

Surviving the **SIGHTS** and **SOUKS**

By Hilary Munro

Relax, pack a sense of humour, learn a few useful Arabic phrases, and have a strong feeling for the worth of Egyptian Pounds (LE) related to your own currency!

Just these four things should allow you to not only survive but also enjoy the sights and souks in Egypt. The alternative is that you will leave angry and unhappy, which is a huge pity because Egypt truly has some amazingly interesting sights and an engaging people.

Being positive and interested with a firm idea of what you want and a friendly disposition goes a long way with touts. But equally, you need to know how to say no firmly with a smile – that is when your few Arabic phrases come in.

La'a, Shukran (no, thank you) with a palm flat downwards and then make a small movement away.

'tsk' is understood as a polite 'no' throughout the Middle East.

For kids who really don't understand 'no' (it must be generic to all cultures) firmly say: 'Amshee' (go away)

Egyptians have a great sense of humour: to an opening gambit from a tout, smile and if you can manage it,



make a quip. More often than not, you will be greeted with a grin back.

This is astounding really, given that fully 45% of Egyptians are living at or near the UN subsistence level of two US dollars a day and the current dearth of tourists is catastrophic for many. I for one cannot imagine how to exist at these levels, without or without smiles.

Understanding that these touts are doing it to put food on the family table may perhaps reduce anger. So by all means be firm with refusals, but add a smile. Remember LE20 is just over £2

or just under three dollars. This is not to say that the way to go is flashing \$50 dollar bills, but perhaps not squeeze out that last LE5 discount.

Extra tips to increase your enjoyment of the sights and reduce the hassle:

- Consider bringing your own guide with you when you are new to the country (ask around for recommendations from friends, the BCA Clubhouses, CSA, your hotel). There are clear advantages: you will get good information on what you are seeing, a genuinely interesting time – and the guide will keep all touts at bay. As a bonus, the guide may also come with wheels. If the guide is good, it will be accepted you will give a tip on top of the fee of about LE 50.

- Always negotiate a price at the start.

- Keep small notes and coins: no one ever seems to have change.

- Camel or horse rides are a great way to experience Egypt, especially at the Giza Pyramids. Make sure the price is negotiated in advance – and that it is clearly agreed the price includes both the outward and return journeys. Bring water with you!

continued overleaf

- In common with major tourist sights the world over, water and sodas come with a hefty mark up. A small bottle of lukewarm water or a small Coca Cola will set you back anything from LE8 (USD1.34, GBP£0.90). They cost LE2 in the shop. If this bothers you, bring your own drink; it is hot and a desert environment so you need to guard against dehydration.

- There are no official free guides. Security men at the entrance check entrance tickets only. If a custodian or official looking guy asks to check your tickets, retains them and turns authoritatively to guide you to the place, you know this is a scam. Politely and firmly ask for your tickets back stating that you have no need of a guide. A hand out saying 'my tickets please, we don't need a guide' (in English) will be understood.

- If you agree to exchange foreign coins into LE, make sure you know the exchange rate and have the exact amount of LE required.

Tips or 'Baksheesh'

- If the custodian of the site accompanies you, then a tip at the end will be expected. If you don't want this, then politely say so at the start.

- Photos are usually not allowed in the sites. If you do take photos, expect to give the custodian a tip of LE20 or so.

- Tourist police at the sites are not well paid and rely on contributions from tourists to make a living wage. Understanding this will perhaps minimise the annoyance you feel.

Finally, it helps to have a sense of amused fatalism. Of course, not all encounters are going to be positive and you will inevitably fall for a scam. No matter how long you have been in Egypt, however prepared you are, you are outclassed. There is over 2,000 years of practice here! Their forebears earned their living at Giza or Luxor. The historian Herodotus came in 450 BC and wrote about them.

And if all else fails, call on the tourist police nearby to help you – and give them a small token of thanks.

hilary@munromail.net

