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NILE FILE

Don't be put off by the recent attacks on tourists in Egypt: many people are staying away, so now you can have the ancient wonders all to yourself

WORDS *Philip Watson*

I AM LYING ON THE SUN DECK of my slow boat down the Nile, sipping a cold beer, my legs dangling over the edge of a small plunge pool. In the distance I can see children swimming near to the banks, biblical scenes of bulrushes, fishermen and herds of goats and lofty minarets shaded by parched pink mountains. Every so often I hear the long resonant sigh of a train whistle or a muezzin's call to prayer. My mood is so languorous, and the ship is gliding so imperceptibly, that it almost seems as if I am still and the landscape is gently moving. It is both magical and utterly unforgettable.

Call me old-fashioned, but it's at times like these that I think that this business of travelling isn't so bad. Up there with visits to the Taj Mahal, Victoria Falls, Manhattan and the Great Wall of China, a boat trip along the Nile is one of the great travel experiences. Place it in a country that can also offer the Pyramids, the tomb of Tutankhamun

and the monumental temple of Karnak, among many other attractions – and that boasts a 5,000-year history that makes Rome seem like Las Vegas – and you begin to realise that Egypt has an awful lot going for it.

For us boys, too, there is something undeniably intriguing about all the Egyptology. Maybe it's the vestiges of those *Look and Learn* books we had as kids, those birth-of-civilisation history lessons at school, all the mythologies and hieroglyphics, the legends of the Victorian Grand Tourists and of Howard Carter's famous 1922 discovery of King Tut's burial place, miraculously untouched through the centuries and unrivalled in its treasures. Or perhaps it's the accretion down the years of all that *Death on the Nile* stuff, of Roger Moore scampering around the Pyramids in *The Spy who Loved Me*, of Indiana Jones, perhaps even of the beautiful, buxom Rachel Weisz in the *Mummy* films.

Whatever it is, I heartily recommend that you go – and that you go now. OK, it can be a bit expensive – even though such catastrophic events as the massacre of 60 tourists by Islamic militants at Luxor in 1997, the events of 11 September, and the conflict in Israel have severely damaged Egypt's tourism industry and pushed prices down. But the country is safe – armed guards and even police escorts at major sites see to that – and the bonus for travellers is that visitor numbers for the most popular attractions are now a fraction of what they were.

"It's both tranquillising and invigorating," my partner said, as we lay back on the sun deck, watching the milky orange corona of the sun disappear over the horizon, having spent a blissful afternoon in the seductive company of Queen Nefertari, her tomb ablaze with the most richly exquisite reliefs and murals in the whole of Egypt. I couldn't have put it better myself. ☺

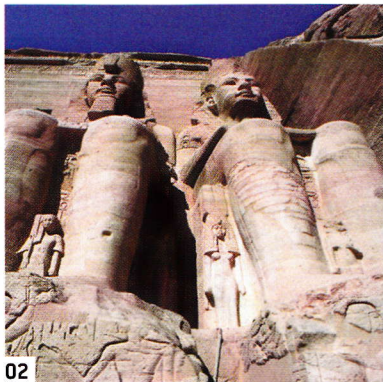
Pyramid power

Above, the Great Sphinx. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* a less luxurious way of travelling along the Nile; statues of Rameses II guarding the entrance to the temple of Abu Simbel; more Nile transport; ram-headed sphinxes in the Karnak Temple complex; haggling in Cairo's bazaars; goods for sale in Cairo's Khan al-Khalili, one of the largest bazaars in the Middle East

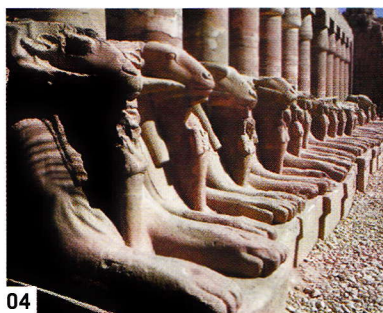




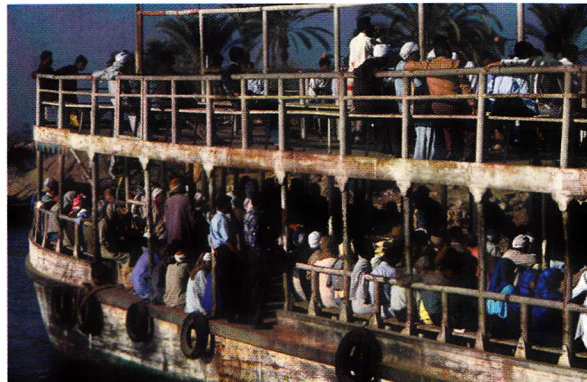
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WAY TO GO

