

Episode 88: Exploring Egypt

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about another one of their favourite countries: Egypt. They discuss Egypt's incredible ancient sites as well as its natural beauty.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about another of our favourite countries, and this is the one that I listed as my number two overall when we ranked our favourite countries in the fiftieth episode, and it is Egypt!

Wendy: So do you stand by¹ that ranking now?

Nick: I stand by it now. Yeah, I mean, look, we could have ranked these countries in different ways and maybe you wake up one day and want to do it in a different way. But I think it's ... I'm pretty happy with Egypt at number two, I don't think that's out of left field² exactly.

Wendy: No, not at all. Egypt was very memorable and we have very fond memories of it. Also because it was the first big trip that we took together and we were both pretty new travellers at that time. We hadn't really seen much beyond Europe and, well, yeah, I mean Egypt just has so much to offer and every single day we would see something new that was just so incredible.

Nick: Every single day. And so it actually probably set a bar too high for, almost for the rest of the world, because we thought, 'Wow, this is what travel is, every day you just do incredible things, see incredible things,' and, you know, it turns out that not every country has what Egypt has to offer. Umm, but it's a truly spectacular country. It's obviously very well-known and has fascinated people for many, many years and many, many centuries. But it really deserves every accolade³ that it gets, I think. And actually I remember our friends, uhh, Richard and Jo, they ... we were talking to them about Rome once and how much we loved Rome. And they said, 'You know what? We came to Rome directly from Egypt and then we were a little bit disappointed with Rome.' So even Rome kind of pales in comparison⁴ to Egypt

¹ (to) stand by (phrasal verb): continue to hold that position

² out of left field (phrase): unexpected

³ accolade: award, honour, praise

⁴ pales in comparison (phrase): cannot compare, is nowhere near as good

or it did for them. It probably still wouldn't for us, but, uhh, it just shows how amazing Egypt is.

Umm, so we started in Cairo obviously, that's where we flew into. And we spent quite a long time in Cairo, because there's a lot of things to see. And, you know, a lot of people dislike Cairo because it's very noisy and it's very crowded and, you know, the traffic and everything is a disaster. But if you really give it an opportunity, there's a lot of incredible things in Cairo itself.

Wendy: Yeah, I remember going to the Coptic area where the Coptic Christians live and visiting the church there. And, yeah, just lots of different neighbourhoods, different aspects of the city to explore.

Nick: Yeah, different markets and things like that. And obviously that's the base where you go and see the pyramids, which are in Giza. And so you can see them from certain points in Cairo, if you're able to climb up to the top of a certain building or something like that. Uhh, we went to the pyramids on your birthday, which was very nice, I hope, for you.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, that was, uhh, many birthdays ago but, yeah, it was a great one. Hard to beat, probably.

Nick: And I remember we ... I guess we left to go out, we'd sort of been and we'd been around the pyramids and we thought we could exit and come back in. And then maybe it turned out that we weren't supposed to do that. But of course in Egypt you can give a little bit of *baksheesh* (small amount of money) and usually get what you want. And so we were able to get back after they'd closed it, or after the last entry was already closed, because we wanted to stay for sunset if we could. Because it was winter, and so the sun was setting quite early, so it was still possible to see it more or less while the site was still open. Uhh, and so we got back in and then had this great image of these silhouettes⁵ of these amazing pyramids with the sun setting in the background.

Wendy: Yeah, I do remember that. And, yeah, there was something sneaky⁶ about that. I'm sure that we paid some *baksheesh* to somebody who let us through a hole in the fence or something along those lines⁷.

Nick: Yeah, exactly. Uhh, and so then we saw a lot of other incredible ancient sites as well, from, you know, from the Pharaonic period of Egypt, so if you go south down the Nile, you go to Luxor, which is really where some of the most incredible things are, because that's where you have the Valley of the Kings and you have the Temple of Luxor and the Temple of Karnak. And we just spent days and days there.

⁵ silhouettes: outlines of shapes against the sun

⁶ sneaky: tricky, not correct behaviour

⁷ or something along those lines (phrase): or something like that. See also: [Episode 79: Alternative Berlin](#).

You know, every day you would go and have a few temples on your, kind of, agenda for that day, and, umm, you just keep going and going and going. And I remember we met a guy who we were kind of friends with while we were there. And I remember he had to schedule himself a rest day because he he just said, 'Right, I've seen so much the last couple of days. Today I'm doing nothing, and then tomorrow I'm going to get back into it and go see some more.' But that's what it's like in Luxor. You could just spend days there and seeing amazing things every day.

Wendy: Yeah, and the temples are massive, and it's mind-boggling⁸ to think about how they could have built them, you know, without any modern machinery at all, just with people, and their bare hands⁹, basically.

Nick: Yeah, they're basically bigger and older than almost anything else that you see anywhere. So if you look at Roman sites that we go to a lot in Europe and around the Mediterranean, you know, those are, in some cases, a thousand and in some cases two thousand or more years newer than these Egyptian, uhh, buildings, and they're still amazing in their own right, but they're smaller and newer, for sure.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: Umm, and one of the other great things we did when we went to Aswan was go down to Abu Simbel, which is a famous temple with these four enormous statues of Ramses the Second, one of the most famous of the Egyptian pharaohs. And we didn't really ... I don't know if we really realised this, but basically at the time, umm, there were some security concerns around there, and they were only taking on the public buses four foreigners I think on each bus. And there were only two buses per day. And all of, basically all the other tourists in Aswan were going on an organised tour, and it was for sunrise at Abu Simbel. So they would leave at three or four a.m. to go for sunrise in tour buses. And we said, 'No, we'll just take the public bus,' and we bought a ticket and they said we were allowed on it, and that left at eight a.m. I think. And so we were going down the road, and, you know, it takes quite a while - three-to-four hours - to get to Abu Simbel from Aswan. And then at a certain point, we started to see on the road opposite us, all of the tour buses coming back, because they'd all been there for sunrise. And what it meant was, and it was a complete accident on our part, is that we got there, and we were the only people there, because everyone else had gone on this sunrise tour. And so we had the whole place to ourselves and that was just truly spectacular.

