

Episode 137: Alex secretly climbed the Great Pyramid

The Greek historian Herodotus wrote about seven great architectural structures. That list became known as the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Of those seven achievements, four were destroyed by earthquake. Two were destroyed by fire. Only one is still standing – the Great Pyramid of Giza, in Egypt.

This pyramid today has a height of 450 feet, or 137 meters. It was the tallest structure in the world for over 3800 years.

And now, it's a popular tourist destination. People from all over the world will travel to Cairo, and stand next to this enormous structure, and just wonder about all the manpower and materials and work that went into creating it.

And there are others, like today's guest, Alex, who look at the Great Pyramid and think "I'd like to climb to the top of that pyramid". And Alex came up with a plan to do just that.

What he didn't plan on was getting caught.

Scott

What were you doing in Cairo?

Alex

It's funny when you look back on the path that your life has taken and how many events you could trace back to just a random choice - sort of an arbitrary event of chance type deal. When I entered college, I had to pick a foreign language and I kind of had done, like, the French thing in high school. I wanted something a little different and there were some options. I just saw Arabic on the list and I kind of just, "Sure. I'll sign up for Arabic 101. Let's go." That decision has cascaded and changed my life so much, including the story that we're about to talk about. My college had a relationship with the American University in Cairo to do an exchange sort of thing. So, for my third year, I signed up to do that for a full year. I was at the American University in Cairo studying Arabic and taking other courses as well from, like, the fall 2006 semester through the academic year.

Scott

So you were a college student, you were in Egypt studying the Arabic language, and you had this crazy idea. How did this idea get into your head?

Alex

During the break between semesters - the winter break - I came back to the US. My family wanted to see me. While I was home, I was on Facebook and I came across a classmate of mine who was taking Arabic with me, who posted these photographs that were just like, "Wait, what?! They looked like they were from on top of the Great Pyramid Giza." As I read the captions and the comments and all that, it was, "Yes indeed, that's exactly what was going on." I thought, like, "How did you possibly do this?" So I was anxious to ask him about it. I returned to Cairo - flew back to Cairo - sometime in early January. When I saw him, I was like, "Dude, we need to have a conversation. Was that really on top of the pyramid?" He said, "Yeah, it was." I

was like, "How did you make that work?" He told me that he went late at night to, sort of, the site - the Monument site - and gave a guard a hundred pounds, which was about \$20 at the time, just to let him enter the park. The guy let him through. This is very believable. Like, bribery is bribery. Greasing palms is an effective way to get things done more efficiently in Egypt and across the Middle East because, like, one-third of Egyptians live on less than \$2 a day, so 20 bucks in someone's pocket is a big deal. I was like, "Really? Wow, that easy, huh?" He said, "Yeah." So that put the idea in my head, especially because I had been an avid rock climber since I was about 13 or so, so, clearly, I wanted to climb

Scott

This makes me think of something that parents say. If your friend jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you do it too? Apparently you would.

Alex

Well, it's a fair point. I was 20 at the time and. There were all kinds of decisions that I made when I was 20 that I would neither repeat nor endorse now. I had not fully developed a brain and whatnot. It just sounded really cool. It does. I'll give you that.

Scott

It does sound cool. So you were an avid rock climber - you said that already - and you had a rock climbing friend, Ryan. How did you guys meet?

Alex

Yes, he became my best friend. We met at our local climbing gym in Cincinnati, Ohio, where we're from. When we first met each other, we didn't like each other at all, and then we became just the closest of friends who spent all our time together. So we had such a close friendship. I was going to turn 21 in March of 2007. As a sort of birthday present - I think he was in college in Massachusetts at the time - he booked a ticket to come see me in Cairo and we were going to hang out for a week. We met at the climbing gym and we were climbing partners, sort of. There's a climber, there's a belay right down managing the ropes, and all of that. People typically climb in, like, partnerships and that's the kind of relationship that we had.

Scott

It seems like a climbing partner was coming to visit you and you had this crazy idea - the pyramid. It's like all the details are sort of coming together. You wanted him to come and go with you, obviously. How did you bring him into this?

Alex

Kind of, as a surprise. I wasn't so sure yet myself. I mean, I knew I really wanted to do it, but I was nervous about doing that.

Scott

Of course, because this is highly illegal.

Alex

Yeah. So, I was really thinking hard about it and I didn't want him to be super jazzed about the idea. Then, I find myself sort of thinking, "Oh, maybe this isn't such a good idea." So I waited until he was in Cairo and he was totally in. He was like, "That's amazing. That's it. We should do this."

Scott

He was there for almost a week before you even told him, right?

Alex

Yeah. If I recall, the climb happened on his penultimate night in Cairo, so I think I told him maybe the day before that - three days before he was to part, probably, in the morning. He had questions. He was sort of like, "Whoa, wait a minute." I studied Arabic and the culture for a couple of years. He's coming into this totally blind, so he definitely had some questions, but then he was in.

Scott

But this climb isn't like typical climbing at the side of a mountain. Do you need to take equipment or ropes?

Alex

For the pyramid? No.

Scott

I mean, because it's at a 90-degree angle— what is the angle that you'd be climbing?

Alex

I don't know, actually. That's a really good question, but it's not quite what you describe. The angle is not as gentle as it looks from the ground. I found that out, sort of, halfway up the climb, when I looked below me, I thought it would sort of fan out like a staircase. If you fall, you're going to probably, maybe, like skipping a stone across a pond. You might hit a few, but you're going straight to the ground.

Scott

You planned it, obviously, at night just for less visibility.

