



PHOTO: MOHAMED A. FAHMY

Accessible EGYPT

WHAT A DIFFERENCE a small wooden ramp can make. Able-bodied visitors to the Temple of Hatshepsut on Luxor's West Bank probably wouldn't even notice the simple wooden addition to the grand access ramp. For anyone who needs a wheelchair or mobility scooter to get about, however, these five planks of timber bridge a discouraging step and make the female pharaoh's graceful temple a whole lot more accessible. And, in a nutshell, that is the mission of *Accessible Egypt*: to improve access for disabled people at Egypt's temples.

Accessible Egypt is a campaign launched by Jane Akshar and Joanne Stables—British expats who now live in Luxor. It was only in recent years, as Jane herself became progressively reliant on a motorised scooter (Luxor's first), that she realised how difficult it was to enjoy the region's magnificent temples. The paving stones in and around the structures are often so gappy and uneven that they pose a problem not only for those on wheels but also people using walking sticks or frames—or even just a little wobbly on their feet. Jane wants Luxor to be famous as Egypt's first disability-friendly ancient heritage site.

At a time when Egypt needs all the visitors it can get, the work of *Accessible Egypt* has seen early interest from local antiquities authorities. The opportunity is there to make Egypt a real option for people who never thought they could visit Egypt before.

Recently *Accessible Egypt* has made contact with *Helm*, an Egyptian non-profit organisation that has accessibility to private and public premises as one of its core aims.

Part of the solution might lay in mudbricks. They are cheap and easy to produce en masse, easy to replace when necessary, and are remarkably durable.

Joanne Stables reveals that “on the West Bank of Luxor at the ancient necropolis of Dra Abu el-Naga, a group of workmen employed by the American Research Centre in Egypt (ARCE) have been busily working away to produce more than 15,000 mudbricks for a number of international archaeological missions.” One of these missions is the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, which is developing a paved walkway at Medinet Habu to allow visitor access to the western precinct of Ramesses III's temple, as well as the House of Butehamun. The paving blocks produced by the ARCE team are composed mainly of soil collected from the (carefully sifted) spoil heaps of the nearby archaeological excavations.

“As a paving material,” Stables says, “mudbrick has a number of advantages when compared to conventional stone paving. For example, mudbrick is able to endure exposure to direct sunlight and high temperatures more than limestone and sandstone which are known to deteriorate with the increase of temperature. Furthermore, mudbrick is more resistant to cracking due to its ability to absorb movement.”

Other fixes can be made relatively simply. Visitors to Luxor's temples may have noted a bed of loose stones and pebbles that runs between the edge of the pavement and the walls or columns of the temple. This is part of a crucial Theban groundwater project, with the loose stones assisting in drying out the temples' foundation material and arresting the devastation of rising salt. This is not just damaging the stone; it is destroying the reliefs on the temples' walls—sometimes faster than they can be studied.

Often, however, the bed of loose stones is not flush with the level of the pavement and presents a hazard. The most straightforward solution is to simply bring the stones up to pavement level by adding a layer of similarly-sized cobblestones. This would maintain the important conservation objectives, and stop anyone from falling off the edge of the pavement.

Accessible Egypt has also reached out to the missions working in the field to be mindful of accessibility when they come to site management. Sometimes a tiny adjustment (gentle ramp instead of steps, no loose debris) can make a huge difference.

As President Sisi has declared 2018 the year of the disabled, Jane and Joanne at *Accessible Egypt* see this as an ideal time to take the initiative. Part of their proposal to the Ministry of Antiquities for support states that “making the temples of Luxor more accessible will actually bring about long-term business benefits. By improving accessibility, the number of sites visited by disabled visitors would significantly increase, thereby improving the tourist economy and increasing the tourist revenue received by the Ministry of Antiquities.” At a time when illicit digging is rampant in some places, there's no doubt that extra funding would lead to greater protection of vulnerable sites all along the Nile, and an even greater stewardship of Egypt's cultural heritage.

While it may not be possible to make every site fully accessible to people with mobility issues, *Accessible Egypt* is giving it a red hot go, and Hatshepsut's temple seems a good place to start. You can't see it in the photo opposite (because of the low angle), but there is a second processional ramp that leads to the temple's upper terrace (famous for its portico fronted by those giant Osirian statues of the queen). It also has a lip that creates a discouraging step—but here there is no little wooden ramp.



Jane Akshar at the Temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, in front of a much-photographed statue of Sekhmet. The smooth-looking pavers here are deceiving. Jane says that “although the guardians were very willing to assist, the uneven nature of ancient paving stones and the steepness of the ramps made visiting beyond the first court impossible. The floor of the gateway to the second court is almost a major hazard even to the able-bodied.”



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A site visit to Seti I's memorial temple at Luxor, with Jane (left) and Joanne (right) looking into disabled access. Jane reports that “Seti I's temple is much better [than Medinet Habu], almost the best in Luxor. I would guess 85% is wheelchair friendly. Some of the chapels have a single step, and parts of the exterior have loose debris which bog you down, but you can get to all of the major parts.”