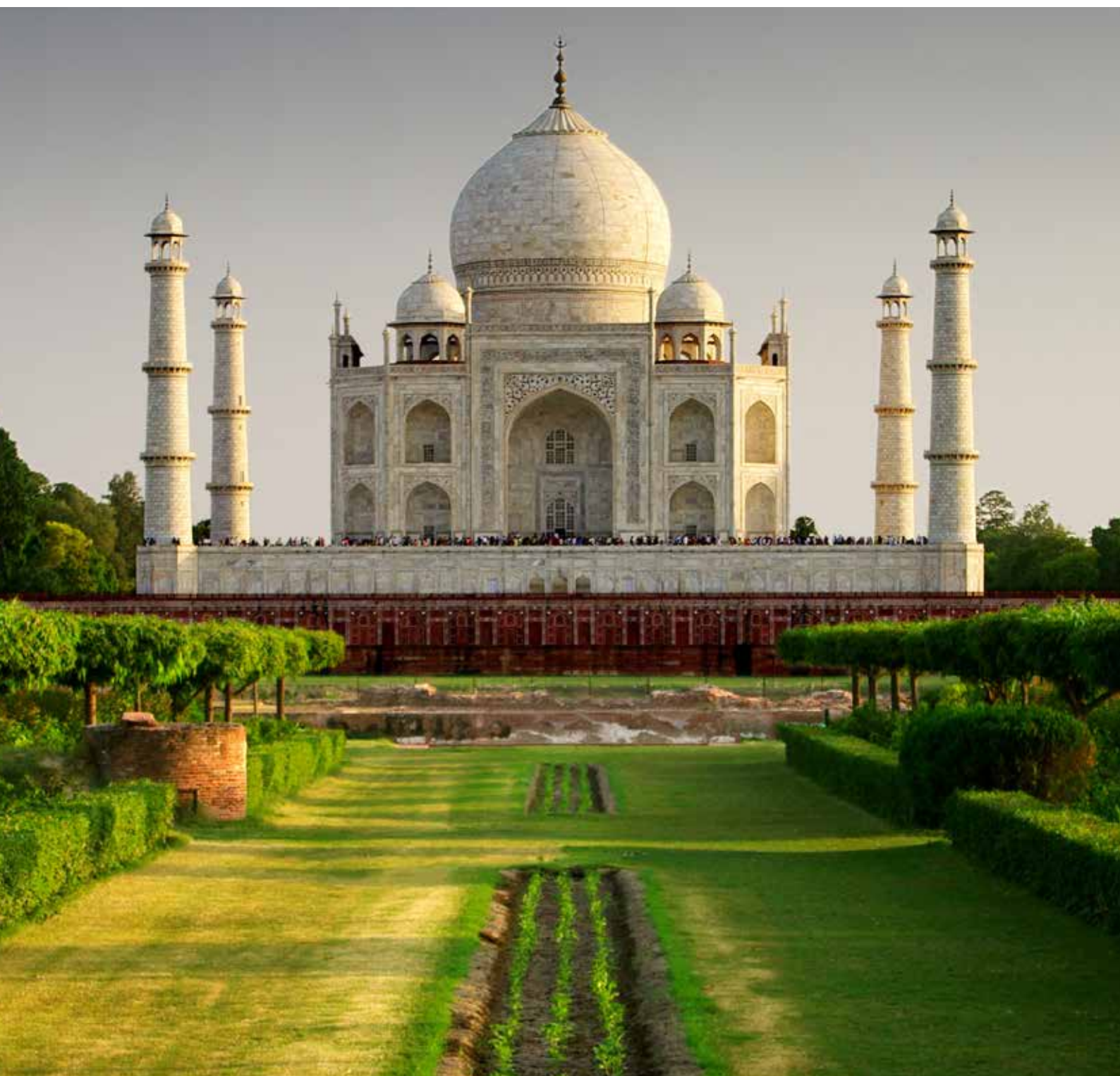


Winter 2014

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FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART



Exploring
the Dakhla Oasis

Roman temple at Deir el-Haggar

The Dakhla Oasis lies west of the Nile river, between Cairo and Luxor. Egyptologist Garry Shaw follows the trail of one of the earliest visitors to the Oasis, Archibald Edmonstone, around Egypt's 'wild west'

It was dawn when I left the White Desert for Farafra. The rising sun had already revealed the petrified zoo of chickens, horses, and sphinxes that had commanded my attention the previous evening. Eroding limestone giants, stretched and unfolded themselves for the new day. The desert foxes, gaunt-faced and curious, had long since scurried away, fed, if not full, from scraps of bread offered by Saleh, my driver. White, jagged splats of limestone appeared like frozen waves upon a yellow ocean. The air was crisp.

