

Cairo's other pyramids

Cairo is so famously chaotic that after a quick look at the Great Pyramid and Tutankhamun's treasures most people flee for the relative calm of Luxor. But they're missing a trick. Tutankhamun was a fine lad, I'm sure, but he didn't do much apart from, well, die. Suffering just a little from lifelong overdosing on Tutankhamun, I set off in search of a different pharaoh, the amazing but virtually unheard of Snofru (or Sneferu), who built three enormous pyramids that nobody ever bothers to look at.

We take the wonderful road that runs south of Cairo through the lush green Nile valley, my all-time favourite road, because beyond the palm trees is the desert, the necropolis of Memphis and the other pyramids that are Egypt's best-kept secret. Ancient Egypt proper begins at **Saqqara**, where we stop to look at the **Step Pyramid of Djoser**, the first building to make extensive use of stone.

Until then, a dead pharaoh was buried under a mastaba – a huge two-storey oblong made of mud bricks. It was around 2700BC that Djoser's vizier-cum-physician, Imhotep, had the wizard idea of stacking three mastabas on top of each other to create the first pyramid. Saqqara is a vast site, magical and mysterious, but there's hardly anybody here: the splendid new Imhotep Museum is deserted.

To see the next-oldest pyramid, knocked up by Snofru about 4,600 years ago, means driving further south, into the Fayum oasis, well off the beaten track. The roads are just wonderful, busy with country people and animals for the date harvest. I spot a water wheel still turned by a blindfold ox after all these years, and mud-brick pigeon houses just like they built in antiquity. Things change in Egypt, but nothing ever changes much: driving down this road still feels remarkably like travelling through ancient Egypt.

Eventually, we reach the sleepy village of Meidum, where goats loiter in the street, and we can see Snofru's weird three-stepped tower sticking up above the palm trees. Snofru was trying to put up a true pyramid here, with smooth sides, but his experiment failed when the outermost layer of stones collapsed. What is left is an imposing ruin with a mound of debris at the base, hence the name: the Collapsed Pyramid.

Near the top, pigeons flutter into a hole, their nesting place for 4,000 years. At the entrance for humans, 65ft off the ground, I take my last gulp of fresh air and crawl down a long, sloping passage barely one yard wide. Then I'm in a horizontal corridor, grateful for the invention of electric light and praying like mad for no power cuts. Before long, I'm standing in the burial chamber, admiring a fine vaulted and corbelled roof 50ft high. In the heart of the pyramid, it's stiflingly hot, totally creepy but totally wonderful, literally breathtaking, and again we have it all to ourselves.

The pigeons stayed at Meidum, but Snofru abandoned his rather big mistake and went back to the drawing board. In fact, he moved his entire outfit back up the road to **Dahshur**, where he built "the city of the two pyramids".

The Dahshur pyramid field has a remote air today, with nothing left of the mud-brick city, but Snofru's vast stacks of stones are still standing. However, the next great pyramid experiment also went badly wrong. Ominous cracks in the internal chamber meant a drastic change of design, reducing the angle from halfway up by about 10 degrees, which explains why it's called the **Bent Pyramid**. Snofru was making progress, though: at least his new pyramid didn't fall down.

We walk round the outside, looking at the smooth, white limestone outer casing, which survives almost intact, showing how the Big Three at Giza must have shone in their prime. A hot breeze blows across the desert. There's no sound but the police camels groaning, and not a Nikon in sight. In the near distance is the forbidding ruin of the Black Pyramid of Amenemhet III – off limits to visitors, in a military zone. We can, however, get right inside Snofru's third creation, which did not collapse or need bending: the **Red Pyramid**.

It's not the biggest – a mere 343ft high – and its outer casing has vanished, but – third time lucky for Snofru – this was the world's first successful smooth-sided pyramid. Built using a plumb bob, without the advantage of pulleys, its construction is more accurate than that of many modern skyscrapers. The locals have ditched the old name of Shining Pyramid North, in favour of the Bat Pyramid. Wondering why, we squeeze down the steeply sloping entrance corridor that leads to the first of three chambers. There's an echo, a distant crash, then silence.

I can hear my heart beating as I stand in the burial chamber, inhaling essence of bat droppings matured for 4,000 years.

