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Senior Traveler: Egypt: Safe, spectacular

By John J. Hilferty
For The Inquirer

High on travel lists under the heading, "Someday I'd like to go there," is Egypt, land of pharaohs, tombs and temples.

Unfortunately for many Americans, seniors included, the dream of Egypt is often met with fear that traveling to the Middle East is unsafe.

But the facts are somewhat surprising. There were 46 million international tourist arrivals in the Middle East last year, an increase of 5 million from 2006, the United Nations World Tourism Organization reports. "Saudi Arabia and Egypt [were] among the leading destinations in 2007," the organization says.

But Americans visiting Egypt represented a mere drop in the bucket - 178,000 last year, says the Egyptian Tourist Authority in New York.

My only visit to Egypt was six months after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks - a delicate time if ever there was one. We grew accustomed to the ever-present Egyptian Tourist Police standing by with automatic rifles, though the sight might bother some travelers. The police are Egypt's response to terrorism, activated after the Nov. 17, 1997 attack at the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri, when Islamic extremists killed 57 tourists.

On my trip, there was at least one armed guard on every tour bus and two on every riverboat carrying tourists on the Nile. The soldiers and guards became a reassuring part of the landscape, no more intrusive than a train of camels silhouetted across the desert horizon at dusk. My wife and I discovered that the most dangerous part of our trip was crossing the streets in Cairo, where traffic regulations are disobeyed en masse. Cars, trucks and buses take on the menace of the bulls of Pamplona.

Egypt fascinates like no other land. For instance, you learn that the reason King Tut's tomb was so full of treasure is that it remained buried beneath the tomb of a far superior pharaoh for hundreds of years before archaeologist Howard Carter unearthed it in 1922. You also will marvel that the 450 miles between Cairo and Abu Simbel contain the remains of dozens of temples and tombs covering a 5,000-year period - some well preserved, others still covered by desert sand.

There are more than 80 pyramids in a 30-mile stretch of the Nile below Cairo, and about 1,000 sphinxes have been discovered, including the Great Sphinx at Giza, believed to be dedicated to Abu el-Hol ("the terrible one").

To appreciate the splendors of Egypt, I strongly recommend the longer tours of at least 10 days. You will want to hang out in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where most of King Tut's treasures are kept, and the fascinating Khan al-Khalili market, which has been selling soup to nuts since the 14th century. The aroma of spices is worth a visit in itself. You'll see men making fezzes and find shops selling wool and cotton products, jewelry in gold and silver, fancy carpets, carved and decorated leather goods, brightly colored pottery, curved daggers and swords, and water pipes.

The recommended way to travel the Nile, whose shores hold most of Egypt's treasures, is by riverboat and plane to Aswan and Abu Simbel.

Elderhostel offers one of the most popular Egyptian trips for the 50-plus among us. "Beyond the Pharaohs: Egypt Past and Present" is a 12-day trip leaving the United States on Oct. 7, 14, 21, 28 and Nov. 11. (Many tours to Egypt shut down during the hot summer months.) The basic cost is \$3,491 per person, not including roundtrip airfare to Egypt. It does include plane rides from Cairo to Luxor, where the most popular tombs are located, from Aswan to Abu Simbel, and back to Cairo.

The itinerary includes six nights in Cairo, one in Alexandria, and four nights sailing the Nile on the HS Radamis II, a four-deck vessel with a capacity for 150 passengers, sun deck, restaurant, three bars and a lounge. For more information, call Elderhostel at 1-800-454-5768 or go to www.elderhostel.org.



JANE WOOLDRIDGE / Miami Herald

Tourists visit the monument to Ramses II at Abu Simbel, Egypt. Between Cairo and Abu Simbel are dozens of temples.

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For other trips to Egypt, check Vacations To Go (1-800-510-4002; www.tourvacationstogo.com/egypt_tours.cfm). Tours are listed based on days and prices, such as budget, \$45 to \$130 per day plus airfare; first class, \$80 to \$275; deluxe, \$100 to \$400, and luxury, \$400 to \$600.

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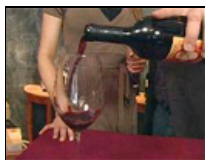
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