



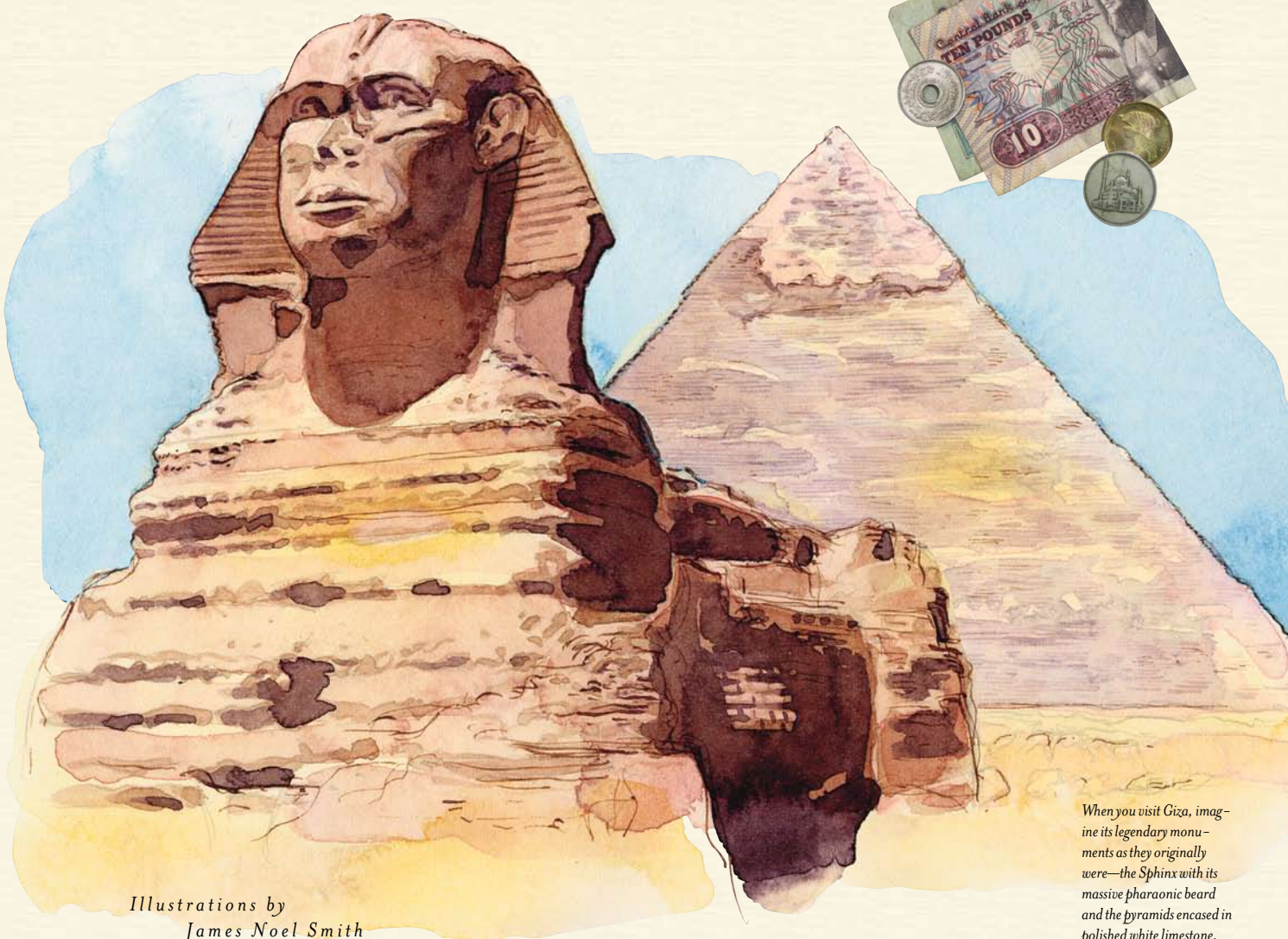
Some places are perfect for the independent traveler. And some, well, aren't. For our series "Iconic Itineraries," we've picked six destinations that are must-sees but whose massive tourism infrastructures are so geared to groups that having an authentic, unique experience can seem next to impossible. Not to worry. Working with the world's leading travel specialists, we've created step-by-step trips that let you see the best each place has to offer, but on your terms. Each of our highly detailed itineraries has been vetted and perfected by a Condé Nast Traveler editor, and each can be either bought as is with just one phone call or customized at will. So here is:

13 Perfect Days in...

3

Egypt: Cairo, Aswan, Luxor, and More*

By Klara Glowczewska



Illustrations by James Noel Smith

When you visit Giza, imagine its legendary monuments as they originally were—the Sphinx with its massive pharaonic beard and the pyramids encased in polished white limestone, like giant gleaming crystals.

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*Visit cntraveler.com/iconictrips for the first two in our series of must-have Iconic Itineraries: spectacular trips to PERU (including the Andes, the Incas, and the Amazon) and RUSSIA (including Moscow and St. Petersburg).

The Challenge

Egypt is among the world's most popular destinations. Especially in the high season, October through April, its historic sites, the majority of which are in a narrow band along the banks of the Nile River, are a series of bottlenecks. If you have only 10 to 14 days and need your sightseeing to be efficient and foolproof, then a guided tour is the only realistic option: one, because the must-sees are scattered the length of the country, and transportation—planes, cars, boats—needs to be seamlessly arranged; two, because you need help securing entrance tickets and effectively negotiating lines at museums and monuments. Yet fully guided tours run the strong risk of leaching all charm and serendipity from a trip. Egypt—for all its current political and economic dilemmas, its tatty, chaotic cities, its heat and crowds—remains magnificent. You cannot fully appreciate it, feel its weight and complexity, if you are never alone with it.

