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## Essay

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### Egyptian Mystery Tour

*Lisa Lumsden wrote this account in tenth grade at San Dieguito High School in her hometown of Encinitas, California. Among her many interests and hobbies are travel and international affairs, Polynesian dancing, and composing songs. Other activities include cheerleading and membership in a church leadership group. She has won awards for writing and photography, and has twice placed second in San Diego County's Science Fair.*

When summertime rolls around and my friends are packing their water skis, suntan lotion and beach towels for a few weeks in Lake Tahoe or California, I usually find myself packing my passport, mosquito netting and bottled water. In my family, when we pick our summer vacation destination, the more unlikely and less glamorous the place, the better. This summer, my dad and I spent a month backpacking through the Middle East. Both of us had wanted to go to Egypt for a long time and despite the attacks on tourists, bombings and warnings from the State Department telling us not to go, we decided it was time to see the pyramids. We didn't want to be tourists; we wanted to be travelers. We didn't want to Hilton-hop with a huge group of other Americans in an air-conditioned bus, stopping every few hours to jump out and snap a few photos before moving on to the next temple or monument. We wanted to be on our own and really get to know Egypt and its people. We had traveled internationally before, so we knew what we were looking for. We were looking for adventure.

An opportunity arose when we were sailing by felucca, a small sailboat commonly used for travel on the Nile. We were sailing from Aswan, a small, picturesque city in the south made famous as the setting for Agatha Christie's

*Death on the Nile*, to Luxor, an ancient city known throughout history as the dwelling place of the pharaohs, both in life and in death. In addition to its many fabulous temples, Luxor also boasts the Valley of the Kings, whose many tombs serve as the resting places to such unforgettable beings as King Tutankhamen and Queen Nefertiti. The trip was to take three days and two nights, and we were to stay on the felucca the entire time.

Our boat was captained by an Egyptian, Captain Abdullah, and a Sudanese, Captain Alli. Before setting sail we had been promised many things by these two entrepreneurs. One was that their knowledge of English was ex-

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tensive. But as the hours went by, the four of us were having an increasingly hard time communicating even the simplest of queries, such as "Is the boat really supposed to be tipping this way?" and "Are you sure we're still sailing in the right direction?" It became apparent that our captains hadn't been completely honest with us. We had also been guaranteed that only bottled water would be used for cooking and cleaning the dishes because of the susceptibility that tourists have to the many dangerous diseases that lurk in the Nile waters. Even so, it seemed that every time we turned around, Captain Abdullah

was dipping our plates and cups into the Nile to clean them, or washing our fruits and vegetables in the contaminated waters. To this day I'm not sure that we caught him every time he exposed us to infection, and I'm amazed that neither of us got sick.

Our two captains were not exactly the most trustworthy of sailors either. Even though a law exists in Egypt prohibiting Nile travel for feluccas any later than eight at night, my dad and I woke up one time at two in the morning to find ourselves drifting aimlessly down the river—heading straight for a gigantic luxury liner that wasn't going to get out of our way. Meanwhile, our stalwart captains were bundled up, asleep in the bow. We woke them up in barely enough time to get us safely to shore.

Despite more than a few "misunderstandings" with the two men, they were really friendly and helpful. They gladly taught me all the Arabic that I would ever need, as well as how to sail the felucca. They were also very knowledgeable about all the "sights" as we sailed along, happy to share their stories and information in halting English.

The second night aboard, while Captain Alli was teaching me how to say "handsome" in Arabic, Captain Abdullah suddenly steered the boat over to the side of the river. It was already pitch black and the only sound was the buzz of mosquitoes and the water lapping gently against the shore. Abdullah told us in his very choppy English to get our "torches" out. I threw my dad a questioning glance. We weren't scheduled for a bathroom break for another few hours. He shrugged and, being able to understand some of Abdullah's English by now, we got out our flashlights and followed him down the wooden plank and onto the sand.

