

WFTGA Meeting in Egypt—January 2007

By Yvette Kaplan, Member of the Greater Boston Tour Guide Assn.

The World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) represents and supports individual tourist guides all over the world. Among the goals of the WFTGA is to raise awareness and the profiles of Tourist Guides, The WFTGA achieves these goals through contacts with the tourism industry worldwide and marketing and promotion of member associations to the industry and throughout the globe.

One of the goals of the WFTGA is to engage more cultural and hospitality partners and to cooperate with other organizations, such as the Federation of European Guides (FEG), the National Federation of Tourist Guide Assns-USA. (NFTGA), and the International Association of Tour Managers (IATM).

The Cultour Card issued by the WFTGA and available to all members is a wonderful resource. I use mine in my travels within the U.S. and to other parts of the world to gain complimentary admittance or discounts in almost every place I show it (whether or not the venue is noted as a participant in the Cultour Card program).

My local guide organization, the Greater Boston Tour Guide Association (GBTGA), is a member of the WFTGA. The WFTGA holds a conference biennially (every other year), most often in January and in different parts of the world. The tour guide association of the host country organizes the meeting and makes arrangements for special events that one could not attend otherwise. Countries bid to be hosts and are chosen by the board for the next meeting.

Tour guides come from all over the world to attend these WFTGA conferences. The meetings are wonderful opportunities to make friends, network and learn from interacting with guides from other cultures. I have developed friendships with several guides and have seen them on my travels and have been their host when they came to The States. The WFTGA conference presentations and workshops are usually very interesting, although some of the discussions do not apply to tour guides in North America.

I attended my first conference ten years ago, in 1997, in Montreal. It was an easy decision as I could drive there and be a tourist for once instead of a Tourist Guide/Tour Director.

I also participated in the meeting in Scotland in 2003. There was a pre-tour organized by the British Blue Guides starting in London and ending in Dunblane, a town situated between Glasgow and Edinburgh where the meeting took place. The post tour, held after the close of the conference, took us all the way to the North of Scotland. It was a wonderful, well organized meeting which included many interesting extra venues and, of course, being in Scotland, the activities included poetry and drinking.

In 2005, Australia was selected as the venue and I didn't go. I've been to Australia before and it would have been quite an expensive trip. Instead I decided to go to the conference of the Federation of European Guides (FEG) in Sicily around the same time. My friends from Vienna and Stockholm had told me about the FEG conference and I was the only non-European attendee. I extended my stay and had a marvelous time exploring Sicily for eleven days.

Conference Attendees

In Australia in January 2005, Egypt won the privilege of hosting the meeting in 2007. I have been to Cairo, but always wished to go on a Nile Cruise and was excited when I read that a cruise was one of the post conference tours. I decided to attend the conference and room with Terry Hall of Chicago. As I was the only attendee from Boston, I was "adopted" by the large Chicago group. From the U.S., there were twelve attending from Chicago, twenty-one from DC, plus the President of the NFTGA, Bobbie Gattuso, from New Orleans.

Esther Banike, the vice president of the NFTGA is also the Vice President of the Chicago guide association. Along with Bobbie Gattuso, Esther was selected to be one of the NFTGA official U.S. conference delegates. Esther was in touch with me before our arrival. She made up a logo for each tour guide association and wanted us to apply it on a black T-shirt that we would wear as our “uniform”. Most countries have colorful costumes that they wear to the “farewell gala dinner”. While too informal for the gala, our American group looked quite good in our matching black T-shirts on one of the days of the conference. (See picture below.)



The logo to the left was the Chicago version, designed by Esther Banike of the Chicago Tour-Guide Professionals Assn. (CTPA). She also prepared and emailed customized logos for other local guide associations attending the WFTGA conference

The Chicago guides “volunteered” to organize the silent auction to raise funds for a WFTGA scholarship program. This year’s recipient was from Mozambique. The auction took place at the Gala Dinner and raised over \$4,000 from items donated by individuals and associations.

Pre-Conference Tour

Terry and I arrived in Cairo a day before our pre-tour to Alexandria was scheduled. We were able to walk around and discover the hustle and bustle of downtown Cairo on a Friday, which is a holiday. It seemed to us, to be a very busy day of shopping. We were struck by the fact that the majority of women wore (at least) a head covering. We did very well finding our way with my Lonely Planet and Terry’s DK guide books.

There were two full coaches going to Alexandria for the two-day, one-night pre-tour, which is where we first met some of our colleagues from other countries. Our guides were excellent. The guides were also Egyptologists and very knowledgeable in the over-five-thousand-year history of their country.

The Cairo Conference

The conference itself took place (and we were housed) in the very nice Cairo Conrad Hotel, which is an upscale hotel that is part of the Hilton chain.

After the opening ceremony—during which we were greeted by a representative from the Ministry of Tourism and President of the Egyptian Tour Guide Syndicate—the scheduled speaker was **Dr. Zahi Hawass**, the well known author and scholar. Unfortunately, we were told that Dr. Hawass was in The States having eye surgery and instead of his talk we were shown a video made by Dr. Hawass explaining some of the fascinating archeological projects he and his team are working on, including finding the mummy of Queen Hatsephut and the burial place of Anthony and Cleopatra.

