

Life on the Nile

You probably have memories of the first week of February, when there was the coldest snap for several years, and it even snowed in Havant. I am lucky: I don't. That was the week that Frances and I chose to spend in Egypt. While England froze and ran out of grit for the roads, we were enjoying a week of continuous sunshine on a pair of Nile cruises.

The most popular way to visit Upper Egypt is to take a cruise boat between Luxor and Aswan. This is the area where many of the finest ancient Egyptian temples were built, and Luxor is just across the river Nile from the famous Valley of the Kings, where many of the Pharaohs' tombs have been discovered. There are several hundred boats specially built for these cruises, though quite a number of them are out of service at present, and moored alongside the river bank at one of the two towns. The standard cruise takes a week, sailing upstream – which is *down* on the map: Nile geography is confusing – for three days, spending a night moored at Aswan, and then another three days back downstream to Luxor. It has never been possible to sail further than Aswan, since the First Cataract breaks the river there into dozens of narrow channels round rocky granite islands. That is why the British chose Aswan to build the famous dam just below the cataract, and thus store the water from the annual Nile flood, and release it gradually through the dry season. That was at the beginning of the 20th century, and it revolutionised Egyptian agriculture, allowing farmers all along the Nile to get two or three harvests a year without regularly losing their land under flood water for several months every year.

However, by the 1950s, it was clear that the dam wasn't high enough, and Nile water was still flowing directly to the Mediterranean Sea. By that time, Colonel Nasser had ejected King Farouk, and he planned to build a new High Dam just upstream of the cataract. But the USA and Britain disapproved of Nasser, and cut off the funds promised by the World Bank. Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, to use the tolls to finance the building, we got involved in the Suez campaign which led to the British forces leaving Egypt, and Nasser got help with constructing the dam from the Soviet Union. [*Perhaps Roger Bryant will give us an article on that period soon.*]

Work started in 1960, and it was obvious that the resulting lake above the dam would flood many of the villages and ancient monuments in Nubia, the part of Egypt between Aswan and the Sudan. The most famous of these is Abu Simbel, which was built into the cliff on the bank of the Nile for Ramses II, about 1300BC. The thought that this magnificent pair of temples would disappear under water for ever galvanised the world into a rescue operation. UNESCO organised fundraising and engineering, and the entire complex was moved inland and uphill, so that once again it overlooks the river, but safely on dry land in an artificial hill with a perfect reproduction of the cliff.

And we wanted to visit it. We had been on a Luxor-Aswan cruise in 1995, and greatly enjoyed it. Now we found that Voyages Jules Verne run a double cruise in a week, from Aswan to Abu Simbel on what is now called Lake Nasser, and then taking a coach back to Aswan to join a Luxor cruise on its way back downstream. This allowed us to see all the sites, but we worked twice as hard as the passengers who did the full week cruise on either boat.

We were due to leave from Gatwick on Monday morning, and I had planned to drive there with an early start. But by the Saturday, the weather forecast was so menacing that we

hastily booked a hotel in Crawley for Sunday night, and set off from Havant just as the first snow started. So on Monday morning, we excavated the car from the drifts in the hotel car park, and had an easy drive to the airport – where our flight was the only one with no forecast departure time! We eventually got away 2½ hours late. It turned out that not only had the plane had to come in from Dublin, waiting there until the Gatwick runway had been cleared, but our pilot had had great difficulty driving to work, a journey that usually takes 20 minutes.

The charter flight was completely full, and of course the late start meant we didn't reach Luxor until after dark. There we were loaded into coaches, and found that the flight carried many different tour groups. Ours was only nine people, a very good number. We were met by our tour guide, Mohammed, who was with us throughout the holiday, and proved a first class guide, full of fascinating information, provided he wasn't distracted by his mobile phone. Luckily there is no signal on Lake Nasser, but once we got back to civilisation, he was constantly being rung up in the middle of describing a temple.

