Episode Book

EPISODE #5564

Why Egypt Tops the "Never Going Back" List

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SYNOPSIS

A long-running Travel subreddit thread asks one simple question: which country would you never visit again? Egypt keeps landing at the top — and some Egyptians are the loudest critics of their own tourism industry. We dig into the stated reasons, the defenders' counter-arguments, and the ten countries that recur most often, from India and Morocco to Thailand and Italy. What emerges isn't really a verdict on any country — it's a story about the gap between the postcard and the ground.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a number for you. In a thread where travelers name the one country they'd never go back to, the same country keeps landing at the top of the pile, over and over, until it stops looking like a coincidence and starts looking like a verdict.



Herman

And it's not a small country, and it's not a country nobody's heard of. It's one of the most famous destinations on earth.



Corn

Right. So Daniel sent us a whole thing about this. It's one of the longest and most polarizing threads on the Travel subreddit. The premise is simple: name the country you visited and would never revisit. And Daniel noticed Egypt comes up a disproportionate amount of times. Even some Egyptians jumped in to say they personally wouldn't recommend visiting under any circumstance. But then other people had good things to say about traveling there.



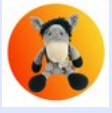
Herman

So he wants both sides.



Corn

He wants both sides, and then he wants the list. He asked us to look at ten of the countries that come up most often in that thread and the stated reasons people give. So that's the shape of today. Why Egypt dominates, why some Egyptians are the loudest critics of their own tourism industry, what the defenders say, and then the ten-country rundown.



Herman

There's a lot to unpack here, because the thread isn't really about travel. It's about expectation.



Corn

Start there.



Herman

Travel is identity-adjacent. People spend money they don't have, they take time off, they build up a place in their head for years. So when you ask "would you ever go back," you're not asking a logistical question. You're asking someone to relitigate a decision they made about themselves. That's why the thread runs for years and why it gets nasty.



Corn

And why the answers are so confident. Nobody says "it was fine, probably wouldn't return." They say never.



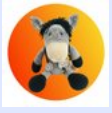
Herman

Never is the whole genre. It's a strong claim, and a strong claim invites a counter-story. Somebody says Egypt was unbearable, and within an hour you've got three people saying Egypt was the best trip of their life. The thread's length is that argument repeating itself.



Corn

So it's a mirror. You learn less about the countries than you do about the gap between the dream and the ground.



Herman

That's the mechanism we should keep coming back to. The higher the pedestal, the harder the fall.



Corn

Then let's do Egypt first, because Egypt is the anchor. Why does it come up so disproportionately?



Herman

Because it's a bucket-list destination with a bucket-list gap. People grow up seeing the Pyramids in every documentary ever made. They arrive with an image that's essentially a museum. And then they land in Cairo.



Corn

Which is a city of twenty-plus million people with a lot of noise and a lot of dust.



Herman

And a tourism economy where a huge number of people are competing for a small number of tourist dollars. The complaints are remarkably consistent. Aggressive hawkers. Persistent scams. The feeling that you cannot walk ten feet without being asked to buy something or being told you're going the wrong way so someone can redirect you for a fee.



Corn

There's a line in the thread I keep thinking about. Something like: "I couldn't walk ten feet without being asked to buy something."



Herman

And the specific geography matters. Giza and Luxor are the worst offenders. The Pyramids have a whole ecosystem of touts around them, guys selling camel rides, guys selling photos, guys selling you a ticket that isn't a ticket. Luxor's the same at the temples. The sites are magnificent and the approach to them is a gauntlet.



Corn

Harassment of women comes up constantly too.



Herman

Constantly. That's not a marginal complaint in that thread, it's one of the top three. Women describing being followed, being grabbed, being propositioned, and finding that the response from people around them is shrug. That's the kind of thing that doesn't just ruin a trip, it ends it.



Corn

And then there's the pollution and the crowd factor in Cairo. The noise, the traffic, the air.



Herman

All real. Cairo's air quality is bad, the traffic is chaotic, and the tourist sites are packed in high season. None of that is a secret. What's interesting is that the thread treats these as betrayals rather than as facts about a big developing city.



Corn

Because of the pedestal.



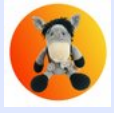
Herman

You don't go to Cairo expecting Cairo. You go expecting the postcard.



