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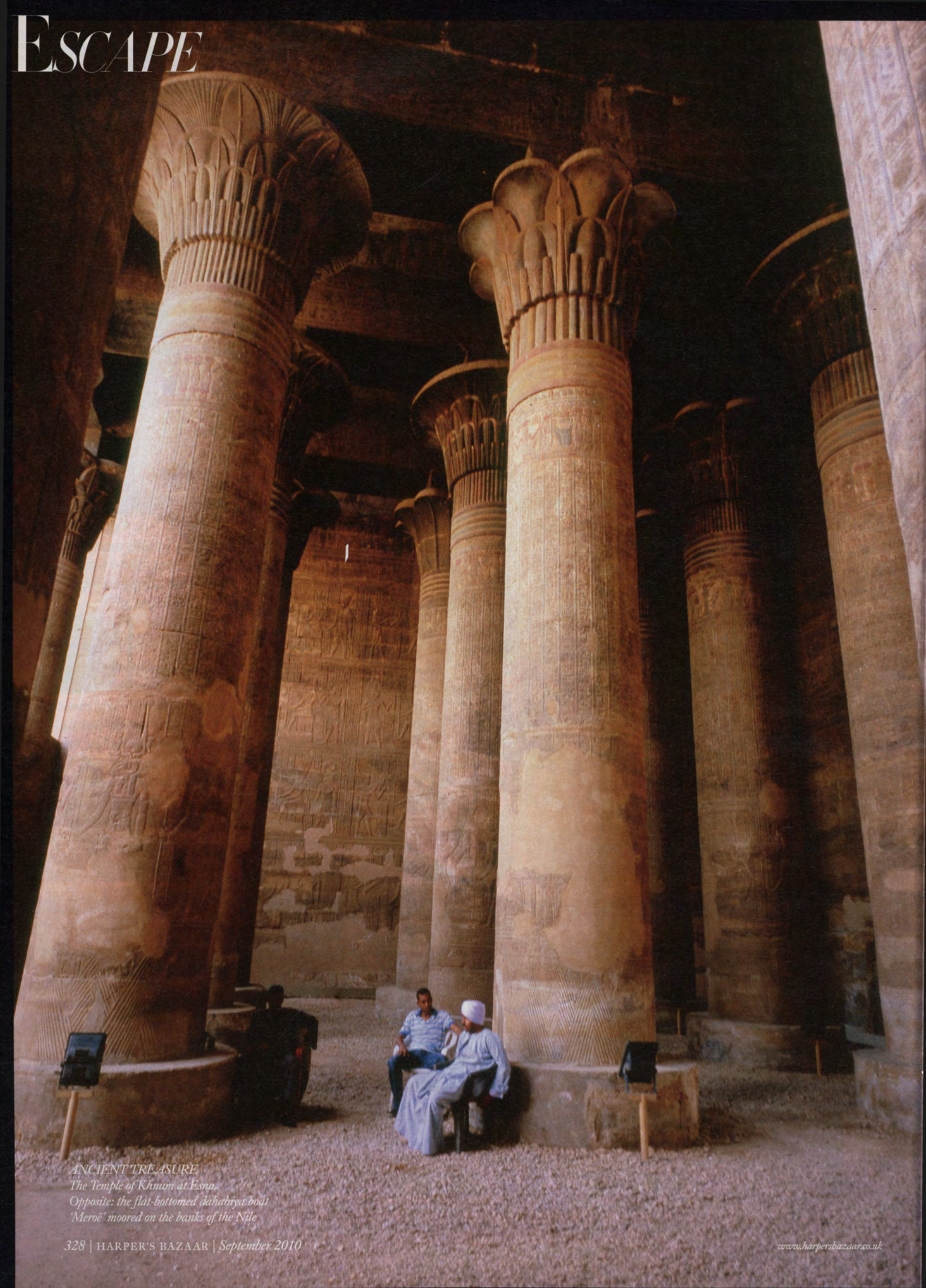
September 2010 £4.10
www.harpersbazaar.co.uk

Printed in the UK

USD \$8.99 CAD \$9.95
AUD \$10.95 NZD \$14.90
FR €6.95 IT €7.95 



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ANCIENT TREASURE

The Temple of Khnum at Esna.

