

Stephen M. Yoss

Epic Journey 2008 -- Family & Friend's Newsletter
Volume VI - The Ancient Cities Edition

01 October 2008
Week XXXXI Abroad
Rome, Italy, Europe

Sawasdee, As Sa- laam Alaikum, & Buon Giorno!

Greetings from Thailand, Egypt, and Italy. It has been a busy couple of weeks with travel on three continents over several cities. These three countries

are as diverse as they come. Each had marvelous sights, history, attractions, people, music, foods, and cultures. Thailand was a constant party, Egypt was a window into the dawn human history, and Rome was simply elegant from start to finish. Another great chapter to the epic journey.

Phuket, Thailand

Thailand was a destination that I was especially excited about. It has a reputation as being fun and inexpensive, which are two qualities I love in a destination. From Sydney I flew to the island of Phuket, a small island to the west of Bangkok. I originally



Saying farewell to my elephant after an afternoon safari. In order to avoid confusion, I'm the one on the right.

had some loose plans for my time in Thailand, but that all changed when I boarded the plane to leave. During my flight I had the pleasure of sitting behind two rowdy and rambunctious Aussies, who were heading in the same direction. After a couple of cocktails, I discarded my original plans and joined them on their holiday. This was their fourth trip to Thailand and they definitely knew the ropes of the place. I canceled my hotel reservation and booked a room at their hotel at Patong Beach. The next few days were filled with hiring motorcycles and riding around the island, ATV quad bike safaris through the jungle, and exploring Patong's many bars. I have many stories from my week with them, however most are

not newsletter appropriate so ask me when I get home!

In the middle of my time in Phuket, I took a break from the party at Patong beach and escaped to the tranquil jungle. As the United States has the bald eagle to represent itself, Thailand has the Asian elephant. In recent years the population has significantly declined due to a number of factors. I wanted to visit them because I know one day I will not be able to. After a several hour drive through the jungle I arrived at Siam Safari tours. After an introduction I got to spend the afternoon perched high upon the back of a giant grey beast while marching through the wilderness.

Riding an elephant is what I imagine



Above: A long-tailed monkey literally eating out of the palm of my hand. These little critters would not stop climbing all over me! If I only had the same luck with women... Below: Riding a camel at the Great Pyramids in Giza, Egypt.



riding a giant dog would be like. They move slowly and deliberately through the jungle, investigating the brush like a dog would investigate a fire hydrant. The entire time they are moving, they are eating. They can eat and drink more than the entirety of AΔΓ at a free LMU barbecue. My tour took me to the top of a nearby mountain to a clearing where I had a commanding view of the valley below. After coming back down, I was able to reward my faithful elephant with a basket of fresh fruit. While the ride might have been my favorite part of the afternoon, I am positive the elephant enjoyed the fruit the most. The elephant and I are now best friends and play poker every Wednesday night.

After a night camping at the elephant ranch, I enjoyed a few more sights of the region. I spent the afternoon being entertained by wild monkeys at a nearby Buddhist shrine. While I was expecting a few monkeys I was greeted by dozens. As the guide parked the car, they descended from the trees to greet us. As I exited the vehicle with a fresh banana, I became an instant celebrity in the monkey world. I couldn't stop them from climbing all over me and eating out of my hand. Sadly, once I ran out of bananas they became less interested. So, I departed back to the Patong for another night of craziness before flying to Bangkok.

My last night before leaving I decided to let my primordial self



out to play, by attending a Muay Thai boxing match. Thai boxing mixes traditional boxing with elements of martial arts. The fights take place in a Western style ring with standard round times, but adds the ability to kick and knee the opponent. The fights are

intense to say the least and often end in a knockout. The night I attended there were eight fights. The contenders were diverse and all demographics were represented. Most of the fights were great, especially the final title match when a fighter from Sweden knocked



Top: The Grand Palace of Thailand in Bangkok. I bet there is more gold in those buildings than in Fort Knox. **Middle:** Enjoying the rain in Bangkok. It took all my will not to break out in song and dance. **Bottom:** A view of Phuket, Thailand. Its even better when your there.



Above: A complete view of Giza with the Great Pyramids, the Sphinx and surrounding ruins. The artifacts date from 2560BC.

Below: Prior to my hot air balloon flight in Luxor, Egypt, out a local Thai fighter shopping centers with the latest couture and technology, as well as equally large slums and tenement houses. While in Bangkok I visited the Grand Palace, which is the residence of the King of Thailand. The palace is amazing and features many stunning temples and courtyards. Besides the palace the rest of Bangkok is more industrial city than tourist des-

Bangkok, Thailand

If Phuket is Hawaii, Bangkok is Detroit. Bangkok is a massive metropolis that is torn between being developed and being in destitution. The city has massive

shopping centers with the latest couture and technology, as well as equally large slums and tenement houses. While in Bangkok I visited the Grand Palace, which is the residence of the King of Thailand. The palace is amazing and features many stunning temples and courtyards. Besides the palace the rest of Bangkok is more industrial city than tourist des-

