

This story was a finalist for inclusion in a *Traveler's Tales* anthology, and a longer version of it appears in the opening of my travel memoir, *Two Laps Around the World*.

Chasing the Spirit of Moses

By Bob Riel

It was 6:30 a.m. when three guards approached us on the Cairo train platform, guns slung over their shoulders.

"What nationality are you? English?" one of them asked.

I hesitated. "... No, American."

"American?! Aye!" he shouted.

Walkie-talkies crackled to life. All we heard was a string of Arabic, laced several times with the word "American."

"Come," the officer said and motioned for us to follow him.

On most days, our early arrival in Cairo after an overnight journey from Luxor would have been a mundane event. This is, after all, a well-worn path on the Egyptian tourist trail. But this wasn't the most common of days. Just over 24 hours earlier, terrorist bombs had shattered the country's composure.

My wife, Lisa, and I had heard about the bombing the previous morning when we went to meet a guide who was scheduled to take us to Luxor's Karnak Temple. When we saw Mohammed, though, he had a stricken look on his face and said to us: "Did you see the news? Three bombs exploded during the night in Sharm el Sheikh. More than 80 people killed."

It's always shocking to hear news of any such attack. Even when we are not in London or Madrid or Bali or New York, it's impossible not to be moved by the tragedy and appalled by the senselessness of the violence. But not only were Lisa and I in Egypt when this occurred, we also happened to be on our way to the Sinai Peninsula the very next day. In fact, we'd recently been debating whether to go to Sharm el Sheikh or Dahab, two contrasting towns on the Red Sea coast.

There we were, standing alongside the Nile River, about to visit the ancient temple complex at Karnak, and our guide was telling us there had been a terrorist attack a few hours earlier

in a region of the country that we would soon be visiting. We looked around at the street and the river. Everything seemed normal. If we hadn't been told this news, it would have appeared like any other day.

"It is very tragic," said Mohammed, "but you should go on with your plans today. There is more security here now. It will be very safe. You should focus on the moment."

We decided to listen to him, so for the next few hours we toured Karnak Temple. As the morning wore on, though, and the desert sun grew more intense, Mohammed began to share some of his thoughts.

"This is not a war against the West," he said to us, "this is a war against humankind. These are the worst kind of Muslims who do these acts. They are using their religion for bad aims. In Egypt, we believe in a tolerant Islam. I don't know what kind of people can do this, to kill people like this!"

At another moment, he swept his arm around. "Look at all of these boats on the river. They may all be empty soon if tourists don't come to Egypt; and these merchants, and taxi drivers, and restaurants. So many people rely on tourism to make a living."

"Do you think there may be another attack?" asked Lisa. "Are you afraid? Is it dangerous?"

"Ah, what is dangerous?" whispered Mohammed. "You can have danger in your home or crossing the street. You must live your life, I think."

What is dangerous? We couldn't get that question out of our minds for the rest of the day. What, we wondered, is the proper reaction to a terrorist attack in a foreign country, when you happen to be traveling in that country on the day the bombs explode? Should you leave immediately? Or, if you decide to stay, is it possible to go on with your trip as if nothing happened?

News reports later indicated that at least half the tourists in Egypt did leave in the day or two after the bombings. But a sizeable number also chose to remain. Some of them just assumed there wouldn't be a second attack; others refused to give in to the terror (like the woman we met on the train later that evening who said, "I don't like to be bullied by terrorists"); and some were just hardened to terrorism in general after a string of attacks in all parts of the world. In the days ahead, a common refrain that we heard among tourists was, "where can you consider yourself safe now, anyway?"

In the end, Lisa and I also decided to stay in Egypt. I'd like to say that it was a heroic decision, that we wanted to live our lives and not be bullied, and, yes, we certainly carried some of that sentiment inside. But we still would have put our safety first had we felt seriously threatened. There was no single reason for our decision, but rather a web of

interconnected ones. Most importantly, we didn't feel unsafe among the Egyptians, who had been gracious and welcoming to us.

So it was that the following morning we found ourselves standing on a train platform in Cairo. We'd arranged for a van to meet us at the station and drive us to St. Catherine and then onto Dahab. But as we watched almost all of the other travelers disappear into the early morning haze, there was still no sign of our driver. Now, three armed guards were asking us to follow them.

At the front of the train station, one of the guards asked if we were waiting for a ride.

"Yes."

"Give me the name of your driver."

I fished around in my backpack and pulled out the name and number of the Egyptian company through which we had arranged our transportation. He took the piece of paper and disappeared. The other two guards remained close by.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"He go to phone your driver," a second guard said.

