

Through the Middle East

11:30 am February 24th, 2006

Across the Middle East

EGYPT

My life in Australia is now officially over. This morning I stepped off the plane into Egypt.

My first impression of Cairo was that it was a modern version of Fez. Sand hanging in the air, diffusing the morning light, gave a misty feel to the city, through which even modern buildings, cracked and smoothened by the winds, looked ancient. As the air cleared, the city revealed its true colours, dirty and crowded, with ugly modern buildings built next to decaying beautiful ones.

I had an amusing encounter at the hotel, when the clerk asked if I was booked for the 23rd or 24th. I was sure that today was the 24th, so this question threw me out and I simply replied "I booked for tonight" to cover my bases if time zone changes had thrown me off. He replied "we are booked up for the 23rd". I said again, "I booked for tonight", and he looked it up and said, "ah you are here for today, the 24th".

Some history of Egypt, the first great civilisation of the world.

Egypt has had civilised life for 7000 years, which were solidified into eight kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt, and finally united by Menes in 3165 BCE, starting the Old Kingdom, centred around Memphis (was just outside Cairo, but now ruined). The Old Kingdom lasted for a thousand years through five dynasties (I get to see the Great Pyramids at Giza, built in the fourth dynasty), until it broke apart in the fifth dynasty, in 2180 BCE. Egypt was reunified by Montuhotep II in 2040 BCE, creating the Middle Kingdom, based around Thebes (now Aswan, in about a week I'll get to see the Middle Kingdom tombs). The New Kingdom developed in 1570 BCE, and reached its height of Mediterranean power during the 18th, 19th and 20th dynasties, from 1550-1069 BCE, but declined with the invasion of Ageans (the Egyptian Dark Ages), and was overthrown by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Alexander founded Alexandria, the new capital, from which Egypt was ruled for 300 years by a dynasty founded by Alexander's general, Ptolemy (apparently they Greek rulers were very snobbish, calling it 'Alexandria Besides Egypt' and intermarrying, only Cleopatra even bothered to learn the local language). Cleopatra was the last Ptolemaic ruler, she was made coregent with her brother Ptolemy XIII, and to gain sole power she formed an alliance with Julius Caesar. When Caesar was killed, she married Marc Antony as protector, but Caesar's nephew Octavian (whose sister was married to Antony) became Roman Emperor and defeated the Egyptian navy in 31 BCE. Cleopatra committed suicide with an asp, and the Romans ruled Egypt. This lasted until the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs (with only 10 000 troops) in 640 CE (the Fatimid dynasty founded Cairo in 969 CE, and made it the new Islamic capital, building many mosques and markets I get to see), then again by the Ottoman Turks in 1517 CE. Egypt was conquered by Napoleon in 1798 (who had an Alexander the Great complex, similar to Hitler who was possessed by the idea of invading India), but the British expelled them in 1801. Egypt became independent, but this only lasted until 1882 when the British occupied Egypt for

unpaid debts from the building of the Suez Canal. The current independence came after the 1952 Revolution.

Cairo. Anyway, I am in Cairo, the largest city in Africa, and one of the densest in the world, with nearly twenty million people. I decided to spend the morning looking at some of the more obscure regions of the city. I walked to downtown, seeing a motorbike accident, and the first of a surprising number of donkey-pulled carts (the donkeys were dressed up nicely). I then walked south along the Nile, lined with ancient fig trees and date palms, with half wild looking dogs, and cats sleeping on the side walk.

I was after the Coptic quarter, so once I walked far enough south I turned east, thinking to cut along the residential streets. The streets turned into small winding alleys, with blind ends and rubble-blocked paths, and finally terminating in a large wall. In the end I had to retrace my steps to leave, much to the amusement of two small children and their donkey. Trying another time, I bumped suddenly into a huge domed church complex. It was the Coptic quarter, occupied by Coptic Christians since Roman times. The Coptics in Egypt, like the Nestorians in Iraq, are one of the few surviving churches from the splinter ~150CE on the nature of Jesus (they maintained that he was human, but the divine spirit resided in him, unlike the Catholics who say he was both human and divine). I saw ancient Roman towers, the hanging Church, and the Church of St Sergius. Wandering through the complex, it turned into a maze of winding streets lined with decaying tombs. I walked back past St Sergius during mass, and a guy outside beckoned me in to have a look. I generally feel uncomfortable about entering churches, in case it is disrespectful not to pray, but he pulled me in so I watched the service with Coptic chanting and the heavy smoke on incense in the air. As added plus, being ultra-orthodox, they gave me bread.

08:30 am February 25th, 2006

Cairo

In the afternoon yesterday I met Michelle at the airport, then we walked into Downtown Cairo. As we dodged cars and walked through noisy crowds around shops, lots of people would come up and start a conversation.

One in particular was very amusing. He called himself "Mission Impossible", which he thought was quite funny. I waved him off when he started talking to us, but he crossed the road with us anyway and kept talking to Michelle. "Why does your boyfriend keep giving me the cold shoulder? You know people in Egypt are very friendly and open minded, in the tourist areas some try to get you to buy things, but outside the tourist areas many just want to talk to you, to learn about other cultures. I am not a guide or taxi driver, I am an accountant, I was just hanging out with my friends and I wanted to talk to you because you look like nice people."

During his friendly chatter I started to get worried, because he *hadn't* tried to sell us anything, so I started watching my bag and Michelle's in case he was distracting us from pickpockets. After maybe fifteen minutes he started to talk about places to eat and offered to show us a really good place. I relaxed, and we followed him because he was really quite friendly and it was enjoyable now that I knew he was just a tout. The place he showed us was really nice he talked to the owner and showed us the menus, all the time protesting to Michelle (and calling her suspicious) that he was completely independent.

When we agreed it was nice, but said we weren't hungry, he shrugged and said he would show us back to where we were. On the way he passed his "family's" perfume shop, where he insisted we pop in to meet his cousin. His cousin sat us down and gave us tea - Michelle protested, saying "really, we are not going to buy anything, so if that is what you are after we won't take any tea". I sipped my tea and sat back, watching as the cousin faked offence, insisted it was just tea between friends, and then showed us all the perfumes/oils. They were actually very nice, and if he had focused on me he probably would have made a sale, but Michelle resisted even "Arabian nights" (which he described as Egyptian viagra) with smaller and smaller bottles. Finally, having had a pleasant and amusing hour, we left the shop with smiles and waves (to their grumbles). The funniest thing about the whole incident was that they tried to prove peripheral things in the sales pitch, like showing a photo of Jimmy Carter eating at the cafe, and showing the cousin owned an American passport, as if these truths validated the entire story.

Calling an early night, I slept for twelve hours, Michelle is now passing the fourteen hour mark, feeling unwell from a Singaporean tuna sandwich.

09:05 pm February 25th, 2006

Islamic Cairo

During breakfast this morning we met Tamara, who is on our trip starting tomorrow, and is one of only four besides ourselves that are going the whole way to Istanbul. Michelle asked if she would like to see Cairo with us, so the three of us walked to Islamic Cairo, the old centre of Cairo dating back 1000 years.

Both Michelle and Tamara were given the hisses/kisses of appreciation from the Egyptian men, and many said to me "you are a very lucky man, you have two wives - how many camels?" which Michelle and I decided is play-acting for the tourists.

Islamic Cairo was really odd, such a contrast - ancient mosques from 200-1000 years old (including Al-Azhar, world's oldest surviving university at 1000 years), the old city walls with the three gates of Bab an-Nasr (Gate of Victory), bab al-Futuh (Gate of Conquest) and Bab Zuweila, and the Citadel, founded by Saladin in the 12th century. Yet there was so much rubbish, piles of it standing among the rubble of half demolished historic sites, streets completely filled in with it, the buildings were decaying and all was shrouded in the choking smog.

We walked through Khan al-Khalili, the Great Bazaar (built in 1382), avoiding being sold tacky snow glob pyramids and camel shaped handbags, and after a long day of walking we headed back to meet our tour guide. Justin seems okay, quite relaxed, and there are only a total of twelve on our trip, which should be a nice number.

10:14 pm February 26th, 2006

Pyramids

I am sitting by the fire in the Sahara desert. This morning we left Cairo, loaded up onto the bus and drove to Giza, which is now an outer suburb of Cairo and stops about 50m from the Sphinx. You can even see the Sphinx and the three great pyramids from the local Pizza Hut.

We had a heavy haze of sand from the recent sandstorm, which hung around all day, obscuring the view from the lookout, but we got to walk right up to the three great pyramids, with their flanking 'wives' pyramids (one each, except for the favourite wife who went in the main pyramid).

We walked past the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops). It is the oldest in Giza (finished 2566 BCE) and largest in the world (146.5m high, weighing nearly seven million tonnes with 2.3 million limestone blocks). It is a wonder of accuracy, built on a levelled plane so precise it only varies by 2cm, nearly a perfect square, and facing due north. The pyramid was found empty when broken into in the 9th century).

The second pyramid is that of Khafre (Chephren), finished 2532 BCE, the son of Khufu. It is the only one still with part of the original limestone casing, after the rest was carted off by Islamic rulers ~1000 CE to build Cairo. We went into the inner tomb of this pyramid, through a steeply sloping tunnel only about a metre high, making a long limbo for the poor Egyptians who had to carry the treasure in. The tomb was empty except for the sarcophagus and some graffiti by the Italian explorer who broke in in 1818.

The third pyramid was that of Menkaure (Mycerinus), son of Khafre, finished 2472 BCE. He was the last of the Pharaohs of the fourth dynasty of the Old Kingdom, and built the smallest of the pyramids (66.5m) in respect to his father and grandfather (maybe it helped that everyone was sick of working on them?). It was the nicest, since all of the tourists, and most of the obnoxious camel riders, were around the first pyramid.

The pyramids were magnificent and ancient, history on a grand scale. Napoleon described the pyramids - *"From the summit of these monuments, forty centuries look upon you"*, but I find it really hard to believe that he actually climbed them (especially with his short legs), so I'm guessing it is metaphorical, or simply pontificating.

We walked through the temple where the mummy of Khafre was prepared before being entombed, and gazed out over the Sphinx (Abu al-Hol, Father of Terror). The Sphinx was carved from a piece of limestone left over from Khufu's Pyramid, and is 20m high and 73m long. It had perfect features, amazing beauty for such an ancient statue, missing only the nose and beard from where Napoleon's soldiers shot them off with a canon. In front is a stela recording a story by Thutmose IV (15th century BCE) who rested in the shade of the sphinx during a hunt and dreamed he would win Egypt's throne if he cleared the sand from the Sphinx (he did, then he did).

After the pyramids we went to a perfume factory, which was like a group Amway party version of our previous sell. It was interesting though to learn about the 'Secrets of the Desert', the seductive perfume for girls to wear (Arabian Nights is the one for men trying to seduce). When women use Secrets of the Desert they put it on after midnight, with a dab on each nipple and one between their thighs, to seduce their husband. The lady said it is the reason for overpopulation in Egypt. It is made from a blend of oils, the most seductive of which is Ylang Ylang *smiles*

After lunch we drove out to the Western Desert, about four hours driving through a black desert (the sand is yellow, but the landscape looks black due to all the basalt rocks in the sand). We made

a camp and dinner, I am now feeling drowsy in my warm sleeping bag. I received many compliments for my green scarf.

04:37 pm February 27th, 2006

Sahara deserts

I had forgotten that camping entails waking up during the night with sore hips, and having to unentangle from the sleeping bag to go to the toilet. Still, it was wonderful to be able to peek out into the stars through the biting cold, and to wake up surrounded by desert beauty.

While driving through the desert today we came across dense fields of fig trees and a small village in the oasis of Bahariya. It looks like a ghost town, with acres of empty houses and plots on either side, but that is from rapid building rather than emptying, as the Egyptian government is trying to relieve overpopulation in Cairo by encouraging people to move (rather unsuccessfully), even adding a 35 000 Egyptian pound inducement (about A\$10 000).

We drove through the black desert all morning, until white rocky limestone outcrops started to mingle with the basalt planes. We stopped for lunch in the middle of the white desert, with a lunar landscape of limestone domes, ridges, towers and mushrooms. We went for a long walk through the desert, and Michelle climbed a couple of mushrooms, grazing her knee on one. I declined, saying it wasn't really my thing. Then we walked up to the ridge and sat down in the shade, talking together while enjoying a view over the spectacular landscape.

07:47 pm February 28th, 2006

Al-Qasr

I am lying on a rooftop in Al-Qasr, the prayers and being broadcast into the night, and the donkeys are braying.

Last night I watched the sunset in the white desert. Although completely barren, there were small birds catching flies, buzzards overhead and the tracks of bat-eared foxes (I caught a glimpse of one that came up to the camp at night). Michelle and I were trying to work out the primary producers (it must be microscopic lichen), one of the girls commented that we must be scientists because we want to know why. The guide didn't know the name of the small bird, so I dubbed it Michelle's Flycatcher, she wasn't impressed so I renamed it Adrian's Flycatcher.

This morning we drove across white desert, black desert and yellow sandy deserts. We reached Farafara oasis in the morning, and swum out into the chilly cold ponds. Also in Farafara we visited an amazing gallery, with the most beautiful traditional house, filled with sculptures and sandpaintings. Really beautiful work. Outside the gallery I bought a hat and gloves knitted from camel hair for the cold desert nights.

After driving through the desert for many more hours we reached Dakhla oasis. Dakhla has been populated from prehistoric time, through Pharonic Egypt and Islamic occupation. The village I am

in, Al-Qasr, had a medieval mud village, wonderfully preserved for hundreds of years. It dates back as far as a thousand years, including a tall mud minaret 800 years old, although most of the village is 500 years old. While a village, it was more like a tiny city, with the buildings all two to three stories tall, with narrow streets or enclosed alleys running between them. We saw the buildings for making olive oil (with the crusher and the press) and bread (with a mill for grinding grain and an oven), the madrassa and the stables (complete with resident donkey). The city is amazing in how intact it is, now empty except for the bats and woodpeckers, it is one of the most amazing sites I have seen in my travels.

Now I am lying on the roof of our inn writing, having had a beautiful meal, while everyone else is downstairs watching a movie and smoking apple hashish.

05:50 pm March 1st, 2006

Western desert and Luxor

Today was one long drive across the western desert, nine hours in the truck, driving over a long flat plain with a police escort. We finally reached green fields this afternoon, the irrigated land around the Nile, and drove into Luxor.

Luxor is built around the 4000 year old Pharaonic city of Thebes, the capital of the Middle Kingdom Period (recentralising after the collapse of the Old Kingdom). It remained the capital during the New Kingdom (1550 to 1069 BCE), when it had over a million people, and was an important city even in Alexander the Great's time, where he added monuments to Luxor Temple (which we are visiting tomorrow). On arriving to Luxor, we visited a papyrus museum, to see how papyrus is made (actually it was a bit like a cooking show "here is one we prepared earlier" crossed to an infomercial "but for you we have a special price"), then checked into our hotel. Such a pleasure to have a swim and a shower, and a real bed tonight :)

12:20 am March 3rd, 2006

The temples of Thebes

Last night we had drinks in Luxor, horse races until 1am for me (Michelle came in about 4am). I find drinking games unpleasant, people end up drinking more than they want to, people pressure them too much, and they dominate the conversation. I left bored and sobering up.

This morning though was one of the most magical of my travels. We started in the Temple of Karnak. Karnak was built over 2000 years, starting from the Middle Kingdom (c1965 BCE) to the New Kingdom and Graeco-Roman periods. I had expected maybe a pile of rubble, some ruins, but instead I found the most incredible intact temple.

Karnak was unbelievable, probably the most amazing historical site I have ever seen, humbling to my sense of time and place. The temple complex is rare in the number of different ages represented, as it was added to over thousands of years, building up to a complex 1.2km² in size. Entering the site was a row of ram-headed sphinxes (dedicated to the god Amun (originally god of

the winds and the air, a minor local god, made Egypt's national god in the New Kingdom and identified with Re, the sun god, and his consort Mut and son the moon god Khons). I was blown away by the size of the entrance, a wall 20 metres high, carved with beautiful hieroglyphics, still perfect after thousands of years. I was admiring the intricate carvings of dragonflies and birds and the small statues and temples to minor kings for ten minutes before I looked straight ahead and saw a gate through the wall with a row of awe-inspiring columns.

The columns I had seen were from the Great Hypostyle Hall, the largest in the world. The hall was of a staggering size, with 134 columns, each 26 metres tall and ten metres in circumference. The columns, so fat at the bottom, rose up gracefully, representing the papyrus stem, and supporting a row of stone beams which used to support a ceiling for what must have been the largest room in the world for thousands of years. The hall was built by King Seti I (1313-1292 BCE) and was completed by his son Rameses II (1292-1225 BCE) during the New Kingdom. The hall was staggering in size, before considering the age, and the enormous amount of work and skill that would have gone into plastering every surface of the hall, and carving beautiful images into the stucco. Where the stone is protected from sunlight the images still retain their colour, showing what a vibrant place the temple must have been when new.

Outside the hall were more small temples, dedicated to various gods and pharaohs, including the only Pharonic Queen, whose image was carved out by her step-son (upset at being kept waiting for the throne), and whose obelisk was encircled by stone to prevent it being seen. We learnt about Pharonic politics, the counting system (like Roman numerals) and offerings, and saw the sacred pond (representing the waters of chaos from which creation arose, and where priests bathed three times a day). Michelle and I walked through the site in wonder, then found a small niche, thousands of years old, to curl up in and savour the history of the site.

Linking Karnak temple to Luxor temple was a 3km row of sphinxes, still intact under the houses and sands that conceal them. Luxor was also amazing, a smaller version of Karnak. Luxor was started in the Middle Kingdom c2055 BCE, with most built by the New Kingdom Pharaoh Amenhotep III. It was extended by Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE), and when Alexander the Great conquered he built new additions to the temple, showing he worshipped the Egyptian gods (332-323 BCE). At the front of the temple was the massive giant seated Ramesses II, with obelisks and a naked Nefertari (his chief wife) clinging to his leg). The temple included an enormous hypostyle hall, as tall as Karnak but smaller in area, with only 34 columns (each representing a bunch of papyrus rather than a single stem).

It was hard to believe just how *old* the temples were. When Luxor was discovered by Islamic conquerors 1000 years ago, the temples were mostly under the sands. They found the ceilings, and used them as foundations for their buildings. They built a now ancient mosque on top, with the removal of the sands, the door to the mosque now stands 20m high. With the sands removed, the temple shows other signs of its age. In places the Roman changes to the temple are still in place - where the Romans plastered over the carvings and painted frescos, however these were not as permanent as the original stucco, and have mostly faded. There is also graffiti carved into the ruins from ancient Greek explorers, discovering the site two thousand years ago. A site so old that even graffiti written on it two thousand years later is historical...

Leaving Luxor we drove through the Eastern desert, in a police-escorted convoy to Hurghada. Stopping off at the time points, little kids with baby camels or goats came out to the bus offering to pose for photos. I gave one five pounds (\$1.10) and he beamed for the next ten minutes :) Now I

am across the road from the hotel after a dinner and a few drinks. Everyone else has gone to the beach party.

10:09 pm March 3rd, 2006

Hurghada

A lazy day in Hurghada. A morning shopping and by the pool, a nap and an afternoon drinking Sakaras. The others are heading out for another night at the Ministry of Sound beach party.

04:10 pm March 5th, 2006

Red Sea and Luxor tombs

large smile I just had an amusing incident. As I was walking to the internet cafe, one of the shopkeepers called out to me, "where are you from my friend?", I smiled and nodded and kept on walking, as they continued "what is a destination?". Philosophy instead of a sales pitch? I stopped, turned around and listened to the shopkeeper, a young man. He continued, "can I ask you what this word means? A destination?". I answered. He then pulled out his mobile phone and asked me to read him a message from someone written in English. I read it word for word, but didn't translate the subtext to him, which was, "I am pregnant, I need your details for the birth certificate and maybe for legal reasons and I won't ever see you again you bastard". He smiled and asked me to text her back, which I did, then continued on my way.

Yesterday I was by the Red Sea, scuba diving and snorkelling. On our first dive we went to a place that very commonly has dolphins, dove down, and saw many fish and a stingray, but no dolphins. Giving up, we got out of our gear and drove to the second site. On the way we saw a pod of twenty dolphins, he stopped the boat and we all jumped in. The dolphins swam over, under and through us, coming within a metre of me, it was beautiful and amazing. The second site was called the 'visual garden'. He gave us some fish food to take with us, and hundreds of fish swarmed in and ate out of my hands. I saw Barren Wrasse, Moon Wrasse, Bird Wrasse, Sand divers, Vermiculate Wrasse, the beautiful Spotted Sweetlips, Sunrise Dottybacks, the long thin Flute fish, Malabar Groupers, Redmouth Groupers, Scalefin Anthias (I thought they were two different types of fish, but they strong have a strong sexual dimorphism), Pennant fish, Crown Butterflyfish, Antenna Butterfly fish, Raccoon Butterflyfish, Masked Butterflyfish, Lined Butterfly fish, Threadfin Butterflyfish, a large Royal Angelfish, Yellowbar Angelfish and Lizardfish.

After the diving we joined the police convoy back to Luxor and checked into our hotel, walking through the ubiquitous metal detectors at every hotel and tourist site, that are set off by every person and ignored by the guards.