A short drive later and I was in Farafra, a half-finished vision of a Wild West outpost, where Saleh, paid and pleased, dropped me off and departed back for Bahariya Oasis, performing an illegal-in-forty-countries U-turn in the process. There, following true Western movie convention, as a stranger in an unfamiliar town, I was immediately picked up by the local police and questioned on my reasons for being in the oasis; more importantly, they wanted to know when I'd be leaving and suggested that I take the 2pm bus.

I had no real problem with this, as I'd planned on taking public transport for the next leg of my journey anyway, but soon after, over Turkish coffee in a local cafe, I was invited by two sporty Spanish honeymooners and their rotund guide, Mohammed, to join them on their whirlwind tour of the oases. After all, we were heading in the same direction: Dakhla Oasis, the third oasis on my trip through the Western Desert, where a variety of ancient sites neatly illustrate Egypt's long history with these isolated Saharan islands.

Accompanying my travels in digital form was the 1822 travel narrative of Archibald Edmonstone, the first European to visit Dakhla in modern times, who coincidentally was born on the same

London street that the British Museum still stands. Edmonstone, a wealthy baronet, arrived in Egypt in late 1818, aged 23, with the intention of exploring the oases as "objects of curiosity" and to look for "old buildings." A true Brit, he also wanted to get there before the French consul and Dick Dastardly-alike Bernardino Drovetti, who was busy hoovering up as many artefacts and accolades as he could for

If Edmonstone's gamble paid off, Britain, and adamantly not France, would be the first to celebrate the addition of a new patch of green to its maps of the Sahara Desert

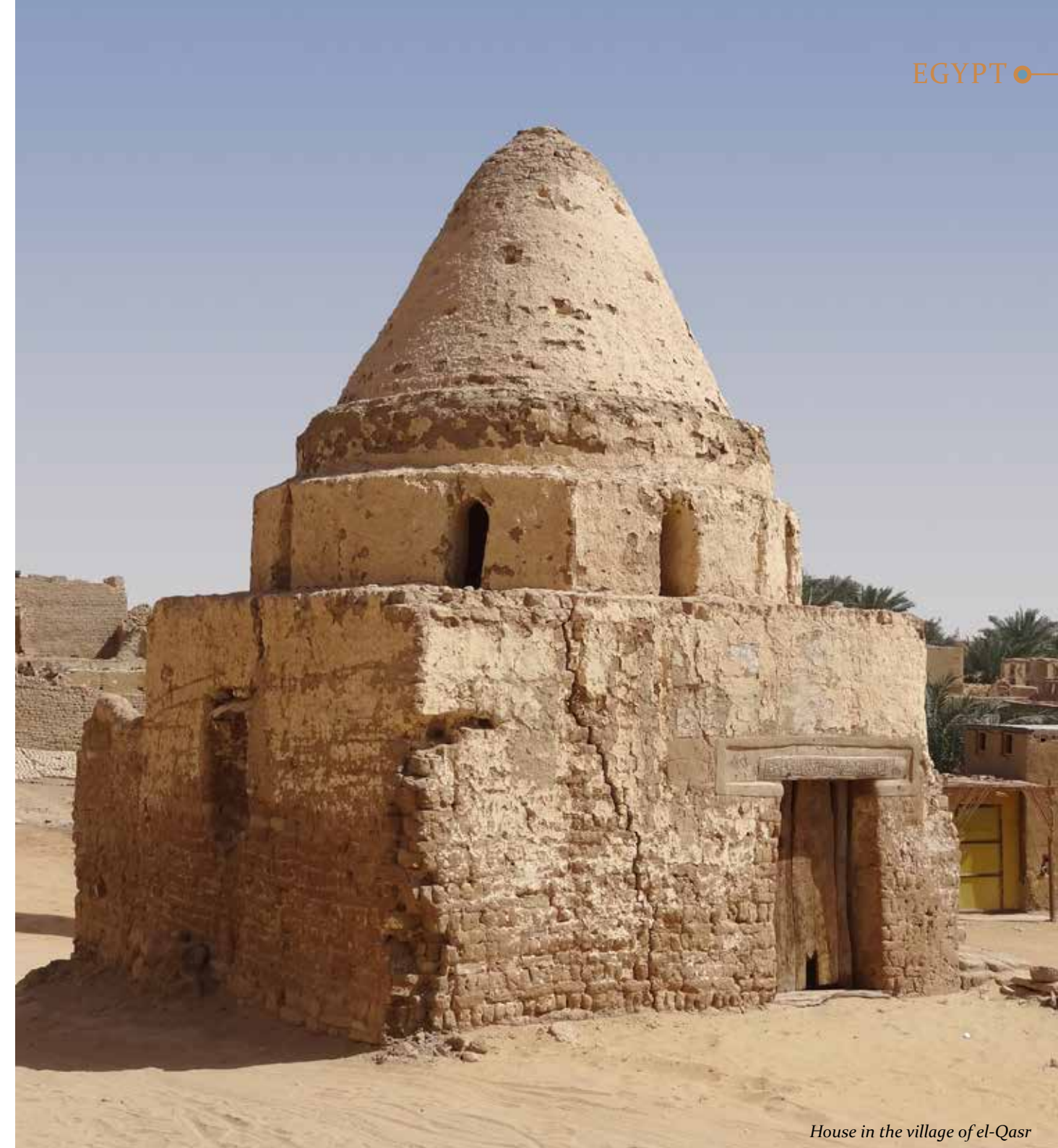
himself (and France, of course). Informed that Drovetti had set out for the oases a few days before him, Edmonstone decided to cross the desert directly to Dakhla, rather than take the safe route to Kharga first, as Drovetti had done. This was risky for two reasons: 1) it would mean a longer trek through the desert, and 2) no European was certain that Dakhla Oasis existed. If Edmonstone's gamble paid off, and he didn't end up a scorched pile of carrion picked desert bones, Britain, and adamantly not France, would be the first to celebrate the addition of a new patch of green to its maps of the Sahara Desert.