After about ten miles of walking, I began to get a little suspicious. What I thought was going to be a bathroom break had turned into a hundred-mile trek through the Egyptian desert. We walked in a line behind Abdullah and had to walk fast to keep up with his quick pace. With each step I took, soft sand spilled over my sandals and covered my feet, making it difficult to walk. The night air embraced me and cooled the beads of sweat that were forming on my forehead. Our two flashlights lit only a tiny patch in front of us; I couldn't help but wonder what lay outside

the light. We watched closely for scorpions and sand viper tracks—in my Birkenstocks and shorts, I didn't feel very protected. I tried to get an idea of our surroundings but the black, moonless night made it impossible to see anything. Nobody spoke at all, not even to ask Abdullah where we were going, and the desert around us was silent also.

I can remember so clearly how the thoughts raced through my head. Where were we going? Why were we following this man who hadn't exactly proven his trustworthiness to us in the past? What made us think that he wasn't taking us somewhere to rob us, murder us, and throw our lifeless bodies into the Nile? Or better yet, leave us for the jackals to devour. I could have said, "Enough! Let's just go back to the felucca and get some sleep!" We probably would have turned back right then. But there was something holding me back: I was finally getting a taste of what I had come to Egypt for in the first place. My dad looked about as torn as I. He'd always been one to experience life to the fullest and encouraged me to do the same, even though I knew that he didn't want to risk my safety. I gave him a reassuring look, one that said, "Don't worry—I want to do this as much as you do," and we continued on our way.

We finally reached our destination, a wooden door in a tall cement wall. Our captain's knock and call in Arabic were answered by a woman in a black veil who, silently welcoming us with a nod of her head, let us in. We were led into a dirt courtyard. In opposite corners were two one-room cement buildings and in the middle were a mint tree and a little well. When a handful of children gathered around Abdullah and hugged him, calling out "Father" in Arabic, I finally understood. We had been led to Captain Abdullah's home, here in the middle of the desert. He took us to one of the buildings and invited us inside.

The room that we entered was completely bare. There were no furnishings, no pictures on the walls, not even electricity. A single window let the cool night air into the suffocatingly hot square room. Cracks on the walls and ceiling stood out in the flicker of light from a few red candles placed on the floor. Abdullah brought in woven mats and the four of us took a seat on the dirt floor.

Our captain told us that his "madame" was going to make us dinner. We demurred, saying it wasn't necessary, but he insisted. I pushed the thoughts of grilled sand viper and fried dog to the back of my mind. While we waited, Abdullah's children came in and entertained us. I'll never forget one of them—a little girl of about nine, her black hair in naps and her bare feet dirty and cracked, dancing around the room like a fairy, her movements lighting up the room. Her wide smile was made even more brilliant against her dark brown skin. She pranced about from here to there, playing with my hair and finally becoming enchanted with my camera.

After a while she became bored with the adults and took my hand to lead me through the blackness of the courtyard and into the building in the opposite corner which served as living quarters. What I saw amazed me. Abdullah's "madame" was preparing our

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## **Watching closely for scorpions and sand vipers, I didn't feel very protected in my Birkenstocks and shorts.**

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meal in complete darkness—there was no electricity at all. I stood in the corner to watch her cook. While the little girl scurried around the kitchen trying to get things together, her mother, dressed in a long black gown and veil, gracefully moved about the room, tending the fire or stirring the soup. She murmured gentle commands to her daughter, never scolding or raising her voice when the little girl knocked over a pot or dropped a utensil. She would pause in her work only long enough to make things right again, then continue her task. I looked around the room and was astounded at the primitive means of cooking she used: an open fire for heat, a tub of cold water for refrigeration, and very few tin pots and utensils for preparing everything. She looked across

the room at me and even though we spoke completely different languages, a silent understanding passed between us.

When I returned to where my dad was, I saw that our captain had brought in his hookah, a big glass water pipe very common in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East. He sat smoking his *shisha* (honey-soaked tobacco), and as the sweet smoke filled the room, I marveled at how I had actually come to like the smell—me, who had a coughing fit whenever I was within fifty feet of a cigarette.

I decided to take a walk in the courtyard, alone. Staring up at the stars, I was surprised to see the same familiar constellations that I usually saw at home in the States. I was so overwhelmed at the awesomeness of everything that was going on around me. Here I was, a fourteen-year-old girl from Encinitas, California, experiencing things that *National Geographic* writers only dream about.