This morning I started with the Valley of the Kings, where later Pharaohs were buried once they saw that pyramid stood out and were robbed. The valley has nearly a hundred tombs in it, with no outward display, just a small entrance blocked with rubble. They have all been cleared out now (all but one by graverobbers, Tutenkahmen by the Egyptian museum). The valley is overlooked by a pyramid shaped mountain called Al-Qurn ('The Horn').

We visited the tomb of Rameses IV (20th dynasty), which was lived in by Coptic Christians ~150CE, and contains antique Jesus-graffiti. It was just a short passageway leading to a small room with a giant sarcophagus, but what was amazing was the carvings on every surface, hieroglyphs and religious scenes, all still with fresh colours on. The tomb was decorated with the Book of Gates, the Book of Caverns, the Litany of Ra, the Book of Nut, the Book of the Night, and the Book of the Earth.

The second tomb I visited was that of Rameses III (20th dynasty). This was a larger tomb, with additional chambers of mummies of muscians to keep him company. The tomb had a kink in it, as the builders bumped into a lost tomb while digging, and had to redirect their efforts. It contains paintings of the burial offerings, the king with the gods, the Litany of Ra, the Imy-dwat, the Book of Gates, the Book of the Earth, the Book of the Dead, and astronomical scenes. The third tomb was that of Rameses I (19th dynasty). It was tiny (it is assumed it was a hasty burial), but the paintings were the most vivid of all, and I could imagine the Temple of Karnak in its full glory of colour.

After the Valley of the Kings we visited the Tomb of Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut was the most powerful Queen of Egypt, ruling ~1500 BCE after her husband died. She made herself coregent, displaying her step-son, and ruled for many years, building temples and tombs, waging major wars and so forth. When she finally died, her stepson took her place and removed her carvings from all of her monuments. The Tomb of Hatshepsut is enormous, a three tier columned monument carved into the mountain, looking more like a modern five-star hotel than an ancient tomb. The area is now desert, but at the time she built a three kilometre canal to irrigate the valley and plant a garden, complete with trees imported from the land of Punt (modern Somalia, the tree roots are still in the valley).

Finally, we went to the Valley of the Queens. Like the Valley of the Kings, it is a barren valley surrounded by high stone cliffs, with many hidden tombs. We went in two, the plain Tomb of Tyti, and a Tomb to the prince Amunherkhefsef, who died when he was nine. His mother was so upset she gave him her tomb, then miscarried the child she was carrying and left it in the tomb to keep him company.

Just as a side note to the Valley of the Queens, Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian (~500 BCE) had this to say about embalming: *When the wife of a distinguished man dies, or any woman who happens to be beautiful or well known, her body is not given to the embalmers immediately, but only after the lapse of three or four days. This is a precautionary measure to prevent the embalmers from violating the corpse, a thing which is said actually to have happened in the case of a woman who had just died.*

On the way back we visited the Colossi of Memnon. The ancient Greeks believed they were statues of Memnon (slain by Achilles in the Trojan War), but they are actually the only remaining quartzite statues for a temple built by Amenhotep III. After an earthquake in 27 BCE a bell-like ring was sometimes heard from the statues, until the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus tried to repair the statues in 199 CE, and stopped the ringing.

08:47 pm March 6th, 2006

Aswan

We caught the train from Luxor to Aswan this morning. After the most amazing falafels for lunch, we drove out to Aswan dam, a large dam 3.6km wide and 111m high, which was built to regulate the flow of the Nile. It took ten years to complete, and was finished with the help of the Soviets in 1971. We weren't allowed to take photos of Aswan low dam (Saddam Hussein once said that if he wanted to destroy Egypt he would just blow up Aswan dam, wiping out the 99% of the country that live on the Nile), which was okay with me *shrugs* just a large wall.

The amazing thing about Aswan dam is that the blockade of the Nile created the enormous Lake Nasser, flooding many Pharonic Nubian sites. The Egyptian government and UNESCO spent the ten years during the creation of the dam to relocate the ancient temples to higher ground. We caught a ferry out to Philae temple, which was one of those dismantled and reassembled stone by stone sixty metres higher up the mountain. The temple is beautiful, and quite intact being a young (Ptolemaic dynasties) temple, which much added over Roman times (including a small temple to Hadrian). The temple is dedicated to Isis who found the heart of her slain brother Osiris on the island.

One of the interesting things that I learnt is that the original deciphering of hieroglyphic text was not just done using the Rosetta stone, but also required the Philae Obelisk (which like the Rosetta had multi-lingual inscriptions). Many of the god figures carved in the walls had been defaced by Coptic Christians who lived in the temple and converted it into a church, but luckily the place was too large for them to damage much of it. As an additional reminder for the bizarre things people do, a tourist group came in and had a group prayer / meditation - not in the converted Coptic church, but in the old Egyptian offering room. Very strange behaviour. Tamara later commented that at least having multiple gods like the Egyptians made sense out of evil and wrong, as the will of gods clashed, unlike "Our God". When I looked pained she said don't you agree, and I had to explain that I wasn't religious but I do agree with her analysis of one of the inconsistencies of the Christian god.

06:15 pm March 7th, 2006

Abu Simbel and camel safari

We had a 3am start to drive ~400km south, nearly to the Sudanese border, to visit Abu Simbel. The tomb was amazing, carved into the mountain side with a 33m high entrance way, with two seated gods, each 20m tall, on either side of the doorway. The large tomb was devoted to Ramesses II as Pharaoh and God, made ~1280 BCE. The tomb is aligned for the sunrise, on two days a year (20th February and 20th October) to strike through the entrance and crown Ramesses II seated in the holiest site at the back of the temple. There is also a smaller tomb, dedicated to Ramesses' favourite wife, Nefertari (out of his 40-odd wives) as an avatar of Hathor.

It is amazing that the entire complex was relocated up the mountain side during the flooding of Lake Nasser, and delightful that thousands of engineers spent millions of dollars to preserve such a wonderful piece of human heritage.

After falafels for lunch we went on a camel safari (dromedary) across the desert to an old Islamic

monastery mudvillage. My camel was called Fire, and even broke out into a trot for me. Then a boat trip and a stroll through a botanical gardens. A most enjoyable time.

04:27 pm March 9th, 2006

Travelling down the Nile...

Two days ago I was walking around temples and going on a camel safari. Today I am lying on a felucca, drifting down the Nile, the world's longest river at 6680km.

At the temple, a guard came up to our guide and spoke rapidly, handing over a sheet of paper. Our guide turns to me, and said "My friend here has just won the lotto, and they sent him instructions on how to claim it, can you summarise it for us?" Doubtful, I took the sheet and read, it was one of those Nigerian lotto scams, just send us US\$900 to claim your prize. I told the guard it was a scam, it seemed strange to me that they have the same scams here, and more obscene to swindle someone whose wages are about US\$680/year.

After the temple and safari we had dinner at the felucca captain's house. We sat on the roof, covered with sand and painted pastel blues and yellows in Nubian style (very Rastafarian). We ate a beautiful Nubian meal, sitting on floor mats and listening to local music. I held their child, Habib (which means 'My love', such a wonderful name to call a child), when I passed her on she cried, so I rocked her to sleep. They also had a little boy, Andrew and Justin played soccer with him, until he discovered the better game of throwing the ball off the roof and getting Andy to fetch.

Yesterday we set off for Luxour by felucca, down the Nile. We sailed down the river, tacking backwards and forwards to use the wind, lying lazily on the mats on the deck. I spent the day reading (*The history of the Arab people*, and the sequel to *The Number One Ladies Detective Agency*, a beautiful drifting novel), napping and relaxing. We didn't go too far, because the wind was too strong.

Here is an interesting story about the Nile from Herodotus : *One of the rulers of Egypt, Pheros, when blind after he speared the Nile in rage at a flood. He was blind for ten years, after which he received an oracle from the city of Buto to the effect that the time of his punishment being now ended, he would recover his sight, if he washed his eyes with the urine of a woman who had never lain with any man except her husband. He tried his wife first, but without success – he remained as blind as ever; then he tried other women, a great many, one after another, until at last his sight was restored. Then he collected within the walls of a town, now called Red Clod, all the women except the one whose urine had proved efficacious, set the place on fire and burnt them to death, town and all; afterwards he married the woman who had been the means of curing him.*

Still on the felucca today, we have had to turn back because the strong wind ate up too much of our time. It has been a beautiful lazy day, one where you cannot feel guilty by choosing between sleeping, reading or simply thinking.

03:35 pm March 10th, 2006

Down the Nile...

Another afternoon not moving much, because the wind was too strong to sail. We had a big party last night, most people tried the '100 club' (Beth, Gay, Justin and Andrew did it). I drank lots of wine, and with everyone drunk (except, oddly enough Michelle and Jamie) we had a bonfire, some locals came down and played the drums, I gave out izzy wizzies, and had a great time.

Since we didn't get far enough, we returned to Aswan this morning, and took a mini bus to Kom Ombo and Idfu.

Kom Ombo was quite interesting. It is a small temple, and young (~150 BCE, Ptolemaic), a double temple dedicated to Sobek (the crocodile God) and Horus (the falcon God). Being sacred to the crocodile God, they mummified crocodiles here, of which we got to see three, which was very interesting. They also had a 20m deep well, connected by underground tunnel to the Nile. The huge (~10m diameter) stone well had stairs carved into the edge, for the priests to walk down. They used it as a Nilometer, measuring the height of the flood each year (used to determine taxes on farms, as a measure for likely productivity).

After Kom Ombo we drove to Idfu, a Ptolemaic temple to Horus (~200 BCE). Idfu is the most intact temple in Egypt, since it was buried in sand for so long. Once it was found, they had to remove 400 houses built on the roof and uncover the sand. Inside it is completely intact, showing the full entrance way, courtyard, hypostyle hall with roof, and the inner sanctum. However the temple was lived in by early Christians, who carved off most of the statues of Gods, and lit cooking fires inside, blackening the roof and columns with smoke.

Now we are in Luxour waiting for the overnight train back to Cairo.

03:45 pm March 11th, 2006

What was in the tombs?

Overnight train to Cairo last night, still feeling stiff and tired. Today we went to the Egyptian Museum, to see the relics that were rescued from the various tombs (mostly in Luxour) that were not comprehensively robbed, with about 100 000 items. The museum was pretty interesting, but I am very tired at the moment.

The highlight was the Tutankhamun exhibition, even though he was a young and insignificant pharaoh who only ruled for nine years (dying at 18). His was the only tomb to be discovered intact so it is the only measure of the true glory of the Pharaohs - we saw his magnificent solid-gold death mask, his gold sarcophagus's, four golden shrines and 1700 other items buried with him (including multiple beds, jewels, statues, very decadent).

