

One Week in Old Kingdom Egypt: An Insider's Primer

By David A Cintron

In November of 2003 I was fortunate enough to take my first trip to Egypt with an academic group led by Dr. Willeke Wendrich of UCLA. Our mission was a sweeping chronological tour of Old Kingdom architecture and history. It was to be a very aggressive visit, starting each day with a lecture and handouts on another phase of Old Kingdom history followed by a full day of sightseeing. Although this was my first trip I was not an uninformed visitor having spent the last several years in a rigorous study of Predynastic, Archaic and Old Kingdom Egypt, lecturing at ARCE and writing articles.

What I expected to find was a wonderful land full of ancient sites under the control of a national organization with over 100 years of experience in conservation. What I did find was not what I expected.

Arrival – Cairo Airport

Driving out of Cairo airport the first ancient monument to come into view was an obelisk just outside the airport in Heliopolis, confirming what I've read about the ancient city being buried under modern development. We continued south along the Nile through Cairo then over the river and across to Giza. It was dark and the last leg led down roads full of goats, donkeys and locals to the hotel almost as if we had taken a magical exit back to an earlier, simpler time.

When I arrived at the Mena House I was delighted to find the Great Pyramid visible from my balcony. The pyramid was not lit and its dim shadow only hinted at the triangular behemoth I knew was hiding in the darkness. Suddenly light flashed against its side for only a moment and was dark again, gently teasing my curiosity. Its revelation would have to wait until morning.

Day 1: 1st – 3rd Dynasty Archaic Saqqara

I rose to find the Great Pyramid once again obscured, this time by a shroud of Nile fog. Breakfast was at 7:30 and at 8:00 we had a lecture which took time that I did not want to take as I was eager to see anything and everything. To make things worse, we discovered on the way to Saqqara that everything was to close at 3:00 for Ramadan, challenging us to fit an eight hour day into six.





Our first stop was the first dynasty mastaba field. I was very excited to see the tombs I had read so much about until I discovered they had all been reburied. Walking along the edge of the escarpment all that was visible was the occasional mud brick wall protruding from the sand. I noticed the wind that was whipping up the hill was fierce and was eroding the mud brick that was exposed. It seemed to be disintegrating right before my eyes. There was no effort to conserve any of this save for the naturally protective sand, serving the same role today as it did for the early burials five millennia past.

Before entering Djoser's complex we took a side trip to the Serapeum. It was closed to the public and we were not allowed to take photos. Looking up at the roof I could see the urgency of conservation as, in spite of or because of its longevity, it seemed that it may collapse at any moment. All but two of the tremendous coffins were thoroughly encased in wood to protect them from the work on the roof. The one we did see up close was a truly beautiful monolith.

Our featured site for that day was Djoser's complex. The entryway was so crowded one could barely squeeze through. Once inside I could not get enough of the magnificently restored complex and gained immense respect for M. Lauer's brilliant work. One can only hope this effort will be continued in the areas of the northern courtyard and the Western Massifs, all of which are still buried. A pleasant surprise came when we were granted access to another closed area, the interior of the



pyramid itself. The original entrance is too dangerous so we entered through a 26th dynasty tunnel dug underneath the southern face as part of an ancient conservation effort. The tunnel opens into the central shaft near the top and the view makes one a bit nervous (as do many open shafts) dropping off a good 60 feet from the railing. The patchwork ceiling looks like it too should have long ago fallen down; thankfully the ancient mortar is still holding fast.

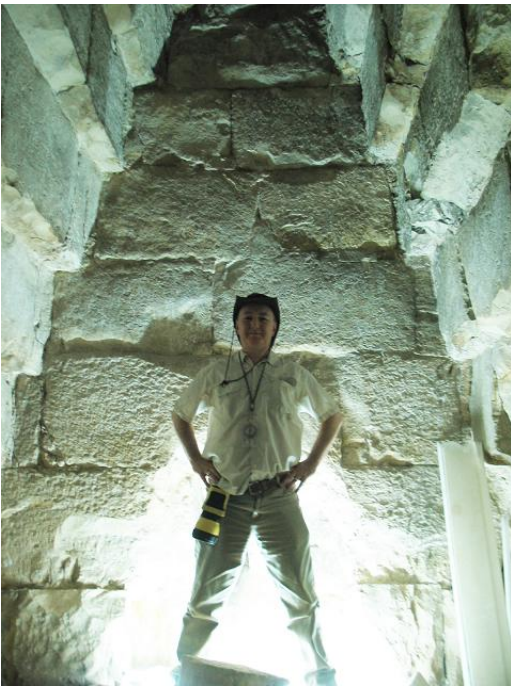
Returning to the hotel in daylight I found to my surprise that Giza was not located away from the city nor attended solely by the village of Nazlet al-Simman. I realized that I had received this impression from the aerial photographs that attempt to hide the city. No, Pyramid Road is lined with 4 star hotels, restaurants of every kind, and shops galore.

