

## PART TWO

# THE NILE RIVER CRUISE



Map: courtesy of Google

## 2 – FROM LUXOR TO ASWAN

Monday, 2 December

During our flight to Luxor, hot drinks and salted crackers were served. From time to time I glanced out of the window at the profound darkness until finally lights began to appear in the distance. When we reached them, the plane turned around and, at one point, I noticed a long dark area between the lights. I assumed that this was the River Nile.

We touched down at about 8.30 p.m. after our hour-long journey, and were driven to the arrivals area in buses. Once again we had to wait for a considerable amount of time before our luggage appeared on the conveyor belt, and then another delay resulted from the search for Angelina's luggage that had been sent directly to Luxor. I felt sorry for her as she had been wearing the same clothing for the past three days and had been keeping a low profile. She and Dodi were now informed that her suitcase had been sent from Luxor to the hotel in Cairo where we had been staying. We all groaned when we heard this news, and told her how sorry we were to hear it. Dodi was just as upset as she was, and apologized profusely for what had happened.

At last we made our way out of the airport, got into a waiting coach, and were driven to our cruise liner that had been moored nearby in the River Nile. This turned out to be a four-storey ship of moderate size that had been lashed between two other ships; we had to walk across a gangplank, pass through one ship, then enter our one. In the central hall we were given electronic keys to our cabins. My en-suite bedroom, which contained a large double bed and a small bathroom, was on the same level as the hall, the second floor; I guessed that the first floor underneath was used only by members of the crew. Once I had put my luggage in my room, I returned to the hall and went upstairs to the third floor, where the restaurant was located. This was quite large, and an impressive selection of tantalizing dishes were displayed on tables in the middle and at the far end of the room. We were shown to tables that had been reserved for us, then invited to help ourselves to whatever we wanted. I chose a plateful of hot cooked food that was quite tasty, drank some water from a bottle that I had with me, and finished with some small – and sinful – slices of cake. As I was tired by the end of the meal, I said goodnight to my companions and returned to my room.

After writing some of my diary, I stopped at ten o'clock and went to bed. Although the room was a little cool, lying under the duvet proved to be very comfortable. Despite the fact that we would get a wakeup call at six o'clock on the following morning, I set the alarm on my phone to 5.30 a.m., turned off the light, and fell fast asleep.

Tuesday, 3 December

My phone alarm woke me at 5.30 this morning, giving me ample time to do my morning exercises and use the cramped but quite adequate bathroom. The phone in the bedroom rang at 6 o'clock, as expected, and I was in the restaurant fifteen minutes

later eating breakfast with my companions. I started with juice and fruit, had a bowl of cereal with milk, then finished with a freshly-made omelette with cooked vegetables and bread, and washed all this down with a cup of tea.

By seven o'clock we were in our coach, ready to leave, though the two troublesome ladies held us up yet again. At last we were off and, having crossed the Nile to the west bank, we bumped our way along country roads with trees, fields and farms on either side, towards the famous Valley of the Kings. This was where we would visit some of the famous pharaohs' tombs. On the way we saw some hot-air balloons in the sky near some mountains to our left.

We then turned off the road and made our way up into the sandy-coloured mountains, leaving the lush countryside behind. Soon we found ourselves approaching the very familiar-looking Valley of the Kings. Having seen photographs and television programmes over the years about Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon discovering Tutankhamun's tomb in this famous necropolis, I was now quite excited at the thought that I was about to see this place for real, at long last.



*The Valley of the Kings, near Luxor*

Once the coach had been parked and Dodi had purchased tickets for us all to visit three of the tombs, a few of us, including me, bought entrance tickets for Tutankhamun's tomb, despite the fact that so little was to be seen inside it. When everybody was ready, we were driven in a couple of electric buses to the area where the tombs were located, and where Dodi began to tell us about the place.

Although the pyramids of Giza have come to symbolize Egypt, the majority of royal tombs in the country had actually been cut into rock. A reason why this location had been chosen was possibly because a nearby peak of the Theban hills, al-Qurn (known to the ancient Egyptians as *Ta Dehent*, 'The Peak') bore a resemblance to a pyramid. The valley's isolated position benefitted from its difficult access, and a team of special tomb police known as the Medjay were employed to guard the necropolis. The first royal tombs here were those of Amenhotep I and Thutmose I. The valley was used for burials from about 1539 to 1075 BCE, and contains at least 63 tombs. The first one that we would see, Dodi explained, would be the tomb of Ramesses IV, who died in 1149 BCE. This would be the best one because of its elaborate decoration. Laid out on a straight axis, the corridors of the tomb descend gradually to the burial

chamber. The decorations and texts that we would see were based on ancient Egyptian literature: the Book of Caverns, the Book of the Dead, the Book of Amduat, the Book of the Heavens, and the Litany of Ra. We were told that the tomb was excavated in 1905–6 by Edward R. Ayrton, and in 1920 by Howard Carter.



