

To expand the range of her India column, Suzan Crane has changed the name to Views from a Broad. This time out she explores ancient wonders and recent terrorist attacks in Egypt.

# Pyramids and a scheme

The hospital was a simple concrete building with no signage. A camel was parked outside next to the steps on which five civilian garbed men – including the 26-year-old doctor and his even younger nurse – were smoking cigarettes. Inside, peeling paint hung like stalactites from a crumbling ceiling in an unmanned reception area that consisted of a lone rusty metal desk. The place was deserted. I cautiously limped into an examining room with these questionable medical practitioners, feeling at once foolish and grateful that my malady was nothing more serious than an infected foot wound.

This was Egypt and I should be describing the fabled pyramids of Giza, the majestic Sahara desert, the antiquities of Luxor, but this pathetic hospital in tiny Nuweiba, Sinai where a rookie doctor advanced with a syringe while insulting America remains a vivid memory.

But the negative reaction to my Americanism was, thankfully, an isolated incident. Truth be told, I had minor concerns about my reception in Egypt – especially in light of today's inflammatory political climate and media-induced stigmatization of Muslims. But more ominously, my ill-timed arrival was closely preceded by a fatal bombing in Dahab, the third to hit Sinai's beautiful Red Sea coast – two previous explosions having afflicted Sharm El Sheikh and Taba – in recent years. Though the attack had an adverse effect on Egypt's usually fecund tourist trade, my trepidation was unfounded. In fact, the affability of the nationals verged on annoyance. Okay, most of the greeters were men, as women don't generally interact here (except in Cairo – few are even visible). And yes, there was some lascivious intent, but this was not dissimilar to the unwanted attention one tolerates in India, so no problem.

Having harboured big fantasies concerning Egypt's many celebrated attractions, the reality was disappointing. Egypt is a tourist haven, and despite diminished numbers, most of the country's important sights are reduced to circus sideshows, with two-week package-dealers in two-bit tourist caravans running amok over ancient wonders of the world. An anticipated spiritual experience of taking a pre-dawn hike to the summit of Mt. Sinai – a Biblical site revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews where God supposedly laid down the Ten Commandments to Moses – was likewise thwarted by people bellowing to each other on the "Steps of Repentance," camel hawkers and vendors vociferously vending. But the sunrise vista from the apex, a panorama of jagged peaks and creviced valleys, was well worth enduring the arduous trek and obnoxious crowds.

Several days in and around Cairo were enough to navigate the highlights: the Islamic Sector, City of the Dead, and the vital – albeit slightly shabby – Egyptian Museum. One day, of course, was dedicated to inspecting the Pyramids, and an evening to sailing down the Nile on a *felucca*. An intended loop through the western desert culminating in Luxor, home of the Valley of the Kings, was promptly scrapped after two days in Baharia, the first of the oases towns in the arid, excruciatingly hot Sahara. I did manage, however – en route to my expedited escape to the Red Sea – a jaunt through the spectacular Black and White Deserts, the latter featuring a milky expanse of sand from which sprouted remarkable, nature-sculpted chunks of limestone.

A 10-hour bus journey from Cairo deposited me in Sinai, where mountains meet the sea and the desert meanders endlessly through the interior. The peninsula, famous for its diving and snorkelling sites, is also home to St. Katherine's Monastery, one of early Christianity's only surviving churches. A place of pilgrimage since the 4<sup>th</sup> century when the Roman empress Helena erected a small chapel beside what is believed to be the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses, the chapel below Mt. Sinai is dedicated to St. Katherine, the legendary martyr of Alexandria who was tortured on a spike wheel and then beheaded for her Christian beliefs.

After a brief stay in the former hippie haven of Dahab, now a neon boardwalk lined with hotels, diving centres, restaurants and souvenir shops, I headed further north where hundreds of nature "camps" embroider the shoreline up to Taba, the border crossing with Israel. Normally the bungalows swell with young Israelis who come to chill on Egypt's cheap dime. This time, however, the entire coastal area was eerily desolate. Following the Dahab attack, the Israeli government's vehement advisories have deterred its citizens from visiting Sinai. But for the residents whose livelihood depends on these vacationers, the dearth of business is a matter of acceptance and faith. "Inshallah," ("God Willing") they would say when queried about the situation. With few other travellers around, I spent two glorious weeks hanging with the locals – smoking *sheesha*, learning to belly-dance and gaining inspiration through their resolute courage and good humour.

For me, that's what life's journey is about. The sights are grand, but the citizens of the world make it truly beautiful, except for a few racist pricks.

