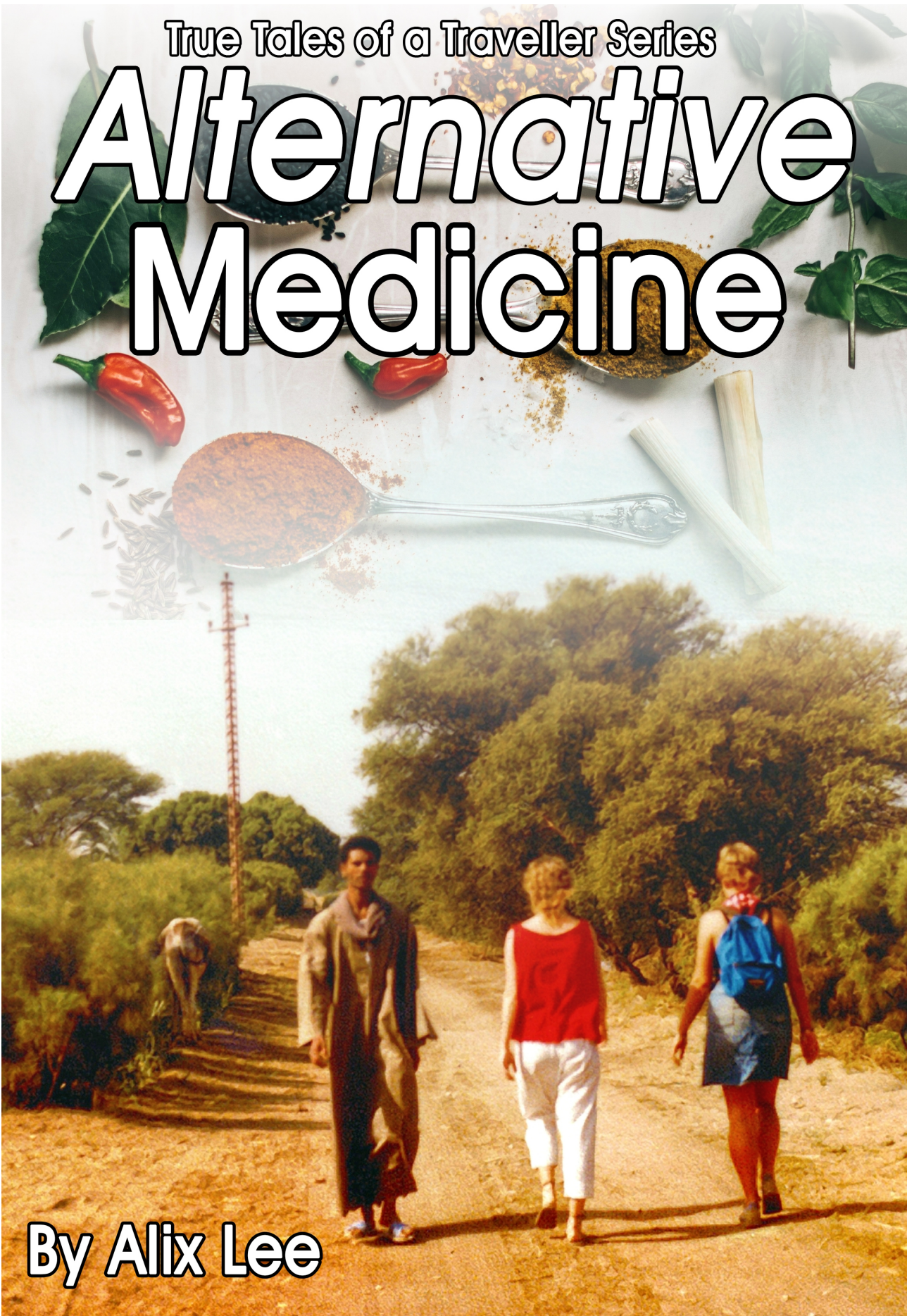


True Tales of a Traveller Series

Alternative Medicine

By Alix Lee



Alternative Medicine

*A True Tale of a Traveller, Set in Greece and Egypt in the Early
1980s*

1st Edition

by
Alix Lee

www.alixlee.com

Copyright @Alix Lee, 2018

Cover Design by Alix Lee

"All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware."

Preface

The True Tales of a Traveller series of short stories and novellas consists of several dozen real-life traveller's tales covering over three decades. Although presented in a short story format for reading convenience, these stories are not fiction. Apart from some of the characters' names which have been changed to protect their identities, everything in these stories is true.

These stories do not all fit neatly into the 'travel story' genre, although some will indeed meet most readers' expectations in this regard. Others are simply adventures - or misadventures - that happen to have taken place in various different countries.

The fourth of this series of stories, *Alternative Medicine*, is set mostly in Greece and Egypt in 1983. At around 13,000 words, this story is a lengthy short story which may need more than one sitting. Like the other stories in the series, it provides not only an entertaining read, but also information on all the places visited, some relevant only to the era in which the story is set, but most still relevant today. In addition to being a travel story, *Alternative Medicine* is also a story about career hopes, delusions, expectations, and opportunities.

Tale Four: Alternative Medicine

Ealing is a major suburban district in west London. It's located about 12 kilometres west of Charing Cross, and is best known for its film studios, which are the oldest in the world. My tiny studio flat there wasn't the oldest in the world, perhaps not even the oldest in Ealing, but I felt certain it was the coldest.

After spending Christmas with my parents in the Isle of Man, I had returned from their home in Port Erin to London on the second day of the New Year, 1983, with my mind finally set on making a go of life in the capital. I quickly found my flat in Ealing, and through a temporary work agency equally swiftly found a job as a warehouse assistant at a large furniture shop in Richmond upon Thames. Richmond upon Thames gave me the impression of being noticeably more upmarket than Ealing. It lies on the edge of metropolitan London, and includes large areas of open space, such as Richmond Park and Kew Gardens. The job was thoroughly unrewarding, but that was to be expected. In principle, I had decided in favour of settling down in London despite being alone again now, apparently emerging from a break-up with my ex-girlfriend Diane, with whom I had travelled overland from Athens, and a failed attempt at a new relationship with Meena, an ethnic Indian girl from the UK I had met in Rotterdam. Going back to Athens after all the trouble I had been through to get to England from Greece made all that hardship seem pointless. But each night in that bitterly cold, ground-floor flat, as my thoughts wandered back to Greece and Israel, I changed my mind back again. The room itself was cold enough as it was, with its glass-roofed attached kitchen (probably originally a greenhouse); just keeping it warm enough to be habitable was a challenge that depended on a constant supply of 10 pence coins for an electricity meter. But being alone again, despite all attempts to avoid such a fate, made it feel all the colder.

I consoled myself that the job was good exercise which took my mind off my failed relationships. And apart from that, I had no other choice for the time being: I couldn't imagine saving the money from this job for an airline ticket back to Athens in addition to the money I would need to survive while I looked for work there again. At least, not within three or four months.

But finally, one bitterly cold evening when the 10p coins for the meter had run out, I reached the conclusion that I had made only one, fatally flawed decision. All the subsequent hardships, disagreements, and heartbreak of the past several months had stemmed from that mistake: I should never have left Greece in the first place. One way or another, I decided, I had to get back there, even if it meant as hard a trip as the one Di and I had endured travelling from Greece to the UK. With my next pay packet from the furniture store I would have the money for the Dover to Calais ferry or hovercraft fare, with some to spare for two or three days budget accommodation, either in Athens or on my way there. If I used up the money on accommodation before reaching Athens, then things would be pretty tough when I got there too, but still preferable to London. And as there was no other way for me to get to back to Greece, I resolved that I would simply take the long, hard way back, overland.

