

Baksheesh

Most people going to Egypt spend a full day exploring the Pyramids under skilled supervision by genuine experts about the history, construction, cultural implications and mysteries of these splendid monuments. My wife, for example, went to the Pyramids with my daughter and her high school class, spent a day riding camels and going through the insides of the major pyramids. Serious stuff with professional guides.

One of the stories she brought back with her was the importance of "*baksheesh*," or small currency for tips. She warned me ominously as I prepared for my stopover in Cairo on the way to Saudi Arabia on business. She said, "One is virtually required to carry wheelbarrow loads of small cash for tips, otherwise"... she punctuated her sentence with a raised finger, Socrates style..."You will get nowhere anywhere in Egypt."

So my colleague, Jack, and I got off the plane and obtained as much baksheesh at the cambia at the airport as would fit comfortably in our wallets. On to our hotel, the Hotel Misr. The bellboys were very polite, but waited patiently for what I presumed was a little baksheesh. They smiled broadly when I gave them a Egyptian pound note worth around twenty cents American. They seemed so happy, I wondered if I over-baksheeshed them, but thought no more about it. When we met in the bar after we were settled it was around 11:30 at night. Our plane left at 10 AM the next morning and as I yawned and stood up, ready to go to bed, Jack said, "Let's go see the pyramids." This seemed like such a preposterous and dumb suggestion, I, of course, said, "What a great idea."

So we found a cabbie that agreed to take us to the grand monuments and line up a guide or two to show us around. The pyramids aren't in the middle of the desert as it turns out. They are in the Cairo suburbs, for God's sake like Sherman Oaks to Los Angeles. I had, in my imagination, expected at least a three hour drive to some isolated place in the desert boonies. We screeched to a halt in front of the huge Sphinx, laying majestically protecting the giant monuments. Our driver asked us to stay in the cab while he went to get a guide. So we waited.

Some time passed. It was now 12:30 AM by my watch. We discussed our luck that the cabbie knew actual guides at this time of night. Our expectations were soaring. Finally our cabbie came back, opened the door and led us up to the Sphinx. There stood a phalanx of "guides." Around ten men in robes, some in

turbans, some bare headed, waiting patiently for the suckers. Jack and I looked at each other, expectations somewhat reduced.

We walked up to the head of the line. A man in a light yellow robe and huge black turban and a beard, introduced himself as “Yusif.” We shook hands. He placed his hand on the side of the Sphinx and said, “Sphinx.” We nodded our heads knowingly, then he pointed to the paw. “Sphinx paw,” he said majestically. We nodded our heads again. “Baksheesh,” he said, holding out his hand. Jack reached in his pocket and pulled out a one pound note. He looked at it, gave us a wide grin and walked to the back of the line.

Our next guide took us up to the Cheops Pyramid. He pointed with his finger and said, “Pyramid.” We looked at each other. As hard as this is to believe, we were already convinced that this huge tetrahedron was one of the great pyramids. It began to look like we were not going to go into the edifice...probably a prudent move as it turned out. “Baksheesh,” he said, hand outstretched. This time I pulled out the note. Same response, he looked at it, gave us a beaming smile and went to the end of the line.

Next we walked around, all our guides, ourselves and the taxi driver, to a small bunker-looking small building. We ducked our heads, entered a small room. Our new guide pointed to a hole in the wall. He crawled inside and invited us to do the same. After we brushed ourselves off, he pointed to the ground, “Bones,” he said. “Tomb,” he said. “Baksheesh,” he said, hand extended.

This went on for about an hour, little tomb after tomb, none of the big ones. After each minimal information session, “Baksheesh,” was the final word. At last we were in a small enclosure. Jack whispered in my ear. “You know,” he said, “they could whack us over the head, leave us here and wall up the hole in the wall and they wouldn’t find us for a thousand years.” That idea and the fact that our baksheesh was getting into big notes convinced us that our midnight adventure with the pyramids was over. We had baksheeshed everyone at least once and we owed our taxi driver a large tip too.

It was 2:00 AM now. As we pulled away in the taxi, we waved to our guides,. They waved back, huge grins on all their faces, presumably, I thought, at their good fortune to find two baksheeshable suckers in the middle of the night. Then as we were nearly out of sight, they collectively turned around and went to their suburban houses, I speculated.

Two weeks later, when I returned home, many stories on the tip of my tongue, I got “the look” from my wife half way through my baksheesh narrative. It said, “I told you so!!!!” Surprise.