Day 2: Early 4th Dynasty Meidum

That morning we started our day heading south to Meidum, driving for an hour down narrow paved roads past villagers and animals along a canal where locals were busy washing clothes and catching fish, and finally onto the main highway.

The pyramid itself is very impressive. It can be seen from very far away and it dominates the landscape. Like a small mountain its size is not apparent until one gets right up under it and then it is suddenly a formidable climb. Pictures do not do justice to its perspective. A short climb up the rubble at the base leads to a short flight of stairs and through the door into the pyramid. The shaft is quite long but only about 5 feet square so you can walk but you have to crouch. It's also a bit claustrophobic until you get to the bottom where there are 2 chambers that seem large after the climb down but small when compared to the photographs and charts. Although the chambers were supposed to be for blocking stones, I noticed the roof was rounded which seemed to defeat the purpose. A set of wooden stairs lead up through a hole that seems to be no larger than the entry shaft. The stairs are steep and the walls are rough, but when you emerge into the pyramid chamber the climb is well worth it.

The corbelled vault is small and got hot and humid very quickly with 10 people inside so our visit was short. On the way out there is an excellent view of wooden beams still in situ after 4500 years and of an opening into the small relief chamber over the entryway. It seemed odd that there was need for a chamber over the space at the bottom of the ramp. On the way out I also noticed a dressed stone protruding down from the rough ceiling of the entry shaft, a smooth angular block in the midst of roughly carved walls, stranger still as the shaft appears to have been carved after the pyramid was completed.



Curious about the condition of this pyramid complex I circled around to find the causeway. Now no more than a dirt path between two huge mounds of sand, albeit an impressive dirt path, at the end lies what should be its Valley Temple but I was saddened to find no more than piles of sand and oozing groundwater. I could only wonder

what lay beneath, and when resources will be found to excavate and conserve this complex which only belongs to the second oldest pyramid still standing.

Next to the Meidum pyramid is Mastaba 17. The entry leads through a tiny tunnel carved through the mud brick that must be negotiated on hands and knees. This short but tedious trek requires true conviction. After about 30 yards there is a cheap wooden ladder which drops down 8 feet, and then a series of wooden planks leads through another small hole and over a series of large blocks. Finally one steps down into the main chamber. More planks go out the other side over more blocks towards the original entrance, now buried under the mastaba. The main chamber is larger than expected and contains a large but empty sarcophagus. Its heavy lid is propped up by a small wooden mallet that can not be less than a thousand years old. Tremendous monolithic limestone blocks form the roof over the sarcophagus, the main chamber and the entry way.

Our final stop for the day was Hawara and the pyramid of Amenemhat III. There were no other visitors there and I doubt they get very many. The pyramid is little more than a pile of mud brick and rubble. The entryway does not go more than 10 feet before it is filled to the brim with thick mud. The labyrinth lies on one side of the pyramid in the form of a field a quarter mile square of unexcavated mounds. On the other side is a Greco-Roman cemetery that goes a half mile in the other direction, made of hundreds of piles of rubble punctuated by mud-brick, shreds of linen, reed matting, pottery shards and tantalizing holes in the ground hinting at unexcavated chambers.

That night our tour guide, Fadel, bought us dinner at Cristo, across the street from our hotel. It was an excellent sampling of local cuisine.

Day 3 – the Faiyum

This was an unusual day as we once again departed from our Old Kingdom chronology to visit the ancient Faiyum. Out on the northern shore of the old Faiyum lake there was not another person or a drop of water as far as the eye could see; at least 30 miles. Our first stop was Dr. Wendrich's excavation at Kom W where stone tools and pottery shards were so numerous it appeared they composed most of the mound on which we were standing. From there we drove farther down the ancient coastline to a mysterious temple of unknown purpose and date standing on a hill that overlooks the dried up lake bed. The architecture appears Old Kingdom but no one really knows for sure. Looking out across the desert we could see our next destination, Crocodilopolis/Dimai, a Greco-Roman city that was once an island but that now lies about 30 miles from the modern lake shore.