We travelled aboard Abercrombie & Kent's Sun Boat III, which has two lounge areas, a bar, a restaurant and two sun decks. The decor is a little cheesy and the evening meals can be overly formal, but the standard of food and service is about as good as it gets. All 18 of the cabins and suites have minibars, CD players, air conditioning and views of the river; most have king-sized beds. Other

companies offering Nile cruises include Thomas Cook (0990 666 222) and Kuoni (01306 856 3911). In Cairo, we stayed at the best place in town: the Four Seasons. Other recommended hotels include the Nile Hilton (0800 856 8000), overlooking the Nile; the colonial Windsor Hotel (00 20 2 591 5277), a former British Officer's club with a great bar; and the Mena House Oberoi (00 20 2 283 322),

a Victorian hunting lodge in Giza with unparalleled views of the Pyramids. Four nights at the Four Seasons and four on the Nile (including flights and transfers) start at £1,432 per person with Abercrombie & Kent (0845 0700 610; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk).

SEVEN WONDERS OF THE EGYPTIAN WORLD

THE PYRAMIDS 01

It's a surreal experience to head out to these ancient monuments, which, contrary to popular belief, are not beached in remote desert but located on the outskirts of modern Cairo, near a golf course. Yet visits repay the highest of expectations, especially at dawn or dusk. Rip-off camel rides and the nightly *son et lumière* shows are, however, best avoided.

ABU SIMBEL 02

This great Sun Temple was hewn out of a cliff overlooking Lake Nasser in the 13th century BC, but lay buried in sand until the 19th century AD. It has a 33-metre high facade with four imposing statues of Ramses II. This was the highlight of Thomas Cook's steamer cruises along the Nile in the 19th century; its popularity remains undiminished today.

CAIRO'S BAZAARS 03

You'll be assailed by salesmen and the assault on the senses is more than proverbial, but a visit to one of Cairo's sprawling bazaars is an absorbing experience. You'll pass sacks of incense and

spices, copperware, carpets, trinkets and souvenirs, live birds and guinea pigs. Oh, and Man Utd shirts. Best is Khan al-Khalili, one of the biggest bazaars in the Middle East. And, of course, before you buy, haggle.

THE KARNAK TEMPLE 04

An unmissable ancient masterpiece that stretches over 100 acres, Karnak is second only in importance to the Pyramids here, and is everything you might have imagined an Egyptian temple complex to be. There are forests of gigantic columns, towering gateways, avenues of sphinxes and 30-metre obelisks, some weighing more than 300 tons – just how did they get them vertical?

MUSEUM OF EGYPTIAN ANTIQUITIES

This is where you'll discover, among the 120,000 priceless exhibits, the funerary treasures of Tutankhamun, including his solid gold death mask, and the famous Royal Mummies. You can see the teeth, toenails and matted hair of some of these ancient pharaohs and it takes a little while for the reality to sink in: these aren't models but real kings and queens from more than 3,000 years ago. It's like eavesdropping on something intensely fragile and private.

DENDERA

Lying 56km downriver from Luxor, Dendera is home to the grand Temple of Hathor, a shrine to the goddess of love, sex, joy, music, revelry, drunkenness and generally having a good time. Situated in an area still regarded by the authorities as politically "sensitive", it benefits from lower visitor numbers and a darker, secretive air. The walls are elaborately carved with fertility symbols, aphrodisiac offerings of mandrake fruits, shapely maidservants and men with elongated phalluses.

THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS

Tucked into the dry Theban Hills, this is the necropolis that houses the tombs of such notables as Tutankhamun and Ramses VI. It's a bit touristy, but most of the tombs are richly adorned with wall paintings and hieroglyphics. Nearby is the glorious tomb of Queen Nefertari, which has a sign outside that reads: "You are in the embrace of history." And the long corridors and shadowy antechambers can give you a faint echo of their original discovery. "Consider the thrill of when Carter first entered a place sealed for 3,500 years," said our guide outside King Tut's tomb. "It must have been like Armstrong's first step on the Moon."