

LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

# Condé Nast Traveller

WIN A BREAK  
IN ONE OF THE UK'S  
TOP LUXURY HOTELS

CONDE NAST TRAVELLER  
\$8.75  
PRINTED IN ENGLAND  
7 112527 417534 1 7  
RAVEL®

NOVEMBER 2006 \$3.50

WINTER SUN SPECIAL

6 of the best **NEW** hideaways in **Thailand**  
(Plus 10 more places to stay)

**Australia's most civilised wilderness**  
Where to stay in the Blue Mountains

Intimate islands to call your own in the **Caribbean**

**Sails in the sunset**  
Gliding along the Nile in a two-masted cruiser

**A YEAR IN PROVENCE**  
How you can live the good life

**BRITISH EDITION**

India  
+5 Raj hotels

The world's top places to dive  
Five small and stylish Scottish retreats



# Drift back in time

There are faster ways to sail down the Nile, and more comfortable ones, too, but nothing compares to gliding along in a *dahabiya*, the boat of choice for both the 19th- and 21st-century Grand Tourist. Words by **Anthony Sattin**. Photographs by **Alexandre Bailhache**



From the stylish, mahogany deck of the *Assouan* guests can discover Egypt's lesser-known temples





# It

TOOK FOUR MEN TO sort out the rigging on the 45ft mast, taking turns to grab the thick ropes and leap like bellringers, dropping quickly to the foredeck.

Eventually the massive red-and-white-striped sail unfurled. As it slowly caught the slack breeze and billowed, we began to glide upstream, so gently at first that I had to check our progress against the palm trees on the bank to be sure we were moving. But before long the modern town of Esna and its Graeco-Roman temple slipped out of sight and we slid further south into Africa.

I watched it all from the comfort of a divan, a pillow behind my head, the canvas awning keeping the sun off my face, my bare feet planted on smooth mahogany decking. Cruising the Nile, the world's longest river, has never been like this, or at least not for the past century. Until recently, if you

wanted to float through the land of the pharaohs you had to choose between the comforts of large, modern and often soulless cruise ships and the significant discomforts of *feluccas*, the cramped, open-decked Nile sailing boats. Now there is a third option. The *dahabiya*, a large, two-masted sailing boat with cabins, offers the possibility of sailing the Nile in leisurely comfort. This was the boat of choice for 19th-century Grand Tourists and, if my hunch is right, it will soon be the favoured way for discerning 21st-century pharaoh-hunters to travel.

We had already spent a couple of days on land in the company of Luxor's pharaohs and *fellahs*; days of great wonder and frustration, of seeing splendours but having to share them with tour groups, of queuing to see tombs and the museum, of being hustled on the east-bank corniche and followed by crowds of children in west-bank villages. As we drove in an obligatory armed convoy from Luxor to Esna, the police car assigned to protect us overtook our car at 75mph and disappeared up the road. Then, at Esna, the world slowed, the crowds thinned and everything quietened as we walked through the town's laid-back souk to visit the remains of Khnum, a Graeco-Roman temple. Among the many carvings on its walls, I noted, was an image of the ancient gods sailing across the

celestial heavens on a boat that might have been a prototype *dahabiya*. It was the perfect introduction to the *Assouan*, tied up at the nearby landing stage, earthbound but still divine. Being in Egypt can often feel like time-travelling; sailing on a *dahabiya* only heightens that sensation.

The *Assouan* is an archetypal *dahabiya*, a new-build along traditional lines, which means that it has a steel hull (in the 19th century these were brought out from England), wood-cladding and polished wooden floors. Below, there are six double cabins, two suites, which are slightly larger with French windows that fold back to open the room to the river, and a salon. Above is a shaded upper deck scattered with chairs, divans and a dining table. When the weather allows, this is where time is passed and meals are eaten. The *Assouan* has a crew of 12 and can sleep 16 passengers, although there were only six of us on this trip. If the

wind failed in the 19th century then

the boat had to be paddled or pulled, latterly by a steam-

tug. Some of the new *dahabiyas* on the river

have motors, but the

*Assouan* did not,

although there was a generator to power the lights at night. If the wind failed we would have to be pulled by towboat, but it hadn't come to that yet.