I found Crocodilopolis to be a unique experience. Ancient mud brick walls still tower as high as 30 feet over the ground. Roman granaries stand with roofs intact but filled with sand, long gone wooden doors failing to keep out the desert. An ancient quay extends far into the empty sea. I sit on a crumbled throne in a palace of fallen bricks.

That night we treated ourselves to Tex-Mex cuisine, Egyptian style.



Day 4: Early 4th Dynasty Dahshur

Once again we headed south along the canal, this time to Dahshur, stopping first at a charming local farm. I was able to take some wonderful photographs of Sneferu's pyramids from behind a body of water I imagined may have been shared by Sneferu. Perhaps it was even the same lake mentioned in the Westcar Papyrus where his ladies rowed for his entertainment.

We 4-wheeled down a narrow dirt road approaching the pyramids from the back side, stopping at the edge of the desert where an Egyptian family visited with us and posed for pictures. I imagine we were a rare event as the guards gave our tour guide a hard time for coming the wrong way.



Our drivers raced our jeeps across the sand to the Bent Pyramid. Again I found the pyramid to be tremendous, not done justice by photographs. The size of this pyramid is also deceiving from very close up because the change in angle tends to hide the top half. The pyramid is indefinitely closed for much needed conservation. I was also disappointed to find that the entrance to its southern satellite was being used to store furniture.

I took off from the group and walked down to the Valley temple. I was eager because I had carefully studied the excavation reports written 50 years earlier for a paper I wrote outlining how a clue in the Palermo stone hints that Sneferu may have planned both pyramids to be built as a pair from the beginning. For a few minutes I found myself all alone in the ancient Egyptian pyramid field; I could see no one and nothing to anchor me in the 21st century; a curious feeling of timelessness suddenly broken by our squad of jeeps breaking the horizon. I entered the valley temple and walked alone among its broken pieces as I envisioned its vanished splendor.



Following this we walked around the Black Pyramid, and then drove over to the Red Pyramid. There were many visitors inside which drove up the heat and humidity, yet I felt could have spent hours inside. Suddenly everyone was gone and once again I found myself alone, this time in the burial chamber of Sneferu's pyramid, as Sneferu would have been when he was dead and buried. I felt I could hear him laughing because after so many thousands of years people were still looking for him, and he had fooled us all.

The Saqqara Palm Club provided a hearty feast for us that evening.

Day 5: 4th Dynasty Giza

After four days of anticipation we finally arrived at the Giza plateau. Standing at the base of the Great Pyramid this immense structure does not appear anywhere near as large as it actually is. For some reason the perfect shape fools the eye making the pyramids built in perfect pyramid shape look smaller. The step pyramid at Meidum and the Bent pyramid at Dahshur both look much taller even though they are significantly shorter.

We were dropped off outside the Sphinx enclosure and proceeded around to the Valley temple and the Sphinx temple. The Sphinx temple is not open to the public as it is in very poor condition, but the Valley temple was filled with tourists. This structure is in excellent shape. The huge blocks are intact and in place, a fact which, restored or not causes one to wonder why, when looking at the Sphinx and Valley temples side by side, they have survived the centuries so differently.

I was photographing the Sphinx from a ledge outside the Valley Temple when we received permission to go inside the enclosure. We all ran to the thrill of being close enough to touch this, the foremost of ancient monuments, at least to an Egyptophile.



It was no less than Monsour Boriak, Inspector General of the Giza Plateau and 2nd to Zahi Hawass who led us to the Sphinx and afterwards took us over to the Workmen's Tombs. We were treated to a walk through of the excavated area and a peek inside a few of the tombs. Following this we drove back to the plateau to see an excavation still in progress under the ramp of Menkaure. Although all we could see was the sealed doors which had not yet been opened, it was exciting to be let in on a new find.

Our excitement was broken by the arrival of another special event: we were to enter the Great Pyramid.



Entering the Great Pyramid is almost like entering a Disneyland attraction. The main entry way is not the original, but a twisty, curvy corridor hacked out by medieval Arab explorers which bypasses the descending passage and plug blocks, ending halfway up the ascending passage. A short duck (crouching) walk brings you to the base of the Grand Gallery. Standing inside this palatial chamber as one pictures a stack of solid rock 200 feet high pressing down on its roof inspires an undeniable feeling of awe.