Alex

Yes.

Scott

What happened?

Alex

You guys started by drinking a lot of coffee.

Alex

Egyptians might get mad at me for saying this, but you would think of this as Turkish coffee. Heavy grounds toward the bottom. It's very strong, typically with a lot of sugar. So yes, we were certainly pounding that to make sure that we would be awake even just to get there and then also the energy for the climb.

Scott

As if the adrenaline wouldn't do the trick.

Alex

There was that, yeah. That was a nervous energy, but the coffee certainly helps.

Scott

What time did you leave to set out to head toward the pyramid?

Alex

I would say it had to be between, like, 1-3 AM, something like that to hail a taxi. Cairo is a city of 18 million people. I mean, there's stuff going on all night long, so you can eat very easily, find a taxi, but you can't really just hail the taxi and say, like, "Take me to the pyramids." It's going to raise an eyebrow. So we hailed a taxi and the location I gave was— there's kind of, like, an area outside the main gate. There's actually a Pizza Hut that has probably one of the best views of the monument site that's there. So I sort of gave that as a location and just had him drop us off there near the main ticket boots of the pyramids.

Scott

It almost seems like you're overly cautious. Like, what's the taxi guy ever going to say? Is he going to call the police? Like, these guys want to go to the pyramids at 3:00 AM. Something's up.

Alex

Right. Which, of course, is absurd. Like, he doesn't care. He just wants his fare. I think you're onto something there that was indicative of not the anxiety, but the nervousness around, like, not wanting to screw this up, and getting into legal trouble in a foreign country. I mean, they have a whole show about it, right? What's it called?

Scott

We've all seen Locked Up Abroad.

Alex

Right. It's not usually on people's bucket lists. There probably were some steps that we took that were overly cautious, but it's better safe than sorry.

Scott

There are multiple pyramids at this location. Why did you choose this particular one?

Alex

I guess I can think of three reasons. 1) It's the one that my friend, my classmate did. If there were other factors that made him decide on that, whatever. I knew that one was doable because I know someone who did it. 2) It's the tallest. It's 481 feet tall, if I've got that right - about 187 meters. So, if you're going to climb a pyramid, you might as well climb the tallest one. Most important is its peak. The smaller of the two is a true complete pyramid that has, like, a pointed top for reasons that I don't know. The larger of the two does not. It's missing sort of the top couple percent of the stones and there's a flat landing or kind of a platform up there, so you could actually summit and, like, hang out. That's a big advantage for sure.

Scott

So you got there and you're starting to survey how to get in...

Alex

Yeah. I was kind of, like, just checking the area out for, like— we don't know what we're doing. I got as much advice from my classmate as I could, but when you're actually in there, it's kind of

like, "Well, what do you do?" So we're walking around. At the time, there was a perimeter fence, but the security was so poor that stretches the definition of both perimeter and fence - to call it that - and we did find a gap that was away from the main entrance, not like a gaping hole, but it was obvious that it would be fairly easy to get through. So we thought that we'll just give that a trip, and we did. Well, that area was guarded. Out popped the guard who sort of, "Whoa, stop."

I was pretty nervous at this point. I mean, I had done sort of the bribery thing, let's call it - tipping for sort of casual things. If you'd like extra service, you can get things done very quickly. If I had to deal with government paperwork because I was a student abroad, I could slip some money to the person at the counter and be in line faster, but nothing like this. So I was pretty nervous at this point. When the guard stopped us, it was like, "Okay, here we go." So I reached into my jacket and I pulled out a hundred-pound note and I sort of said, like, "Oh, I'm sorry for the inconvenience here. I hope that this will sort of make up for that. He was not having any of it. He backed away palms up. "No. I can't take that. Get out."

Scott

What bad luck. You run into a guard with a little bit of integrity.

Alex

Exactly, yeah. The chances of that were pretty low. The chance that the spot was even guarded was extremely low.

Scott

Because yeah, this is the middle of the night. There's normal viewing tourist hours during the day. Nobody's going to be wandering around there that time of night except for the security guards...

Alex

And the people who are trying to break into.

Scott

Exactly.

Alex

But yeah. This was a spot where there was no natural security post. Obviously, if we had seen him before we tried to get in, we wouldn't have tried to go there. So he was probably just hanging out at a sort of unofficial post. It was a surprise.

Scott

So it seems like this is a critical part of your adventure here. Did you, at that point, think, "Okay, well I guess it's not going to happen.?"

Alex

You're right. It was a critical point because we were dejected. The only method that I had learned to make this work fail, but we weren't willing to give up just yet. We were bummed. We're walking around perimeters, sort of, discussing between ourselves like, "Do we just go home?" Like, "No. We're here. Like, Ryan, you're leaving soon to go back home. We're going to do this." And then we kind of went back and forth like that. Eventually, we found ourselves back near the main gate and were still sort of discussing what we ought to do when one of us - I don't remember who - said like, "Look at the guy at the very main security booth, like, right at the

entrance. Check it out.” The guard there was elbow on knee, head in palm, snoring asleep and totally out. So Ryan and I sort of exchanged glances and shrug. This is our end.

Scott

And there were no other guards in the area that could have seen you?

Alex

Surprisingly, no. Not that I recall. I think there was, like, the one main gatekeeper, if you will. We didn't know what we were going to find inside, but there was a shopkeeper who - like I said, again, being Cairo at 3 AM, there are still little sort of bodega-type things that are open - was leaning in the doorway. He was alert and awake. He saw us standing there.

