INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Two Egyptian vignettes

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Dear Peter,

1. The Quiet Americans in Bokra Land.

After my Swissair flight from New York touched down at Cairo International Airport the night of April 11, I had the good fortune to be offered a ride into town by Maureen, a guide for a New York-based tour group.

Maureen and and I had chatted across the aisle during the Zurich to Cairo stretch. She had amused both of us by describing the trials and tribulations of conducting a covey of elderly American tourists through strange territory like Egypt.

The main hazard, she said, is that most of them never crack a book on Egypt before they leave the States and are unprepared for the experience.

Indeed, as we piled aboard the tour bus outside the airport, some of my countrymen could not get over the sight of all those men walking around in robe-like galabiyahs. "Do you suppose they wear anything under that?" a male voice was heard to exclaim in a jocular manner.

Culture shock surely cuts both ways. What must the more formal-minded Egyptians think about all the funny hats we like to wear?

According to my informal surveys taken at several tourist spots around town, you can always tell an American tour group from a French, British or German one by a greater propensity to wear funny hats: boating hats for the women and baseball and golfing caps for the men, in all the colors of the rainbow. I have even seen one young American ascending the staircase at the Nile Hilton in an Arab headdress.

Leaving the airport, we drove through the darkened streets of Heliopolis and Nasser City to Cairo center. One small car we passed was suffused inside with a bright glow. I looked down to see an Egyptian man behind the wheel, his wife beside him and two children in the back seat. All eyes in the car were riveted to a portable television set propped up on the dashboard.

I don't know who was watching the road.

Throughout the ride, Maureen delivered an educational briefing over the bus PA system. She pointed out that Egypt was not like the United States, things moved at a slower pace and you have to go into situations with different expectations.

Kenneth Cline is a Village Reporting Fellow of the Institute studying the life of the Egyptian peasantry.

''The two most common expressions you will hear while in Egypt are bokra, or 'tommorow,' and mâlesh, which means 'it doesn't matter,''' she said. ''Learn those two words because you will hear them often.''

Maureen had worked in South America for several years before she was offered her present job. Because she had mastered the manãna approach to life, her company apparently felt she could handle the bokra mentality, she had told me on the plane.

From that night on, I was alert to all signs of the bokra mentality in Egyptian society.

But I have been disappointed so far. I have yet to hear an Egyptian say ''bokra'' or ''malesh'' in the context that Maureen had in mind.

But I myself have used malesh.

The occasion was my discovery that the hotel staff had mistakenly thrown away my almost-full can of shaving cream. This followed by a week the disappearance of one of my socks in the laundry.

Facing the apparent culprit, I pointed to my desk and made motions with my hands to describe the lost item. Muchtar, the second floor man, helpfully scraped his chin in a pantomime of shaving. That's it, I said.

Muchtar shrugged his shoulders, said he was sorry and made another pantomime to illustrate something being thrown away while they were cleaning my room.

Raising both my arms with the palms upward, I actually said it: ''malesh.''

And of course, it really didn't matter.

2. You Get a Better Rate in Samadoun

Travelling the well-marked tourist path in Egypt is easy. You want to get from Cairo to Luxor or Alexandria and inexpensive, comfortable, high-speed trains are available.

But getting to a place like Shibin El-Kom, only 75 kilometers away, is more problematic. Even though it is the capital of Minofaya, one of the richest agricultural governorates in the Delta, Shibin El-Kom is never visited by westerners unless they have specific business there, like me.

I was to discover later that middle class, time-conscious Egyptians take buses or taxis between Cairo and Shibin El-Kom. These one-hour journeys cost only 75 piasters.

Not knowing this, I went to the central railway station to find a way to Shibin El-Kom. There was only one way, they said, a third class, four-hour trip for 25 piasters.

The price was certainly right, although I was suspicious of the time factor. I had taken a second and third class train from El Minya to Cairo that chugged into the Ramses Station in the wee hours of the morning six hours late.

But I didn't have to be in Shibin El-Kom until the next morning. And anyway, it was about time I actually mixed with some Egyptian peasants and a third class train is a good place to start.

