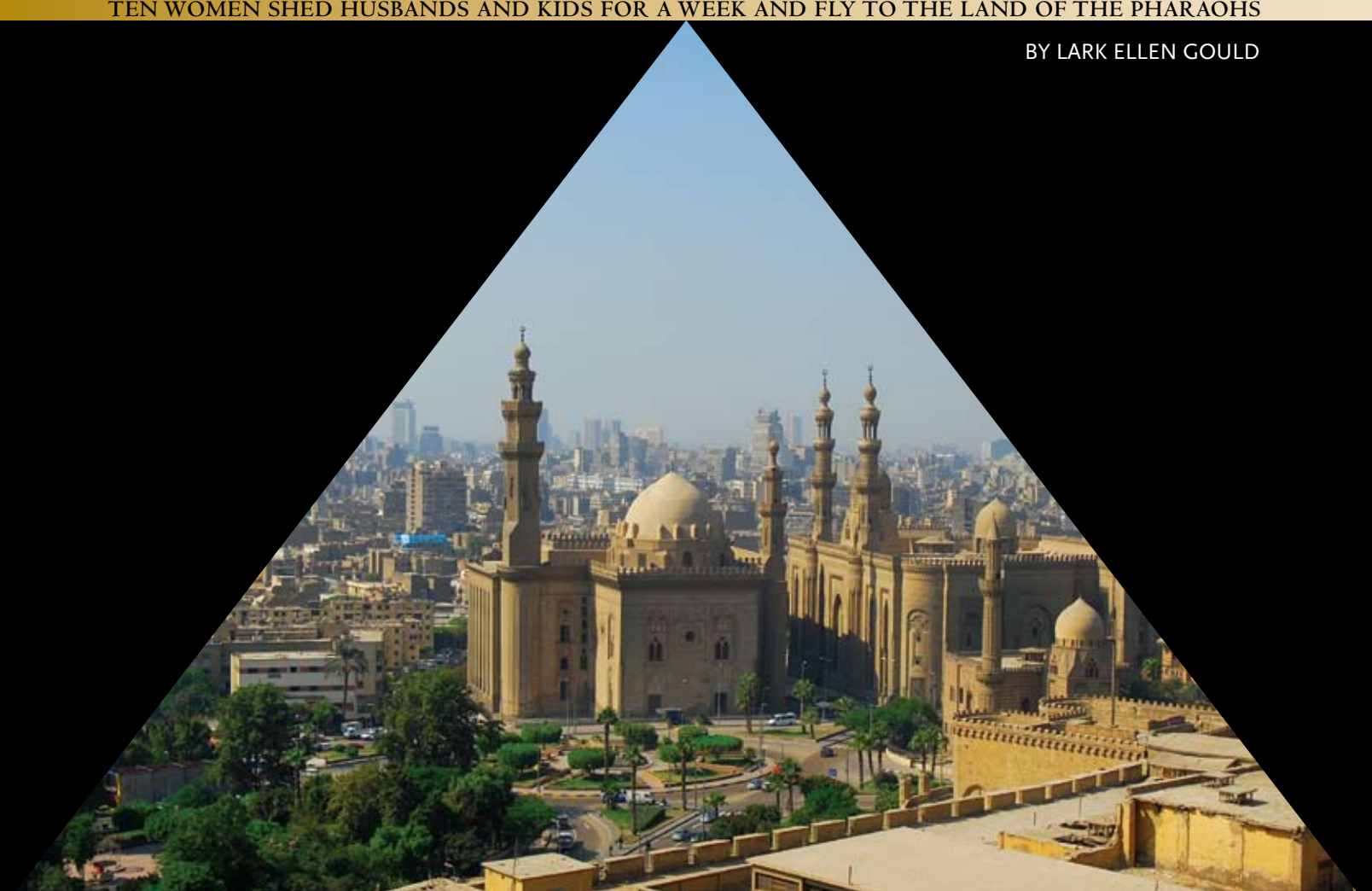