Corn

Now here's the part that surprised Daniel. Some Egyptians joined the thread to say don't come.



Herman

That's the detail that makes this thread worth an episode. It's one thing for a tourist to say they wouldn't return. It's another for someone who lives there to say they wouldn't recommend it.



Corn

And what reasons do they give?



Herman

Mostly economic desperation. The tourism sector collapsed after twenty-eleven and never fully recovered, and then the currency devalued hard, and a lot of people who used to have other work ended up in the tourist economy because that's where the cash was. So you get a situation where the pressure on tourists isn't malice, it's survival. The Egyptians in the thread say that directly. They say the guys hassling you at Giza aren't evil, they're broke.



Corn

Which is a much more uncomfortable answer than "Egyptians are rude."



Herman

Much more uncomfortable. And then they add the second layer, which is frustration with how tourism is managed. They'll say the government spends money on the pyramids and not on the neighborhoods around them. They'll say the infrastructure is deteriorating. They'll say the harassment culture isn't being policed because nobody with power pays a price for it.



Corn

So when an Egyptian says don't come, it's not a lack of patriotism. It's a complaint about a system.



Herman

It's arguably the most patriotic thing in the thread. They're saying the country deserves better than what it's currently offering visitors.



Corn

Which is a very different sentence than "the country is bad."



Herman

Completely different. And the thread doesn't always make that distinction, which is one of its weaknesses.



Corn

Okay. Now the defenders. What do the people who loved Egypt say?



Herman

They say the same things the critics say, and then they say "and it was worth it." The Pyramids at sunrise with nobody around. The temples at Luxor, which are among the most extraordinary things humans have built. A Nile cruise, which is one of the great slow travel experiences on the planet. The Red Sea diving, which is world class. And then the thing that comes up again and again: the warmth of ordinary Egyptians once you're outside the tourist zones.



Corn

That's the part the critics rarely mention.



Herman

Because if you stay in the tourist corridor, you only meet the tourism economy. If you get out of it, you meet the country. The defenders in that thread are essentially saying: the hassle is real, and it's manageable, and the payoff is enormous.



Corn

Manageable how?



Herman

Hiring a guide. Staying in a hotel with a good concierge. Not going to Giza on your own at noon. Learning ten words of Arabic. Dressing conservatively as a woman. The defenders are very specific about tactics, which is actually the most useful part of the thread.



Corn

So the split isn't "Egypt good" versus "Egypt bad." It's "the tourist corridor is brutal" versus "the country behind it is extraordinary."



Herman

And both are true at the same time, which is why the thread never resolves.



Corn

Let's widen out. Daniel asked for ten countries. Where does the rest of the list go?



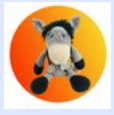
Herman

The countries that recur most are Egypt, India, Morocco, Turkey, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, Italy, and France. Not necessarily in that order, but that's the cluster.



Corn

India.



Herman

India's the other big one. The complaints are the same shape as Egypt's but amplified. Overwhelming crowds. Pollution. Harassment. Scams. Sensory overload. People describe arriving in Delhi or Varanasi and being completely unprepared for the intensity. The thread's India comments often read less like complaints and more like shellshock.



Corn

There's one that stuck with me. Something like "I was scammed three times in one day."



Herman

That's not an unusual number for a first-time visitor. The classic ones are the taxi that takes you to a "government" shop, the train ticket that isn't a train ticket, the guy who says the temple is closed today but he knows another one. None of it is sophisticated. It works because the visitor is disoriented and tired.



Corn

And the defenders of India say the same thing they say about Egypt.



Herman

They say you have to slow down and you have to accept that India is going to be India. The people who love India love it hard. But the thread is full of people who went for two weeks and came home wrecked.



Corn

Morocco.



Herman

Morocco's complaints are more specific. Aggressive touts, persistent harassment, and a particular feeling of being unsafe for women in Marrakech and Fez. The thread has a lot of women describing being followed. There's a line about being followed by men everywhere in Marrakech.



Corn

Which is the same complaint as Egypt.



Herman

Same complaint, same mechanism. A tourism economy where the pressure on visitors is intense, in a culture where the norms around approaching women are different from what a Western tourist expects. The result is a trip that a man might describe as "pushy" and a woman might describe as frightening.



