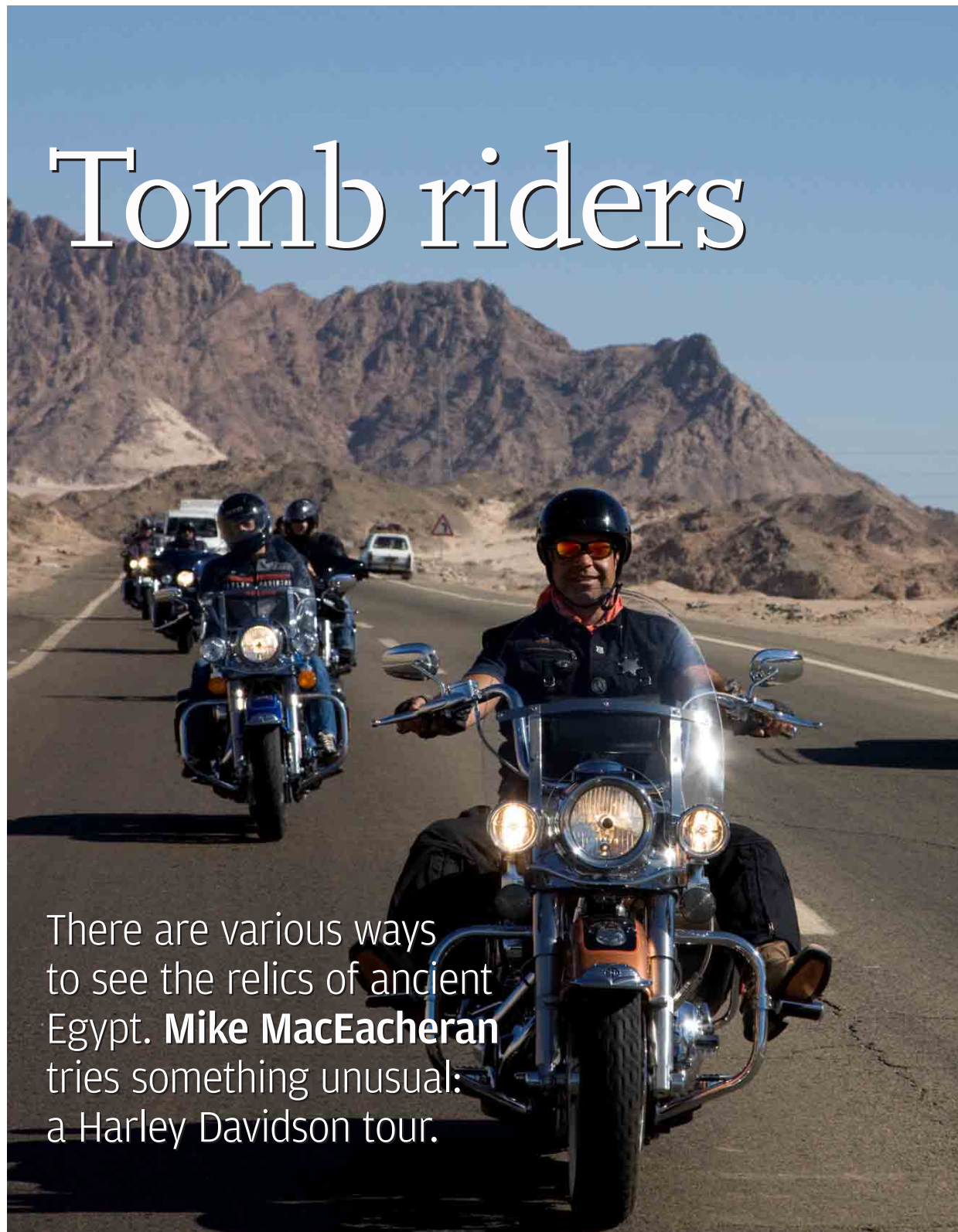


# Tomb riders



There are various ways to see the relics of ancient Egypt. **Mike MacEacheran** tries something unusual: a Harley Davidson tour.

The ancient Egyptians were masters of the art of transportation. Obelisks were quarried hundreds of miles from where they were erected. The red granite burial chamber of the Great Pyramid of Giza came from Aswan, more than 900 kilometres south along the Nile.

Today's Egyptians have lost their touch; the streets of Hurghada, on the country's thirsty, sun-dried east coast, are jammed with overloaded buses, donkey carts and reluctant camels. As though frozen in time, they all wait – and look on in awe as a fleet of chrome Harley Davidsons purr to life beside them.

This is the beginning of an overland tour that will take in Luxor, the mesmerising Valley of the Kings and Karnak before the final sprint back to Hurghada.

"Ten minutes people. Ten minutes," screeches Sharif Bergami, a member of the Harley Davidson Owners Group in Cairo. He has a sparkle in his eye and wears a sheriff's badge to remind everyone who's in charge.

"Lock and load," he shouts when it's time to move.

I'm qualified to ride the gleaming piece of machinery between my legs but I was born to be mild rather than wild. Some double up on larger bikes. Bergami squeezes a box helmet onto my head and gives the group the thumbs up. Five minutes later, I'm riding a Harley Davidson Softail Heritage Classic across Egypt, listening to Lynryd Skynryd on the in-bike stereo and feeling cool for the first time in my life.