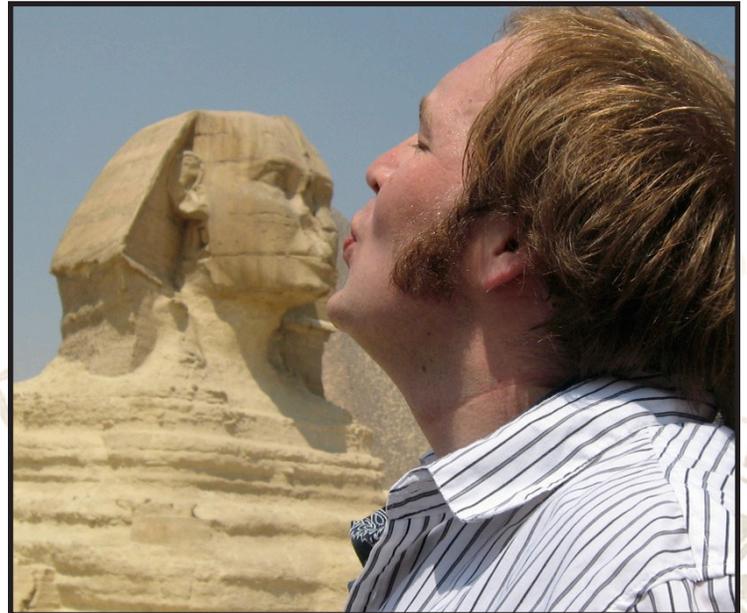
tinuation. It is a shopper's paradise, but I definitely prefer the relaxed atmosphere of the beaches of Phuket.

Cairo, Egypt

There are few places that can conjure images in everybody's mind but Egypt is one of those places. It is one of the births of civilization and its history is as long as time itself. I remember learning about Egypt as a young boy in elementary school. The Great Pyramids, the Sphinx, the Nile, and the Pharaohs have always fascinated me. I was so excited when I arrived in Cairo that I immedi-

ately departed from the airport to Giza to experience the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx.

I always thought that Giza would be in the middle of nowhere, but to my surprise it was only a short ride from downtown Cairo. While it might be near Cairo, it is still surrounded by sand dunes and desert. The complex is large and the best way to see everything and not die in the heat is to travel by camel. The camel is an exceptionally tall animal and I was sitting about eight feet off the ground. They are big, slow, lazy and need constant supervision (the Britney Spears of animals if you will). However, their tenac-

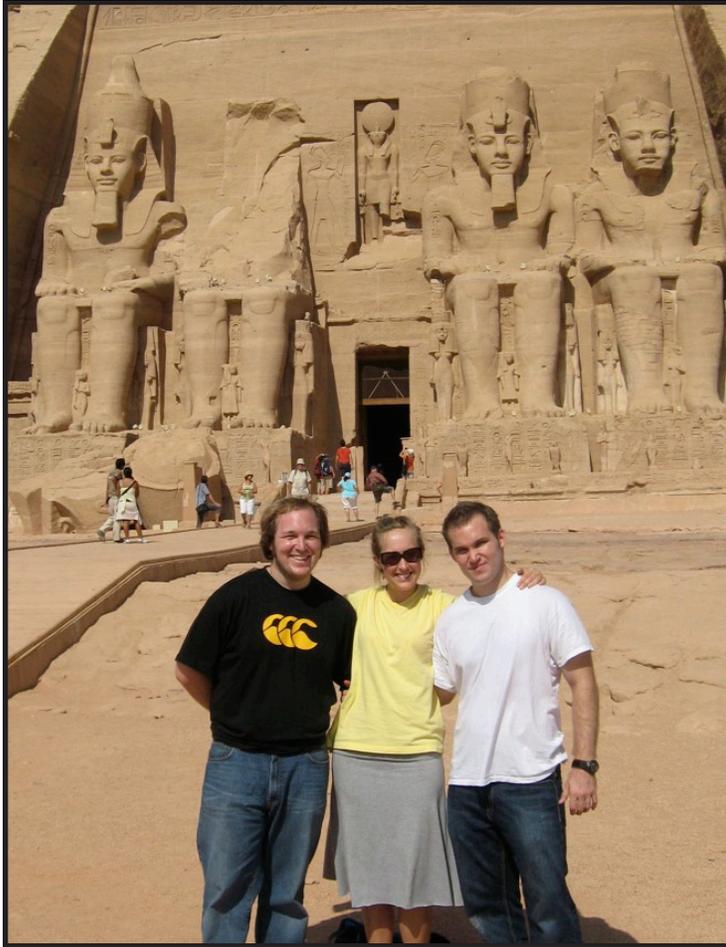


Getting some action with the Sphinx. I thought she was into me, but she did not call me the next day. I guess we will always have Cairo.

ity makes them the best animals for riding in the desert.

My tour took me around the Giza area and allowed me to get up close and personal with the artifacts. Although not technically allowed at the urging of my guide I climbed halfway up the largest pyramid! Thankfully, I descended be-

fore anybody noticed. After that I examined the Sphinx. The pyramids were used as burial devices and the Sphinx served as their guard, to warn off potential grave robbers. The pyramids and the Sphinx are both larger and smaller than you imagine. While today's monuments might dwarf them, you must



remember they were built without any modern tools.

