaining. Keith was beside himself by the time we entered King Tut's tomb. We saw his Mummy which was exciting and reminded us of Juanita in Peru- except it was almost 4000 years older. It's impossible to imagine how exciting it must have been for Howard Carter's team as they uncovered Tutenkamen's tomb.

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After a terrific visit we made our way by coach to the nearby Deir el-Bahari, another historic temple set into the mountains.

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Our last stop of the day was at a hotel on the banks of the Nile where we enjoyed sundowners watching the sun set before our transfer back to the airport and Sharm El Sheik, returning back to the hotel around 1130pm.

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Thursday – Our day trip to Cairo.

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Another early start after a long but wonderful day yesterday. Originally we weren't supposed to do this trip with Tui as they only do it on Thursdays and Luxor on Wednesdays and we wanted a day between the trips. However our Viator tour which we'd booked for Friday got cancelled at the last minute so luckily we managed to get space on the Cairo Tui day otherwise this would have been a huge blow!

We were picked up at 6.30am and driven once more to the airport. Unfortunately our flights were delayed so the wait in the airport was tense to say the least. But at 10 am, 2 hours later than scheduled we boarded our plane, and by 11.15 we'd touched down in Cairo.

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Our guide, Habib, was waiting and did a marvellous job at putting our minds at rest that we had time to see everything still. Our first stop was the Great Pyramids of Giza. THE moment we'd been waiting for, for what seems like our entire lives. I felt sick with nerves- would they live up to my expectations, would I be disappointed. I really had no reason to

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worry- our first sighting of the great pyramid took our breaths away. It was huge. Seriously bigger than I'd imagined and just awesome. How the heck was this build over 4000 years ago with no machinery, its just a mystery!



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Our schedule was hectic due to the flight delays, but we managed to enjoy (well lets say participate!!) in an hour's camel ride from the base of the great pyramid to the National Geographic Panoramic viewpoint and back. I say 'participate'- I literally was terrified of the camel ride, no word of a lie, I didn't realise I'd have a panic on it, but I did! Howev-

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er, I did the ride, didn't fall off, and actually loved it – in hindsight! A highlight was the remarkable view, and being able to escape in to the desert. Plus we got some lovely pics of us there. The journey back was better than the way going as the pyramids were in my eyeline rather than behind me. It really was a truly spectacular way to experience the pyramids though, despite my nerves.

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After our camel ride we were ushered into the 2nd Pyramid, as we had opted to go inside. Our legs were both shaking following the camel ride and we'd been given strict instructions to be as quick as we could as time

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wasn't on our sides! The descent was cramped- we were both doubled over and it was really steep. It was hot humid and really hard going, but we are so glad we did it! It was worth every single second of the hard going conditions- I'm so proud of us for doing it, and thankful to our guide Habib for making it happen despite the time constraints.

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From here we had quick stop at the Sphinx viewpoint and then made our way into Cairo on the coach to the Egyptian Museum. It was here that we were able to see King Tut's burial mask and coffin- and probably the most gold I've seen in one display! Again, it

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was hard to believe that these date over 4000 years old yet look brand new. We are really lucky to have seen both these exhibits as very soon - in the next few days- they are being moved out of the Egyptian museum into a brand new museum which is yet to be finished but once it is will be the largest museum in the world. We have already said when that is completed we would like to return to visit it. No pics allowed.

There were lots of interesting exhibits in the Egyptian Museum, including more mummies, and it was a nice way to catch our breath after two very full on days.

After our museum visit we went for a meal on the Nile before making our way back to

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the airport for our (delayed!) flight back to Cairo, returning to our hotel around 0130 in the morning. It had been an exceptionally busy day but one of the best of our lives. Well worth every single second of anxiety and stress – we cannot recommend this Tui trip highly enough.



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Friday was spent recovering at the hotel. Our day passed quickly as Keefy listened to music and I read my book. It was extremely satisfying to have ticked off the bucket list items so we could now relax!

Saturday was our last full day in Egypt and we had booked one final excursion – a jeep ride into the Nabq National Park which isn't far out of Sharm. We were picked up in a painted jeep with no real expectations at all. As we arrived into the National Park, the jeeps were put into full blown adventure mode. We tore through the desert at 100 km ph being plumeted around the back in fits of laughter. It was lots of fun!

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Occasionally the jeep would stop and we walked a little way through a canyon – which would have had a river in over 3 million years ago, or to a viewpoint in the stones. The scenery was beautiful and a real contrast to the man made resort of Sharm el Sheik.

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As the sun set we made our way to a Bedouin camp – not massively convinced how authentic it was to be honest, it felt gimmicky and the included camel ride was 5 mins long and dull. I managed much better this time on the camel, but it was incomparable to our Cairo camel ride. Dinner was a BBQ which we opted out of as our bellies were unsettled, partly the heat and partly travel sickness from the jeep ride, but we enjoyed a spectacular sun set. The main feature of the day was the breathtaking scenery in the national park, the jeep ride and the sunset.

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On our final night in the hotel we were treated to some belly dancing which was super- I wish there had been more authentic entertainment throughout the week, but that's something I often say on these Tui getaways and I realise we probably are in the minority on what we like to have for entertainment!

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Sunday soon arrived – our flight home wasn't

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until the evening so in the morning we made use of the free boat shuttle service to the nearby coral reef local to the hotel, where we enjoyed another hour of snorkelling. We got to see lots more colourful fish and coral and even saw a Red Sea puffer fish hiding behind some coral.



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What a great week we'd had. I had been nervous about travelling to Egypt due to safety concerns, but I have to say they were unfounded. I think there is definitely a threat to tourists in some areas (not Sharm) currently, but if you are on an official guided tour it seems to be the norm that you get an armed

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solider or policeman with you. In Cairo we even had a police escort. So we felt extraordinarily safe.

I am so so pleased we made the trip and cannot recommend our itinerary to you highly enough- if you've got time 2 weeks would probably be less intense! Winter would be a great time to visit as it was exceptionally hot in Aug, but that was the only time our schedule would allow and we wanted to visit so badly we didn't want to wait incase the Foreign office changed their minds. I never would have imagined doing a Tui trip for Egypt but I am so glad we did. Their local guides and ground agents who run the tours - Travco- are excellent.

Until next time

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