As a young guy, with just 15 months or so of living and working abroad under my belt, I had to admit that the time I had spent abroad so far had made a huge impression on my life. It had been adventurous, interesting, and challenging, as well as often turbulent, but never dull. In contrast, my life in London was predictable and dull, with a predictably low income, predictably few opportunities, a predictable daily routine, and a predictably non-existent social life (I couldn't afford one). I just couldn't wait to leave, despite the conviction I had that hitching back to Athens would be hellishly difficult.

But at least I knew that no matter how hard the trip back to Greece was, once there, circumstances had to be better.

Hop On the Magic Bus

Then, only a couple of days before embarking on my planned hitch-hiking trip, I saw an advertisement in Time Out magazine for a new, low-budget trans-Europe bus service called the Magic Bus, which included a London to Athens route. It seemed like a godsend. With little more than a week's wages, I would have enough for the fare and a few night's economy accommodation in Athens. I wouldn't have to hitch at all. I left for Athens very early on the morning of March 2nd, 1983, a bitterly cold, but dry day. Though infinitely preferable to hitch-hiking back, this was still taking a big chance - I would still have very little money to spare upon my arrival in Athens. However, I figured that such was what travel was all about anyway. The alternative seemed to me to be a future in London determined by my poor educational background.

At three days and two nights, the bus trip was no-frills, hard-going travel aimed at young shoestring travellers. Upon arrival in Athens, I would have just about enough cash left over to stay two or three nights in a cheap guesthouse or hostel while I looked for work. Even with heating, as the bus ploughed relentlessly through the darkness of the night, particularly on the first night, when travelling through the mountainous terrain of west-central Europe, it got cold enough for most passengers with sleeping bags to get into them, while those without simply covered themselves with all the thick clothes they had available. Fortunately, I had a sleeping bag, and compared to what I had envisioned, sleeping a couple of nights in a sleeping bag on a bus seemed more of a luxury than a hardship. I was truly happy to be back on the road.

On the bus, I reflected on what seemed to be the poor choices I had available in my work life due to my lack of any useful marketable skills. I also reflected on my break-up with Diane and my affair with Meena.

I knew that many men, including some of those I knew well, would have handled those two relationships completely differently. Instead of relating everything that had happened honestly and forthrightly to their first girlfriend as I had, they would simply deny that the affair with the second girl had ever taken place. And, moreover, many would just go right on seeing both girls, keeping knowledge of the one away from the other; 'two-timing' it was called. My biggest problem, I concluded, was that I was just too honest.

That same honesty, I thought, was also one of my biggest drawbacks in finding a suitably rewarding career. I couldn't become a business magnet, for example. Big business was simply too mercenary for me; I knew that to get to the top as a businessman I would be presented with too many difficult choices that would entail either compromising my principles - or being pushed out of the market by a rival. And I couldn't become a lawyer, either, even though I wouldn't have to make those aforementioned compromises as a lawyer, and I often imagined myself in court, mercilessly grilling those who I felt had crossed me previously in life. The legal profession, I felt, was riddled with lawyers who were also liars; I would never be able to fit in with them. Nor could I become a politician, unless I was to be some incorruptible Gandhi-type character. So that made becoming a head of state impossible, even though I felt that to be the most suitable calling for my talents. And apart from that, I still hadn't decided which state I wanted to be head of! There was no getting away from it. I was forced by circumstances in the short term to accept any menial work like warehouse assistant that I could find, and perhaps just rise to the highest office in the land meteorically later on as a grassroots leader, bent on prising corrupt political leaders out of office.

But, God, surely there had to be some alternative to jobs like warehouse assistant in the meantime, some area of endeavour where I could bring my qualities of honesty and incorruptibility fully into play? These were the thoughts that occupied my mind on the long trip back to Athens.

Sitting towards the back of the bus, a conversation between a young guy from northern England and a Dane who were sitting behind me, at the very back of the bus, just before we reached the Italian-Yugoslav border, stayed in my mind.

The Briton freely admitted that he was travelling between Greece and the UK to sell drugs, although he didn't specify exactly what kind of drugs. It seemed to me to be incredibly foolhardy to admit that you were engaged in a criminal activity to someone whose background you knew almost nothing about; judging from their conversation the Dane was somebody the English guy had met on the bus. Even if the drug trafficker had kept quiet about what he was doing, it still seemed a very dangerous way to make money. True, if he were caught trafficking in a European Community country (later the European Union), punishment would be lenient. But what if he were caught in Yugoslavia? And that was the country we were now entering.

Yet, on the other hand, I realised this represented an opportunity to break free of the constrictions on money-making put in place by educational background. The trafficker could, possibly, make a lot of money. I felt I needed something *like* that, but less dangerous and less morally questionable (although an occasional marijuana smoker, I could not condone trafficking in hard drugs, which I guessed was probably where the most money was). But what exactly? The reason drug trafficking was so profitable for the trafficker was precisely because it was dangerous. I desperately needed a job that was well-paid, without being *too* dangerous, and yet open to anyone regardless of educational background.

But again, what?

At the time we passed through Yugoslavia, there was still no sign that the country would ever be known as anything other than 'Yugoslavia'. But then again, at this time, there was also nothing to indicate that the Soviet Union would ever come to the end it did.

I had visited Yugoslavia as a boy with my parents, but of course we had only visited the very few places then frequented by foreign holiday-makers. Nevertheless, the holiday had made an impression on me. I remembered it for cholera and typhoid warning signs wherever there was standing water, and for the terrible quality of the roads we travelled on. My father drove us all the way across the continent, and smooth road surfaces seemed clearly to finish at the Italian border with Yugoslavia. This time, on the Magic Bus, we travelled only on major highways of reasonable quality. What made the biggest impression on me during this, admittedly very short time spent in Yugoslavia, was the lack of smiles. I didn't see any, from one end of the country to the other, either in the towns we passed through, or at the couple of rest stops we made. Sullen, unsmiling faces followed us at the restaurants we stopped at. I couldn't determine whether the people those faces belonged to were hostile to us, simply disliked us, or just felt they had nothing to smile about.

The dreariness of Yugoslavia made entry into Greece feel all the more welcoming and promising.

"Do You Speak My Language?"

Four days after leaving London, I was back in the Athens district of Nea Smyrni, which lies to the south of the city centre, at the basement flat of my Egyptian friend, Saad. I stayed at a cheap hotel in the historical central Athens district of Plaka for just the first night, before seeking Saad out. He handed me a bottle of the local brew - Fix Beer - and a glass without even asking whether I wanted to drink. Over drinks, I asked him if I could stay at his place while I looked for work?

"Why do you ask such a question?" he asked me, throwing his hands up, an expression of pained puzzlement coming over his bony features that I couldn't recognise as being genuine or otherwise. "My home is your home. Stay as long as you like."

Saad worked as a waiter, and before I could even put my plan of looking for work on the yachts in the marinas outside Athens into action, he suggested washing dishes at a restaurant he had worked at not long previously. The restaurant, at the end of Agias Fotunis street, did a roaring business, especially at weekends, so it was hard work at times. But the pay was very reasonable, and so was the amiable, portly, ever-smiling, middle-aged boss, George. I started work the very same day.

Apart from now being single again, there was another aspect in which my second stay in Athens differed dramatically from my first. The previous year, I had known hordes of native English speakers. Di and I had even shared our apartment with a number of them. And most of those people I knew who were not native speakers still spoke the language well.

Suddenly, as a native English speaker, I was in a minority of one. For the first time in my life, I didn't know a single other native English speaker. Saad was the only person I knew who could speak English fluently; some of my new acquaintances didn't even speak English at all. As someone who still felt that all other languages were on the way out, this was a matter of some concern for me. I didn't know how to even begin to get it across to my new circle of Greek and Egyptian friends and acquaintances that they had to work, much, much harder on their English.