Travelling to the Oasis

As I lay in the comfort of my spacious, air-conditioned van, whizzing along a modern tarmac road, I imagined Edmonstone, with his two European companions, two Egyptian servants, interpreter, and twelve camels setting out into the relative unknown (presumably his Bedouin guides were less nervous), marching through the sands for thirteen hours a day.

Unlike the minor inconveniences I'd experienced in the oases, Edmonstone was truly travelling through a dangerous and wild frontier. Three years before his visit, four hundred raiders from Libya had plundered Dakhla, killing people and "carrying off much booty". Two years afterwards, in 1821, the Pasha, Mohammed Ali, had sent troops to subdue the entire area. To reduce the risk of trouble, it was "strongly recommended" to Edmonstone that he wear Mamluk clothing; his "look" included "a coarse silk waistcoat with long open sleeves... an immense pair of cloth trousers, red slippers, and a turban of white muslin." He also slung a Turkish sabre across his shoulder, hid a dagger beneath a shawl tied around his waist, and hung a brace of pistols under his left arm. Unlike Edmonstone, I was dressed in a faded blue t-shirt and a tatty pair of jeans. Desert travel has certainly changed.

Driving to Mut, Dakhla's capital, we passed farmers wearing wide straw hats, a local fashion noted by Egyptologist Herbert Winlock in 1908. The soil was pink, almost purple, and the gamoosa (water buffalo), so prevalent elsewhere in Egypt, had been replaced by cows. Squat pink-mud huts with palm roofs stood in the fields between villages of colourfully painted domed-houses. Along the way, we briefly stopped at the el-Muzzawwaga tombs, a small splat of a hill, as if sculpted from mashed potato, pierced by Roman era tombs.



House in the village of el-Qasr

Edmonstone, the first to comment on this "insulated rock perforated with caverns", observed scattered fragments of human remains littering the earth, remarking, "The inhabitants of the adjacent hamlet had stripped them in hopes of finding something valuable; and the jackals, which abound here, had completed the work of devastation." He attempted to take some bones, but his guides threatened to abandon him if he did so. I too was shown a pit of assorted remains. They stared up at me as if saying, "wonderful, another gawker."