The other thing that was quite interesting where the mummies, there are eight in the museum (not Tutankhamun's though, they left his in his tomb - rather odd, if it is a sign of respect, then they missed the point, because the reason of hiding the tombs was to keep the body with all the stuff for them to use in the afterlife), including Ramses II. Ramses' tomb would have been amazing to see before it was robbed, considering the glory of young Tutankhamun, I can only imagine the riches

that would have been buried with one of the most powerful Pharaohs, one who built hundreds of temples, had 400 wives and lived until he was 98. His mummy was small and withered, still with wisps of hair. We also saw animal mummies, giant crocodiles, cats, dogs, chickens, monkeys, antelope and so forth. Oddly enough, the British aristocracy used to have mummy unwrapping parties. They would purchase a mummy that had been raided from a tomb, invite all their friends over for a dinner party, and then retire to the parlour to unwrap the mummy together.

06:21 am March 13th, 2006

Mt Sinai

Yesterday we drove from Cairo to Mt Sinai, across the desert of the Sinai Peninsula between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. We crossed the Suez Canal (which opened in 1869, and has allowed the intermingling of Mediterranean and Red Sea aquatic species), but didn't see anything because it is a highly guarded military facility.

There used to be Arabian lions on the Sinai peninsula, but they are now extinct. Herodotus' description of their mating habits may provide an explanation - *it is hard to avoid the belief that divine providence, in the wisdom that one would expect of it, has made prolific every kind of creature which is timid and preyed upon by others, in order to ensure its continuance, while savage and noxious species are comparatively unproductive. Hares, for instance, which are the prey of all sorts of animals, not to mention birds and men, are excessively prolific; they are the only animals in which superfetation occurs. A lioness, on the contrary, the most bold and powerful of beasts, produces but a single cub, once in her life – for she expels from her body not only the cub, but her womb as well – or what is left of it. The reason for this is that when the unborn cub begins to stir, he scratches at the walls of the womb with his claws, which are sharper than any other animal's, and as he grows bigger scrabbles his way further and further through the until by the time he is about to be born, the womb is almost wholly destroyed. In the same way, if adders and the Arabian flying snakes were able to replace themselves naturally, it would be impossible for men to live.*

We climbed up Mt Sinai last night, about a 10km uphill walk along the camel track, followed by 750 of the 3000 Steps of Repentance. It was night, but the nearly full moon was enough to see the way. An uncomfortable combination of being icy cold and hot and sweaty from climbing, followed by a cold and uncomfortable night on the top of a church on the mountain. At three in the morning hundreds of people walked up to see the sunrise, singing Christian songs. The sunrise was not very spectacular, and I asked myself again why I climbed the mountain.

The walk down was pleasant though, I took the 3000 steps down (I doubt that there are exactly 3000 steps, the sections I counted were not exact, using the criteria of a rise of 5cm or more in the central third of the path. I guess they may have used alternative criteria, but I think they just decided 3000 was a better number than 'the 2854 steps of repentance'). I may be unrepentant because I only took them down, not up. The desert mountains were very primordial and majestic, and I used the walk down as my justification for the exercise.

I caught a cold yesterday (which may have contributed to the misery of the camp at the summit), and I was very tired, so after the drive to Dehab I had a nap for the entire day rather than dive. I have a reputation for loving naps :)

09:35 pm March 14th, 2006

Red Sea Diving

My last day in Egypt was a good one. Last night I had a nice mushroom soup for dinner, and an amazing chocolate thickshake, which was pretty much a litre of chocolate ice cream in a glass with a chocolate wafer stuck in the top. I had enough naps during the day that I woke up refreshed this morning, even with the snoring of my new roommate Ken, and today I had two wonderful dives - the Canyon and the Blue Hole.

The first dive went really well, I had the buoyancy spot on, and the dive master afterwards came up and said I was a natural diver, he was surprised I only had six dives. The Canyon was nice, but being below 18m I couldn't go in (Michelle said there were pretty much no fish inside the cavern anyway - she had trouble equalising due to sickness, and didn't enjoy the first dive much). The second dive was at the Blue Hole, a 900m deep sinkhole in the reef. We swam around the edge of the sinkhole (I went down to 30m because the divemaster was confident it wouldn't be a problem), watching the fish dart out for a metre past the reef, then back to safety. There were thousands of small orange and blue Red Sea Lions floating in schools just off the reef. I swam into the school and they floated all around me, hanging suspended like golden snowflakes...

09:58 pm March 16th, 2006

Jordan

Yesterday we crossed into Jordan. While the day was painfully slow (waiting for immigration and the ferry across the Gulf of Aqaba), it does feel amazing to now be in a place with such history, in the Arabian peninsular, the very cradle of civilisation. Jordan saw the rise and fall of all the great empires, first the various Persian and Mesopotamian empires that fluctuated across Arabia, then the Greek empire, after Jordan was conquered by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE. When Alexander the Great died his wife was pregnant. His generals got together to discuss the fate of his empire, and decided to wait to see if the child was a boy or girl. A boy would get the empire intact, a girl and the generals would split it between them. Ptolemy, the general who took Egypt once the daughter was born also took Jordan. The Jordan region was later ruled by the Persian Seleucids and Sassanians before the Turkish Byzantines took over, and was then conquered by Islamic empires in 7th century, first the Umayyad Empire, then the Abbasids, Fatimids and Seljuk Turks (in 1037 CE). The region was captured in 1099 during Pope Urban II's Crusades, and recaptured in the 12th century by Nur ad-Din, Saladin and the Mamluks. Jordan was ruled by the Ottoman Turks from 1516 until WWI, where the Turks fought with Germany, prompting England to send Lawrence of Arabia to convince the Arabs to rise up against the Turks on the promise of independence after the war. They did, but England broke the promise, and ruled Transjordan as a League of Nations colony until after WWII, when it finally became independent.

Wadi Rum

Last night was painful with a cold desert camp and an ear-nose-throat infection, but I got to wake

up in the Wadi Rum, the desert valley where Lawrence of Arabia was based. He got first class Honours for his thesis on Crusader Architecture. This morning was spent on a jeep safari across the Wadi Rum. The desert is a yellow sandy desert between barren mountains, but the unusually heavy rains recently have caused startlingly bright green plants to blossom from the sand. When the hills roll just so, the plants line up and the desert looks beautiful and green.

We drove to a cleft in a mountain crag, squeezed in through the siq and found a 2500 year-old Persian map carved into a stone table, outlining water pools and tracks through the desert. We then drove through to see some natural rock bridges, Wadak Rock Bridge, Umm Fruth Rock Bridge and Burdah Rock Bridge, which I looked at and Michelle climbed. We saw a few camels, and some nomadic Bedouin with herds of goats. There was much for the goats to eat right now, with the rains, and they have some very clever ways to survive the dry years. One of the mountains we saw rising out of the desert contained an 18m deep stone well, craved straight into the mountain. The entire mountain was then landscaped with funnels and walls to divert all rainflow into the well. I walked up and down a tall sand dune (very tough), Hudson would be proud of Michelle for following the Wiggles advice and running up and then rolling down the sand dune.

Petra tomorrow :)

09:00 pm March 17th, 2006

Petra

Today was a wonderful day. Exhaustion and earplugs let me have a seven hour sleep through Ken's snoring, and there was decent orange juice with breakfast.

Petra *A rose-red city, half as old as time* (actually Burgon retracted the 'rose-red' afterwards, when he visited and thought it was more salmon-pink).

I spent the entire day wandering through Petra with Tamara. The ancient city was beautiful and wonderful. It was built by the Nabataeans when they moved from north-western Arabia to southern Jordan around the 3rd century BCE. They built Petra to control the spice, silk and slave trade routes through Middle East. It was a thriving empire, ruling most of the Middle East until 106 CE when it was conquered by the Romans. This was only just found out, when a letter from a Roman soldier to his wife in Egypt was discovered, talking about his time in Petra. The Romans had to cut off the water supply to the city and siege it for three years before they could conquer it. Once the Romans conquered Petra they shifted the trade routes through Palmyra, but Petra was still lived in until 555 CE, when a massive earthquake destroyed most of the residential caves (but left the tombs intact).

Petra is built in a series of valleys through craggy faulted sandstone. Gentle hills hit steep cliffs at the edge of Petra, we walked in along the 1.2km long, 2m wide siq (a rock cleft created by an earthquake). The Nabateans were a very technologically advanced people, with hydraulic engineering, iron smelting and copper refining. Along the walls of the siq were two troughs (which used to be covered with clay lids), one to pipe water into the city, and one to pipe sewage out. At intervals there were stairs up to the pipe, where sewage traps were placed to keep the system clean. The sandstone walls are very colourful, mostly red, but with swirls of green and yellow, where the dominant oxide changes from iron to copper or sulphur. There were icons to the gods of trade carved out along the route, and a fossilised fish in the wall at one point. The road through still

retains the original Roman paving in places, with large rounded pavestones. At several points offshoots of the siq were dammed, the original dams were destroyed by earthquakes, but the Nabataeans used them to control the winter floods.

As the siq ends, the Treasury (Al-Khazneh) peaks through the gap, and we came out to the beautiful facade of the tomb to a Nabataean king 56 BCE. The facade is 30m wide and 43m tall, and is beautifully carved straight out of the mountain in a fusion of Nabataean with Hellenistic, Egyptian, Roman and Persian influences. The carvings are beautifully intact (the carvers started at the top and worked down, so as not to destroy their work), except for the central cylinder, which locals thought was filled with Egyptian or pirate treasure (hence they called it the Treasury), and tried to open by shooting their rifles at it, and a few of the gods which were obliterated by Christians. The actual tomb inside the massive facade was quite small, the opposite of the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, with no facade and elaborate chambers carved into the mountains.

Past the Treasury we walked along the Street of Facades, with rows of Nabataean tombs carved into the mountain, each with a stairwell carved on top (the symbol of eternal life). Past the Street of Facades we entered the main residential valley, with hundreds of small houses, each carved out of the mountain. The entire mountain face was peppered with doorways, each with a carving of a stairwell above. From the residential valley was a long colonnaded street, with columns running along the road, and the ruins of shops and stores that used to sell their wares here. The road runs to the amphitheatre, which was carved out as a meeting place for business and religion in the 1st century CE, seating 3000 people, then expanded under Roman rule to seat 7000 for entertainment.

From the amphitheatre we walked several kilometres and climbed up the 800 steps to get to the Monastery (Ad-Deir), another amazing tomb facade (or a temple, it isn't sure). We walked back and visited the Lion Triclinium, Al-Habis Fortress (built by the Crusaders when they controlled Petra) and the Royal Tombs. The Royal Tombs used to be similar to the Treasury and Monastery, but are more eroded, leaving less detail, but still the imposing structures. The sandstone was impressively coloured in this region, such that some facades looked like polished marble, or abstract Aboriginal rock paintings, with the brightest swirls of colour meandering across the surface. I spent all my money on my first souvenir in the Middle East (and probably last), three old coins found at Petra, an Ottoman Turk coin (maybe 500 years old), a Roman coin (1500 years old), and a 2000 year old Nabataean coin.