We were told it was a three-hour drive to the boat, but time is flexible in Egypt, and we drove through the night for over four hours. This was almost the only time we saw the real Egypt. People were walking around, or sitting drinking coffee, in every village we passed through, and all the men above teenage appeared to be wearing the *gallabiya*, a long one-piece robe rather like a night-shirt. Further north, most men wear western clothes, though I was surprised to find many more women wore the Islamic headscarf than we had seen in 1995. About midnight, we reached Aswan, a large town, but had another half-hour drive down steadily bumpier roads to reach our boat, which was of course moored above the High Dam.

After hours in the plane and the bus, this was a different world. The *Prince Abbas* is a modern ship, but it is based on the design of Thomas Cook's first Nile steamer built in 1887. In fact in several of the public rooms, they had framed pictures and documents about the original *Prince Abbas*, including the passenger list of a cruise in January 1890, which included no fewer than five MPs with their families. (I expect they paid their own fares.) Cook catered exclusively to British tourists, but now we found a mix of many nationalities, especially a lot of Egyptian families. Early February is the school holidays, and clearly the Egyptians like visiting their monuments, just as we visit National Trust houses.

The light of morning showed we were moored in a very industrial dock by the railway station, but very soon we set off on our voyage – for about ten minutes. We had only to sail to the other end of the High Dam to visit the first group of temples, relocated on to higher ground from three sites about 20-30 miles south.

Since so many sites were threatened by the rising water, the engineers have moved them into groups of three. This allows the boats to stop for an extended visit, when tourists can move easily from one temple to its neighbour, only a few hundred yards away. So here we landed at Kalabsha, the second-largest temple in Nubia. This is an example of the paradox of ancient Egyptian temples. There is a strong feeling of "When you've seen one, you've seen them all." Kalabsha is a 1st century BC rebuild of a 15th century temple, but in the same style. Clearly the sort of people who say, "I've no time for this modern architecture" had the upper hand for thousands of years. It is only when you look closely at the hundreds of wall carvings (and decipher the hieroglyphics) that you can see how old a building is. Then you notice the differences. Egypt's dry climate keeps stone temples in perfect condition, but

there are no ancient houses, since they were built of mud brick, and replaced frequently. Within a few minutes' walk of Kalabsha were two other monuments, one of about the same age, and the other, now called the hemispeos of Beit-el-Wali. (*"What's a hemispeos?"* you ask. We weren't told, but perhaps Sisyphus could put one in his crossword.) The Arabic name means *"the house of the holy man"*, and it contains carvings of the military triumphs of Ramses II, who died in 1237 BC. He is the best-remembered Pharaoh (possibly the Pharaoh of Exodus), since he has left impressive statues of himself all over the country. But when he was alive, the pyramids were already 1,300 years old.

For the rest of the day, we sailed south on the lake. The Tropic of Cancer crosses the lake a few miles south of the High Dam, but there is no change to lush tropical vegetation, just desert on both sides. The day was spent agreeably in eating and lounging in the sunshine. Food and service were excellent, and it always surprises me how hungry I get doing nothing on a ship. The *Prince Abbas* is unusual in having the cabins opening directly on to the deck, where nearly all of the others have them along a central corridor. At sunset we reached our next group of sites, Wadi-es-Seboua, and moored alongside a small island for the night.

Next morning we were loaded into the ship's lifeboat for the very short trip to the temples. Wadi-es-Seboua (Valley of the Lions – another Ramses II temple approached along an avenue of sphinxes) was the first to be moved after 1960. The process involves cutting up the temple into its separate blocks of stone, and reassembling them at the new location. This temple was moved by the Egyptian government before UNESCO had got the support of international experts. The result is that the standard of reconstruction is not as high as at the other sites, where you might think they have never moved. Here it was obvious that gaps in the stonework had been filled in with cement. The inner chamber of the temple is cut into the rock, and was converted many years later into a Christian chapel. This has happened in many temples.