Why Snofru needed three pyramids is a question nobody can answer, but he was probably buried right here. I certainly feel as if his ghost is breathing down my neck. The benevolent Snofru's sheer power shows in the astonishing mass of his absolutely monster pyramids at Dahshur and Meidum. He must have used the stars to mark out their plans, but the structures have been there so long, the stars have changed position in the sky. To build them, he shifted a total of 124m cubic feet of stone, exceeding the mass of the Great Pyramid of Giza. That makes Snofru, not his more famous – and proverbially nasty – son Cheops, the greatest pyramid-builder of all time. In hieroglyphs, Snofru's name ends with two triangles, as if they called him Two Pyramids, like an ancient Egyptian Two Jags.

IF THERE'S not much left of Snofru himself, his wife's elegant gilded furniture gives us a glimpse of palace luxury: in the Cairo Museum we inspect Queen Hetepheres's cedar bed with lion legs, her canopy for antimosquito curtains, her gold manicure set, a box of 20 silver bracelets with butterfly motifs – and her exquisite gilded armchair, which is reputedly the oldest chair in the world. Another day, we return to Saqqara to see the tombs, many of which have carved and painted scenes of daily life four millennia back. In the tomb of Princess Idut, a crocodile eyes up his lunch, fresh baby hippo.

In the tomb of Kagemni, there are marsh and river scenes with fish, butterflies, frogs and hyenas. The 32-room tomb of Mereruka is decorated with dancers, acrobats, and kids

wrestling – and some charming taxation scenes that show the nonpayers getting beaten up. It's all rather like an early species of strip cartoon, but all in deadly earnest, because what is shown on the walls is what the deceased will enjoy in the next world. Most important, then, are the depictions of food – meat, wine, bread and beer – which could be magically brought to life as a perpetual feast for the dead man's ka, or soul, in eternity. In the main offering hall, Mereruka's more-than-life-size ka-statue strides into the room, hot from the afterlife, as if making a beeline for the grub. In the tombs, the stillness is broken only by birdsong. It feels as if I've walked inside ancient Egypt and shut the door.

Pyramid areas of Cairo

The pyramids area around and south of Cairo is where nearly all pyramids were built more than four thousand years ago.

Apart from some smaller pyramids, all were built during the Old Kingdom which lasted from the 4th to the 6th dynasty (*about 2613-2181BC*).

They are located in and around the old capital **Hwt-ka-Ptah** (*Memphis*). South of To-She (*Fayoum*) there is only found a handful of pyramids, and then only very small pyramids.



The Kufu (*Cheops*) pyramid seen from the Mena House garden today
[See larger photo](#)

The most known pyramids are of course the three main 4th dynasty pyramids of Giza where the pyramid of Kufu (*Cheops*) are the largest and most referred to. Name of Kufu's pyramid is the "Pyramid which is the Place of Sunrise and Sunset" and it had an original height of 146 meters (*479ft*).

Above is a photo of the pyramid as seen from Mena House garden, and under a nearly hundred year old photo taken from same place.



same view from [Mena House](#) as above - nearly 100 years ago
[See larger photo](#)

If you go to the pyramids area before this, please don't forget to visit the Solar-ship museum! Not only is it the oldest remaining boat in the world, but it's a true 43

meters (141ft) long beauty which show you how the pharaohs of ancient Egypt travelled the Nile in style, gods as they were.



The Step-Pyramid of Zoser with remains of Unas Valley Temple in the foreground.
[See larger photo](#)

The first pyramid in Egypt was built for the 3rd dynasty Pharaoh Zoser (*about 2667-2648BC*). This is a step-pyramid and we even know the person behind the construction, the legendary Imhotep. He was vizier and chief architect of Zoser but had knowledge about far more than architecture. Astronomy and medicine being among the other areas he is renown for.

This lead to an unusual event in ancient Egypt as Imhotep 2000 years after his death was deified as a god of medicine and the Greeks came to identify him with Aesculapius. In late pharaonic period there was a cult centre for Imhotep in Sakkara where pilgrims came with mummified animals, especially the representation of the God of wisdom, the ibis bird.

