

Jordan and Egypt Sketchbook

MIKE FITCHETT



TEMPLE OF HERCULES
CITADEL AMMAN 30 03 10

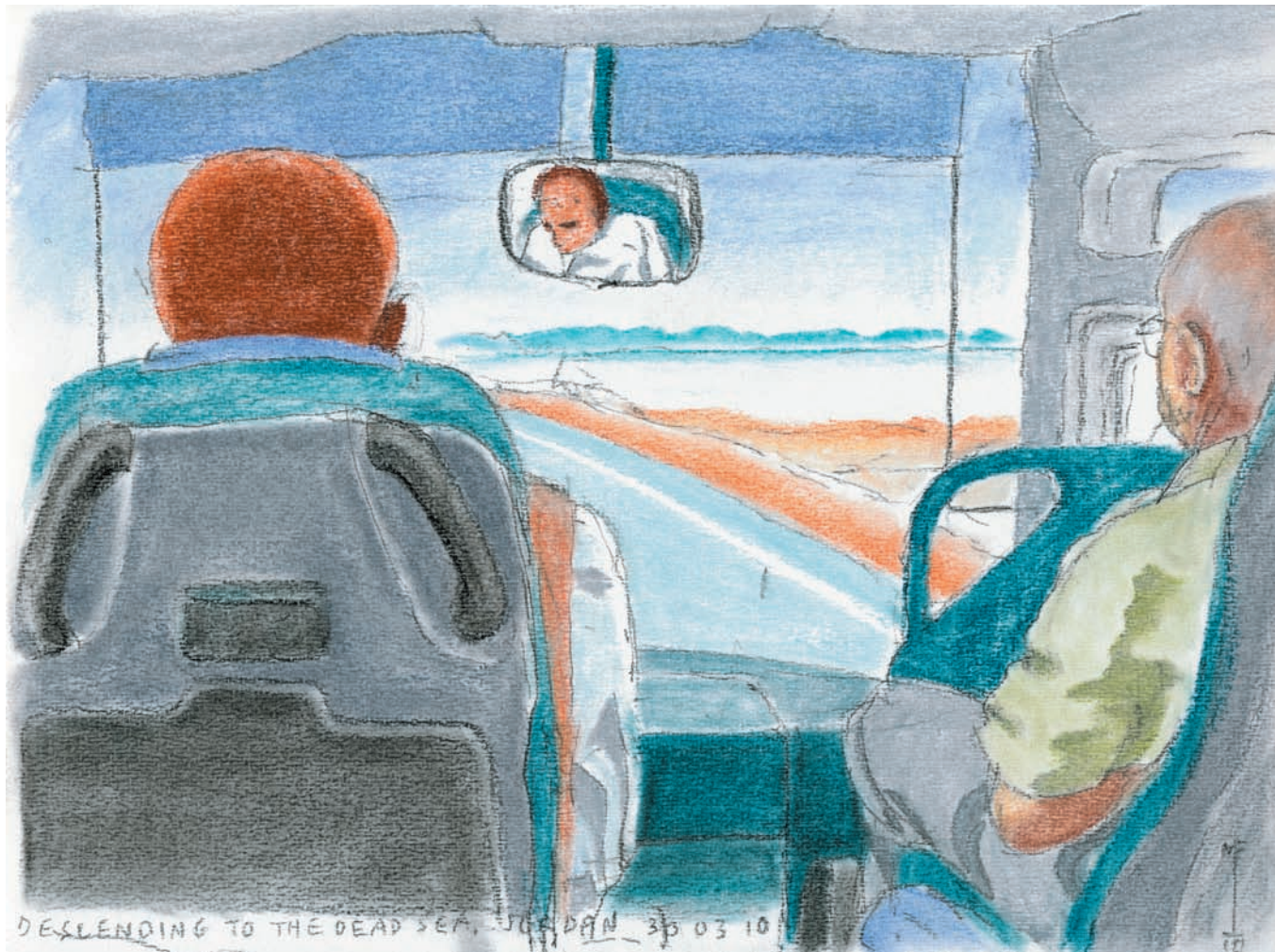


AMMAN 30 03 10 ABDON CIRCLE



PYRAMIDS, GIZA, 04 04 10





Landing on a Sunday School Map

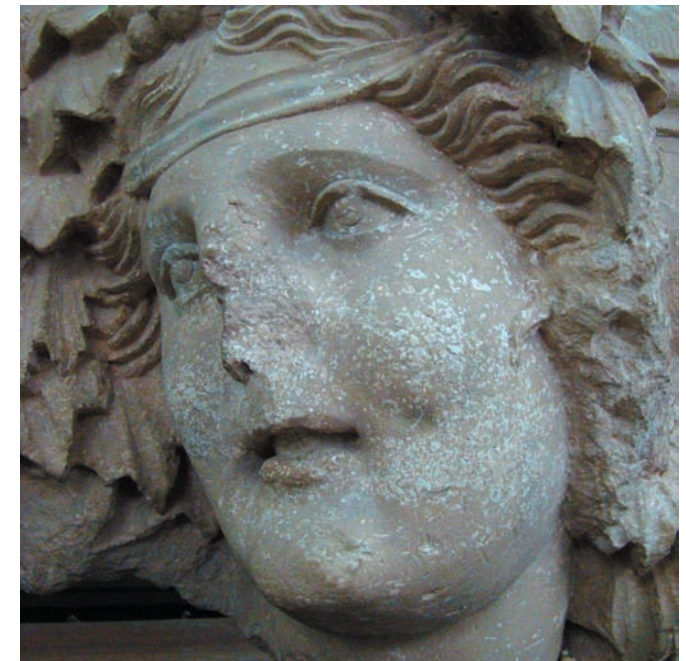
Half an hour before landing at Amman, the air route map is showing the hockey stick coastline with upturned Carmel thumb, whilst to the East hangs the vertical string of the Jordan river with a blue balloon tied to each end.

Since Bible days of long ago, there have been some changes to that map, not just politically but physically too. No longer is there a “River Jordan, Deep and Wide”, nor is the Dead Sea the same shape. Harvesting of water for irrigation, mainly by present-day Israel, has shrunk the legendary waterway to little more than a muddy stream, and the famous saline sea surface at the lowest point on the planet has evaporated alarmingly. But there is still a sense of wonder and a serene calmness at the place where it is believed the baptism of Jesus took place - an atmosphere enhanced rather than spoilt by the careful uncovering of three layers of ancient church, built one above the other despite the dangers of the once treacherously flooding Jordan river.