The Solution

It is threefold. One, book a private guided tour, not a group one. Yes, it will cost more, but this is the trip of a lifetime—and worth it. There will be large groups with squawking guides wherever you go, but at least you will be able to enjoy private meals and the flexibility and personal attention of one-on-one guidance. Two, contact Egypt specialist James Berkeley of Destinations & Adventures International (see “Wendy Perrin’s 128 Top Travel Specialists,” August 2006, or go online to cntraveler.com/travelagentfinder). Berkeley has access to some of the best guides in the country and will customize your schedule, allowing for plenty of private time. Three, strongly consider going in May, June, or early July. If you can tolerate heat—and in Upper Egypt temperatures can reach (an albeit dry) 120 degrees at midday—and are able to build enough pool time into your schedule, it’s your best chance of seeing the monuments without hundreds of other visitors intruding on your views and experiences. Here is the itinerary Berkeley and I designed—so you can see the most, in the best way, and have some unprogrammed time as well.

Day 1: Cairo

Take EgyptAir’s overnight flight from New York, which lands at 11:30 A.M. (If you purchase your international tickets on EgyptAir, you’ll save hundreds of dollars on the internal airfare). At Cairo International Airport, you will be met and assisted through customs/immigration by your guide. The trip to town takes an hour. The best two hotel options—both of which offer superb Nile views—are the hushed and marbled Four Seasons Hotel Cairo at Nile Plaza (20-2-791-7000; fourseasons.com;

doubles, \$300–\$900) and the much cheaper Nile Hilton (where I stayed), a 1950s classic on central Tahrir Square, across the street from the Egyptian Museum. The rooms are tired, but there’s a great outdoor pool and a lively lobby

filled with everyone from Cairo yuppies to Middle Eastern businessmen and expats. Ask for a high floor with Nile views (20-2-578-0444; hilton.com; doubles, \$115–\$165).

To minimize jet lag, stay active until at least 9 P.M. First, have a swim and a light lunch while taking in the Hilton’s social scene. In spring and summer, Arab families rent the spacious cabanas surrounding the grassy pool area and camp out en masse. Then ask the concierge to arrange a small picnic for later (a bottle of wine, a few snacks), a car and driver

(\$25–\$35 per hour), and a reservation for dinner at an outdoor table (weather permitting) at the Citadel View Studio Misr restaurant, in Islamic Cairo’s Al-Azhar Park (20-2-510-9150; entrées, \$18). An hour before sunset, picnic in hand, head with your driver a few hundred yards south down the Corniche al-Nil, the riverfront thoroughfare, toward a felucca [Fig. 1] at Dok-Dok landing, located between the Grand Hyatt and the Four Seasons. **A boatman will sail you along the Nile as the sun sets and the bridges fill with couples enjoying the soft evening air** (feluccas, about \$7 per hour). After darkness falls, ask your driver to take you to the 74-acre Al-Azhar Park, created in 2004 by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture on what was a 500-year-old rubbish heap. No alcohol is served at the Citadel View Studio Misr restaurant (the driver will wait), but the mixed grills are delicious and the view magical: You’ll see the illuminated Citadel, the fortress built by Saladin in 1176 to defend the city from the Crusaders, and its iconic Mohammed Ali Mosque (1830–1848).

Before you succumb utterly to jet lag, there is still the drive back through the bustling streets—pedestrians dodging traffic, men in cafés sucking on water pipes, here called sheeshas [Fig. 2]—all the intoxicating hubbub of a city that lives on desert time, where nighttime is the best time. Keep your eyes open: Cairo is the unofficial capital of the Arab world, and this will give you a feel for the texture of everyday life.

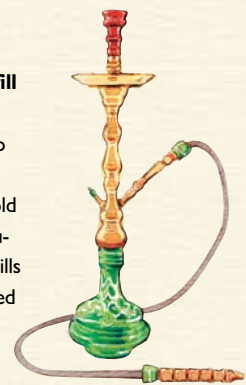
Day 2: Giza, Memphis, and Sakkara

It will be painful, but get up at 6:30 A.M. (you’ll be glad you did), and after a big buffet breakfast—standard in all of Egypt’s hotels—meet your guide in the lobby at 7:30 for the drive to the Giza plateau and its three great pyramids and Sphinx, about ten miles southwest of Cairo. The pyramids “open” at 8 A.M., and you want to be there when they do. Although chronologically speaking you should begin with the site of ancient Memphis and its necropolis of Sakkara (the first capital of a united Egypt, established in 3100 B.C.), the pyramids of Giza, dating from about 2500 B.C., are the country’s ur-monuments, and the Great Pyramid



[Fig. 1]

