

## Obama and the secrets of the Pyramids

By Zahi Hawass



I have met many famous people at the Pyramids, but I can say that one visit stands out in my mind as one that I really enjoyed -- that of US President Barack Obama.

When he arrived in at the Pyramids, Obama was casually dressed. He was very nice to me from the moment that we first met, and it was truly a pleasant surprise when Rahm Emmanuel, his chief of staff, mentioned to the president my profile that was recently published in *The New York Times*.

When Obama stood in front of the northern face of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, he looked up and said that he could finally see why people say that it must have been built by aliens from outer space! I told the president that anyone who had no knowledge of Egyptology might say this, but I also told him that if he had the information that we have as scholars, he would change his opinion. I began to tell him about the evidence that we have found relating to the construction of the Great Pyramid, including the quarry where the stones that form its core were cut from the bedrock. I also mentioned the remains that we have found of a ramp located at the southwest corner of the Pyramid. It was built of rubble and mud, and was used to bring the stones up from the quarry. We know that the Egyptians made the base of the Pyramid a nearly perfect square, and that they cut down nine metres into the solid rock to create the structure's base. The only debate now is about the nature of the ramp used in building the Pyramid. **Was it outside the Pyramid, or inside as a French scholar has suggested?**

I explained to President Obama the story of the secret doors inside the Pyramid. We know of two that have copper handles, one in the 20-by-20 centimetre shaft that leads from the Queen's chamber, and one in the matching northern shaft leading from the same room. In 2002, a camera inserted into a small hole drilled in the southern door revealed a second door without any handles behind it. I told the president that we had chosen the team who will work with us to explore the secrets of these doors further. He said that this would make a perfect film for the Discovery Channel. I laughed, and responded that since the first programme on the discovery was made by National Geographic, this would start a fight between the two channels!

The president decided that he would go inside the Pyramid, and I believe that this was the first time that an American president had ever been in the burial chamber. On our way up the Grand Gallery, he asked me where Khufu's queens were buried. I told him that they were laid to rest in their own small pyramids outside the Great Pyramid, and he laughed, saying that this meant that Michelle would not be buried with him. We left the Pyramid and went inside the tomb of Qar, which is located to the east of Khufu's monument. When he saw the hieroglyphic sign *Hr*, a front-facing human head that represents the preposition "on" or "upon", he remarked that it looked like him because of its large, protruding ears. I laughed, and told him that I thought that he looked more like King Tut.

When we visited the Khufu Boat Museum, I stopped to tell the museum director in Arabic that I did not really like the new carpet that they had installed for Obama's visit. The president asked me what I had told her. When I translated, he said that he agreed with me that the carpet was not a good fit for the museum. When we finished viewing the boat, I presented him with a replica of a statue of Tutankhamun. He seemed very happy to see how much his face resembled that of the young king. I also gave him a replica of my lucky hat, and explained to him that it had a noble purpose -- the replica hats are sold to raise money for the redevelopment of the Suzanne Mubarak Children's Museum in Cairo. President Obama said that he did not think that the hat would fit, as his head is very large. He tried it on, however, and we found that it fitted him perfectly!

We left the Khufu Boat Museum and walked down to the Sphinx, and Obama said that he would not have believed that he would ever be face-to-face with it in his lifetime. We took photos

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