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*A subtle-but-significant improvement at Karnak Temple. New paving work allows for a much smoother ride through the Great Hypostyle Hall. Since this photo was taken in June 2018, the entire central nave that leads into the temple has been*

*upgraded with new paving stones. The two rows of columns that line the nave reach heights of 20 metres (over 65 feet) and are topped with wide, bell-shaped capitals representing papyrus stalks in bloom.*

# Accessible EGYPT

**I**N A LAND FAMOUS (and treasured) for a slower pace and its own concept of time, things are happening at Karnak Temple at lightning speed!  
 In June this year, new pavers appeared along the central nave of the Great Hypostyle Hall (above). The fact that

these were noticeably smoother than the older surrounding pavers was no accident. The Luxor Governate had begun responding to calls for greater access to Egypt's heritage sights for explorers who were differently-abled.  
 The sight of old pavers being replaced, however, caused



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Accessible Egypt's Jane Akshar enjoys the smoother ride along the passageway of Karnak Temple's Second Pylon, built by the 18th Dynasty's King Horemheb (ca. 1300 B.C.).

New signage helps direct people to areas with upgraded paths. For people using wheelchairs and mobility scooters, this simple addition makes a big difference.

some concern that ancient stones were being lifted up to make way for modern replacements. Responding to the outcry, a spokesman for the Ministry of Antiquities revealed that the tiles being removed *were* indeed old. Ten years old. They were laid in 2008.

Dr. Peter Brand, Director of the Karnak Hypostyle Hall Project, explained to **NILE** that “few of the original paving stones have survived. The newer paving stones often wear out and they are constantly being replaced.”

One myth that Peter was keen to debunk was a tall tale that some tourist guides tell: “Near the entrance [to the Hypostyle Hall] there is an alabaster slab with scenes of bound enemy prisoners. It is part of a small shrine for a royal throne or statue built up against the 2nd Pylon. Tourists are sometimes told that it is all that remains of the alabaster floor of the hall, but this is false.”

This recent renovation of the pathways has happened remarkably quickly (not just for Egypt, but for any local government anywhere). It comes about after just 18 months of solid campaigning, primarily by two organisations: *Accessible Egypt* and *Helm*.

We first met *Accessible Egypt* in **NILE** #10 (Oct-Nov 2018). Jane Akshar and Joanne Stables are two British women who have lived extensively in Egypt, and want Luxor to be famous as Egypt's first disability-friendly ancient heritage site. Back problems had led Jane to purchase a mobility scooter (Luxor's first) and encountered a world of potholes, gravel, gappy and uneven pavers, and stairs.

Luxor is often billed as “the world's largest outdoor museum”, yet Jane now discovered what many others had already experienced: access to the famous sites often felt