From there we had to make our own way to the next temple, Dakka, which was visible at the top of a slope about half a mile away. For those unwilling to walk, there was a camel-rank beside the landing stage, with 20 camels ready to give you a ride up the hill. One of our group confessed to a lifelong ambition to ride a camel, so here was her chance at last. I was able to take a photo of her as she arrived, and it looks as if she is riding alongside the lake with no buildings anywhere near. Dakka dates from the Ptolemaic period, about 200 BC, and because the Ptolemies mostly had quite short reigns, the inscriptions just refer to *'Pharaoh'*. The stonemasons were a long way from the capital, Alexandria, and weren't certain the same Ptolemy would be on the throne by the time they finished carving the hieroglyphics.

Then it was a short walk downhill, past another small Ptolemaic temple, which is unique in having a spiral staircase to the roof, and a wonderful view over the lake. Meanwhile the ship's boat had come up to fetch us back, and we sailed off south again to the next group, which includes the oldest temple we saw, dating from before 1450 BC. It had been added to by later Pharaohs', including Ramses II, of course. The buildings in this group were the smallest we visited, and the only time we had any crowding. Unlike the hundreds of ships in Upper Egypt, there are only seven on Lake Nasser, and we saw only three of them. So even though we all arrived about the same time, there was room for everybody, except at the last site, the small tomb of Pennut, an important official under Ramses VI (1135 BC). Here there was hardly room for six people, so we were grateful that Mohammed arranged for us to sail back to the ship without waiting for the other groups who were well behind us in the queue.

In the evening, the crew laid on a Nubian entertainment for us, with singing and dancing. And their eye lit on Frances, who was persuaded to join in. Next morning we had a quick visit to the only site that hasn't been moved. Qasr Ibrim used to be a fort on top of a 150-foot hill overlooking the modern village. Now it is a tiny island too small for tourists to land, and the village is deep underwater. The ship sails right up to it, and we look *down* on the ruins from the top deck. After a few minutes, we reversed away, and went on to Abu Simbel. On this part of the lake we did see a few boats: fishermen, and one tug pushing a barge full of stone. There is also a weekly passenger boat that sails non-stop between the High Dam and Wadi Halfa on the Sudan border. This is part of the famous overland route from Cairo to the Cape. Unfortunately it passed us during the night, so I couldn't see how crowded it was. But there are hardly any people living by the lake. There were a few at each temple hoping to sell souvenirs, or offering to have their photo taken with a baby crocodile about 6 inches long. But there was very little of the hassle and cries of *Baksheesh* (Money) you get at the Upper Egypt sites.

Towards the end of the morning, Abu Simbel appeared ahead of us in the distance. Most visitors arrive by coach or plane, and have to come to it from the back. We had the stupendous view getting bigger and bigger, and sailed right up to the shore before moving round to moor in a creek beside the site. The main temple is for Ramses II (of course) and has four colossal 69-foot statues of him seated in front of the entrance. There is a so-called Small temple alongside (large by any other standard) which is, unusually, dedicated to his '*Great Royal*' wife Nefertari (there were over a hundred others), and even has two 33-foot high statues of her with four more of Ramses. Beside these are many smaller statues of some of Ramses' numerous wives and children, but they are so overpowered by the king and queen that you hardly notice them at first.

Here we caught up with the crowds for the first time. The majority of visitors come by coach in convoy from Aswan with a police escort, and then drive back again after a few hours. By visiting after lunch, we missed the largest crowds, who had already left, but there were still plenty of people staying on. The temples have a succession of rooms getting smaller as you go into the hill. The final sanctuary is so carefully aligned that at dawn on Ramses' birthday and coronation day, exactly six months apart, the sun's rays shine all the way into it and light up the statues of Ramses and two of the three gods. They are connected with Ra, the sun god. The third is Ptah, who was associated with the afterlife, and so he stays in the dark.

