

Trip log for Oriental Institute Sudan tour, December 2018

Mon 10 Dec: We, along with much of the tour group, arrived at Khartoum airport from Cairo, at around 6:30 pm. We were met by a representative of the local travel agent, Italian Tourism Sudan; and transferred to the Corinthia Hotel (celebrated for its football-shaped silhouette (which is supposed to be the sail of a ship)). We were assigned a smoking room; so we immediately had to change rooms. (We had had an awful lot of trouble with the hotel rooms in the previous two weeks in Egypt; fortunately after this we had no further hotel problems in Sudan...) The tour manager was Sherif Samy, who had been tour guide on the just-previous Egypt tour. Our Sudanese tour guide was named Hamid.

Tue 11 Dec: We spent this day in the Khartoum area. The morning was devoted to the Sudan National Museum (essentially of archeology), very near the hotel. The museum proper is middle-sized, and has some very fine ancient sculptures on the ground floor; with later Christian and Islamic art on the 2nd floor. Even better are the outside open-air-but covered exhibits: including 3 temples rescued from flooding by the 1960s UNESCO project---from Semna West and East, as well as from Buhen. We knew in principle of these temples from reading; but the reality surpassed our expectations. Lunch was at a nearby restaurant with an extensive buffet.

In the afternoon, we crossed the river to the Omdurman area---mainly to see mausoleum of the Mahdi, who had defeated Gordon and the British in the 1880s. In the later afternoon, we boarded a medium-sized boat, for a short cruise down the Blue Nile, to its confluence with the White Nile. It was interesting to compare the different flows of the two branches as they met. Then dinner was back at the hotel.

Wed 12 Dec: This was essentially a travel day. We divided up into 5 groups, in separate 4x4 vehicles (Toyota LandCruisers---though in one case, the logo instead said "LrndCruiser", which I think reflects the learned flavor of OI tour groups!) We traveled mainly through the Nubian desert, in all about 6 hours---with a break in the middle for a picnic lunch (provided by the Corinthia, and set up in an open "building" by the side of the road that was clearly used as a rest stop).

It was just before sunset when we arrived in the area of the sacred mountain Gebel Barkal: in fact we pulled up next to a small pyramid field at its base, so that we did get some tourist-viewing for the day. We were further delighted to see that our hotel, the Nubian Rest House, was just a short distance away, with excellent views of Gebel Barkal. The hotel itself is fairly basic but comfortable, though with weak lighting. (The wi-fi alas was mostly useless.) Dinner was a small buffet---the property is owned by our host agency, Italian Touring---who provided a staff member Alessandra to oversee the stay of our group.

Thur 13 Dec: The morning was devoted to Gebel Barkal: Indeed we walked out the front gate of the hotel, directly to the site. We explored some temple ruins by the base of the mountain, as well as a small related museum. And then we moved over to the adjacent ongoing archeological dig, where we got an introduction by the Italian

archeologist in charge, named Ciampini. We re-visited the pyramids, returning to the hotel for lunch.

In the afternoon, we drove to the necropolis at El Kurru: This included a somewhat larger pyramid field, from the Napatan era, say after 800 BC. We returned before dusk, with some tour members (but not us) climbing Gebel Barkal to see the sunset.

Fri 14 Dec: Today we made a day trip to the north of Gebel Barkal: We drove several hours up to the site of the 3rd cataract of the Nile---this is a stunningly beautiful and lush green area, which suddenly appears after many hours of pure desert scenery. This was a real bonus; and in the category of scenery (as opposed to archeology), a big high point of the trip.

Then we began heading slowly back south: first to Tombos---where there is a quarry with an unfinished statue of the 25th dynasty pharaoh Taharqa; it also includes lots of monumental-sized 18th dynasty inscriptions on large rock outcrops. Here we had another picnic lunch, under some large trees. We were astonished when our drivers pulled planks and chairs and sawhorses and table clothes off the top of the 4x4s and set up tables and chairs for us. The picnic had been prepared by the rest house.

We then continued farther south to Kerma---the longtime capital of the Nubian civilization. Here, before the later age of Egyptian-style pyramids, the rulers were buried under monumental mounds, often with many sacrificed retainers; a large preserved mudbrick structure called the Western Deffufa remains enigmatic. The local museum includes some excellent sculptures of rulers, including some from the later 25th dynasty period such as Taharqa. Then headed back to Gebel Barkal.

Sat 15 Dec: Another day primarily consisting of driving---east toward Meroe. After crossing the river, we first visited Nuri---a necropolis used soon after El Kurru, and with a good-sized pyramid field.

Late in the morning, we reached the Ghazali Monastery (about 7th century)---walls preserved to about chest level, reminding of some similar sites we'd seen in Jordan. We had a picnic lunch in the area.

Then another stretch of driving, until around 4:30 pm we reached the Nile---where we somehow packed all 5 of our LandCruisers onto a smallish ferry across the river. There were lots of birds flying low over the water.

