Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Travelling Companions

by Lesley Dawson

Would you not expect a man, an American man, a well-travelled American man to take the lead when travelling in the Middle East? I certainly thought so, when I travelled with an American friend in Egypt.

We had just finished a very interesting and enjoyable tour of Egypt, involving Cairo, Luxor and Aswan. That involved visiting the Cairo Museum to see the Tutankhamen exhibition, the Pyramids at Giza and then exploring the famous burial sites in the Valley of the Kings. Also included was afternoon tea at the hotel in Luxor made famous by the film of Agatha Christie's "Death on the Nile" and a short flight to Abu Simbel to see where the huge statues had been moved to save them from rising Nile water.

We had travelled by coach from Jerusalem and crossed the border into Egypt not far from the Rafah exit from Gaza to Egypt and then crossed the Suez Canal at Port Said. All our itinerary was organized for us. We needed to do nothing except turn up on time.

In a moment of madness, I had suggested that we tack on a visit to Alexandria under our own steam. We did not have to be back in Bethlehem for another week, and I knew that my Gazan colleague Mohammed was visiting his in-laws there. In fact, Mohammed had invited us to join him in Iskandria, as he called it.

Would you believe it? I maintained that my Arabic language was good enough to hold a telephone conversation to get instructions on how to get there. Of course, I assumed that Mohammed himself would answer the phone at his fathers-in-law's house. You know what they say about the best laid plans? Mohammed was out when we phoned and I had to speak with his brother-in-law, Ahmed. Ahmed's command of English was as good as I now realized was my telephone Arabic.

We stumbled around until I thought I knew where I was going and heard that Ahmed and Mohammed had agreed to meet us at the railway station in Alex.

Having successfully negotiated booking seats on the train from Cairo to Alex, we relaxed a little. What we did not realize was that there are two stations in Alex. At which one should we alight? I realized that I was on my own making this decision as my companion looked at me blankly and when back to reading his book.

I decided to look on the platform when we arrived at the first of our possible stations. I was convinced that Mohammed would be on the platform to meet us. No such luck, so we pressed on to central Alex. On leaving the train and exiting the station I looked around for my big strong saviour from Gaza, but he was nowhere to be seen, and my other "so-called" supporter was out of ideas about what we should do.

In a moment of revelation, he came up with the idea that we should take a taxi to the De La Salle School in Alex. They would help us out as Bethlehem University was also a De La Salle establishment. We secured a taxi and fortunately he spoke good English. He knew where the De La Salle Brothers were. Not to worry, he could take us there.

Hearing Andy speaking with the French brothers at the school convinced me that we would get no help here. And I was correct. Regretfully shaking their heads, they couldn't suggest anywhere we could stay. Back at the taxi our driver came up trumps and took us to "somewhere not too expensive" that he knew about.

Again, left to make the decision if this was a place we could stay, I negotiated with the French speaking landlady and despairing of somewhere to sleep that night, agreed it would do. Andy was not very impressed with it, but then neither was I, but I had run out of patience, so this was it. Madame took charge of our passports, as per Egyptian law and we set off along the sea front to walk off our frustrations with each other.

We had just got to the point when we could cheerfully have murdered each other when, guess who we saw coming towards us? Just the man I wanted to see, my very welcome friend, Mohammed, accompanied by Ahmed. After much laughing and talking and shaking hands in my case, and kissing on both cheeks for Andy, we discovered what had happened.

Apparently, we should have alighted from the train at the station on the outskirts of the city and this is what Ahmed was supposed to tell me. I couldn't really blame Ahmed, I am sure he tried to tell me, but I didn't understand. They were walking along the seafront hoping that they might find us. And they had.

Now came the issue of where I had found us to stay. Mohammed took one look at it and declared it not suitable for two westerners. I am still not sure exactly why it was not suitable, but obviously I had missed important clues about the kind of place it was. We must leave and find something more suitable. Not so easy to do. Madame had our passports and was not going to release them without payment. This I reluctantly did and we sped off happily with our two porters.

They took us further along towards the old lighthouse and booked us in, happy to leave us somewhere "more suitable". After that all our troubles were over, we were escorted everywhere and ate calamari with Mohammed's family and visited the Catacombs, the university and the royal palace of King Farouk, the last king of Egypt. I decided then that some men are more interesting in books than they are in real life