Mohammed was not allowed to escort us in the temples, so he gave us a talk on what to expect, and left us to visit at our own pace. There is an incredible amount to see, but we emerged eventually, and went back through the gardens behind the artificial hills to get back to the ship. But we hadn't been warned of the particularly aggressive Nubian market just outside the gate. This was our first real encounter with the Egyptian '*hard sell*' on this trip. Things seem to have changed. Previously, if you said '*No*', the seller would reduce the price, and could never understand that you didn't want his item even as a gift. This year, the technique was often to quote a very high price, and if you said '*No*', they added something else for the same price. Not a good sales method and it spoiled what had been a lovely visit.

After dinner, we went back for the Sound and Light show. Because so many visitors come to Abu Simbel, they run a different commentary on the loudspeakers at each performance, and provide headphones for the other languages. As a result, most of the audience continue

chatting through the show. In any case, the commentary doesn't come up to the standard of the magnificent temple illuminations.

We were a few days too early to see dawn strike right into the temple, but some of our group went back to see it light up the facade. There was an impressive sunrise over the lake seen from the ship. Then we boarded our luxury coach – no mere minibus, even though we were only nine – for the long and dull drive through the desert back to Aswan. We were joined by two armed policemen, and travelled in convoy with a dozen other coaches. The government is taking no chances with terrorist threats to tourists. We stopped at the High Dam again to drive over it, and see how it had been built into the valley. And of course we could see Kalabsha again, just to the south.

Then we drove into town to join our second ship, the *Hameez*. If we had come straight to it, we should have said it was a very good ship, but we didn't find it quite up to the standard of the *Prince Abbas*. The nine of us joined halfway through a standard Nile cruise of some thirty other British passengers, who had already visited half the sites on the way up from Luxor. But as I said, we were a hard-working group. There was just time for lunch and we set off for Philae. This temple was just above the first dam, so for some fifty years of the 20th century, it was regularly half-submerged for the six months of the flood season. The High Dam threatened to drown it completely, so the entire temple complex was cut up and moved to another higher island within sight of the original. Being so close to Aswan, it is a very popular excursion, especially on a Friday (the Egyptian weekend) in the school holidays. Dozens of small boats ferry visitors from the Nile shore, but there is in fact plenty of room on the island.

The temple itself is most impressive. Built only about 250BC, 'new' by Egyptian standards, it looked much the same as the Ramses temples we had seen the previous day. There are several other buildings on the island, including one built by the Roman Emperor Trajan about 100AD, but still basically in the same style. After taking the boat back to our coach, we thought we had had a long day, but there was one more item before we finished: a visit to a perfume shop. Frances and I had gone through that on a previous visit, so we resisted the salesgirls' approaches. And finally back to the *Hamees* for dinner.

Next morning we were offered an optional sail on the Nile to the Botanic Gardens on Kitchener Island. Frances opted out, but the rest of us embarked on a felucca sailing boat, and were blown gently upstream for half an hour, with the boat flying a Manchester United flag, and a Liverpool scarf stitched to the sail. There was time for a pleasant walk round the gardens, but Mohammed miscalculated our return, and only allowed twenty minutes to sail back into the wind. It soon became clear we should be late for the *Hamees'* departure, and we flagged down a passing motorboat to give us a tow. Even then there wasn't time to go back to the landing stage: we sailed right up to the *Hamees* and climbed on board from the roof of our felucca.



Now we were back on the busy part of the river. We frequently passed several tour ships coming up in convoy, and when we arrived at our first temple, Kom Ombo, there were three other ships docking at the same time. This is a double temple, and quite 'new', with half of it dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile god. So although there are the usual wall carvings of pairs of gods, or the king making an offering to a god, in this case one of them is a man from the feet up to the neck, and then has a crocodile head. After a short visit we set off again, and just had to sit in the sun and watch the world go by, always an interesting view on the Nile.

