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DESTINATIONS

From Honking Cairo: Road Touring the Nile Delta

. . . to the rustling countryside

By Ethan Gelber

Our alarms went off at 5 a.m. Groggy, confused, and a little grumpy, everyone dragged the bags and bikes downstairs. (First we wiped two weeks' worth of slimy pollution and city grime from the saddles - there was more than we could believe.) By 6:30, just as the sky was beginning to glow with the first hints of morning, we had left the island of Zamalek (the Cairo neighborhood-on-the-Nile where our hotel was), crossed the Nile to the west, and started moving down river toward the north.



Cairo at dawn

It was eerie. A morning dew-fog still hung to the ground and the filtered, uncustomary morning light made it seem like we were cycling through a fairy tale. Only, instead of turning a corner and coming upon a storybook castle full of waltzing princes and princesses, we took every bend carefully, wary of the unexpected, looking out for speeding trucks and buses. This became even more important after andrEa, Corinne, and I had a little pile-up on a super-slick area of road. Fortunately, everyone was wearing helmets and no one was badly hurt. Just a couple of scrapes and bruises.

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As the sun rose higher and the day slowly came to life, more and more cars appeared on the road, and the cacophonous mayhem of Egyptian roads began. It was the usual disorder of trucks, pick-ups, buses, vans, minivans, jeeps, taxis, cars, tractors, motorcycles, mopeds – all going way too fast – along with donkey carts, and bicycles honking, beeping or bell ringing all the time. Really, all the time. Big horns, little horns, deep horns, high horns, crazy electronic horns, and bicycle bells. Sometimes it seems like drivers must be honking at the trees and clouds. Maybe even at the air! To our un-Egyptian eyes, there just doesn't seem like there could be any logic to why anyone would honk as much as most Egyptian do. Especially when everyone else is honking at the same time. No one can hear the horns of any other cars over the sounds of their own horns. Maybe that's the idea: people honk to block the noise of other honkers.

And if that wasn't enough, as the dawn gave way to day, people started walking along the roadside, with donkeys, horses, or water buffalo, and carrying huge baskets, or pulling heavy carts loaded with hay or vegetables or bags piled high with unknown things: grain? flour? earth? And the people wanted to get our attention as well. Hisses and really loud kissing sounds seemed to fly at us from every side, whether or not we could see the caller. (In Egypt, to get your attention, people hiss or make very loud kissing-type noises. It has been hard for us to get over the feeling that they are being rude or suggestive. But all they really want is to get your attention and to say what everyone in Egypt seems to know how to say in English: "Hello, welcome to Egypt. What is your name? My name is [fill in the blank]. How are you?")

So, we returned their hellos, waved a lot, and continued to push through the lifting fog. We also continued to be extra careful about how we biked. Our choice of roads had left us on a two-lane thoroughfare (one lane in each direction) that did not have a very good shoulder and was sometimes not in very good shape, especially in and near villages and cities. This meant that we had to watch the road as much as we had to keep an eye out for every vehicle traveling in any direction and every person who was saying hello. The latter was particularly important since the rules of the road seem more like casual suggestions, rather than actual rules.

People mostly drive on the right-hand side of the road, except when they are

“The morning's

turning or merging or passing, in which case time spent on the wrong side seems not to bother anyone. It can be particularly harrowing when cars pass car in the same direction since drivers don't wait for the lane in the opposite direction to clear before trying to pass. They just, well – they just pass! And on-coming traffic does what it must to get out of the way. This usually involves a lot of horn honking and light flashing and courage, and almost always works out, with the passing car returning to its proper lane or the other car swerving off to the side of the road to avoid a collision. When we are cycling we have to be especially alert to cars traveling in our direction that can get forced off the road right next to us, in addition to cars passing cars and traveling in the opposite direction. It can feel like playing chicken with a military tank though, since the opposite car neither slows down nor leaves much room. This was made even more clear to us when two passing minivans, traveling in opposite directions, came so close to one another that, right before our eyes, one bus' side-view mirror was demolished by the side-view mirror of the other. No one even stopped to ask questions or sweep the glass off the road. It would probably have been too dangerous.

cycle was, without a doubt, the most otherworldly cycling experience we have had so far.”



Biking along an Egyptian country road.

But we persevered. Through the spooky lifting fog, and despite the traffic and absence of road signs in anything but Arabic, we stuck to our purpose and the road. And we were rewarded. The farther we traveled into the delta, and put distance between us and Cairo, the greener, calmer, and more lush it became. The crowd, once crowded with honking, speeding, gas-spewing trucks, had more donkey carts and pedestrians than motors. And the gentle welcoming hospitality of the farming people became more evident. On one occasion, as we were resting by the roadside, a man appeared from out of a nearby hut made of dried earth and wood and surrounded by vividly green fields of sun-lit alfalfa and other crops. In broken but easily understandable English, he asked us if we wanted directions, or help, or tea, or even lunch. We thanked him but said no since we wanted to keep going. But, when we weren't jousting with cars, we felt his welcome everywhere.