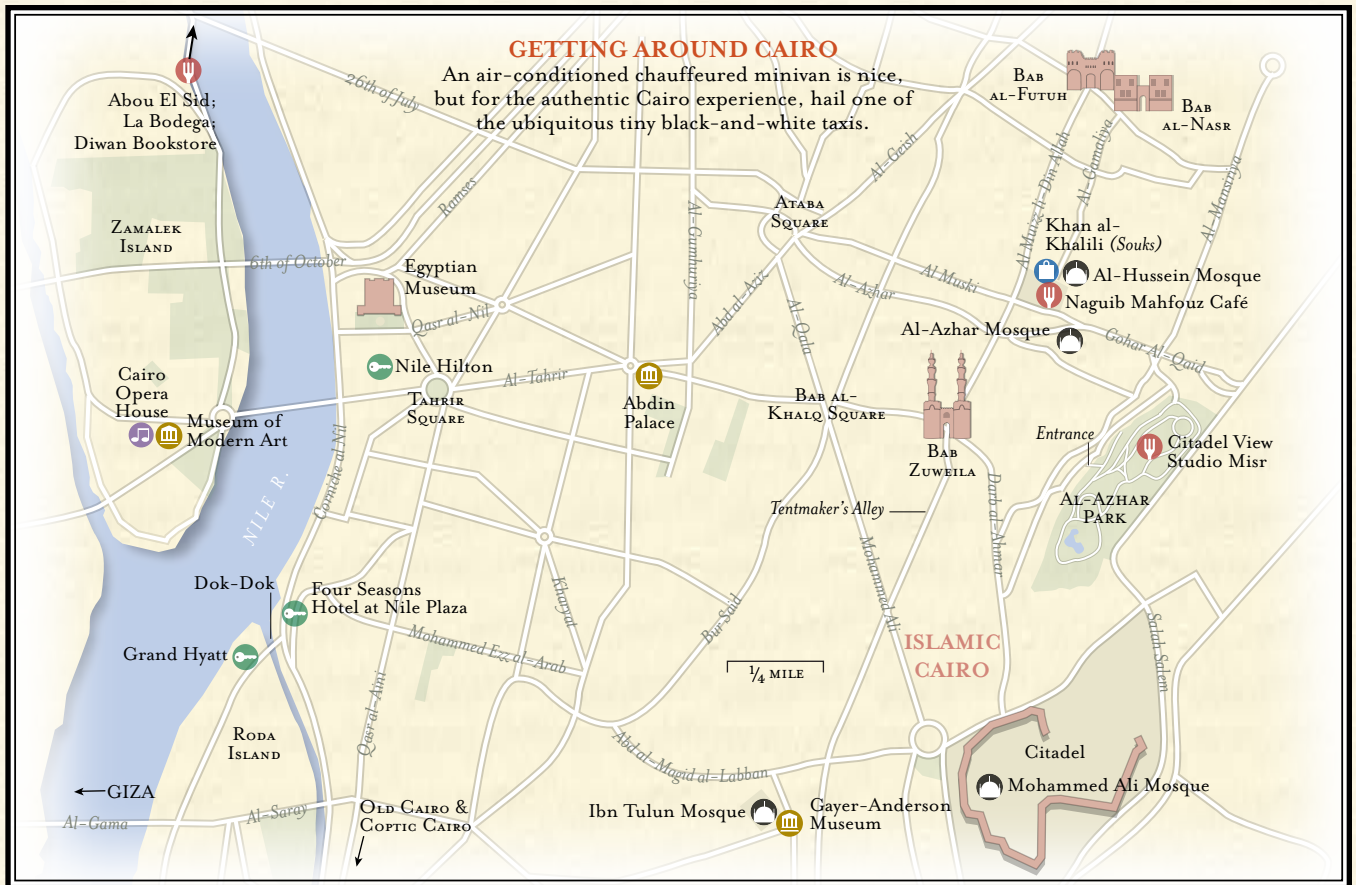
Feluccas are an intimate and quintessentially Egyptian way to experience the Nile, whether in Aswan, Luxor, or Cairo. You can usually rent one for less than \$10 an hour, including boatman.



[Fig. 2]

Many an evening in Egypt ends with the ritual of the ubiquitous sheesha, or water pipe. Men do it, women do it.

When you book your trip, **DON'T PREPAY ALL YOUR MEALS:** Some days you might want only a light snack or prefer more sightseeing to a long sit-down lunch



(a.k.a. Khufu's) is the only remaining Wonder of the Ancient World, so you might as well start with a bang. Your guide will give you tickets for entering whichever of the three pyramids is open that day, and then you'll be ascending and descending narrow, low-ceilinged corridors, finally leading into the King's Chamber, where the sarcophagus once stood. Note: This is not for claustrophobes, and it's hell on the hamstrings. **When you emerge, 45 minutes later, circumambulate the base of the pyramid, looking up as you go: There's no better way to fully comprehend the structure's enormity, nor the lust for immortality that inspired it.** You will now be ready for some air-conditioning, so stop at the small Solar Barque Museum, on the south side of Khufu's pyramid. It houses the 140-foot cedarwood barque belonging to the pharaoh, which was discovered buried in a pit adjacent to his pyramid. Walk to the Sphinx, ten minutes downhill. Although riddles remain, the human head on the feline body probably portrays the pharaoh Khafre, as the beast was carved from the bedrock leading to his pyramid. Then it's time to stop for lunch at the Mena House Oberoi's Khan El Khalili restaurant, which sits in the shadow of the pyramids (20-2-590-3788; entrées, \$15-\$22).

Arrive no later than 2 P.M. at the Memphis Museum, where the main attraction is the colossal fallen limestone statue of Ramses II, housed in its own pavilion, with a raised walkway that allows you to get up close and gaze down upon—like a fly buzzing over a felled elephant—the pharaoh's idealized features and musculature. Then it's back to

the car and on to Sakkara, 15 minutes away. There are more than 200 pyramids and graves in this vast funerary complex, whose monuments cover every period of Egyptian history (right through the Christian era). The one to see is Djoser's Step Pyramid, built circa 2650 B.C. It is the world's earliest stone monument, a precursor to the smooth-sided pyramids of Giza, and its architect was the Frank Gehry of the ancient world, the later deified Imhotep. Take the time to walk around—the visitors are fewer here than at Giza—and when you reach the pyramid's rear, chances are excellent

Arabic pop music will be blaring in whatever car you're in. THE FREQUENTLY INTONED, LOVELY WORD "HABIBI" MEANS SWEETHEART OR MY DARLING

that you will be alone, with just desert silence and wind. You can be back at the Hilton by 5 P.M., in time for a swim before the pool closes at sunset and a rest before dinner. Then it's off on your own—a regular taxi is fine—for the short drive to Zamalek Island, an erstwhile expat and upper-middle-class residential enclave of leafy avenues and bourgeois apartment buildings and villas, now a bit shabby. Stop by the excellent Diwan English-language bookstore, open until 11:30 P.M., to stock up on books for the trip ahead (159 26th of July St.; 20-2-736-2598; go to cntraveler.com/iconictrips for my reading recommendations). The

What to Pack

Sun hat and glasses, a fan (take it everywhere, especially if it's summer), and an empty, soft-sided bag (to bring your purchases back home). Women should have one long, loose skirt and a thin shawl (cool, comfortable, and appropriate for visiting Muslim sites).

Map by Joyce Pendola

Abou El Sid restaurant is just off 26th of July Street, behind a large, ornate wooden door. Inside, you'll find Royalist Egyptian meets Andy Warhol decor, and an interesting menu of Egyptian dishes, including one of my favorites, *fet-tah*, a risotto with yogurt, tomato, and beef. Have your concierge book ahead (20-2-735-9640; entrées, \$6–\$8). You'll find taxis outside for the ride back to the hotel.

