



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

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by Alison Woollard

“Wherever I lay my Hat; The grand hotels of Egypt”

Lee Young

Lee started her talk with a rapid history of hotels over the centuries starting with the accommodation for travellers in the Bible and in Greek and Roman times. She mentioned caravansaries in deserts and the support given to pilgrims in medieval monasteries and nunneries. Many modern words come from these medieval institutions: hotel, hostel, hospital, hospitality. Changes in transport brought changes in what was offered. The coaching inns looked after horses when regular coach routes developed. We had eaten our lunch before the talk in The Railway pub next to Witham station. The development of spas in the eighteenth century and the general growth of tourism throughout the nineteenth century encouraged the growth of hotels. The oldest identifiable hotel dates to 69 BCE in Pompeii and the oldest hotel which is still in use is in Japan: Nishiyama Onsen Keiunkan has been run by the same family since 705 CE

In mid nineteenth century Egypt there would be some tourists but most travellers would have been soldiers or colonial administrators passing through on their way to India before the construction of the Suez Canal. The port of entry was Alexandria which was seen as a one-night stop on the way to Cairo with nothing of interest to see. However, Cairenes began to stay in Alexandria during the hottest months of the year to escape the stifling heat of Cairo. So popular was this idea that whole government departments would suddenly discover the need to ‘inspect’ something in Alexandria and move there for the hottest months. Architects and planners from Egypt had also visited some of the other stylish coastal towns around the Mediterranean and wanted to introduce style and flair to Alexandria. The Hotel San Stefano built in 1887 is a good example of this development with its dining terraces, reading room, gardens, tennis courts and good food. The hotel was only demolished in 1993 and the site now contains a 30 storey Four Seasons hotel which has continued the San Stefano name.

The publication in 1847 by John Murray of his Handbook to Egypt written by the pioneer Egyptologist John Gardner Wilkinson started to open the country to more travellers. It contained information about trains, boats, where to stay and what to pack. Only four hotels are mentioned including the British Hotel and the Hotel d’Orient in Cairo. However, Cairo was changing under the rule of Muhammad Ali and his successors. Visitors to Europe had seen the Great Exhibitions in London and Paris as well as the way cities such as Paris were being redesigned on modern

lines with parks and wide boulevards. Similar changes happened in Cairo and there were opportunities to develop tourism and provide elegant accommodation.

One famous English man took advantage of such opportunities. Samuel Shephard arrived in Cairo in 1842, having been thrown off a P&O mail boat for mutiny and insubordination. He found work at the British Hotel and proved to be very successful. He found favour with Egypt's ruler, Pasha Abbas, and was granted a site to build an even bigger hotel: the Palace of Alfi Bey, which overlooked the recently created Ezbekiya Gardens. Shephard also provided the catering for Nile boats and provisioned troops who were passing through Cairo. The hotel changed hands many times as well as being altered and added to. It was celebrated for the grandeur of its architecture and its guests and the terrace of the hotel became famous as the place to watch the world go by. The Shephard Hotel was destroyed by fire in 1952 as a symbol of British rule but a modern hotel with the same name opened nearby in 1957.

The arrival of Thomas Cook tours in the 1860s and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 created a large increase in the number of visitors to Egypt and the need for more hotels. Many stylish hotels opened in the final decades of the nineteenth century: the Gezira Palace Hotel, the Grand Continental, the Hotel de Nil, the Savoy, the Hotel d'Angleterre and the Mena House Hotel close to the pyramids.

Earlier in the nineteenth century visiting the pyramids from Cairo was a lengthy expedition with no facilities for 'tourists' although one local woman did provide accommodation in some of the tombs and even operated a 'restaurant' in another tomb, using the desiccated remains of its original occupants as fuel for cooking the food.

The Mena House was initially a hunting lodge built in 1869. It was sold in 1883 to an English couple who then sold it on two years later to another English couple, Ethel and Hugh Locke King who built the hotel on the site and opened it to the public in 1886. In 1890 it could boast having Egypt's first swimming pool. The hotel was used by Australian troops in both world wars. In 1943 it was the venue for the Cairo Conference which discussed the Far East and in 1977 the results of the Mena House Conference led to the Camp David Agreement, which restored Egypt's sovereignty over the Sinai peninsula.

The development of the railways meant visitors were able to travel more easily further south to Luxor and Aswan so hotels were developed in these towns too. The Old Cataract Hotel was opened by Thomas Cook in Aswan in 1898. The health benefits of the climate for visitors escaping northern winters were stressed and there were also increasing numbers of visitors from America. The veranda of the hotel overlooking the Nile and with a view of the tomb of the Aga Khan is celebrated for its breath-taking views. The Aga Khan was a frequent guest at the hotel. Agatha Christie is also connected with the hotel and she set parts of 'Death on the Nile' there.

The Winter Palace in Luxor opened in 1907 and became a centre for Egyptologists working in the area, notably Howard Carter.

The mass tourism which developed in Egypt since the advent of much cheaper air travel led to the building of hotels very different from the grand hotels of the nineteenth century. Tourism has faced many challenges in recent years: terrorism,

Covid, the prospect of recession and the ecological pressures to reduce air travel. Lee's talk made us wonder what kind of hotels we might be staying in in the future as well as stirring delightful memories of sitting on hotel terraces watching the sun set behind the monuments of Egypt.

Alison Woollard