Scott

How far away was this shop from the main gate?

Alex

I'm really bad with this, but I would say a couple of hundred feet - like half, a football field.

Scott

Close enough that he could see that you guys were kind of walking around acting suspiciously.

Alex

Yes. And that we were interested in the entrance to the pyramids. So it's kind of a different version of “bribing the guard” thing. I had only been in the country for 7-8 months or whatever it was, but I did have enough on-street knowledge to know that we needed to patronize this guy's shop if we were going to mollify him to sort of turn a blind eye to whatever it is that we were about to do. So I was like, “Okay, we've got to go do this.” So we did. We went in. I bought a bag of peanut M&M's, little mini-sized ones - I don't remember what Ryan got - and that did work. I mean, I think the guy stayed at the cash register. He didn't even come back to the doorway. So we were on our way. The guard was still asleep. So we just literally snuck right past him and just walked straight through into the maintenance.

Scott

So the gate wasn't locked, closed, or anything. He would be there spotting somebody coming in if he were awake?

Alex

Yeah. Like I said, at the time, in 2007, it really was quite porous. The whole thing was very penetrable. So he was supposed to sort of act as the gate, but he was tired. So now we're in. Just to orient in space, when you're looking at the main entrance, sort of like the iconic photo, the sphinx is, like, in your face, straight ahead and the two main pyramids at the site are sort of staggered behind that. So when we enter, the sphinx is in front of us. On the left, it is obviously a very popular tourist site. So there is, like, a trotted path to follow that people would walk to go see things - we're just walking on that - and there's a retaining wall on the left hand side for whatever reason - I guess to separate the sort of the actual site from the walking path. We were kind of, not cartoonishly, sneaking tiptoeing, but we were ducked a little bit, crouching, and using the retaining wall for some cover because there was a maintenance crew doing something on the sphinx itself - a pretty sizable one. Actually, it's way too hot during the day in Cairo to probably do that kind of work. Plus, it detracts from the tourist factor, right? So they

must do that stuff at night. We didn't want them to spot us. It was unlikely that they would have if we had just walked normally but, again, we were nervous.

Scott

But they're just doing their job though. They're not there to guard the place.

Alex

No. It was very clear. They didn't even seem like they were Egyptologists doing some kind of preservation or there was scaffolding that was involved, et cetera, so who knows what they were doing. They were very involved, chatting amongst themselves. Egyptians are very charismatic, charming, and love humor, and so there were lots of boisterous laughter. They were not paying attention to us. But nonetheless, we did use the retaining wall as some cover. At some point, we kind of paused and had a whisper conversation among ourselves. I don't remember what the decision in front of us was but, like, should we do this or this? When we heard a sound all of a sudden and we turned around, it was another guard 10 feet away. He's snoring. He's also asleep. Clearly, this also was not an official post but he maybe wants to avoid the detection by his supervisor to grab a quick nap. I mean, he was right there. It was like, "Okay, we got to go." So we started moving quite a bit more quickly past him just in case we would wake him up and we'd be detected.

We passed the Sphinx. Now, it's behind us on the left. The sleeping guard that we didn't expect was behind us on the right on the main path. At the Monument site, on the left hand side, it's no longer there, but it was really weird. I never went inside this thing. It was this museum that supposedly held something called a solar boat. It was called the Giza Solar Boat Museum. This held an actual artifact, an actual ship called a solar boat, and they were the vessels that were used to transport the body of the pharaoh upon his death to the burial site at the pyramid - the boat from life to the afterlife was the idea. It looked like— have you ever, like, flown internationally into Dallas?

Scott

No.

Alex

Okay. Well, they have these weird little, like, pods that carry you from the plane to the gate. It just looked like a weird capsule that is on the left. There's the path and the one side of the pyramid is directly on the right. So we're between those two things. We were there. We were at the base of the pyramid. We're using the museum thing and the pyramid itself as cover from both sides. There were supposed to be guards at each of the four points at the base of the pyramids, but we noticed that, on the far side away from us, there was a sort of makeshift campfire going. They were gathered around that and talking amongst themselves. I'm sure that the night shift got— I mean, nothing's going to happen. Nothing ever happens, so they weren't staying at their posts and they were just doing their own thing. We noticed that it was a concern, but it was not. We were not thinking that it was likely that they would stop, turn around, and see two people standing in the dark.

Scott

How cold was it?

Alex

February is a month when there are a lot of sandstorms. Also, for some reason, it's a month where people burn a lot of trash and they do that at night, and that kind of warms it up. This is, maybe, in the third week of March - I don't really remember. I had a jacket on, but Ryan didn't. He just had a T-shirt on, so it must have not been that cold.

Scott

Once you start climbing, you're going to be warm anyway.

Alex

That's true, yes. But this was a pivotal moment here. I mean, we're standing at the base and I'd be curious to know if Ryan would agree with this. If he had at that point said, "This is not a good idea, man. Let's just get out of here." I would've said, "Yep, you're right. Let's go." We'll be on our way. I know I would've felt that way. I wondered if he would say that he felt the same way if I had said, "Nah, let's forget about this," or if he would've fought me on that. But that's not the way it went anyway. It ended up going where I looked at him and I said, "Well, I guess we better start climbing." Ryan looked back at me and he said, "Yeah, I guess we should." He started. Off he goes. I was like, "Oh shit, I love that."

Scott

No hesitation. Just get going.

Alex

Absolutely. I think he was maybe waiting for, like, a green light from me - who knows. I don't know what he was thinking, but he's off. So I was like, "Okay, shit. We're doing this. Here we go." So we started climbing.