Day 3: Cairo, Part 2

Meet your guide after breakfast at 8:45 A.M. sharp to be among the first in line at the Egyptian Museum, across the street from the Hilton. **As the doors open, run, don't walk, up to the first-floor Tutankhamun Galleries and head straight to**

Room 3. While other guides spend ten minutes on the ground floor with orientation lectures, you can steal some time alone with Tut's resplendent gold death mask [Fig. 3]. There are two other must-sees. The Royal Mummy Room (No. 56) has the remains of 11 pharaohs and queens from the seventh to the twenty-first dynasties, including the formidable Ramses II; there is something vertiginous about inspecting the corpse of one of the ancient world's most powerful rulers close up (note the elegantly elongated fingernails and aquiline nose). The Fayoum Portraits (in Room 14), found on Greco-Roman mummies dating from 30 B.C. to A.D. 395, are haunting in their realism and the youth of some of their subjects.

Tear yourself away. This is your last full day in Cairo, and you should spend the rest of it walking the medieval Islamic city. Have your guide and driver escort you to the southern end of the quarter's Ibn Tulun Mosque. Built between A.D. 876 and 879, it is the city's oldest functioning Islamic monument and magnificent in its severe simplicity and scale. Immediately adjacent is the Gayer-Anderson Museum—a fascinating old house where a British army doctor who was



[Fig. 3]

The deep blue in King Tutankhamun's death mask, at the Egyptian Museum, symbolizes rebirth, the gold eternal life. Don't miss it—it's shockingly beautiful.

Unless you have more than four people with you, request a minivan ahead of time; if you don't, YOU MIGHT BE FERRIED AROUND IN A SMALL BUS that seats 18 to 20 and all but screams "tourists"

an avid art collector lived from 1935 to 1942.

Drive from here to Bab Zuweila, the only remaining southern gate of the medieval city of Al-Qahira ("The Victorious," from whence Cairo was derived). Your guide will still be with you, but the car and driver should go wait at Bab al-Futuh, one of the two northern gates. You'll be walking from now on. **Start by climbing either of the two minarets at the top of the gate. It's worth the effort for the old-city views, a sea of seemingly crumbling houses punctuated by domes and minarets—snap away.** Next stop is Al-Azhar Mosque, with its vast white-marble-floored central courtyard. Founded in A.D. 970, it

was once one of the world's foremost centers of learning, and today its sheikh is the highest theological authority for Egyptian and Sunni Muslims. (Women must wear head scarves—supplied for visitors at the door.)

Hungry and tired? Ask your guide to walk you—all the while pointing out the other notable mosques, mausoleums, and madrassas—to the Naguib Mahfouz restaurant (5 Al-Badistan St.; 20-2-590-3788; entrées, \$12–\$22). Named for Egypt's late Nobel laureate in literature, it's the safest bet for Western stomachs in this part of town. Instead of sitting in the formal dining rooms, opt for a table in the up-front snack area, overlooking the alleyway running between Al-Hussein Mosque and the gold souk.

You are in the middle of the Khan al-Khalili market—part tourist trap, part the real thing. Bid farewell to your guide after lunch and spend the next few hours exploring on your own, slowly snaking your way north. Try your skills at bargaining (gold jewelry? Egyptian cottons? alabaster vases?) [Fig. 4], and take in the boisterous, crowded, congenial, and utterly exotic scene—**men balancing large crates of freshly baked pita on their heads, others hawking tamarind or licorice juice, enormous glass tanks on their backs.** Don't worry about getting lost—that's sort of the point.

Connect with your driver at the Bab al-Futuh gate for the ride back to the Hilton. You have barely scratched the surface of what is one of the world's most historically and culturally fascinating cities, but your impressions will be vivid and long-lasting. End the day with a light dinner at any of the hotel's restaurants—you must be at the airport before six tomorrow morning.

Day 4: Abu Simbel and Aswan

After an early breakfast, transfer to the Cairo Airport for your 7 A.M. EgyptAir flight to Aswan (arriving at 8:40 A.M.), which connects to your 45-minute flight to Abu Simbel at 9:55. Your next guide will meet you on the flight and will accompany you through Day 8 (at which point, you'll meet up with another guide). A bus will take you from the airport to a village that's just a five-minute walk from the temples at Abu Simbel. Nothing, not the tour buses nor the heat (you are just 25 miles from the Sudanese border), can diminish the impact of these two savagely beautiful structures that were built into a mountainside on the West Bank of the Nile between 1274 and 1244 B.C. by Ramses II. The original feat is matched only by

the skill with which the temples were cut into pieces and reassembled on high ground in the mid-1960s to save them from the newly dammed Nile's rising waters. The facade of the Great Temple of Ramses II [Fig. 5], with its four colossal statues of the pharaoh,

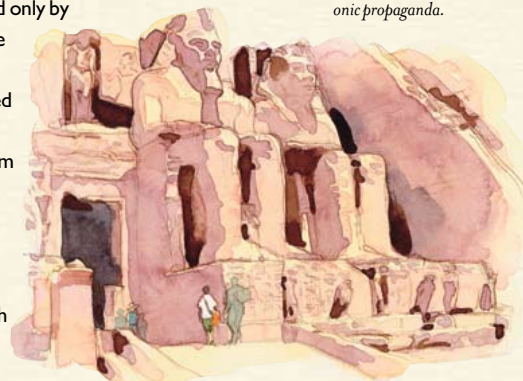


[Fig. 4]

Alabaster vases—buy them in Cairo's souks or in Luxor—make pretty lamps or candleholders. Wrap them well and place them gently in your carry-on.

[Fig. 5]

Ramses II (whom you saw in the Royal Mummy Room at the Egyptian Museum) built Abu Simbel to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of his ascension—a sublime instance of pharaonic propaganda.



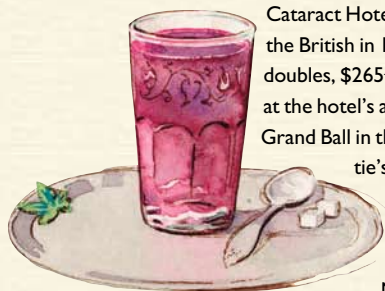
The Tip

Eat a big breakfast—you'll need energy for all the sightseeing. And always carry an insulated water bottle.

seems conceived on a divine scale; it's both an overwhelming display of Egyptian imperial power in what was then ancient Nubia and a bold grasp at immortality by a pharaoh who was not interested in going gently into that good night.

