



# Arabian Heights

IT'S ALWAYS THE RIGHT TIME TO DISCOVER THE MAGIC OF EGYPT, SAYS KIA ABDULLAH

Egypt – if you're doing it right – will delight you with grandeur, exasperate you with clamor, humble you with history, then suddenly calm you with silence. It is everything to all people: culturally iconic, historically fascinating, economically emerging and aesthetically stunning. In short, it's everything it's cracked up to be.

I started my trip with a short stay in Cairo, the humming, crackling capital that is filled to the brim with over 9 million people, making it one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

But I don't want to go to a crowded city, I hear you cry. It's certainly not an unreasonable protest, but vibrant colour and excessive noise are an intrinsic part of the Cairo experience – the calm will come later. If I am honest, I have never seen anything quite like Kornish Al-Nile on the Saturday following Eid. Music, voices, lights, colour, movement all clash into each other, making for a totally immersive experience. There's no denying that your first night in Cairo will leave you jangling inside. There's just no way to really sample local life and return home feeling

serene. My advice is to just go with the flow (namely, where the crowd will take you). After all, there are few better ways to see a city.

The next morning, we rose early to join our guide, Nabil, on a trip to the Giza Pyramids. The tourism board releases only 150 morning and 150 evening tickets to go inside the Great Pyramid Khufu (also known as Cheops). There is no guarantee that you will be able to buy tickets when you turn up on the day so I would advise booking your trip with Memphis Tours ([memphistours.com](http://memphistours.com)) who will take care of all the smaller details. Visiting the chamber deep inside Khufu is a mystical experience.

In the semi-darkness, we walked up stairs, which levelled out onto a steep plateau with only handrails and a few wooden slats on the ground to guide us along. At certain points, we had to crouch, climb and squeeze through – just like in an Indiana Jones movie. The chamber deep inside the Pyramid is dark, empty and airless, but still retains a mystical quality that hints at its extraordinary history. We spent a few minutes inside, marvelling at the achievements of our ancient cousins

Emerging back into the sunlight, we took a moment to admire this incredible feat of humanity. Built around 4,000 years ago, the true nature and method of construction remains a mystery, only adding to the magic of Egypt.

After the Pyramids came the Sphinx which, while incredibly impressive, seemed suddenly small compared with what came before. We were lucky enough to visit when there were few tourists around, but it does tend to get rather busy so be prepared to wait for that perfect shot of you looking fabulous next to the Sphinx.

After a quick lunch, Nabil took us to the expansive Egyptian Museum. As we walked among the relics of a time long past, there was a magical moment where, mid-sentence, Nabil was interrupted by two young Egyptian boys, curious about some element or other of Egyptian history. In Arabic he patiently provided answers, which they absorbed in obvious fascination. Afterwards, the boys apologised for the interruption and headed off, animatedly discussing Nabil's explanation. I joked that the boys must have

been part of the package we booked; such was the charming nature of the exchange.

We rounded off the day with some shopping in Khan El Khalili Bazaar and a refreshing drink Al-Fishawy café, a hive of activity patronised by locals and tourists alike. Our charming driver, Ahmed, took us to the train station where we said goodbye to Cairo and boarded the night train to Aswan. Speeding along the Egyptian landscape in your own private booth feels heady, romantic and adventurous. It's not travel in the lap of luxury, but it's an authentic and exciting way to experience this great land.

After a surprisingly good night's sleep

It is on this part of the journey that you will have your chance to unwind and enjoy the peace. Sailing down the Nile with the smell of campfire in the air and the Islamic call to prayer wafting across the water is the quintessential Egyptian experience. Here, you can forget all the noise and clamour of Cairo and enjoy the quiet and calm.

From Edfu we sailed to Luxor with its famed Karnak Temple and Valley of the Kings and Queens. At one point during our visit, we were the only two people in the tomb of Tutankhamun, looking over his renowned remains. I'll admit that it's not the most romantic scene I've ever painted, but it was a

*“Speeding along the landscape by train may not be the lap of luxury, but it's an authentic and incredibly romantic way to experience Egypt”*

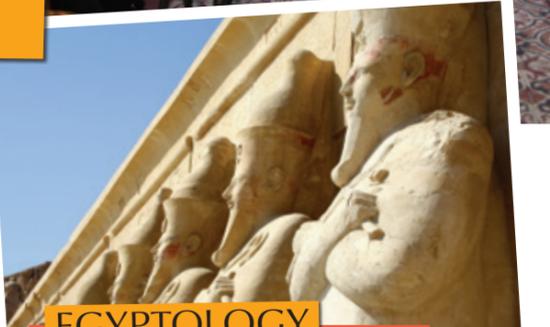
on the train, we arrived at Aswan and boarded the Sonesta Moon Goddess for our 4-day cruise down the Nile. Wary that cruises can so easily lapse into 'cheesefests' with their karaoke nights and fancy dress parties, we were glad to see that the Sonesta got the balance right. There was evening entertainment of course (a belly dancer, a whirling dervish, a barbecue on the top deck), but there was none of the artifice that so often permeates a trip via ship.

At Aswan, we visited the High Dam, Lake Nasser and the Temple of Philae, an imposing structure that looks straight off a film set. After a deliciously peaceful night on the water, we sailed onwards to Edfu where we visited Horus temple, yet another testimony of the Egyptians' architectural supremacy.

truly treasured moment. Here lay the kid we all learned about in primary school – arguably the most famous Egyptian in history – and we were the only two people in the room. Incredible.

The other staple of Luxor is the temple of Queen Hatshepsut. Built to the backdrop of desert mountains, this building is a truly impressive sight to behold. We rounded off our activity with a dawn balloon ride, taking in a glorious sunrise over the open-air museum that is Luxor.

Finally, when we were all tempted out, we retreated for two days of indulgence at the Luxor Sheraton. Lazing in the sunshine with the pool on one side and the Nile on other, we enjoyed the perfect ending to our crazy and amazing trip.



## EGYPTOLOGY

### Extensive coverage

Keep a scarf with you so you can cover up if you need to. Egypt is relatively modern, but you may need to cover up to visit certain sights.

### Making changes

Keep change with you at all times. Trying you pay by credit card will be a headache.

### Don't haggle away

You won't win. If someone comes and ask you to look at their shop – don't. You'll be stuck there for hours.

### Getting there

Departing London to Cairo; returning Luxor to London, From £430pp [egyptair.com](http://egyptair.com)

### Where to stay

10-day tour including stay in Cairo, 4-day Nile cruise and a stay in Luxor, From £510pp [memphistours.com](http://memphistours.com)