The King's Chamber was a change from the corbelled rooms of earlier pyramids. The walls seem perfectly square and flat. Despite the strong echoes, the complete lack of external noise makes it seem extremely quiet, and despite the lamps the walls absorb so much of the light that the chamber still seems dark. These effects combine to create a truly surreal experience.

The chamber was also larger than I expected. At the far end there is a stone box which is supposed to have been a sarcophagus. The air shafts up the sides are open. One is hacked out with a French fan inset into the wall, making it appear as if the pyramid were built by the French after all. There is a humidity monitor and controller and it was very hot. A lot of people jumped in the coffin and wanted their picture taken; I of course was one of them.

I was, once again, the last one out, this time with one of the youngsters in our party. The guard unexpectedly gave the two of us one minute to visit the Queen's Chamber. The passageway is only 3 feet high, yet in the excitement we ran full speed to the end, took a quick look, a picture or two and ran back down and out the theme-park entrance.

Our day ended with another unique and thrilling experience. We stopped at a local stable and were given the choice of horse or camel to ride. My choice was a small but spunky Arabian. Not at all happy with walking this one wanted nothing if not to run. Released from whatever cell he was kept in he insisted on riding the wind. As soon as he could he took off on a gallop up the hill and I was only too happy to let him. At the top the entire plateau was visible from end to end, a truly unequalled panorama. It only took half the time to get back because now my small stallion was able to run even faster downhill.

Day 6: 5th-6th Dynasty Abusir and Saqqara

Trekking a mile across the sand from where our bus had parked in front of the Valley Temple of Userkaf, and packing plenty of extra water, we arrived at the Sun Temple of Niuserre. No other tourists were present but I felt spike of jealousy when two riders galloped between the dunes in defiance of the monuments overlooking their joyride. These broken yet beautiful monuments were recently brought to the attention of the general public with M. Verner's *Abusir*. They seemed all alone in the desert but each one was attended by one or more quiet yet friendly local Antiquities men who seemed to magically appear upon our arrival.

It was an even longer walk back around the pyramid of Userkaf, past the pyramid of Shepseskare, and over to Raneferef. This unique monument is called a pyramid but because it was never finished all that remains is what was meant to be the burial chamber open to the sky. Although we were now only a short way from our bus, we spent hours poring over the scattered remains of the Sun Temples of the Sixth Dynasty. It was exhausting, walking four hours through the sand but the well-preserved reliefs, exquisitely carved columns and beautiful black basalt flooring begged our attention and our photography.

Our tour of the late Old Kingdom drawing to a close, our last stop was the Pyramid of

Unas and the Pyramid Texts. But it seems that in Saqqara anywhere a shaft is sunk something new will be found, so right next to Unas we were able to peer down into a 60 foot deep excavation revealing the 2nd dynasty tomb of Hotepsekhemwy. Next to that is a shaft of Persian date over 100 feet deep and 30 feet square, so large one can scarcely conceive how its



sheer vertical walls stay in place. In front of Unas pyramid are two large boat pits, each 150 feet long. I was disappointed I could not walk down Unas causeway to his Valley Temple, but it had been a long day.

We feasted for the third and final time at the Saqqara Palm club.

Day 7: Postscript

What I expected to find was a wonderful land full of ancient sites under the control of a national organization with over 100 years of experience in conservation. What I found was a scattered collection of archaeologists doing what they could with the resources of a nation struggling to support its growing population and modernize its infrastructure.

A wall has been built around the Northern end of the Giza complex, in effect requiring anyone entering to pass a checkpoint. Perhaps this will be somewhat effective in reducing unauthorized traffic on the plateau. There has been concern expressed that this wall was built over the northern end of the Old Kingdom settlement currently being excavated in front of the famous Tombs of the Workmen. It is illustrative of the trying task at hand in this land that this wall was built in order to protect what can be excavated in the present day at the expense of what cannot.

I was also surprised to find that there is enough work in Egypt to keep 1000 professional archaeologists busy for 100 years, at least. I had heard that in recent years the Egyptian government has been leaning towards forcing archaeologists to work in areas that are threatened with permanent loss, even to the exclusion of ongoing work in other areas. It seemed unfair only before I saw the urgent need of preservation on such a massive scale. The current pace of work is steady and yes, conditions are continually improving, so our curiosity will continue to be stimulated by new finds for quite some time to come. In this way, the protection of Egypt's past will ensure we all have a rewarding future.

