

Following in the footsteps of my ancestors

Discovering an ancient land that her globetrotting family had talked much about left our traveller enthralled – and vowing to return

My family were inveterate globetrotters, so I grew up hearing tales of all kinds of faraway places – including Egypt. Ah, that tennis club in Alexandria! Those elegant dress shops in Cairo's Rue Solomon Pasha! The parties and camel-racing beneath the Pyramids, at the grand old Mena House hotel at Giza...

Of course I know that Egypt now is very different from how it was then. Still, I was excited to learn that my own first few nights in Cairo would be at this very same Mena House. I don't think they race camels any more, and suburbs have swallowed the palm-fringed dust-track that once led to its door, but Mena House was still a hotel to remember.

The entrance hall is a remarkable fantasy of fretted gold, the public areas are furnished with Islamic antiques, and the elaborately panelled restaurant serves what must be the best eggs Benedict in the Middle East.

And of course, it is still almost in the shadow of the Pyramids. In fact, as I ate my eggs Benedict the first morning, the Great Pyramid was the huge shape just beyond the waving palm trees outside the window.

And the idea of eggs Benedict today, pyramids four thousand years old and my own family history made me aware of what so many other people also notice about Egypt – its strange juxtaposition of past and present, of changelessness in the midst of change.

Changing

Egypt is certainly changing now, though largely peacefully, it seems. My January stay felt safe, and there were no Foreign Office travel restrictions, but I checked with the FO website every day and made sure to absorb the general advice before I drove across the blue sparkling Nile into Cairo city, past the now faded glories of those dress shops, through the crowds to the Cairo Museum.

This huge terracotta-coloured museum stands in a garden full of date-palms and creepy statues of tremendous antiquity. It is everything a vintage museum ought to be, with long echoing galleries, mahogany cases, and dingly painted pillars with ancient hand-typed signs. You almost expect to find Hercule Poirot twirling his moustaches amidst the shadowy rows of mummies. Tutankhamen's treasures are kept here, but there's much more: strange earrings hung with spindles, gold-bladed daggers, elaborately beaded shrouds, shoes shaped like the Pharaoh's enemies, to be crushed into the dust.

The Pyramids, too, the



Citadel, the medieval mosques – there's lots to see in Cairo, but I also wanted to visit somewhere more unusual. At a couple of London exhibitions, I'd seen the fascinating Wissa Wassef peasant tapestries of Harrania. Colourful, subtle and unique, they are collected by connoisseurs and museums worldwide, and I wanted to see where they were made.

The late Ramses Wissa Wassef, architect and professor, made his home and workshop in what was then a remote village in the early 1950s. Harrania is less rural than it was, but the centre's rambling complex of traditional-style domed buildings and pleasant gar-

dens is still an oasis of calm. It accepts visitors, but sees no souvenir-seeking hotel coach parties, for the centre buys every single piece of work that the weavers produce at a good price (paying a premium for creativity) and sells internationally.

Wissa Wassef, who died in 1974, was a visionary, a genius perhaps. "He had the gift of seeing peoples' potential and helping them to achieve it," explained his son-in-law Ikram, who now runs the centre.

Passionate about developing natural creativity, Wissa Wassef taught weaving to any village children who wanted to learn. They used natural wool, dyes created from plants, and created

their tapestries directly on their high, old-fashioned looms without preliminary drawings. They created amazing things: Biblical stories of glory and power, peasant scenes of harvest and hard work, ducks, birds, plants and animals, stories and legends.

Sophisticated

As they grew to adulthood, their work became ever more sophisticated and complex. During my visit, weavers came and went to suit their own schedules, sometimes with their own children in tow. Bright images sat half finished on the looms, harking back to a more rural life, or perhaps inspired by the gardens all

around – gardens where the natural dyes are also grown.

I was sorry to leave Cairo, because I liked this chaotic, varied, noisy, historical city, but Luxor also had its own appeal. Once the desert capital of Thebes, it is far more relaxing than Cairo, with roads lined with bright flower beds and many hotels. The sun shines all day and every day, and I was frankly tempted to lounge by the beautiful bright Nile that flowed past the gardens of the laid-back Sofitel Karnak where I stayed.

I did manage a sunset boat trip and I took the hotel's shuttle boat into town one day, but I'm glad I spent most of the time visiting the an-

Eggs
Benedict, the Pyramids and my own family history made me aware of what so many people notice about Egypt – its strange juxtaposition of past and present

FACTFILE

■ A two-centre trip including international and internal flights, transfers and B&B for three nights at Mena House Oberoi in Cairo and four nights at the five-star Sofitel Karnak in Luxor, costs from £847 per person. Discover Egypt also offers Nile Cruises and tailor-made Egyptian destinations.

■ The Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre at www.wissawassef.com/

■ Discover Egypt on 0844 880 0461 or www.discoveregypt.co.uk

■ Morning view at Mena House with the sun rising over pyramids of Giza, top; weaver at Wissa Wassef, Harrania, left; a Nile shuttle boat from Sofitel Karnak hotel heads into Luxor town, right

tiquities. Around here are the Valley of the Kings with its surprisingly bright and large royal tombs, and acres of amazing temple ruins with forests of columns, innumerable statues, ceremonial avenue of sphinxes, and inscriptions and carvings on almost every surface.

By the end of my week, my list of things to see in Egypt had become longer. Aswan, Abu Simbel, Siwa oasis, and the White Desert with its eerie rock formations – I did need more time. So I resolved to come back before too long. I might even look for somewhere that does camel-racing, and if my ghostly ancestors are looking over my shoulder, I'm sure they'd approve of that.