It was just after dark when we got to the Meroe area---so we didn't see the views until the next morning. We were staying at the Meroe Safari Camp, also owned by Italian Touring. They are in the process of constructing more standard hotel rooms; but we were in the old units, which consist of permanent tents: these are fairly spacious and comfortable, compared to the permanent tents we had stayed at in Tanzania earlier in the year. The only real nuisance is that the bathrooms were not ensuite; Instead each unit had its private bathroom in a separate area about 50 feet away. But at least the bathrooms were fairly sizable, with a shower as well as an anteroom with toilet, where there was enough space to keep our toiletries there (rather than having to bring them from the room each time). There were very polite lizards who shared out showers with us. In contrast to Gebel Barkal, here dinner was served on plates by the wait-staff.

(Paradoxically: in this seemingly more isolated location than Gebel Barkal, the wi-fi was far more reliable...)

Sun 16 Dec: Today was devoted to the necropolis at Meroe---occupied several centuries after el Kurru/Nuri above.

In the morning, we saw the excellent views of the main pyramid field---the camp sits in a bluff overlooking the site about 2 km away. After breakfast we drove (some members rode camels, but not us) to the far south side, with its smaller pyramid field. In particular, this provided an excellent view of the main north pyramid field, which we walked to afterwards. These pyramids are in comparatively good condition: while some are partly ruined, many are essentially intact. The pyramids are solid, with no interior chamber. But each has a small shrine area on its east side: some of these are ruined, but a fair number are partly reconstructed, using most of the original walls with their extensive carvings. One enjoyable feature of the Sudanese pyramid fields is that, since they are smaller than the huge Egyptian pyramids, it's easy enough to walk all the way around the field, taking in all the details. There is no doubt in our minds that the Meroe pyramids gave us the high point of this trip.

After lunch back at the camp, in the afternoon we moved on to the "Meroe Royal City", with the ruins of the town for whose occupants the pyramids were built. This is more ruined than the pyramids themselves. We also spent a few minutes in the market of the modern town---which is situated near to a narrow point of the river.

Finally just before sunset, most of us returned to Meroe North, to see the sunset over the pyramids.

Mon 17 Dec: A comparatively leisurely travel day, back to Khartoum. We first visited the small pyramid field at Meroe West, which we hadn't had time for the previous day. This was very peaceful, in the morning light.

We left the main road to visit the temples at Musawwarat es-Sufra: especially one dedicated to the lion god Apedemak. Another temple included sculptures, notably a head-high statue of an elephant (which is not a frequent subject in Egyptian-influenced art).

We continued on dirt roads to the further site of Naga: This is known for its particularly well-preserved late-period carvings---notably Queen Amanitore is shown in a standard Egyptian "smiting" pose---but portrayed with broader hips than the conventional Egyptian impossibly-slender style. Our leader Emily Teeter is partly an art historian---and this was surely her favorite site of the trip. We had a picnic lunch near the temple; before proceeding to the more ruined but still gracefully geometric Amun temple.

We arrived back at the Corinthia Hotel in Khartoum before dark. And had our farewell dinner in the restaurant.

Tue 18 Dec: Some of the group left earlier; but the majority were leaving on the 7:30 pm flight back to Cairo. So at 10am, Emily led most of this remaining group, walking the short distance back to the Sudan National Museum. It was fascinating to re-visit the exhibits, now that we had seen the original sites where many of the artifacts had been found.

About 8 of us met in the hotel restaurant for lunch at 1pm. Unfortunately the staff were being exceptionally slow and inefficient, so that we ended up in a hurry to finish our packing for our 3pm airport transfer.

We stopped briefly at the Catholic Cathedral on the way out; but traffic being sluggish, we thought it best to then continue to the airport, arriving about 4pm. We cleared security and checking by around 5pm. It was too early for the gate to be announced, so we were stuck before the final security check prior to the gates.

Unfortunately, there was now a sour note: Our tour manager Sherif at this point decided to walk away from his duties to us. (He made himself comfortable in the VIP lounge.) During this period (about 5pm to 8pm), Judy was taken away by airport officials for a further baggage check, for 45 minutes. We are in the process of lodging a protest with Egitalloyd over this unprofessional conduct for not being there to help Judy.

The plane arrived in Cairo only about a half hour late; we were met by further Egitalloyd staff, who helped us through security etc, to our final flights.

We were very annoyed that EgyptAir has no arrangement with Etihad Air---so that they would not check our bags through to our final destination of Chicago. As a result, even though we were not leaving the Cairo airport, we had to clear customs there as though we were entering Egypt; then retrieve our luggage, and check in with Etihad, as though we had come from Egypt! Grr.

We did get checked in with Etihad, finally now in business class; and had an uneventful but very uncomfortable flight 1am to 6am in Abu Dhabi.

Wed 19 Dec: Our flight left Abu Dhabi around 9:30 am (after still more security checks: this time Steve was "randomly selected" for extra checks); and after a long 14-hour flight (on which we were able to sleep a little better), we arrived in Chicago about 2:30 pm, getting home around 4pm.



Corinthia Hotel



Gebel Barkal



Gebel Barkal



3rd Cataract



Kerma



Meroe



Ghazali Monastery



Musawwarat es-Sufra



Naga



Nuri