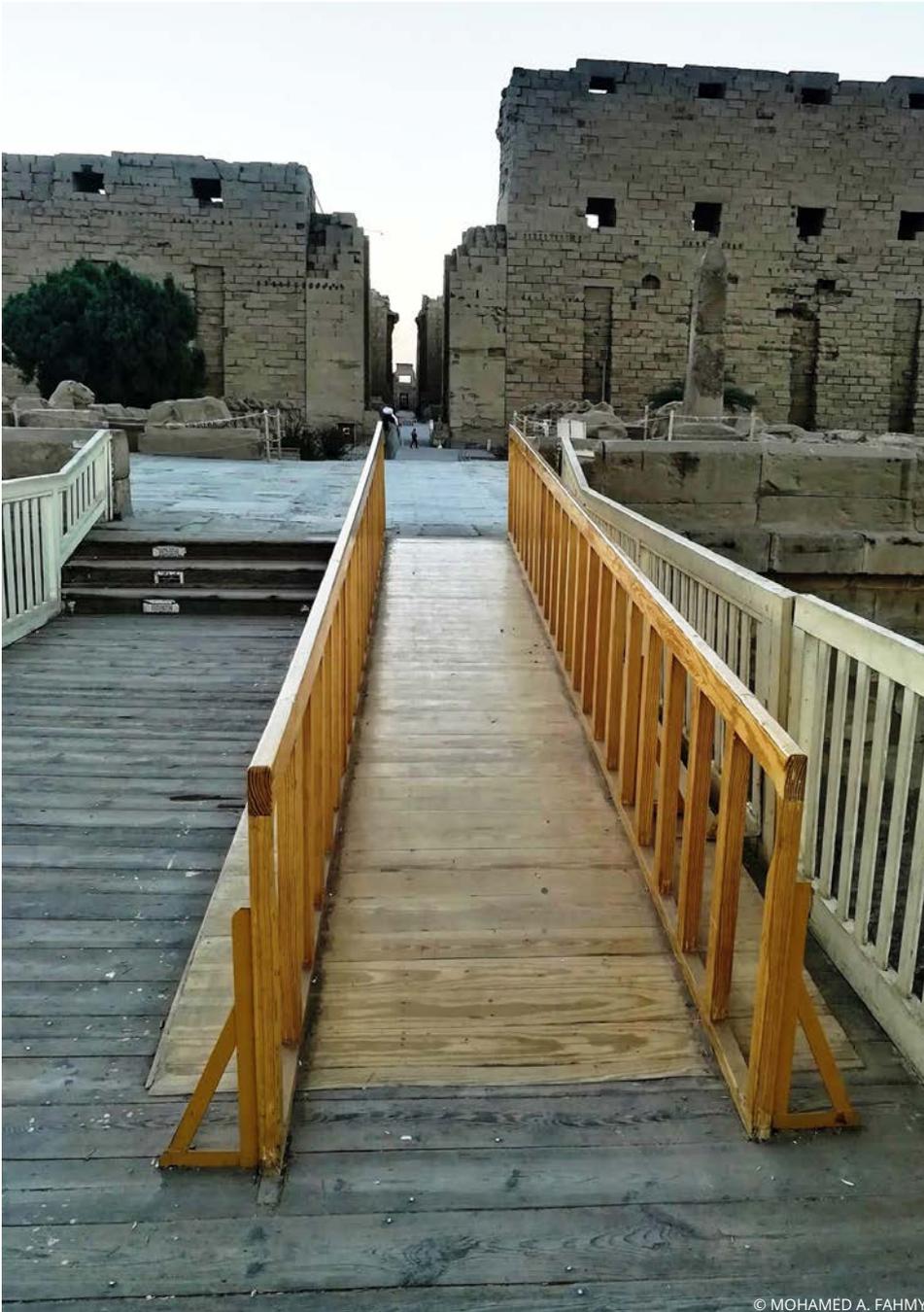
like an obstacle course for people with varying abilities.

Yet progress is being made. In late July, the Secretary-General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, Mostafa al-Waziry, unveiled the new wheelchair-friendly path along Karnak Temple's southern axis. It now extends out to the wonderfully-preserved Temple of Khonsu, which receives comparatively few visitors. The new access path may see a few more explorers venturing south to admire one of the treasures of the Karnak Temple complex.

Egypt's Minister of Antiquities, Khaled Al-Anany, recently announced that the entire Karnak Temple complex would soon be accessible through a series of wheelchair-friendly walkways, designed in cooperation with an Egyptian organisation called *Helm* (Arabic for “dream”). *Helm* is passionate about improving inclusion for people with disabilities in the workplace and society at large.

Egypt's President Sisi designated 2018 as a year for the disabled, and small improvements are popping up at some of the big tourist drawcards. At Abu Simbel, golf carts run from the visitor car park to the main temple to help those who are less steady on their feet, and free wheelchairs are available for Karnak Temple's popular Sound and Light Show. New information boards at the temple are positioned at a lower height and accessible to those who are seated or with impaired sight.

Things are looking up for people with special needs. *Accessible Egypt's* Jane Akshar and Joanne Stables are excited about what has been achieved—but have their sights set on what still needs to be done. “The Valley of the Kings”, Jane points out, “is theoretically wheelchair friendly—as long as you have five strong men with you!”



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*The western entrance to Karnak Temple leads down to the river, which means an extra hurdle for people with mobility issues—steps. A welcome (and welcoming) sight has appeared at the temple: a robust new ramp with sturdy rails, and—importantly—built at a gentle slope. Beyond, new, smooth paving leads through the Avenue of Sphinxes.*

*An early visitor to Karnak Temple was Henry Light, a captain in the British Royal Artillery. He toured Egypt in 1814 and described his first impressions of “Carnak”:*

“It was impossible to look on such an extent of building without being lost in admiration; no description will be able to give an adequate idea of the enormous masses still defying the ravages of time. Enclosure within enclosure, propylaea [monumental gateway] in front of propylaea; to these, avenues of sphinxes, each of fourteen or fifteen feet in length, lead from a distance of several hundred yards. The common Egyptian sphinx is found in avenues to the south [running to the Temple of Mut and to Luxor Temple]; but, to the west [pictured left], the criosphinx, with the ram’s head, from the one or two that have been uncovered, seems to have composed its corresponding avenue. Those to the south and east are still buried...”

*As tourism recovers in Egypt, hopefully more people—of all abilities—will be able to experience that same “lost in admiration” feeling as they encounter Luxor’s Karnak Temple.*