

It's not what you think

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Serene Assir travels through the Upper Egyptian governorate of Sohag to find that her understanding of the town was defied to its very core

Not too long after I started to work in Cairo, I met the famed journalist for *The Independent* Robert Fisk in my native Beirut while covering the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war. We spoke about many topics, one of which was Egypt, and he asked me whether I'd been to the rural areas, and, in particular, to Upper Egypt. I suddenly felt a pang of shame at the fact that I had not travelled south in this vast country. "If you haven't," he told me, "then you haven't really seen Egypt."

Just to make things clear, I don't usually subscribe to characterisations of particular places or regions as more or less "real" than any others. Nevertheless, having travelled almost religiously for years, I learnt that some places do lend themselves to self-exposure more than others. While Egypt cannot be anything but the entirety of it, including Cairo -- rich and poor -- the Delta, and even Sinai, something about Upper Egypt being the historical birth place of much of what is specifically Egyptian, as opposed to Arab-Egyptian, in terms of political and social culture, certainly constituted a major pulling factor.

Then came the opportunity. I decided to join *Al-Ahram* photographer Sherif Sonbol and Swedish stage designer and traveller Gerd Karlsson on their journey through Upper Egypt and the Red Sea in the town of Sohag, capital of what at once constitutes one of Egypt's largest, poorest, most densely populated and least urbanised governorates. Not an area to be visited by lazy tourists who seek all sites to be laid out for them on a silver tray, ready for them to take their quick snapshots and run off back to their luxury hotel, Sohag is, by contrast, a crucial spot for any traveller to visit if in search of a true understanding of modern and ancient Egypt, and of how the two continue to interact.

Sohag is also, in and of itself, intensely beautiful, both in terms of its impressive, varied natural and historical scenery and in terms of the warmth, genuine hospitality, frankness and cultural integrity of its inhabitants, who genuinely wanted us to be there and to talk and write about their region when we returned home. Most Egyptian tourism websites and guidebooks catering to the global traveller tend to skip Sohag altogether, while the few that do include it only do so insofar as mentioning two or three of its historical sites, while failing to mention places to stay and less frequented and obvious sites of great artistic and cultural interest to anyone with a taste for beauty, politics, history or culture.



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An artist rests in the shade of history at the Temple of Seti I at Abydos, Sohag

Perhaps the journey begins in Ramses Station, in Cairo, for most fellow travellers are most likely to be from the southern governorate. Already, the exchanges among people become more friendly and warm than they generally are in the streets of the bustling metropolis you leave behind. In addition, while I had often heard that Upper Egypt functions along socio-political lines which in many ways defy the calling of the central government in Cairo -- by virtue of traditionalism as opposed to any form of active rebellion -- already what became apparent on the train was that some of the people on board were more important than others, and were thus worthy of being addressed in ways that have simply gone out of fashion in the capital. A woman seated by me, for example, turned out to be a member of one of the more important and respected families in the governorate. Hence young men from other wagons continually came to her seat to pay their respects to her and to confer their greetings to her husband -- the ringtone on her mobile phone was, appropriately enough, a technological version of *Speak to me Softly*, the theme song in *The Godfather* soundtrack.

Eight hours later, I was there. Arriving late into the night, I was nevertheless warmly welcomed in the clean and comfortable Al-Safa Hotel in mid-town Sohag. I slept in a room overlooking the Nile, which was a real luxury, especially when I woke up to find it gleaming before me, more sparkling and wider than I had ever seen it further downstream. Perhaps this was the way the river looked thousands of years ago: still unpolluted and untainted by humanity's constant desire to overshadow and ultimately destroy nature's beauty and power. I was ready to start.

AKHMIM -- A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME: Though the town of Sohag indeed has very little to offer to the eager traveller, Akhmim, a much older town just 10 kilometres away from the governorate's capital centre and just a bridge across from its outskirts, proved to be the ideal start to the journey. Until the dawn of the 20th century, Akhmim was a more important town than Sohag, and both the presence of an important Pharaonic temple at its heart and its modern-day bustling production and trade bear witness to its significance as an ancient town.

Indeed, it may as well be a town stuck in its past. Though an intensely active town, Akhmim has somehow been completely excluded from the processes of industrialisation and modernisation which have taken place in most other Egyptian towns of similar size. Practically every building boasts a shop beneath it. And every form of labour is distinctively old. From the man who irons *galabiyas* with a foot-iron heated on hot coals for 50 piastres a job to the cotton factory worker making beautiful, brightly-coloured cloth on textile machines whose structures date back to Pharaonic times, the citizens of Akhmim marvelled at the sight of our cameras and gladly posed for us. Rather than a journey in distance, walking through the town, whose roads had, for the most part, not yet been asphalted and whose people had not yet been institutionalised along urban lines, was more akin to a journey through time. Of course, there were shots indicating when it was, including a kiosk selling postcards featuring photographs of contemporary Egyptian pop stars Tamer Hosni and Rubi -- just to show how music always somehow manages to get anywhere first, and how any country must always reflect different parts of itself at any different point within itself.