Corn

Turkey.



Herman

Turkey's interesting because the complaints are more mixed. Pushy salesmen, especially in the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. Scams in the tourist areas. And then a layer of political instability concern that's been in the thread for years. But Turkey also has a huge number of defenders. Istanbul and Cappadocia come up as favorite places constantly.



Corn

So Turkey's a country where the thread is split.



Herman

Split. Which is closer to the truth for most of these countries than the "never again" framing suggests.



Corn

China.



Herman

China's complaints are different in kind. Less about harassment, more about friction. The language barrier is real. The surveillance is real. The pollution in some cities is real. And navigating as a foreigner has gotten harder in the last few years, with the apps and the payments and the visa situation. People describe a trip that was logistically exhausting.



Corn

And the crowds.



Herman

Chinese tourist sites in high season are on a scale that Westerners don't have a reference for. The Great Wall on a holiday weekend is not a contemplative experience.



Corn

Thailand.



Herman

Thailand's complaints are mostly about over-tourism. The beaches that were paradise in the nineties are now wall-to-wall. The scams are well-documented. And the sex tourism reputation puts off a certain kind of traveler, especially people traveling with kids. But Thailand also has the most defenders of anyone on this list. The food, the cost, the ease of travel. It's a country people go back to ten times.



Corn

Vietnam.



Herman

Vietnam's complaints are the traffic chaos, the scams, the pushy vendors, and the pollution. Hanoi's traffic is a thing you have to experience to believe. But again, huge number of defenders. Vietnam's one of the countries where the thread splits hardest.



Corn

Mexico.



Herman

Mexico's complaints are mostly safety-related, and they're regionally specific in a way the thread often isn't. People will say "I'd never go back" and then mention they were in a state that has a travel advisory. Which is a very different claim than "Mexico is dangerous."



Corn

That's the nuance the thread keeps losing.



Herman

It keeps losing it. Mexico is a country of a hundred and thirty million people. Saying you'd never go back because of one bad week in one city is like saying you'd never go back to the United States because of one bad week in one city.



Corn

Italy.



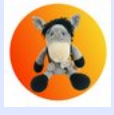
Herman

Italy's complaints are pickpockets, over-tourism, and rude service in the tourist traps. Rome and Venice and Florence in high season. The pickpocket thing is real and organized. The rudeness thing is real and mostly a function of the tourist-to-local ratio. And the over-tourism is real enough that Venice has started charging day-trippers an entry fee.



Corn

There's a line from the thread about Italy. "I loved the history but hated the crowds and the pickpockets."



Herman

That's the whole Italy complaint in one sentence. The country is extraordinary and the experience of it in July is miserable.



Corn

France.



Herman

France's complaints are the classic ones. Rude locals, especially in Paris. Over-tourism. Pickpockets on the metro. And a particular kind of disappointment that people feel when Paris doesn't live up to the image. Paris is one of the most photographed cities on earth and one of the most complained about in threads like this.



Corn

Which is the Egypt mechanism again.



Herman

It's the Egypt mechanism exactly. The higher the pedestal, the harder the fall. Paris and the Pyramids are the same story in different costumes.



Corn

Okay, so we've got the ten. What does the list actually tell us?



Herman

It tells us something about global tourism that's uncomfortable. These are almost all countries where tourism is a significant part of the economy, and where the local population has a complicated relationship with the tourists. On one hand, the money matters. On the other hand, the money comes with a constant low-grade invasion of your neighborhood.



Corn

So the resentment is structural.



Herman

It's structural. If your city gets ten million visitors a year and you can't afford to live in the center anymore, you're going to develop feelings about tourists. That's true in Venice, it's true in Barcelona, it's true in Reykjavik. The thread is a bunch of tourists experiencing the downstream effects of that resentment and interpreting it as personal rudeness.



Corn

That's a much better frame than "the French are rude."



Herman

Much better. The French aren't rude. The French are tired.



Corn

And social media makes it worse.



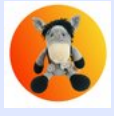
Herman

Social media makes it worse in both directions. It builds the pedestal, because you see the perfect shot of the Pyramids at sunrise and you don't see the traffic on the way there. And then it amplifies the disappointment, because the bad trip becomes content too. The thread is essentially a machine for converting private disappointment into public data.