The previous year, I had learnt a relatively substantial vocabulary of Greek, and before that some Hebrew, as well as some of the native languages of my fellow kibbutz volunteers, but this was mainly for fun, as well as to help me understand their various strange English accents and wrong word order. The idea of *needing* to speak a foreign language in order to merely get by was new, not entirely welcome, and very challenging. I had always considered the onus to be on others to improve their English or try harder to make themselves understood. After all, I already spoke the 'international language'!

At the restaurant I worked washing dishes, only the boss could speak any English at all. Neither his son nor the waiter could speak more than a few words of English. Worse still, sometimes in the early evenings when things were very busy, but not yet busy at the dishwashing end, the boss would ask me to help serving tables. Often, customers either assumed me to be Greek, not noticing my foreign appearance, or else just reasoned that anyone in such a work environment would have to be fluent in Greek, and shot out fast-paced strings of orders, or amendments to their orders, or worse still, comments about the food they had been served, leaving me straining to take in all these rapid-fire barrages of Greek and then react accordingly. I apparently performed well enough though, because after a couple of weeks the boss had the bright idea of taking me off washing dishes, re-assigning an elderly relative to that job, and putting me on waiting tables full time. I lasted three nights! I finally told the boss I wasn't ready for it, and he reluctantly put me back on dishwashing "for the time being."

Unfortunately, that still meant I had to work on my Greek, not a notion I relished. The boss seemed disappointed with my decision to temporarily return to dishwashing and told me that "any old fool" could wash dishes; he wanted to give me the chance to improve my work situation.

I had never imagined myself having to work so hard just to be a lowly waiter. But I resolved to fall back to the even lowlier position of dishwasher; I knew I was simply not ready to handle the work of a waiter. And I had been concerned about which state I would want to be head of!

Some of Saad's Egyptian friends could speak at least some English. But when together, they had no reason to. They were three, four, five or more, and I was one. Why should they all speak English just for my benefit? So, I had a tough choice: learn some Arabic or exist like a ghost, completely outside their conversations. Thus I had to learn at least some Arabic in addition to Greek. I decided to make an effort, and learn as much of both languages as I could, even though I found such superficially simple and relaxing endeavors had a habit of making me truly exhausted and prone to falling asleep at random in the daytime for hours at a time.

But as a novice Greek speaker, I was very much aware of the fact that my Greek was better after little more than six months in the country than my French was after six years of mandatory French lessons at school, and this was a big encouragement. I began wondering if my Arabic wouldn't also benefit from spending some time in an Arabic-speaking country?

I had remained in touch with as many of the volunteers from Israel's Kibbutz Magen as I had the addresses of. One was Jeanette, a Swedish girl from the southern Swedish city of Karlskrona. I had written to her from London, explaining that I was going out to Greece again as I still wanted to do some travel in the region and couldn't settle down in England for reasons I wouldn't go into. In her return communication, she had related how she had missed the kibbutz way of life as soon as she had left, and regretted that she hadn't visited Egypt while in Israel. I wrote to her again from my new abode in Saad's apartment to tell her that I was in fact planning to visit Egypt, and before I knew it there was a reply from Jeanette asking if she could come with me? About 10 days after my confirmation that of course she could, the boss of the restaurant called me from my dishwashing, telling me that someone had come to see me. I left the dishes, walked to the open-air front of the restaurant, and there was Jeanette, backpack still on her back and a big smile on her face! We hugged, and exchanged flurries of questions and answers, with me running out of the kitchen every chance my workload permitted. Finally, the boss just let me go home early, and took care of dishwashing himself! A few days later, we were on a flight to Cairo. Jeanette had in fact booked her trip to Cairo with a three day stopover in Athens, returning on a direct Scandinavian Airlines flight from Cairo to Copenhagen, which she said was closer to her home than the Swedish capital. All I had to do was get an Athens-Cairo return matching her dates and times as closely as possible. As it turned out I managed to get on the very same flight as her, with the Egyptian national carrier, EgyptAir. All this was made possible by a matter of weeks of rent-free accommodation, with no costs of any kind.

Going South

Even before I went to live in Athens the previous year, I had been aware, from descriptions given by my uncle and aunt, of how dysfunctional the traffic system there was. Their daughter, my cousin, was killed there. She was struck down by a careless driver right in the middle of Athens, a city she had adopted as a second home. So I was ready for the traffic, or at least as ready for it as I could be.

I was also ready for Cairo traffic to be just as bad, but not for the reality. If the Athenian traffic system could have been described as merely 'dysfunctional', and the traffic in Istanbul (judging from my visit the previous year) as 'a mess', then traffic in Cairo was just pure chaos, and couldn't even be described using the word 'system' at all. Our plans for travelling around the city quickly deteriorated from an ambitious selection of locations to "let's just get somewhere, anywhere, quiet enough to think and talk, away from this hellish traffic."

Regardless of the traffic situation, at least one location we felt was mandatory. Giza, home to the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx was a must-see, so we had to stay at least one full day in the capital before heading further south. Technically, I had already visited Egypt before I even arrived in Egypt; by virtue of having hitched down the Israeli-occupied Sinai Peninsula, which was now back under Egyptian administration. However, even visiting the country's capital, I couldn't imagine our Egypt trip to be complete without seeing the pyramids.

Although Giza is not actually a part of Cairo but a separate city, practically speaking it lies on the outskirts of Cairo (about 16 km southwest of central Cairo). Giza already had a population of well over a million in its own right at the time of our visit and was growing fast, like everywhere else in the country. Naturally, our focus of interest was not the modern city, or even the old town, but the complex of ancient monuments known as the Giza Necropolis located a few kilometre's west into the Libyan Desert from the Nile, close to the old town.

The Great Pyramid is the oldest of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World, and the only one

still in existence. It's also the oldest and largest of the three pyramids in the Giza pyramid complex. Initially it stood at 146.5 metres tall, and it was the tallest man-made structure in the world for more than a staggering 3,800 years. Perhaps even more significantly, it was still the second-tallest construction (after the Cairo Tower) in Egypt at the time of our visit.

Nobody knows how the Giza pyramids were built. As Egyptologists are taken to have the last word on everything to do with Egypt, the mainstream belief they have engendered, tailored to fit the very few historical facts known, is that the Great Pyramid was built as a tomb over a 20-year period. It is believed by Egyptologists that the pyramid was built as a tomb for Fourth Dynasty Egyptian pharaoh Khufu, and although 20 years is the standard construction timeframe given, some Egyptologist even believe it was built over a mere 10 years, from start to finish, without the use of pulleys, wheels, or iron tools.

Experts from the world of civic engineering have duly ridiculed these construction theories. It is estimated that 5.5 million tonnes of limestone, and 8,000 tonnes of granite were transported to Giza from Aswan, more than 800 km away, and - apparently - without wheels. The largest granite stones in the pyramid, found in the King's chamber, weigh 25 to 80 tonnes. No university or research institute has ever attempted to prove this possible because the result is known without trying. The final conclusion seems to be the same as the initial one: Nobody knows how the Giza pyramids were built. All we really know is how magnificent they are.

At the time of our visit to Giza, it was already illegal (I later learnt) to climb the pyramids. However, little attention was paid to this regulation, and the lower levels of the Great Pyramid were thronged with people in the late afternoon, enjoying the cool of the evening air, and the views. Jeanette and I climbed about a third the way up the Great Pyramid before deciding to sit down.

A man sitting a few metres away, asked Jeanette, who was closer, if she spoke Greek?

"Greek?" she repeated with surprise. "Of course not!"

Hearing this, I had to put in that, yes, I did speak a little Greek. The man, a student of Greek, was very pleased to have a chance to communicate in Greek, even on such a basic level as my proficiency provided, although why he had thought we may perhaps be able to speak Greek in the first place I never found out.