The pyramid is built on the idea of mastabas, the form of the pre-pyramid tombs. This was done in several stages and one can still see remains from one stage which had four mastaba-forms on top of each other (*one smaller than the other as they rose upwards*). Later this was extended and the final pyramid has six mastabas or steps.

Around the pyramid was a large wall 545 meters long and 277 meters (*1788x908 ft*) wide. The wall had 14 entrances but 13 of these had only false doors, so the only open entrance to this pyramid complex is the door in the south east corner.

Zoser's pyramid complex is the earliest stone structure of its size in the world.



Entrance area of Ptah-Hoteps mastaba-tomb and its guard
[See larger photo](#)

Allow us this time to take you inside two mastaba-tombs and show you some unique relief's from the daily life in Egypt, more than four thousand years ago.

The Mastaba-tomb of Ptah-Hotep

The name Ptah-Hotep mean "beloved of Ptah", the god of Hwt-ka-Ptah (*Memphis*). Ptah-Hotel lived for more than four thousand years ago in the 5th dynasty, and was overseer of the priests of Nyuserre pyramid and the prophets of Isest and Menkhauhor pyramids.



Decorated door in Ptah-Hotep's mastaba
[See larger photo](#)

Most of the mastaba is decorated with scenes from the life and surroundings of Ptah-Hotep as he this way would remember the life he lived. Note from the photo above that even the inside of the door opening is decorated.



Ptah-Hotep drinking and receiving offerings
[See larger photo](#)

In the relief above Ptah-Hotep sits drinking on a chair by a table (*enter the larger photo to see the details*). On the right side we can see the first of a longer line of persons bringing different form of offerings to the deceased. In relief parts that have lost its colour over and under the table one can find offerings in form of birds, grapes and more.



Man bringing offerings
[See larger photo](#)

Here the food offerings to Ptah-Hotep are seen more clearly. Note the bird the one who bring offerings are holding and the birds in the middle of the offerings.



A group of butchers felling an ox
[See larger photo](#)

A group of butchers can be seen felling and parting an ox as part of preparations for offerings. Note; there was never any human sacrifice in ancient Egypt only animals, birds, vegetables, fruit, wine and so forth. When the offering ceremonies was over, these offering became food for priests or normal people.

A tradition that most likely has its root from these offering is still found on the countryside in Egypt. After 2 weeks and then 40 days after a person is dead and buried, the family meets bring food to the tomb. When the meeting around the tomb is over the food is distributed to needing families in the name of the deceased.



Bringing in a herd
[See larger photo](#)

Bringing in a herd and in the lowest line of animals one can see an antelope in the front. The person behind is bringing in two smaller antelopes while holding each of them with a rope.

These photos are only some examples from the mastaba-tomb of Ptah-Hotep. We hope they show how important it is to use some time in this tomb as other. An unique opportunity to get a glimpse into the life of the people who lived in the Nile valley for over four thousand years ago. It would be a great pity if such an opportunity should be lost due to a strict schedule of any premade package tour...

Next we are going to another person who lived here during the fifth dynasty in what we today call the Old Kingdom. His name is Ti.

Mr. Ti I presume?

The Mastaba-tomb of Ti

From Ptah-Hotep's mastaba this virtual tour goes to Ti who was overseer of the sun temples of Neferikare and Nysare during the fifth dynasty. We are not only looking for a historical tomb, we are looking for Ti himself.



Entering the mastaba-tomb of Ti
[See larger photo](#)

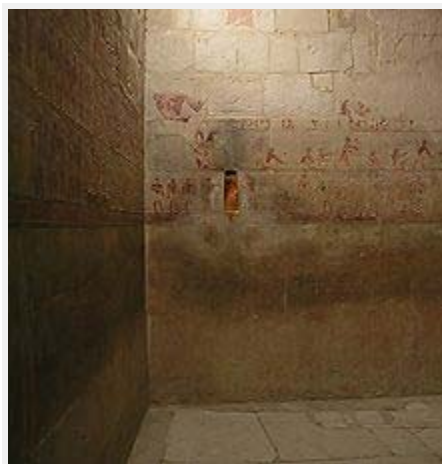
The guard is taking us through the entrance into a larger columned court. In the middle of the court there is a shaft which leads down to the burial place itself. We are not going there but will continue from the court and deeper into the mastaba-tomb.