Amman, the capital, ranks amongst the most ancient cities of the world, with origins in the stone age. Stone survives from Roman times in the form of a magnificent amphitheatre and odeon, and also due to centuries old re-cycling. Ancient Greek buildings were simply quarried by successive builders - the ruins of a once opulent house on the citadel bear testament to this with Greek inscription, upside-down, evident on a building block just above ground level. Nearby in the small Archaeological Museum, more significant writings in the form of Dead Sea Scroll fragments survive, inscribed on parchment and even engraved on copper. In adjoining rooms, terracotta and marble figures and body parts, life size and miniature, bear testament to the days of the Greeks and Romans who gloried in the unclothed human form.



We took our chance to sit in, or rather on, the Dead Sea. This marvel of buoyancy, supports awkwardly sprawled mud plastered tourists, alongside young Arab women, who though happily being photographed, choose to bathe virtually fully clad in trendy sportswear on the grounds of modesty.



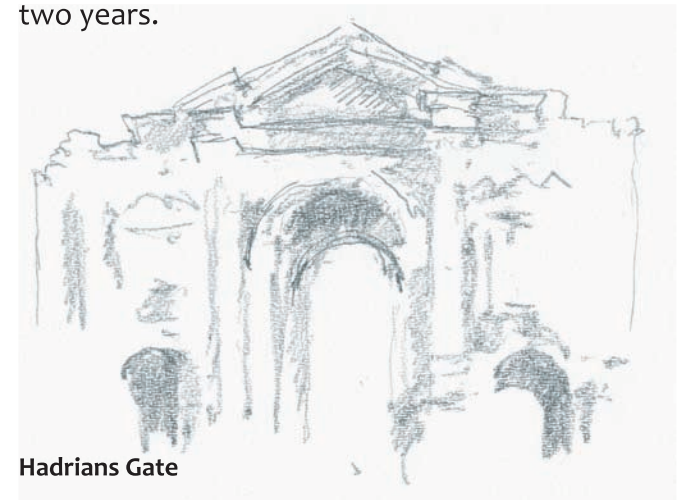


The Nynphaeum

With Grate Thanksfull

Modern Jerash stands astride the remains of one of the Ten Towns, or Dekapolis. Amman was another: the ten had their own trading organisation and currency in ancient times. Sections of the ancient wall survive, though the modern town sprinkles its block houses far beyond them.

The Emperor Hadrian, noted for demanding the best PR, has a gate named after him. It served no purpose but to give him the grandest entrance and accordingly the biggest head in the Roman world when he visited. The triple arch in honey coloured limestone stands some distance before the South gate: between the two stretches the Hippodrome, which though big, is small by Roman standards. Crowd control was a problem in its day, as rival team supporters engaged in mortal combat with such ferocity and frequency that hundreds of spectators lost their lives and events had to be suspended for two years.