Another very interesting talk was by **Mr. Hisham Zazo**, the Director General and Vice Chairman of Affiliated Members of the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations (UN). He spoke about the WTO, a policymaking political organization, and about the Code of Ethics of Tour Guides. He stressed the importance of tourist guides who should be called “ambassadors,” as guides are the true bridges between cultures. Without guides, visits to a country or city are not optimal. He talked about the importance of training and the fact that compensation is not adequate. In some cases, companies are replacing live guides with technology such as audio tours. The WTO is working on interactive relationships by pressing for our rights, using the media and proper lobbying.

Another lecture was given by **Fadel Soliman**, who gave an introduction to Islam and Coptic Orthodoxy. This was a great presentation to help us understand aspects of the cultural and history we would learn more about during our stay in Egypt. It was also an opportunity to ask questions and discuss relevant issues. The speaker was the Director of Bridges Foundation whose goal is to bridge the gap between peoples through education. To learn more look at: www.bridges-foundation.org

Workshops were another aspect of the conference and included: Guiding in Sacred Places; Guiding Youth Groups; Legal Issues Facing Guides Worldwide; Setting up Guide Training Courses for Adults; Antiquities and Archeology; Cultural Awareness; Adventure Tourist Guiding; Tourist Guides from the Past, Present, and Future; How Technology is Changing the Industry; plus Ethics and Problem Solving. It was good to discuss our rights as freelance workers and how we can improve relationships with the companies that hire our services as tour guides. We learned more about the WFTGA training facility in Cypress, and how the WFTGA trains guides and sends trainers to different parts of the world to assist countries or areas that are trying to upgrade or establish trained professional guides.

As part of the conference agenda, we enjoyed guided tours to the Egyptian Museum, as well as the Pyramids and the Sphinx. Included dinners each evening were in at exotic locations with entertainment, camels, lion cubs and campfires.

On the day we saw the famous pyramids outside Cairo, the U.S. attendees wore our black T-shirts with the special local guide association logos on the back. If you look at the picture below, you can see the famous Pyramids of Giza in the background.



A sampling of international guides attending the January 2007 WFTGA conference poses at the Giza Pyramids. The group includes Bali, Egypt, Singapore, and US guides from Boston, Chicago, New Orleans and Washington, DC.

Kneeling, front row L to R: unidentified man, Walid Batouty, Egypt; Bobbie Gattuso, New Orleans.
2nd row: Terry Hall, Chicago; Marie Pinho, DC; Maricar Donato, DC; Nyoman Khandia, Bali, Indonesia; Esther Banike, Linda Chestnut, Michele Krug, Chicago; Jean Wang, Singapore. **Back row:** Carol Wilken, DC; Beverly Livingston, Chicago; Deborah Androus, DC; Howard Eng Hua Lim Singapore.

As we had some free time to explore Cairo on our own, Terry and I elected to return to the Egyptian Museum, visited Old Cairo, the famous Coptic Museum, the 13th century Synagogue, the colorful Khan-Al-Khalili Bazaar, the Citadel and the Mosque of Sultan Hassan. I wanted to see the modern Synagogue, built in the early 20th century as a house of worship for the 200 Jewish families that still live and worship in Cairo.

Cairo is a city of 17 million people and it seems like everyone drives a car, most of which are very old and would certainly not pass our anti-pollution standards. We learned to dodge the cars crossing the roads and how to bargain with the taxi drivers and in the shops.

The days of the conference went by very quickly and all too soon it was time to say our good byes. At the closing ceremonies we were told about the travails of a guide from Iraq—all the delays and difficulties he encountered to attend the Conference. His story was amazing! The conference participants empathizes with him—there is virtually no tourism in Iraq now. Sensitive to his dignity, the conference rewarded him with a prize for enduring the greatest hardship to attend the conference. It was very inspiring to learn how important it was for him to be with other like-minded people.

The newly elected WFTGA Officers were introduced and it was announced that the next (13th) WFTGA conference will be held in **Bali, Indonesia, from Monday, January 10, 2009, until Friday, January 16, 2009.** The theme will be “**Eco -tourism: The Tourist Guides Role.**” For more information see: www.wftga.org and www.baliwftga2009.com.

Post-Tour

About one half of the attendees went on the post-tour excursion, which was a four-day cruise on the Nile from Luxor to Aswan. It was a very comfortable river cruise and, for me, a lifelong wish was fulfilled by visiting the Temple of Luxor and Karnak and seeing the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. I cannot describe the grandeur and beauty of these places.

Conclusion

The 12th WFTGA Convention theme for Cairo was “Guiding from the Ancient World to the Modern World Tourist Guiding the Evolving Profession.” As the out-going President of WFTGA, Ruby Roy, wrote in her welcome letter, “This 12th WFTGA conference gave us all the opportunity to network, develop and discuss various aspects of our profession as well as learn from our world wide trainers on developing and evolving our skills to meet with the demands of the future needs of travelers and visitors to our countries”.

I have found that attending the WFTGA conferences to be very worthwhile. I hope that you will consider attending the next WFTGA conference to be held in Bali in January 2009. I know I plan to be there!