They called me back in, whereupon Abdullah's madame immediately began serving a six-course meal that would have put the best cook in Paris to shame. It definitely made me ashamed that I had been expecting fried dog for dinner. We ate like royalty while Abdullah and his family sat by and watched, for they refused to join us. Feasting on grilled chicken, vegetable soup, garlic rice, pita bread, cold watermelon, and sweet Arabic tea and coffee, I knew this was a meal that I would not soon forget. Our hosts seemed content to just sit and watch us enjoying our meal so much. Between each bite we tried to communicate to the family how wonderful the food was with gestures and grunts of approval and appreciation.

When we had finished our meal, we reluctantly admitted that it was time to leave. As I said goodbye to my new little friend, she pulled me down to her level and threw her arms around me tightly. I hugged her back, the tears welling up in my eyes.

Having said goodbye to everybody, we grabbed our flashlights and began the hike back across the desert to the boat. This time, the thoughts racing through my head were not of sand vipers and scorpions, but of how incredibly lucky I had been to experience all that I had that night.

When we got back to the boat, none of us were (continued on page 31)



# Afterwords

*This department welcomes your comments on the literature published in Merlyn's Pen. Contributions may be of any length (up to one thousand words) and in any style: reactions quickly penned after reading a story, thoughts about the content or form of a published work, even expository essays.*

*Send to: Afterwords, Merlyn's Pen: The National Magazines of Student Writing, P.O. Box 910, East Greenwich, RI 02818. Use the submission guidelines and cover sheet on page 5.*

*Students in the eleventh and twelfth grade at Severn School in Severna Park, Maryland, share their responses about stories that appeared in the October/November 1994 issue.*

## Poolside Regret

By Alice Reagan (Oct./Nov. 1994)

This story depicted the perfect summer setting. I liked how the lifeguard, despite a boring job, still found a little treasure: watching the teenage boys dive. I also enjoyed her disregard for the small kids in the shallow end when she said that the only problem of the job would be witnessing one kid go under for more than two minutes.

Another humorous side of the story was when she couldn't think of anything clever to say to her old boyfriend until after their conversation. Thanks for an enjoyable read!

—Todd Brusnighan

## Stupid

By Gerard Golden (Oct./Nov. 1994)

Sometimes I wish I were stupid also. But then I would not understand this short story, and that would mean missing out on reading a disturbing but intelligent insight on the attitudes of

many American teenagers and adults. The people who do not worry about the environment, their peers' drinking problems, the starving people of Africa, or even the homeless people who are sleeping on the sidewalk outside their front door—they are stupid.

Many people wish that life was one big dreamland. I am one. But that is not reality, and ignoring the serious problems that exist in our suburbs can only make bad situations worse. Black or white, rich or poor, young or old, male or female, the problems affect us all. Unfortunately, these problems will not be dealt with until they are knocking on our doors. I'm glad I'm not stupid.

—Raphael Sassi

This story is about wishing that sometime you could go through one day without worrying about anything. It speaks about exactly what today's teenagers are thinking about. In this world full of danger, corruption and pollution, it is impossible not to worry about tomorrow—or even today. This story brilliantly describes the hope of not feeling guilty or scared at every waking moment. "Stupid" made me feel a lot better about my worries.

—Jill Stursa

## Essay

(continued from page 18)

really talking much. We were all so lost in our own thoughts of how exciting the night had been. I rolled out my sleeping mat and lay down contentedly, my stomach full of good food and my ears ringing with laughter and talking. The rocking of the boat against the shore of the Nile quickly made me drowsy, and I fell asleep in the gentle Arabian night. ★

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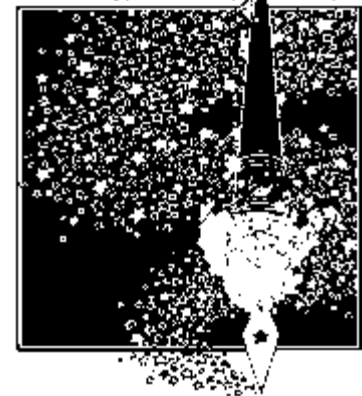
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- \*Author's home address and phone
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