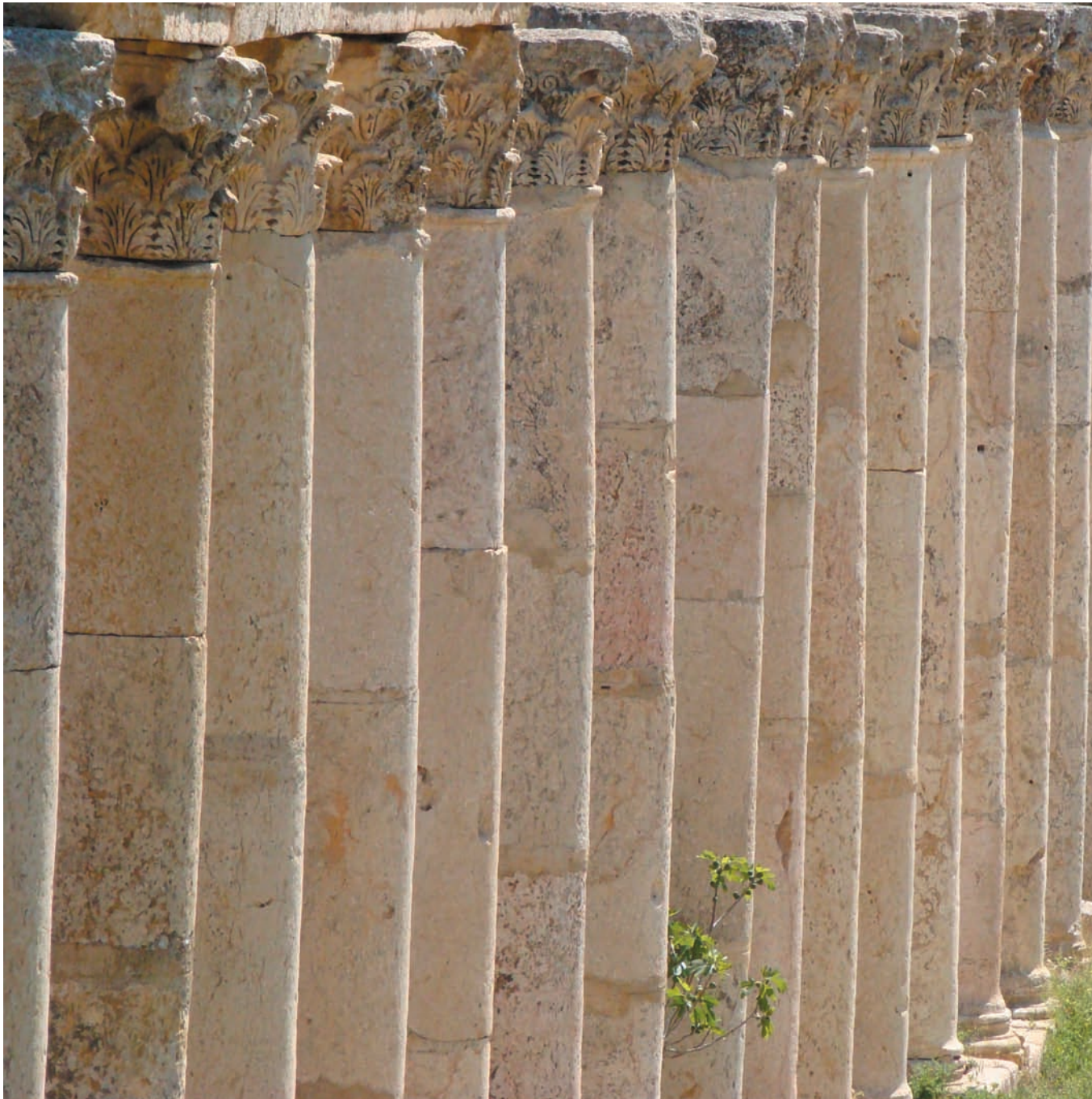
Hadrians Gate



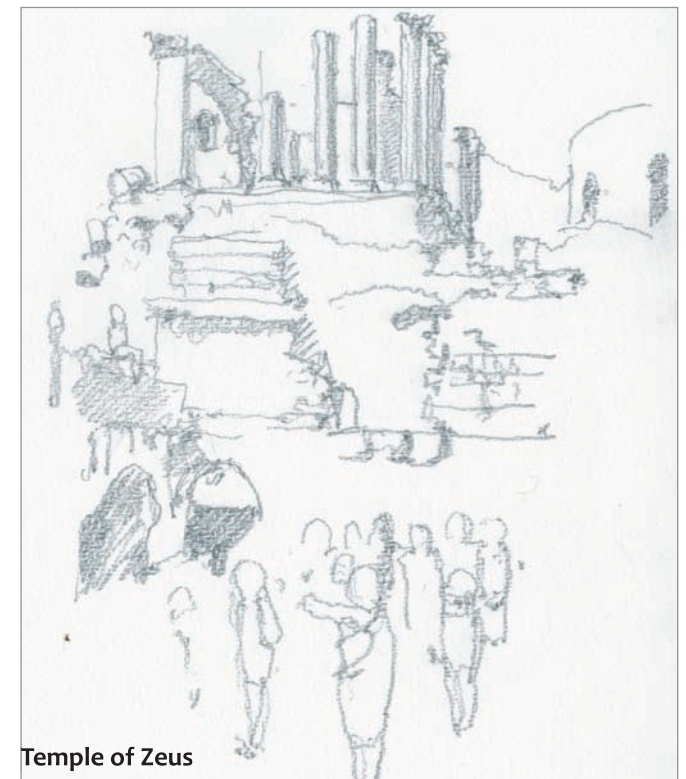
Child control was our problem, not that the excitable swarming school parties could be silenced by us, though our guide did try and appeal to their teachers. Maybe they were all on end of term outings. For the girls, their dress was the only conservative thing about them, as they shrieked, banged drums, photographed each other and made a general hullabaloo as they were shepherded along by teachers with covered faces but wearisome eyes.

To add to the general din, as we entered the amphitheatre, a group of men wearing traditional Arabic robes and headgear were playing enthusiastically on drums and bagpipes: lively Scottish reels perfect for the school girls to dance to. "Your tips accepted with Grate Thanksfull" said the label on their strategically placed gratuity box.

3,500 people can be seated in the theatre, and without the cacophony we endured, all would be able to hear perfectly thanks to the acoustics which despite the incompleteness of the structure, still works perfectly. It's a technology which is lost, a mystery known only to those who devised it. Despite the racket we were all encouraged to test the effect, and standing centre stage, it is possible to speak out and sense when your voice carries: if you stand on a central point, still marked on the floor, you are returned a physical resonance of your words as the sound waves echo. "Let's 'ave a bit of 'ush!" I yelled optimistically. But it didn't make any difference.

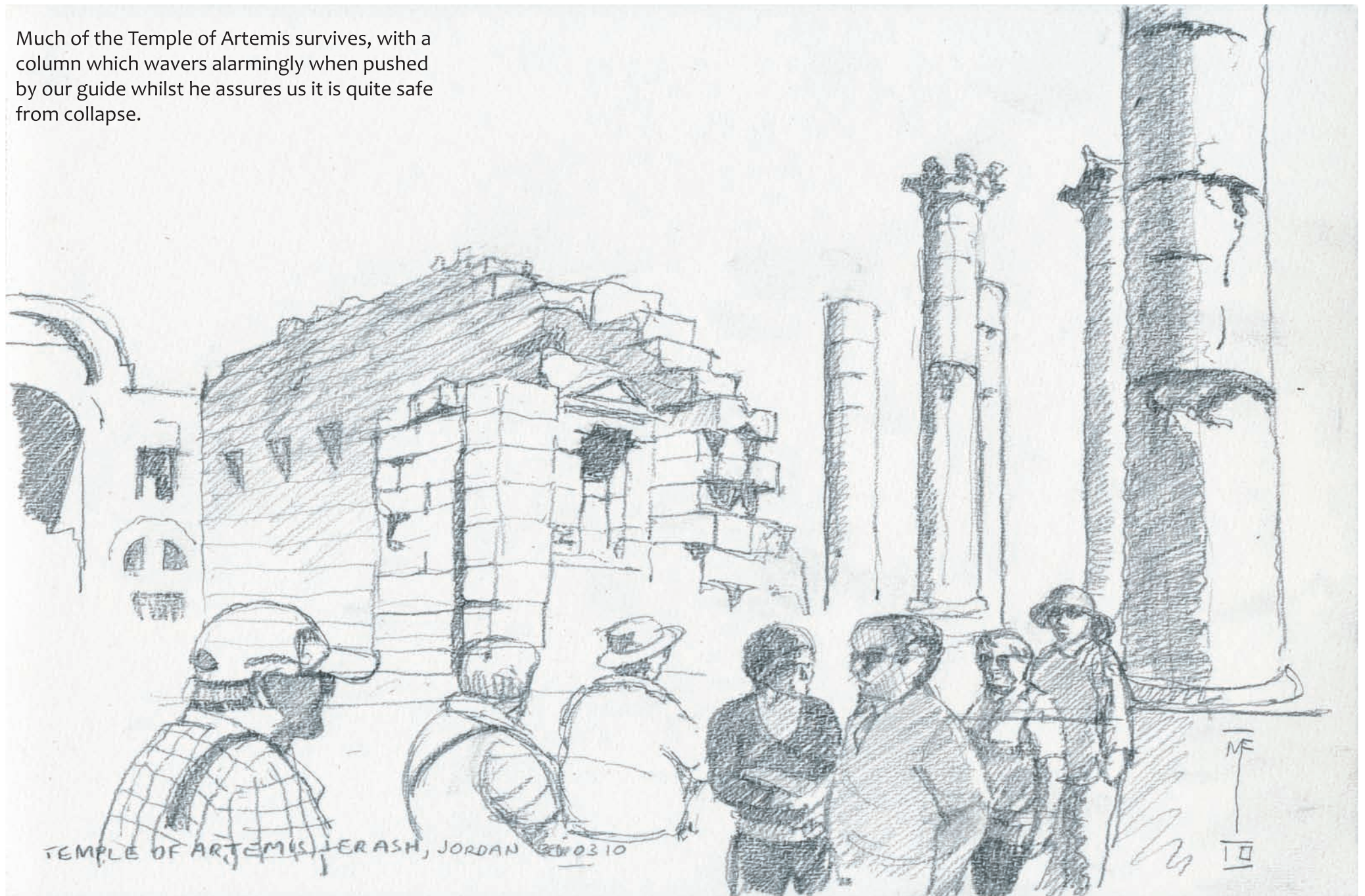


Sufficient evidence of the grandeur of Jerash remains to give a real sense of the city as it once was. Many columns still stand, marking the main thoroughfare with a raised pedestrian colonnade of square cut slabs and chariot carriageway. This also has a robust stone surface but with the join lines set at an angle, thus preventing wheels ever becoming stuck tram-like in a join. You can still almost see the wear pattern from wheels of long ago. Intersecting the main street at right angles are two secondary streets, much less trodden by visitors, there hoopoes could be glimpsed on the paving, darting from behind tufts of the spring green grass that thrived in the cracks.



