

Discover Egypt

This historic country will leave you feeling more alive than ever.

WORDS CAROLINE RICHES



Image: Patrick O'Neill/Intrepid

Riding camels
in the Sahara.

Mummies, sarcophagi, pyramids and tombs – when we think about the Ancient Egyptians, we picture their afterlives. It's hardly surprising; this bygone civilisation spent their entire lives preparing for their demise.

Surrounded by death, Valley of the Kings is a dusty valley between dry brown mountains, where the ancient city of Waset (what we know as Luxor) gives way to the mighty Sahara. It's one of the hottest – and quietest – places on Earth. While the adults fan themselves in the meagre shade available, the kids gabble excitedly about, well, death.

"Once you died, they kept your heart in your body so it could travel with you to the afterlife," 10-year-old Brady tells us. "Then the god of the dead weighed the heart, and if it weighed more than the feather you were considered more wicked than good, so you wouldn't even be granted an afterlife."

Our Intrepid guide Walid seems to smile with pride: "Some children are so intelligent, they often know more about Ancient Egypt than the grown-ups. I really appreciate how they teach our ancient civilisation in your countries."

Certainly, all six kids – ranging in age from 5 to 14 – on our Egypt Family Holiday for Solo Parents tour seem well versed in the morbid process of mummification.

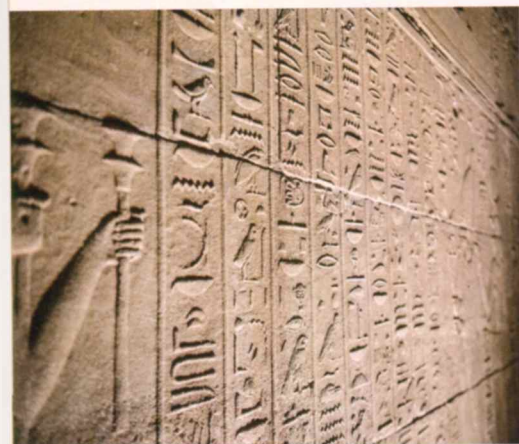
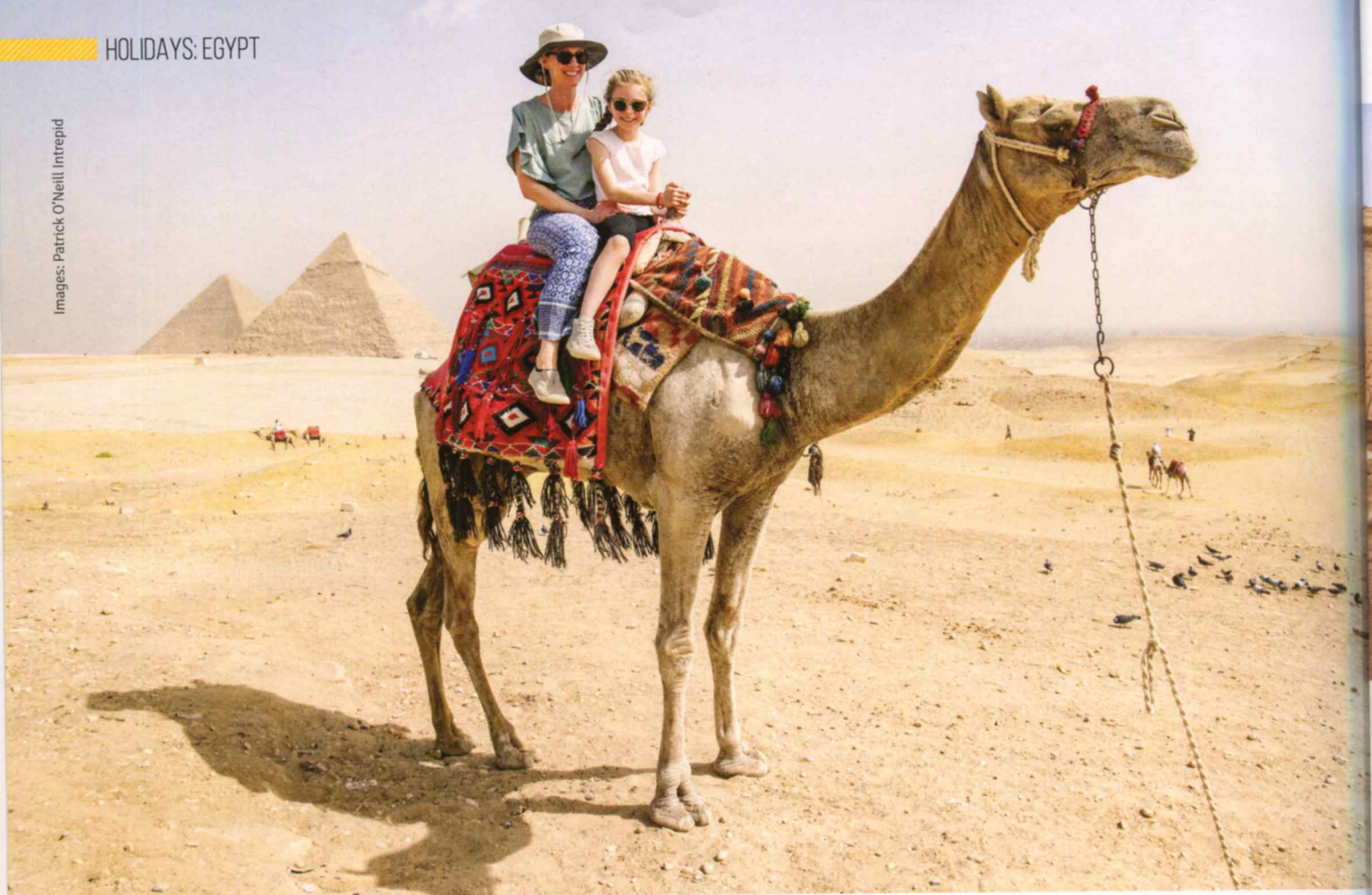
During our eight-day trip, Walid has made sure to explain his country's ancient history in an entertaining way for the little ones.