*The tomb of Ramesses IV, Valley of the Kings*

As it was still early in the morning, only a few tourists were about, but when Dodi noticed a large group approaching, he urged us to go into the tomb straight away. At the entrance we showed our tickets to the man in charge, and stepped inside. The first thing that caught my eye, when looking up to the right, were Coptic inscriptions and illustrations near the entrance. Dodi had told us about these; at some period Coptic people had taken shelter here. Although there was little or no colour on the walls in this entrance corridor, it was very beautiful as they were completely covered in carved hieroglyphs. Only on the ceiling could be seen remains of some coloured paintings. As I slowly made my way along the three main corridors, I stopped now and then to photograph what I saw, using both my camera and phone. Eventually I approached a large chamber where the walls and ceilings were covered in very well executed and preserved paintings, then stepped into the burial chamber, where there was a large,



though empty, stone sarcophagus. Like most of the other tombs, everything of value had been stolen from this one, despite the presence of guards. Past the burial chamber was a narrow corridor that was flanked by three side chambers, all of which were decorated. I was really thrilled to be in this very special place: a real Egyptian tomb with all its superb decoration.

As I spent so much time admiring everything and taking photographs, I was one of the last people to emerge from the tomb and join the others in a nearby café. When we were all together once again, Dodi told us a little about the next tomb that we would see: that of Ramesses III (c. 1186–1155 BCE), who had been assassinated in the Harem conspiracy led by his secondary wife Tiye and her eldest son Pentawere. Dodi explained that when workmen began to make a tomb for an earlier pharaoh, Setnakhte, they discovered that a corridor was approaching one of the chambers of an adjacent tomb that belonged to the pharaoh Amenmesse. They therefore stopped working on the tomb. Later the construction was resumed, this time for Ramesses III, by following a different axis. Inside we noticed this change of the corridor's direction. Although several corridors looked quite similar to the previous tomb, with white walls covered in hieroglyphs, the subsequent chambers were full of interesting paintings depicting mortals and gods on boats and, as Dodi had told us, single-, double- and triple-headed snakes that were to be seen here and there.



*The tomb of Ramesses III, Valley of the Kings*

Dodi had left it up to us to decide which tomb we wanted to see next, but as nobody had any idea of which one to choose, he chose the tomb of Ramesses I, the founding pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty, who had died in the 1290s BCE after ruling for just one or two years. Although the decoration in this tomb was minimal, Dodi chose this one because of the fine wall paintings to be seen in the burial chamber. Having made our way through the plain corridors of the tomb, we soon found ourselves in the elaborately decorated burial chamber. Here, against a predominantly blue background, an assortment of gods and humans were depicted. Undoubtedly the reason for the lack of decoration in the rest of the tomb was the haste in which it had been finished.



*The tomb of Ramesses I, Valley of the Kings*

After this visit, most of the group relaxed in the café while a few of us went into Tutankhamun's tomb. Although I was very much aware that almost everything of importance had been removed from this tomb by Howard Carter and his team in 1922, I was not going to leave Egypt until I had seen it with my own eyes! We walked down the unadorned corridors to the room where the stone sarcophagus and simple wall paintings were, and also to the room where the mummified black body of the young



pharaoh lay in a glass case with a thin sheet covering most of his body. I was really thrilled to see this at long last; standing by the body, I felt that I was finally able to say goodbye to somebody whom I had known about for such a long time. Recently I had watched a BBC programme in which the entire body had been scanned and digitally reconstructed. It showed a young man with a fractured right knee and a badly distorted left leg and foot, which explained why he had to walk with a stick; quite a number of the pharaoh's walking sticks had been found in the tomb.