The Medieval town of el-Qasr

At the north edge of Dakhla Oasis, our next stop, the medieval town of el-Qasr

("The Fortified Town") came into view. After turning off the main tarmac road, and driving through a palm grove, the honeymooners, Mohammed and I left the van and rounded a modern white mosque. Splendidly wonky and sepia toned, the town, founded in the 12th century above a Roman fort, is an unusual sight: part-reconstructed, mostly abandoned, yet still occupied by a few hundred people.

It is a living village, protected by antiquities guards working for the Ministry of Antiquities. Every house exuded age from its cracked mud-brick pores, revealed by their shedding plaster. Many doorways were low to the ground, barely a couple of feet high; men in galabeyyas squatted

beside them in the shade. Heavy doors sealed the town's various quarters, keeping its population – 4,000 strong in the 19th century – safe from bandits. It was like being led through a half-remembered dream of an Ottoman fantasy. Two hundred years earlier, upon "discovering" el-Qasr, Edmonstone had been less enchanted: "The only thing worthy of observation in the town is a strong sulphuric and chalybeate spring, which the people consider extremely sanative, and drink when left to settle for 24 hours in an earthen jar."

As I followed the cuddling Spanish and the sweating, narrating Mohammed around the narrow streets, the imposing



Entrance to temple
at Deir el-Haggar

walls of multi-storey houses loomed, draping us in continuous and cooling shadow; the German explorer Gerhard Rohlfs, along with his entire team of 100, had briefly stayed in one of these houses during his desert explorations in 1874. Some houses displayed acacia lintels over their doorways with inscriptions informing passersby of the occupant, as well as the name of the artist who carved the inscription; the oldest dated to 1518. Presumably Rohlfs wasn't present long enough to commission his own lintel.

Our first stop was the mosque and mausoleum of Sheikh Nasr ed-Din, who was himself present yet absent, buried in a shrine, enveloped by a green sheet. It was surrounded on the walls by Quranic verses, which dipped in and out of niches with artistic abandon. Although the mosque had been rebuilt in the 19th century, its minaret maintains its 11th-12th century structure, though it too has undergone reconstruction; two layers of wooden beams jutting out from its body.

A madrassa (school) was next door. This had been renovated, and is still in use today. Conveniently for the medieval population, it also functioned as a meeting

place, a courtroom, and as a place of punishment, all no doubt classified under "entertainment" by the townsfolk. To add to the ambiance, prisoners were once tied to a stake still standing beside the entrance, a definite warning to any would-be unruly school children.

In the maze of streets, Mohammed, clearly as geographically gifted as a globe, next led us to a house that incorporated ancient Egyptian temple blocks in its facade, some exhibiting figures and hieroglyphs; one block displayed the torso of a squatting baboon-shaped Thoth, his hands casually resting on his knees as if patiently waiting for his head and legs to return. Others were penetrated by long vertical scratches, made by people in antiquity collecting magical temple-powder. The now crumbling town also once had a mill (with an ox or donkey-powered mechanism), and an oil press.

The Roman temple at Deir el-Haggar

Our next stop was Deir el-Haggar – "The Monastery of Stone". Edmonstone found this temple, "in tolerable preservation, though half filled with sand", which he tried to clear, but quickly gave up. I found

it with a motorbike parked inside the visitor centre; a dusty blue basket rested on its back, making its presence at least excusable as an ad-hoc storage space. The walls within were salmon-pink and hung with information panels, which explained the temple's history and recent restoration work.

Despite taking the form of a typical ancient Egyptian temple (court, hypostyle hall, sanctuary), Deir el-Haggar was erected under Roman Emperor Nero (54-67), and decorated under his successors, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian in honour of the gods Amun, Mut and Khonsu. Stepping outside the visitor centre, I spied distant Roman tombs dug into the sandy hills; in the early first Millennium, farms and priests' houses stood on these now barren plains between the temple and the tombs. After "inheriting" Egypt, the Romans had actively encouraged Nile Valley Egyptians to relocate to Dakhla to produce cereals, oil and wine, meant to feed the imperial machine. Massive aqueducts were built near the temple, connecting springs and fields.

This prosperity wasn't to last, however. Early in the 5th century CE, massive

sandstorms engulfed Dakhla's farms and temples, apparently while they still functioned. Deir el-Haggar was among those enveloped, causing its north wall to collapse and its ceilings to fall.