With buildings the colour of the earth and the few cars that are dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, Akhmim, the ninth province in ancient Egypt, also boasts a temple whose main feature is a unique statue believed to depict Merit Amon, daughter of Ramses II. According to archaeological researcher Samir Abu Ali, the temple area was discovered by mistake in 1981 while an Islamic institute was being built at the site. The majestic statue is a colossal 11.5 metres tall, and braves the sun day in day out, never losing grace. Weighing 30 tonnes, it is made of limestone rock, and, following ongoing restoration work, much of the detail on the princess's body and dress has already, in all likelihood, recovered its original splendour. The pleats on her garments and the streaks in her hair have an incredible gentleness, which is in stark contrast with the often hard and linear style characterising much of the Pharaonic art depicting royalty. The statue of Merit Amon is referred to as the symbol of Akhmim -- and she is certainly its jewel, serene and yet stoic in her poise. Not far from where she stands is a much smaller statue of a seated Ramses II, and, interestingly enough, a much later statue of the Greek goddess of love Aphrodite, dating back to the Graeco-Roman period.

While excavations at this site continue, another newly unearthed temple area is currently the spotlight of the town insofar as historical research is concerned. An enormous statue of Ramses II is being exhumed, and thus far much of it remains beneath the earth. Nevertheless, the richness of the detail of the engravings around the base is already very obvious to the naked eye, and much as the site is blocked off to photographers without a permit, you will get away with a visit -- and it's certainly worth it, if only for a look at the splendour of this recently unearthed giant.

THE CHURCH OF SAINT MERCURIUS AND THE MARTYRS' MONASTERY: Another particularly significant aspect of Sohag is its high density population of Coptic Christians and the presence of monasteries and churches dating back to periods during which the persecution of the Christians in Egypt was the norm. Upper Egypt was, during the Byzantine era, a relative sanctuary for Christians, and Copts from all over ancient Egypt flocked to Sohag, Assiut and Al-Minya in search of safety.

In very close proximity to Akhmim, the Church of Saint Mercurius is particularly interesting in that its external architecture is bleak and almost fortress-like, while the interior is richly decorated in burgundies, blues and golds. The walls are covered in proverbs, including "Do not begrudge the oppressor" and "He who has been born is blind." Also of great interest is a painting depicting the birth of Christ, and perhaps more so, the small museum that stands by the church houses an extremely rare double-sided painting on wood -- one side shows Jesus before the resurrection and the other afterwards.

Farther out, in mid-desert, lies the Martyrs' Monastery. This site bears witness to the barbarity of the persecution of minorities, a phenomenon which began with the birth of politics and of course continues to take place en masse today. The monastery is small yet intensely beautiful. Pilgrims arrive here by bus in order to pay their respects and pray before the glass cases where some of the mummified heads of the dead are enshrined. Not for the faint-hearted, a room behind the monastery houses several of the bodies of Coptic martyrs. All are robed in white garments, and their heads are decorated with jewels and crowns. One case provides the resting place of a mother who is still holding tight to her baby in the face of death, her expression still bearing witness to the horror she witnessed and underwent. It is said that within less than a week, approximately 3,000 Copts were massacred in this area -- a figure paralleled by the number of Palestinians and Lebanese killed in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in 1982.

THE WHITE AND RED MONASTERIES: Thousands of people stood in and around the White Monastery when we arrived late in the afternoon. They had come in mid-July from all over Egypt to Sohag to celebrate St Shenouda's *moulid*. The activity was incredibly intense: children ran and played together through the courtyard of the ancient monastery, one of the oldest and most significant in Coptic, and indeed Mediterranean Christian history, while men and women from Shubra Al-Kheima in Cairo sat, chatted and drank tea with their new friends from Assiut. Others posed by a wooden effigy of the saint for pictures, while some simply sat in the repose and cool of the monastery.

Built on the foundations of an ancient Pharaonic temple, the monastery now houses 14 monks and six apprentices, a sharp contrast to the 5,000 that at any given time came to this centre of religious learning prior to a devastating earthquake that shook the area and destroyed much of the original monastery complex in the 13th century.

But now is the time for the *moulid* and thousands of pilgrims camp in the cemetery complex beyond the monastery. "The only time I've ever seen anything like this," Karlsson told me, "is in European music festivals, when people come together and the importance of the event outdoes the difficulties of the living conditions." Echoes of a festival do exist, for the ancient practice of the *moulid*, dating back to Pharaonic times and now finding expression in both the Muslim and Christian faiths in Egypt, extends beyond religious worship. It is also often about communality, travel, novelty and the inauguration of new links and ties, while it is always about celebration, colour and dynamism. For me, the most intense aspect of the scene was the fact that here was a seemingly endless gathering of people whose daily lives are usually filled with difficulty, but is here exalted and festive, for it is their gathering and their exit from the mundane. So while men and women were tattooed with religious symbols and market sellers sold pretty

much anything that one can imagine, children ran freely, and the sun beat relentlessly down, but it did not matter because the whole area was simply so much fun, and such a beautiful expression of humanity beyond the confines of the urban.