Scott

What's the texture of the surface of the wall? Did you know what to expect? Was it what you expected?

Alex

Yeah, I did kind of know what to expect. On one of the site surfaces, there is a tourist site. I don't remember how far up it was, but you can go inside of the pyramid and there's, like, hieroglyphics on the inside. You can see where they would bury the— so, some version of climbing the pyramid is legal and, in fact, encouraged as part of the experience. So it's not like you're not allowed to touch them. People are all over them all the time. I had been to see the pyramid because I was in Egypt. I did kind of know what to expect about that. Climbing it when there isn't, like, an ushered way to do it was a different experience. These things are massive. It's got about 2.3 million stones - the whole thing - and the lightest in weight of them is about 2.5 tons. At the bottom, they're near 10 tons. It's just absolutely enormous. So I knew about the texture. It is true, though, on the thing about the angle of incline that we were about to scale. I did envision - I don't know why - more of a staircase-type experience. I'm going to step up and push myself up with one leg and then I'm going to do it on the next thing, and it was not like that at all. That's why I referenced the size of these stones.

Scott

So what was the process of— as you went up, how did you gain altitude?

Alex

It did change as you ascend because the stones do get smaller. When you're near the bottom, the next stone that you need to get on top of is about waist level. So you're clearly not in a staircase-type experience. Like, I had been expecting that I would put my elbow or my forearm kind of on the stone in front of me that I needed to get on top of and then hoist a leg up on that stone, and then kind of use that as leverage to roll the rest of my body - not roll, it wasn't like that - as leverage to get the rest of my body up on top and then rinse and repeat.

Scott

At the top of each of the individual stones, there was a little bit of a ledge?

Alex

Yes, definitely. There was a sufficient ledge. It wasn't like I'm going to lose my balance and fall.

You were comfortably on the next stone. Maybe, about halfway up, I did look down. People who are afraid of heights don't look down, but we were fairly-experienced rock climbers. Like, that was not a problem. So I looked beneath me and that was a little nerve-wracking. It does not fan out like a staircase like you would expect. I mean, when you look at any picture of the pyramid that's taken from the ground, it really looks-- I don't know why this is different when you're climbing it, but it really does look like, sort of a gentle-- and so if you were to fall, it might be like falling down the stairs hitting each step along the way. That is not the case. You might skid across a couple of them, but you're pretty much headed straight to the ground if you fall once you reach a certain height. So that did make me a little nervous. I mean, at this point, if you're halfway up, it takes just as much effort to go down as it does the other half, so there was no thought of stopping. I just noticed it and I was like, "Oh, okay."

I would say maybe two-thirds or three-quarters of the way up, we do start to hear some sound. We stopped and paused because we didn't really know what was going on or, like, what was starting. Well, it was the Adhan, which is the loudspeaker that is affixed on top of mosques that announces the call to prayer. Muslims pray five times a day, and this had to be what's called the prayer. It happens a little bit before dawn. "Allahu akbar" begins the call to prayer, and that's what was happening. The person whose job that is is called a muezzin. Cairo has about 4,000 mosques in it. They call it the city of a thousand Mosques, but it's much more. I think, now, they've synchronized everything and they only have one muezzin. So it's sort of a standard system and that was not true then. Every mosque had its own muezzin who would announce the calls to prayer and not everyone's watch was on at the same time.

Scott

They didn't synchronize.

Alex

Yeah. And the way they would chant-- everyone had their own little style. So one guy started and then it started to swell as the other mosques joined in. Eventually, it was this cacophony. The sound enveloped us. We're out in the desert and it was, like, sort of a moment of we're not in Kansas anymore. Wow, this is really cool.

Scott

What a unique soundtrack for the adventure you were having right there.

Alex

Exactly. The lights of Cairo were on one side. The pyramids are not remote out in the desert. I mean, like I said, from the main gate, there's a Pizza Hut right across the way. It sort of is at the edge of a megalopolis. So the lights of Cairo on one side, the sound of this call to prayer, and then the barren desert on the other side— yeah, it was pretty cool. I mean, it was sort of a moment to pause and soak in the whole climb. I don't totally know - It took about maybe 45 minutes or an hour, maybe. Ryan summited first, and I followed not too long after. I was really surprised at how big the platform is. Like I said, this pyramid has a flat top to it. You can't get a sense of, at least - maybe, I'm just bad at this - the size from the ground about how big it would be. Not that we would have to stand in place for fear of falling over the edge, but I didn't think there would be enough room to, like, really kind of hang out. It's huge. I would say, as an adult, you could take, like, maybe 8-10 wide stride steps from one side to the other. There's a lot of room up there. I got to the top. Ryan was seated. His legs were kind of dangling over the top platform. He looked at me and said, "Hey." There we were on top of the great pyramid.

Scott

It's over 480 feet tall, which is 187 meters. So you're up almost the height of a 50-story building.

Alex

Well, Scott, I had never thought about it. Yes, I had never thought about it.

Scott

Yeah. I mean, I can imagine you'd be a little concerned that if you got up close to the top and slipped and fell, that would be a serious fall.

Alex

It would definitely be a serious fall, but it really is the nature of that platform in such that, even if you're just slightly careful, you're good, you're safe.

Scott

What was up there? What was it like being on top of this thing?