Abandoned to the elements, it became a ruin, ignored until Edmonstone's visit and only properly documented in 1908. And this wasn't the end of its woes; between 1965 and 1968, antiquities looters attacked the temple on nine occasions, cutting away 32 fragments of the best preserved parts of the walls. Only recently had Deir el-Haggar been reconstructed and its fabric properly protected. To combat the shifting sands, archaeologists had erected a palm-branch fence around its perimeter. Spare temple blocks, unplaced during the reconstruction, lay at its edge, awaiting some Lego savant. A guard's hut, a TV antenna optimistically protruding from its roof, symbolised newfound protection.

Over the next hour, I wandered through the temple, its columns rising to a vacant ceiling, some still bearing the remains of ancient plaster and paint. Broken pottery littered the floor. I spotted the word "Caesar" written in hieroglyphs within the royal cartouches. Small orange-beaked birds chirped in dusty holes. Bats hid in subtle cracks. They were rare signs of life in a now desolate place.

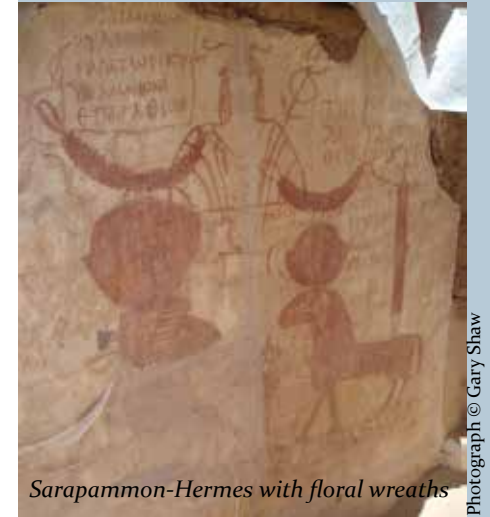
Outside, I found the names of Rohlfs' expedition members carved high on a column, dramatically illustrating the height of the sand in his day. The names of other early explorers can also be found at the temple, simultaneously presenting a compendium of desert exploration and incriminating the high class vandals. Among them were the names of both Edmonstone and Drovetti.

Following his return from the oases, Drovetti had written that his visit to Dakhla had occurred "toward the end of 1818", contradicting Edmonstone's claim to have beaten him there, as he had only arrived on 16th February 1819. This created a controversy that was only settled one hundred years later, when a graffito at Deir el-Haggar, dated 26th February 1819, was found to bear the name Rosingana; as Rosingana had accompanied Drovetti to Dakhla, this provided the proof that the French Consul had indeed exaggerated the date of his arrival to bolster his claim of being the first European to visit the oasis. Dick Dastardly-like indeed!

Before leaving, in an overlooked gateway penetrating the temple's mud-brick

temenos wall, I found images of gods, sacred animals and Greek inscriptions painted by the Roman-era devout. One of the earliest was a bearded image of the god Sarapammon-Hermes, upon which later worshippers had added pictures of a ram – symbol of Amun-Re – and a Thoth baboon, along with four floral wreaths with looped ends. At first, I was moved by the presence of these crudely painted images of devotion and the darkened patches of plaster left by the touch of pious, ancient worshippers. Then I realised that Sarapammon-Hermes, now overlaid with floral wreaths protruding from either side of his torso, appeared like the robot from *Lost in Space*.

It was time to move on.



Sarapammon-Hermes with floral wreaths

Photograph © Gary Shaw



Doorway in el-Qasr



Scenery at Dakhla Oasis

The Old Kingdom tombs near Balat

Our final stop was Balat, on the eastern side of the oasis. As we neared, a thriving village presented itself; the dusty streets were topped by palm branches, stretched between the roofs of mud-brick houses painted in hues of pink and red. It was here that Edmonstone had set up camp upon arrival at Dakhla.

Soon after, the local sheikh had brought the frazzled explorer some much-needed food; in return, Edmonstone had given him “an Indian handkerchief, with which he seemed pleased”. Without Edmonstone realizing, in the vicinity of his camp were the buried remains of some of the oasis’ most ancient structures – a series of great tombs dated to the 6th Dynasty, each belonging to a regional governor. This cemetery is now known as Qila’ el-Dabba.

I followed Mohammed and a galabeyya-clad tomb guardian across the pink sand to the tomb of Khentika. Discovered in 1977 by Egyptologist Ahmed Fakhry, and dated to the reign of King Pepi II, the tomb resembled an upturned jelly mould; in antiquity, workers had excavated a giant stepped pit and constructed the burial chamber at its base.