Temple of Zeus

Much of the Temple of Artemis survives, with a column which wavers alarmingly when pushed by our guide whilst he assures us it is quite safe from collapse.





It was lunchtime, and fortified with coffee I decided to risk public gaze and sketch the South Gate. I was not prepared for the overwhelming curiosity of schoolchildren who surrounded us, one pack after another, intensely eager to see what I was doing, block my view completely but pass favourable comment, or at least keep their comments in English favourable. There was no shyness or reserve shown by any of them - for many it might have been their first encounter with an English artist. It was a big relief to finish, shut my book, escape the melee and be Grate Thanksfull that the kids didn't follow us.





Ticking off the Deka Polis, we passed through Irbid, past rows of black-oiled shop fronts: individual car workshops stacked with body parts alongside shorn off and complete shells. We arrived at another of the ten: Gadera, known as the place in the New Testament where a herd of pigs, miraculously driven mad by demons, rushed headlong into the sea. From the account the owners were far from Grate Thanksfull: Jesus was obliged to leave. The pigs would have had a fair journey: the Sea of Galilee, or Tiberius, is visible from the city but sufficient kilometres distant for the swines' momentum to have waned considerably. Today they would also have had to make a tricky border crossing: as we looked down from the citadel, the green valley below us was part of Israel.

Black basalt was used to build parts of Gadera: incredibly hard to work and inclined to shatter. But in the impressive theatre where much survives, the stones are still knife pleat sharp despite thousands of years of weathering. Stretching beyond and North are the Golan Heights, once part of Syria, now Israeli and contested by Jordan. Nor for us was it peaceful: noisy school parties made sure of that. But bliss - they departed. We all had good cause to be Grate Thanksfull.



Jerusalem mosaic at Madaba

Moses and Mosaic

Mount Nebo, from where Moses was given a glimpse of the Promised Land, rewarded us with an excellent view. Haze normally obscures distant places, but not so for us. We could see the Jordan valley, Dead Sea, then Jericho and just pick out part of Jerusalem in the very far distance. A Franciscan church houses a magnificent Roman mosaic. A shepherd has kicked out an intrusive hyena, and more scenes depict animals and harvesting in what could be the story of the human struggle to survive.

More mosaic: this time in a church in Madaba. Dating from around 655 AD, this one gives us a historical view of the Holy Land: the river Jordan, desert, wilderness, and the Dead Sea with two ships, one harvesting salt and the other tar, which used to bubble to the surface and was used as waterproofing for boats. And at the centre of the map, indeed the world, is Jerusalem, colonnaded and gated, the tessera formed into an ariel view folded flat to show the main street and churches.



Part of the mosaic at Nebo



Travelling south, the Kings Highway hairpins the 8,000 metre deep rollercoaster of the Al Mujit Valley, border of the ancient Moabite and Edomite territories. We stopped for a rare springtime sight: black iris, national flower of Jordan, growing tall and strong from parched sandy dry cracked soil. Scallop striped petals and rocket shape buds defy the climate of the fourth driest country in the world, whilst nearby trembled a solitary delicate blue desert lily.





We continued to Kerak and the immense vaulted crusader castle, lofty and impregnable atop natural rock ramparts.

Switching to the Desert Highway we headed south again, to the town of Wadi Muse, or Valley of Moses, then out to Taybat Zeman, an old village sensitively restored from dereliction to a low-rise eco-friendly hotel with artisan workshops and Hammam, (Turkish Bath). With our room key came a village map with which we navigated the little streets to find our house number for the night.





Secrets in Stone

For around 500 years known only to local inhabitants, the place we know as Petra was re-discovered by the Swiss explorer Burckhardt in 1812. At that time a “lost” city was believed to exist but no Westerner had ever located it. Burckhardt appealed to his local guide who had let slip about its existence, on the pretext of wanting to make an offering to the prophet Moses at the nearby shrine. And so he gained entry into this unique marvel.

This once secret treasure is now revealed to thousands of tourists who each day dodge horse drawn chariots as they descend the As-Siq, the narrow passage through curving cliffs, whose curtains part to reveal what the builders, the Nabateans, had stage managed to impress.





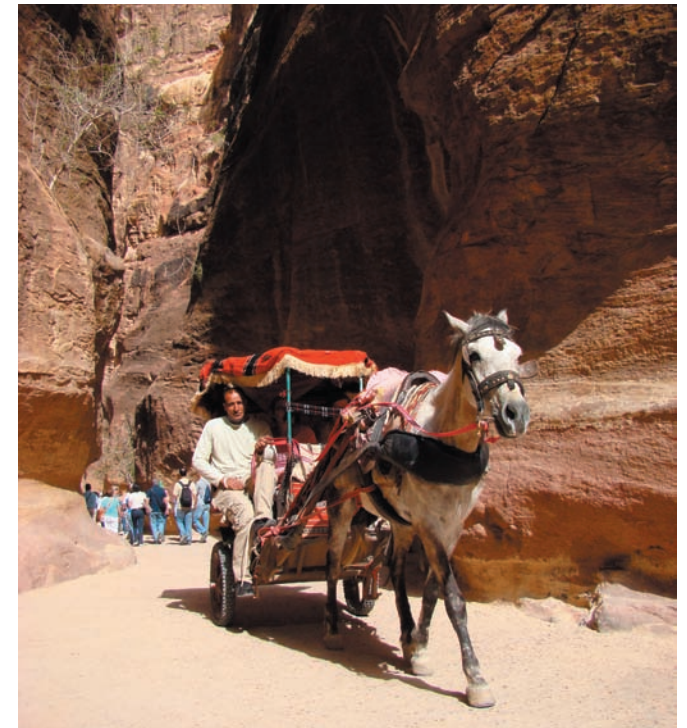
What is revealed is the most famous treasure of Petra: the Treasury, spotlit with sunshine from early to mid-morning. The name is probably a misnomer, as it could have been a tomb, temple, or possibly a reception hall for important foreign visitors or traders. Soaring 43 metres high, the architecture is in itself stunning, more so for being hewn directly out of solid sandstone cliff. More stunning is the detail remaining in much of the decoration. The style is classical - of its time (1st century BC), which confirms the Nabateans role as international traders.

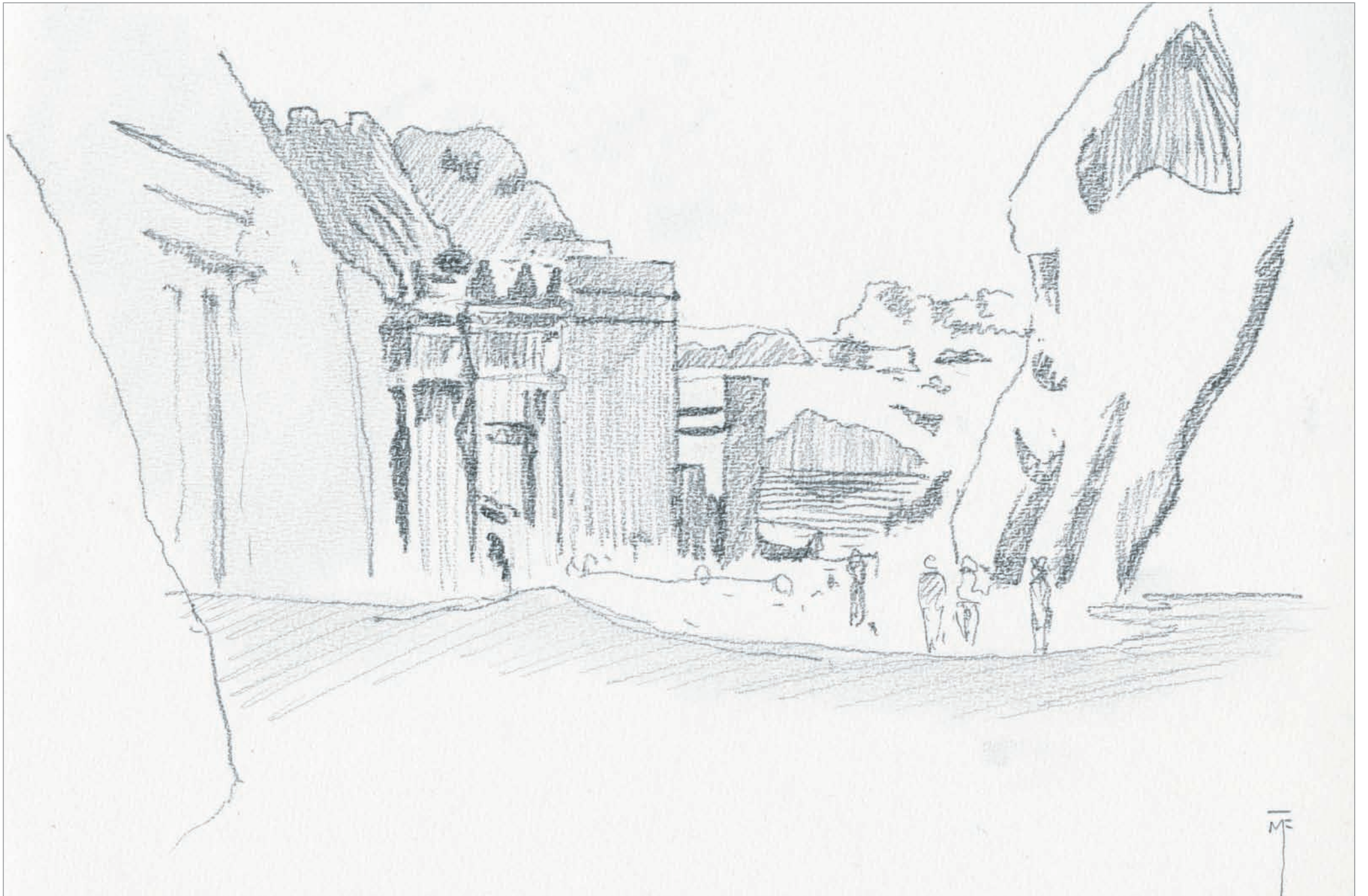


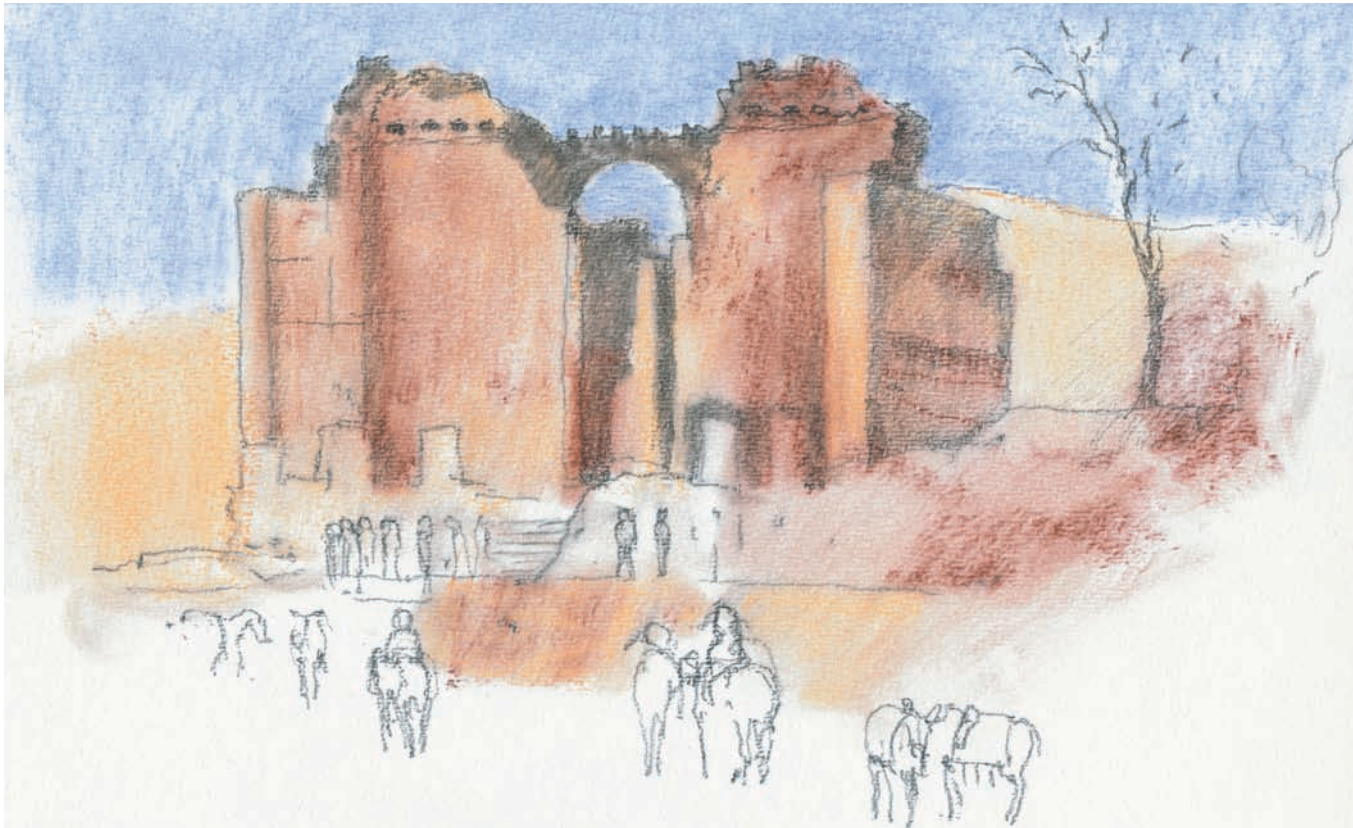




Much more rock carved architecture remains, including an amphitheatre and many tombs. So much architecture, teased out of the spectacular landscape, is unreal. And whilst something is known of the Nabateans, the stones still hold many secrets as written evidence comes mainly from other cultures including China. What is evident however is their engineering and plumbing skills, with dams and even a tunnel to divert sudden floods harmlessly away but also to conserve the same water for their own use. A regular water supply can still be seen in the remains of clay pipes which run in the cliffs alongside the main entrance path, the terracotta sections shaped and joined especially to avoid leaks or bursts under high pressure.







Emerging from the free standing temple and treading the ancient paved precinct, littered with toppled column sections, we pondered over the reaction of the original builders, were they able to return and see their city now in ruins but a world heritage attraction. Children hawked concertinas of postcard views, women sat motionless in the shade beside rudimentary souvenir jewellery stalls and camels knelt, knocking back bottled water before lurching to their feet in slow motion carrying another nervous tourist. In its deep cliff chamber the treasury turned rich rose colour as the afternoon light faded and the air cooled.





Blooming Desert

Sand stained mist casts a curtain over a rocky peak, the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, which rises like an optimistic jagged bar graph from a dusty plain. Beyond the mud brown cubes of the town of Wadi Rum we clamber aboard desert painted jeeps and swerve from tarmac onto a meandering tyre marked track across sandy wilderness.

Sandstone and granite rock citadels remind us of the Scottish Glens, but the arid ground suggests that water is a world away. But not so: the further we drive the thicker the hazy blue carpet of desert blue flowers.