The incident made me look at language-learning in a different way. I had previously only thought of foreign languages as, at best, an interesting entertainment, and at worst, the biggest disadvantage to overseas travel and a source of endless headaches (literally). But if a Greek speaker could be found even in such an unlikely place, maybe it was worth me making more of an effort to learn the language, regardless of whether or not I could use it in my job.

Jeanette mocked my insistence on practising my limited Arabic with everybody who spoke to me, but I felt locals were always impressed at anyone who had bothered to learn a little of their language and as a result were much more friendly and welcoming. As darkness fell, we descended the Great Pyramid, to make the trip back to Cairo. But, returning a greeting in Arabic with a middle-aged local who apparently worked there as a curator of the Sphinx, the man's eyes lit up, and after a few further remarks, he switched to English to ask us if we would like to see inside the Sphinx. It was obviously already closed to the public, but he made an exception for us, and led us under the great monument, giving us a free commentary.

The Sphinx of Giza, known as the 'Terrifying One', is a limestone statue of a mythical creature with a lion's body and a human head. It faces directly West to East, and is generally believed to represent the Pharaoh Khafre, of the Fourth Dynasty (the son of Khufu, for whom the Great Pyramid was built). The view held by modern Egyptology is that the Sphinx was built in approximately 2500 BC. Little is known about Khafra, except for the historical reports of Herodotus, who described him as a cruel and heretic ruler. It measures 73 metres from paw to tail, stands 20.21 metres high, and is the oldest known monumental sculpture in Egypt.

However, when things like this happened in Egypt, I was never quite sure if credit was due to my Arabic, or Jeanette's appearance, or both. The sylph-like, blue-eyed blond attracted a huge amount of attention from Egyptian males, even more than she did in Greece, which was plenty. I guessed this was due to the rarity of blonds in these countries as much as her undeniable good looks. One Bedouin outside Luxor later even offered me 18 camels for her. I had to explain that she wasn't mine to trade. This seemed to flummox him.

And Further South...

The next day, we took the train from Cairo to Luxor, a trip further south of over 600 kilometres. A few days later we would go from Luxor on to Aswan, a further 200 kilometres-plus south, from where we would head south again to Abu Simbel. In short, it was a trip which followed the fertile banks of the world's second-longest river on its north-south orientation for that part of the river which lies within the borders of Egypt.

The train was certainly no express, taking over half a day to make the journey to Luxor, and we arrived early in the morning of the day after we left Cairo. In those days, there were no restrictions on travel for foreign tourists (but I later learnt, with the dual considerations of security and bringing in the tourist dollar, tickets on ordinary 2nd class trains were no longer sold to foreign tourists).

Everywhere we travelled south of Cairo, there were signs of life close to the river's banks. By the same token, it was easy to see that for most of the river's length in Egypt, you didn't have to go far from the river to find nothing much but desert or semi-arid land, often just a few kilometres from the riverbanks. At 6,853 km long, the water resources of this great river are shared by eleven countries, namely, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo-Kinshasa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. For Egypt and Sudan, the Nile is the primary water source.

At the time of our journey, Egypt was enjoying a rapidly growing tourist industry, with no signs of Islamic terrorism aimed at tourists. Backpackers and other budget travellers like ourselves tended to take the train, while Nile cruises were another way to travel the north-south length of the country, popular with those who could afford to travel in a little more style.

But the Islamic extremists - then known as 'fundamentalists' - were on their way. One thing that stayed in my mind from the first day we spent in Luxor was eating at a local restaurant on that first evening. Beer was on the drinks menu, even priced according to brand. Being somewhat fond of fermented beverages in those days, I ordered a couple of bottles, one for me and one for Jeanette. Ten minutes later, a teapot and two glasses were placed on our table. I stared at it for several moments, wondering at what point in placing our order I hadn't been clear enough. Should I try again, but in Arabic?

Jeanette shrugged; she didn't care much for beer anyway, and poured herself a cup of tea, while I called the waiter (and boss) over. "I ordered beers." I told him. The man leaned over and told me in hushed tones: "It is beer," he told me. "Nowadays, there are fundamentalists here in Luxor. If they see me serving alcohol, they will make trouble for me." I was surprised, but as I poured myself a cup of 'tea', I realised that from a distance, especially after losing its froth, the colour was not unlike a mild tea without milk, such as Oolong. In fact, Jeanette had not realised until she put it to her mouth that it wasn't tea at all.

I was intrigued by the claim that 'fundamentalists' were now active in Luxor whereas they hadn't been previously. I thought of Egypt as somehow beyond their reach. But a decade and a half later, the Luxor Massacre would usher in a new era of tourism in Egypt, in which the government would have to increase security for foreign tourists in order to keep them coming. In the Luxor Massacre, 62 people, mostly tourists, were killed at Deir el-Bahri, an archaeological site and major tourist attraction just across the Nile from central Luxor.

Our Land

We stayed at a guesthouse on the west side of the Nile, a little out of town in a welcomingly quiet location. The second day, we tramped around areas of interest in and around the city with an English woman in her thirties named Sharon, who was resident in Cyprus. Staying at the same guest house as ourselves, we had met her at breakfast and just decided to see the place together.

Of the wealth of ancient monuments in and around Luxor, Luxor Temple, which lies in the heart of the city, on the east side of the Nile, just west of the railway station, was the first we visited.

The temple is believed to have been constructed in approximately 1400 BC. Unlike the other temples in Thebes (as Luxor was known), Luxor Temple is not dedicated to a cult god or a deified version of the king in death, but rather to the rejuvenation of kingship. It is believed to have been where many of the kings of ancient Egypt were crowned, either in reality or conceptually. To the rear of the temple are chapels built by Amenhotep III of the 18th Dynasty. Other parts of the temple were built by Tutankhamun and Ramesses II. During the Roman era, the temple and its surroundings were a legionary fortress and the home of the Roman government in the area.

This entrance area to Luxor Temple was flanked by six massive statues of Ramesses II, two seated, and four standing, the two seated statues still being relatively intact. Ramesses II, who is thought to have reigned from 1279 to 1213 BC was also known as Ramesses the Great, and was the third pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty of Egypt. It's comforting to know that the rulers of ancient times were every bit as modest as their modern counterparts, if not more so, and thought it only natural to install multiple statues of themselves at a place of worship.

Strangely, this popular tourist attraction was quite difficult for me to photograph. Not because of any technical difficulty in taking a shot of a huge lump of carved rock which hasn't budged for thousands of years, but because of the participation of a village idiot-type character in the creation of the record of our visit.

It started when Jeanette asked me to take a shot of her at the site, which I did. After I lowered the camera, I realised that someone else had been in the viewfinder, a middle-aged man with a broad smile, dressed in a dark galibea (also written as jellabiya, a traditional loose-fitting, full-length garment worn by both males and females). I told her about this, moved to another angle away from this character, raised the camera to shoot, looked in the viewfinder, and there he was again, a few metres behind Jeanette. As I moved around to try to get a shot of just Jeanette and the temple, he did too, to make sure he was in it. Finally, we had to pretend to give up and make to leave the place, while Sharon pretended to be about to take a photo from another angle, even though she had no film left in her camera. We wandered slowly away from the temple in a direction which would exclude him from the picture, then I suddenly raised the camera and shot before he had a chance to realise what had happened. Later, perusing postcards on sale locally, we noticed that this character was in about half of them!

Later on the same day, we visited Karnak, which lies a few kilometres north of central Luxor. Karnak is said to be the largest ancient religious site in the world, after the Angkor Wat Temple of Cambodia, and one of the most visited historical sites in Egypt. It's a vast complex, of which only parts are open to the public. The main difference between Karnak and most of the other temples and sites in Egypt is the length of time over which it was developed and used. Construction of temples started in the Middle Kingdom (2050 BC and 1800 BC) and continued through to Ptolemaic times (Greek era of rule, from 305 to 30 BC). Approximately thirty pharaohs contributed to the buildings, enabling it to reach a size, complexity, and diversity not seen elsewhere. The history of the Karnak complex is largely the history of Luxor. Slightly less annoying than the village idiot at Luxor Temple, but many times more numerous were young lads trying to flog locally-fired knickknacks they claimed had come "from the tombs"!