*The tomb of Tutankhamun, Valley of the Kings*

Taking a last glance at these two rooms, I left the tomb and joined the others in the café. As it had turned warm by now, I took off my jumper, draped it over the back of my chair, put my jacket back on again, and drank some water. Shortly afterwards Dodi told us that it was time to leave, and so we gathered our things and started to walk back to where the electric buses would pick us up. However, the inevitable happened: the two unreliable ladies were not to be hurried as they were just settling down to drinking mugs of tea. Dodi finally managed to shift one of them, but the lady with the autism refused to budge. In desperation Dodi left her in the café and walked

with the other lady, whose name I now had discovered was Teresa, towards the exit. When the two of them caught up with us, Dodi said that he would go back and get the other lady, Hazel. Although he was successful this time, Hazel kept well away from him and walked at her own pace. I now began to realize that Teresa had somehow managed to befriend Hazel and was trying her best to help her; when leaving the Grand Egyptian Museum a couple of days previously, I had noticed that the two ladies were deep in conversation.

Passing through a small bazaar where salesmen tried to sell us souvenirs and items of clothing, we got into a couple of the electric buses and were driven back to our coach. However, Rosaleen, who was sitting beside me, suddenly realized that she had lost her scarf and told the driver that it must have fallen out of the bus. He zoomed back and returned by the same route, whereupon it was found caught up around one of the wheels, undamaged.

Back in our coach, we drove to the next attraction in this region: the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh who had reigned between c. 1479–1458 BCE. As Egypt's second woman who ruled in her own right, she was the Great Royal Wife of Pharaoh Thutmose II, and the sixth pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The most glorious of her building projects was this mortuary temple that we were now being brought to see. Located a short distance from where we had been, this masterpiece of ancient architecture, now fully restored, rose above the desert floor and into the cliffs of Deir el-Bahari.



*The Temple of Hatshepsut, near the Valley of the Kings*

When our coach stopped near this huge and very impressive building, we could see its three massive terraces in the distance. At the entrance to the archaeological site, we stopped and listened to what Dodi had to say about this place. The design, he told us, was heavily influenced by the adjacent temple of Mentuhotep II, built six centuries earlier, though the arrangement of the chambers here was wholly unique. The most notable reliefs were to be seen in the porticoes that fronted the main terrace; below, the lowest terrace led to a causeway and the valley temple. The central axis, which normally was reserved for the mortuary complex, was occupied instead by the



sanctuary of the barque of Amun-Re, with the mortuary cult being displaced south (our left) to form the auxiliary axis with the solar cult complex to the north (our right). Separated from the main sanctuary were shrines to Hathor and Anubis, which were on the middle terrace.



*A fresco and a terrace in the Temple of Hatshepsut, near the Valley of the Kings*

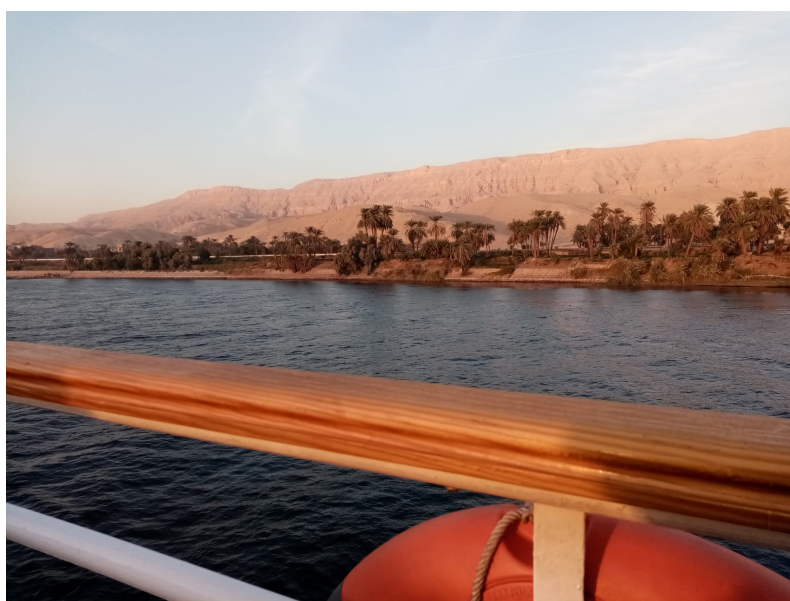
After Dodi had finished telling us about the temple, I walked towards it and had a look at some of the fine frescoes painted on the walls inside the portico on the ground level. I then climbed up the wide staircase to the upper levels, stopping every now and then to admire the fine architecture, the reliefs, and the views from the terraces. At the upper terrace I discovered an entrance to the festival courtyard, and went inside to take a look at it. In the middle was a long queue of people waiting to see the Amun-Re shrine. I wanted to join it but, as I was now running out of time, I turned right and went into the little solar cult court, where I was called over by a man standing beside an entrance to an area that I could not see. Holding my camera to the opaque glass of a door, he took some photos of what looked like a little chapel. Of course he wanted money for doing this, and so I gave him €1.