The nearby Temple of Hathor is dedicated to Ramses' first and favorite wife, Nefertari, represented on the facade—unusually and touchingly in a culture where size signified stature—at the same scale as her husband. You can ponder the nature of ancient love on your flight back to Aswan, which departs Abu Simbel at 1:55 P.M. and lands at 2:40 P.M. (flight times may vary slightly).

Aswan is situated at what was in antiquity the southern border of Egypt, the point where the Nile cuts through the granite rock of the first cataract. (Nubia lay beyond.) You'll be spending the next two nights at the Sofitel Old Cataract Hotel, a splendid reddish-brown pile built by the British in 1899 (20-97-231-6000; sofitel.com; doubles, \$265–\$648). Make a reservation for dinner at the hotel's atmospheric 1902 restaurant, site of the Grand Ball in the 1978 film version of Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* (20-97-231-6000; entrées, \$11–\$16), then spend the rest of the day luxuriating in the hotel's picture-postcard views of the Nile. The terrace is a must for lunch or a cold glass of karkadeh [Fig. 6].



[Fig. 6]

Don't leave Upper Egypt without trying karkadeh, a refreshing signature drink brewed from the scarlet hibiscus flower.

Day 5: St. Simeon's and the Aswan Market

After breakfast on the terrace, walk down to the river with your guide to a waiting felucca, which will take you across to the western bank. From there, it's a 20-minute camel ride to St. Simeon's Monastery, the best example of an ancient Christian (Coptic) stronghold in Egypt. Dating back to the seventh century and abandoned in the twelfth because of difficulties with the water supply and Muslim attacks, the monastery is a wreck, but the setting—on high ground surrounded by desert sands—is splendid and the ruins have an oddly powerful aura. **Note the marks in the cells in the upper enclosure: Here the monks once attached themselves by ropes to**

At the Sofitel Old Cataract Hotel, in Aswan, splurge if you can on one of two palatial, FAMOUSLY OCCUPIED SUITES: the Winston Churchill (\$1,122) or the Agatha Christie (\$1,329)

large metal rings, the better to stay upright and awake all night long, reading and/or praying.

You'll be back at the Old Cataract for lunch on the terrace or the the air-conditioned café in the hotel's new wing. Wait out the midday heat poolside—desert sightseeing, especially in the off-season, takes a surprising toll. Around 4 P.M., have a driver (no need for a guide) drop you off at the south end of the Aswan market; arrange a meeting time and precise location at the north end. The market

is essentially a small-town main street with offshoots—easy to navigate, relatively tourist-free, and an unintimidating place to sharpen your bargaining skills. Bring home a selection of spices [Fig. 7], and stock up on Egyptian-cotton galabeyas: They make fantastic sleepwear, and the least expensive cost \$5 to \$10, the most elaborately embroidered up to \$75. Evenings are truly lovely in Aswan, so have dinner on the terrace at the Basma Hotel. Order the Oriental mezes and any of the grilled meats (20-97-231-0901; entrées, \$6–\$12).



[Fig. 7]

Bowls of artfully displayed spices in the Aswan market smell as beautiful as they look. The blue is indigo, used for washing whites.

Day 6: Elephantine Island and Cruise Boat Boarding

Because Nile cruise boats require that you book a minimum of three nights, you will be embarking at noon today, although not actually sailing from Aswan until tomorrow afternoon (see **The Basics** for boat recommendations). All excursions through Day 9 are included in your cruise package, but because you have a private guide, you'll be able visit sites in a different order than the other passengers, minimizing the likelihood of being stuck in crowds.

Leave your packed bags in the Old Cataract lobby after breakfast (they'll be transferred to your boat) and you're off to Elephantine Island via felucca. Elephantine was the nucleus from which the town of Aswan (Syene in ancient times) developed, a crossroads of ancient trading routes from Lower Egypt, the Western Desert, and India. Roman garrisons tromped through here in later times, as did the Turkish troops of the Ottoman sultan in the 1500s and the armies of British general Lord Horatio Kitchener during the conquest of Sudan (1896–98), as the lands that were Nubia came to be called. There are two interesting Nubian villages to tour—note the “designer” doors [Fig. 8]—and a small museum in the former home of Sir William Willcocks, engineer of the Old Aswan Dam (1902), where you can see objects unearthed on Elephantine and its environs from prehistory on. But the overall impression is of compacted ruin upon ruin. Still, if your guide is good at filling in the gaps, there is arguably no site like it for feeling the whoosh of aeons. **Recover from historical vertigo—and from the heat (there is little shade on Elephantine)—during a slow sail along the Nile to nearby Kitchener's Island, a.k.a. the Aswan Botanical Garden**, where Kitchener, after his victory over the Mahdi in Sudan (Muslim-Western conflict is indeed an old story), indulged his passion for horticulture by importing hundreds of species of flora from the Far East, India, and elsewhere in Africa.



[Fig. 8]

Like Egyptian houses, Nubian dwellings were made of mud brick but are much more decorative. Many homes on Elephantine Island have colorful painted doors.

Lunch is on your moored cruise ship [Fig. 9]. Escape the heat in the top deck's plunge pool or with a nap in your cabin. Toward day's end, your guide will take you to the elegant, red granite Nubia Museum, a must-see for the fresh

Egypt



Day 7: Cruise from Aswan to Kom Ombo

The construction of monumental structures here did not end in antiquity: The High Dam, your first stop after breakfast and a 15-minute drive from the cruise ship dock, was completed in 1971 to replace the Old Aswan Dam. It has helped regularize land cultivation by stopping the yearly flooding of the Nile, doubled the country's hydroelectric power, and created the world's largest man-made lake, Nasser. But the dam has also given rise to a slew of health, environmental, and archaeological problems; in fact, had it not been for a massive international rescue effort, many temples upstream of the dam would have been submerged beneath Lake Nasser. The most famous of these after Abu Simbel is the enormous Greco-Roman Philae complex, your next stop, where the goddess Isis was worshipped until well after Christianity was embraced by the Roman Empire (which by 30 B.C., when Cleopatra surrendered to Octavian, included Egypt). **Make sure your guide tells you the story of Isis, her brother-husband Osiris, and their child, Horus—a sort of ancient precursor to the Christian Holy Family.** The last stop before returning to the ship and getting underway is the Unfinished Obelisk, in the quarry from which much of the red granite for ancient Egypt's monuments was extracted. It would have weighed 1,168 tons and stood 137 feet high, but instead lies like a beached behemoth, freed from the bedrock on all but one side, its fatal crack for all to see.