Wendy: Yeah, I think it was probably more of a budget consideration than anything else, because we didn't want to pay for the tour so we took the cheaper public bus, umm, but, yeah, it definitely worked out in our favour.

⁸ mind-boggling: hard to comprehend, overwhelming

⁹ bare hands: literally: naked hands; figuratively: without any machinery or assistance

Nick: For sure. And as they on the Egyptian tourism, umm, posters and things, I think one of their slogans is, 'Egypt: more than monuments'. Umm, because people are drawn so much by the historical sites, but it is more than monuments as well and so one of the other things that we absolutely loved was going to the Western Desert, and in particular the White Desert, and we'd never seen and still have never seen desert like that before.

Wendy: No, it's not, you know, the typical kind of rolling sand dunes that you would see in Morocco or other parts of the Sahara Desert. Umm, it's, yeah, I've never seen anything like it before. So you have these kinds ... these white, like, really bright white rock formations that have been eroded¹⁰ over time by the wind and the sand rubbing up against them. Umm, it almost looks like another planet. Uhh, I don't really know how to describe it other than that.

Nick: Yeah, and also the desert, the actual sand was quite white as well, and so it was just this blinding white everywhere you go. And then the sunsets were just absolutely amazing because there was ... you know, you could see the sun really setting over the horizon because there were no other ... there were no buildings or anything out there. And just the contrast between the white and the blue of the sky and then the red and all of the different colours that the sunset makes. Umm, that was a truly spectacular trip and so we were really glad that we took the time to go out and do that because not everybody does it, umm, because it's quite far on the other side of the Nile and you've got to, you know, make a loop around. And we spent, in all, going to some of the oases and around that, probably a week or so doing that, so not everybody has that time.

Wendy: No.

Nick: And so we were lucky to do that. And then on the other side of the country, in the Sinai peninsula, you've got amazing diving and snorkelling in the Red Sea as well, so that was something else that we did.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, that's true. Umm, and that is also kind of a touristy area and in some ways it's not really our type of destination, 'cause it's, you know, kind of a beach resort type of place. But the diving and the snorkelling is spectacular, when you get underneath the water and see all of the sea life there. Umm, yeah, it's really beautiful.

Nick: Yeah, so I think the resorts, or some of the resorts are places like Sharm El Sheikh and now you can fly there from Europe on budget airlines and things like that. We went to a place called Dahab which is more of a lower key kind of place. And the appeal of Dahab was that there's this particular snorkelling and diving spot called the Blue Hole. And it's quite bizarre because you can basically just walk out to it, so the water level is not deep at all, and then suddenly there's just this huge hole, and then there's just all this coral and all the fish and everything just gather

¹⁰ eroded: shaped by natural forces such as wind

around there and it's just this amazing place. And it's one of the great snorkelling experiences that we've ever had for sure.

Wendy: Yeah, the visibility is fantastic and you just see so many vibrant colours and the fish, and then in the coral as well. Umm, yeah, it's a whole different world under the sea.

Nick: Definitely. So to go back and revisit your question right at the beginning, after ten minutes of talking about Egypt, yeah, I think I'm happy with Egypt as my number two country that I've ever been to.

Wendy: Good!

Comprehension Questions

1. How did Nick and Wendy get back into the pyramids after the site was closed?
2. Why were Nick and Wendy at the famous temple at Abu Simbel all by themselves?
3. According to Wendy, why is the White Desert in Egypt different from other parts of the Sahara?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Taking photos against the sunlight is not usually recommended, but if you do it right, you can get some nice _____ of people or landmarks.
2. She thought they were very happy together but then he broke up with her. She didn't expect that at all and thought that it came _____.
3. She had eight children and once her husband left her, she had to do everything with her _____. She hardly had any support from anyone.
4. In Australia there are famous rocks in the ocean called the twelve apostles. There are only eight left now because the others have _____ away.
5. She said that being voted as the best player in the competition by her peers was the greatest _____ of her career.
6. They've said for years that they will not sell their house despite pressure from investors, and they still _____ that.
7. It's _____ to think how far technology has come in such a short time. Only 45 years ago, people were still watching black-and-white TV.
8. There is a replica Taj Mahal in Bangladesh, but it _____ to the Indian original. The Bangladesh one is a poor imitation.
9. I think he said they were going to Spain for two weeks and Italy for two weeks, or _____. It might have been three weeks in one country and one in the other, I don't remember exactly.
10. Monkeys can be very _____. If you're not careful, they will distract you and then steal food from you.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you been to Egypt? If so, did you enjoy it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Does the concept of *baksheesh* (paying small amounts of money, or tips, for small favours) exist in your country? What do you think about it?
3. Which of the two natural attractions that Nick and Wendy mentioned sounds the most interesting to you: the White Desert or the Blue Hole? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They paid a small amount of money (*baksheesh*) to someone at the entry to let them back in.
2. They took the public bus rather than the sunrise tour buses that everyone else took.
3. Instead of sand dunes that are typical in the desert, the White Desert contains unusual rock formations instead.

Exercises

1. silhouettes
2. out of left field
3. bare hands
4. eroded
5. accolade
6. stand by
7. mind-boggling
8. pales in comparison
9. something along those lines
10. sneaky