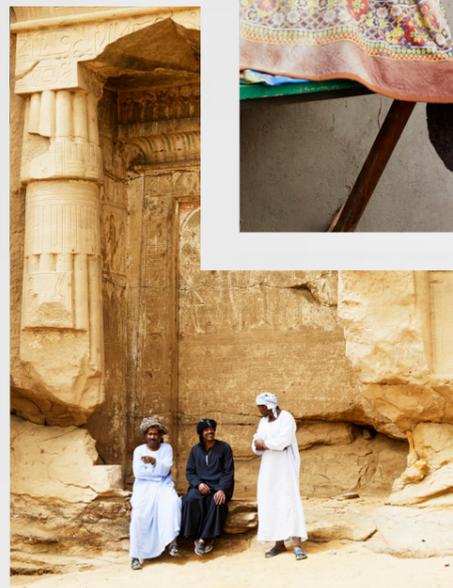
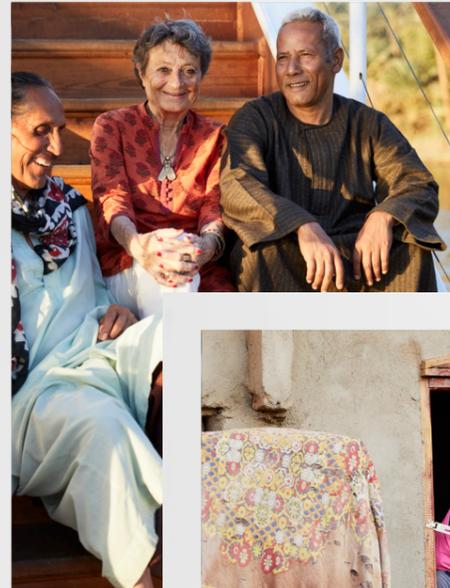


LIFE *on the* NILE

Story by GISELA WILLIAMS



THIS PAGE: TRIBE X DIGITAL; OPPOSITE PAGE: DYLAN CHANDLER



NEW EXCAVATIONS *and a DESIRE to feel truly TRANSPORTED after years of LOCKDOWNS have sparked a new EGYPTOMANIA. The SLOWED-DOWN pace of a TRADITIONAL NILE CRUISE is a particular DRAW.*

By car, it takes about three hours to drive from Esna, a city on the west bank of the Nile, to Aswan, in southern Egypt. But on one of Nour El Nil's fleet of six *dahabiya* boats—shallow-bottomed vessels with two distinctively red and white striped sails, whose traditional design is not so different from their pharaonic predecessors—it takes five days. And yet one wishes it would stretch on even longer.

From the first moment of a Nile cruise with Nour El Nil, life slips into an idyllic routine: A breakfast of strong coffee or mint tea with fruit, pancakes, and eggs is followed by an outing to an ancient ruin—exploring the decorated tombs of El Kab one day and a temple dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile-headed god, on another. After a family-style lunch, guests dip into the swift current of the bracing Nile for a swim, with young crew members joining in, doing backflips from the bow. Even if there are 24 guests—the maximum number permitted aboard Nour El Nil's biggest boat—there are plenty of corners on the deck and in the library to curl up with a book while watching the lush scenery drift by, a stirring call to prayer occasionally overpowering the sound of birdsong and water lapping against the side of the boat. The day ends with a three-course dinner and then a retreat to the glossy white cabins below, each room tastefully appointed with comfortable beds, en suite bathrooms with showers, and a few little artful details from local artists and artisans, like a vintage painting of a desert landscape or Berber woman, but nothing to distract from the view of the Nile out the rooms' large windows. ➤

From top: Wadi el Shat valley and desert, a stop on the Nour El Nil cruise; Nour El Nil owners Enrique Cansino, Eléonore Kamir, and Memdouh Sayed Khalifa; a scene from the small village of El Hedge, a stop on the Nour El Nil cruise; three local men in front of the Gebel Siisileh temple site. Opposite page: Nour El Nil's *Adelaide* sailing on the Nile.

Journeying along the Nile has long captured imaginations. It's one of the world's oldest tourist destinations, a route popular with ancient Romans dating back more than 2,000 years. The water of the Nile was considered so pure that in the 16th century, Ottoman sultans had it shipped to Constantinople for drinking. In the 1870s, the Nile cruise became an important part of the Grand Tour, when Thomas Cook & Son built up a fleet of steamships that transported wealthy travelers between Cairo and Aswan. A 1933 cruise on the river with her archaeologist husband inspired Agatha Christie to write *Death on the Nile*.

The unhurried pace of travel dictated by water and wind, passing by ancient sites that are carved into limestone cliffs, feels like the ultimate luxury, a truly transportive experience, and clearly what many travelers are seeking after years of pandemic lockdowns. Demand for spots aboard one of Nour El Nil's boats has increased over the past year to the extent that its owners—Mexican-born Enrique Cansino; his French wife, Eléonore Kamir, who designs all the interiors; and Egyptian sailor and boatbuilder Memdouh Sayed Khalifa—have started work on a seventh vessel, this one with solar panels. “We’ve had

guests who have returned two or three times,” says Cansino, who often joins the cruises and enjoys connecting with the guests and working alongside the crew. “We are like one big family,” he says, adding that they have been able to hold on to and pay all their employees throughout the pandemic.

The increased interest in exploring the Nile today is reflective of a broader surge of fascination with Egypt. According to the country's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, there was a steady rise of culture-focused visitors in 2021, fueled by the continued archaeological excavations of remarkable treasures, including last year's discovery of a 3,000-year-old “Lost Golden City” outside Luxor. Next year, Egypt will celebrate the centennial of Howard Carter's opening of King Tutankhamen's tomb, which in the 1920s set off a worldwide fascination with all things ancient Egypt. Many hope that this fall will mark the long-anticipated opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum, an ultramodern complex designed by the Irish firm Heneghan Peng Architects located just a mile from the pyramids at Giza, which will be the largest archaeological museum complex in the

Below, from top: Inside the Al Moudira hotel in Luxor, designed by Sednaoui's father; the dome at Ardi, a holistic wellness center in Dahshur, also designed by Sednaoui, used for yoga and meditation

ELISA SEDNAOUI'S SCENT MEMORIES

The model—a former Karl Lagerfeld muse—and philanthropist was born and spent her early childhood in Cairo accompanying her father, the renowned architect Olivier Sednaoui, to his building sites. “There is something that happens when I land in Egypt,” she says. “The moment the airplane door opens and I smell the spices and the dust and the desert, something starts to move inside me and I immediately think I am home.” In 2016, she opened a cultural center called Funtasia in Luxor, where trained facilitators lead creative learning and arts workshops for children. This month, she is launching a progressive nursery school and kindergarten, also in Luxor. Her favorite spaces in the country are designed by her father, specifically Ardi Holistic Wellness Center, which overlooks the Dahshur pyramid complex outside Cairo. It is owned and run by her stylish godmother, Shereen Malak, who curates wellness retreats with renowned healers and yoga practitioners. In October and November, Ardi will offer three-day detox and yoga retreats with nutritionist Anni Harala and yoga teacher Suzy Kussner.

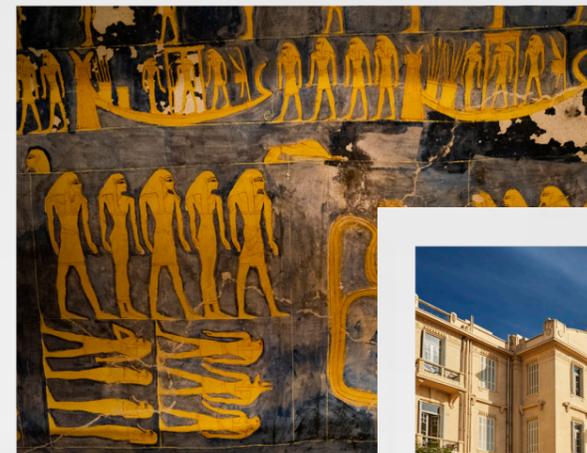
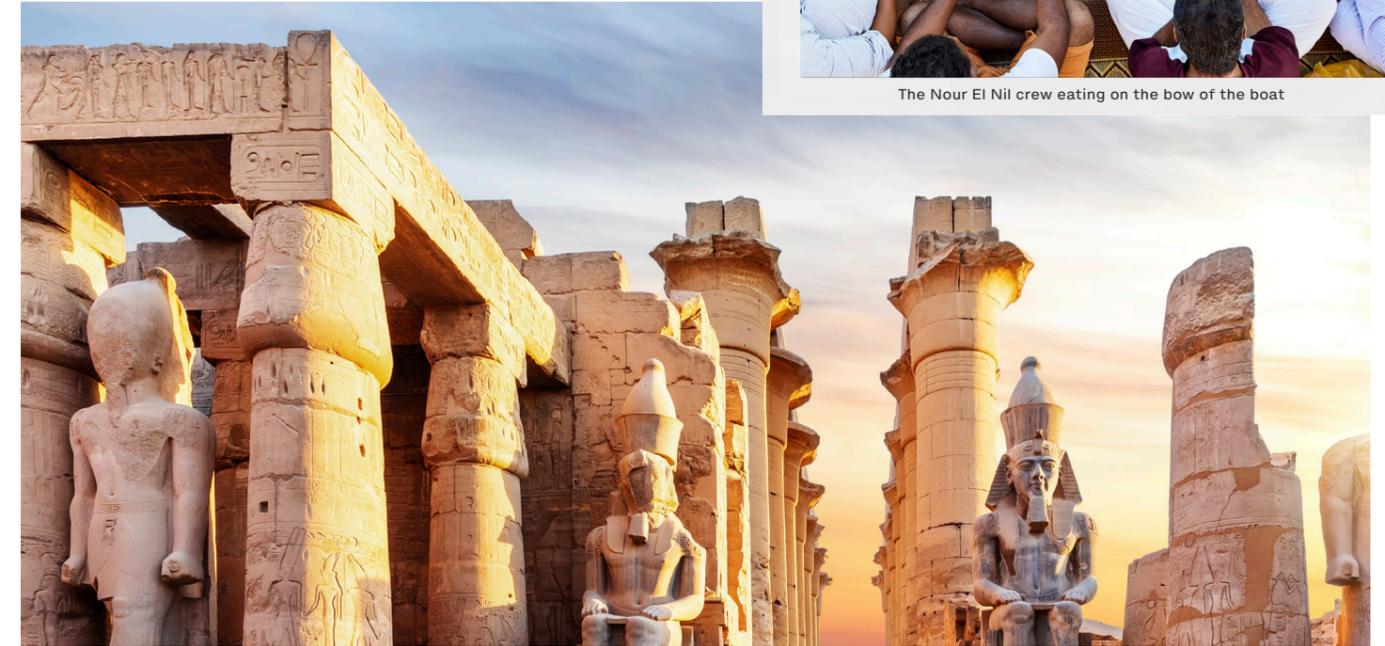
“I smell the SPICES and the DUST and the DESERT... and I immediately think I AM HOME.” ELISA SEDNAOUI

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: COURTESY ELISA SEDNAOUI; DYLAN CHANDLER/COURTESY AL MOUDIRA HOTEL LUXOR; MANON IBRAHIM/COURTESY ARDI. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DYLAN CHANDLER; ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; DYLAN CHANDLER; RENAT BUTS/COURTESY SOFITEL; GETTY IMAGES

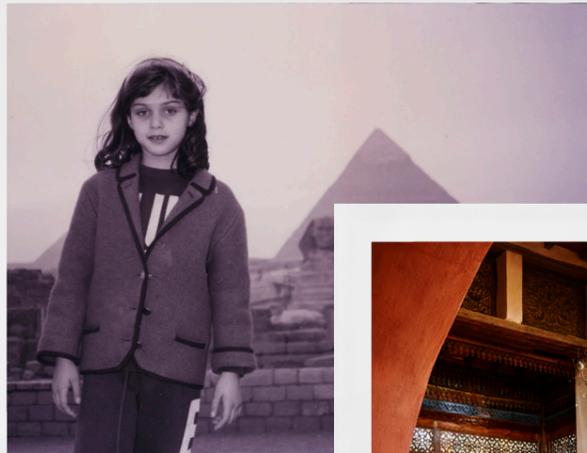
Watching the LEGENDARY RIVER slowly glide by... KNOWING you are on a JOURNEY that PEOPLE have been TAKING for over 2,000 YEARS—it felt like the OPPOSITE of SCROLLING without PURPOSE on INSTAGRAM: RESTORATIVE instead of draining.



The Nour El Nil crew eating on the bow of the boat



Clockwise from top: The Temple of Luxor, a woman smiling in El Hedge, and the Sofitel Winter Palace hotel in Luxor, and tomb carvings in the Valley of the Kings near Luxor



Above: Elisa Sednaoui at age seven in front of the pyramids at Giza



world and contain all of King Tut's treasures.

These noteworthy discoveries and openings have sparked a renewed Egyptomania, attracting a flock of international creatives and celebrities, including J.J. Martin, the colorful founder of the fashion and lifestyle brand La DoubleJ; model Imaan Hammam, who is half Egyptian; filmmaker Dexter Navy; and actor Gerard Butler.

Martin, who this past April took a spiritual trip through Egypt led by a mystic high priestess named Dee Kennedy, describes the experience as one that “blows your head off and opens your heart.”

