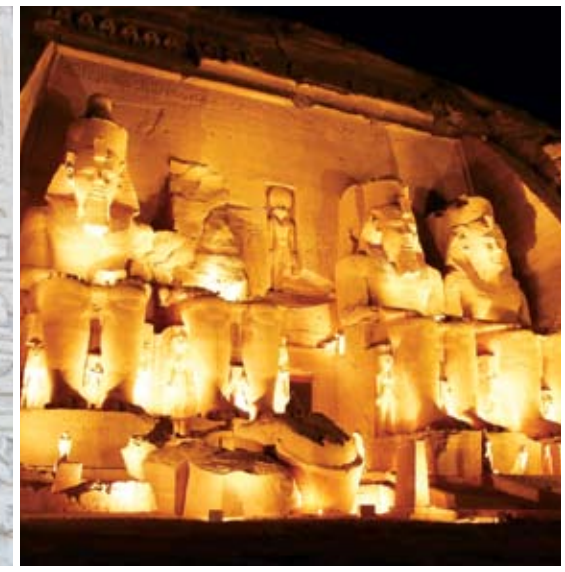

STATUES, STONE AND SAND

The temples of Abu Simbel.

by **Wendy Lindsay** / photography by **R&W Lindsay**

As we sail under the Egyptian sun on our cruise ship, the Kasr Ibrim, we see very few boats cruising Lake Nasser on the way to Abu Simbel. The trip is tranquil, with expansive, horizon-touching stretches of desert lining the shores. We are far from any major settlements, and the stars visible in the sky at night are phenomenal.

Approaching the temples of Abu Simbel is an exercise in scale-perception, and a trek under the hot afternoon sun is well worth it as we approach the man-made mountain and gaze upon the two temples that lie before us in majestic splendour. If Ramses II built the behemoth structures to intimidate unfriendly neighbours, or to keep out solicitors, he no doubt succeeded. Abu Simbel is a deep-breath-taking sight.

The large temple is fronted by four enthroned colossi of Ramses looming almost 21 metres overhead. To say they're huge doesn't do justice; these statues are *massive* constructs. Designed to unnerve foes coming down the Nile, three sets of eyes gaze stoically at the horizon. Three sets, not four—the head of one statue, victim of a bygone earthquake, lies on the sand. The broken portion at once emphasizes and undermines the structure's quiet intensity; the brow of a disembodied head resting expressionless on the ground, closer to us, enormous and within arm's reach, intimidates us with its power, while paradoxically the barren void left in the statue above hints at weakness. It evokes Shelley—truly a "colossal wreck, boundless and bare".

So, too, could the temple complex in its entirety have suffered a similarly devastating fate. In the 1960s, the construction of the Aswan High Dam elevated the water level of the Nasser Lake reservoir and threatened to completely submerge the Abu Simbel temples and numerous other archaeological sites along the lake's banks. A multinational consortium of historians, archaeologists, craftsmen and engineers was hurriedly pulled together to carefully dismantle and rebuild the temples. Using saws, the temples and statues at Abu Simbel were cut into several thousand massive blocks, each weighing up to 40 tons, and moved to the new site with the same orientation on a plain overlooking, but 210 metres back from, their original position. Because the inner sanctuaries of the temples originally resided inside the cliff, a gigantic, reinforced concrete dome was constructed, then covered with stone and rubble to resemble a mountain. Upon entering the temples, there is little to give away that the structures were literally cut out from the side of a cliff and relocated.

Concealed modern lighting and ventilation inside the larger of the temples heighten the experience of walking through the first atrium's main nave, lined left and right with pillars of the Pharaoh as the god Osiris. Overhead, spread-winged vultures are still vivid in dark blue and gold. Off the side aisles behind the pillars, vast murals depict the exploits of Ramses in battle.

Past the second atrium, where murals beautifully show Ramses and his wife making offerings to the gods, is the inner sanctuary. Here, for the first time, we mortals are about the same size as the Ramses sitting between statues of the gods Amun Ra and Ra-Harakhty. To the extreme left sits Ptah, the god associated with the underworld, and here we have another case study in the uncanny skills and precision of ancient Egyptian engineers and architects. Twice a year, shafts of sunlight enter the temple and strike the statue of Ramses and the gods on either side, illuminating all but Ptah. The dates fall around February 21 and October 21, which, though no one knows for sure, many believe reflects the dates of Ramses' coronation and birthday. And it is a testament to the skill of *modern* engineers that, even after the relocation of the temples, the illumination dates are only thought to be off by one day.

At night, there is a sound-and-light show, an attraction involving lights and lasers projecting images onto the outside temple walls. It's a fascinating contrast—ancient sculptures with lasers, antiquated statues with neon lights. Seeing the temple painted with lights and lasers almost betrays its extreme age and antiquity.

But not quite. In the morning, we look back at the site from the ship, and in seeing the temple complex bathed in the warm glow of the rising sun, that feeling of something ancient and powerful returns quickly. Ramses was a young man when he commissioned the larger temple; it's nearly incomprehensible that now, thousands of years later, images of him continue to stare out at the horizon, practically insensate to the power of time. Well, except for that one broken head, lying on the sand.