So there we were, a young American-Australian couple, an elderly French couple, our Mexican host Enrique and myself, thrown together for five nights, sailing slowly and gloriously down the Nile towards Aswan. Amelia Edwards, one of the most famous of 19th-century Nile travellers, admitted to a

sense of superiority at renting a *dahabiya* rather than cruising the Nile on a Cook's steamer. I felt the same as one of the modern

Cook's cruisers stormed past, rocking us in its wake, its passengers lining the deck-rails filming us and waving as they passed. There are faster ways to travel along the river and more comfortable ones, too. But for now, nothing can match the pleasure of a slow glide along the river in a *dahabiya*.

The novelist William Golding, who made a bad-tempered journey down the Nile in the 1980s, wrote in his journal that 'the rhythm of the Nile is the art of doing nothing. It is a good way of life if you can accommodate yourself to it.' It still is a decent way



Opposite, clockwise from top left: one of the 12-strong crew in the rigging on the *Assouan*'s main 45ft mast; guests enjoy a long, relaxed meal on the boat's upper deck; a guide at El-Kab, whose temple is dedicated to the Egyptian vulture-goddess Nekhbet; waking up in an amply-sized double cabin





## **WE WERE IN OUR DAHABIYA, THE LOW SUN BURNISHING THE WOODEN DECK AND BURNING THE WATER, THE RED-AND-WHITE SAILS HOISTED**

of life, and one we had no difficulty in accommodating ourselves to. We had received our dose of history and culture at Esna and our fill of lunch on the upper deck and were busy watching Egypt go by; talking over what we had seen, preparing for what lay ahead and being lulled into nothingness by the sound of the river against the hull, of thick ropes creaking, of the gentle breeze in the canopy, donkeys braying on the shore, the crew sharing a joke, a farmer pumping water into his fields. Life in Egypt, as elsewhere, is rarely this calm and quiet. I dozed... and woke as the sun slipped behind the palms and a *muezzin* called the faithful of some unseen village to prayer. I wandered down to my cabin for a shower.

The Nile, of course, is not just any old river and a cruise along it is not just any old journey, for this is the river of history. Not just of history that has passed and been set in stone, but also of history that repeats itself. There were, of course, the antiquities – a site a day was the regime. But there was also the other sort of history all around us. Leaning against the railing, Jacques from Arcachon in southern France watched a fisherman in a small dugout smashing the surface of the river with a stick and pointed out the similarity with images he had seen on tomb walls in Luxor. 'It is to scare the fish into the nets,' he explained. An ibis flying overhead served as a reminder of the god Thoth. And we, too, were part of that repeating history. Shakespeare had the

Roman soldier Enobarbus describe Cleopatra's boat in this way: 'The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold; purple the sails, and so perfumed, that the winds were love-sick with them'. And here we were in our *dahabiya*, its Arabic name translating as 'the golden one', the low sun burnishing the wooden deck and burning the water, the red-and-white sails hoisted and Selim, our talented Nubian chef, creating a mouthwatering wake of aromas.

We ate all our meals on deck, something one doesn't do on large Nile cruisers for the simple reason that when they tie up for the night they park in rows of up to a dozen boats deep, which means the air is likely to be thick with diesel fumes. The *Assouan* was tied up more or less wherever the captain chose and almost always alone. The first night was cold and we sat swaddled in blankets, clutching Selim's chicken soup. The second night was warmer and by the time we reached Aswan we were up on deck in the evening without sweaters. We ate together, long relaxed meals washed down with lemonade, Egyptian beer or wine. Selim was a master of classic Egyptian cooking – of *fiul nabbed* (fava bean soup), houmous, big fresh salads, *kofta* (grilled minced meat), Nile perch and an assortment of delicious desserts that included guava ice cream. As each course was finished, a little handbell that sat on the table needed to be rung; it became a

*Opposite*, the distinctive red-and-white sails of a modernised *dahabiya*, billowing up the river along with a smaller sail boat. *Above*, a young time-traveller watches the banks of the Nile from her hammock on the *Assouan's* deck, where meals are also taken, during the journey from Luxor to Aswan



## 'SALAAM ALAYKUM' ('PEACE BE WITH YOU'), WAS THE GREETING AS WE STROLLED BETWEEN THE HOUSES TO THE EDGE OF THE SITE

running joke that unlike your average 19th-century *dahabiya* traveller, none of us was born with a bell in our hand.

**M**OST NILE CRUISES VISIT the same major sites at Esna, Edfu and Kom Ombo. The *Assouan* was no different and we had to jostle with the crowds to see the sights. Not that I was complaining. If I had never been to Egypt before, the spectacular temple of the falcon-god Horus at Edfu would have provided a perfect introduction. While most ancient buildings are in ruins or have been restored, Edfu is still in its original state, mostly intact. True, the colours have gone from the pillars and many human-heads were mutilated by early Christians, who feared that these images might come to life. Otherwise the temple is much as the ancients left it a couple of thousand years ago. And yet for all the glory of Edfu and the other big temples, two of the memories that stand out most clearly are from lesser-known sites.

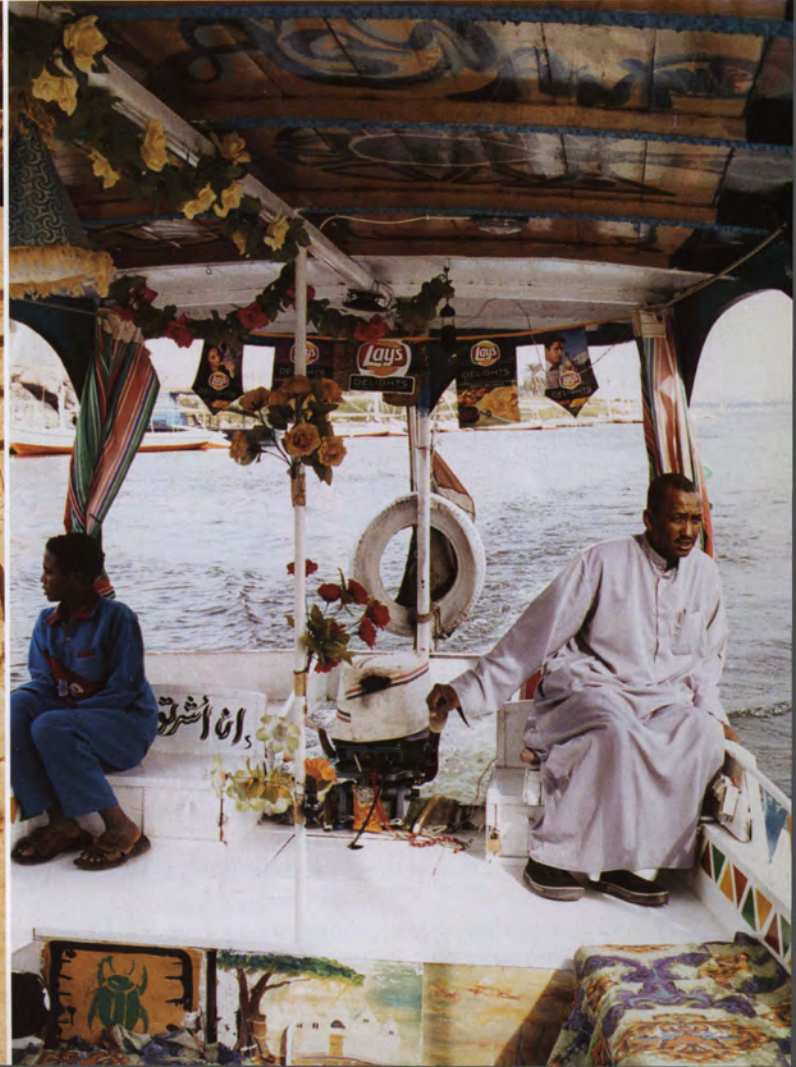
Most boats sail straight past el-Kab, so when we pulled up it was at a landing stage without the shops selling overpriced water pipes, scarves, bottled water and postcards of Kom Ombo. Instead we stepped onto a village landing. '*Salaam alaykum*', ('Peace be with you'), was the greeting as we strolled between the houses to the edge of the site. El-Kab was an important town long before the pyramids were built at Giza; its vulture-goddess, Nekhbet,

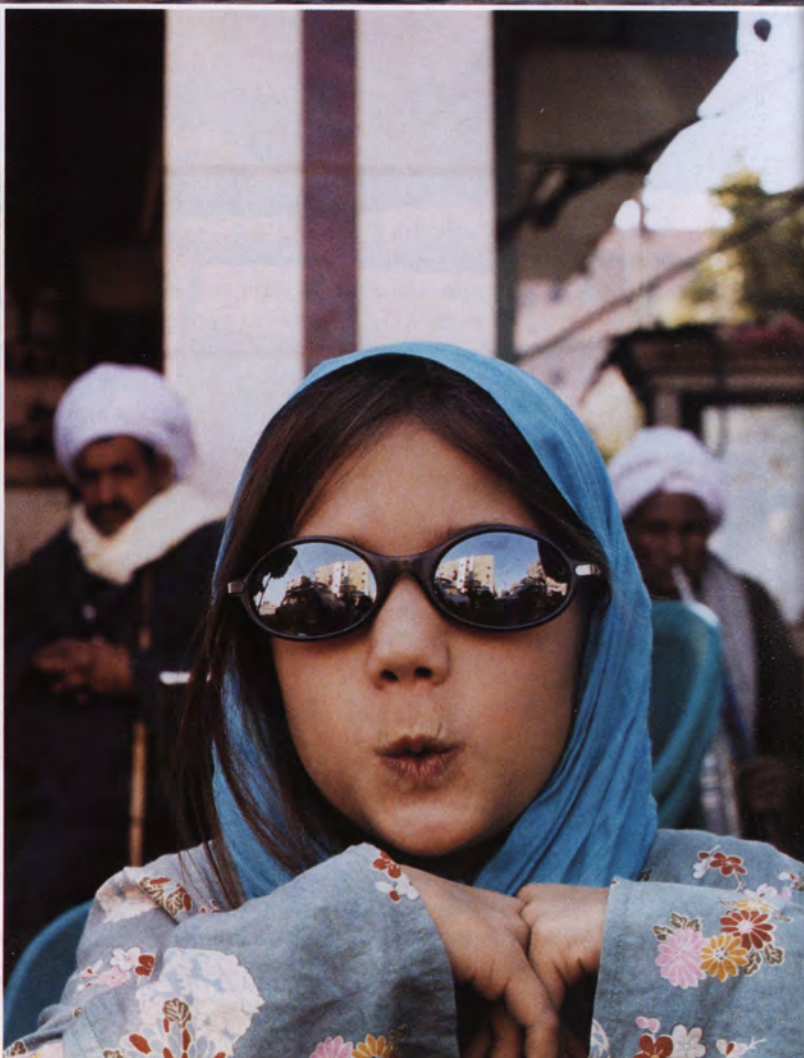
was known as 'Lady of the Mouth of the Desert' and protector of the southern half of Egypt. The main temple complex dates back to the beginning of Egyptian civilisation, but because of the needs of 19th-century brick kilns there is now little to see apart from the foundations, a few shattered columns and the mud-brick walls of the central temple. It was the walls that impressed me the most, for they are tall and thick and still run for over a quarter of a mile in each direction. Beyond the ruins, I could make out a row of tombs cut into the hillside. Inside we found paintings of farming and wine-making on the walls, a celebration of the good lives that were lived here.