You will reach Kom Ombo, 25 miles north of Aswan, at about 5 P.M. Built under the Greek Ptolemaic pharaohs, it was largely completed in the first century B.C. by Cleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos, and is most noteworthy for the beauty of its setting, on a high promontory at a bend in the Nile. A treat awaits back on board: watching from the roof deck as the sun sets and darkness falls over the river. You will be in Edfu by morning.

Day 8: Cruise from Edfu to Luxor (East Bank)

The Temple of Horus (the falcon god) at Edfu is a quick visit—you'll leave the dock at about 8 A.M., ride to and from the temple in a horse-drawn calèche, and be back on board by ten. Ptolemaic Edfu, begun in 237 B.C. and completed in 57 B.C. (also by Cleopatra's father), is a masterful replica of a pharaonic-era temple, a style that was already archaic while it was being built. It is also the best-preserved Egyptian temple in existence: It was set far back from the river and was completely entombed in sand for 1,900 years. **Check out the laid-back little town of Edfu from the calèche on the way back—its residents, men and women, overwhelmingly in traditional dress, nary a pair of pants in sight, and the streets largely**

The COMFORTABLE BUT SNUG quarters of the cruise boat will be a shock after the Old Cataract. It smacks of "mass tourism," but the experience is still worth it

perspectives it affords on Egyptian history from the point of view of Egypt's southern neighbor. Note the fine sculpted head of Taharka (690–664 B.C.), one of Egypt's Nubian pharaohs. And at this time of day, you'll likely have the place to yourself (Al Farnadek St.; 20-97-231-9333; numibia.net/nubia). On your way back to the boat for dinner, stop at a government-certified jewelry shop (there's one on the Corniche, just across from the boat landing) and spring for a gold chain and a cartouche pendant with your name inscribed in hieroglyphics—a corny yet pretty souvenir.

filled not with cars but with carts and wagons. Steel yourself for the vendors at the dock: They were the most aggressive I encountered.

You have about six hours of onboard relaxation ahead—a leisurely progress over 65 miles down the Nile to Luxor. Save your reading for later, and keep your eyes trained on either bank [Fig. 10]: bright-green belts of cultivable land, palm groves, farmers and their water buffalo plowing the fields, a felucca moored against a bank, a donkey braying,

desert sands beyond. There are no satellite dishes, no telephone wires, and other than the occasional mosque minaret, nothing to suggest that you are not

in pharaonic Egypt. It is at once serene and troubling: What must life be like if there is no possibility of its changing? Do young people from villages such as these migrate to cities and become fodder for militant Islamists?

You will reach Luxor in the late afternoon or early evening (depending on the length of your transit at the Esna lock). Although you've paid to sleep on the boat tonight, consider paying an extra \$240 to check into the hotel Al Moudira a day early. You're already booked there for the following two nights, but Al Moudira is such a splendid hotel—uniquely atmospheric, with large, domed, beautifully furnished rooms—that it's worth splurging on a third night. Trust me (20-12-325-1307; moudira.com; doubles, \$240). Pack your bags and give them to the driver—he'll keep them stowed in the car while you explore the mother lode of Egyptian antiquities. Known as Waset in ancient times, Luxor was renamed Thebes by the Greeks and Al-Uqsir ("The Palaces") by the conquering Arabs in the seventh century.

Unless you're up to rising at 5 A.M. to take in the rosy-dawn vibe of Luxor's monuments, there is no reliable way of eluding the tourist mobs. But take heart: CROWDS ARE MUCH SMALLER IN SUMMER

The capital of Egypt during the New Kingdom (1550–1070 B.C.) and its ceremonial capital for millennia, Luxor has been described as the world's largest open-air museum.

Your late afternoon is spent with your guide at the East Bank temples of Karnak and Luxor. (The East Bank was the site of the ceremonial temples and the town, whereas the West Bank, where the sun sets, was the realm of the dead—of mortuary temples and tombs.) The Karnak complex, dedicated to the triad of Amun-Re (the supreme god and source of pharaonic legitimacy), Mut (his wife), and Khons (their son, the moon god), was the largest place of worship in the ancient world, built over 2,000 years by a succession of largely New Kingdom pharaohs (including, of course, Ramses II), each embellishing

his predecessors' contributions. You could easily spend several days here learning about the significance of every pylon, temple, column, statue, frieze, sacred pool, and obelisk. But since you have a schedule to keep, absorb what you can from your guide's explanations and **be sure to sit and linger awhile amid the astonishing forest of 134 gigantic papyrus-shaped columns in the Great Hypostyle Hall—like something left behind by a race of giants.**

Proceed to Luxor Temple, a five-minute drive away. The temple is open until 9 or 10 (depending on the season), so you still have plenty of time before dinner. Built largely by Amenhotep III and dedicated—as was Karnak—to the triad of Amun-Re, it was added to by Ramses II, Alexander the Great (who had himself declared pharaoh), various Romans, and even Arabs and Christians. As you enter the Great Court of Ramses II, you will see the fourteenth-century Mosque of Abu el-Haggag, dedicated to a sheikh who arrived here from Baghdad in the twelfth century. The obelisk in front of the first pylon on the left has a twin that now towers on the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Then it's time for dinner—either back on the boat or at Al Moudira.