Kilometre after kilometre pass. Along the highway bronzed dunes languish in the heat and distant moun-

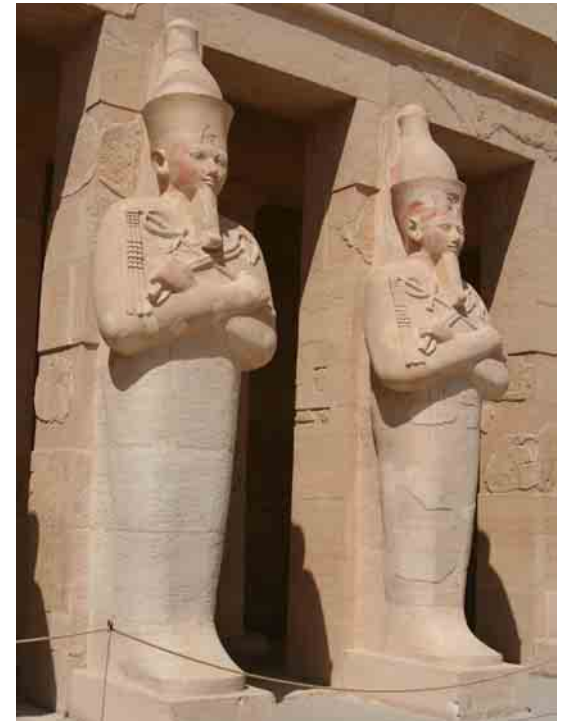
tains look ragged and starved. Above, the aquamarine sky stretches all the way to Luxor.

In the Qena valley, lush emerald palm trees and evergreen grasses – watered by the Nile – decorate the roadsides, irrigation channels span out like fronds from an over-hanging date palm and the white sails of the traditional Egyptian sailing boat, the *felucca*, reach upwards from the river.

We reach the Nile's west bank just before dark, as the sun stretches shadows to breaking point. Homer – the Greek poet rather than the Springfield layabout – wrote in *The Iliad* that Luxor was a place "where only the grains of sand of the desert surpassed the quantity of riches enclosed within". When the Arabs arrived in Luxor, they named the city Al Uqsar – literally, "the palaces" – for the temples, with their grand courtyards, massive pylon structures and forest-like hypostyle halls. It does not disappoint today, either.

By the time we arrive at Karnak Temple, day has turned to night; the Egyptian sun god Ra has passed over to Osiris, keeper of the afterlife. The temple complex is lit sparingly by torches and lamps. Its deep shadows prey on the imagination like jackals, then the silence is broken by a pre-recorded god-like voice, which booms out the temple's history from discreetly positioned speakers. Despite the uncanny similarity, it's not Bergami – he's gone to a bar.

The Avenue of the Sphinxes, which in antiquity connected the temples of Karnak and Luxor, illustrates the vision the pharaohs had of making Thebes – which stood where Luxor now does – the capital of



Left: the Harley Davidson convoy, led by Sharif Bergami. Above: statues of Hatshepsut, Egypt's longest-ruling indigenous female pharaoh.

the greatest civilisation in human history. According to historians, Karnak's Temple of Amun is the largest columned sanctuary in the world and is big enough to enclose Paris' Notre Dame.

Early next morning, the only sounds on the west bank are from Nubian fishermen dragging patchwork nets onto their skeletal boats and the murky water breaking against the hardwood teak of their hulls.

"Ready for the ride of your life?" barks Bergami, breaking the calm and wiping down his Harley.

As the day's colours change, we cruise past Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri, the tomb of Egypt's longest-ruling indigenous female pharaoh. The main building, Djoser-Djeseru, an example of perfect symmetry predating the Parthenon, in Greece, is located at the entrance to the Valley of the Kings. Here are the towering, 3,400-year-old Colossi of Memnon, all that remain of the burial temple of Amenhotep III. Somewhere nearby, on the banks of the Nile, Egyptologists are looking for the tombs of Cleopatra, the last pharaoh of Egypt's Ptolemaic dynasty, and her lover, Mark Antony.

As we weave between tour buses in a zigzag formation, we are seeking the Valley of the Kings – the necropolis of the Egyptian sovereigns from the 18th to the 20th dynasties – and it rises ahead. The first tomb along the approach to the centre of the valley contains the sarcophagus of Ramesses IV, sovereign of the 20th dynasty and son of Ramesses III. "It is the largest in the entire valley," says the tour guide.

Inside, day trippers and aggressive hawkers disturb the silence. But by closing my eyes, it's easy to disappear to a world away from the tourist hordes and motorbikes. The sand smells like perfume and – with a little imagination – the crushed myrrh used in embalming.

It's getting difficult to pay attention to the hieroglyphic patterns of ibis, snakes and scarabs on the crumbling walls and to the guide because from outside comes the noise of revving engines.

We may not have had time to visit the ever-smiling King Tut in his underground cavern – but with more than 200 kilometres in front of us on the road back to Hurghada – the grin on my face says I do not care.

**Getting there:** take Emirates ([www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) from Hong Kong to Dubai and connect on to Cairo. Take Egyptair ([www.egyptair.com](http://www.egyptair.com)) to Hurghada.