

TRAVEL & FOOD



TRAVEL & FOOD

Standing at the huge foot – or rather paw – of the Great Sphinx of Giza, I felt dwarfed by its majesty. To be that close to such a magnificently carved creature was just one of many magical moments on my trip from Cairo to London.

I had joined part of the reimagining of the Kangaroo Route, which in 1947 made its epic air voyage from Sydney to London stopping at Darwin, Singapore, Kolkata, Karachi, Cairo and Tripoli in just four days.

Nearly 80 years on, bespoke travel company Captain's Choice was giving it a 21st century spin with a specially chartered Qantas A330. This time the one-off spectacular was taking two weeks and again setting off from Sydney, stopping at Darwin, Singapore, Kolkata and Colombo before the final leg from Cairo, where I joined, to Rome, Toulouse and London.

To capture the Kangaroo Route's pioneering spirit, in my five days I experienced everything from the pyramids at Giza to a behind-the-scenes guided tour at the Vatican Museums, a stroll through the unexpected delights of Toulouse and dinner under Concorde's wings.

First up was Cairo. The awe-inspiring Sphinx is said to have been carved from a single limestone ridge around 2500 BCE while the Great Pyramid of Giza, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was made from two million blocks of limestone and held together by pressure and ingenuity.

Ancient Egyptians were master innovators and engineers and we got to see that up close at the Grand Egyptian Museum, or GEM, which opened last year. Costing over £900m and taking more than 20 years to build – some estimate as long as the pyramids themselves – the museum holds over 100,000 artefacts and you could easily spend a day here.

The big draw for us was the Tutankhamun galleries. For the first time since Howard Carter and his team discovered the young king's tomb in 1922, all objects – almost 5,400 – have been brought together in one place. There's the 110kg gold coffin, his gold mask, thrones and chariots, as well as his walking sticks. King Tut is thought to have been about 19 when he died from a combination of a fractured leg and malaria.

Later that evening we returned to the pyramids for an exclusive dinner and light show. All food and excursions are included with Captain's Choice and they go above and beyond to make it extra special. Being an Aussie company, everything and everyone was very laidback.

I loved the bonhomie of the group – they were all grown-ups with a sense of fun and adventure. As this was a one-off trip, there were over 130 passengers – an unusual number as groups normally number 25 to 30. You could mingle as much (or as little) as you wanted to; I



PHOTOS © GRAND EGYPTIAN MUSEUM

chatted with everyone from an art gallery owner to a politician, healthcare worker to accountant.

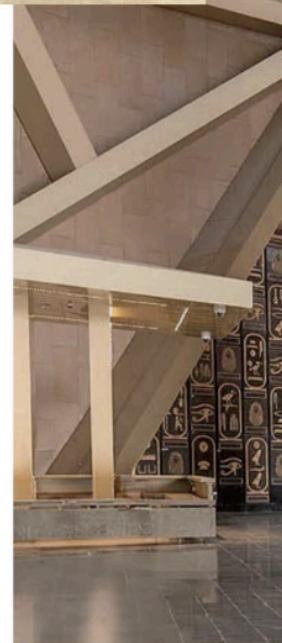
Despite so many passengers, there was loads of room on the plane and the specially-selected Qantas crew dressed up for each destination. Leaving Cairo, some donned pharaoh costumes and there was one Cleopatra, who, I learned at the GEM, was a Macedonian Greek.

Next stop was Rome, where a private nighttime tour of the Vatican Museums was a cultural highlight. Avoiding the queues we got to see a snippet of some of its 20,000 works up close. The plaster cast replica of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (the original marble version is behind shatterproof glass in St Peter's Basilica following a vandal attack in 1975) was still hugely moving. It captures the moment when Jesus was taken down from the cross and his mother Mary tenderly held him.

The Sistine chapel was being cleaned when we visited but the other artworks from Raphael's *School of Athens* to Nero's bathtub and the Gallery of Maps more than made up for it.

This being Italy, food was factored in too. We finished the evening most unexpectedly with delicious pasta overlooking St Peter's Dome. Rome in a beautiful nutshell.

The next day I woke up early to wander around the Eternal City. Our hotel was →



FROM LEFT: Margaret
Hussey dwarfed by the
Great Sphinx of Giza;
inside the new £900m
Grand Egyptian
Museum in Cairo

Ancient Egyptians were master innovators and engineers and we got to see that up close at the Grand Egyptian Museum, which opened last year. Costing over £900m and taking more than 20 years to build – some estimate as long as the pyramids themselves – the museum holds over 100,000 artefacts



TRAVEL & FOOD



FROM TOP: The trip included a private after-hours visit to the Vatican Museums, including The Sistine Chapel, delicious pasta overlooking St Peter's and whizzing past the sites on a vintage car tour



minutes from the Spanish Steps and the designer shops of Via Dei Condotti. Rome still feels like a film set, with Piazza Navona one of my favourites spots and less crowded than the Trevi Fountain, where you now have to pay €2 to reach the viewing area.

It was time for food again, and where better than the Alfredo alla Scrofa restaurant? This is the home of fettuccine Alfredo – the butter, pasta and parmesan dish created around 1908. This classic old-school restaurant's walls are lined with pictures of celebrities who've enjoyed the simple dish from Marlon Brando and Audrey



Hepburn to Sophia Loren and Jimi Hendrix.

Full and happy, we thankfully had designated drivers for our next escapade – a vintage car tour through the streets of Rome. I was in an open-top Morris Minor and our convoy of about nine cars included vintage Fiats.

We whizzed through the Italian capital with police motorbike escorts stopping traffic for us. It was thrilling, fun and wholly Roman with our officers enjoying it just as much as us as we passed the wedding cake (otherwise known as the Victor

Emmanuel II monument), the Colosseum and Circus Maximus, where centuries ago Rome's chariot racing took place.

The next day was the home straight to London, via Toulouse. On the plane we were welcomed back as friends. It's how you wish air travel could always be: relaxed and fun. Captain's Choice also has its own doctors as well as culinary, history and cultural experts on trips, so no stone was left unturned when it came to service.

With my glass of champagne just finished, we landed in France's third biggest city. It's the home of the Airbus, so some aviation fans went to explore its history. I meandered through the pretty streets and ended up at the Victor Hugo market where there was a lot of duck, foie gras and cassoulet, as well as the best-looking loaves of bread I have seen in a long time. It's a great place for people watching – groups were standing around drinking the local Fronton wine and snacking on cheese.

And then it was back on the plane for the final stop. Captain's Choice calculates the emissions from each trip and offsets it through its partnership with everclimate, which helps support Forever Wild Narndee, a biodiversity hotspot in Australia, and the Indian Wind Project in India.

Landing at Stansted, there was a farewell dinner at the Imperial War Museum at Duxford, Cambridgeshire, with emotional speeches of memories made. Under the wings of an iconic Concorde, it was a fitting end. ■

BOOK IT: Captain's Choice offers all-inclusive luxury travel experiences with five-star accommodation, gourmet dining and guides. Explore more journeys at captains-choice.com

Margaret's flights to Cairo, Rome, Toulouse and London had a carbon footprint of 1,135kg of CO₂e (ecollectivecarbon.com)

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES