Jewel on the Nile

In Cairo, a Faithful Re-creation of an Egyptian Village

By Jack Goldfarb
Special to The Washington Post

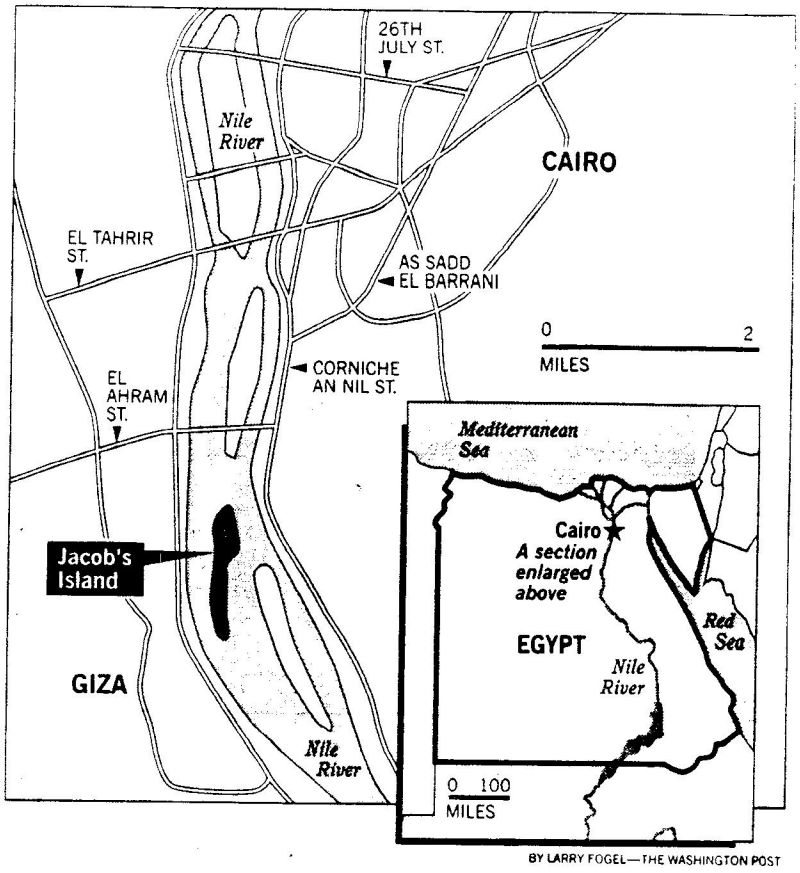
Sweating it out in a taxi hopelessly snared in one of downtown Cairo's traffic jams, I lapsed into a daydream. Horns blared. Drivers glared. Tempers flared. But I was centuries removed, trying to imagine the simpler, less hectic way of life on the green banks of the Nile thousands of years ago when Pharaohs ruled this land.

Just a few miles south, I found that ancient unruffled lifestyle—an authentic re-creation of it, anyway—on Jacob's Island in the Nile.

Spread over 32 acres of the island in Cairo's elite Giza suburb, the Pharaonic Village is a theme park of antiquity. At the village, the other visitors and I climbed aboard a flat raftlike vessel, preparing to float through a time warp for a close-up view of life in Egypt more than 35 centuries ago. This was the era of the New Kingdom, circa 1554 to 1075 B.C.—a splendid golden age when Egypt was the world's strongest power. Those were the times of Ramses, the prodigious royal builder; Tutankhamen, the golden boy king; and Queen Hatshepsut, one of history's most powerful woman rulers. The arts flowered brilliantly. And the Nile Valley was the heartland of one of the world's greatest civilizations.

Reedy papyrus plants cover much of the island, while tall trees screen off the high-rise buildings and factory chimneys of Cairo and help muffle the din and clamor of modern Cairo's 8½ million inhabitants beyond the island's shores. To further enhance the realism, indigenous birds and animals of Pharaonic times, depicted on tomb and fresco paintings but long since vanished from the Egyptian landscape, were brought in from the Sudan and reintroduced into the environment—including brown-billed Meidum geese and rare hippopotamuses. Almost all the present trees—pomegranate, jujube, date palm, Assyrian plum, tamarisk—were varieties extant in New Kingdom Egypt.

Seated on the raft, our group glided into the village, entering through the "Canal of Mythology." Underscoring the importance of religion in the Egyptians' daily lives, an array of 12 painted plaster gods lined the canal bank.



BY LARRY FOGEL—THE WASHINGTON POST

In prime place, the masterful figure of Amon, "king of the gods," gripped a royal scepter. Next stood Thoth, lord of wisdom and magic, whose mystical powers were held in reverent awe. This ibis-headed star watcher, measurer of the earth and inventor of hieroglyphics, represented the Egyptians' great respect for mathematics and language.

Osiris, lord of the afterworld and immortality, was wrapped as a mummy. A former earthly king, Osiris was slain by his jealous brother but was restored to life by his loyal sister-wife, Isis. Their child, the falcon-headed Horus, with the sun and moon for his eyes, became the god of light and the skies. Pharaohs were said to be the incarnation of Horus, while noble Isis, the most beloved of goddesses, symbolized the ideal woman—protective mother and faithful wife.

The Egyptians, in their mythology, believed that their ancestors were autochthonous—that they sprang from the soil. Khnum, creator of life, represented here as ram-headed with two horizontal horns, was said to have formed human beings out of clay, spinning them off a potter's wheel.

Longhaired, robust Hapy, hermaphroditic god of the Nile, presented a startling image, with female breasts and head covered with aquatic plants. Hapy symbolized fertility and opulence.

Last in the assemblage of gods was Bes, a grotesque dwarf with huge eyes and a tail. A popular deity, Bes protected man against evil and reptiles, considered interchangeable. Closely associated with music, dance and pleasure, Bes was believed to bring happiness.

After passing a lush garden with a lotus-covered pool, we entered the workaday world of ancient Egypt. Farmers clad in white-linen loincloths, wearing caps simulating New Kingdom hairstyles, toiled in the village field, furrowing the earth with wooden mattocks while a pair of yoked oxen dragged wooden-bladed hoes to till the soil. Most farmers in Pharaonic times

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Egypt

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labored on royal family estates and temple lands or for wealthy landowners. Using primitive implements, the farmers cultivated wheat and barley (mostly for brewing beer), the mainstay crops of Pharaonic Egypt. Fields like these were irrigated by a shadoof, an ingenious device utilizing a counterweight to raise buckets of water from conduits.

At the edge of the field, beekeepers were breeding honeybees in hives of mud tubes, a practice still used in Egyptian apiculture today.

Beyond the fields, in a bustling shipyard, craftsmen constructed longboats of cedar wood. They lashed planks tightly with hemp ropes and pegged them with wooden dowels. Other workers put together smaller craft made of papyrus. Papyrus boats, used for fishing and hunting by these riparian people, were said to repel crocodiles, the bane of the Nile-dweller.

A crew of fishermen grappled with a dragnet sagging with a rich haul of wriggling boltis. Then as now, the Nile was a vital source of food.

At the far side of the island artisans were engaged in a dozen varied activities. Bare-chested young laborers molded bricks of mud and straw; muscular youths positioned palm-tree trunks for the framework and roof beams of a house; others shaped jars on whirling pottery wheels, sculpted statues out of limestone blocks and assembled furniture in a carpentry shop using simple tools—mallets, stone adzes, bow drills.

Young girls, coifed in wigs of black goat hair, pressed flowers for perfume essences and wove flax on upright wooden looms.

Stepping ashore on the canal bank, we approached a majestic temple, modeled after the magnificent style built on the west bank of the Nile by 11th Dynasty Pharaohs. At the door, a high priest in sphinx-like headdress and regalia solemnly greeted us. Behind him the open court was surrounded by a soaring colonnade. The common people could only enter this far, and then only on special occasions.

Beyond a vast, dimly lit hypostyle hall, past bolted and sealed wooden doors, was the innermost sanctum. In the darkened chamber rested a two-foot-high, gold-leafed image of a god, worshiped only by the Pharaoh himself, as chief priest. Egyptians did not participate in temple services but depended on their priests to dutifully conduct the ceremonies and rituals that would keep the gods appeased.

At the rear of the temple I peered into the mummification room. In this funerary process the internal organs of the deceased were placed in canopic jars. After a drying-out period the body was wrapped in linen bandages into which amulets were scattered to ward off evil spirits.

Behind the temple glistened the sacred lake where the priests bathed and purified themselves. They were required to keep their bodies totally hairless, even to remove eyelashes and eyebrows.

