

# Did someone mention pyramids?

*Pharmaceutical Journal* staff are sometimes called upon to report from far-flung corners of the globe. *The Journal's* managing editor and seasoned traveller **Graeme Smith**, who generally has a robust constitution, reveals a downside of international travel

To Egypt to attend World Congress of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences — lucky me! Pleasant start to journey. Eat customary pre-flight crab salad with Bloody Mary at Caviar House in Heathrow departures lounge. Am unexpectedly upgraded to World Traveller Plus on boarding! Things looking good. Can't wait to see pyramids. Arrive soon after midnight. Things looking not so good. Cairo airport like gulag — stern immigration officers, big spotlights, guns and dogs. Drive through miles of building sites and arrive at extravagantly beautiful hotel in suburb of Heliopolis. Check in. Straight to bed.

## Day 1 — Fleeced

Order taxi at hotel. Concierge says obsequiously that "it will be a limousine, sir". Am impressed. On arrival, looks like ordinary car to me. Then hit road and see what passes for taxi in Cairo. Am glad am in "limousine". Go to museum and see King Tut and all that, which is great. But city centre is 20-minute drive from hotel. Price of journey is 55 Egyptian pounds. As first day in Cairo, only have 100 pound notes. What's this? Driver has no change? So am fleeced of 45 pounds already! Breakneck-speed driving is frightening but no worse than expected. Feel lucky to survive return journey in normal taxi as nearly crash head first into bus. In evening, take dinner cruise on Nile. That's more like it!

## Day 2 — Accosted

Venture valiantly into Khan el Khalili — the souk — with two companions. To help us along, sing "The old bazaar in Cairo" and do sand dancing in manner of Wilson, Keppel and Betty. Am told to shut up. Tourist parts fairly pleasant but — harum scarum! — bits off beaten track are certainly not. See stall which has, like lollipops, boiled lambs' heads on sticks for sale along with other pieces of wood festooned with gory, dripping entrails. All in open air in 95 degree heat. Flies in seventh heaven! Barefoot people. Extremely poor. A companion admires "spirit of free enterprise and lack of a welfare state that encourages people to work". I just see dogs, dead rats, rags and filth. Hot foot it to more savoury parts of souk, whereupon accosted by young Arab who wants us to look at various stalls. Ignore him. But he becomes abusive. "What is the matter with you people? You \*\*\*\*ing Brits! You never spend any \*\*\*\*ing money. You're worse than the Americans. Worse than the Jews," he rants, to our horror. Appalled, we walk on. He follows, prodding me hard in arm and shouting incoherently about Iraq and \*\*\*\*ing Tony Blair. Am starting to panic but . . . what's that? A heavily accented voice shouts "Leave them alone!". Do

not stop to identify our deliverer but hurry on, although can hear elderly Egyptian continue to berate our tormentor. Soon after, he catches up with us, apologises. "He's a \*\*\*\*ing idiot," he says, emphatically, and marches off. Odd that this whole series of exchanges is carried on in English. Is clearly for our benefit. Is it for real, or has it been staged? Recover from ordeal by sipping hot mint tea in nice, historic cafe called Fishawi's while someone polishes our shoes to straight-from-the-box shine. Later, a shopkeeper leaps out of his shop as we pass and whispers, "What can I do to relieve you of your money?" At least he is honest.

## Day 3 — Invited

After opening session of congress, am invited by two British colleagues to attend evening "Son et Lumière" at pyramids. Can't wait to see pyramids so, excitedly, I agree. Told to wait by phone later for instructions. They will text me with arrangements. So wait by phone. For hours. And hours. Nothing happens. Is not First of April, is it?

## Day 4 — Saved

Monday — and fellow reporter needs to get taxi to congress venue. Driver wants 100 pounds, when we know fare is no more than 35 pounds. She offers 50 pounds. Abuse. Again, saved by elderly Egyptian who steps in and says: "Madame, you must not go wiz zees people. Zey are creemeenals!" At lunchtime eat club sandwich in cafe near hotel.

## Day 5 — Confined

Attend session in morning, then light lunch. Start to feel ill so have lie down. Wake up at 4pm. Feel like death warmed up. Must have been that sandwich. Very disappointed because have to miss fancy international reception. Do bit of writing then, whoosh! It begins — Rameses' Revenge! Spend rest of evening and most of night admiring elegantly appointed bathroom. Manage eventually to climb into bed. Wake with start at 4am, covered in humiliation and distress.

## Day 6 — Still confined

Luckily, have no session in morning and spend it admiring elegantly appointed bathroom again — except for when have to evacuate (forgive the expression) for short time to allow maid to retrieve bedding from bath, where have tried desperately to wash it in hair shampoo and shower gel. Oh, the shame! Manage to get through afternoon session with one or two runs (*That's enough!* — Ed.) to nearby facilities. Difficult day. In lot of pain. Feel fed up. Get work done but eat nothing. Decide to abandon planned sight-



Photograph: Foppe van Mill

## Destined never to be viewed

seeing trip after congress and change flight home so as not to have to stay any longer than necessary. Has been presidential election in Egypt today. In evening, hear gunshots in streets around hotel. Move swiftly away from balcony. Retire to bed — well, lie on top of bed, wearing three pairs of underpants and a bath towel.

## Day 7 — Assisted

Last day of congress. Still not eating. Still in pain. Feel weak. Get through final session but can't bear thought of gala dinner at Giza so, regretfully, don't go, and so still don't get to see pyramids. Maybe see them from plane tomorrow. At midday a colleague says I look green. Another says I look ashen. My fellow reporter is also worried about me, but less colourfully so: she just says I look terrible! Have lost weight. Hurry to pharmacy. Meet clinically competent antipodean congress participant there who suspects acute bacterial gastroenteritis and recommends antibiotics. Buy five-day course (no questions asked!) for £1.80. Evening, starving, so force down some bread, water and chicken consommé.

## Day 8 — Relieved

Flight home is at half past eight in morning. So excited I wake up at half past three. Struggle to airport, where manage to buy Imodium and dish them out like sweets in departures lounge. Have become drug dealer! No upgrade this time. Didn't see pyramids on take-off — plane facing wrong way. Hideous, roller-coaster-like turbulence over Greek islands. Pilot says will last 10 minutes. As flight attendants hurry to pack away drinks trolleys and strap themselves down, my companion and I laugh and laugh. "We hope we live that long," we quip. Luckily, Imodium has taken effect! Home at last. Stagger indoors at 2pm and spend rest of day in bed, wistfully clutching postcard of pyramids.