We reached Gebel Silsila after sunset the following day and tied up under the floodlit temple. Enrique, who knew the site well, couldn't wait until morning and walked us down the narrow gangplank after dinner. The limestone *gebel*, or mountain, hems in the river: this is one of the narrowest stretches of the Nile. And for more than 1,000 years this was where Egyptians came to cut stone for their magnificent monuments. We hurried all over the site, about 40 miles north of Aswan, climbing into shrines and tombs with their gods and carvings. At the main quarry, we lay on the sand and marvelled at the ingenuity, raw power and achievement of the people who removed so large a section of the mountain and floated it downstream to build places such as Luxor and Karnak.

*Top left*, Medinat Habu Temple at Gurna. *Top right*, one of the *Assouan's* crew keeps watch. *Opposite, clockwise from top*: the Ramesseum Temple at Gurna, built by Ramses II; crew at the helm of the *Assouan*; a guide shows his guest the Gebel Silsila temple from a small alcove on the site









## WE MARVELLED AT THE PEOPLE WHO FLOATED A LARGE SECTION OF THE MOUNTAIN DOWNSTREAM TO BUILD THE TEMPLES OF LUXOR AND KARNAK

The world changed beyond Silsila. The swathe of farmland that lines the banks of the Nile became a narrow strip, the temperature rose, the people darkened and the desert encroached. And then, suddenly, too soon, we were at the end and the crew were all on deck to oversee the furling of the sail and the lowering of the mast as the tugboat pulled us under the bridge at Aswan. Returning from time-travelling can have its difficulties, but our landing was smooth as we were towed past the long line of floating hotels and the sprawling modern town to the island of Elephantine, the place where most ancient Egyptians and 19th-century Grand Tourists tied up their boats and thought of home.

### Weather to go: The Nile, Egypt

The weather is mostly hot and dry and the crowds can be suffocating in high season. Good times to visit are in spring (March to May) or autumn (October to November). **Best month: November**

Sunshine	Temperature	Rainfall	Humidity
8hrs	17°C min, 31°C max	0mm	Medium

### GETTING THERE

★ **British Airways** (0870 850 9850, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies daily from Heathrow to Cairo from £430 return. **Egyptair** (020 7734 2343; [www.egyptair.com.eg](http://www.egyptair.com.eg)) flies daily from Heathrow to Cairo from £350 return, and each Monday direct from Heathrow to Luxor from £350 return.

★ Booked through **Abercrombie & Kent** (0845 0700 612; [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)), the Assouan costs from £1,979 per person for five nights, with BA flights, Egyptair flights (Cairo to Luxor; Aswan to Cairo), transfers and three nights bed and breakfast at Cairo's Semiramis Inter-Continental Hotel. Booked directly with **Nour el Nil** (00 20 1 05 70 53 41; [www.nourelnil.com](http://www.nourelnil.com)), a double cabin costs from £1,350, including all meals and soft drinks.

The sailboat can be booked on a cabin-by-cabin basis or chartered.

### OTHER DAHABIYAS

★ **Abercrombie & Kent's Lazuli** cruise costs from £1,419 per person (based on six people travelling) with BA flights from London, domestic flights, transfers, four nights at the Mena House Oberoi, Cairo, five nights on the *Lazuli*, all excursions and guides. ★ **Bales Worldwide's** (0845 634 5112; [www.balesworldwide.com](http://www.balesworldwide.com)) Nostalgic Nile Tour, including BA flights from Heathrow, private transfers, four nights bed and breakfast at the Mena House Oberoi, Cairo, and a seven-night cruise from Luxor to Aswan on the *Zahra* (which operates in both directions), all-inclusive with entrance fees, guides and tips, costs from £1,894 per person.

Opposite, clockwise from top: the temple at Gebel Silsila, also home to a limestone quarry which the ancient Egyptians used to build their monuments; a young passenger in Kom Ombo market, one of the stop-offs on the Nile cruise; the Assouan sails close to the riverbank. Above, Kom Ombo market