

Egypt: Developing perspective

"Hello mister, what time is it?" "Welcome Canada. Number 1." "Welcome to my city." The vocabulary was limited, the sentiments sincere and the people simultaneously warm and overpowering in their extroversion. The country was Egypt.

That little corner of North Africa heralded for its great ancient civilization and in modern times frowned upon for the ridiculous complexity of the Arab-Israeli war was the setting for the 1975 World University Service of Canada's (WUSC) International Seminar. This summer 50 Canadian students representing universities from across Canada packed bag and baggage, apprehensions and some vague pre-conceived notions together to board a plane from Montreal heading for the United Arab Republic.

This group under WUSC's sponsorship was separated in five research areas and the goal of the seminar was to learn in seven weeks all that we could about this country. Academic preparation before leaving was thorough and almost every participant could have quoted, book, chapter and verse the details of his research project.

No one, I believe could have been adequately prepared for the culture which they were about to enter and the constant revision of values and perspectives which would both plague and delight us throughout the ensuing weeks.

Our Quebecair charter flight left Montreal July 7th en route to Beirut, Lebanon. There our Egyptair connection was to take us to Cairo. Arrival in Beirut brought the first of many situations to which we would have to adapt and live. I heard the excited gasps of Canadian students capturing their first glimpse of the Mediterranean's aquamarine water and the breathtaking beauty of the surrounding city. Beirut rises high into the hills, lit like stars, but the nighttime hush due to the curfews accentuated the reality of the tense Moslem-Christian antagonism. Everyone in the arrival lounge seemed aware of the precariousness of Lebanon's internal conflict, and our possible position and these feelings were complicated by a myriad of warning gestures and visible evidence. Khaki clad, steely eyed soldiers bolstered deadly-looking machine guns on their shoulders or near their hands.

Photographs were forbidden anywhere in the airport area. Adding to the intrigue during our twelve hour wait, was the sight of a black limousine on the tarmac delivering businessmen to a private jet. These men were dressed in garb ranging from the conventional western business suit to the white robes of Arab oil magnates surrounded by burly guards.

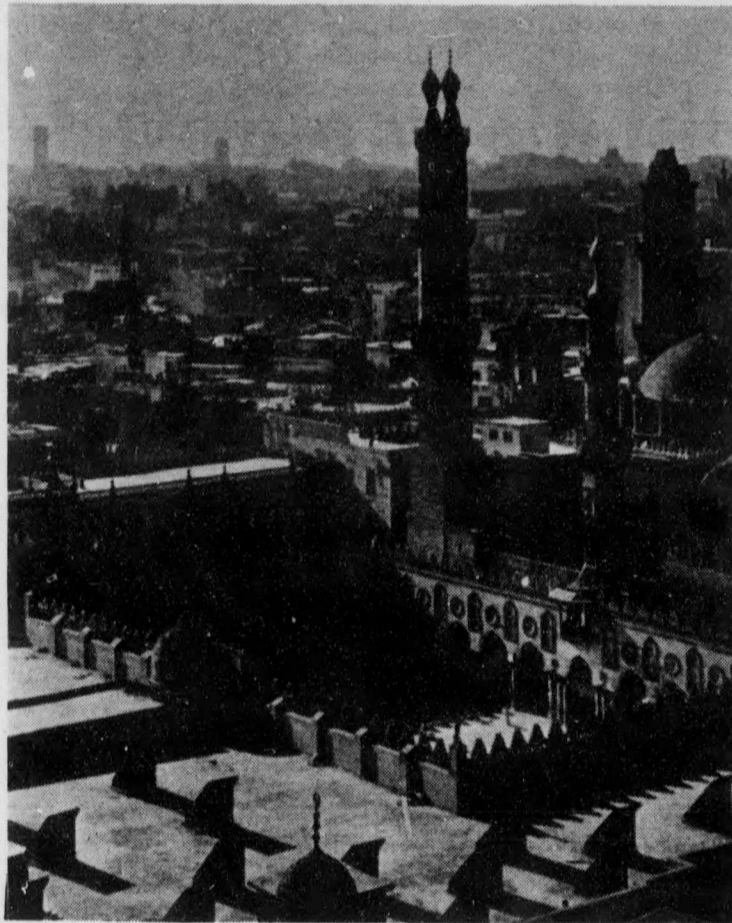
The premonitions which abounded in the air terminal that day, echoed in a recent front page article in the Sept. 17th Daily Gleaner: "Sunday night security forces clashed with a group of gunmen near the villages of Kfar Shima and Hadath in the hills above Beirut airport, and a bullet from the fight pierced a glass door in the departure lounge. Passengers waiting for a flight to Cairo dove to the floor."

The flight, we later found out, had been delayed due to mechanical difficulties in two Egyptair planes that had been sent to transport us to Cairo and we got underway again late that night.

Cairo, a city which has been simultaneously described as a Western, modern city, "presenting all facets of the Western lifestyle and keeping pace as well

with the pace of the high rise construction and development in technology and scientific discoveries." Cairo, however, also embodies the teeming, active, dirty and backward stereotype of a developing country where eight and a half million residents are crammed into a city which has say authorities, facilities for three million. So which description is correct?

It must be honestly said that both are correct representations of the city and indeed of the country. Comparisons force one to be continually aware of the scope of these contrasts and are obvious by simply moving around. On the barren sands at Giza, 6 km. from the center of Cairo, the majestic Pyramids cast their nighttime shadows over a crowded village where peasants retire to mud brick abodes reminiscent of Biblical times.



Yet, less than 1 km. away, affluent young Egyptians dance at the Saddle Club to the same hits heard on North American radios. Appreciative eyes outside the club wander over the Rolls Royce of Saudi Arabia's crown prince while a farmer saunters by on his overlaid donkey, not paying attention to this four wheeled steed.

I have been asked repeatedly what it is "like" in Egypt and what most clearly represents the country. It has been, at best of times difficult to ascertain or explain to anyone. Falling in love with Egypt, as I have, becomes purely a matter of personal taste. Things happen there on a personal rather than a basis which is bred out of neat, but cold instructions. Both systems have their advantages, it can indeed be argued, and difficulties arise for those who normally live in one system and then temporarily change to the other.

Becoming accustomed to the personal method of handling things was easy for many of us on the seminar, while some people were completely at a loss. Many liked to haggle over prices, amicably chastizing a merchant for charging "too much; too much" while others clung to reassuring signs: "Fixed prices". Some would not venture into the network of streets and lanes in the Khan El Khalili Bazaar in Cairo, because of its labyrinthian character, and others loved it.

The seminar was thrice blessed from the very beginning. Since we were sponsored through Cairo University and indeed treated as a Canadian delegation, we had connections with all facets of the university and eventually government officials who assisted us in our respective projects.

Through the Misr (Arabic for Egypt) Travel agency, we had the opportunity to see all of the touristic areas in the country and the time to gain a complete overview, although admittedly not in depth of the historical significance of the country. Our initial connections with Cairo University and our status permitted us a visit to the Sinai Peninsula, where the Egyptian command had regained territory from the Israelis in the October War of 1973, and we saw, as well, the Aswan Dam in Upper Egypt.

The opening week of the seminar was devoted to lectures at Cairo University where experts on hieroglyphics, Coptic art and religion, Islamic art and Moslem religion, and political science prepared us for the sites that we would be visiting and investigating. A ten day tour of Upper Egypt, which included Luxor and Aswan, was ideal for the research topic of the group in which I participated, tourism. It was necessary to find out the attractions which enticed visitors to Egypt and the background on promotion and investment schemes that were being developed by the ministry of tourism in various parts of the country. We were glad for the opportunity to see these areas first hand.

By MARGOT BREWER

Editor's Note: Margot Brewer, University of New Brunswick Arts senior travelled to Egypt this summer with WUSC.

The dormant and silent quality of the Temples of Karnak and Luxor and the Valley of the Kings was awe inspiring in spite of the heat which rose by 10 daily to over 110 degrees Fahrenheit. We investigated these wonders for three days beginning at the Valley of the Kings, King