For just a few short springtime weeks this part of the desert blooms. Water does indeed lie below the surface: a spring trickles from a cleft in a massive rocky outcrop, whilst nearby fig trees grip sand or rocks and sinewy bushes are airbrushed golden green.





Heading back to Amman we are given a comfort break at a roadside gift shop cafe. As we enter we are confronted with the Dead Sea. Not salty water, but just about anything else that can be extracted from it. Dead the sea might be, but it seems it can yield a huge choice of life enhancing preparations.

First there's Salt Soap. OK, if you want salty soap, we guess the Dead Sea ought to provide that. Maybe it would come in useful to clean off the Black Body Mud? We saw people coating themselves with that on the shore, now you can have it in a convenient tube, or maybe choose the Mud Mask instead? If after cleaning it off you think you look too dark, there are tubes of Skin Whitening. Or if that doesn't work there's Skin Bleaching. And much more: Moisturiser Cream, Massage Cream, Day Cream, Night Cream, Hand Cream, Foot Cream, Tightening Cream (?!), Anti-Crack Cream, and - now this looks really useful - Slimming Cream! We take a close look at the label. There's the catch: low calorie diet essential. We carefully replace the rather expensive tube on the shelf and head outside, speculating on whether there is really any difference in the ingredients of all those embrocations. Speculating too on whether anyone has ever asked for "one of everything please".

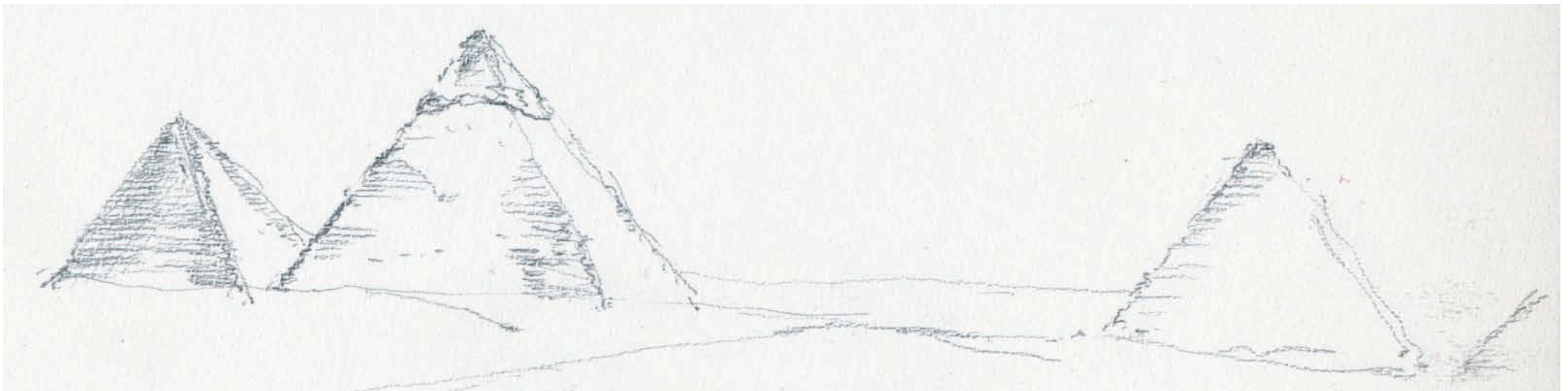
Wadi Rum



Aloof and Disdainful

Battered from the daily hammering it gets, Cairo's traffic scurries and weaves. Scurries in a perpetual hurry and weaves around itself and the large patches of disintegrating tarmac of the tyre polished highways. Our tour bus surfs the tide of this maelstrom along Alexandria Desert Road, and there, rising sentinel behind shambolic low rise apartments is a pyramid, a mountain of giant crow steps, dusty but implacable.