The second night, Jeanette and I took a meal without Sharon at a large local restaurant where

my insistence on exercising my still-flimsy Arabic language abilities truly paid off dividends. I ordered our meals and drinks in Arabic. A few moments later, two men who had been taking their meals nearby and heard me, walked over and introduced themselves to us in Arabic. Or rather, the older of the two, apparently in his late 30s, introduced both of them, while the younger man merely smiled, nodded, and shook my hand.

Of course, it took no time at all before I was out of my depth communicating in Arabic. The older man, polite and soft-spoken, had introduced himself by the French name of Marcel, and if he hadn't been wearing the traditional galibea, he would easily have passed for a somewhat swarthy Frenchman. Even Marcel's mannerisms seemed somehow French, different from those of most local people in some indefinable way. He quickly switched to French, and upon finding my French to be even more limited than my Arabic, to English.

Marcel was a local resident who had spent many years working for a large French upmarket, all-inclusive holiday company which was very popular and successful across western Europe at that time. His younger brother was far less fluent in foreign languages, and apparently less internationalised. The two worked together on an international trade project, Marcel revealed to me after we had spent some time in casual conversation about travel in Egypt.

Once he learnt about my travel background, and my intention to continue travelling in the region, Marcel insisted that Jeanette and I visit his family home, where he could tell us more about this lucrative trading project, which we could work with him on if we wished, as they always needed new people. With his fluent English and polite etiquette, he seemed to easily win Jeanette over, which was a cause of some concern for me. I was used to her attracting a lot of interest among local males, and I knew she didn't really like that, but who could refuse this gallant Franco-Egyptian gentleman? I didn't want to have to rescue her from a local's home and bring her back to the guesthouse. But, Marcel made clear, throwing up his hands, that if we had no interest in his little project, well, that was also fine; and his brother would be only too happy to drive us both back to this location or to our guesthouse, whichever was more convenient. Still, he felt he had to tell us more about the project, and mentioned that there were already several other Europeans involved, and they certainly hadn't regretted their involvement. So we agreed, and he drove us to his family home in a large house a few kilometres out of town.

As his mother brought us tea and snacks, Marcel pointed out that his house was home to three generations; his grandparents, parents, himself and his brother, then added in a joking tone that if they could get his brother married it may soon be home to four generations! "What about yourself," I asked, "are you married?"

"Me?" Marcel asked with obviously feigned surprise. "Oh, no, I'm too old now. And, anyway, who would want someone like me, always in some other country?" I wondered if his deliberately self-deprecating manner was his way of letting Jeanette know that this eligible bachelor was in fact unattached...?

We engaged in casual conversation on cultural differences between Egypt, France and Sweden, in a spacious hall-like room which provided views of Luxor through a large open doorway. Marcel's brother brought out a suitcase to show us, and placed it in front of me.

"What do you think of the artifact, Alix?" Marcel asked me with a restrained smile.

I couldn't understand what he meant. "You mean the suitcase", I asked, looking around to see if there was something I was missing.

"No. The ancient artifact, in the suitcase", Marcel insisted with an open palm held in the direction of the case. Suddenly, I believed I understood. He hadn't noticed that something he thought had been put in the case, in fact had not been put in it at all. Only his brother had just seen the case, not him.

I picked up the small case and showed him it was empty of any contents. "There's nothing in

the suitcase".

Marcel took the case from me, pushed one side slightly inwards with both thumbs, and a pocket I wouldn't have guessed was there became visible. From it, he extracted a wooden board on which a partially complete mosaic was fixed.

"Voila!" He exclaimed, as he stood, and held the artifact up to make sure we had both seen it. Jeanette looked at him, eyes wide. Marcel sat down again on Jeanette's left side - I was on her right - placed the artifact on the coffee table in front of us, then leaned towards Jeanette and whispered, with a sense of awe, "This is over 2,500 years old." Then, looking at me, he added with a smile: "And *very, very* valuable. This will sell for a very fine price in Switzerland, which is where it's going the day after tomorrow. You may be surprised to know how much."

I felt some concern at Marcel's whispering to Jeanette. It seemed to me to be far too close, and far too intimate for Egyptian decorum. Did he fancy his chances with her? Was he deliberately trying to make her feel at ease with his closeness? Or was he just so thoroughly Westernised that he paid no heed to local notions of propriety when the only other local person present was his brother?

These questions occupied my mind and made me a little slow to realise exactly what Marcel's 'trade project' was all about.

But I soon caught on. "This, I designed myself," Marcel told us, pointing to the suitcase with some pride, then opened the suitcase again to demonstrate that the pocket was not easy to detect. I had to admit; I would not have noticed it on a cursory inspection, had I been a customs official, for example.

I asked how such an item could be sold in Switzerland? Would it be legal?

"It isn't illegal in Switzerland, but it would not be legal here," Marcel told me, shaking his head with an expression that wrinkled his forehead, that seemed to indicate troubled and yet perplexed emotions at this apparent injustice.

"But, anyway," he continued after a pause, on a slightly more upbeat tone, "we only sell at private auctions." He then looked me straight in the eyes and added: "These are *very* discreet collectors, I promise you. You have nothing to worry about regarding legality. Most are also very influential people..."

If Marcel had sensed that Jeanette was not impressed with his trade project, his intuition was right on the mark. But I was intrigued. And now I wanted to know more.

Marcel went on to tell us more about the process of delivering ancient artifacts retrieved locally to various locations in Europe. Most were sold in France and Switzerland, only a few in the UK and West Germany. But, I was very surprised to learn, some were even sold in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Marcel was at pains to make me understand that delivering artifacts to their buyers or to private auctions in Europe was safe, straightforward, involved no real work, and was very lucrative. His brother just sat there nodding in agreement, which made me wonder whether he really understood, or was just nodding out of habit at hearing something he had heard his brother say many times before. But the thought foremost in my mind was that this was the alternative money-making method I had been wishing for on the bus from London; something very lucrative, and yet not dangerous, and not exclusive only to people with particular educational backgrounds.

A couple of years of such work, Marcel assured me, and I would have earned enough to start my own business, if I so wanted. Or alternatively, to spend a few years just travelling, without working. It seemed like a godsend. I smiled at Jeanette, but by this time she seemed very uncomfortable and ready to leave. She made covert indications that she had had enough of the company. Although I wanted to stay, to learn more of the details of this trade in ancient artifacts, I felt some responsibility towards her and decided that if she really wanted to leave,

then leave we would.

I told Marcel as we were leaving his home that I was very interested in joining his trade project, but would first be spending some time travelling around Egypt, as we had already made these plans. This elicited a slightly pained look and a sigh from Jeanette that in turned made me feel a little frustrated: I didn't think I deserved her reaction, and couldn't really understand it. I explained to Marcel that Jeanette wasn't looking for work, only myself. Marcel, for his part, seemed to have given up trying to interest her in the project anyway, which at some level was a relief for me: it seemed that in fact Marcel's only interest in Jeanette had been in recruiting her to his trade project. I shook hands with Marcel, and he urged me to return as soon as I could. His brother drove us back to our guesthouse.

Almost as soon as we got out of the car, and still within earshot of his brother, Jeanette told me she "couldn't understand" my strange behaviour towards Marcel. Why did I have to pretend I was interested in his so-called 'trade project'? Why couldn't I just tell him straight I had no interest in it? I didn't have to pretend to be friendly to every single person I met, including criminals.