*Opposite: the flat-bottomed dahabriya boat
'Meroë' moored on the banks of the Nile*

Adrift on the Nile

CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER is lulled
into a state of bliss when she takes a languid
river journey through the land of the
Pharaohs in a motorless sailboat
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON McCULLIN





I had wanted to make this sailing trip up the Nile since I got a taste of it as a dreaming 14-year-old, trailing my hands off the side of a felucca that tacked about in front of the Old Cataract Hotel in Aswan. That trip had lasted all of an hour, in which time my father managed not to exchange me for a goat and a half-dozen camels. Now I was to spend six days aboard a much bigger vessel, a dahabiya, popular in the pre-Agatha Christie era of Nile travel. In this boat without engines, we were to sail at the leisurely pace of the 19th-century Grand Tourist, from Esna, outside Luxor, up the Nile to Aswan.

There was the promise of balmy, star-filled nights and the freedom of sleeping out on deck. There would be river swims, desert treks, souks and picnics and, most of all, a chance to explore ruins and temples away from the tourist hordes. Various friends had separately hyped this trip, hosted by Arabist Sylvie Franquet and writer Anthony Sattin, as the best adventure of their lives, and I was jittery with romantic expectation.

I hoped the *Meroë* would be nothing like the brutish, motorised cruise ships that plough up and down the river. With loudspeakers blaring and tourists waving from their multiple decks, they carve up the banks, churning silt in their vast wakes, before mooring two or three abreast next to the most visited monuments. With the *Meroë*, it was love at first sight. She had an elegant prow, a reassuringly wide flat-bottomed hull, and a certain theatricality when her red-striped lateen sails unfurled. 'She looks like a girl with a very pretty face but a large behind,' joked my architect friend. 'So much the better,' replied Anthony, explaining that this

way she could be hauled up onto sandbanks, enabling us – as I soon discovered – to visit temples off the beaten track.

I was happy to see that there was enough space onboard the *Meroë* to accommodate comfortably my disparate group of friends. On the glamorous upper deck, with its day-beds and canopy, there was elbow room for everyone: for the children to set up dens and cushion blockades, for the sunbathers and readers to lie spreadeagled and undisturbed, and for the Scrabble Four to bicker out of range. Below, the 10 panelled cabins were inviting – cool and white to catch the watery, ever-changing light.

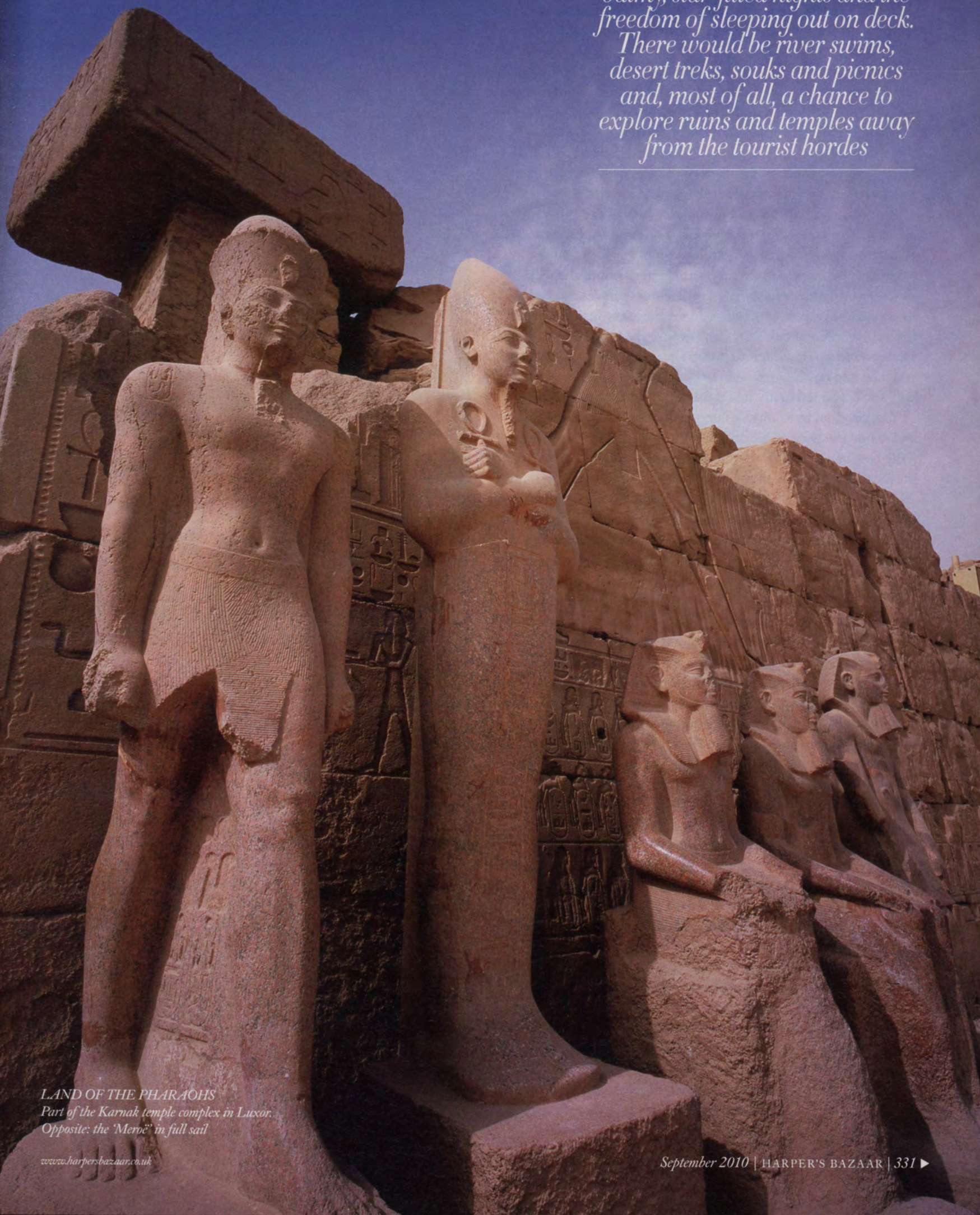
With no engines to steer us, we fell in with the rhythm of the winds, adjusting to the languid pace of the journey. The crew, between discreet prayers to Mecca aft and games of beach football, tended to our needs, resplendent in their dark djellabas.