Day 9: Luxor (West Bank)

You will spend the next two days almost exclusively on the West Bank—mornings visiting the vast necropolises and the mortuary temples where the bodies of the deified late pharaohs were mummified, and afternoons in the pool at Al Moudira

[Fig. 11]. Your new guide will pick you up in a minibus after an early breakfast, and you will head for the mountain ravine known as the Valley of the Kings, site of at least 60 royal tombs, the descending corridors and chambers

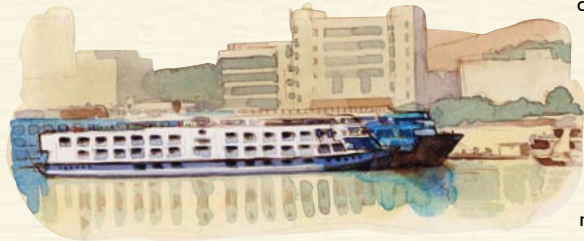
hewn from the rock during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth dynasties. Only a few are open at any given time, the rotation limiting the damage done by human moisture to what remains of the delicate wall paintings. We visited Tutankhamun's tomb (No. KV 62). It's fascinating to see the small spaces where all the treasures on display in Cairo's Egyptian Museum were once crammed, and to realize that his mummy still lies, unusually, inside the red quartzite sarcophagus in the burial chamber. The tomb of Ramses III (No. KV 11), the last of Egypt's warrior pharaohs (1184–1153 B.C.), is one of the valley's longest and most beautifully decorated. The scenes and symbols on the walls give the deceased pharaoh—as was customary—the knowledge he needed to complete his journey into the afterlife. You will remain for at most ten minutes in each tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

Hop back in the car for a short drive to Deir al-Bahri, the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut (1473–1458 B.C.). **Of**

[Fig. 10]
The views from the decks of Nile cruisers are alone worth the price of admission—here is eternal Egypt, the fertile countryside as it must have looked in ancient times.



The Tip
Bring wads of single-dollar bills with you for tipping—perfect for monument guards and felucca boatmen.



[Fig. 9]
Nile cruise boats are often docked five or six deep, their doors aligned. You embark and disembark by walking through the other ships.

all the sites in Egypt, this is where you will most wish for the crowds to disappear—they truly interfere with the sight lines of this unusual triple-tiered, ramped temple, set dramatically into an escarpment. The only way to achieve solitude is to begin the day here, arriving at dawn (before the parking lot fills with buses). But no matter when you visit, it's



[Fig. 11]

Everything about Luxor's Al Moudira hotel is enchanting—even the pool, surely the loveliest in Egypt. The view from here is of the hills concealing the Valley of the Kings.

[Fig. 12]

Fragments of the fallen statue of Ramses II, at the Ramesseum in Luxor, inspired Shelley's famous poem "Ozymandias." Each foot is the size of a small car.



still a mesmerizing site—as much for the beauty and surprising modernity of its architecture as for the story behind its builder, Egypt's only female pharaoh (not queen—pharaoh), who reigned for 20 peaceful and prosperous years after usurping the title from her young nephew.

Finish the day's sightseeing at the Valley of the Queens, burial ground of the queens, princes, and princesses of the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties. Arrive by car at about noon. There are far fewer tombs to visit here: Although more than 80 have been found, many are just shafts and others are in poor condition (the quality of the rock here is inferior to that in the Valley of the Kings). Two are notable. One is that of Amunherkhepshef (No. 55), a son of Ramses III who was only 10 or 11 when he died. Note the moving reliefs of the boy, in kilt and sandals, being led by the hand by his father during the first stage of his journey into eternity. The jewel of the Valley of the Queens, and of all of Egypt, is the tomb of Nefertari (No. 66), wife of Ramses II (the Abu Simbel couple). A sort of ancient Egyptian Taj Mahal, it can be entered only by special arrangement with Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and for a hefty fee (see "The Fabulous 50," December 2006).

You should arrive at Al Moudira by one o'clock, in time for lunch; eat in the charming pool area (the hotel serves some of the best food in Egypt). Spend the balance of the day floating in the pool and napping, and when you've revived, have the concierge arrange a camel, horseback, or hot-air balloon ride or a felucca sail (fees for all of which are extra). Come back to Al Moudira for dinner in the main restaurant, where the tables are set beside a fountain strewn with flower petals.

Day 10: Luxor (West Bank, Part 2)

You could easily spend a week in Luxor, but since you've only got this one day, head out early with your guide and driver for the Tombs of the Nobles. Until this past winter, the tombs were scattered amid the houses of the village of Old Gurna, whose residents had for decades refused to relocate. That process is now under way, and more excavations are sure to follow. It's worth imagining how the nonroyals of ancient Egypt lived and died, and this necropolis, together with your next stop,

the Workmen's Village and tombs at Deir al-Medina, near the Valley of the Queens, are two of the few places where you can do so. The tomb of Ramose (No. 55), a governor of Thebes, has charmingly realistic scenes of Ramose and his wife and family. The Workmen's Village, the archaeological remains of a small settlement inhabited for centuries by those who labored on the royal tombs you saw yesterday, is a five-minute drive away. The houses were tiny and the workweek long—nine days on and one off, according to my guide—but some residents were determined to get their share of the pie, if not in this life then in the next: For example, the tombs of Inherkhou (No. 359), a foreman, and Sennedjem (No. 1), an artist, are small but exquisitely decorated.

It is now midmorning. **Your next two stops are, happily, not on the itinerary of many tour groups. Chances are good that you will have the ruin of the Ramesseum, the mortuary temple of Ramses II, largely to yourself.** And ruin it is. The temple was to be Ramses II's masterpiece—which is saying a lot, given his propensity for self-celebration—but is instead a breathtaking reminder of how man's best-laid plans can come to naught, its centerpiece the dramatically shattered remnants of the pharaoh's colossal statue [Fig. 12]. Nearby, Medinet Habu is the mortuary temple of Ramses III, the last great pharaoh, and is by contrast very well preserved, the bright colors of the ancient paint still clearly visible in many of the wall reliefs.

Designed in the 1940s, the West Bank village of New Gurna was a MUD-BRICK MASTERPIECE. Walk a few paces under the graceful arcades to feel natural ventilation more effective than any air-conditioning

Head to the East Bank for lunch at El Kababy, across the Corniche from the Sofitel Winter Palace hotel. The food is indifferent at best, but the restaurant's views—across the river to the Theban hills—are lovely. On your way back to Al Moudira, you will pass New Gurna, a village designed 60 years ago by renowned Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, and the two seated statues at the Colossi of Memnon (a.k.a. Amenhotep III, Luxor Temple's chief builder). The giant, crumbling figures are all that remain of the pharaoh's once-vast mortuary temple.