On the way back we climbed up to the High Place of Sacrifice, with spectacular views of Petra and the mountains, and a sacrificial alter and table for religious ceremonies.

Turkish baths

Coming back from Petra I went straight in for a Turkish bath. We started out with a steam for half an hour, very different from a Banya or Sauna since it is not as hot, but so steamy you can only see about 50cm. It was glorious to feel the sweat pouring out, especially after eight solid hours of hiking. Then I lay on a heated marble slab for ten minutes, followed by a shower and a scrub by a Jordanian guy using a cleaning glove. After the scrub came a spa, which was too hot, and made me feel a little ill (I had to have a lie down because I felt like fainting), another shower and a massage (which I don't like, but everyone else loved).

06:51 am March 21st, 2006

Roman ruins in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria

The Dead Sea and Amman

The day after Petra we left for the Dead Sea. The shore of the Dead Sea is the lowest dry land in the world, at 396m below sea-level. It is quite interesting, because when plates are pulled apart they split to form three rifts which become deep trenches, then eventually seas/oceans. The centre of tearing of the African plate, focused on Ethiopia, has split to form the Great African Rift Valley/Lake Victoria, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. The Dead Sea lies in the continuation of the Red Sea rift (about 14km wide and 72km long). The desert lake has dried since then from the desert heat, so it is now so salty it is 33% solids (20x bromine of sea water, 15x magnesium, 10x iodine), and 'dead', since no fish can survive.

The Dead Sea was great, so much fun. We all went for a swim at the local beach, and bobbed around on the surface of the water. It was actually tough to stand up, since our legs floated up so well. I tried to work out how much lead I would need to scuba there, I am guessing about 60kg. The water was so salty it tasted vile and burnt our lips and eyes, but it was so much fun floating around that it was worth it. The salt was precipitating out on rocks and safety ropes in the water, which became sharp enough to cut my legs when I brushed past them, and I had really picked the wrong day to shave :) After floating, we covered each ourselves in Dead Sea mud (I got called naughty for slapping mud on Andy when he was trying to clean off), which was nice messy, gooey fun.

After the Dead Sea we drove to Amman, during the drive Michelle cut my hair with a Swiss Army knife, it turned out well even with the bumpy road. Amman has been continually occupied since 3500 BCE, called Rabbath Ammon 'Great City of the Ammonites', then Philadelphia after it was taken by Herod for Rome in 30 BCE. It fell to Persian Sassanians in 614 CE, and reduced in size and importance, only regrowing as the capital of Jordan. Getting into Amman we walked into town and back, then (being toured out), we ordered in pizza and drank Jaegar bombs (well, Michelle and I did). Osmosis Jones was playing (with Arabic subtitles), we had about ten Jaegar bombs each (and a few vodkas) during the movie, so we were drunk and giggling, and everyone else was looking at us laughing at the cartoon, and at Drix leaving the city via the bladder. I was drunk and happy, full of good memories, and I mucked around and flirted with Andy (which Andy and especially Katho found very amusing) - when I sat on his lap he lifted me up and gave me an izzy-wizzy, a very impressive lift from sitting. I had a really fun night, and a good sleep afterwards.

Jerash

The following day we drove to Jerash. Jerash became a major city under Alexander the Great (333 BCE), and was conquered by Pompey for Rome in 64 BCE, (when it was renamed Gerasa). Gerasa became a city of the Decapolis (a league of major commercial cities), reaching its peak in 3rd century CE with a population of 15 000 Romans. The ruins have now been restored are were magnificent to wander through, newly restored.

We entered the city through Hadrian's Arch, built in 129 CE for the visit of Emperor Hadrian. The entrance leads to the main market place, a huge round paved area surrounded by columns (all still standing). Small stalls for butchers and merchants were arranged around the market place, and from it lead the *Cardo maximus*, the main street (with an underground sewage system). The city

contained a *Nymphaeum* (public fountain), Hippodrome (seating 15 000 for chariot races), a Temple to Zeus (built 162 CE) and a Temple of Artemis (the Goddess of the hunt was the patron goddess of Jerash). The columns of the Temple of Artemis are famous as one is a moving column - it sways gently in the wind (I couldn't see the sway, but when I stuck my finger in a crack I could feel it being squashed). There was also a magnificent theatre, with the acoustics designed to allow everyone inside to clearly hear the person in the middle (with amplifiers surrounding the theatre, and all the design calculated to move the sound from the centre to the audience). They demonstrated the acoustics for us with an Arab marching band playing 'Yankie Doodle' on bagpipes, which was quite odd.

I enjoyed being in a city which invested so much in its public buildings, with beautiful carvings designed to last thousands of years :)

Syria

In the afternoon we drove across the Syria. Syria was a similar history to Jordan, since Lebanon and Jordan were a part of Syria, except after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire France was given the mandate over Syria, rather than the British (until independence after WWII). So now they have excellent desert pastries and people ask if I am French :)

Before the rise of Islam, the chief religion here was Zoroastrianism, the worship of Ahura Mazda revealed by Zoroaster three or four thousand years ago. Under the Sassanians in the Middle East it was quite a savage religion, persecuting other religions and worshipping fire. It was led by the Magi, about which Herodotus had to say; *The Magi are a peculiar caste, quite different from the Egyptian priests and indeed from any other sort of person. The Egyptian priests make it an article of religion to kill no living creature except for sacrifice, but the Magi not only kill anything, except dogs and men, with their own hands but make a special point of doing so; ants, snakes, animals, birds – no matter what, they kill them indiscriminately. Well, it is an ancient custom, so let them keep it.* They fled to India in the eighth century when they were persecuted during the Islamic conquest and conversion of the Middle East. Jadav Rana, the Hindu king of Sanjan, accepted them on the condition that they don't try to convert anyone, so now they remain a very small religion (they still don't proselytise). I think this humbling experience has been good for them, because they now focus on education and arriving at moral positions through self-reflection, so their religion has the highest literacy and tertiary education rate of any religion. Also, they firmly believe in the equality of all people, regardless of religion, race or gender, they are environmentally conscious, believe in charity, and condemn all oppression or cruelty towards people or animals.

Anyway, we didn't get to do much in Syria that day, because the border crossing took so long. We went to Damascus (Ash-Sham), the oldest continually inhabited city in the world (7000 years), in the Ghouta oasis on the Barada River. Damascus has been a capital for a long time, being a major city in the Persian, Greek and Roman Empires, then the Arab empire after it fell to Islam in 635 CE. In 1200 it was sacked by Ghengis Khan and the Mongols, then ruled by the Mamluks and Ottomans before world war I. We had dinner in the historic walled Old City in the centre, a great mezze of vegetarian food and excellent mint lemonade. The cafe was right by Umayyad Mosque, which is a bit of a floozy of religions, starting out as a Temple of Jupiter thousands of years ago, before converting to a Byzantine cathedral and then a mosque in 705 CE. It is where Saladin is buried. We went shopping in the souk (market), one of the best in the Middle East, an enormous network of covered shopping streets, and had Arab icecream, which was great :)

On a banner in the souk: *From Syria the country of peace and loving to the aggressive Israel and ally America... We are in Syria and the country of self-esteem and home-bred. We refuse to your democracy after what we had seen happened in Iraq and Palestine and now your democracy build on peoples bodies which you bombed on civilians innocents, and when the matter reached the council of security in the United Nations and how you used the rejection right (the veto) to save Israel for only a suspicious matter, and how American pushed the council of security to issue a decision against Syria followed by new decision even Syria executed the first one, but the Syrian people not afraid what ever the difficulties could be, and they are resistant by leadership dearest the President Bashar Al-Assad.*

Lebanon

Yesterday we paid a flying visit to Lebanon. We visited Baalbek first, which contains an ancient temple to the Phoenician god Baal (Baalbek means City of Baal). Baalbek was renamed Heliopolis (City of the Sun, it has 300 sunny days a year on average) by the ancient Greeks, and Baal was turned into Jupiter (and the temple converted) by the Romans. Baalbek also has later built temples to Venus, the Goddess of Love, and Bacchus, the God of Wine (who alone of the Roman gods has no gender). The temple was magnificent, enormous stones rising up to look over the snow covered mountains. It contains the famous six columns of Baalbek, which have never fallen over the 2000 they have stood there (since they were imported from Aswan in Egypt, being shipped to Beirut and then rolled 1000km through the mountain passes to Baalbek), with the Lion head gargoyles overlooking the site. Baalbek has the largest carved stones in the world, three enormous sandstone pieces at 100000 tonnes each, a fourth was carved, but at 120000 tonnes was too heavy to shift, remaining in the quarry as The Stone of the Pregnant Woman.

Driving over the pass to Beirut, I was delighted to regain my hearing in my left ear, which had been gone since Dehab. I guess I just needed negative pressure :) Beirut was great, originally known as Beryte, a modest port in Phoenician times (2000 BCE) which rose during Roman times with one of the first three Schools of Law. The city was largely destroyed during the civil war, but has been recently rebuilt. Now the city is obviously rich, with the main streets looking like they belong in New York, and expensive cars driving around. Yet there were still bombed out buildings that have been left, the old surviving churches have bullet holes in them, and the beggar children have no hands :(

Our guide left us in Beirut, so I lead Andy, Katho, Tamara, Ruth and Ken on a list of highlights that I wanted to see. Andy and Katho made up a theme song to 'Map Man', and we got to see Downtown, which was a beautiful cafe district (we had icecream). We saw a Knights Hospitaller Church converted to a mosque a thousand years ago, St George's Cathedral, the Grand Serile (an enormous Ottoman era building) and the Roman bathes. The city was very friendly, when we looked lost we had people coming up to us to offer directions, they all chatted for awhile. Katho asked for directions from one guy, who asked if we could ask again in Arabic or French, because his English wasn't very good, and a security guard ended up showing us to the Roman bathes. Tamara said it was the second best Roman bathes she had seen (after Bath), and told us how the stone pillar in the bath were built to support the floor of the sauna. The fires would have been lit beneath, and every night the slaves would have to crawl under the floor to clear out the ash. We really enjoyed Lebanon :)

Palmyra

Today we drove from Damascus to Palmyra, stopping at the Bagdad Cafe near the Iraqi border. Palmyra (Tadmor) was an Assyrian Caravan town 4000 years ago (built on an oasis 200km from the Euphrates River, vital as a watering hole in the desert crossing), and an important outpost in the Greek Empire. It was annexed by Rome in 217 CE, and became amazingly wealthy through taxing trade, with a population of over 200 000 people. As the most eastern part of the Roman empire it was only tenuously held, and when Zenobia became ruler of Palmyra in 267 CE after her husband Odenathus suspiciously died, she claimed descent from Cleopatra and rose up against Rome. She had early success, but the city was sacked by Emperor Hadrian in 273 CE, and has since been buried in sand.