We also finally took advantage of the relative calm to look around. The

**Ethan Gelber, Biker
for Peace**

morning's cycle was, without a doubt, the most otherworldly cycling experience we have had so far. The densely populated villages we passed through, the colors, and the chaos were unlike anything we knew. It was also our chance to see contrasts we expected – the older Egypt of run-down towns and garbage-strewn streets mixed with the signs of modern growth and prosperity: ancient farming practices, like basic irrigation plots, fed using the shadoof and the Persian wheel, or the much more modern mechanical water pumps; a stretch of new brick-and-plaster two-story buildings being built over a thick clump of tiny and ramshackle dust- and exhaust-caked mud shacks; donkeys heehawing at honking trucks; a filthy, shoeless boy running alongside a girl wearing a perfectly pressed school uniform; one woman wearing the body-shrouding covers of the more devoutly religious walking with another dressed exactly like a business executive from New York; a sun-healed hard-skinned farming man in a turban, a *galabiyya* (traditional robe), and clogs laughing and smiling at a joke told by a friend in a suit and tie.

The author of this article, [Ethan Gelber](#), was GORP's guest from June 21 to July 11, 1999. He fielded questions on international travel with bikes, long distance trip planning, and insight on road touring in Europe, New York and New England, California, and Ontario.

[Read over Ethan's forum.](#)

Everywhere we turned, there were people climbing in and out of buses and vans, buying or selling from shops packed with everything imaginable, eating at noisy street-side stalls made more deafening by loud music. There were even roadside butchers who hung skinned beef carcasses from hooks right alongside the road and sold meat from tables only a foot from the pavement. The list could go on and on and never do justice to the sensory overload.

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DESTINATIONS

From Honking Cairo: Road Touring the Nile Delta

Running for the Train

By Ethan Gelber

Finally, by 2 o'clock and after 90 km (56 mi) of mind-blowing sights and sounds, we reached the outskirts of Tanta, the biggest city of the delta. We had to slow to a crawl to get through the muddy and pot-holed streets packed with the animals and people in a poorer part of town. We also had to stop frequently for directions (we had not seen a sign in English since we left Cairo) to the train station and the end of our cycling adventure and the beginning of our train adventure. Since we were running short on time, we had decided to take a train to Alexandria for a few days.



In Egypt's Nile delta region, the river fans out into many canals.

So far on our trip, we have succeeded in taking our bicycles on trains in France, Spain, Italy, and Tunisia. It was time to test the Egyptians. After figuring out how and where to buy tickets and deciding to reserve in the first-class coach - you have to see the crowded and tight second- and third-class cars to know that taking bikes on them would be possible but very difficult - we moved everything to the right platform, prepared everything for loading and awaited the train. Having practiced on- and off-loading bikes many times now, we are practiced professionals, but nothing could have prepared us for what almost happened.

No one told us that the first-class cars had only one door and that the train we were taking would stop for only *three minutes!* When the train did arrive, we were

The Nile

The Nile Delta is the unusually fertile triangular-shaped area formed as the Nile fans out into

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about 75 feet from where we had to be. And when everyone on the platform started rushing, we realized there was trouble. We had to run five Wheeler bikes, two trailers, two big and heavy sacs, five sets of panniers, and assorted other bags to the single door where there was no official room for the bikes.

Anthony ran with two bikes and leaned them against the train before running back to get more stuff. I (with two more bikes) jumped on the train and started trying to arrange everything so there would be room for all the bikes, bags, AND five people. After what seemed like only a few seconds, I turned around and realized that some helpful people were literally throwing the remaining bikes into a pile on the train behind him because. . . the train was actually leaving. It was moving! And andrEa, Corinne, Padraic and Anthony were still on the platform!

I quickly vaulted over the pile of bikes and leaned out the door, ready to grab bags and people as they arrived. And what did he see? His four panic-stricken and wide-eyed teammates all in a row, running alongside the train as fast as their legs could carry them and their very heavy bags. It seemed like they would never make it. They were too far away and carrying too much stuff. People on the platform and others in the train with I were yelling at them to run faster. But they couldn't. Uh-oh, thought I (who didn't have the tickets), this could be a problem.

Fortunately, just as it seemed like I would have to travel alone with the Wheelers and everyone else would wait for the next train, the train slowed and then stopped and made it possible for everyone to jump on board.

... .. many canals and then drains into the Mediterranean. (Deltas got their name because they have the form of the Greek letter "delta" which is shaped like a triangle.) There is so much water in the Delta, and the earth has been replenished so frequently, that some people consider it one of the most green, fertile and cultivated regions in the world.

Because there is so much opportunity for agriculture, every available piece of land is used for crops or people. Which means that it is a very crowded part of Egypt. The population density in some areas is believed to be more than 1,000 people per square mile (386 per sq km). Many work as farmers raising beans, corn (maize), cotton, millet, rice, and wheat.

The most impressive thing about the modern Delta is the complex system of irrigation canals that keep this area producing year-round. This was plenty apparent to us as we followed the waters on our bikes. Every field and every furrow was being used to grow crops, and water was in great abundance. There appeared to be three basic devices for getting water from the canals into the irrigation ditches that crisscross the Delta: the *shadoof*, first used in about 1600 BC; the Persian wheel, created in the second century BC; and the modern water pump, which chugged away in every corner of the Delta.

Whew. But after only a few seconds, it started again and everyone was stuck in a small area with a pile of bikes, bags, and about ten people - the five of us, a porter, the conductor and two other helpful people. Needless to say, it took another fifteen minutes to sort out the mess, stash the bags, arrange the bikes and find our seats, but whew, at least we were all on the same train.

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