*The Colossi of Memnon*

I then hurried back and found my companions sitting in a shaded area outside a café. Shortly afterwards we left, travelled back to the coach park in a couple of the electric buses, then started our return journey to our ship. On the way, however, we stopped briefly to photograph the two faceless Colossi of Memnon, both of which had represented the pharaoh Amenhotep III. From here we drove to the centre of a small town named Al-Qurn (Alabaster Village), where we stopped at an alabaster workshop to see how the products were made. The mottled-skinned man who explained everything to us outside the premises spoke excellent English and had a good sense of humour. Colleagues of his sat cross-legged nearby on a long, low platform, demonstrating their skills. Although it was interesting, I sensed correctly what was about to happen next: we were brought inside to admire the products made here and, of course, to purchase some of them as souvenirs. As before, most of what was on offer looked vulgar, and I had no inclination to buy anything. Leaving the showroom, I went outside, where a couple of the workers tried to trick me into taking a couple of small items that were supposed to be ‘free’ gifts, then asking me for money. I sat down nearby and, when the coach door was finally opened, I sat inside and waited for the others to return.

Soon we were on the road again, driving back to our cruise ship. When we reached it, I went to my room, where I freshened myself up, then went to the restaurant and had some lunch. After I had finished eating, I returned to my bedroom to have a much-needed siesta. When I woke about an hour later, I discovered that I no longer had my jumper; I had either left it in the coach or at the café in the Valley of the Kings. As it had been my favourite jumper, I was upset at discovering this. I then sat down to write some of my diary, but stopped at about 4.30 p.m. and went up to the top deck to drink a cup of tea. From here I was able to admire the scenery as the ship had now begun its leisurely journey up the Nile. Like many other people, I was inclined to imagine us sailing *down* the Nile as the river seems to run southwards from the Mediterranean Sea in the northern part of Egypt, but of course the sources of the Nile are located in countries south of Egypt. The Blue Nile begins in Lake Tana in Ethiopia, and the White Nile comes from Lake Victoria, half of which is in Uganda and the other in Tanzania. The Nile is therefore one of just three major rivers that flow from south to north. Although it has been considered to be the longest river in the world, it now appears that the Amazon could be slightly longer.



*The River Nile*

Having relaxed for a while on the deck, I returned to my room and brought my diary up to date. I then had a very welcome shower.

At 7.30 I went up to the third floor for dinner. At the top of the stairs I was stopped by a man with a camera who insisted that I strike up a series of silly poses supposed to resemble ancient Egyptian depictions of people and gods. Although I refused, he finally got his way and took several photographs of me. I was therefore not too surprised to discover that nearly everyone in the restaurant had dressed up in some sort of fancy costume; most of the ladies looked very elegant indeed. I therefore had to apologize for making no effort to put on something exotic. (I had heard of the plan to dress up this evening, but had paid little attention to it.) I sat down to have a good meal, starting with soup, and finished with a selection of sweet treats. This time I washed down the meal with a glass of red wine. While we ate, a group of waiters emerged from the kitchen banging a drum and singing lustily in Arabic. A generous helping of birthday cake was placed on a table nearby, and the singers eventually sang the Happy Birthday song in English.

As I now felt so tired, slightly dizzy and lacking any interest in partying, I excused myself after I had finished eating and ran down the stairs in order to avoid the man with the camera. Back in my bedroom I sat down and finished writing my diary, then went to bed at 9.30.

#### Wednesday, 4 December

Once again my alarm clock woke me at 5.30 a.m. After a good night's sleep, I felt more energetic this morning. I had a good breakfast with my companions in the dining room, and once again started the meal with an omelette. By seven o'clock we were ready to visit the Edfu Temple. As many of us were exhausted after the previous day's activities and the party that had followed dinner in the evening, only a small number of people turned up. Mercifully there was no sign of either Hazel or Teresa; we discovered that Hazel was unwell and had decided to stay in her room.