Corn

And the data is useful.



Herman

The data is useful and the data is misleading. Useful because it's specific. People in that thread tell you exactly which scam to watch for, which neighborhood to avoid at night, which tour operator to skip. That's actionable. Misleading because it flattens a country of a hundred million people into one verdict.



Corn

So how should a traveler actually use a thread like this?



Herman

Read it for the specifics and ignore the verdicts. If twenty people say the taxi scam at the Cairo airport works like this, that's a fact you can prepare for. If one person says Egypt is a hellhole, that's a data point about one person's week.



Corn

And the counter-thread matters just as much.



Herman

It matters more. The people who loved Egypt and India and Morocco are usually the ones who did the preparation. They're not lucky. They're informed.



Corn

There's an ethics question buried in here too. Is "I'd never go back" a fair judgment to make public?



Herman

It's fair as a personal statement and it's unfair as a general one. The problem is the thread doesn't distinguish. And the countries that come off worst are almost always the ones where the gap between the tourist's expectation and the local reality is widest, which is also usually the ones where the power imbalance between visitor and host is most extreme.



Corn

Meaning the people with the least power get the worst reviews.



Herman

Meaning exactly that. Egypt doesn't get bad reviews because Egypt is bad. Egypt gets bad reviews because Egypt is poor and heavily touristed and the tourists arrive with a lot of money and a lot of expectations, and the collision is ugly.



Corn

That's the thing I keep coming back to. The thread is a mirror of the travelers as much as the countries.



Hilbert

I drove a van for a tour company out of Cairo for about eighteen months, back in the late eighties.



Corn

Okay.



Hilbert

Pyramids, museum, dinner cruise, back to the hotel. Same route five days a week. The thing nobody tells you is that the touts at Giza weren't there in the morning. They showed up around ten, when the first buses landed. Before that, it was just the site and a few guards and the hawkers hadn't set up yet. If you got there at seven, you had the place to yourself.



Herman

That matches what the defenders in the thread say. Sunrise at the Pyramids.



Hilbert

The company I worked for knew that and didn't care. The schedule was the schedule. The buses came when the buses came. So we'd roll in at ten-thirty with forty people and drop them straight into the worst version of the place.



Corn

So the tour itself was manufacturing the bad experience.



Hilbert

The tour was the bad experience. The site was fine. We sold them the postcard and then delivered them to the traffic jam.



Herman

And the guides knew?



Hilbert

The guides knew. There was one guy, Ahmed, who used to tell his groups to come back on their own the next morning if they wanted to actually see it. He'd say it quietly, at the back of the bus, so the company didn't hear. Half of them did it. The other half complained about the crowds.



Corn

Which half wrote the reviews.



Hilbert

The ones who complained. The ones who went back at seven came home with the trip they wanted and didn't say anything to anybody. That's how it works. The people who had a good time don't post.



Herman

That's the whole selection problem in one sentence.



Hilbert

Anyway. The van had a bad clutch and I replaced it myself in a parking lot in Giza. Cost me about forty pounds. The guy who sold me the part tried to overcharge me and I argued him down. That's the country. You argue, you get a fair price, you move on.



Corn

And then you leave.



Hilbert

I liked it there. I'd go back. But I know what I'm walking into, which is the part most people don't.



Herman

That's the practical version of everything we've been saying. The preparation is the trip.



Corn

So let's land this. Daniel asked for the ten countries and the reasons, and we've got them, but the reasons turn out to be more interesting than the list.



Herman

They do. The list is a set of countries where the gap between the image and the reality is widest. Egypt, India, Morocco, Turkey, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, Italy, France. Every one of them is a place people dreamed about for years before they went.



Corn

And every one of them has a thread full of people saying it was the best trip of their life.



Herman

Every single one. Which is the thing to hold onto. The thread isn't wrong and it isn't right. It's a collection of specific people having specific weeks, and the useful part is the specifics.



Corn

The forward-looking question is whether the destinations do anything about it. Venice charging day-trippers is one answer. Egypt investing in the site experience instead of the postcard is another. Whether the industry actually addresses the root causes, or just keeps selling the image and letting the collision happen, is the open question.



Herman

And whether travelers start reading these threads as preparation instead of as verdicts.



Corn

That's the one. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you want to find us, we're at my weird prompts dot com. You can email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.