Freshly sourced local produce and simple but inventive dishes appeared out of a tiny galley kitchen. *Ful medames* (fava beans) with goat's cheese and guava jelly for breakfast were addictive, as was river fish wrapped in banana leaves for lunch.

By early morning, we would be drifting off our moorings past papyrus-fringed adobe villages with charcoal-makers squatting on the banks and farmers tending their oxen and loading bundles of sugar cane onto their camels. We became hypnotised by these biblical landscapes passing in slow motion beyond our decks, bucolic scenes that reflected those painted onto the temple sites we visited along the Nile – unchanged, it seemed, since the time of the Pharaohs, 3,000 and more years ago.

Despite the unexpected noisiness of life along the Nile – passing boats and horns, the slapping waves, the clanking ropes and rigging, and the hooting of the old coast train that rattled

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LAND OF THE PHARAOHS
Part of the Karnak temple complex in Luxor.
Opposite: the 'Merve' in full sail

ESCAPE

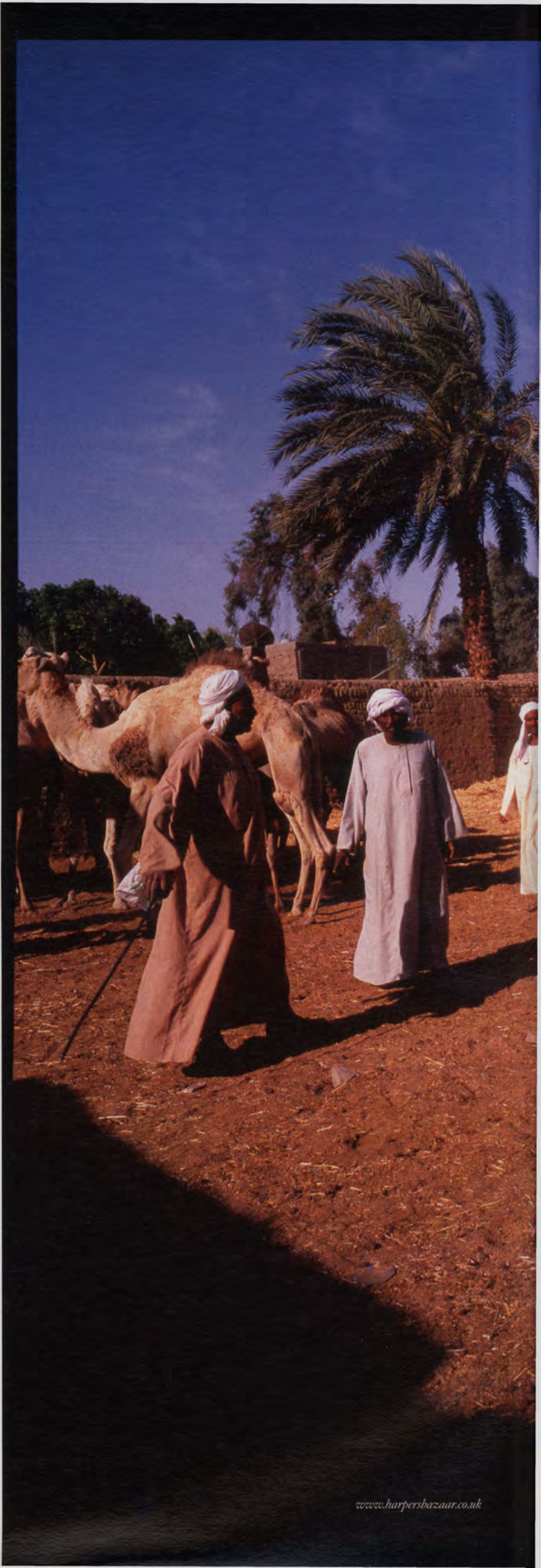
like a refrain from a Tennessee Williams play – it was hard to shake off the all-enveloping sense of blissful torpor that took hold of us. One guest refused point-blank to ever get off the boat. She cared not a fig about missing the former ancient capital of Upper Egypt, El Kab, deserted except for us, its mysterious tombs – which we visited on donkeys hired from entrepreneurial village boys – carved into the hillside. She also bowed out of a memorable walk one velvety night through the Pharaohs' quarry and temple complex at Silsila, where the stars rose bright enough to illuminate our way. And she merrily saw us off, peering over the pages of her fifth novel, at Wadi El Chatt. Here we trekked the valley, with its prehistoric rock paintings, until we reached a high, barren plateau with a view of the Eastern Desert, a vast expanse of sandy nothingness rolling out to the Red Sea.

Anthony was the consummate guide, feeding the children colourful stories about hermaphrodite gods and appealing divinities, and informing the adults without appearing to do so. And the statuesque Sylvie, towering over most of the local males, good-humouredly fended off lecherous advances in the souks, and interpreted for each side the more confusing aspects of the two different cultures. 'Just because the lady doesn't wear a wedding ring does not mean she is ripe and waiting for you,' she told one hanger-on in perfect Arabic. 'If you want to buy,' she explained to us, 'it is considered bad form not to haggle.'