Alex

We had enough sort of, I guess, ambient light from, I don't know whether it was from the city or what, but you could see on the surface of the platform. A bunch of names were carved into it. Some were, like, from the 1800s - people that had done this. Others were more recent. I think I read somewhere afterward that, in the 70s, this was a very popular thing to do. Someone had left, like, a Swiss army knife up there in order to continue this tradition. I don't remember how, I'd have to ask Ryan, but it sort of said on the knife itself, on the plastic, sort of red surface of a big Swiss army knife, "Welcome to the club. Use this to carve your name into the top of the pyramid. We're not interested in defacing the monument." So Ryan pocketed the pocket knife. To my knowledge, I would imagine that he still has it to this day. That's quite a memento.

We were just sort of looking, hanging, looking out over the city lights, walking around, and taking a few selfies. Well, Ryan, like I said, was really into analog photography. Dark room. He was really into the whole process. So, throughout the whole trip, he had been very interested in achieving or obtaining quality photographs that he could develop. Then, back in the US, I had a little— it was called a power shot. It was a Canon simple little thing, but it did have a timer. The platform looked like an antenna, almost. It's like a wooden structure that mimics the completion of the actual pyramid shape. I don't remember exactly how, but you were able to place a camera somewhere such that you could then do a timer and have a picture taken. We both did

that and I took a short video. I wish I had taken more, to be honest, as it got lighter. I just have one that's maybe half a minute long. I'm, "This is fucking cool. We are on top of the pyramid right now." We were really just taking it all in. It really is an enormous, one of the biggest, most populous cities in the world on one end, and then, like, quintessential - what you think of as the desert - on the other. So there we were.

Scott

How long did you stay up there?

Alex

Probably about an hour and a half - two hours I would say. We got a little bit of daylight. You can see the other pyramid - the smaller one that is truly pointed - so that was cool. We were looking down, sort of, upon that and were really kind of laughing at like, "This is just insane - what we just did." So, yeah, it was about 1.5-2 hours, something like that. It was great and it was truly a magical experience. I will never do anything this cool ever again in my life - I'm quite certain. Then, it was time to get ready to head on down. Young 20-somethings didn't really think things through such as one perhaps might have, and the problem that we did not anticipate for the descent was the effect of the sunrise in a big city when the sun rises with tall buildings blocking a lot of light. That increases as the day goes on and the sun gets higher in the sky. We all know what I'm talking about. That was not the case here. When the sun crested, it might as well have been noon. I mean, there's nothing out in the desert. There's nothing to block the sunlight from being just everywhere. It was day as soon as it was sunrise. It was like a normal full-on midday day.

Scott

Obviously, being at the top of the pyramid, there are no tall buildings around you to block the sun from you. You were the tallest.

Alex

Yes, we were. That's right. We were also very interested in not being detected, and detection is obviously significantly easier when there's sunlight. So the combination of these factors created a problem. It was time to start going down.

Scott

Obviously getting up is optional. Getting down is mandatory.

Alex

That's a good point. Descending is mandatory. Yeah, it's a good way of putting it. I guess the guards around the campfire at the base thought, "Well, shit, it probably ought to get back to work now. Day is going to start." So they resumed their posts. It was time to start descending quickly. We realized the situation that our chances of being detected were increasing rapidly by the time.

Scott

I'm putting myself in your shoes. I'm thinking now it's daylight. Obviously, somebody's going to see us as we come down.

Alex

Yeah. We were really hoping to avoid that. The cover of night was basically everything. First of all, it was the time when the guard was asleep. Second of all, obviously, it's dark. I was

definitely nervous about what was going to happen. They were at each of the four points of the pyramids, so it's not like there was a more strategic area for the exit. At some point, we're going to go from the last stone to the ground and then we're going to be between two guards.

Scott

Exactly, yeah. Did you go down the same surface that you climbed?

Alex

We did not.

Scott

What was your reasoning behind which way to go down?

Alex

That's a good question. I believe we went down the side where, like I said, there's sort of a part of the monument site where you can go in. I guess we just figured that maybe it would be more stable for safety reasons because they would curate that area for normal tourist traffic. I'm kind of post-hoc thinking about what the reasoning might be, but I'm not sure if we put a whole lot of thought into it. We just knew that if we were going to evade detection at all, we needed to get going.

Scott

What's the process for going down? I mean, I'm picturing you sliding down on your butt.

Alex

Yeah, pretty much. You sort of scoot your butt across the surface of the stone, reach down with your toe, and then just put the rest of the weight on your one foot and then get the other foot down. That process gets more necessary as you near the bottom. Like I said, the stones are smaller on top and larger at the bottom. I don't remember what the very, very top few steps were like but, at some point, it's pretty much scooting your butt, putting one foot down on the lower one, and then putting the rest of your body weight on it. About a third of the way down, sure enough, I guess, a guard was looking upward for whatever reason. We were spotted, and he was not happy. He was really not happy. He was sort of pointing forcefully, like, "Get down here!" So we picked up the pace even more. I was very nervous at this point. I really don't know why. I don't know how I thought that this was not going to be the outcome. I mean, I guess we needed to leave. I should have asked my classmate about a safe descent.

Scott

Yeah. The exit strategy. That would've been a good thing to get from him.

Alex

It really would've been, I was taken in by the romance of the barricades of just doing the climb itself. I didn't really think about the rest of it. So, my heart was racing now. I realize we're in trouble and, quite frankly, I don't know what kind of trouble it's going to be. As we're scooting along, he sort of turned to me and said, "How do you say I'm sorry in Arabic?" I told him, and he totally butchered it with, like, his voice trembling when he got down, but he tried. I must have seen this in a movie and my brain in sort of a panicky amygdala-activated state was able to access this idea - I realized that they don't want evidence of this possibility getting out there, so they're probably going to take our cameras and get rid of our photos. I said, "Hey, Ryan. Switch out the film that you took pictures with. Put it in a blank and I'm going to switch out my memory

card and put it in a blank one." So we did that as we were descending. Of course, the other guards from the three posts have all gathered around the one that spotted us to sort of handle the situation. If they were to seize my memory card, they would be seizing a blank, and likewise with his roll of camera film.