“The idea of drifting on the Nile inspires the imagination,” notes the French shoe designer Christian Louboutin, who is half Egyptian and has long been inspired by the Nile and the country's ancient history. “It represents a journey of desire and beauty that moves at a different, slower pace, one where you are carried by the river and the wind.” Louboutin has had a striking mud-brick home designed by Egypt's most respected living architect, Olivier Sednaoui, on the West Bank of Luxor since the late '90s. (He also has his own private *dahabiya*.) A few years ago, he became a patron of the dramatic Colossi of Memnon site, the remaining

giant figures of Amenhotep III, each carved from a single block of sandstone, which once stood guard over the pharaoh's mortuary temple, now gone. “I love to take friends around Luxor who have never been,” he says. “It doesn't matter how old they are; they are always filled with so much wonder, you can see the magic in their eyes.”

Before setting sail, I was grateful to have a full day to explore Luxor, a majestic city divided by the Nile and still dominated by its pharaonic-era sites. I booked a night at the atmospheric Winter Palace hotel, now managed by Sofitel, a setting straight out of *Death on the Nile*. Descending the lobby's dramatic white marble staircase on my way to the Victorian Lounge, I would not have been surprised to bump into the ghosts of past celebrity guests like Christie or Howard Carter.

Due to the multitudinous requests from Nour El Nil clients for travel advice, the company has recently launched a tour-operator arm, which organized a driver and tour guide for me. Because it was June, very hot and late in the season—which is typically from October through May—I was almost alone at the

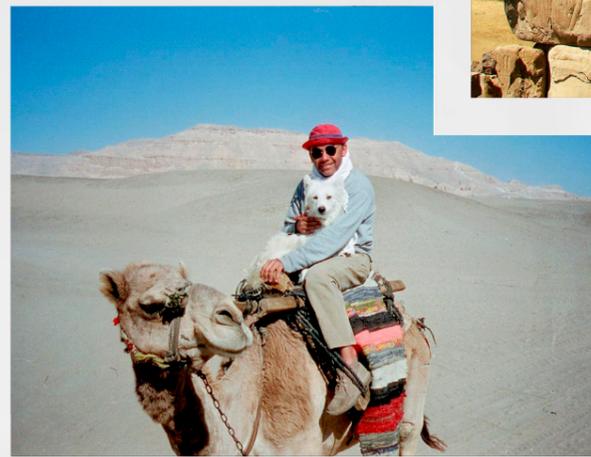
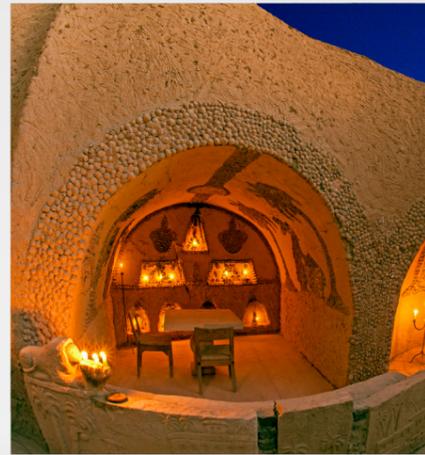
CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN'S HIDDEN GEMS

Everything from the designer's shoes to his private spaces are shaped in some ways by his love for Egypt. When he has guests in Luxor, where he has a home, he takes them to the Marsam restaurant at the back of the Colossi of Memnon site. “It's a pure oasis of freshness and quietness where they serve delicious mezze, and the view on Memnon is a bliss,” he says. He also advises taking in the Ramesseum temple site at sunset, when it is “particularly beautiful.”

Elsewhere in the country, he loves to visit the desert oasis of Siwa, “one of the most charming places in Egypt,” recommending the ecoresort Adrère Amellal there, and in Cairo he always visits the Gayer-Anderson Museum, “a 17th-century construction filled with treasures, which used to be the home of a British Royal Army doctor and amateur Egyptologist” in the 1930s and '40s.

“The IDEA of DRIFTING on the NILE INSPIRES the IMAGINATION.”

CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN



From top: An interior at the Adrère Amellal ecolodge in Siwa, the site of the Colossi of Memnon, Louboutin on a camel in 1999

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: ANASTASIA ILINA; CLAUDE MEDEALE/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES; TRAVELPICTURES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: ALBERTO SILIOTTI/COURTESY ADRERE AMELLAL; NICK BRUNDLE PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES; © COURTESY CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN

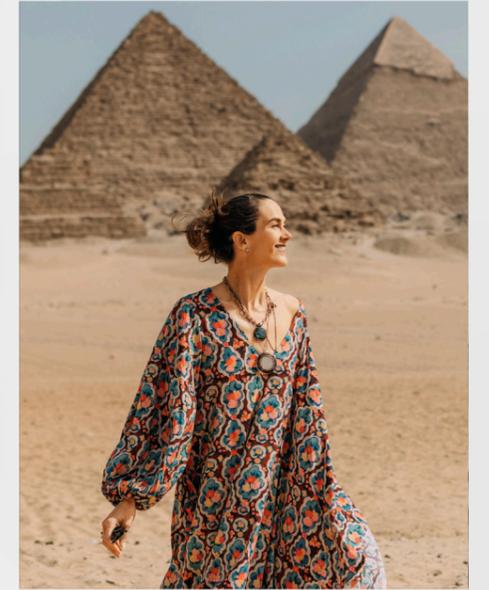
Luxor Temple and in the Valley of the Kings. Thanks to Louboutin's advice, I knew to stop afterward at the Luxor Pottery School, for whimsically painted mugs and bowls, and to have dinner at Al Moudira, an enchanting palace hotel run by the discerning Zeina Aboukheir.

The Nour El Nil journey truly begins in Esna, a small, dusty city about 30 miles south of Luxor, where a dedicated and knowledgeable guide, Adel Abuelhagag, led us into the city and the remains of the Temple of Esna, which dates to the 18th Dynasty but was completed between 40 and 250 AD when the Romans ruled the country. We stood in a monumental hall of 24 towering pillars gazing up at their elaborate capitals carved to resemble lotus flowers and palms. About two dozen men were perched above us on scaffolding, patiently wiping away centuries of dirt and smoke to reveal lush jewel-tone colors, while doves swooped in between them. Through a window at the back of the building, I saw more men who were digging; an excavation for the rest of the temple had been underway for just a month.

Settling into the glossy white cabins on *Agatha* after our adventure in Esna made the boat feel even more like a floating oasis. Lunch on deck was served family style on a long table under a chandelier and included cumin-spiked cooked vegetables, fresh pita bread, tahini, and Egyptian salads. Although each day felt deeply restful, what makes the Nour El Nil itinerary unique is that there is a sense of adventure and connection embedded in the daily outings. One evening before sunset, we walked through a village of mud bricks built on a hillside and then beyond into the desert. We watched, in awe of the scene, as the sun seemed to melt over the rolling dunes of golden sand. Another night, we anchored next to Gebel Silsileh, a small but dramatic temple lit up with theatrical spotlights, which is next to an important ancient sandstone quarry. After dinner, the crew, who by then most of us knew by name, surprised us with a musical performance of traditional songs from upper Egypt and pulled everyone from the table to dance.

Sailing up the Nile grants a permission to let one's guard down and provides an immediate escape from the daily churn. Oftentimes, it can take a few days or a week even to destress and adjust to the pace of travel; here, it's instant. Watching the legendary river slowly glide by, both sides lined by lush green water grass and palms, mango trees, and banana plantations, knowing you are on a journey that people have been taking for over 2,000 years—it felt like the opposite of scrolling without purpose on Instagram: restorative instead of draining. In the distance, just beyond the emerald-green quilt of farmland, I could sometimes spot ancient tombs cut into sandstone cliffs, a vivid visual reminder of how incredibly long the arc of history is and how brief one's own time is within it. It forces a reflection, a taking stock, that, rather than foreboding, feels life-affirming. Exploring the ruins can bring the smallest joy into sharp focus. HB

I SLIPPED into the NILE “like SILK sheets, ROLLING around in hippolike BLISS.” J.J. MARTIN



From top: Martin on a trip to Egypt in April, an entrance to the Philae Temple near Aswan, the Isis sanctuary inside the Philae Temple



J.J. MARTIN'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The American, Italy-based founder of the wildly colorful La DoubleJ lifestyle brand described her recent journey through Egypt with Dee Kennedy's *Awakening the Divine* (Kennedy's company providing “sacred journeys” through the country) as a rebirth. “From the moment I arrived in Egypt, I felt more at home than I ever have in Milan or Los Angeles,” she wrote recently in a newsletter. “I loved the burning heat, the haggling, hassling street vendors, even the icy, muddy Nile, which I slipped into like silk sheets, rolling around in a hippolike bliss.” This October (14–26), she will return, this time not as a guest but as Kennedy's co-host on another Nile journey.