

# W

**RUNWAY  
REPORT**  
THE SEXIEST  
LOOKS FROM  
PARIS, MILAN  
& NEW YORK

Party Favors: The  
Political Insiders on  
Hollywood's Payroll

Family Feuds:  
The Dynastic  
Dramas Gripping  
London and L.A.

Plus: Richard Serra,  
The Dowager Duchess  
Of Devonshire &  
The Season's Most  
Glamorous Jewels

# HOT BETTY

God Bless America Ferrera, TV's New Sweetheart

May 2007 \$4.50 US \$5.50 CAN  
08453  
0 357078 4



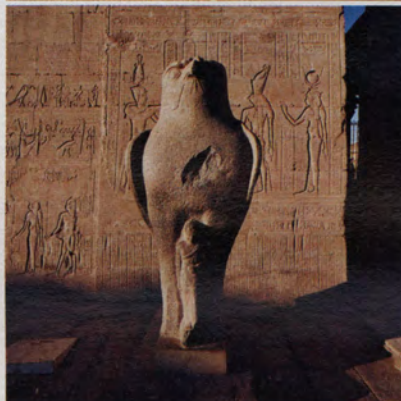
**F**or as long as Egypt's Nile Valley has been a favored stop on the international travel circuit—that is to say, since about 330 BC—the region's fabled historical treasures have coexisted with an array of irritants and obstacles. The ancient Greeks, who first arrived during the reign of Alexander the Great (their graffiti is still visible, carved into temple walls), had to contend with hostile Egyptian armies and local tribesmen. For the wealthy Europeans who ventured to Luxor in the 19th century, the chief concerns were dysentery, poisonous snakes and infernal heat. Today's main problem for tourists: other tourists, most of whom cruise the river en masse on ships that leave behind thick brown clouds of diesel fumes. The boats, with names like *Nile Style*, are multistory monoliths with tiny balconies or sealed cabin windows. Around sunset you can see the passengers gathering on the upper deck, margaritas in hand, waiting for the belly dancers to perform and wondering if that's all there is.

Lately, however, a small fleet of traditional sailboats, sporting graceful triangles of canvas cloth in lieu of engines, has been gliding along the Nile's waters, mooring in places the larger ships can't. Known as *dahabiyas*, the boats are updated versions of the two-masted, flat-hulled vessels that ferried Gustave Flaubert and Thomas Cook along the river during the 19th century. Now they're favored by people like Christian Louboutin, the French shoe designer who has a house near Luxor and in 2003 custom-ordered his own *dahabiya*, outfitted with five spacious cabins. Every winter he invites friends including Diane von Furstenberg and Daphne Guinness for a sail south toward Aswan, where the Nile stretches toward the Sudan.

## Mystic River

What's the best new way to sail down the Nile? Slowly, very slowly, on an old-style *dahabiya*.

Photographs by SEAN DONNOLA



From top: A member of the *El Nil* crew at the helm; a giant granite falcon statue at the cult temple of Edfu; the *El Nil*'s below-deck living room.

The main problem for tourists in Luxor: other tourists, most of whom cruise the Nile en masse on gigantic cruise ships.

GEORG JENSEN

## Mystic River

If you're still waiting for your own invitation from Louboutin, you now have another option: booking passage on a private dahabiya for a five-day sail. On a sunny late-winter afternoon in the river town of Esna, I step aboard the 154-foot *El Nil*, relieved to leave behind the cacophony of car horns that is the soundtrack of urbanized modern Egypt. (Drivers honk at one another to say hello, goodbye and everything in between.) Within minutes after the boat leaves the dock, I wonder if someone's slipped a Xanax into my glass of fresh lemonade: It feels as if we've floated into a new world, one where the loudest sounds come from egrets, camels and distant minarets, and the sights on the riverbank pass by in a slow-motion *tableau vivant*.

Our boat is one of two dahabiyas owned and run by an unlikely trio. Eleonore Kamir, the resident designer and decorator, is an aloof Frenchwoman who appears on deck in a chic assortment of head scarves and ivory bangles. Her companion, the garrulous and eager-to-please Enrique Cansino, is a Mexican-born Parisian who attends to guests and oversees the crew. Then there's the nautical expert, mustachioed local sailor Mamdouh Sayed Khalefa, who comes from a long line of Nile sailboat captains. Also on board for this trip are three couples—two French and one Danish-Egyptian—and a crew of 12 local men, outfitted in floor-length galabias.

The boat, with 10 double cabins, is available for private charter, but even if you opt to take your chances and sail with strangers, you can be sure the vibe will be nothing like the Love Boat-among-the-ruins experience offered by many of the cruise liners. "It's a good thing there are bridges and locks on the river," says Kamir at lunch, as one of the ships chugs along in the distance. "Otherwise, those boats would be even bigger." We've been sitting over a meal of stewed lamb and local vegetables, slowly drifting along as we

intermittently zone out to watch the scenes unfolding on land: donkeys grazing on clover, kids waving as they jog next to us along the bank, women washing clothes in the river.