I was taken aback, and for some moments couldn't really grasp her meaning. I protested that I wasn't pretending to be friendly to anyone. I had found Marcel to be a very amiable, polite, and likeable character, I told her, and had no reason not to be equally friendly in return. I thought she had felt likewise. I pointed out to her as we walked up the several steps that led into the open air restaurant of our guesthouse that she could have refused to visit his home if she hadn't wanted to go there.

"I didn't know he was criminal then!" Jeanette told me with an obvious lack of restraint in her tone of voice, despite the fact that there were still guests eating at two of the restaurant tables, and we had evidently attracted their attention, and smiles: I felt they had assumed us to be a couple in a quarrel. I smiled back with a shrug and decided to leave the rest of the conversation until we were out of earshot, in our room on the top floor of the 3-storey building.

"May I ask, Jeanette," I asked as soon I had closed the door behind us, "in what sense Marcel is a criminal?"

She looked at me with an air of disbelief: "He's a tomb-robber! You don't think those ancient artifacts are his, do you?"

Now it was my turn for disbelief. "Oh, come on, Jeanette," I told her, "that's a huge exaggeration. You heard him tell us that his family has lived on that land for generations; who do you think the artifacts belong to, if not to his family, and perhaps neighbouring families?"

"To the Egyptian government, of course!"

I felt myself beginning to lose patience. I wanted to tell her, "you're really stupid", but settled for "you must be very naive, Jeanette. The government here; they're the only criminals around. Mubarak's thugs are just a bunch of crooks, why would anyone willingly give them anything of value? You must be joking!" I was referring to the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, a military man who had become president after the assassination of Anwar Sadat, but not through an election.

"It doesn't matter what kind of people they are; they are the legitimate government of Egypt!"

"They're the government of Egypt, I'll give you that. There's nothing legitimate about Mubarak and his cronies. He wasn't elected president. This isn't Sweden, you know!"

I argued that on the other hand, Marcel's family had lived on that land for generations and had more right to anything found on or around their land than the corrupt Egyptian government. We talked back and forth on the subject for about 20 minutes, but in the end I just dropped

the subject in the interest of keeping my cool. I decided to just let Jeanette believe what she wanted and refused to discuss the matter any further.

The twin room we were sharing was not en suite. That gave me an excuse to leave the room for the toilets and showers. By the time I returned, it was Jeanette's turn.

I had discovered from conversations with Saad's friends in Athens before we even arrived in Egypt that most Egyptian males found the idea that I was sharing a room - as I had in Saad's apartment - with a nymph-like, blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian girl who was "just a friend" to be stretching credulity a little too far. Even those who took me at my word broke into broad, knowing smiles despite themselves. So I had fallen into the habit of calling Jeanette "my girlfriend". Having been unattached for several months, there were times when I had wished that was true. But this wasn't one of them.

As I lay on my bed, I ruminated on the possibility of us taking separate rooms for the rest of our trip. Unfortunately, we were both budget travellers trying to save on costs. But apart from that, I realised that if I suggested we sleep in separate rooms for the rest of the trip, that would be an indirect acknowledgement that our little disagreement had affected me on some level; that it mattered to me. And I didn't want her to believe that.

So, I just lay on my bed reading the Lonely Planet guidebook for Egypt, while Jeanette lay tucked up in hers, writing a letter. Truly, we were like a couple in a tiff, who had to bear each other's company simply because they had nowhere else to go. But I preferred to think of us as like two strangers sharing the same hostel dorm that no-one else happened to be staying in at that time. I decided that would be the mode of travel for the remainder of our time in Egypt: I would speak to Jeanette only when necessary, and not get into discussions on anything more involved than our itinerary, as they were sure to be things she knew nothing about anyway!

The next morning, Jeanette was up early. "Are you planning to take the train to Aswan today?" she asked me matter-of-factly.

She had initiated conversation, not me. That was good enough for me, and I took it as a demonstration that she needed me more than I needed her. I shrugged: "Up to you!"

"Well, let's get going then", she came back, asking if I knew the train times?

"There's just one, er", I coughed and paused for emphasis, to make sure I had her full attention, "*slight* problem. If we follow that plan, we don't get to see the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens."

"So what?"

"Well, it *is* the er, let's say highlight of a Luxor visit for most people interested in the ancient culture, which includes me, I don't know about you? It is where most of the royal tombs are located, Tutankhamun's for example. It *is* one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world, so most visitors *would* want to take it in"

Jeanette shrugged. "Well, I guess I'm not 'most visitors'. I don't care about Tutankhamun's tomb..."

"Fine!" I exclaimed with feigned light-heartedness. "It's nothing to me; I've seen it before anyway..."

"You've been here before?" she asked. I had her there; I knew she would have to ask.

"No, I saw it during a visit I made to London in about 1971. Very impressive it was too..."

She smiled. "Was your visit to London part of a doctorate degree research project for 10 year-olds?" she then asked, looking at me directly for the first time that morning. She had seen

through my attempt to come across as learned and informed, and was mocking me. "Anyway," she continued when I had no reply, "we have to stay here again on the way back to Cairo; otherwise the journey is just too long. Did you not think of that?"

It was true that I hadn't, but I would have been the last to admit it. She had just scored two points against me, but I would not let her know it. "OK!" I exclaimed. "Let's get going! I believe the next train is at about nine thirty, and it'll get us in to Aswan Station at nearly one pm. We won't have time for breakfast, of course..."

"That's fine by me. I didn't come to Egypt expecting the comfort of breakfast right on time every day..."

"Good", I said with a forced laugh. "If you don't mind a little hardship, I'm sure you won't be disappointed!"

And South Again...

Aswan lies on the banks of the Nile, like all major population centres in Egypt. Its existence has been inextricably intertwined with the river since ancient times. As the ancient city of Swenett, Aswan was a frontier town in antiquity, facing the south, and is supposed to have derived its name from an Egyptian goddess of the same name. Throughout its ancient history the town was an important military station and garrison town, and here tolls and customs were levied on all boats passing on the Nile southwards and northwards. I gleaned all that from the guide book. However, what neither of us knew when we arrived there is that Aswan is one of the hottest cities in the world, with average high temperatures consistently above 40 degrees centigrade from June to the end of September. The highest temperature recorded there as of our visit was 51 degrees centigrade in May ten years previously. Even at the time of our visit, in April, it felt noticeably hotter than Luxor, and quite uncomfortable. Aswan is also one of the driest cities in the world, and rainfall doesn't occur there every year, sometimes not for five or six years, or even longer.

We emerged from Aswan Railway Station in the early afternoon heat and found a cheap guesthouse very quickly, within walking distance of the station. It was listed in my guide book, and I took that as enough of a seal of approval. The receptionist, who I realised was probably also the manager of this small establishment, was a jovial fellow with a thick mass of hair despite his being in late middle-age, and he suggested some of the nearby points of interest as he showed us our room. But I didn't seem able to concentrate on what he was saying at all. Jeanette seemed similarly fatigued, and I wondered if the cause had been our train journey or if it was just the heat in Aswan. I couldn't think of anything unusual about the train journey; if anything, it was comfortable plain sailing compared to the grueling long-distance journey from Cairo to Luxor.

I was keen to see the city, despite feeling slightly unused to such heat coupled with a complete lack of humidity. However, on this, our first day in Aswan, Jeanette said she needed to rest. At first, I felt a little peeved and considered setting out to look around by myself, but in the end I agreed to wait until she felt rested, and lay on my bed, as Jeanette slept, fully dressed, on hers. Eventually, I too fell asleep under the hypnotic spinning of the overhead fan, and we both slept far longer than we had intended. It was already late afternoon by the time I awoke, and shook Jeanette awake. She told me she didn't feel up to walking around the town and needed some more sleep to recuperate. We could go out in the evening, she said. I reluctantly went back to sleep, and awoke late at night; Jeanette had also woken, and had been to the communal toilets, where she said she had thrown up.