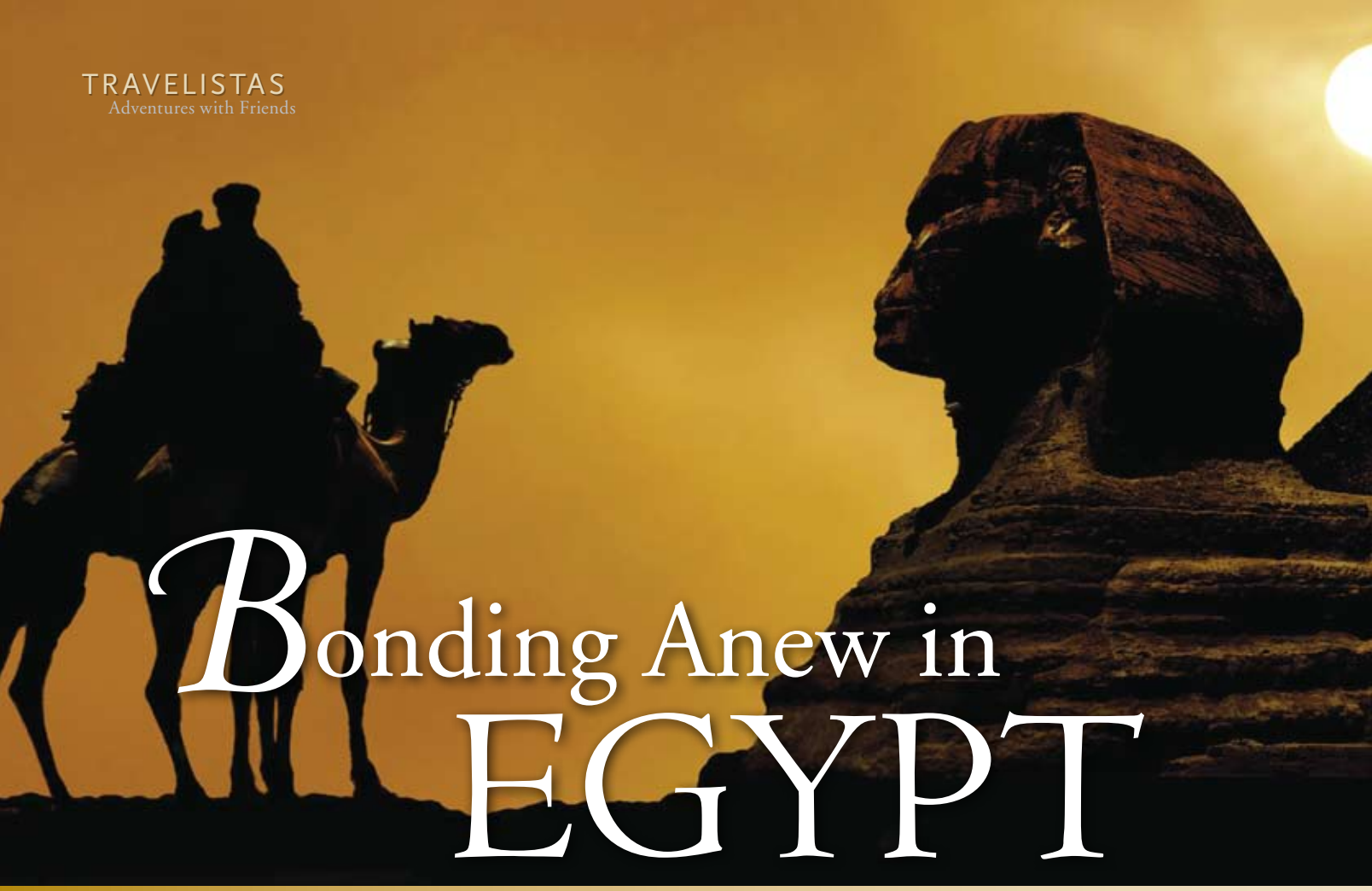


Bonding Anew in EGYPT

TEN WOMEN SHED HUSBANDS AND KIDS FOR A WEEK AND FLY TO THE LAND OF THE PHAROHS

BY LARK ELLEN GOULD



It was a clear April morning when ten women set out from O'Hare Airport for what seemed like the far side of the moon. Egypt, with its chaotic traffic, crowded bazaars and exciting historical meanderings, would provide all the adventure they were hoping to find and prove itself the perfect getaway. No men, no kids; just each other and a place they could lose their roles and duties and simply have fun.

Their travel consultant arranged an itinerary that focused on Cairo and Luxor for the seven days the women could commit to the trip. The costs seemed to work for everyone's budget without sacrificing experiences or hotel amenities. Nights at Le Meridien Pyramids in Cairo would allow them to wake up each morning to views of the Great Pyramid of Giza right outside their windows. In Luxor the group would retreat to Maritime Jolie Ville each afternoon – just a 10-minute ride from city center by free shuttle bus. The property's comfortable mid-priced bungalows spread throughout a 24-acre plantation of palms with plenty of terraces to view timeless sunsets over the banks of the Nile with a mellow glass of wine.

The women, all in midlife – two attorneys, one charity fundraiser, a social worker, a real estate consultant, a travel agent, and four stay-at-home moms – shared a sense of adventure and curiosity. They were out to discover some parts of the world they had yet to experience and might not see otherwise.

"This vacation was a departure from the typical house by the lake or camping with the grandkids. It wasn't a vacation my husband wanted to take, but it was a place that had always fascinated me. It's a different kind of trip: You don't have to worry about anyone else and you can just have fun," said Julia Wade, a nonprofit

fundraiser. "I knew most of the women that I would be going with and felt comfortable with them. We have a great dynamic."

About half of the women had been friends for years. When they went to China together the year before, they bonded with several of the other women in their tour group. They knew that on their next trip, in such good company, they were bound to have fun no matter what came their way.

"We had done our research for this trip. We are not novices at traveling, yet here was a place that takes some planning," said Jane Grimm, an attorney from Hinsdale, IL. "Egypt was especially adventurous, since few of us had had much exposure to Islamic culture."

There were plenty of highlights in Luxor, such as the sound and light show at the Temples of Karnak (a dramatic encapsulation of the 1,300-year history embedded in the pylons and complex monuments that lace through the area) and the awe of wandering through the tombs in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens.

"Those tombs were beautiful, especially the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut," (a woman who dared to challenge the traditions of male authority and died mysteriously for it). "But nothing could prepare us for the Valley of the Workers," said Grimm.





Those 'fortunate' enough to die before their rulers were buried in decorated tombs of their own."

There were other surprising moments for the group of women in Luxor, said Cathi Parks, a mom with a taste for adventure. Sailing up the Nile in a felucca – a traditional wooden sailing vessel – was one of these amazing moments for her.

"The wind died so we weren't moving very fast, but we really didn't mind because it was a national holiday and all the people in the city seemed to be enjoying themselves on the banks of the Nile as we slowly drifted past. They were swimming in the waters and having picnics with their families and we felt a part of all that," said Parks.

And then there were some light-hearted thrills, such as walking into a teahouse as a formidable group of ten women and ordering up some hookah pipes for a session of "hubbly bubbly" with apple-flavored tobacco.

"We had so much fun! I had never experienced anything like this before. We just laughed and laughed and took a bunch of photos," added Wade.

In Cairo, other unexpected adventures awaited. Oh, there were the camel rides and photos at the pyramids and the must-do experience of crawling up the shaft to the grand gallery in the Great Pyramid of Giza to find the eroded, empty sarcophagus of the Pharaoh Cheops, (2520-2494 B.C.) who built the pyramids at Giza and the Great Sphinx (the mummies and treasures have long since succumbed to the hands of tomb raiders and archaeologists).

