

Travel



Tomb raider

Swapping the car for a donkey and a hotel suite for a rooftop sunbed, *Giselle Whiteaker* discovers the ancient city of Luxor



On arrival at Luxor we are approached by a man offering taxi services, but then we are stopped by a guard, while leaving the airport. Asking what the problem is, we are told 'no problem'. After some time, our guy slips the guard a little money and we are free to go. This is how Egypt works - it's all about the 'baksheesh'. It is 3am when we reach the hotel, so we are pleased to find the reception manned. "We should have a booking?" I say. "Ah yes, for tomorrow," is the reply. Not what we were hoping to hear. "Do you have a room available now?" I ask. "No, but you can sleep on the roof," is the hotel manager's reply. We agree and lug our baggage up four flights of stairs. Stretched out on musty old sun beds, we try to sleep. Then the rooster down the street starts crowing and the temperature drops slightly. I pull the thin blanket over my head. Cars roll by, dogs bark, my companion starts snoring. I concede defeat and burst into laughter. At 8am the sunbed next to me creaks to life. I open my eyes to find that the roof doubles as a breakfast terrace. We are surrounded by hotel guests eating. The waiter offers us coffee in bed - one of the advantages of your bed being in a restaurant. We 'properly' check in and head out to explore. After numerous offers of caleche - local transport in the form of horse and carriage - we find the sphinx-lined entrance to the Temples of Karnak, a spectacular complex of gigantic scale sanctuaries, obelisks, and pylons. The site has been redesigned, restored and decorated over nearly 1,500 years. Every surface is carved with hieroglyphics.

The highlight is the Great Hypostyle Hall, a forest of 134 towering carved stone pillars. Often we are approached by locals, beckoning us to follow so they can show us a private area or point out a hidden image, obviously with the expectation of baksheesh. Sometimes this can be worthwhile, however, often it is just an attempt to extort money for pointing out the obvious. We negotiate a caleche back with Ahmed and son, a friendly pair, until they realise we are going to pay the negotiated price with no baksheesh. Suddenly they drop us three blocks from our agreed final destination. After lunch we move on to Luxor Temple, a single temple complex built on an older sanctuary site. Originally Karnak and Luxor were connected by an avenue of sphinxes, but only a short stretch still exists. The 24-metre entrance walls, flanked by huge statues and a pink granite obelisk, loom over the visitor inspiring awe. Somewhat out of context is a chamber that was plastered over by the Romans and used as a cult sanctuary - a bizarre contrast to the surrounding reliefs. Alexander the Great also had influence here, rebuilding one shrine and adding reliefs of himself as pharaoh. We search for these images, but find them impossible to distinguish, even with baksheesh-motivated assistance. Our confidence in the assurances that a given image is Alexander is shattered when each person points to a different relief. In the evening we visit a local restaurant. After a quick meal of tender barbecued chicken with freshly baked Arabic bread, rice with barley, and vegetables in a rich tomato sauce, we become