The guesthouse was almost empty, so no-one had noticed her discomfort. We went over the things we had eaten in the past couple of days, trying to find a culprit, but I felt a strange lethargy coming over me even as we discussed the subject, though I really did want to know what the cause of our malaise was. I felt that what I really needed was some more rest, and not having found a suitably suspicious item of food we had both eaten, put my tiredness down

to the heat.

However, something that still occupied my mind was our quarrel of the previous day. When I had come down with colds, flu, or other such common ailments in the past, it hadn't escaped my notice that very often they had been preceded by some kind of negative circumstances in my daily life: exhaustion, worry, and even just heated arguments and other inter-personal conflicts. At such times, it seemed I somehow became more prone to get sick. I wondered if this had been a factor in our present state of feeling out of sorts? Certainly, Jeanette and I had some major differences of opinion, but I didn't want that to lead to her being unwell any more than I wanted to be unwell myself. I vowed to put our disagreements aside and not even mention or discuss them for the time being. Maybe that would do the trick and we would be, as people often said in the northern England town where I grew up, 'as right as rain' in the morning. I smiled inwardly at the analogy. I felt a little cool rain would indeed have been the most right thing in the world that could happen at that moment; I was sweating constantly.

But by morning, I felt much, much worse. I had voided my bowels and vomited in the toilets during the night and felt temporarily better for that. After throwing up, I felt very comfortable lying on the cool floor of the toilets, and had slept there for some time, I didn't even know how long. It seemed the floor was just the right temperature, every other place had me either sweating or freezing.

I put this sensitivity to temperature down to Aswan's furiously hot climate. I reasoned that I just needed another day to acclimatise and a little more rest, and then I would feel alright again. So I returned to my bed, and slept again. But by the time I awoke, it was, apparently, already quite late in the morning. I looked over to Jeanette's bed. I wondered what to say to her, but to my own amazement, I found I could hardly muster the strength to say anything.

She was awake, and as she turned over, I noticed she had been crying.

"What's wrong, Jeanette?" I finally forced out. "Why are you crying?"

"I was dreaming of Swedish food," she answered. My mind turned briefly to food, but I felt nauseous even to think of it. I just wanted a drink of something to set my temperature right.

For a long time, I lay on my bed looking over to Jeanette's bed, wondering what I should say in response, what I should suggest. But before I managed to say anything, she turned over to face me again and said, slowly: "Alix...I think I'm going to die now..."

I thought of what she had said, and the way she had said it. She had said it almost as if she was asking permission to be the first one of us to die, and as if she knew at some level that I too was aware that we were dying. I wanted to tell her she was talking nonsense, but I found I didn't even have the energy to get a single word out.

That was the catalyst I needed. I knew now beyond a shadow a doubt that something was seriously wrong here, and it wasn't going to get better without help - and I had to get that help fast, or it would be too late. I felt responsible for Jeanette being in the state she was; after all this entire trip had been my idea.

I decided to tell the guesthouse management, and ask their advice. Rising from my bed, I almost flaked out, but managed to make it to the corridor outside our room before needing to prop myself up against the corridor wall. I made my way, hands on the wall to steady myself, slowly towards the staircase at the end of the corridor, which led down to the ground floor reception. But on the way, it crossed my mind that I needed to get more rest before taking on something so involved as explaining our ailments to strangers. I looked at the tiled floor and it struck me that it was similar to that of the toilets; it would be just the right temperature to rest on without sweating and recover a little energy before continuing. But another thought struck me at almost the same time: if I lay down, I would not get up again.

I reprimanded myself for even thinking of lying down in the corridor. When, in my entire life,

had I ever been unable to walk to the end of a corridor without taking a rest part way along? It wasn't even a long corridor! This strange lethargy was not normal, I told myself, and I had to get to the bottom of it as soon as possible.

I did manage to get to the top of the staircase, but at that point my energy gave out. I collapsed, and descended the stairs in the most direct manner, only vaguely aware of hard edges banging into me as I fell down the stairs

Some moments later, I was awake again, propped on a stool with my back resting on the wall of the reception area, and two men looking over me. One, the manager, held a cup of hot liquid to my mouth, with some sort of thick roots in it. I took a sip reluctantly, expecting its heat to send me into further sweats, but I didn't. I noticed I even liked the smell of the drink. For what seemed to be the longest time, I couldn't think of anything at all to say; I just put all my concentration on this cup of hot liquid, and on holding it without spilling it once the manager had released it into my grasp. I felt a tingling come back into my hands, which had been numb.

I knew the manager and the other, much younger man, were talking about my ailment, but I didn't have the energy to speak to them about it. Yet after about 10 minutes, I was completely clear-headed, though still as weak, and on my second glass of whatever I had been given. That was my first brush with 'alternative medicine', or traditional, non-chemical medicine as far as people of that region were concerned. As my mind cleared I began to become aware that there was something I had wanted to tell the manager about, but I didn't know what it was. Suddenly, it came to me, and I actually involuntarily blurted out her name: "Jeanette!"

Both men looked at me. My voice had not even sounded like my own. "My girlfriend is sick...", I continued.

"Where is she?" the manager asked. "Is she in the room?" I nodded. The younger man went upstairs and five minutes later he reappeared, helping Jeanette down the stairs. The manager let Jeanette sit in his chair as there was no other place to sit in the small reception area, and the younger man gave her a glass of hot water. Throughout all this time, the tone of conversation between the two of them revealed that they regarded this as a serious matter, but my flimsy Arabic didn't give me the slightest idea of what was actually being said. As I recovered my senses my voice began to sound like my own, and the manager asked me various questions about how long we had felt sick and how exactly we felt. He also made a phone call, and I wondered if he was calling for medical help. He was.

"I've just called a doctor; his surgery is only five minutes' walk away. It's closed now, but I called him at home and he will be at his surgery in 10 minutes. It may take you two longer than normal to get there, so maybe you can go now. My son will take you there. He is an excellent doctor; I'm sure he can help you."

Jeanette looked like she could pass out at any moment, but insisted she could walk by herself. The manager's son escorted us a nearby doctor's surgery, and left us there in the doctor's charge.

The doctor may or may not have been an excellent doctor as the manager claimed, but I had my doubts. I had never in my life seen such a dirty doctor's surgery, and wondered how it was possible for a medical practitioner to have such a poor concept of basic hygiene. Half the room, which looked like an unused storeroom and apparently wasn't used often, was covered in a thick layer of dust. For a moment, I debated with myself whether or not I should take an injection from a doctor in such a filthy environment. After all, by this time I was already feeling much better. But I could see that Jeanette was having the same thoughts about hygiene as myself, and I reasoned that if I didn't let the doctor give me a jab, Jeanette would need no other encouragement to follow my example and walk - if that was the right word - right out of the place. And I knew she really did need to take a chance with an antibiotic or whatever the doctor now wanted to give us. She was in no state to refuse.

We both felt much better by evening, and able to eat, though quite weak and lacking in energy. At first, I had not wanted to return to the guesthouse to rest for fear of a repeat episode of slipping in and out of sleep, getting weaker and weaker. But by the time we got back there, I noticed that colour had returned to Jeanette's face, and though she still seemed weak, her speech was normal. Still, I decided to stay awake, while she slept, and continued reading my Egypt guide book. By this time, I really did feel 'as right as rain'.

Neither of us knew the nature of the sickness that had struck us so fast and so forcefully. For me, that was the full extent of my brush with this awful sickness, but Jeanette told me months later that she had experienced a series of apparent recurrences, and that her local doctor in Sweden felt she had probably contracted malaria.

The next morning, we descended the stairs I had fallen down the previous day, this time in the normal manner, ready to set off to see one or two of city's tourist attractions by ourselves when we encountered again the owner-manager of the guesthouse, who was talking to two brothers from London in their mid-20s who had arrived the previous evening.