Afterwards, they had filled the space with mud-bricks. The guardian descended a set of shallow steps towards the burial chamber’s dark entrance way, his sandals alternately shuffling and slapping against their uneven surfaces. Within, in the dim light, little paint remained. Broken images of Khentika, painted in brown and blue and with surprisingly large eyes, stared out at me from the reconstructed walls. Crudely executed figures and boats were

testament to the oases’ provinciality; after all, the best artists lived at court in Memphis, far away from Dakhla.

There is very little evidence for contact between the Egyptians and the people of Dakhla before the late Old Kingdom (2584–2117 BCE). But in this time, around twenty towns, mainly in the western side of the oasis, were built. The most important settlement was at Ain Asil, about 1.5 km from Qila’ el-Dabba and Balat. It was there that Dakhla’s newly installed governors managed the oasis, and indeed, the oases as a whole. To promote their status, around their administrative headquarters they built funerary chapels – cult places where the locals could generously offer food to their spirits in death; conveniently, bakeries were constructed around these chapels to facilitate this process.

Mohammed, the honeymooners, and I next entered the tomb of governor Bitsu, which on the surface looked like a WWII bunker. Within, little remained but a sarcophagus, painted on its interior with roughly drawn hieroglyphs and an image of Bitsu himself, sat on a chair beneath a canopy. All seemed appealing, except for Bitsu’s ridiculously long legs, which flowed from his torso along his chair to the ground like a barely contained flood. Clearly, his inexperienced artist had painted the chair and the inscriptions first, and then had to figure out how to fit Bitsu into the remaining space. As clumsy as this might seem, for a short time at least, Bitsu’s unusual tomb art was in vogue.

Not long after these paintings were finished, Egypt’s great Old Kingdom collapsed and the country fragmented into

competing regions. Without the patronage of the royal court at Memphis, artworks across Egypt began to be produced in a similarly crude style to those at Dakhla. The arts would not recover until the Middle Kingdom, one hundred years later.

Moving on

My day of unexpectedly efficient sightseeing at an end, I bade farewell to Mohammed and the Spanish honeymooners in front of my hotel at Mut. My chance encounter with Mohammed had streamlined my visit, removing any need to concern myself with public transport or hiring a guide. I again thought of Edmonstone, only 23 years old, bedecked in assorted weapons, riding his camel into the unknown, and felt a bit of a sham-adventurer. I was suddenly

pleased that my “run in” with the police at Farafra had added some extra spice to the day. Exploring the desert should not be easy, and indeed, the oases do still truly feel like an Egyptian Wild West, but one that has been tamed somewhat, accessible to all wanting to escape the beaten tourist path. An achievable adventure for the cautious explorer.

The next day I planned on heading to Kharga Oasis to finish my loop. Edmonstone spent four days exploring Dakhla before making a similar move. On the way, half a day’s journey from Balat, he bumped into Drovetti, still crossing the desert, still hoping to be the first. Despite Edmonstone’s mention of a “conversation” between them, neither explorer records Drovetti’s reaction. Says it all really. ●

Getting there

Flying

Numerous carriers depart the UK for Egypt, including British Airways, EgyptAir, Air France, KLM, Lufthansa, and EasyJet. Major international airports are located in Cairo, Luxor, Sharm el-Sheikh and Hghada.

Border crossings

From Jordan, buses regularly depart from Aqaba and Amman for Cairo and Alexandria. Entering from Israel and the Palestinian territories, there are two official borders: Rafah and Taba. Rafah is normally closed to tourists, leaving Taba the usual entry point. The border crossing with Libya is at Halfaya Pass, though this is often closed (and seriously not recommended at present). Ferries to Egypt depart from locations in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, and Sudan (indeed, the Wadi Halfa ferry is the only way to cross into Egypt from Sudan without flying).

Getting around

Excluding Siwa Oasis, a loop from Cairo through the oases of Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhla and Kharga, returning to Cairo can be done in a week using public transport. Buses from Cairo to Mut in Dakhla Oasis depart from Cairo Gateway (also known as the Turgoman Garage) at 7am and 8pm each day (LE 75). The journey takes about 13-14 hours, with the bus passing through Bahariya Oasis after 5-6 hours, and Farafra Oasis after around 9 hours.