"We let kids take part as the pharaohs and the queens and be part of the story," he says. "They love the mummies and the pyramids and Tutankhamun, the golden boy."

As far as we're aware, Tutankhamun is the only pharaoh left in the Valley of the Kings. Hidden by sand and rock for thousands of years, his tomb was only discovered in 1922 ▶



Images: Patrick O'Neill Intrepid



images

Clockwise from top: The iconic Egypt shot of us sitting on a camel in front of the Pyramids of Giza; Walid was an incredibly patient and knowledgeable guide; our tour group at Abu Simbel; Valley of the Kings; hieroglyphs at Abu Simbel.

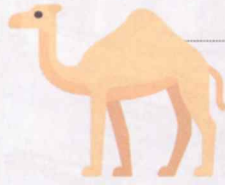


Abu Simbel was carved out of a sandstone cliff.



Great guardian

The Great Sphinx of Giza was built to ward off evil spirits.



Survival instincts

Camels' humps are made up of stored fat that they can metabolise when food and water is scarce.



Egypt

Head start

The nemes headdress symbolises that a pharaoh has left his physical life and begun his spiritual afterlife.

Making history

The oldest papyri ever discovered was uncovered in 2013. It features journal entries by the men who helped build the Great Pyramid of Giza and Pharaoh Khufu's tomb.

when British archaeologist Howard Carter first held a candle inside, claiming he saw "wonderful things". The dazzling collection of treasures found in his chamber are now housed at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, along with some of the Valley's famous former residents, including Ramses II-IV and the female pharaoh Hatshepsut. The museum's Royal Mummies Hall, which boasts the most important collection of mummified royalty anywhere in the world, has mummies going back 4500 years – a mesmerising attraction for kids and adults alike!

But seeing an ancient king in his own tomb is even more intriguing. Tutankhamun was just 19 when he died, and his stunted body looks sad and vulnerable. As the children take in the boy king's wisps of hair, his toes with jagged nails, his open mouth and his peaceful resting face, they can hardly believe they're staring at a body that's more than 3300 years old.

He's a spring chicken, however, compared to the Pyramids of Giza – one of which, the Great Pyramid of Giza, is the only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World still standing. The fact they're still around isn't hard to believe – what's actually difficult to imagine is how they got there in the first place. We gaze at the stone slabs, so huge and perfectly carved. Back in 2575BC, how did they move them?

Walid is full of fascinating facts.

"If the Great Pyramid was chopped into 12-inch cubes and laid out in a line, there'd be enough to circle the moon three times," he tells us.

Despite that, you'll only need a few hours to walk around the three pyramids, climb down inside them (at an extra fee), take a camel ride around them or just sit and stare at them.

Our week in Egypt also takes us to ancient temples such as Abu Simbel, which was carved

out of the mountainside during the 13th-century reign of Ramses II to impress those entering Egypt from the south. Walid helps the children decipher the stories of love, death and war splashed across its walls in stunning hieroglyphs.

All of Intrepid's guides in Egypt are locals with a thorough knowledge of both Egyptology and Islam. They patiently answer endless questions from the children on topics from the women's hijabs to the meaning of the call to prayer and what on earth the men are smoking in the shisha cafes. It's an appreciation of Islam we hope they will take home with them.

While wandering the souks, bunking down on night trains and drifting along the Nile on a felucca, Intrepid ensures a safe and informative opportunity to understand both ancient and modern Egypt. One of the best ways to do so is to drop in on some locals for dinner – a common feature on Intrepid's itineraries. We're lucky enough to enjoy an evening with a Nubian family in their brightly painted home on the banks of the Nile in Aswan. We eat amazing stews, moussaka and sticky baklavas, then dance while the kids play football.

Aswan is one of the world's hottest, sunniest and driest cities; some of the young kids here may never have felt rain. Locals rely on the Nile and its irrigation for life, as Egyptians have always done.

Life and death are Egypt's yin and yang. Here, living is always done in the shadow of death. Sometimes, however, that's the best way to know you're alive. **ft**



Go to familytravel.com.au for travel inspiration, ideas and tips to turn your travel dreams into reality. Be sure to sign up to the e-newsletter to receive the best family content direct to your inbox.

NEED TO KNOW



BEST TIME TO VISIT

The best time to visit is from October to April, when temperatures are slightly cooler. Keep in mind, however, that December and January constitute peak season, so sights like the Pyramids of Giza, Valley of the Kings and Abu Simbel can get quite crowded.



TOURING THERE

Visiting on a family group tour is a great way to experience Egypt. See intrepidtravel.com for more.



BEST FOR KIDS AGED

Primary-school aged and above. The little ones will enjoy the hotel pools, while older kids will get a lot more out of Egypt's fascinating history and colourful culture.



GETTING THERE

Emirates flies to Cairo via Dubai.