When we got to the bottom, Ryan said he's sorry. I took a different approach, sort of - very overly confident in trying to do the whole Egyptian charm charisma thing. I offered the guy, "Hey, do you want a cigar? Do you want a cigarette?" And he just was like, "No, I don't want a cigarette. I'm angry. You are in trouble." But I was kind of, "Hey, good morning!" and trying to play this down a bit, but that was not effective at all.

Scott

Well, the fact that you were already up there obviously made them look foolish because somehow you had gotten past them.

Alex

That factors into what eventually happens because that's exactly right. It probably was a bit of that. They're thinking, "Great. Now, we have this whole process that we're going to have to go through." They sort of ushered us to, like, a security booth - I think it was near that weird museum thing. Six people or so could fit inside the booth. They sat on a bench and they were sort of discussing among themselves what to do. Sure enough, they did one of the first things they did. They seized the cameras and they grabbed a blank memory card, and they seized Ryan's camera and they seized a blank roll of film.

Scott

Did you try to fake disappointment that, "Oh no, there goes our pictures."?

Alex

Probably not. I think we were probably, like, looking kind of down. In my periphery, I could see what they were doing and I'm sure I couldn't hide maybe a tiny smirk. Again, I was learning Arabic - at this point, it had been 3 years. I wouldn't have called myself fluent in Arabic until after about 15 years of studying it. I could sort of get by with some everyday stuff, but I don't really know what they're talking about. They're clearly having a discussion on how to handle this. One of them kept turning to us and gesturing with wrists- that's how I learned that word - like, "You are arrested, you are detained, you are in trouble." It was probably the one that spotted us who did it three times or so. Ryan was very- I mean, he's like, "Man, I have to get on a plane like the day after tomorrow. That's not happening. I can't do that. That's it." Like, "Well, it's not really up to me, man. I don't know what to tell you. We're in some shit here."

At some point, it was time to act. I did exactly what you suggested earlier. I sort of said, "Hey, okay, let's all hang loose a little bit. You can take us downtown and put us in jail and we can do that whole thing, but it isn't going to reflect very well upon all of you because we clearly were able to get past you and you weren't doing your jobs very well. So it's in everyone's best interest if we can find a way to work this out." Then, there was more huddling and discussing among themselves. They were into it. They bought into it. Part of this has to do with American privilege in Egypt. The American passport is kind of a shield to a lot of things. 20% of Egypt's GDP, on average, historically, is from tourism. So if there was a news story about the harsh treatment of Americans by Egyptian forces or officials, justified or not, that is bad because of the reliance of Egypt's economy upon tourism revenue. The passport is a bit of a shield in ways that it is not for Egyptians in their own country. It's not cool.

So I was leveraging sort of that, I guess - plus these guys wanting to keep their jobs and us wanting not to go to jail - to come up with this idea where, "Hey, let's just be cool and everybody go about their business." Someone said, "Come with me." So we followed him and he ushered us over to this, like, I guess I'll call it a holding cell because that's at least the function it was playing right now. There were remnants of a campfire and there was a bunch of camel shit in there. It was just sort of not an official tourist site. I don't think there were, like, hieroglyphics or anything related to antiquity but, for some reason, it's mostly an enclosed walled structure where someone had a fire and Camels released themselves at some point. He told us, "Just wait. Do not move from here. Wait until 8:00 AM when the park opens to the public, and then just go." That's pretty much what we did. I think we probably had to sit in there for maybe another 1.5 hours or so. There are photos of us sitting in that thing too. Ryan actually looked pretty alert, but my eyes were— I'm tired. This was a pretty exhausting experience. I'm looking like I'm about to go to sleep.

Scott

Aside from the physical part of the climb, I mean, it's got to be mentally exhausting to almost get caught and then actually get caught.

Alex

Yes. And I felt a sense of responsibility sort of throughout the whole trip, frankly, when he was there because, objectively, when I look back on it, upon reflection, I didn't know shit. I was the host and he was the guest. It's like, "Hey, you're doing this Arabic, Egypt thing. I'm going to trust your judgment on these things." That added to the mental energy that was involved. I felt the obligation to resolve the situation and handle the interactions with the guards and all of that. Ryan was kind of just there at everyone's mercy, so I felt really bad about that. Yes, it was very draining. We got some funny pictures from inside there too. So that's what we did. At 8 o'clock, the monument site opened to the public and we walked right past a main gate guard who did a double take of, "Wait a minute, hold on. How are you coming from the inside? How could you be a tourist interested in the only still-standing ancient wonder of the world and spend, like, two minutes and then go, 'Yeah, I'm cool. Saw it, let's go.' What is going on here?"

Scott

Didn't even ask to get your hands stamped or something.

Alex

Yeah. Exactly. Right. He was just, "What is going on here?" We did not engage. I immediately hailed the first taxi that I possibly could. They started lining up around that area at that time, so it was very easy to sort of get in the car and go. We were just laughing our asses off the whole ride home, just like, "What did we just do?" That was when, like, the good adrenaline kicked back in and we're sort of safe. We're in safety. We even got to keep our pictures. We accomplished our goal and it was wild.