We first visited Fakhredin al Maany Citadel, which was built only 800 years ago after the Islamic conquest of the region. It was a lovely little castle, I wandered around it by myself, poking into small passageways and admiring the view over Palmyra from the highest towers, cheering me up a lot. The castle was extended about 300 years ago, by a noble with visions of independence from the Ottomans. He made peace with them eventually, and the Sultan invited him and his sons to Constantinople to seal the peace, then hung them.

The city itself was amazing. It isn't strictly Roman, being rather Nabataean under Roman rule, with the Nabataean fusion of styles. It was an enormous city, with a 6km wall surrounding it, and a 1.3km main street, lined with columns (many of which are still standing). Only 30% has been uncovered from the sand, with the work still underway, but they have already revealed a Senate, bathes, temples and a small theatre. We saw the columns with Zenobia's titles carved on them, with one of her titles (Empress?) removed by the Romans after her defeat. The main street has an unusual double arch at the end, where the street needs to turn to the Temple of Bell (Roman architecture likes straight streets, so two archways were built, each perpendicular with the road they faced, and slight askew from each other, to give the impression of a straight road).

Temple of Bell was very impressive, still largely intact. Bell/Baal was the most important God in the Palmyrene pantheon), although Zenobia was also a convert of Mani, the Babylonian prophet (210-276 CE) who formed the major religion Manichaeism which tried to peacefully fuse together Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism into a pacifist religion (which lasted a thousand years before dying out). The Temple was converted to Jupiter under Roman rule, and later used as Church and Mosque, with fresco of Gabriel and St George, and a mark cut to indicate the direction of Mecca. The temple gate was impressive, carved with olives (the symbol of fertility), grapes (the symbol of immortality) and poppy (the symbol of medicine). The whole complex looked pockmarked, as the Ottomans cut out the rock to extract the bronze dowls used in the construction. A really wonderful site...

06:24 pm March 23rd, 2006

Two impenetrable fortresses

Crac des Chevaliers

Yesterday we drove from Palmyra to Crac des Chevaliers (Qala'at al-Hosn). Crac des Chevaliers was originally built as an Islamic fort by the Emir of Homs in 1031. However almost all the castle is Crusader built, as they vastly expanded the basalt fort with limestone in the 12th century, building a second castle around the first. The castle was built to guard the only significant gap in the

mountain range between Syria and Lebanon, and was the castle where Richard the Lionhearted was based. It was repeatedly attacked by the Muslim warlords, but was never breached (alone of all the Crusader castles). The only reason it was ever taken, was that after Saladin took back Jerusalem and the rest of the Middle East, and sieged Crac des Chevaliers for several years, the 200 remaining knights saw no point in holding out, and in 1271 surrendered to Beybars in exchange for free passage to the coast. Beybars let them retreat, but was so fearing a trap that rather than enter the gate, he tore down the southern tower and went in through the wall (this tower is now different from the rest, as he rebuilt it in the hexagonal Islamic style, rather than the round Crusader style).

We got to crawl all over and around the castle, through the dungeon and kitchens, the meeting hall, Turkish baths, secret tunnels and the round table where the knights meet on the roof. It was really quite spectacular, and you can see why it was never taken, rising up on a steep mountain, with an enormous outer wall, an inner moat, 13 watch towers, and an inner castle. Lawrence of Arabia said it was “the finest castle in the world”, which I really like, because it sounds like an opinion which is repeated simply because he is famous, but actually he was an expert on Crusader architecture, so his opinion is valid :)

After walking through the castle we had a mezze lunch on the roof, then drove to Aleppo via Hama. We only stopped briefly in Hama to see the *norias*, waterwheels pumping water up from the river to aqueducts to supply the city. The sixteen *norias* of Hama are the largest in the world, and date back to 1100 BCE.

Aleppo

Today we had a day to wander around Aleppo (Haleb). Aleppo has been a major city for 7000 years, making it the second oldest continually inhabited city in the world (close behind Damascus). We walked into the Old Town of Aleppo, which largely dates back 700 years, but there are parts including Madrasa Halawiya, which was built in the first Islamic century, making it over 1300 years old, and one of the oldest mosques in the world. Also very ancient is Jami al-Kabir, the Great Mosque, which was originally built by the Umayyads, although of the old structure only the minaret stands from 1090, as the rest needed to be rebuilt after the 1260 Mongol invasion.

We walked along the old town wall, 5km of solid rock, with seven gates. Inside the wall we visited the old mosques, schools, and Al-Bimaristan al-argouni (an insane asylum built in 1354). We visited the Aleppo Citadel, standing raised in the middle of the city on a 50m high artificial hill. The citadel is massive and ancient. The constant upgrades have meant that the current structure is about 700 years old, but parts of it are far older, including a 3500 year old Hittite temple to the storm god. The citadel door is wonderfully designed, being high up on the wall, only accessible by a drawbridge. Unlike most door, which face the exit, the Aleppo door is actually perpendicular to the castle in a niche, so that invader that make it to the door can be shot at from three directions (and have boiling oil tipped on from the holes above), and they only have a few metres to use a battering ram to knock down the walls. Inside the castle is enormous, housing 1000 people during peace times, and up to 10 000 people during war. There are palaces, mosques and bathes inside. The citadel was so strong that over the 7000 years Aleppo was only stormed successfully once, by the Mongolian invasion.

Aleppo was a major city because it is on the crossroads of two trade routes - between the Mediterrean Sea and the Euphrates, and Damascus and Istanbul, making it a major trading centre in the world. It has been estimated that during early Islamic times as many camels came through

Aleppo in a day as came into Cairo in two months. So the *souqs* (markets) were well worth visiting. Most date back from the 13th century and Ottoman era, with hectares of markets and 30km of passages under a vaulted stone ceiling, and many stone khan (commercial courtyards, a complex where merchants could bring in their camels, sell their goods and stay). The *souqs* have strong stone walls and enormous iron doors (which swing open to let camels in, and have small doors like catflaps for people), so that the merchants could lock up the entire *souq* at night, rather than pack away each stall. I went shopping with Michelle and Tamara. They both bought plenty of jewellery, we had 12 cent falafal kebabs, and were given free pancakes from a guy they smiled at. Each time we went into a stall to look at something the seller pulled up chairs and poured us a tea to drink, and we had wonderful conversations with the very friendly people. Tamara cheered me up by offering to buy me a present, and Michelle cheered me up with her humorous pursuit by an Armenian shopkeeper. Afterwards Rhys was telling us about an Australian he met who had been in the Middle East for three years, and was very happy to see Rhys 'to talk to someone who could speak English'. I commented that many people here had a very high functional vocabulary, and Michelle laughed and rolled her eyes, remembering my unfavourable comparison of Rhys's English skills versus her Armenian suitor. Syria has actually had the nicest, most charming people, except that if I am not there Michelle gets groped constantly. It was a most enjoyable shop :)

It has been interesting watching the scenery change over the trip - Egypt was solid desert, except for the irrigation from the Nile and oases. Jordan was semi-arid, with some shrubs in the desert, and moving up in Syria it became quite verdant (in Lebanon too, where I had the best oranges I have ever tasted), except in the east where the Iraqi desert started. Now to Turkey...

05:23 pm March 25th, 2006

Underground cities

Turkey

Yesterday we drove from Syria to Turkey. Turkey probably has the longest modern history in Europe, with cities in Turkey for over 9000 years, which were ruled as city states until united by the Hittites (2000 BCE to 1200 BCE). After the Hittite Empire splintered up, Turkey remained separate cities until it was united by the Greek and Roman empires. The Roman Emperor Constantine founded a new city at Byzantium, later named Constantinople, then Istanbul, in 330 CE, which became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire and the centre of the Byzantine Empire for 1000 years. The Christian Byzantine Empire was reduced in size with the Seljuk Turks gaining land in Turkey in 1071, and then the Fourth Crusade ('the Crusade that went wrong', as if the others didn't) plundered Constantinople and the Mongol invasion by Ghengis Khan destroyed the Seljuks. Osman (1258-1326 CE) founded the Ottoman Empire which took over the entire country with the fall of Constantinople in 1452, expanded throughout Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire was reduced in size by the independence movements started by the French Revolution (giving separate states in Eastern Europe), and was reduced to Turkey after defeat in WWI (would have been absorbed into Greece except Mustafa Kemal lead a War of Independence, finished in 1923) and became a Republic.

Cappadocia

We spent today in Cappadocia, a region of Anatolia (Asian Turkey). Cappadocia has really

interesting geology, tufta (very soft pre-sandstone rock) with coloured clays, limestone and basalt. The uneven erosion has given a bizarre landscape, with natural minarets, cones, spires and fairy chimneys up to 20m high, all crowded together to look like domed roofs of a crowded city. We camped in Urgup, which is very close to some ancient villages in the Göreme Valley (which have been occupied for at least 5000 years). The different houses are carved straight into the rock (it is so soft to cut out). We walked in one valley, beautiful with the apricot and walnut trees in bloom for the beginning of spring, with windows and doors cut into the walls of the valley, 100m straight up the rock face. We climbed up to a ground floor set of rooms, with a shared kitchen for the community. From the kitchen led several family rooms, and a narrow chimney leading up to the second floor, with hand-foot holes carved in the chimney so we could climb up (Michelle was very happy at all the climbing). The view from the top rooms was amazing. We also walked through a low tunnel to come out in another valley, having walked straight through the mountain. It was very impressive. The area was Christian after the 4th century, so there are more than 400 churches, hermitages and small monasteries in the area, all carved into the rock.

After sipping a beautiful Turkish lemon tea, we visited a pottery factory, and watched them make pottery in the old Hittite style and the Ottoman style.

