

Notes on a philatelic visit to Alexandria

David Ogden (ESC 480)

EGYPHILA, the recent Egyptian stamp exhibition at the beautiful Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, was held from 19-21 September. I was fortunate to attend the event with Jon Aitchison (ESC 661), who acted as the Egypt Study Circle commissioner.

Flying with Wizz Air, I was impressed with the newish Sphinx airport (opened 2018) near the Pyramids on the Giza side of Cairo. It was my first trip to Egypt for 24 years and my first major stamp exhibition apart from Stampex.

On the first day of my visit I took the opportunity to see the National Museum of Civilisation in Old Cairo, itself a stunning building quite apart from the treasures within. The Golden Parade of Pharaohs contains 20 amazing royal mummies, 18 kings and two queens, from between the 17th and 20th dynasties.

It was a short Uber trip to the recently refurbished Postal Museum of Egypt in Ataba Square. Visitors can enjoy a free guided tour of the countless rooms, filled with all elements of postal history including stamps, postboxes, uniforms etc, with a genuine railway carriage representing the Travelling Post Office. Other countries have made generous donations to make it a truly world class museum. The gift shop, which offers various “Egypt Post” themed items, is well worth a stop.

Hany Salam (ESC 580), President of the Philatelic Society of Egypt, and his colleagues were so welcoming and generous, looking after Jon and myself very well as we attended an auction at the PSE headquarters in Abdel-Khalek Sarwat Street in downtown Cairo. Lots of impressive material for sale.



John Aitchison collected a double handful of awards from Hany Salam on behalf of John Davis, Grand Prix winner, at the Palmares luncheon. At right, Hany faces a crowd of enthusiasts at the exhibition opening



The day before the exhibition opened Hany kindly drove us to Alexandria, where the salt lakes on the approach to the Mediterranean city made a spectacular sight. We went straight to the Graeco-Roman Museum to help to set up the exhibits. UK displays had sadly been retained at Cairo airport after a misunderstanding and we put up photocopies in their place.

On 19 September, the first EGYPHILA philatelic and postal history exhibition, under the patronage of the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Dr Amr Talaat, was opened. It was organized by the PSE (founded 1929), which has a history of holding international exhibitions around the world. Hany described how it includes rare collections from international exhibitors, its own members, and other groups including the Study Circle and with participation from senior philatelists in the Arab countries.

Awards of Merit – the Gold winners

John Davis, President of the Egypt Study Circle, impressed the judges with his eight frames on Early and Classical Egypt and he was awarded 97 points to take a Large Gold medal and the Grand Prix as best in show. Close at hand was **Aly Gabr**, whose Third Issue display scored 96 and another Large Gold. **Jon Aitchison's** Officially Sealed Mail won Large Gold with 95 points, and he went one point better with his display of 100 Years of Postal Stationery. **Yasser Omar** scored 95 and Large Gold for his eight frames on Fuad's First Portrait issue, as did **Sami Sadek** for his Travelling Post Offices analysis. Gold medals went to **Aly Gabr** (Forces postal concession, 93), **Ahmed Nabil** (Pictorial Definitives, 90) and **Khaled Mostafa** (Rural Post, 90), all in five frames, **Mohamed Elrayes** (Suez Canal postcards, 90) in eight frames. **Yasser Omar** (1884 surcharge, 93) and **Atef Sarian** (First Issue, 90, and Fuad Birthday, 90), won Gold medals for their single frame displays.



A novel and beautiful Grand Prix award... John Davis' top "medal" was a stunning replica of the scarab god Kheper from the tomb of Tutankhamun

Dr Eng Mohamed Omar, co-ordinator of the exhibition, explained that 52 exhibitors from Egypt, England, Algeria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Oman were taking part in the first exhibition of its kind to be held in Alexandria. In addition, court of honour displays included his own on the Graeco-Roman Museum, Hany Salam on the history of Alexandria's maritime routes up to 1850, and two by Samir Nabih (ESC 505), on the San Stefano and Gezireh Palace hotels

As chairman of the jury, Samir took time out from examining the diverse range of exhibits to explain that Khedive Ismail founded the Egyptian Post in 1865, at a period before stamps, when the value of the service fee was written on the envelope. In 1866 Egypt's first postage stamps were printed in Naples, with geometric decorative forms.