An Egyptian third class railroad car at full capacity, you see, closely resembles the old American college game of: how

many people can we stuff into this telephone booth? You can get real close to people during an excursion like that.

The situation did not look too bad when we left the Ramses Station at noon. Although all the seats had been taken in the first mad rush to get aboard, I found a spot on the floor, near the main doorway, to set my back pack down. Perched on top of it, I was comfortable enough.

Several other men had spread newspapers on the floor, necessary because of the dirt and trash, and we all sat there serenely until the next stop, a slum area on the northern outskirts of the capital.

Another deluge of people, with assorted crates, boxes and baskets, washed into the car. From then on, it was standing room only, unless you climbed into the luggage racks.

One soldier up there, dangling his legs over the side and smoking a cigarette, chatted with his companion, a civilian. A man sitting below them found himself brushing ashes off his grey galabiyah. Angry mutterings were directed to the eagle's perch. The soldier kept smoking, but shifted his cigarette to the other hand, chuckling to his companion as he did so.

Shortly after, I became the object of some angry mutterings.

I thought I was being as inoffensive as possible. But a thin, frail old woman with a pinched face standing close on my right grumbled audibly about something. Some of the people around her peered curiously at me.

Although a man was rubbing shoulders with me on the left and a large woman had placed a large basket of laundry right at my feet, I did manage to sidle a few more millimeters towards the man. The thin woman fell silent.

As more people got on at each stop, and this particular train stopped at nearly every village in its meandering journey across the countryside, my four-hour excursion began to seem less and less of a bargain.

But luck was on my side. A group of students spotted me. Easily recognizable by their western style clothes, they waved me over. I felt that I was falling again into a familiar pattern as I squeezed through the central aisle to where they were sitting.

Egyptian students love to practice their English on Americans. They also seem to genuinely enjoy speaking to foreigners. As in this case, you don't have to find them, they find you.

When I approached the group of four or five young men, one of them vacated his seat and ushered me into it. I made the usual protestations, but Egyptian hospitality can be relentless. I sat down.

They immediately plied me with the usual questions about what country I was from, what was my name and profession, how long I had been in Egypt, did I like it and why was I going to Shibin El-Kom?

Coming from all sides, this kind of inquisition can be intense. But it was limited by their English skills. Once we got past the exchange of pleasantries and basic information, they could not go much farther. With only the most rudimentary Arabic, I couldn't help them much.

Farid (a pseudonym) spoke better English than the others. An agriculture student at the university in Shibin El-Kom (he was forever rattling off Latin names for the local flora), he was slender and clean-shaven with a decided air of sophistication about him. His father is a secondary school teacher.

Although he had never visited Europe or the United States, Farid had attended secondary school in Libya, before relations between Sadat and Khaddafi soured. His perspective on the outside world was a little broader than that of his village friends.

When he invited me to stop off for lunch at his village, Samadoun, I was delighted. He seemed an excellent guide for a tour of an Egyptian village.

The first major structure I saw when we disembarked was the white dome and cross of a church. I asked Farid if Samadoun was a Christian village. The majority is Muslim, but the two groups get along well together, he said. Farid himself is Muslim.

Later in the afternoon, we climbed the minaret of the mosque, the tallest structure in the village, for a panoramic view of Samadoun and the neatly-ordered fields surrounding it.

Like many houses in the village, Farid's was constructed of brick and cement (although I saw sun-baked mud in the village used in walls for courtyards and animal pens). But the attractive stucco finish and electric buzzer at the gate tipped me off that Farid belonged to one of the village's wealthier families.

The house contained other amenities inside: tile floors partly covered by rugs; tapestries adorning the living room wall, including a scene of the Kaaba in Mecca; European style chairs and a couch; an Italian stove in the kitchen; running water in the bathroom; and electricity.

After I visited two other houses in the village belonging to some of Farid's relatives, I saw how atypical his home was. These other dwellings were more like apartment blocks, multi-storied with much smaller rooms, cheap furniture, and little wall decoration. One man was raising rabbits on his roof.

They all had electricity though.

