

## **BACK FROM THE BRINK | PYRAMID HOUSE SURVIVES MOTHER NATURE'S WRATH, BUT WITHOUT ITS GOLD LEAF**

### **The News Sun - Waukegan (IL)**

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Newport Township--Lake County's famous Gold Pyramid House is no more. Gold, that is.

The Onan family's Egyptian spectacle that rises 55 feet above the Newport Township plain was stripped of its 23-karat gold leaf coating last year to make way for a urethane protective layer.

The reconstruction became necessary after a tornado ripped through a subdivision about a quarter-mile south of the pyramid last spring.

High winds damaged the pyramid's coating and dangerously collapsed the dome on the main structure, in which three Onans still reside.

Builder Jim Onan and his wife, Linda, were in the house at the time but were not hurt.

"When the winds hit, one of the (dome's) beams cracked and we had the force of four beams all on the house.

Each beam carried 15,000 pounds," said the Onans' son, Thomas "Rocko" Onan.

"For 12 days, they sat on the house, and we didn't know if we could save it.

A lot of (tour) buses canceled."

Ten crane companies refused to try to lift the dome away because of insurance concerns, he said.

The 11th completed the task successfully, however, and work began to patch the roof and remove the gold leaf-covered outer stainless steel plating.

"Now, we're just trying to make sure it's weather proof," the 25-year-old Onan said.

He resumed tours four years ago upon returning from college.

His father had stopped the tours about a year earlier.

A garage builder by trade with a strong interest in Egyptology, Jim Onan built his meticulously designed Pyramid House from 1979 to 1984, his son said.

Located between Route 41 and the Tri-State Tollway north of Gurnee, it first opened for public tours in 1986, long after it began attracting gawkers. Rocko Onan estimated a second urethane coat would go on after May.

The 12,000 square feet of gold covering, estimated to be worth \$500,000 in the mid-1980s, is to be reattached in two years. In the meantime, tours will take place as usual and the name will remain the Gold Pyramid House.

A 200-ton, 64-foot-tall statue of Ramses II still greets visitors as they enter off Dilley Road. A four-car garage inside a three-pyramid figure sits near the west base of the 17,000-square-foot pyramid home.

The house, a one-ninth-size model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops near Cairo, Egypt, is surrounded by a natural-spring moat.

The 11 1/2-acre site is enclosed by an elaborately decorated wall. Inside, the multiwindowed home has dozens of Egyptian artifacts, as well as historical Egyptian reproductions and a gift shop.

One busload of tourists from North Dakota earlier this month got an up-close look at the urethane-covered pyramid, which appears white from a distance.

Many more are expected to arrive starting in May, Onan said.

Because he and his parents still live in the house, Rocko Onan said walk-up public tours will continue to be restricted to Saturdays and Sundays, June through August.

Last year's damage decreased the number of visitors to 15,000 to 20,000, according to Onan, but he expects more to take the \$5 to \$10 tours this year.

Local tourism professionals said the pure audacity of the pyramid grounds, as well as guide Onan himself, are the highlights of their trips.

The younger Onan has led eight travel tours to Egypt and studied there for numerous periods of several months.

He also studied psychology and history at Carroll College in Waukesha, Wis., for two years.

"Rocko's got great rapport with the people," said Carol Wright of Falicia Tours in Grayslake.

"He's extremely knowledgeable, too.

Usually when groups come in for two or three days, we can run them around most of the attractions in the area, including the Pyramid House."

Tours take about two hours, Wright said.

They are are marketed to a broad range of interest groups, including those focused on cultural, architectural or academic subjects.

Out-of-town pyramid visitors often pair tours with trips to Ravinia Festival in Highland Park, the Cuneo Museum in Vernon Hills, Lipizzan horse shows in Old Mill Creek or Gurnee Mills.

Gail Svendsen, president of the Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said the Pyramid House is included in her group's vast marketing efforts, which reach all 50 states, Canada and even overseas.

Calls about the Egyptian oddity come in "in a steady stream," she said.

"A German media rep had 2 1/2 hours to tour the county last week and when we pulled up in front of the Pyramid House, his eyes popped out. He could not believe what he saw," Svendsen said.

"It's the uniqueness.

Where else outside Egypt could you see this?"

Tom "Rocko" Onan shows off the entrance to his family's Gold Pyramid House in Newport Township. The 17,000-square-foot pyramid is 55 feet tall and was once covered in 23-karat gold leaf. | This gold-plated replica of King Tutankhamen's death mask greets visitors to the house's exact-scale replica of the pharaoh's tomb.