From Mut, four buses a day depart for Kharga Oasis (taking 3 hours). Buses from Kharga Oasis also depart for Cairo (9 hours). In all cases, local minivans and shared taxis are also an option, normally departing when full; the price will vary depending on your haggling skills and the mood of the driver. Alternatively, travel agencies in Cairo, Luxor and the oases offer tours in comfortable 4x4s, often including a night in the White Desert. It is not currently possible to take a bus from Kharga to Luxor, but a privately hired taxi or minibus should cost around 400 LE for the 3 hour journey.



El-Muzzawwaqa tombs

Visas

Most visitors to Egypt can obtain a 1 month tourist visa on arrival at the airport. This currently costs \$15, or its equivalent in Egyptian Pounds. Some nationals, however, need to obtain a visa before leaving their home country. Tourists visiting the resorts of Dahab, Sharm el-Sheikh, Nuweiba and Taba do not require visas so long as they stay in the vicinity of the resort and only remain for two weeks.

Money

Currency: The local currency is the Egyptian Pound (LE or EGP), called "Geneeh" in Arabic. 100 piastres equals 1 Egyptian pound. There are 1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 and 200 LE notes. Money can be exchanged at local banks, local exchange offices and hotels. Banks are closed on Fridays and Saturdays.

Credit cards: Credit cards are accepted by hotels and large shops, but the majority of stores only accept currency.

Shopping

There is a wide variety of ancient Egypt-themed souvenirs on offer across Egypt, from papyrus scrolls bearing temple and tomb scenes to standing statues of Anubis to watch over your desk at work. Among the less touristy purchases, jewellery can be bought for much cheaper prices than in Europe, while boxes inlaid with mother-of-pearl are widely available (though ensure that you are buying the real thing!). Local crafts, including ceramics, also make good souvenirs, especially those from the oases. If you can manage to get them home, carpets and mashrabiya (latticework) screens can decorate your home, or if you like a smoke, sheesha-pipes come in various degrees of quality. It is illegal to purchase antiquities and transport them out of the country.

Short history

Egypt's Pharaonic Period began in around 3050 BCE with the establishment of unified country, ruled by a single king. Egypt's government developed rapidly over the course of the Old Kingdom (2584-2117 BCE), primarily due to the challenges, both physical and administrative, of pyramid construction. Ancient Egypt reached its zenith in the New Kingdom (1549-1069 BCE), when the pharaohs annexed Nubia and controlled large amounts of territory in the Levant, exacting tribute from the rulers of its city states.

Invasions, first by the Assyrians and then by the Persians, led to Egypt's decline over the course of the 1st millennium BCE, and to the eventual takeover by Alexander the Great, instigating the Ptolemaic Period, itself followed by the Roman Period. Coptic Christianity spread across Egypt in the first centuries CE, but was replaced by Islam as the dominant religion in 640 CE, when an Arab army, led by General Amr Ibn el-As, conquered the country. Afterwards, Egypt was ruled by various foreign dynasties, including the Mamluks (1250-1517), Ottomans (1517-1867), French (1798-1801), and British (1882-1922), before achieving independence in 1952.

Egypt has had a tumultuous time recently. The January 25th 2011 revolution set in motion the installation and subsequent removal of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, followed by the installation of President Sisi, an ex-military general. Since then, the banning of the Muslim Brotherhood has led to protests and terrorism, particularly in Cairo. Nevertheless, Egypt remains a vibrant and welcoming country, and those willing to see past the headlines can explore the historic sites virtually alone, while also contributing to rebuilding the damaged economy.

The Essentials

Time difference: GMT + 2

Language: The official language is Arabic. English and French are widely spoken.

Dress: Outside of beach resorts, visitors should dress conservatively. Women should ensure that their legs and arms are covered. Shoes must be removed when entering mosques.

Electrical current/ plugs: Plug sockets are of the round two-pinned variety. The current is 220V AC, 50Hz, except in Alexandria, Heliopolis and Maadi, where it is 110V AC, 50Hz.

Culture: Egypt's culture thrives on good humour, camaraderie, and pride in heritage. Outside of Cairo, the majority of Egypt's population are conservative in outlook; nevertheless, Egyptians are extremely inviting to strangers, so don't be surprised if someone you've met for five minutes asks you to come to their wedding the next day.

Religion: The majority of Egyptians are Muslims following the Sunni tradition. Around 10% of Egypt's population are Coptic Christians.