Although Egypt is predominately Muslim, it is a secular state with many religions living together. While in Cairo I visited the Coptic section of the city. The Coptic religion is a relative of Roman Catholicism. This section of town features several Christian churches, shrines and relics. Most important would be the shrine to the Holy Family, near St. Barbara's Church. This shrine was built on the location of where the Holy Family actually lived when they lived in Egypt during the Pharaonic times. If ac-

curate, I visited a place where Jesus actually walked!

Aswan, Egypt

When I arrived in Egypt I had very loose plans on how I would spend my time. Thankfully, my hosts in Cairo were able to set me up with an itinerary that would allow me to see more of the country than I originally planned. I took an overnight train to Aswan, a city in southern part of the country. When I arrived I had an encounter that was completely unexpected. While leaving the station, I heard "HEY YOSS!"



Top: Enjoying the sunset on the Nile in a traditional Egyptian felucca. The days are blistering hot, but the evening is heavenly. Middle: With fellow Damien Spartan Daniel Venti and his girlfriend Krista Phippen at Abu Simbel, Egypt. Bottom: A view of the interior of the Roman Colosseum.



Top: A view of “the Eternal City”. While the city might be beautiful, it is the “Roma” experience that makes it over the top. **Below:** At the heart of the Catholic Church, St. Peter’s Basilica. As I turned around an old friend and fellow Damien Spartan, Daniel Venti and his girlfriend Krista Phippen greeted me. This was the last place in the world I expected run into a familiar face but it was good seeing a friend. We were able to spend a day together seeing some major sights before parting ways. He is currently in the Middle East and will be returning this December.

Luxor, Egypt

Before departing to Rome I had one final stop in Luxor. Luxor is home to the Valley of the Kings/Queens, which

was the final resting place for many of the ancient Pharaohs and other nobles. While it boasts an abundance of history, my favorite memory was a hot air balloon ride over the temples and other archaeological excavations. I rose before daybreak and got airborne just as the sun rose. It was magical seeing the sunrise over the far off Egyptian horizon and seeing the ruins light up as the day began. The balloon floated gently with the wind high above the action below. It was a unique and fun way to see the larger Luxor region.

Lastly, I visited Egypt during a special time of year, Ramadan.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim year and is their holiest month. During this month, Muslims are to refrain from eating and drinking during the day. They are called to use this time to pray and to grow closer to Allah. Egypt takes on a completely different vibe during this period. The only implication for me was the inability to eat during the day. Although not intentional, I observed Ramadan during my time in Egypt. A small price for such a great experience.

like my first time. The first time I visited Rome was with my Mom in 2000, for the millennium celebrations. In fact, that trip was my first trip abroad. From that first trip as a boy, that city became my first travel love and I have visited many times since. The history, culture, food, style, music, and lifestyle have always impressed me. I have been lucky to travel the world, but I still keep coming to Rome because it is the only place you can get that wonderful unique experience.

Rome, Italy

This was not my first trip to Rome but every time I go there it feels

While in Rome, I always make a point of attending mass at the Vatican in St. Peter’s Basilica. As a Catholic, I feel a sense of closeness



At the Colosseum at night in Rome, Italy. Although in ruins it is still a magnificent piece of architecture and history.



to my faith that can only be experienced there. The beauty and history of the basilica draws you closer to your faith and it impossible not to be emotionally moved by it. It is the mother church for Catholics and it is the location where it all began for us. In addition to the religious aspects, the Vatican offers several other features that appeals to everybody. Such as the copula perched high above the basilica. After mass, I ascended the several hundred steps to the top. It might take almost a thousand steps to reach it, but the magnificent view of Rome is worth the effort. From there you have a commanding view of all of

Rome from every direction.

The Vatican also houses a collection of art that is only comparable to the Louvre in Paris. Masterpieces from all over the world and all eras of history are represented. In particular, famous works such as the Sistine Chapel, the School of Athens, and the Pietà are worth extra attention. Regardless of your faith the Vatican can be enjoyed as there is something for everybody.

While in Rome I also visited the ancient Forum, the Fountain of Trevi, Castel Sant'Angelo, among other various city highlights. Most people who have been to Rome



Top: The ruins of the Roman Forum. This site was the seat of the world's most famous democracy. *Below:* Inside St. Peter's Basilica. In the background the high alter of the Basilica. will agree that there isn't one particular thing that makes the city so magnificent, but rather a symphony of wonderful characteristics. Everywhere you go you are

confronted with another picturesque view, a beautiful woman, a tasty dish, or a new insight into our past. I just need to find a nice Italian wife and I know where I live out the rest of my days.

As I leave Italy for Northern Europe and beyond, I embark on my next set of adventures. It has been an amazing journey, filled with great people, experience and memories. I am truly fortunate and lucky. Expect another edition in a few weeks with new escapades. I hope you will keep reading, as the adventures keep coming. All the best.

Cheers!
--Steve



The magnificent Trevi Fountain in Rome, Italy. In my opinion, the most beautiful fountain in the world. Legend has it that if you throw a coin in the fountain, you will eventually return to Rome. Its worked every time for me.