Farid and I sat down to a hearty meal of sardines (a Japanese import) mixed with tomato bits, mashed potatoes, stewed tomatoes, fasulya or bean stew and homemade unleavened bread.

I assume Farid's mother prepared the lunch, although I never met her. Farid introduced me to two of his brothers and his preteen sister, but none of the adult women in the house. Once I caught a glimpse of a woman observing me from the adjoining room. She disappeared when I looked at her. I assume it was Farid's mother because she was wearing the black dress married women wear in this country.

The same segregation was true of the village. Although Farid introduced me to at least 30 males, mostly student friends of his -- half the population seemed to attend one school or another -- and a few young girls, I never met an adult woman.

Some of the younger women watched me with frank curiousity as I paraded about the village. While standing on the rabbit warren roof, I saw a woman sitting in a doorway wave to me, very shyly. But one hefty middle-aged woman scampered into her house like a startled deer when I came walking up the path.

Farid was an excellent host during lunch, continually pushing food at me. But one slightly discordant note had been struck

before the meal when Farid asked me if I wanted to change some money. A friend of his in the village gave a good rate, he said.

Taken off guard, I just said ''maybe later.''

''Whatever you want,'' he said.

I was not all that suprised by Farid's question because ''want to change some money?'' is the most common expression a foreigner hears in Egypt. It comes at you from men (never women) on the street, in hotels and in shops. I have even been approached by a guard in the National Antiquities Museum.

My understanding is that Egyptians can get a better price for imported goods if they have hard foreign currency. Delivery is supposed to be faster too.

What I was slow to grasp is that the imported automobile, watch, radio or electric fan so dear to the heart of the Cairene might be just as much desired in Samadoun.

After lunch, Farid launched into the hard sell. He asked me what the usual rate of pounds for dollars was in Cairo. I told him one pound ten piasters per dollar. The official rate is 82 piasters to the dollar.

He took a sheet of notebook paper and very carefully wrote the numbers 1.10. ''This rate in Cairo,'' he said. I nodded. Then he wrote 1.13 next to it. ''This rate in Samadoun,'' he said. ''Samadoun better than Cairo.''

I asked him why that was.

''Many bad people in Cairo,'' he replied.

Whatever case could be made for rewarding the good people of Samadoun, the difference was not that great. But my main problem was that I simply did not need to change money right then. I tried to explain to Farid that another wad of Egyptian pounds lying about my hotel room would be a nuisance.

He could not seem to grasp the point. He kept coming back to his sheet of paper, underlining the figures for emphasis. ''This Cairo, this Samadoun; Samadoun better.''

I became increasingly annoyed at the thought that he had invited me to lunch, not for the pleasure of talking to a foreigner, but just to make this banal transaction.

It took him about 20 minutes to comprehend his defeat. He folded up his piece of paper while I looked out the window and studied the adjacent berseem field. ''You don't want to change money?'' he asked. ''No,'' I said.

The interaction between Farid and I had a different quality after that. It was a relief, in a way, because he dropped some of his excessive politeness.

But despite his obvious disappointment at not securing some foreign exchange, Farid remained a conscientious host. This might have been out of necessity. The train to Shibin El-Kom did did not stop again in Samadoun for another three hours, so he was stuck with me.

After lunch, he discarded his western shirt and slacks and donned a dark blue cotton galabiyah. Looking very much a representative of the Samadoun gentry, he conducted me through the village, pointing out the different crops and introducing me to his friends.

By the time we reached the station to wait for the train,

I detected a better feeling between us. As a quid pro quo for the lunch, I had offered to buy him lunch if he visited me in Cairo and said I would send him a book on America (his requested topic) when I got back to the States. I think that helped.

When I got on the train, he asked several people to help find me a place to stay when I got to Shibin El-Kom. In fact, two of these young men, neither of whom spoke English, did just that, wandering about the city with me for an hour asking directions to a hotel.

While saying goodbye, Farid told me again how happy he was that I had visited him in his village. He said he hoped I returned to Samadoun soon.

I like to think he meant that as a friendly gesture. But it's just as likely he was thinking about offering me 1.15.

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