Before dinner, ask the concierge to arrange for a driver to show you around the West Bank back roads, between the hotel and the river (about \$25 per hour). Do not take your guide along: You want to sit back and quietly take it all in—the mud-brick homes, fields of sugarcane, shepherds and their flocks, end-of-day farmers' markets, and even a tiny Greco-Roman temple you won't find in any guidebook [Fig. 13]. The timeless peace of a changeless Egypt. (Continued on page 118)



[Fig. 13]

You never know who you'll meet if you take the time to wander, without a timetable, around the countryside on Luxor's West Bank.



[Fig. 14]

On the Sinai Peninsula, the varieties of beach attire can be as intriguing as the marine life.

Day 11: Sharm el-Sheikh

The glories of Egyptian antiquities have a counterpart in the natural world—the coral formations and marine life in the waters off the southern coast of the Gulf of Aqaba. You will see nothing like it anywhere else, and two days in the Sinai Peninsula—on the beach and in the water—are a great way to top off your trip. Transfer to the Luxor Airport, from which several morning flights depart for Sharm el-Sheikh, and plan on arriving before noon (flight times vary by day of the week). Sharm has all the charms of an overdeveloped shopping mall, but the beachfront Four Seasons will insulate you splendidly from the hordes of European package tourists. Have lunch at one of its restaurants, and spend the rest of the day under an umbrella on the beach or snorkeling its shore [Fig. 14]. Upon arrival, immediately make a reservation at the resort dive shop for a half-day snorkel or dive excursion to Ras Mohammed National

Park for the following morning (20-69-360-3555; four seasons.com; doubles, \$360–\$450; entrées, \$17–\$51; half-day excursions, \$65 per person with equipment for snorkeling; \$85 for diving). Do not book through a local tour operator, as they're used to handling tour groups and you'll end up on a party boat with a spring-break atmosphere. Dinner? Back at the Four Seasons' Arabesque restaurant.

Day 12: Sharm el-Sheikh, Part 2

Your dive boat departs the hotel at either nine or ten in the morning, depending on the season. It will take you to several underwater sites, with the **pièces de résistance being the spots where the seafloor abruptly drops 100 feet or more and you are snorkeling along a sheer vertical wall of coral teeming with a dizzying array of marine life.** You'll be back at the Four Seasons at around one or two o'clock. The rest

of the day? Same as yesterday. You've earned your R and R. (If you can extend your stay by a day, see cntraveler.com/iconictrips for a highly recommended side trip to Mount Sinai [Fig. 15] and St. Catherine's Monastery [Fig. 16].)

Day 13: Back to Cairo

The flight schedules are such that there is no reliable way to fly from Sharm to Cairo and connect to an international flight that same day. Unless you'd prefer a few more hours on the beach, take the 7 or 9 A.M. flight to Cairo

If you prefer to stay above land at Sharm—or if it's too windy to snorkel—sign up for a 4x4 SAFARI TO THE COLORED CANYON, a wadi (dry riverbed) walled by dramatically striated pink and copper cliffs

(the only other one is at 2:30 P.M.) so you'll have a full day to take in—leisurely this time—a few more sights in this historical mille-feuille of a metropolis. At the top of your list should be the newly restored Coptic Museum, with an amazing collection of monastery prayer niches and Coptic textiles. Wrap up your last evening with dinner at La Bodega, an upmarket, Westernized Egyptian hangout in the Balmoral Hotel on Zamalek Island (157 26th of July St.; 20-2-735-6761). Don't rush through dinner even though you're being picked up early the next morning for your transfer to the airport (at 7:30 to catch the New York-bound EgyptAir flight, departing at ten). This is your last chance, after all, to savor the distinctly Old World cum cosmopolitan mood of Cairo—at least until your next visit. □

[Fig. 15] Pilgrims of all stripes climb Mount Sinai during the night and start the walk down after the sun has risen—tiring but unforgettable.



[Fig. 16] Allegedly the original "burning bush," in St. Catherine's Monastery. The highlight is the monastery museum's Icon Gallery.



The Basics

Safety: The Egyptian authorities are ostentatiously concerned about visitors' security. Everyone entering a hotel is carefully screened, as are all approaching vehicles (trunks opened, undercarriages inspected), and groups of travelers larger than four may be assigned an armed guard. Our family of four was not (except during the drive to Mount Sinai), but not once, anywhere, did we feel apprehensive. Because there are no guarantees, to go or not to go is ultimately a decision based on

personal comfort level, but you will generally find Egyptians to be warm, helpful, and innately gracious.

Nile cruise ships: There is an unfortunate sameness to the large Nile boats, but a few are better than the rest. Every cabin on the *Sonesta Star Goddess* is a suite; those on the *Sonesta Moon Goddess* and the *Oberoi Philae Nile Cruiser* all come with balconies; and the new *MY LTI Alyssa Deluxe* has a striking, colorful design, with lots of wood. Your travel dates and schedule will largely determine which boat is best. We were on the perfectly ac-

ceptable *Ti-Yi*, our only option at the time.

How to Book

Contact Jim Berkeley at Destinations & Adventures International (800-659-4599; Jim@DAITravel.com). But first: Go to cntraveler.com/iconictrips for crucial advice on how to get the most out of working with a travel specialist. (Tip: Ask the agents to arrange for guides who are used to taking around journalists rather than tour groups. The commentary will be more nuanced.) The cost of the tour described here,

for the time frame suggested (early summer), is \$3,950 per person, based on double occupancy. This includes all hotels, breakfasts, a three-night cruise, all meals while aboard the ship, transportation to and from airports, cars and drivers and a private guide where noted, and all museum and monument entrance fees. The tour price does not include international or domestic airfare or visa fees (you can obtain your visa before departure, but the cheaper option is to get it at the airport upon landing in Cairo). If you fly EgyptAir, as I did, you'll save 50 percent off the price of its domestic flights.

The Adventure Continues Online You're not done yet! There's much more online, including all the details on a bonus nighttime hike up Mount Sinai and a visit to St. Catherine's Monastery, tips on traveling with kids and shopping (what's up with those carpet schools, anyway?), and a reading list. For all that, plus an easy-to-print PDF of this article, go to cntraveler.com/iconictrips after April 24.