Phone my driver? I exhaled. Jeez, why didn't he say so? These guys were just trying to help us locate our ride, I realized with a sigh. This was nothing more than Egyptian hospitality. Well, with guns as props. Once we understood what was happening, it didn't seem like such a bad thing to have our own security detail. A few minutes later, the lead guard returned and all three of them stood and waited with us until we were safely in the van and on our way.

Shortly thereafter, we left Cairo, leaving behind a sea of brown buildings and murky skies. Then we drove for six hours, past Suez and into the Sinai, through a dry, empty desert landscape that became progressively more rugged and lunar-like. Though it offers very little in terms of vegetation, the Sinai is an important piece of land. It serves as a bridge between Asia and Africa, and between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and has a significance that dates to the Old Testament.

In early afternoon, we arrived at St. Catherine, a small village that is located at the base of Mt. Sinai, the biblical mountain where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments from God. St. Catherine's Monastery, from which the town's name is derived, is the keeper of a bush that is believed to be descended from *the* original burning

bush. The monastery is the starting point for tourists who hike Mt. Sinai in the predawn hours to watch the sunrise from atop its summit.

I gazed at the harsh, sunswept terrain and reflected on the fact that Moses may have walked on this very ground. What would he think of the world today, I wondered? The words and beliefs that descended with him from Mt. Sinai live on, yet several thousand years later we are still engaged in battles between religions and cultures.

After settling into our hotel room, Lisa and I went for a walk in town and, strangely, failed to run into a single other traveler. We stopped in a one-room store on the deserted main street to buy supplies for our hike. A flickering television in the corner broadcast news reports about the carnage in Sharm el Sheikh. We asked the proprietor, a local Bedouin dressed in a galabayya, a traditional white robe, about the news.

“Foolish people, those terrorists!” he said to us. “Why kill? Why? It is crazy!”

This was just one of a string of encounters with Egyptians who, like Mohammed the previous day, were suddenly very willing to open up to us. Many of these conversations were with people who relied on the tourist trade for their livelihood. They were despairing over the terrorist attack, and I sensed that in their anguish some of them spoke to us with a candor they might not have otherwise.

“You are Christian, I am Muslim,” said one person. “But we both have blood, we are both human beings. This is not Islam, to kill like this.”

To be honest, it was easy for Lisa and me to feel self-conscious when we first heard the news about the bombings. After all, we are citizens of a country that had enraged many Muslims with its policies, particularly the decision to go to war in Iraq. It would be easy, we thought, for the Egyptians to be furious with America and Americans, even if the recent attack was not directed specifically at the U.S. That is not, however, what we discovered.

“Look,” said another individual, “it is true that we don’t like Bush. And we don’t like decision to go to war in Iraq. But American people we like. People are not government. We know there is a difference.”

It was a validation, in a way, of our decision to remain in Egypt. We had some terrific experiences and conversations with local people in the days ahead. The Egyptians had always been friendly, but now it was as if they felt compelled to inform us that their culture and religion did not condone such acts of random violence.

That night in St. Catherine, Lisa and I struggled out of bed at 2 a.m. to head over to Mt. Sinai. It was hard to believe that just 20 hours earlier we had been standing on the train platform in Cairo. Improbably, we had still not seen another tourist since then, so we

wondered if we were destined to be lone travelers hiking the trail in the dark, chasing the spirit of Moses. When we arrived at the trailhead, though, we saw a few dozen other people in the vicinity, including a group of French visitors who had come on a tour bus in the night.

From 2:45 to 5:15 a.m., we navigated our way by flashlight up a gravelly track that climaxed in a steep set of several hundred steps cut into the stone of the mountainside. Along the way, we were kept company by Bedouin tribespeople who hawked hot tea, cold coke and camel rides in the moonlight.

Finally, atop the rocky summit of Mt. Sinai, we sat down to rest our tired legs and await the dawn. The sky inched its way out of blackness, with a swatch of crimson light peeking over the edge of the earth and glowing steadily brighter. It provided a glimpse into the jagged, ethereal landscape that surrounded us and, as the sun prepared to rise in the eastern sky, it truly seemed as if the mountain were being blanketed in celestial light. It was not very difficult to imagine Moses having a divine encounter there.

Abruptly, then, the sun made a dramatic appearance—a globe of fiery brilliance climbing above the mountainous peaks of the Sinai to a round of applause and gasps. There we were, amongst a group of travelers from the Americas, Europe, Australia and Asia, standing atop Mt. Sinai at sunrise. For a moment, at least, the specter of terrorism seemed far away.