Scott

Best outcome you could have hoped for.

Alex

Oh, absolutely. Or not being detected - that'd be the only thing I would add. Given the detection, that was certainly the best outcome that could have happened. When we got back to my apartment-- in the first semester, I lived in the student dormitory where the study-abroad-kids

mostly stay, but some Egyptians also stay there as well. I met and became very good friends with an Egyptian named Mina. He is still a very good friend to this day. For the second semester, he and I had rented an apartment together. We just said, "Let's get our own place and do that." So we got back to my apartment and it was early. We were being loud, so Mina woke up, came out, rubbed his eyes, and like, "What the hell is going on here?" We said, like, "Dude, we've got to tell you what we just did."

As we describe the events of the night, his jaw is increasingly dropping gradually, like, "Oh, what?!" He was in total shock. He said, "You do realize that, if I did something like this, I would almost certainly be in a jail cell right now or probably being beaten for doing this? I cannot believe you guys tried to do this and this is another. This speaks to the whole American privilege bed of— yeah, it's sad. I had some access to his heritage that he was barred from. So I loaded the memory card into my computer immediately because Ryan's going to do his whole artsy and going to use a dark room. I was like, "Let's see. He needed to do that later back in the US." Mina wants to see him too. He was like, "You have pictures? Show me. Let's see them." So I loaded them up. We were checking out the pictures, and watching the video. Then pretty much right away, I shot an email off to my parents and my sister - I don't remember what the subject line was.

There's a really good picture of Ryan and I standing on top and you can see the smaller pyramid in the background standing side-by-side, hands around the shoulders, smiling real big - it just came out really well - so I chose that one and just put it in the body of email and sent it off. I remember my mom responding, "Oh, that's such a cute picture of you and Ryan. I hope you guys are having a great trip." Clearly, she did not understand what was going on. She wasn't getting it. She wasn't understanding. I responded and sort of said, "Yeah. Take a look. Take in the surroundings. Where do I have to be to obtain this image? Ryan and I broke into the pyramid and climbed to the top last night. A no doubt and all-caps response came back, "YOU DID WHAT?!" My poor mother... I probably just gave her a heart attack. They were sort of like, "Okay, you're an adult. You're thousands of miles away." But yeah, she probably was stressed out.

Scott

Yeah. She was worried that you were going to make an international incident or something.

Alex

Then when she realized what was going on, she was like, "Oh my God, what is wrong with you? What are you doing?! Whatever you're doing over there, just go to class and go home."

Scott

You do crazy things when you're 21 years old. Would you take a risk like this now?

Alex

No. I reflected on this and I would not. I think I would've been very jealous of my classmate who did this and been like, "Man, that's really cool." But I don't think I would've even gone there in my head about, "Well, how should I plan—" No. I'm 37 now. This is when I was 21. The risk aversion accumulates as you age. I don't think I'd have the guts to undertake something like this. It turned out that I would've been barred from the opportunity anyway. About 1.5 years afterward on August 8, I got an email from my dad. I don't remember what he said, but it was something like, "Gee, you guys really motivated some changes over there." It was a link to a news story. I opened it up and it was about this huge makeover of the security of the Monument site. I think

that's where I read the thing about in the 70s - it was kind of, like, a really popular thing to do. But even today, people would try to climb to the top and the security was woefully inadequate, et cetera. So they were installing a 12-mile chain link fence around the whole perimeter. They were going to put cameras, alarms, and motion detectors. I mean, totally different. I mean, I couldn't tell you how different— a complete makeover is the exact phrase. It was night and because, before, they just kind of put up, like, something.

I don't know how many people between March of 2007 and August of 2008 attempted and did this climb - I'm sure some - but I imagine Ryan and I were among some of the last people that were ever able to do that.

Scott

These things are solid rock. It's not like you could really damage them, but was there any concern that, "Hey, this is a country's national treasure. We're going to be climbing it, desecrating it, or anything?" Did you ever have any thoughts about how that would be perceived?

Alex

I did wrestle with this and I think I honestly still do. Yeah, it's a great point. Ultimately, I think that the construction started about 2550 BCE and they're still standing, so they're clearly quite sturdy. I mean, there is the part that is open to the public, so there is foot traffic already kind of on the monument.

Scott

But it's limited though.

Alex

It is.

Scott

They would probably walk in and walk out through a gift shop, get little key chains, or something.

Alex

No. It's not like that. If you could imagine, I don't know— let's say you're at a museum that has airplanes in it and maybe a mini little staircase - you are contained and directed, so all of the traffic is taking place in a very specific area. But, it's been around for thousands of years. Despite Napoleon, the invasion of Egypt, wars, and all kinds of natural forces and all that, it has stood the test of time quite clearly. We did take the— Ryan has the knife. We weren't into that. I mean, it was cool to see someone from, like, 1800 or whatever who kind decided to carve - like, that was cool - but I didn't want to encourage that. I guess I'd have to say someone who pushes back on my rationalization about the point you're bringing up— if someone really pushed back and said, like, "Yeah, but come on." You're not supposed to do this just like how you're not supposed to use flash photography on the Mona Lisa or whatever. Little by little, it's going to cause— I probably would have to capitulate at some point if someone really stood their ground about that. But it doesn't keep me up at night, yeah.

Scott

if they're still okay after 4,000 years, a couple of US college students aren't going to destroy them. It sounds like they've got it blocked off because it's not going to happen anymore anyway.