"You look very healthy this morning, sir!" He quipped as he saw me.

"I feel healthy too, and thanks for your help yesterday." I wanted to ask him what the drink he had given me the previous day was, but before I had a chance to he introduced us to the brothers, and we ended up in discussion and finally agreeing to split a taxi fare between the four of us to see something called the 'unfinished obelisk', a huge slab of stone thought to date back to around 1500 BC which lay in a quarry outside town.

For reasons no-one knows, this pillar was never erected. If finished it would have measured around 42 metres and would have weighed nearly 1,200 tons. Although I found this interesting, I could see that Jeanette quickly seemed bored, so when the older brother suggested the four of us take a boat trip on the Nile, I agreed immediately.

The two brothers had the same sarcastic sense of humour, and their comments would have kept me entertained even if there had been nothing at all to see in and around Aswan, but such humour was of course beyond Jeanette - even though she was fluent in English - and she sometimes took their jokes to be serious comments. This made me realise the incredible amount of time and effort needed to reach such a level of proficiency in English, or any other language for that matter, that one could understand such clever comments. Jeanette had probably been speaking English almost daily since early childhood, but she still wasn't there as far as the brothers' humour was concerned.

I also wondered whether the brothers - whose names I no longer remember - would have been identical in appearance as well, had the elder not been about twice the size of his younger brother. I reckoned this to have probably been due to his job as a chef, while little brother worked in a pub. So the four of us shared the fare on a felucca, a traditional wooden sailing boat very common in the region, at a cost of less than two pounds sterling each.

Once out on the water, I felt I had been missing an essential part of any trip to Egypt. It suddenly seemed that no trip to this country would have been complete without spending at least a little time on this aquatic lifeline which runs from one end of the country to the other.

This thoroughly enjoyable trip lasted two or three hours and took in a Nile island named Elephantine Island. The island lies very close to the city of Aswan, yet could hardly have been more different. We visited a Nubian village on this island, and it was probably that which set me to thinking of how far south Jeanette and I had come from Athens - let alone Karlskrona - by this point, and wanting to go further still. Interestingly, although I had always thought of Egypt as a part of Africa, which geographically speaking it is, people we spoke to in Luxor and even Aswan often asked us whether or not we had travelled to Africa; evidence that they didn't consider themselves to be in Africa.

Nubia is the region stretching from Aswan in the north to central Sudan in the south, and the

Nubian people are much darker skinned than most Egyptians. It seemed to me like the edge of the real Africa, and I felt it would have been a shame if we didn't go as far south as we possible could, given the limits imposed by time and money.

So when we arrived back at the guesthouse, the manager probably had an easy time of convincing me to take a trip to a place called Abu Simbel, located nearly 290 kilometres to the southwest of Aswan (a distance roughly equivalent of London to Nottingham) and just 40 kms north of border with Sudan, despite his warning that it would be a "full day" and if we planned to leave early the day after, we would be advised to pack now, to save time. Jeanette was for it too, so that sealed the deal. I was pleased, yet still a little surprised, at how easily Jeanette and I now got along, and wondered if our experience of the previous day had given her pause for thought, like it had me, and made her feel that life was too short to be wasting in argument.

We set off the next morning with several other backpackers in a couple of cars, and arrived in the midday heat. The place is located at the edge of Lake Nasser, which is not truly a lake at all, but a huge reservoir, about 550 km long and 35 km wide at its widest point. It was created as a result of the construction of the Aswan High Dam across the waters of the Nile in the 1960s, and named after Egypt's second president, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Being at the edge of the lake, or reservoir, did not make it an area of verdant vegetation; the desert seemed to finish right at the edge of the water. This was the furthest south I had ever travelled, and the same was true for Jeanette, which gave the trip an added air of adventure for us.

The main reason any foreign visitor visits Abu Simbel is to see the twin temples there; Abu Simbel itself was just a tiny village at that time. The temple complex is part of a site known as the 'Nubian Monuments' which run from Abu Simbel up to Philae, near Aswan. The twin temples are thought to have originally been carved out of the mountainside during the reign of Ramesses II in the 13th century BC, as a lasting monument to himself and his queen, Nefertari.

By the time we returned to Aswan, it was already late in the evening. We had taken the manager's advice and our bags were already half-packed, ready for us to begin the long trip back to Cairo early the next morning. We were both in good spirits, and our sickness of just two days earlier seemed like an age ago. The only thing I regretted was that visiting Abu Simbel meant that we didn't have the time to stop at Luxor on the way back to see the Valley of the Kings. It was going to be a long trip back.

"Do you remember what you told me the day before yesterday, as you lay on your bed, Jeanette?" I asked as I sat on my bed double-checking everything in my shoulder bag and daypack.

"I think I do, but I don't want to think about it now!" she smiled.

I wondered if she really remembered telling me she thought she was dying. Even for myself, the memory seemed not to fully belong to myself; more like a 'memory' you seem to have but can't be quite sure if it wasn't just something you saw in a film or read in a book.

And Back North...In a Roundabout Way

The return train journey to Cairo was uneventful, although we did get to know some fellow European backpackers, one of whom was a proficient chess player, which for me helped make the long journey more tolerable. By the time we arrived back in Cairo and checked back in at the same large hostel we had stayed at on our outward journey, our sickness of a few days previously seemed almost like a distant memory to me. I felt excellent. But Jeanette, still at this time assuming our sickness to have been dysentery, rather than malaria, was still very wary of local food, eating only dried fruit and avoiding anything else uncooked or any drinks she didn't know for sure had been boiled. On our last night in Cairo, however, she spotted a fast food restaurant and suggested we eat there. To my amazement, it was a British set-up

called Wimpy. My mind returned to hearing Jeanette telling me of her dream of Swedish food, and I almost laughed out loud. I would not have dreamt of eating at a Wimpy's no matter how sick I got.

Of course, Jeanette was not familiar with the fast-food chain. But for me, eating at the Wimpy in Cairo was an almost surreal experience. The 'Wimpy Bar' (along with the nearby 'Golden Egg') had been the first restaurant I had eaten in independently (that is to say without my parents) over a decade previously, in Warrington, using the 'pocket money' my parents gave me. For an 11 year-old adolescent dressed in his best 'parallel' pants, Saturday afternoons at the Wimpy with a couple of pals from school was 'going out', something akin to going to the cinema, or the 'pictures' as we then called them. By the time I left Warrington at 17, I saw it rather as just some pseudo-American junk food joint (although it was, in fact, American, I assumed it to be British). As a traveller, I generally avoided bland international fast food restaurants in favour of whatever the locals usually ate, but this time I agreed to eat wherever Jeanette wanted to. The place turned out to be spotlessly clean, very untypical of Cairo, and had something of an upmarket atmosphere! With surprise, I noticed that people eating there were also dressed much more smartly than we were, in our worn jeans and t-shirts (ie, they wore clothes that couldn't stay looking clean on the streets of Cairo for very long!). For them, eating at the Wimpy was obviously also a 'night out'.

The next day, we left for the airport and our respective flights, ostensibly to Copenhagen and Athens. Apart from being a thoroughly exciting trip for both of us and something of an adventure, the trip had featured an added benefit I couldn't possibly have predicted.

Although there were only two hours separating our flights, and we could have passed through customs together, I made some excuse not to, and we said our farewells before Jeanette passed through customs alone. We hugged, and wished each other smooth journeys, and I thanked Jeanette for making it a great trip.

I felt somewhat proud that I had kept to my own decision in Aswan not to let our disagreements come between us. I watched Jeanette as she turned back to wave goodbye, and then she was gone. I turned on my heels, and looked at my watch. With luck, I would be able to get on the same southbound train service we had taken on the way out, and be back in Luxor by the next morning. I had unfinished business there.

End of Story