Next we visited Kaymakli. Kaymakli is a huge underground city that was carved into the tufta by the villagers, so they would have somewhere to hide when war came to them (which it did often, being surrounded by Hittites). The city was started over 5000 years ago, and had been continually added to. There are eight underground cities in the region, all linked by kilometres of tunnels, with escape holes to the various villages. Over 5000 people could live in the underground cities for months on end, with the stores of grains and oils, wine presses, bread ovens, fresh water piped in, and 100m deep ventilation tunnels to bring fresh air to the deepest parts of the city. It really was amazing, an entire city inside the mountain, which could only be accessed by climbing down the 100m ventilation shafts, or walking crouched through the long entrance tunnels (only 1m high), which could be sealed off from the inside with large stone wheels. It really was staggering (and so much fun to explore), and I never had any idea the place even existed before this. It is also nice that unlike a castle, which can be used to protect and to dominate, this was simply a retreat of the peaceful away from war :)

According to Herodotus, in the desert near here, *round the city of Caspatyrus and in the country of Pactyica, the tribes have a novel way of finding gold. They go out into the sandy desert where there is a kind of ant of great size, bigger than a fox, though not so big as a dog. These creates as they burrow underground through up the sand in heaps, accumulating the gold. Unfortunately the ants smell intruders, and at once give chase; nothing in the world can touch these ants for speed. So the trick is to ride in with three camels, a male on either side, and the gold collector in the middle on a female who has just given birth. They come in during the morning, when (unlike the rest of the world) the sun is hottest, collect the gold and escape as fast as they can. The male camels get tired and are left behind, but the female camel keeps going hard by the memory of her young who were left at home, and thus a great lead is achieved before the ants muster their forces.* Oddly enough, this is thought to be true, which the key mistake being that the Persian word for “mountain ant” is very close to “marmot”, and the local marmots do indeed bring up to the surface sand rich in gold dust. We saw lots of marmot holes in the ground in the Göreme Valley, but no piles of gold :)

Konya

Tonight we are going to Konya, for a cultural dinner. Konya was the capital of the Seljuk Turks,

and is where the Whirling Dervishes were founded in the 13th century by Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. He believed that an ecstatic trancelike state of universal love could be induced by whirling around and around (like the universe). So with our mezze dinner (which includes all you can drink), we have whirling dervishes and belly dancers.

06:13 pm April 2nd, 2006

Fire and War

I haven't had a chance to update in quite a while.

On my last night in Olympos we made the climb up to Chimera, the Eternal Flame. My fever came back quite strong, according to Tamara, I only felt so very very cold. I wore nearly all the clothes I had, and borrowed Jamie's jacket on top of that. It was so hard climbing up the mountain side, even after half a day spent sleeping, but Tamara kindly helped me and we reached the flame together. Actually it wasn't a single flame, but rather the entire mountain side was covered in small flames coming up out of the earth. They are relatively small now, but thousands of years ago they were so strong that the ancient Greek mariners used them to navigate by. I guess for us it doesn't seem too unusual to see flame coming from nowhere, but for the ancient Greeks? Surely magic was then the simplest explanation...

After Olympos we drove to Kas on the Mediterranean coast. Our first day in Kas was okay, we sailed to the edge of Kevoka Island to see an ancient sunken Lycian city. There wasn't too much to see (pretty much nothing actually), but we had a nice day lounging around in the sun on the deck of the boat on the Mediterranean Sea. Andy, Michelle and I went for a swim and it was *very* cold. Our second day in Kas and we had a total solar eclipse. I kept on looking up, expecting to see the moon gliding towards the sun, but nearly being in the total line, there was no light to reflect off our side. There was no sign of what was coming, even during the partial eclipse you couldn't see the indent of the moon without the thick visor. A pre-industrial viewer would have felt nothing until the three-quarter eclipse, when the day became a little bit paler, and a little bit more chilly. Still, nothing terribly unusual, and then the moon snapped in place, and the sun was replaced by a ring of fire around a black hole and a sunrise ringed the horizon (I was surprised that sunrise/sunset was still on the horizon...). Three minutes of blackness, then the sun was blazing again. No wonder people invented religion, until science becomes quite sophisticated, you *would* have to invoke the supernatural to explain such an amazing event. If the sun can disappear, then why not anything?

It only confuses me that people still believe this now that we *do* have simpler explanations...

After the solar eclipse we hit the road to Ephesus. The truck broke down halfway, so we whiled away the hours drinking the 'Stone of the Pregnant Woman' Jack Daniels which was very amusing :)

Ephesus.

Our next stop was Ephesus (Efes), often considered to be the best preserved classical city. Ephesus was settled by the Ionians ~1000 BCE, and became a great trading and religion city. It was the centre for the cult of Cybele, the Anatolian fertility goddess who became Artemis in the Greek pantheon and Diana in the Roman pantheon. Ephesus was part of the Kingdom of Lydia, who were

apparently the first to invent coins (~650 BCE), and then all types of games during an 18 year famine, to take their mind off being hungry.

During the Roman Empire Ephesus was the second largest city in the Eastern Mediterranean (after Alexandria). The city was beautiful to walk through. We entered in the top half of the city, and strolled down the main street, the Arcadian Way. The buildings were mostly made from marble, which Ephesus was famous for, supplying it to other Roman cities. The Arcadian Way is said to be the first road to have street lights (400 CE), and other streets in the city have holes in the paving where temporary street lights could be placed during festivals. The Arcadian Way was the richer area of the city, with a small covered Odeon (with 2000 people) that was sponsored by the owner of the local brothel. This upper part of the city also had the senate, and the Arcadian Way meets the Marble Way at a few steps and the Hercules Arch to prevent the traffic of the lower city from reaching the pedestrian-only upper city.

From the archway, the Marble Way ran down to the Celsuis Library, which was built in 125 CE as a tomb to Julius Celsius, the governor of the Roman Province of Asia. It wasn't completed before his death, but was originally finished and converted to a library. It became the third largest in the ancient world, with 12 000 scrolls. Across the road from the library is the brothel. Excavators found a tunnel linking the two, and explained it by saying that the men used it as a way to surreptitiously visit the brothel, but recent excavations indicate that it is actually just part of the sewer system. The sewer system was one of the major achievements of the city, running under the road to pipe out sewage 6km away to the ocean (it was extended after several plagues wiped the city out a couple of times). Near the brothel is the Baths of Scolastica, with a *frigidarium*, *tepidarium*, *caldarium* and *apoliterium* ('changing room', but mostly used as a meeting area and the biggest part of the baths). The baths included a public toilet, with rows of toilet seats cut into the marble benches, so that everyone could talk to each other while going to the bathroom. There is also a larger theatre, seating 25000, and the Agora trading area for general goods, and a smaller trading area for luxuries.

We also visited the Temple of the Great Mother Cybele, later the Temple of Artemis, and originally four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Antipater of Sidon (2nd century BCE) described the Temple of Artemis in his guidebook, famous as the Seven Wonders of the World: *I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught (anything) so grand.* It was burnt down on July 21st 356 BCE by a man wanting eternal fame for the destruction of the most beautiful building in the world. This was the night that Alexander the Great was born, and it was said she was watching the birth and therefore couldn't protect her temple. The Ephesians announced that his name was never to be recorded for the act, but a visiting Greek tells us it was Herostratus. After Alexander the Great conquered Ephesus he rebuilt the temple. It was later sacked by Nero, rebuilt, sacked by the Goths in the 3rd century CE, rebuilt, and finally destroyed by the Christians. When I saw it there was only a single standing column left, with a pair of storks nesting on the top.

In the afternoon after Ephesus we visited Sirince, a small Greek Orthodox village that has been there since 500 BCE. We bought peach wine, which we later drank while watching *Pulp Fiction* in the hotel during a beautiful sunset.

Troy and Gallipoli

The following day we drove to Gallipoli, via the ruins of Troy. We only had a little while in Troy, because Justin said it was rubbish, but I loved the time I spent there. I was cranky with Tracey at the start though, because she said that 99% of soldiers before recent times were rapists, and when I said that was incredibly unlikely (agreeing that rap was very common, just not that every soldier did it) she said “well obviously we have read very different history books”. *rolls eyes at SCA member*. Anyway, there was a tacky giant wooden horse out the front (which Michelle and Tamara climbed), then we walked around the old ruins. There are actually the ruins of seven cities of Troy on the same site, dating back thousands upon thousands of years. The Troy of fame, when Menelaus the King of Sparta destroyed Troy to avenge the slight of Paris eloping with Helen, using Odysseus’ (the smartest of the Greek heroes) plan of the Trojan horse (which Cassandra foresaw, but was ignored on), was originally thought to be myth. However Heinrich Schliemann unearthed the ruins of Troy in 1871, and it is now thought that one of the cities (Troy IV) was destroyed in 1250 BCE, and was the setting for the Trojan War. With the trees mantled in spring blossoms, it was hard to picture the site of enormous carnage due to hubris.

Speaking of carnage due to hubris, we then crossed the Dardanelles to reach Europe on the Gallipoli Peninsular. The whole invasion of Gallipoli was just stupid. The Ottoman Turks had payed the British to build them two battleships to protect their empire. When WWI started, the British reneged on their contract, told the Turks they were keeping the Battleships and refused to give them their money back. They then told Istanbul to invade Germany with them. The Kaiser then treated them politely and offered them two German Battleships, and Turkey joined on the side of Germany.

Such a tragedy, in the Greek sense of the word. The British sent Battleships up the Dardanelles to scare Istanbul into submission, but the mines in the straits, supported by the forts of Gallipoli, sunk three battleships and badly damaged three more. More ships, lost than the British wanted to save, and hundreds dead. So on the 25th of April, the British and French tried to take the forts by land, to clear the way for the navy. The mostly British force, along with the French, Australians and New Zealanders landed before dawn on the small beaches, and fought against machine gun fire to take the beach heads. Tens of thousands killed in hours. It is often said that they landed in the wrong place, having to run up steep sand-dunes carrying 30kg packs and weapons, however it has been recently put forward that the Admiral in charge actually changed his mind at the last minute, and invaded there on purpose. The Turks were expecting invasion, and only the small beaches were poorly guarded.

Whatever the disregard for human life, the plan essentially worked. They took the beaches and the original positions, and pushed forward to the Nek, the highest point from where they could take the whole peninsular. The Turks were retreating in surprise until they reached Mustafa Kemal, who ordered them around with the famous orders “I am not sending you there to fight, I am sending you there to die”. Wave upon wave of Turkish soldiers went forward and died, on the bloodiest day 10 000 died.

Mustafa Kemal succeeded in holding the invasion back, and essentially during the next eight months the battle lines didn’t change again. Instead it became a slow trench warfare. The ANZACs dug miles of trenches, creating 372km of trenches along the 7km front. The Turks, to stop the shelling from the ANZACs built their trenches only 5-8m away. Close enough that they could yell at each other, and even swap food. The Turks used to throw tobacco over in return for paper, so both sides could smoke. Every night one Turkish soldier walked between the trenches picking up

tobacco and paper that fell in the middle. He was an icon to the ANZACs, who never shot him, until one day a new regiment moved in and killed him on their first night.

Mustafa Kemal won the battle, and the Ottomans lost the war. He then went back to Istanbul and led a war of independence against the monarchy, a long bloody affair, and founded the Republic of Turkey. He is still considered to be Attaturk, the Father of the Turks, and his brooding face is common on sculptures across the country.

Gallipoli was a very moving place. Quiet and still, the entire peninsula kept as a historic natural monument. We walked along the trenches, barbed wire still lining them, visited the graves and the monuments, and Anzac Cove. In the small museum they had letters from dead soldiers, men drafted away from their families, wanting to be back with their loved ones. There were piles of bullets that were fused together, as the air was so thick with gunfire that many collided in mid-air. A skull with the bullet still stuck in the middle of the forehead. Recruitment posters "Free tour to Great Britain and Europe – chance of a lifetime".

