

Down the Nile by Felucca Egypt, October, 1999



We had reached Aswan by rail. Now, sitting at the water's edge on the terrace of the Isis Corniche hotel, we wondered how to get back. We fantasised about cosy, old-fashioned steamers hosting a handful of Agatha Christie suspects. They don't exist anymore. The glistening five-star, five-tier floating wedding cakes that now ply the Nile have at least 80 cabins. And all of them were chockablock.

We watched the feluccas crossing the river, propelled by oarsmen and colourful lateen sails. Surely some must venture the 150 miles to Luxor? How green would that be!

We patrolled the corniche. Four men shook their heads before we found Ali, a charming Nubian with a blinding smile. Yes, he could, but for some reason we never fathomed it was illegal to transport only two passengers. We went off to find a third.

We failed, and returned to the quay. An elegant young man with a commanding presence appeared wearing a long white djellaba. Deferentially, Ali consulted with him. It seemed it would be possible after all. Ali would pick us up at two p.m. First, he had to buy provisions, and we gave him some cash.

Waiting with our packs on the terrace, we feared that might be the end of the story. Yet, at 2 p.m. a felucca appeared. Ali and a youth called Mohammed helped us on

board *Bella*, and we entered the majestic flow of the Nile reclining on cushions in smug satisfaction.

That feeling drained away before Aswan was lost to view. Ali abruptly steered the boat towards the river bank, where a group of armed soldiers lounged. Our hearts sank. Then, among them we spied the tall figure of the mysterious young man in the white robe. Puzzlement displaced despair. Ali reached into a cranny, delivered a stash of bank notes (ours). A scribble on the manifest and we went on our way.

For three days we floated in a sunlit haze past labouring villagers and long-legged wading birds. Homecoming workers and camels drew silhouettes against the huge red disc of the setting sun. To avoid the cruise ships, we travelled late into the night while Mohammed prepared a supper of fresh vegetables stir-fried on a small gas burner.

You will want to know about the sleeping arrangements. We lay on the floor with the crewmen just a snore away. And the toilet arrangements. We used the traditional sailors' method off the transom or the locals' custom on the river bank. Although one morning, moored behind a cruise ship, we walked up the gangplank, nodded to the uniformed guard, and luxuriated in a five-star freshen-up.

Enroute to Luxor we visited Kom Ombo, Edfu and Esna, and like every tourist we were enthralled by the relicts of past civilisations. But we found our greatest pleasure when passing those huge floating wedding cakes as the passengers crowded the railings to aim cameras at the quaint felucca. We had become local colour, memorialised in hundreds of photo albums and videos.