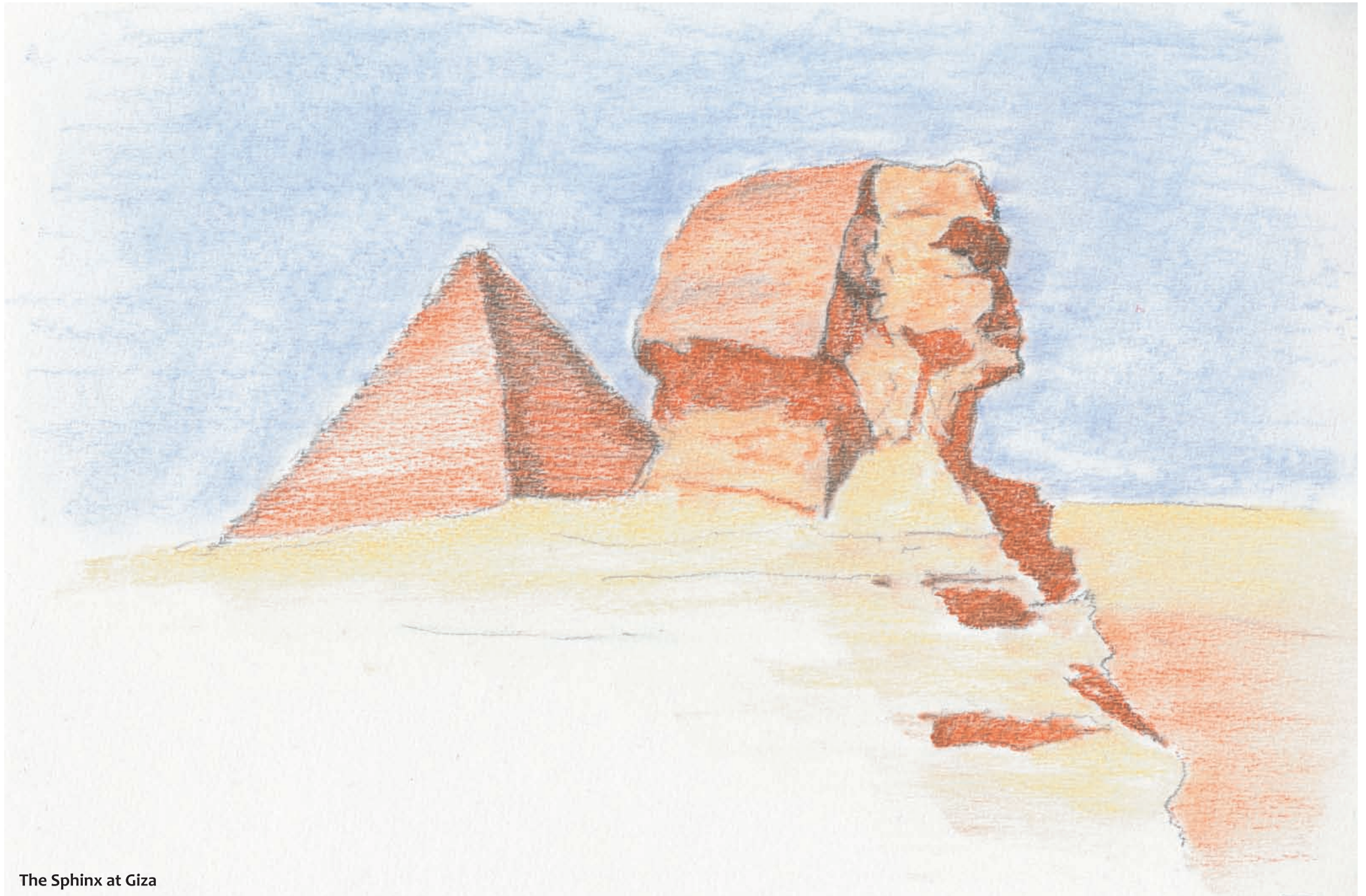
Time eroded and stripped of most of their outer cladding, three triangular giants are rooted firm, impervious to time itself. One is still capped with a cake icing of granite which once adorned them completely, but at its pinnacle juts a loosened stone, angled threateningly as if the power of the Pharaoh Gods is still there in some measure to strike terror into any soul who dare stray into its path of unannounced descent.





At the foot of these giants from the past stands another: bearing a similar aloof and disdainful demeanour is a camel with a mountainous becarpeted pyramid hump, resigned to the indignity of raising another tourist - after the inevitable Egyptian haggle - for a nervous but stately ride. Another camel, with impossibly concave legs rocks by, tassels swinging as it places each flat footstep on the hot sandy ground with all the confidence of a permanently anchored pyramid. It is as if the camels, and the pyramids, know that their ancestry spans thousands of years, so for now, they grudgingly endure the crowds of digital camera wavers and persistent postcard hawkers.





The Sphinx at Giza

As transient as the tin souvenirs they bring tourists to buy, scores of white tin coaches honk, growl and lurch about, shuttling ill disciplined detachments of visitors, eager to take potshots with their cameras in any and all directions. The smoking diesel engine has existed for but a pimple of time compared to the pyramids. For how many years will they outlive it?