We now left the ship, boarded a bus, and drove to the little town of Edfu on the west bank of the Nile. This rather scruffy little town was full of horses pulling carriages that could carry just two passengers and a driver; I noticed that most of the people in them were Oriental. Dodi told us that this had been the normal mode of transport for tourists in the town until fairly recently. Driving up one of these crowded streets, we suddenly turned into a rather scruffy bus and car park. From here we walked to a row of electronic gates, which opened when we used the tickets that Dodi gave us, then made our way to the temple of the falcon god Horus. As I had only seen photographs of the front of this magnificent temple, I was surprised at how big it was inside and how far back it went. It soon became obvious that this fine complex of buildings had been very well preserved.

Built during the Ptolemaic Kingdom between 237–57 BCE, the size of the temple reflected the relative prosperity of the time. Replacing a smaller temple that had also been dedicated to Horus, the present one initially consisted of a pillared hall, two transverse halls, and a sanctuary surrounded by chapels. The inscriptions that we now saw on the walls inside provided important information on language, myth and religion during the Hellenistic period in Egypt. The temple fell into disuse as a religious monument after the Roman emperor Theodosius I's persecution of pagans and his edict that banned non-Christian worship within the Roman Empire in 391. Although the images and hieroglyphs carved on the walls looked superb, we noticed that most of the people's and gods' faces had been destroyed by Christians.



Over the centuries, the temple became buried to a depth of 12 metres (39 feet) beneath the desert sand and layers of river silt that had been deposited by the Nile, and local people had built homes directly over the area. The temple was finally identified by a French expedition in 1798, and in 1860 a French Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette, began excavating the site.



*Top: the pylon (entrance); bottom: the first courtyard, Temple of Horus, Edfu*

When we stopped at the impressive pylon (entrance), we were told that this was the best preserved temple in the area because of its relatively young age and the fact that it had been buried underground for so long. It seems that the falcon god Horus had been a special deity for the people of Edfu for thousands of years judging by other prehistoric findings nearby; Horus was regarded as a god of the sky who protected the trade routes between Egypt and the rest of Africa. People paid their taxes here in the form of offerings to the god, and were subsequently rewarded with pieces of gold that were thrown from the windows of the pylon. However, the door of the temple was only opened once during the year. The first courtyard inside, which was surrounded on three sides by thirty-two columns with floral capitals, contained an area where animals could be sacrificed to Horus. The next part of the temple contained a large



statue of Horus, who protected this particular area. A roofed hypostyle hall, it was the preserve of the upper echelons of society. Important rooms surrounded the hall, including a library called The House of Life. Unfortunately the papyrus books were now all lost, and the stone carvings of the pagan gods had been defaced by the Romans.

The final part of the temple that we saw was the sanctuary, in which a replica of the barque of Horus is kept (the original is in the Louvre). On special occasions, this barque had been used to carry a statue of Horus that was normally kept in a shrine at the back of the sanctuary.

We had a good look around the place and returned to our coach by about 8.30 a.m. We now drove back to our ship, arriving by nine o'clock, when we were due to set sail to our next destination, Aswan. As it was a fine morning, I went up to the deck, where I joined a couple of ladies who were relaxing in the shade near the very shallow swimming – or rather paddling – pool. I lay down on an adjacent deckchair and relaxed for a while, then read a little more of *Brideshead Revisited*. However, when the sun crept around and it became too hot, the young lady beside me and I moved over to the other side of the deck, where there was shade, and sat down. We soon fell into conversation about travelling and other topics, and time went quickly. At 10.30 we were invited to go to the 'Falafel Station' at the far end of the deck, where we helped ourselves to falafels and fillings, served with tea or coffee, all free of charge. We now sat down at a table with other members of the group to chat, eat our snacks, and sip our drinks.

Afterwards, the young lady and I returned to our original seats, and at one o'clock we had a light lunch on the sun deck, which was very pleasant. I then rested for a short while in my room, then got ready for our afternoon visit to the Temple of Kom Ombo, where our ship had now stopped. All we had to do was leave the ship, clamber up some steps and walk a short distance to the archaeological site. Within a very short time we had arrived at the grounds of the temple. Although some of it was in a rather poor condition, it looked as though it had once been a fine building. Dodi told us that it had been reconstructed during the Ptolemaic dynasty, between 180–47 BCE, though some additions had been made later during the Roman period.