When we wake the first morning, we're the only boat in sight, moored next to a dock where camels arrive loaded with sugarcane. In touristy Luxor I'd grown accustomed to constant entreaties from vendors and drivers; when I walk past the locals here, they have a way of quietly asking where I'm from, then responding with a smile and a simple "Welcome." Most are farmers tending to the irrigated fields of scallions, clover and bananas that line the riverbanks. Later in the day we dock next to a small adobe settlement, and as the crew buys ducks and onions for tonight's dinner, we explore the remnants of the ancient city of El-Kab, now a crumbling mass of stones.

Something remarkable happens when you're drifting at a speed of five miles per hour. Gradually your sense of time becomes so fluid that you're not really sure whether you've been sailing for an hour or a day. The boat's 2,300-square-foot mahogany top deck, with its piles of pillows and overhead canopies, is like a floating chill-out room, built for extreme lounging. "It's strange how people forget their problems on the boat," says Kamir. "And they're not bothered by the little things that can drive them crazy on land. If there's a nail that's a bit crooked, that's not what they notice. They're focused on the beauty, and the quiet."

The next day we stop for a three-hour hike through the desert, passing limestone cliffs covered with fading hieroglyphs and climbing to the top of a massive dune that overlooks the entire Nile Valley. From here the Nile looks exactly like what it is—the world's longest river and the source of most life in Egypt, a country that's 97 percent desert.

While walking through a village on the way back to the boat, we pass a sandpit



It feels as if we've floated into another world, one where the loudest sounds come from egrets, camels and distant minarets.



Clockwise from top left: A wall painting at El-Kab; the Nile, as seen through the remnants of a riverside tomb; the *El Nil* at sail; camels return from delivering sugarcane.

## Mystic River



Clockwise from top right: On the deck of the *El Nil*; the pylon at the entrance to Edfu; the *El Nil* crew gathers at the bow; one of the staterooms.



doubling as a soccer field, where about 30 teenagers are in the midst of a game. They invite us to join, and we do; it's one time this week I'm glad I don't speak Arabic, as the kids joke with each other while dribbling around me, their callused bare feet impervious to cuts from rocks in the sand.

Nights on the boat are spent dining on deck, downing multiple helpings of the simple but exquisite meals prepared by Chef Sadat, an Aswan native of Nubian origin. His moussaka is so tasty that it actually cures me of my lifelong aversion to both eggplant and peppers. Only once all week do I leave anything on my plate: a stewed dish of baby camel meat, called lupon. (The dromedary equivalent of veal, it's so tough I assume it comes from the hump.) Kamir has placed a small antique bell on the table, and we're supposed to ring it between courses to summon the waiter; we do so hesitantly and guiltily at first but get used to it all too quickly. During the day, while reclining on deck, we ring for beers, lemonade or traditional karkade—a hibiscus tea reputed to lower blood pressure. After dinner one night, the crew builds a bonfire on the bank, sits down with some drums and sings Nubian folk songs. Whether this is actually any more spontaneous or authentic than the cruise ships' belly dancers is difficult to say, but what's undeniably real is the leisurely pace of life on the boat, something that Egyptians and foreigners alike are nostalgic for. These days visitors to Egypt's cities are often struck by how removed modern life seems from the highly ordered, graceful world depicted on the walls of temples and tombs. On this trip, however, we're often seeing in three dimensions what the temple walls depict in two: farmers working their crops, herons wading through the river grass.

It says a lot about the *El Nil* that by midweek,

though we're in a valley crammed with the world's greatest ancient ruins, we're loath to leave the boat. We nevertheless make the effort at Edfu, a gloriously preserved Ptolemaic cult temple dedicated to the falcon-headed deity Horus. Past the colonnaded Hypostyle Hall, bas-reliefs tell Horus's life story, from his birth to the goddess Isis (who continued to breast-feed him well into adulthood) to his epic battles for the throne.

Farther south, toward Aswan, the Nile widens as it turns a deep blue, and the sights and sounds get more exotic: Birds begin to sound a lot like mammals, and vice versa. On board we play a guessing game—duck, camel or cow?—and we usually guess wrong.

On Friday morning we finally dock at Aswan, Egypt's southernmost city. After five days on the river, it seems a sprawling and chaotic place, its corniche lined with dusty office buildings. The next day we'll drive back to the airport in a police-escorted caravan, mandatory for all tourists since the Luxor terrorist massacre of 1997. (Egypt's tourist industry continues to suffer from that incident and others that followed, though subsequent security measures have greatly reduced the risk.) In the meantime I check in to the 19th-century Old Cataract hotel, allegedly the best place in town. It's when I sit down for my first onshore meal that the reality of life on land hits hard: Lunch is one of those massive buffets where you have a choice of 14 dishes, each blander than the last, served on steam trays. I distractedly reach for the handbell to summon the waiter, only to realize that there is no bell. And no waiter.

Grudgingly, and a bit wistfully, I get up to fetch lunch myself.

—CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY

FOR MORE INFORMATION: [nourelnil.com](http://nourelnil.com)



On the riverbanks, we're often seeing in three dimensions what the ancient temple paintings depict in two.