Dr Ali Abdelmegeid (ESC 746) played an invaluable part as official spokesman of the PSE in the exhibition: he was very visible, ensuring that everyone was kept informed. Local TV captured several people to interview, including myself!



The high-level standard of the exhibits attracted the attention of visitors and officials alike with everyone interested to see the elements of Egypt's history before them. Visitors on opening day included enthusiasts from the world over, including, at right, Mazen Mira from Australia and Dr Mohammed el-Zard, who is new to Cairo



PSE Board members took the opportunity for a group photograph. From left, Khaled Abu Bakr, Samir Nabih, Hisham Bassiouny, Hany Salam, Mohammed Omar, Sherif Hamza, Ali Abdelmegeid, Hassan al-Badry. Below, the exhibition was opened by Eng Mohamed Zahra, head of the Philatelic Printing House, who met Alaa Massoud, President of the Alexandria Philatelic Society, and colleagues Khaled Shamaa, Osama Khayat, Adham Shaker., Mohamed Gaber.



After the exhibition opening we were treated to a personal tour of the museum, which is housed in a wonderful Greek Revival-style building that opened in 1895 and was expanded in subsequent decades. It reopened in October 2023 after 18 years of renovations. Highlights include early Christian mummies, a temple to the crocodile god Sobek, and a courtyard full of statuary.

That evening the official dinner was held at the Nautical club, near the Qaitbay citadel, which was built in 1477 on the site of the Pharos, one of the ancient wonders of the world, in Alexandria's eastern harbour. I enjoyed meeting Dr Mohammed Omar, whose wide range of exhibits included the Mediterranean Games, postal rates and King Fouad. Dr Aly Gabr (ESC 726) was also very good company, telling me about the architecture of Alexandria's Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi mosque. He showed the Third Issue and the British Forces concession rate 1932-41. Vahe Varjabedian (ESC 390) kindly invited me to visit his apartment in Cairo the following week.



Time to enjoy a meal together: right, Aly Gabr, David, Hisham and Zizi Bassiouny, Ahmed Nabil, Hany. In the Sheikh Ali pub, Hermine Varjabedian, Hany, Vahe Varjabedian, David, Jon, Hisham and Zizi Bassiouny.

On September 20 many of us took the trip to Rosetta (Rashid), on the western branch of the Nile. We visited Fort Qaitbay, built in 1479, where the Rosetta Stone was unearthed in 1899 and now resides in the British Museum. Recording a decree of 196 BCE, it helped to play a crucial part in the deciphering of hieroglyphics. I enjoyed visiting the historic Ottoman mansions, covered in ornate mashrabiya (latticework). Most impressive is the House of Amasyali, built in 1808. We also saw the House of Shaheen, featuring a reconstructed mill.



David took the chance to visit Rashid, where the Nile meets the sea, Dahshur and its Bent Pyramid, the Alexandria Catacombs, and even to make his debut on Egyptian broadcasting



The Palmires lunch and awards ceremony took place on September 21. Hany Salam presented the awards, after highlighting the need to encourage younger collectors to become involved in the hobby. John Davis was awarded Large Gold and Grand Prix, and Jon Aitchison accepted several awards on behalf of the UK entrants. Later, Hany kindly drove us back to Cairo.

Back in the bustling capital, I visited the extensive Abdeen Palace museum, built by Khedive Ismail, then travelled on the excellent Metro service to Coptic Cairo. In Islamic Cairo, I was fascinated in Al Muizz Street by a film being shot about Saad Zaghloul, set in 1919 with the “threatening” British soldiers played by Egyptian actors! I hired a driver to take me to the Dahshur pyramids, south of Saqqara, and found myself almost the only sightseer.

Visiting Vahe and Hermine in Heliopolis brought a new experience, visiting the newly refurbished Hindu inspired Baron Empain Palace. My final visit was to the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square, where the Tutankhamun collection still shines. All too quickly this magical trip came to an end. But it won't be long before I'm back in Egypt.



... not forgetting the fantastic newly restored Postal Museum in Ataba Square

●Additional reporting by Vahe Varjabedian and Ali Abdelmegeid. Thank you both.