What's in the end of this long and narrow corridor?

[See larger photo](#)

A new door leads us into a long narrow corridor where the walls have beautiful carved reliefs. Far in front of us can we see a wall in the end, and there it's something whispering an ancient "welcome".



The main hall, and in the wall a hole...

[See larger photo](#)

Here, after the narrow corridor, we end up in a pillared hall filled with wall reliefs.

Much of the colours are still intact, but there in front of us is a small open niche in the wall. Behind it we see light and...



Mr. Ti I presume?
[See larger photo](#)

...a face and the naked upper part of a person who stands there looking us directly in the eyes.

We don't even have to ask the rewritten phrase "Mr. Ti we presume?" - **we know its Ti looking at us through the niche and a distance of nearly five thousand years.**



The Ka door in the pillared hall
[See larger photo](#)

On another wall is a door carved out in the limestone. It don't lead anywhere and none can come though it - if you are not a Ka that is.

In ancient Egypt the Egyptians said the human being had a body, a Ka and a Ba. The body was embalmed and the Ba flew back to the heavens, but Ka remained here. Ka is the double personality of every human being, and Ka came in and departed again through false doors as this, doors we today call for a "Ka door".

Tea with Mr. Ti

The Mastaba-tomb of Ti

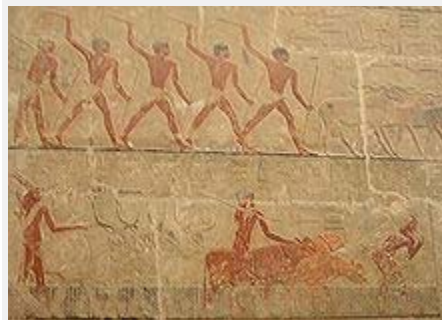
We are inside a time machine; the walls are filled with descriptions of every day scenes from a time long gone. Mr. Ti's Ka takes us around and starts to explain...



Fishing and hunting with Mr. Ti
[See larger photo](#)

Here is Ti out in the marshes hunting and fishing. The vertical lines behind him are papyrus and other plants in the marshes and he stands himself on a papyrusboat.

In front of him is another boat with hunters and the reason Ti is shown higher than the others is because what can be called "value based perspective". Meaning that the important parts get highlighted and enlarged and less important parts get a smaller presentation. As Ti got the leading role in his tomb, it's natural that he is shown as the largest person in the picture. Under the boats we see fish and even a hippopotamus.



Bringing the cattle over a channel
[See larger photo](#)

Its time to take the herd home and in the top row we find five persons from Ti's farm moving rams. Note the winding horns; it's the same as one can see on the creator god Khmun. In the lower row its cattle crossing a channel, but this part is seen best on the next picture.



Ancient trick; how to get the cattle fast over the channel

[See larger photo](#)

Behind we see the bulls are coming and in front of them three cows. They are crossing a channel and one can see how well the water is illustrated in the relief pattern covering the legs of the cows.

See the cow in the middle holding her head a bit high as she is mooing? Well that's exactly what she does, so look at the person who walk in front of her and I will explain why.

He is carrying something on his back, and that's the calf of the mooing cow. This was the technique used when one should get the cattle to move over channels as fast as possible, as sometimes there were crocodiles that got a good dinner if they were not quick enough.



Birds in the herd
[See larger photo](#)

Egyptians today as then love birds for dinner, here is a detail showing some of the birds at Ti's farm.



Workshop, 2400 BC
[See larger photo](#)

There were many professions in ancient Egypt and we know from the remains that they all had extremely skilled workers. On this relief we see them making a table in the upper row. Behind is a person cutting wood and below more people in the workshop.

For the two who makes the table, look at the hieroglyph between them, the one that still have some black colour left. It's a square with an opening below. This is the hieroglyph for "house" as it got walls all around and the opening is the door of the house.



Full activity in the mastaba of Mr. Ti
[See larger photo](#)

Many people are described working in the mastaba-tomb of Ti as here from the end wall in the small side chamber.

The two rows in the middle of the wall where the people are not reddish but lighter brow, that's women making bread.

Allow yourself good time to see this tomb, as when the bread is ready - who knows, maybe we will be invited for a Tea with Mr. Ti?