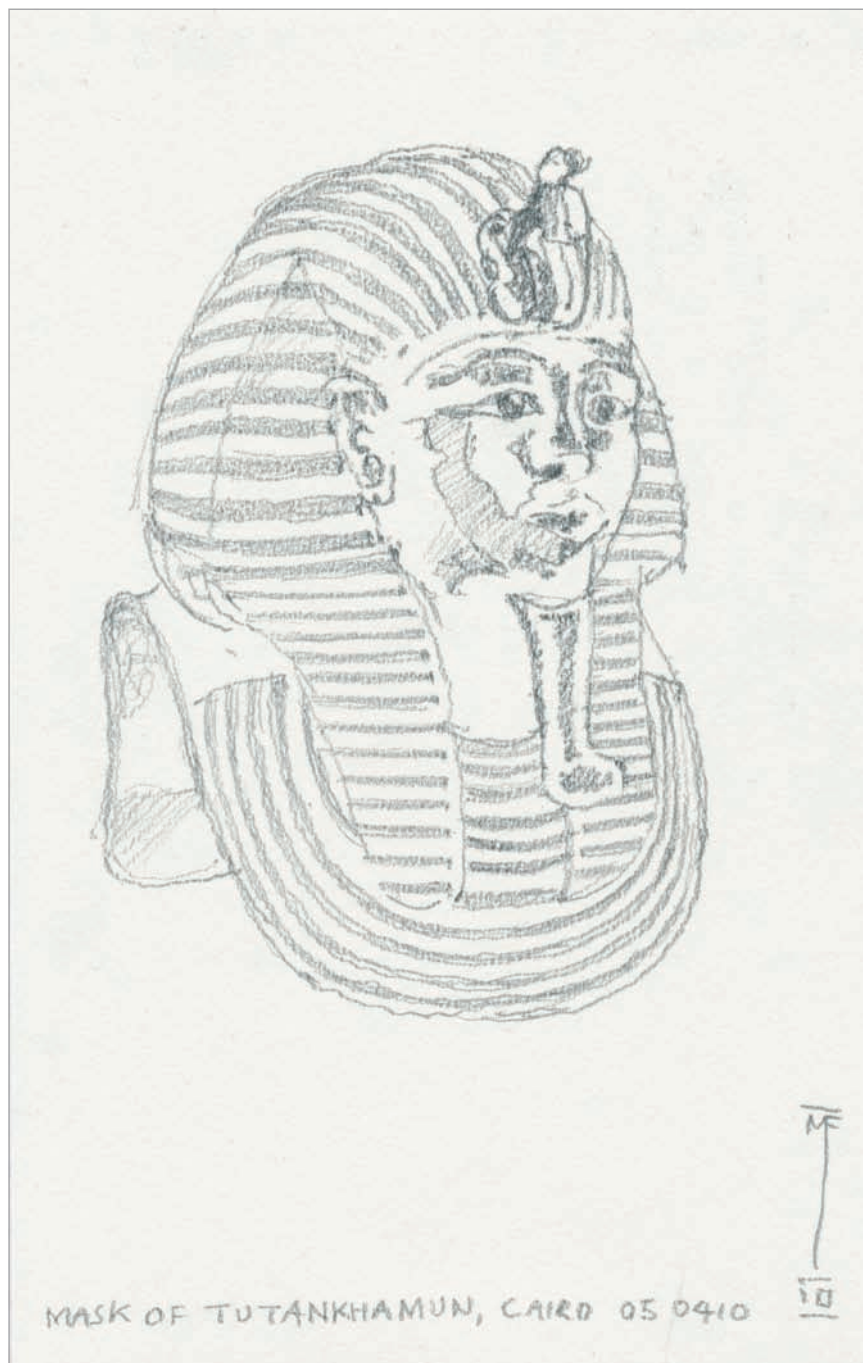
Cairo Practise

Most of Egypt is desert, and so too is Cairo, almost. Sand has drifted and settled everywhere, and so too have dunes of litter and all kinds of rubbish that seem to have been sprinkled liberally from the hazy sky. On the flat roofs of mud brown brick apartments are sticks, bricks, bits of metal, and any old thing that might just make something or repair something. Or at least might have done once upon a time.

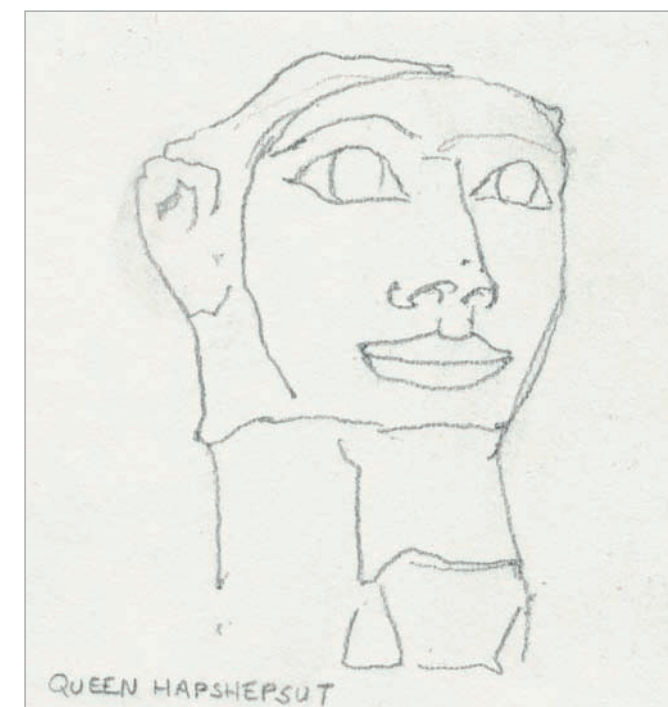


Eighteen million people live here. Or twenty, or twenty-one million, depending on which guide you believe. And today most of them are on holiday, a family day. We skim along an elevated highway, past blocks of partly built but partly occupied mud brown apartment blocks - unfinished so as to avoid tax. Brick infill leaves concrete beams exposed, reminiscent of our old timber framed construction. The similarity does not end there; these buildings are jettied out over long narrow alleys: upstairs you could quite easily shake hands across the street. One after another we glimpse these little streets as they flick by: narrow shafts of dust tinted sunlight penetrating here and there into a dark sandy gloom, a few old cars, some canvas wrapped, tucked onto kerb shoulders below the overhangs.

A family of four on a motorbike zips past in the fast lane, dad steering with son in front of him, mum behind with daughter squeezed between her and dad. None wear helmets. At intersections, white minibuses are skew parked, surrounded by brightly wrapped family groups.



The desert dust is even inside. We file into the Egyptian Museum, where stone carved treasures tell their silent story of the times of the Pharaohs. Light struggles through the dust clouded skylights into the monumentally proportioned interior, and filters through the sagging tops of large sealed display cabinets containing burnished gold funeral casings from Tutankhamun's tomb. Later we see where the world's largest museum will be sited, close to the pyramids, and a new home for these timeless treasures.





As it is a holiday, the tent makers workshops in Old Cairo are all closed. Not so the tourist shops within the police protected barrier: teeshirts, jewellery, pyramids and obelisks, papyrus pictures, perfume, dates and spices, lamps, gaudy sequinned dresses, books and prints, bags and scarves, all stacked high in cave like shops along narrow rock cleft streets. Elaborately carved minarets pierce the cloudless sky, the afternoon call to prayer urging worshippers inside.





Our Cairo hotel is called the Oasis, which it most certainly is. Barrel roofed terraces of single storey rooms open directly onto garden squares, with clipped trees, masses of flowers, fountains and liberally watered lawns. There's a smell of rain in the air from the shimmering sprinklers which are left on for hours. Gated and secure from the main road, it is a world of its own.





Very Good Service!

Returning home via Amman, we dine in an old stone arched building, located on a former caravan route, where camels and other livestock were once taken in at night. Chair backs scraping against stone feeding troughs, we sit at long tables and are served Mount Nebo wine.

On the morning of our departure, a breakfast waiter, as if knowing that we are about to leave, tries to make a favourable impression with uncharacteristically prompt coffee service. “Very Good Service” he says with a grin, returning to top us up within less than a minute and before we have had chance to drink any. We leave our tables to help ourselves from the buffet, only to find that Very Good Service has swept our hardly started fruit juices and coffees from our table, and is more than a little put out when we go after him to retrieve them. Others in our party join us at the table, more than ready for their coffee, but there are no cups at their places and Very Good Service is nowhere to be seen. Normal Service eventually appears, and at length, after protracted negotiation of who is sitting where and shunting of cups and saucers, everyone gets their coffee.

It was as far as it could possibly be from Very Good Service at the airport, where for no explained reason all the women were barred from passing through a single security channel whilst the men breezed through a choice of three. A great shame as up until that moment it had been a Very Good Trip.

Special thanks to John Finnan, our group leader, and
Ghaith Hammouri, our guide, in Jordan.

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