*The Temple of Kom Ombo, near the town of Kom Umbu*

This temple was unique because of its ‘double’ design, meaning that there were two hypostyle (pillared) halls, with rooms and sanctuaries dedicated to two different sets of gods. The southern half of the temple was dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek (the god of fertility and creator of the world), who had been worshipped in Egypt for more than two thousand years before the Greeks arrived. This half was also shared with the goddess Hathor and the god Khonsu. The northern part of the temple was dedicated to the falcon god Haroeris (Horus the Elder), together with Tasenetnofret (the Good Sister) and Panebtawy (Lord of the Two Lands). Because of this, the temple was atypical due to the fact that everything was perfectly symmetrical along its main axis.

In one of the rooms, our attention was drawn to part of a calendar depicted on a wall. The story goes that, during the reign of Djoser of the Third Dynasty in the Old Kingdom, c. 2600 BCE, a star appeared in the night sky when the flood of the Nile extended to Memphis, the old capital. The star subsequently disappeared, then reappeared during the flood one year later. It was decided that this intervening period of 360 days would be divided into three different seasons, and that the seasons would be dedicated to the flooding by the Nile, the planting, and the harvest. These seasons would be four months long, each of which would have three weeks consisting of ten days. The remaining five days were given over to celebrating.

Unfortunately much of the temple had been destroyed by the Nile and earthquakes, then by builders who had used its stones for other projects. Inside, we stopped to look at an image of Cleopatra. When we reached the outer wall of the sanctuary at the very back, Dodi showed us an image (only part of which survived) that depicted medical instruments used for various operations. There was also an image of two women giving birth to babies in a sitting position. The temple, in effect, had been used as a hospital, a school, and a library.



*A stone carving in the Temple of Kom Ombo*

After we had seen everything, Dodi brought most members of the group to a nearby museum to see a display of stuffed crocodiles. As I had no particular desire to see these, I wandered back to the temple to take a photo of one of the carvings, then

headed towards some nearby ruins. Here I found a group of people who had gathered around a large circular wall, which turned out to be the top part of a so-called Nileometer: a deep stone structure used for measuring the depth of the River Nile. As I had seen one of these on a television programme some time previously, I was delighted to see a real one here.



*A Nileometer beside the Temple of Kom Ombo*

I dallied a little while around this area and then, noting the time, I made my way back towards the entrance to meet the group, whom I had seen leaving the museum. With me came Teresa, hobbling on her walking stick. However, as we were not allowed to leave the area through the entrance, we were obliged to go back and use the path that led to the exit, much to Teresa's inconvenience. Here we now saw members of our group leaving the museum; I had obviously thought that the group I had seen earlier was ours! Teresa flopped herself down on a seat and waited until we were all ready to make our way back to our ship. It was supposed to leave at four o'clock, but did not set sail until some time later.

Back in my room I began to write my diary, then went up to the sun deck for some afternoon tea, which I drank while sitting around a table with a group of ladies. Later we were joined by another lady, with whom I chatted, then Dodi appeared. Spreading out his arms, he proclaimed, 'Young people of Ireland – I love you!' Much to his and other people's astonishment, I told him that I had been standing quite close to Pope John Paul II when he had said this in Galway, in September 1979. (As I had been working in the sound department of our national television station, RTÉ, at that time, I had been put in charge of the microphones used by the Pope and others during two of the masses, and had been dressed as a priest in order to blend in with the real priests on the altar.)

We then fell to chatting once again. The lady who had joined us and had sat down beside me started to tell me about a cruise around the world that she had enjoyed, and also about a visit to Norway. While we chatted, it became cooler. To the fore of the ship we could see the sun setting and the sky turning red; above was a crescent moon twisted at a slight angle, with Venus shining brightly above it.

As it now became quite chilly, I went down to my cabin, where I continued to write my diary. As I had time to spare afterwards, I tried to watch something on the television in my room, but could get no sound from it. There were only two English-speaking channels: BBC News and CNN.

At 7.30 I went up to the restaurant for dinner. Today I chose a plate of rice, freshly-cooked turkey and boiled vegetables, and asked for a glass of red wine. This main dish was disappointing as all the food was rather cold, and the meat was tough. I made up for this, however, by selecting several items for dessert. There was plenty of conversation all around me and lots of laughter, though I found much of what was being said difficult to hear. When I left, I stopped to chat to Kate and Angelina, who was now happily reunited with her suitcase; she had returned to the airport at Luxor today and had collected it. As Angelina was from Connemara and spoke Irish fluently, I told her about my attempts to speak the language in Dingle many years previously.

I eventually left the dining room and returned to my bedroom, where I finished writing my diary and went to bed.