There were also the Egyptian Museum tours, the mosque tours, and visits to ancient bazaars that seemed to pop right out of the set of Casablanca. There were trips to jewelry factories where cartouches are created, papyrus factories where delicate hieroglyphic paintings are done, and rug factories where deals are made. In fact, after glasses of mint tea, rounds of thick sweet

"Our guides were wonderful," said Wade. "If we wanted to change something at the last minute, that was fine, but more often it was about getting things into the schedule, not changing them." The trip was packed with purpose and the women wanted it that way.

Visiting the Valley of the Workers was one of those added segues, at the suggestion of their guide, which they stuffed into a crowded day of touring Luxor. Just minutes away from the Valley of the Queens, the group encountered a little known village called Deir el-Medina where the people who worked on the tombs lived – and died. It's an open attraction for visitors but is rarely visited.

"We were able to walk around the excavated houses of the workers and see the dwellings in which the villagers lived," said Grimm. "The walls of the tombs were decorated with exquisite reliefs and paintings in a palette of colors that preserved in great detail the daily lives of the common man, instead of the drama of their deities and rulers. While the tomb workers were richly rewarded with grains and supplies for their service, we learned another more sobering fact: They were not permitted to leave the valley and were often buried alive in the tombs of their kings and queens.

Turkish coffee, and lingering charmed conversation with vendors, the ten women dropped some \$50,000 in combined sales for intricate cotton and wool hand-woven carpets.

But it was the dinner at the house of their guide Mahmoud that was the most memorable experience for this group. In true Egyptian hospitality, Mahmoud's mother and sisters produced a feast for the women one night. Dish after dish, one oeuvre after another, magically appeared from a kitchen the size of a sailboat galley.

"They lived in a typical Cairo high rise building – the whole family in a small apartment. Men don't get married until they can afford to buy their own apartment so Mahmoud was 30 but still living with his parents and sisters," said Grimm. "Because we were all women, the sisters were able to relax and not wear the veil with us. They were dressed in jeans and cute tight shirts just like other young girls. They were college-educated and spoke English so it was really an enlightening time for us. We learned how much they loved their country and religion and that wearing the veil is a choice. How much or how little you veil is really a personal decision," said Grimm.

The lifestyles of Muslim women and the evolution of women's rights in Egypt were ongoing discussions throughout the trip and something the women in this group were able to see, learn about, and appreciate for themselves.

"I had recently read the autobiography of Jehan Sadat," (the widow of Anwar Sadat and a strong role model for Egyptian women during her time as first lady), "and it really came alive for me being in Egypt," said Wade. "We came away with a much greater understanding for Islam."

For this all-women ensemble, traveling is truly becoming a tradition. "I think the group is becoming as important a factor in the travel experience as the place," said Grimm. "We know we are going to have a very good time no matter where we go."

Where will Julia, Jane, Cathi and the rest of their group travel to next year? Provence! ❖



GAL TRIPS

Ladies, pack your suitcases.



Load them up with your favorite dresses, stylish flats, daring heels, glamorous sunglasses and colorful scarves. It's time to get the girls together for a fun-filled getaway. Go for a few days at your favorite hotel in the city, lounging at the beach, or skiing in the mountains.

Better yet, book an edifying journey to Egypt, Botswana, or Chile and Argentina. No matter what destination you choose, getting away with your girlfriends could be the best thing you've done for yourself in a while.



It's a time to tone your body and hone your feminine mystique. Stay up late sipping cocktails, sharing stories, and laughing to your heart's content. Wake up early to meditate in the morning mist or get steamed, buffed, and polished at the spa. Learn a new dance, culinary trick, or artistic technique.

Meet remarkable female role models and explore women's issues in other cultures. From champagne and chocolate to shopping and exploring, ladies' getaways can be inspiring, joy-filled times you're sure to cherish for years to come.



For more ideas and expert travel planning, call our agency at the phone number on the back cover.