So hideous. I can't consider these men to be heroes. They were victims. 500 000 wounded and 100 000 killed. Lives destroyed in such a terrible waste. I just wish we could remember the horror, and never repeat it.

Istanbul

That was yesterday. Today I am in Istanbul. After a week of fire and war, we come to the cradle of culture. As we drove into the city we saw the Obelisk of Theodosius, the 3500 year old column taken from the temple of Karnak hundreds of years ago, were we were so recently. We all split up, and Michelle and I checked into our hotel room, then we met up at the Grand Bazaar. Michelle and I had a great time just walking to the bazaar, indulging in street food, and looking around. The actual bazaar itself was huge, a covered building housing 4500 shops. The labyrinth was built by Mehmet the Conqueror in the 1450s as a mini-city walled off, covering 50 acres and 65 main streets. We spent all of our money, Michelle buying an old prayer necklace from an antique store, me buying a shirt and a couple of old Russian and Turkish coins. Just as well, because I lost my wallet afterwards, and I only wish I had spent that last \$40 too :) We had a great dinner out, although I did get worried when Michelle didn't come home to the hotel room – she stayed out too late and got locked out, and had to spend the night in the truck.

Today Michelle, Tamara and I explored Sultanahmet, the centre of the city. We started with the Topkapi Palace, built by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1453. The Sultans lived in it until the 19th century, and it housed 40 000 people (175 acre complex). The complex was huge, with the most beautiful buildings. We walked through the Harem, and visited the museum where hairs from the beard of Muhammed, along with his bow and sword, and the swords of his successors, the first four Imams, were kept, with a rotation of mullahs constantly praying over them. We also visited a museum with the costumes of the Sultans, preserved thanks to the tradition of packing away the clothes of each Sultan when he died to preserve them (no Sultana clothes are there, because these were considered their private property to be given to relatives when they died, rather than belongings of the state).

After the Topkapi Palace we walked through Aya Sofya, the Church of the Holy Wisdom. It was built in 532 CE by Emperor Justinian, and was the largest church in the world for 1000 years. It has a massive dome and four minarets (added 1000 years later when it was converted to a mosque), although much of the original gold and marble was plundered during the Fourth Crusade.

Wandering around inside it is amazing at just how huge it is. Rooms that would be the size of a Cathedral in England are simply balconies overlooking the main congregation underneath the dome. Westminster Abbey would probably fit inside the main room. It isn't so much a beautiful building, being rather crude and blocky in a way, as awe-inspiring in its sheer size.

After Aye Sofya we visited its sister shrine, the Blue Mosque. The Blue Mosque is very similar in design, just across the a boulevard with a fountain from Aye Sofya. It was built during 1609-1619 by Sultan Ahmet I and his architect Mehmet Aga (he was the Sultan who caused a scandal by entering into a monogamous relationship and having multiple children from the same woman). It has seven slender minarets (there was only meant to be six, but he built a seventh to make up for an insult to the authorities at Mecca), and thirty domes and half domes, but with one main dome like Aye Sofya. The blue tiles were made in the famous Iznik factories, and Sultan Ahmet banned them from making tiles for anyone else. It was an active mosque, so we didn't feel comfortable interrupting people's prayers, and quickly left.

After an exhausting week we frittered away the afternoon sitting in cafes and drinking many litres of water.

07:20 pm April 3rd, 2006

Bosfori Express

Last night was my last in Istanbul. Goodbye to Michelle, the last of my friends to leave. Goodbye to Tamara, a wonderful new friend. She gave me her Lemony Snicket badge to give me good luck, which was really sweet, and walked me to the train station to wave me goodbye at the station.

At the Istanbul train station:

Could I please get a ticket to Veliko Tarnovo?

Oh no, the Bosfori Express line is being fixed, it is not going to Veliko Tarnovo for a month or so. It gets as far as Dimitrovgrad or Stara Zagora.

Can I get to Veliko Tarnovo from there?

shrugs Who knows? It is Bulgaria.

So I hop on the Bosfori Express with Andy and Katho (Ruth decides that it is pushing it too much for her return to Istanbul), into a beautiful three-bedroom sleeper room. Fake wood lining, sheets and blankets, a small cabinet with a mirror, the train is deluxe. I sleep on the top bunk, and strap myself in to not fall out (remembering people with bunk-bed confidence due to a bunk full of toys). About three in the morning we are woken up to hop off the train, emigrate from Turkey, then keep on going. The Bulgarians are kind enough to do their passport control on the train.

This morning I wake up to knocking at the door - "Stara Zagora". We pack our bags and hop off in a city (the third largest in Bulgaria) that none of us had ever heard of. At the train station they sell us tickets to Veliko Tarnovo with no issues, and we wander off for breakfast (pizza and fruit salad). We all have a favourable impression of Bulgaria at this stage, enjoy a slow breakfast and wander back down to the train.

A three hour train to Veliko Tarnovo is charming, with a kind Bulgarian lady showing us to the train, then sharing a compartment with us. She talks to us in English, and looks like us when we don't understand. When Katho looks up "thank you" in Bulgarian she beams at us. A young guy hops on, she talks rapidly to him, and he turns to us and says "I can speak English no problems". He is studying to be a tour guide (speaking Bulgarian, Russian, German, Italian, English and a little Polish and Slovakian), and has lived for a while in the US. He tells us about the great parties at the Black Sea coast, how he loves all the European girls (but not Bulgarian girls), and about his weightlifting (he has enormous arms). When I reply to his questions that I am a scientist, he asks if I know anything about Finnish genetics, and we have a conversation *smiles*. We share chips and the old lady shares pretzels, then he hops off and another young guy hops on. He also chats to us, but with very poor English.

To define very poor English: he was able to communicate to us that he was a final year Philosophy major, he favourite philosopher is Plato (he doesn't like Democritus because he is materialistic rather than idealistic), he has worked in Greece (being half Greek), and doesn't like Bulgarian because the people don't study philosophy or science enough, and the skinheads are racist against the Turks, Muslims, Russians and Macadonians. The most charming thing about our conversation is that Bulgarians nod their head for no and shake their head for yes, which is very confusing even if you know it is happening. The one thing you assume is universal...

He told us that it is ironic that with Bulgaria joining the EU, they have a far longer history than most of Europe, being an empire when most of Europe was only tribes, yet they have a much lower standard of living. The first Bulgarian empire was actually formed in 681, after the collapse of the Roman empire, and was independent until 1014, when it was conquered by the Byzantines. It became independent again in 1185 (the second Bulgarian empire, of which Veliko Tarnovo was the capital), until 1396, when the Ottoman Empire absorbed Bulgaria until 1878 (after the French revolution swept across Europe). It allied with the Nazis in WWII, but Tsar Boris III refused to send the 50 000 Bulgarian Jews to concentration camps, and swapped sides to the USSR before the end of the War. Bulgaria became an independent communist state after the war, and a democracy in 1989.

Now we are in Veliko Tarnovo. He made it to the Hostel with the lightning beginning (first rain of the trip), with a charming hostess and empty rooms. We walked through the city with beautiful cobblestone roads and well-dressed people (a European city in an ancient capital), then settled down to dinner.

By the start of dinner, with the amazing view out the window over the Yantra River Gorge, with old houses clinging to the side of the cliffs and a river meandering below (interestingly, Meander was a river by Ephesus, the word meander comes from the description of the flow of the Meander River), I was in love with Bulgaria. By the end of dinner, with a wonderful vegetarian lasagne and many beers with Andy and Katho for \$7, I was avidly reading the Veliko Tarnovo real estate classifieds. Maybe at the least I could have a summer house here? For under A\$100 000 I could have a beautiful house overlooking the 5th-17th century Tsarevets Fortress... I could live and work in Germany (a nice snazzy downtown apartment in East Berlin - according to Tamara one of the ways you know you are in East Berlin and not West Berlin is that the green walking men are wearing formal hats), and have getaways in Bulgaria...

09:06 pm **April 4th, 2006**

Back on the Bosfori

I am on the Bosfori Express, headed back to Istanbul. I said goodbye to Andy and Katho and now I am travelling by myself again.

We had a really good day exploring Veliko Tarnovo together. Last night we finished up with a few beers on the balcony of Hikers Hostel (the three of us were the only ones staying there at the moment) and chatting to the guy who works there (he said he is incredibly bored at work with no one there). We had a view of the castle and watched the sound and light show *rolls eyes*

Andy said he expected more lasers.

A good night's sleep and a nice shower work wonders, and this morning I was ready to look around.

We walked down to the Tsarvets Fort and as we walked in the gates Katho and I were disgusted by the hideous contraption that played piped medieval music and had corney moving dummies of the King and Queen inviting us to explore. Andy said that it was enchanting, and better than Katho's favourite ride at Disneyland.

The fort is very large, an entire hill walled off, enclosing the ruins of 400 houses and a score of churches. We walked along the walls to Baldwin's Tower, climbed through the ruins, saw lizards scurrying and the execution rock. the most bizarre was the 1000+ year old Patriarch's Church in the centre, which was restored ten years ago and turned into a museum. During the restoration they covered the inside with bizarre paintings, a dark and twisted modern depiction of the bible, closer to the 'Scream' than to religious paintings.

After Tsarvets we caught a taxi to the nearby town of Ammervasi, where we wandered around and saw the Nativity Church, unusual because it was built during Ottoman occupation of Bulgaria, and they insisted on no dome or cross, and the building had to be lower than a Turkish soldier on a horse holding up his sword. To make up for the low long building, they covered the inside with paintings, thousands covering the surface from the Old and New Testaments and of saints. The paintings are unique in their deviations from orthodox traditions, and some are heretical, such as a wheel of life hinting at reincarnation, and the unusual depictions of god.

We took a nature walk back from Ammervasi to Veliko Tarnovo. Katho was sad that a bear cub didn't jump out and attack her with hugs during the walk. We saw St Dimitri's church, where the rebellion to start the second Bulgarian Empire was started, and had an excellent dinner before I had to leave.

08:40 pm April 5th, 2006

Frankfurt and home?

Germany today. In the financial capital Frankfurt. Sure, usually people don't *visit* Frankfurt - in fact only a dozen people had luggage to pick up, the rest were flying through or had business suits and a carry-on brief case. But I love being in Germany. I love the old bare trees just about to bloom with spring, the pigeons and sparrows being indigenous, little girls running around with thick coats on. I love being in a sophisticated cafe-culture city, with an old town centre carefully reconstructed after the war, with some five hundred year old buildings around. I love having an entire street full of museums and a statue that looks historic but spurts out water on the side walk at random times. An intellectual city with class.

Tomorrow Seattle, which I guess means home now.