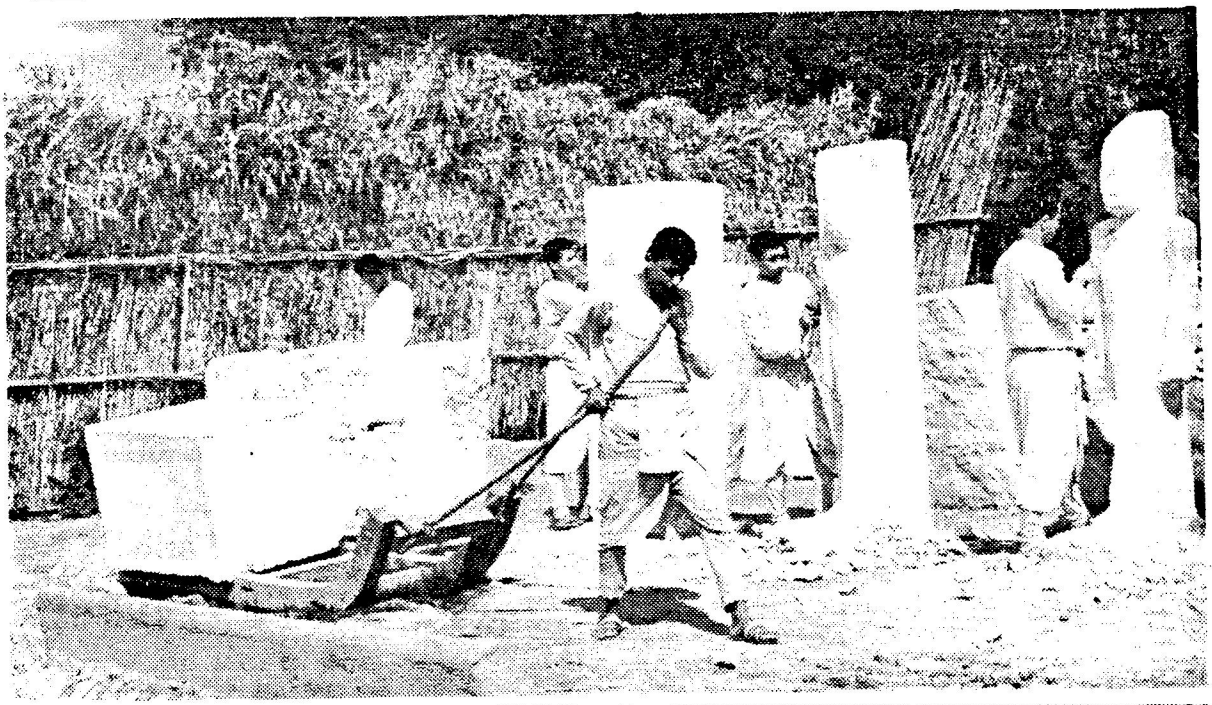
In the village, we inspected two dwellings: a rich nobleman's villa and a peasant farmer's crude abode. In the villa, an anterior garden surrounded a pool filled with lilies and perfumed water. Stairs led to the roof where the family gathered to enjoy the cool breezes on hot summer nights. Wet mats on the floor provided another kind of cooling system.

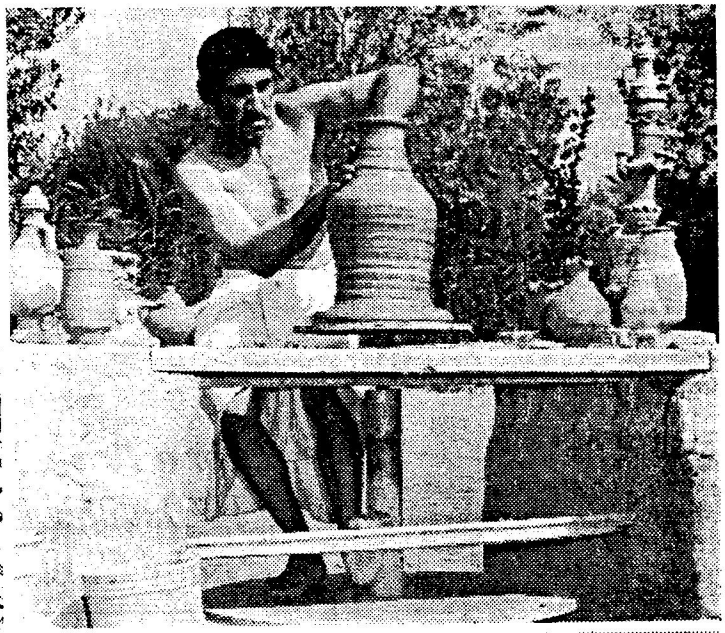
Inside, a spacious all-purpose room served as a salon, drawing room and dining area lighted and ventilated by upper clerestory windows, high enough to keep out the sun. The lady of the house had her own luxurious boudoir, her table laden with cosmetics: red lip powder, henna hair dye, kohl and mascara of every hue. A dark-eyed, long-braided noblewoman primped before a mirror, trying on gem-studded necklaces.

Egyptian men often wore as much makeup and jewelry as the women. In his own bedroom across the hall, the master of the house kept his personal possessions, including ornate bracelets, rings and necklaces.

