

Lonely Planet: Egypt (2008)

By M. Firestone et al

The Lonely Planet guides are infamous and consulted by millions of people across the globe, but to be honest I have never used one and was interested to see what all the fuss was about. The guide is, as you would want, small and compact and could easily fit into your backpack whilst travelling, but I did not find it particularly user-friendly. It is not a “dip in” kind of guide which you can have a quick look at whilst you are on the road; it is a “study before you go” kind of book.

The guide starts well with a colour supplement of the top fifteen places to visit in Egypt covering a wide variety of places; some expected such as the Valley of the Kings, the pyramids and Abu Simbel and others, least expected such as Mount Sinai, Siwa, Dahab and rather randomly Petra which is situated in Jordan. This supplement has lovely images of the sites and a quote from each of the authors about them and is eye catching for the reader.

The guide itself is divided into a series of sections one would expect from a Lonely Planet guide including the history and culture of Egypt (ancient and modern), potential itineraries, food and drink available and then chapters on specific areas of Egypt including Cairo, Beni Suef to Qena, Luxor, Esna to Abu Simbel, the Western Desert, Alexandria, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, with a language section at the back to help you through Egypt with basic Arabic. This section, however I found difficult to follow which surprised me as I speak basic Egyptian Arabic. I found the transliterations odd and unpronounceable. Perhaps for a total beginner it would be more user-friendly, and it is always best to have a try at the local language but I am uncertain about how much you would be understood. There were also some unnecessary phrases in this section such as “Do you mind if I breastfeed here?” as it is not something the average traveller would ever need to use.

The opening page of the guide entitled “Destination Egypt” gives an accurate if somewhat depressing summary of modern Egypt and its politics and problems ending with the unnerving phrase “Your travels in Egypt won’t always be easy going and hassle-free, but they’ll certainly be eye-opening”. If that summary doesn’t put you off travelling there, perhaps their summary of the weather will; “south of Cairo is unbearable” in June to August and winter is advised for Luxor although “Cairo isn’t quite as pleasant” at this time. Despite this rather negative approach to the best time of year to travel I was delighted that they do advise against tipping the guards to go into places that are closed or to do things that one shouldn’t, as well as not touching the monuments.

Moving now to the suggested itineraries which are aimed at different types of travellers; including those on a “punishing” two week trip who want to cover Cairo to Aswan, to those on a month-long trip who want to visit Cairo, Sinai, Siwa and Petra. None of the suggested Nile itineraries include anything that different from a standard package tour and only the Sinai and Siwa trips go off track. I didn’t feel there was anything here that a standard 2-3 star hotel wouldn’t have information on in their lobbies, and was disappointed there wasn’t something a little more unusual.

The section on the history of Egypt was concise and very general, and that on the modern culture included a rather intriguing list of Egyptian authors and novels as well as western books about Egypt, and is one of the few things from the book that I will keep for future reference. The pharonic history

section is well written and informative and was written by Joanne Fletcher and is one of the few sections of the book that is illustrated (albeit sparingly).

One means of travel which is synonymous with Egypt is the Nile Cruise and as would be expected this is included in the book. It mentions that many of the cruises from Luxor to Aswan don't actually include much cruising (as little as four hours a day), and that when moored they often stand ten boats deep meaning there is not much of a view from the windows, other than other boats, which I think some cruise travellers are surprised at discovering. As a better option they suggest that a dahabiyya is the "most luxurious way to see the monuments without the crowds", as these boats can moor in many more places than the cruise boats and have smaller number of passengers on board. They list a number of companies which now provide the dahabiyya option, which sadly suggests to me that this is no longer an **unusual** way to cruise down the Nile but only a **different** way.

The sections of different areas of Egypt are laid out in the same way, with useful information on the location of tourist information offices, ATMs, travel information like train and bus details, and travel agents as well as potential scams that may befall a traveller. This is then followed by a list of the sights it is possible to visit with a small amount of information about each one. Whilst listing the standard tourist sights the guide tries to encourage tourists to do things that are a little bit different such as visiting the Fishawi coffee shop in the Khan el Khalili which has served continually for 200 years, or the Beit Zeinab al Khatoun, an Ottoman House which is used for concerts, belly dancing lessons with Mme Raqia Hassan in Doqqi, sand-bathing in the Siwa desert or diving amongst the ruins at Alexandria. Diving is however covered in more depth in the chapter on Red Sea diving. For those in the Red Sea area who are not interested in the underwater world there is a list of monasteries to visit with a map of their location, and basic information about them.

The guide is peppered with maps of varying scales and details, all of which will prove to be invaluable whilst travelling, although sadly there are very few illustrations other than in the sections I have already mentioned. Whilst the text is informative, easy to read and can't be faulted (other than being a little dry in places) illustrations I feel would make this guide more appealing. Whilst the text is important, whilst planning a trip, especially to unfamiliar places, illustrations would focus the traveller on the places they would most like to visit enabling them to build an itinerary around these. This guide, I feel needs to be used in conjunction with other guides or internet research and therefore is not the only book you would need when travelling to Egypt.

I am uncertain who this book is marketed at, as traditionally Lonely Planet guides are aimed at backpackers and budget travellers who want to see the "real" country away from the tourist trail, and I suppose to a certain extent this book could appeal to this group of visitors, but there is a lot of bog-standard package tour information in here too, such as where to pick up a cruise boat and places to visit (few of which are off the beaten track). I feel there isn't a clear identity for this guide, almost as if it wants to appeal to a wider market but hasn't quite made it.

I would have found this book very useful when I first moved to Cairo to work, as it lists all of the bars and cafes that took me a while to locate through speaking to people and wandering through the streets, as well as English book stores and libraries, and in that sense this is an ideal guide for long-term visitors to Egypt. However for a holiday-maker travelling for a two-week break it might not be ideal and I would recommend a Jill Kamil guide with the detailed descriptions of the sites and

appropriate illustrations, many off the beaten track, or for something more general DK Eyewitness guides which have lots of beautiful images, useful information and a more user-friendly index allowing you to dip in and out whilst on the move.

The Lonely Planet guide is for reading before you go or in your room and not a “travel guide” in the way I personally would use it; whilst travelling.