Weather: Egypt's weather is generally hot and dry, with very little rainfall, especially in the south. Average temperatures in Cairo can reach 35°C in the summer. Typically in March or April, the khamseen – the hot and sandy desert wind – hits Egypt, spreading sand everywhere.

Water: It is advised to only drink bottled water.

Politics: Egypt is a republic with a president as head of state.

Holidays: Islamic holidays are set according to the sighting of the moon, and so the date they fall upon varies each year; key celebrations include Eid el-Adha; Islamic New Year's Day; the Birthday of the Prophet Mohammed; and Eid el-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan. Coptic holidays include Coptic Christmas and Coptic Easter, both of which fall on different days each year.

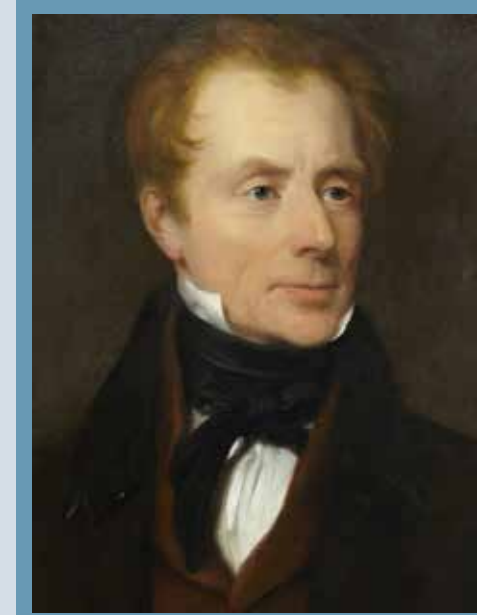
Public holidays are held on set days, and include: 1st January (New Year's Day); January 25th (Revolution Day); April 25th (Sinai Liberation Day); May 1st (Labour Day); June 8th (Public Sector Holiday); June 18th (Liberation Day); 23rd July (Revolution Day); 15th August (The Flooding of the Nile); 11th September (Coptic New Year); 6th October (Armed Forces Day); 24th October (Suez Victory Day); 23rd December (Victory Day).

Other must-see sites

- Bahariya Museum of the Golden Mummies – Bahariya Oasis
- Badr's Museum – Farafra Oasis
- Temple of Hibis (apparently reopening this year) – Kharga Oasis
- The Roman forts of Qasr el-Ghweita and Qasr el-Zayan – Kharga Oasis
- Necropolis of el-Bagawat – Kharga Oasis
- A night in the White Desert



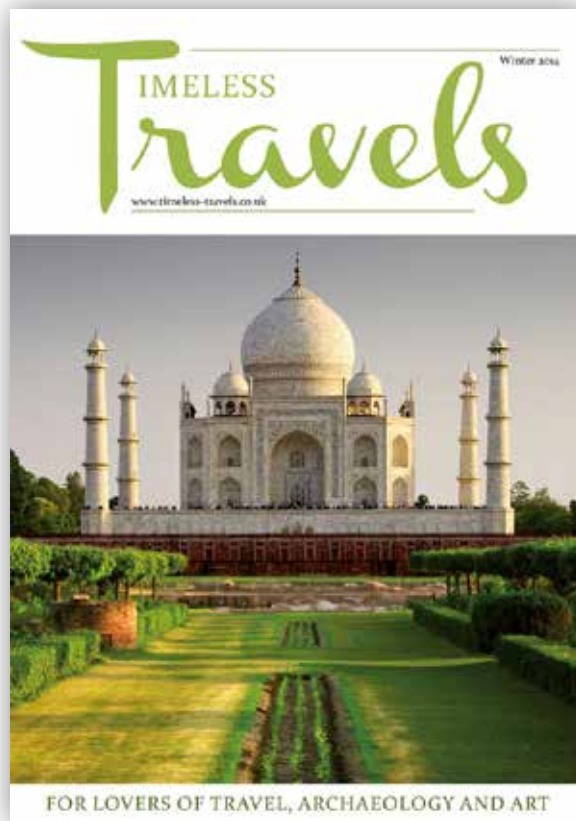
Khentika Tomb, Balat



Archibald Edmonstone III

Born in 1795 he died aged 34 in 1811, leaving a personal fortune of £12,000. Educated at Eton and Oxford he travelled in 1819 to Egypt where he visited and explored two of the oases in the great desert, of which he published an account, with views and plans of the ruined temples and tombs.

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