Alex

Yes. When I read the security overall, I was like, "Oh, whoa. No one is getting—" I mean, unless you came up with a sufficient bribe, it would now be totally reliant on unethical security guards to give— and even then, I guess the cameras would capture it and I'm sure that people would watch the footage and all that.

Scott

That's funny. Your whole plan was hinging on this bribery thing, and that completely failed.

Alex

Totally failed. Can't believe it. Still can't believe it. At another major tourist site, you're not allowed to take any photographs of the inside of the temple because, frankly, they want you to buy the postcards or the official images because that's another source of revenue. But very easily, you could circumvent that. The odds of this plan working were actually quite good and, like, we ran into the one guard, I guess, who was uninterested in money or who just had integrity and character. So that was unlikely.

Scott

If people want to contact you, how should they get in touch with you if they have questions or if they're planning their own escapade up the side of the pyramid?

Alex

I would be happy to assist. By email is good. I'm also on Twitter. I'm sort of off most other social media platforms, but we can list those, I guess.

Scott

Yeah, that's easy enough. Obviously, in the show notes for this episode, we'll have the pictures that you took from the top, so people can see that. It's pretty cool.

Alex

Oh, great. Cool. If you start a new job and they're like, "What's interesting about you?", I mean, it's my automatic go-to. I'll never do anything as cool as that ever in my life. I'm positive about it.

Scott

If you'd like to see the full transcript of this episode, as well as pictures of Alex and Ryan on top of the pyramid, you can get all of that in the show notes for this episode, at WhatWasThatLike.com/137.

If you enjoyed this episode, and you like hearing stories of people trying to do something without getting caught, you might enjoy my conversation with Emily, from episode 79. She was trying to get through airport security, and under her dress was a large volume of cocaine –

Emily

"We just have to ask you a couple of further questions." I was like, "Okay." And they're like, "Do you have any drugs in your suitcase?" I was like, "No." They're like, "Okay. Well, just to check, we're going to send it through this X-ray and then we're going to scan it." So they scanned it

with, like, an ion scanner and it came up clean - I could kind of breathe a little bit - but I still couldn't look him in the face. I just couldn't. Then, he asked me, "Okay. Well, Ms. O'Brien, we're actually going to have to do a body search. Is there anything that you want to say before we do that? Do you have drugs on you right now?" Then, I stared at the floor and my ears were ringing so loud. It took me so long to answer that they had to ask me again. That's when I looked up at him straight in the eye and I said, "Yes."

Scott

That's episode 79, titled "Emily was caught as a drug mule".

I have to tell you, I continue to be totally amazed at the conversations we have in the podcast listener Facebook group. Yeah, we talk about podcast episodes, but there's a whole lot more than that. Recently I posted a question for the group – I asked "What's something you wish you could forget?". And wow, some of the answers just blew me away. There were the funny ones, like one person said "the last two seasons of Game of Thrones". But there were others, telling stories of past abuse, or losing a child or a grandchild – situations where it's easy to understand why you would want to forget those things. Just story after story from people who really just opened up and spilled their heart out. So far there are over 100 responses to that question. It just confirms the fact that you never know what someone has been through, and I just love being a part of all that. If you haven't yet joined us there, I hope you come over to WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook and get in on these amazing discussions.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz.
Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now, here we are at this week's Listener Story. Do you have a story? I'll bet you do. If you have something interesting you can tell in about 5-10 minutes, record it on your phone and email it to me, at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com. We end every episode with a Listener Story, so you might just hear your story right here.

This week's story is about an undetected injury.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks.

(Listener Story)

Hey there. This is Maia. When I was 18, I was invited to go sledding with my boyfriend at the time, his aunt, uncle, cousin, and myself. On my first slide down the hill, my sled, which was one of those saucer-type sleds, spun around, so I was sledding backward. I could not see where I was going. I decided to just hang on and hold through. I ended up hitting a tree very hard.

When I came to, I was nowhere near a tree. I had bounced back from the forest and landed several feet away with a broken neck. I did not know I had broken my neck, so I stood up and walked away. In fact, I was more concerned with my boyfriend's aunt because I thought I had hit her. Little did I know that any minute turn of my head or my body could paralyze me from the neck down. Out of all the odds and throughout this whole experience, I was not paralyzed at all. Unfortunately, nine out of 10 people who experienced the same type of neck fracture are paralyzed from the neck down. Luckily, I was convinced to go to the hospital to get checked out. If anything, I probably have a concussion or whatever - it won't hurt kind of thing.

While awaiting my x-rays, I was getting in and out of bed to use the bathroom, and I walked around with a broken neck. This is crazy. Once the doctors found out that my C6 was fractured, I could not stop hearing the word “miracle” coming from the nurses, the doctors, and my family members. It still echoes in my head today. From there, I was airlifted to a bigger hospital where I laid prostrate for six whole days awaiting my emergency surgery. It was brutal, to say the least. Now, 10 years later, I still have my cadaver belt, 4 screws, and a metal plate behind my throat holding things together. I can walk, dance, and run around as much as I want. I feel like the luckiest person alive, and I'm so thankful.

A few interesting tidbits that I'd like to add from this experience— I'm going to brag for a second. This happened three months before graduating high school. I still graduated and the top 10% was honors. This is actually pretty funny. I never was a huge sweet person. I never really had a sweet tooth or anything until this happened. Now, to this day, I love sweets. The first thing I ate after coming home from the hospital was an entire box of Chips Ahoy - not like me at all. My mom said that the man I got my cadaver bone from must have been a sweet lover. So thank you to him because sweets are amazing.