At the rear of the house was the toilet. Sanitary drainage was used in Egypt long before other people thought of it. Bathing was managed by maidservants, who poured water over the bather from behind a screen.

In the kitchen and the bakery, both in the open air to disperse





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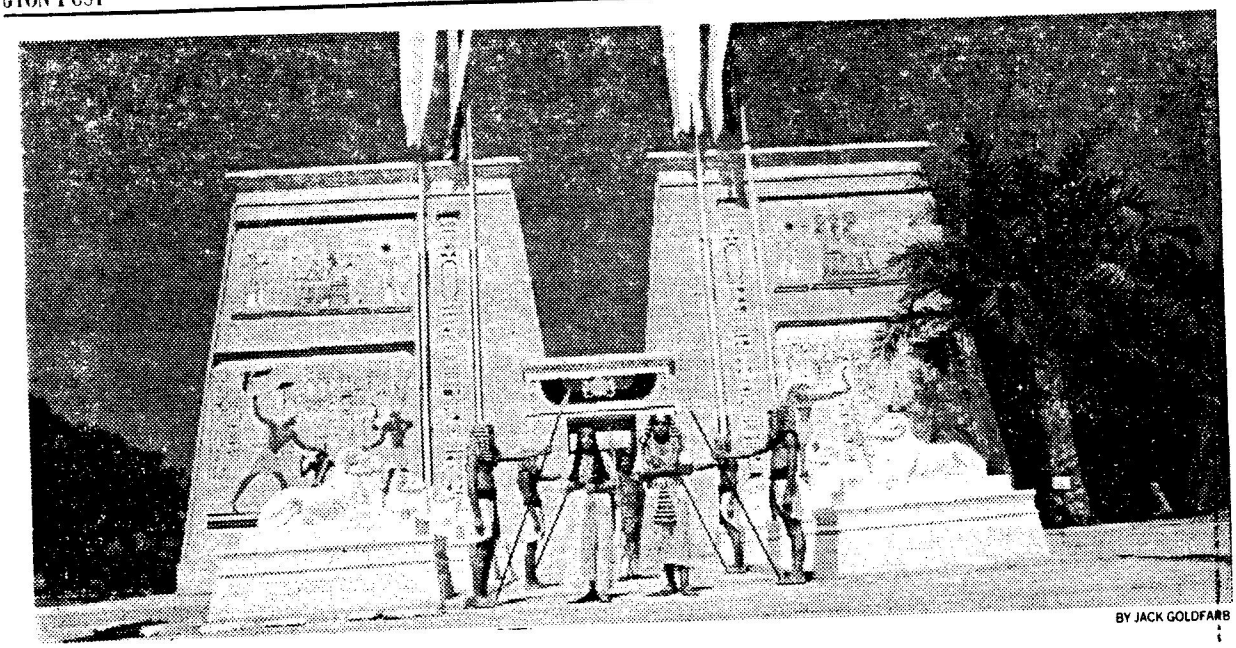
Jacob's Island scenes, clockwise from top: Workers creating bricks and statues, pottery and papyrus boats, and the statue of Hapy along the Canal of Mythology.



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The temple on Jacob's Island.

smoke and cooking odors, garlands of garlic and onions hung from the walls. In the pantry, stout earthen jars stored grain, oil, maize, lentils.

In the back of the villa were the humble servants' quarters—mud-brick walls with a palm-branch roof. Beyond that was the cow pen.

In the peasant's simple hut, by contrast, a single cramped room housed the entire family. A rough-hewn ladder led to the roof. Just like the nobility, the peasant family often cooled off by sleeping there on sultry nights.

Back in my taxi, I was speeding through the streets of Cairo when suddenly the driver braked to a halt at a busy crossroads off the 6 October Bridge. A herd of about 40 camels was being shepherded along the dusty thoroughfare—literally on their last legs en route from the Sudan to a local slaughterhouse. The desert beasts surely sensed their fate, for they took their own sweet time, solidly blocking the intersection. The dromedary drovers prodded, pushed, cajoled to no avail.

Someday in the distant future, when they build a theme park about life in late 20th-century Egypt, they will reenact that peculiar Cairo phenomenon, the traffic jam. But would people believe Camel Gridlock?

The Pharaonic Village is open daily, including holidays, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. It is accessible from downtown Cairo by cab, bus or car. Tickets are about $30 per person, children under 6 free. For more information, contact the Egyptian Government Tourist Office, 630 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10111, 212-246-6960.

Jack Goldfarb is a freelance writer who travels extensively, lived in the Middle East and Europe and is now based in New York.