After dark, we reached Edfu, which has the biggest temple of all south of Luxor. It looked as ancient as the others, but again was Ptolemaic. It was enchanting by floodlight. We had a lucky break here: the main group had visited it on the way south at midday. They told us it was then seething with people, and approached past aggressive souvenir-sellers. We had to share the temple with only about 50 people, and the sellers had shut up shop. We had been told it was fancy dress night on the boat, and Frances and I dressed up in our gallabiyas and Arab headdresses (as worn by Frances on her Jordan ride) only to find we were the only ones. The other group had had a fancy dress night before we joined them. And then after dinner, we had an exam! I have never before been on a holiday that ended with a test. There were questions about all the things we had been told by our guides, and we came second even though there were questions about sites that the other group had seen, and we were visiting next day. The prize was a large box of Egyptian chocolates, which were passed round at our remaining meals.

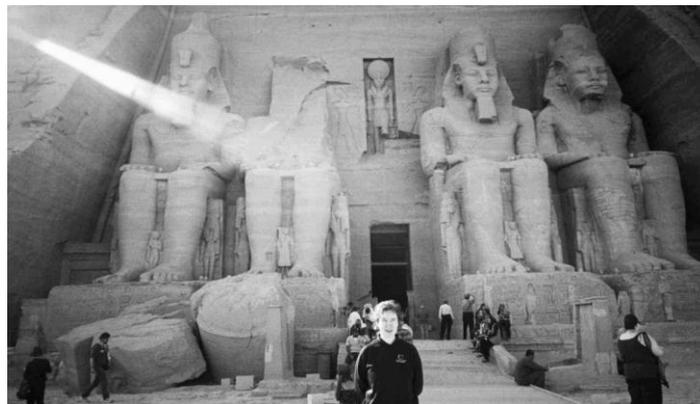
Our last day of sailing took us through the lock at Esna and up to Luxor. There are so many tour ships now that we had to moor several miles downstream from the town centre, and even then we were in a group of four side by side, and had to go through another ship (which had the decorators in) to get ashore. So it was back into a minibus to visit Karnak, the biggest and most famous temple of all – and the most crowded. In fact it got fuller as closing time approached, which was a surprise. It turns out that coaches come up from the Red Sea resorts aiming to arrive after the heat of the day. The temple was expanded over a very long period, but its most impressive features are from Ramses II (though it does incorporate a temple of Ramses III too).

Then a brief visit to a papyrus painting shop, where they gave us a cool drink (but we have a papyrus already) and then the Luxor temple. The modern town has grown up over it, during the many centuries it was buried in the sand; in fact there is one part that can't be uncovered because a mosque was built on top of it. Although the temple is one of the older ones, it does include sections of wall carvings with the name of Alexander the Great, about a

thousand years later. This was again crowded, but we had a bonus to come: after dinner back on the ship, we had a candlelight reception in the temple arranged by Jules Verne for all their tour groups. The loudspeakers played the Grand March from *Aida*, and we could wander around without jostling. This could be a very good climax to the holiday, but there was plenty still to come in our last 18 hours. First, a cabaret on the ship: a 'whirling dervish' and a very poor belly dancer; then next morning another outing.

So often on the last day of a holiday, there is no time to do anything worthwhile. But we didn't have to go to the airport until after lunch, so off we went to the West Bank, to the Valley of the Kings. We visited three of the tombs, and were also able to see into the excavations of the latest discovery, the first since Tutankhamen was found in 1922. His tomb can only be visited with a long queue and an expensive supplement. We had both been before, so we skipped that.

Finally, we drove to the other side of the mountain to the temple of Queen Hatshepsut, the only woman Pharaoh, who reigned from 1503-1482BC. This is one of the most impressive of all, and quite unlike all those we had seen during the week. It is built into the side of a mountain, in three terraces like a wedding cake, and has mural paintings depicting her journey to the land of Punt (probably modern Somalia). And after that high point, back past the Colossi of Memnon (actually Amenhophis III 1400BC) for a last meal on the ship and off to the airport. And back at Gatwick, we found the snow had melted, there had been a downpour all day, and I had a hair-raising drive home in the dark and the rain through lakes on the M23 and Chichester Bypass. Egyptian weather is preferable!



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