The Red Monastery, on the other hand, houses the oldest Coptic art in the world. Currently under restoration, the monastery is testament to the intense attention paid by the monks to beauty and detail. Researchers have discovered that the paintings on the ceiling domes are only the start, for beneath them lie several other layers of work, done and redone as time passed by. Other than red, the principal colours in the monastery are black and white, giving the inside of the complex an aura of strength and intensity. Antonius Shenouda, the monk in charge of meeting pilgrims and visitors, was dynamic in his approach to us, and gladly explained details of the restoration work that was being carried out, and talked to us about the significance of the monastery.

ABYDOS: And just in case that was not enough -- just to repudiate once again comments in journals on Sohag being unexciting and lacking in sites to visit -- we hit the road early next morning to make our way to Abydos. Certainly, even if a traveller were only visiting the Upper Egyptian governorate in order to see Abydos, it would be worth while. For the desert mountain that stretches its belly beneath the sun is home to two temples of extreme historical importance -- one built by Seti I; the other by his son Ramses II. It is also, according to legend, the site where Osiris's head is buried, as well as the birth place of King Mina, who was the first to unite Lower and Upper Egypt. Further, as though such historical significance did not constitute enough of a pulling factor, the area bears witness to the passage of time and the rise and fall of eras. For just beyond the temple area lies a collection of houses dating back to the Graeco-Roman period, and just beyond these limits are the modern houses of the inhabitants of the area. All correlate and all live in harmony with each other, the dead and the living, the line between the modern and the ancient only heightened when the *azan* (call for prayer) breaks out from a local mosque.

Ramses II's temple is filled with colour to this day, in spite of the relentless weather conditions, and the wall paintings remain wonderfully preserved. But it is Seti I's temple which is simply breathtaking, in that it is the only one in all of Egypt to include images and the transcriptions of the names of all known ancient deities, thus rendering it the most complete temple in the country. Ramses's son changed many aspects of the temple, adding -- characteristically enough, in line with his legendary egotism -- paintings across the temple walls of himself standing by the gods, and with African and Asian kings standing at his feet. The uniqueness of the temple lies also in the fact that it includes paintings more dynamic and detailed than in most other ancient Egyptian sites. For example, the entire story of Isis and Osiris is depicted on the walls.

In addition, dynasties of rulers and civilisations that came long after the fall of the Pharaohs continued to make use of the temple site. While the entire era between the fall of the Pharaonic civilisation and the start of the Coptic Christian period saw rulers making use of the temple complex for their own religious practice, the Christians escaped Byzantine persecution by hiding here. Hence in many of the altar rooms, the ceilings are tarred black by the soot of fires lit by night by Copts seeking to keep warm, while many of the Pharaonic wall paintings are covered by images of the Coptic cross. It is, all in all, a temple complex which can only be truly understood when visited -- so spiritually charged by the passage of time, so historically enlightening in each and every one of its details, and so aesthetically astonishing that it escapes accurate definition.

But what is certain is that, though demanding, a visit to Sohag is, on the whole, the ideal escape into truth -- a truth beyond the politics, urbanism and constricts of our time and well into the realm of beauty.

Traveller's notes

Travel in Sohag has, like most locations in Upper Egypt, one major feature which tourists must keep in mind: a police escort will accompany you whenever you go downtown. The reason is safety for the traveller although there is no real danger. The bright side is that the police will not really interfere with your plans. They will simply hang around near you, and wait patiently for you to finish taking pictures or simply walk around.

As for the highlights in Sohag governorate, look for the market in Akhmim on Tuesday and the weekly Saddam Market on Friday, when goods imported from the Gulf are sold at affordable prices.

The massive pigeon houses that characterise much of Upper Egypt decorate the banks of the Nile on the road to Abydos. These architectural marvels are worth a stop.

In mid-town Sohag lies the Al-Safa Hotel, inexpensive, comfortable and relaxing. It has 80 rooms, 28 of which have a Nile view. All have a TV, air conditioning, a private bathroom and a fridge. The hotel also has a 24-hour restaurant which serves wonderful fish. The staff and the managers are very friendly to visitors. Call 002 039 2307701 for reservations.

To get to Sohag from Cairo, the best option is to take the train from Ramses Station. The trip is eight hours so if you leave late at night you'll be on time to start your sightseeing early in the morning. First class tickets cost LE56 one way; second class are at a low LE35.

Within Sohag, it is advisable that you have a car. If you can drive down from Cairo along the Said Road then definitely do so. If, however, you need to take the train, then get in touch with Talaat, a friendly local taxi driver who will gladly drive you around and take you to all the sites for a reasonable price. His mobile number is 002 012 729 0078.

It is important that you have an expert with you -- if not all the time then definitely while you are in Abydos. The best is Salah El-Masekh Ahmed, inspector archaeologist at Abydos. E-mail him for an appointment. He can pick you up in central Sohag and go up to the temples with you. His e-mail is salahelmasekh@yahoo.com.

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