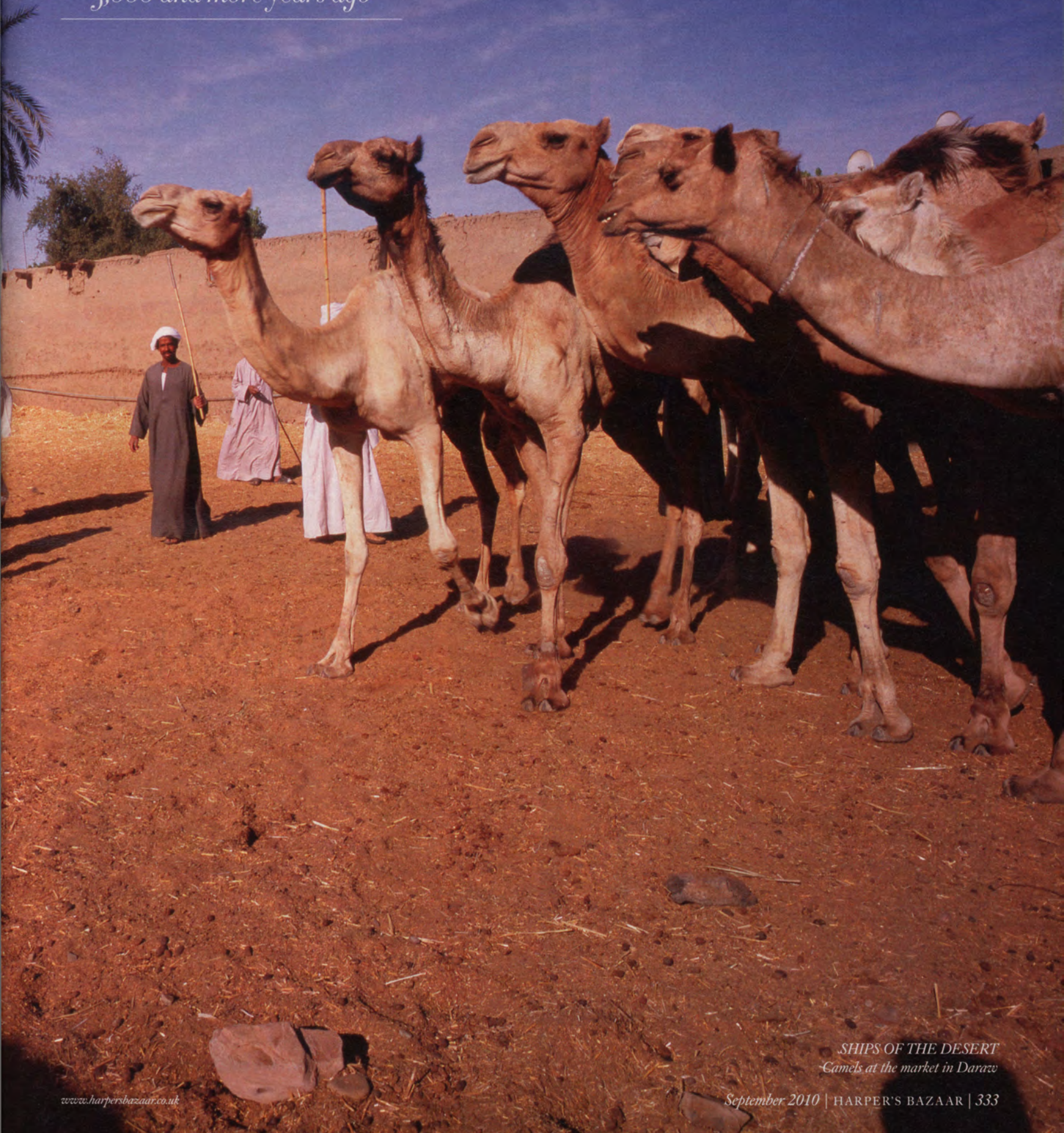
The children took ancient and modern Egypt in their stride, and varied the pace of life onboard with various forays ashore – they cut bananas with the ship's cook, and played football with the locals and chess with the crew. When the temperature topped 46 degrees, they splashed about in the cooling shallows. And when a notorious wind called the khamsin rose up, filling out the sails and making the antique chandeliers swing perilously on their mountings, they adapted best to the latest extreme of weather, taking the opportunity to fly their kites from the upper deck. Now the Nile, flecked with white horses rushing around the inlets and headlands and slapping against the hull, felt even more like a sea. Doum-palms bent double, as geese and egrets took flight against the darkening sky. We adults retreated below deck and whiled away the storm with our favourite evening ritual: listening to Anthony read from his book *A Winter on the Nile*, an account of Gustave Flaubert's outrageous and Florence Nightingale's earnest concurrent Nile journeys, which unlocked the sensual in one and the spiritual in the other.

Later, when the crew brought out the drums and the tabla, and the dancing on tables continued past midnight, I mused that it had not taken very long to get guests to 'defrost from their careers', as the publisher described it. The banker left aside his BlackBerry for the week, and the producer stopped worrying about whether she would ever again get an award. We were happy to let ourselves be cradled in the lap of the dahabiya, content to be lulled by its slow passage southwards, prow and sails set against the current, moving ever deeper into Africa and the heart of the desert. □

*A 10-night Nile sailing trip hosted by Franquet and Sattin costs from £2,750 a person full board, including five nights on the boat, two nights in Luxor and three in Cairo, plus all activities, transfers and tips, with Eau de Nil (07812 566089; www.eaudenil.net). Bmi (www.flybmi.com) flies from Heathrow to Cairo, from £329 return. The best time to visit is between September and May. For holiday inspiration, read *A Winter on the Nile: Florence Nightingale, Gustave Flaubert and the Temptations of Egypt* by Anthony Sattin (£20, Hutchinson).*



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*SHIPS OF THE DESERT
Camels at the market in Darazw*