

## 4 – FROM ASWAN BACK TO LUXOR

Saturday, 7 December

After an uninterrupted sleep during the night, I woke at eight o'clock and sat down to a good breakfast at 9.30: an orange and some other fruit, breakfast cereal, an omelette with sausage, cooked vegetables and bread, and finally some more sinful little slices of cake. Afterwards I returned to my room to use the bathroom and then joined my companions for this morning's felucca trip along the Nile. I now learned that one of the ladies who had attended yesterday evening's spectacular *son et lumière* show had tripped when stepping into the boat after the show, and had cut the back of her head. The wound had been severe enough for her to be rushed to a nearby hospital for stitches. Amazingly, she was with us now and wanted to go on the felucca trip. As she was still rather unsteady on her feet, I held her hand whenever she needed support while leaving our ship and stepping aboard the small felucca vessel. Boarding small boats here normally involved stepping from a pier on to the boat, then from the side of the boat to the floor via a wooden box that tended to move whenever one stepped on to it.



*A felucca on the River Nile, Aswan*

As it was a pleasant sunny morning, the journey along the Nile around Elephantine Island turned out to be very pleasant indeed, for we were now driven just by the gentle wind and not by a noisy motor. We had a good view of Aswan city centre from the river, and were able to watch other boats, feluccas and ships passing by. I chatted to some people, took photographs, and wandered around the boat. When we turned around and sailed between Elephantine Island and Kitchener's Island, we left the city of Aswan behind and found ourselves in pleasantly rural surroundings.

Later, on our way back, Dodi said a few words to us all and introduced the men on board to us, who entertained us with a song sung in the Nubian language. The rhythm

was belted out on a drum that was held like a tambourine. We were encouraged to join in during the wordless sections. When they finished singing, a cover was removed from a large table in the middle of the boat, and there was a general scramble for locally-made jewellery and other souvenirs. Noticing that one of the men had bought a rather pretty necklace, I searched for one and selected two, both of which cost very little. After I had treated myself to a wooden Ankh cross for just €1, all of us were given simple bracelets, made of wooden beads, which I had seen both men and women wearing.



*Dodi at the fore of the felucca, and singing with the Nubian crewmen, Aswan*

When the trip was over and we returned to the quay, I helped the injured lady back to our ship. In my room once again, I tidied myself up and headed off for the Old Cataract Hotel, where Agatha Christie had famously written her novel *Death on the Nile*. I had now decided to go as I had heard such good reports about the hotel from a group of ladies who had visited it during the previous day. Although we had passed it in our coach and had stopped briefly to look at it, I was unable to find it at first. I knew that it was close to the Coptic Cathedral, but I had forgotten its exact location. I asked a couple of local men who either did not understand me or did not know where the hotel was, but I finally got directions from a lady in a nearby park.

I walked on a little farther, turned to the right, and finally found it. I spoke to a man at the gate, who told me that I would have to go into a small building nearby and buy a ticket. I went into it, paid E£ 1,000 (about €19) and was given a large black ticket.



*The Old Cataract Hotel, Aswan*

Outside again, I stopped to admire the elaborate garden and a vintage car displayed prominently in front of it. Noticing this, the man at the gate approached me and offered to take a photograph of me beside the car. I handed him my phone, and he took several pictures of me standing next to, then sitting in the car. I feared that he would ask me for a tip, but fortunately he did not.

After I had thanked him, I made my way slowly over to the hotel with its dark red walls and white window frames. Before going inside, I removed my sun hat and combed my hair. As expected, the interior looked quite magnificent, though the style of architecture was rather heavy. The main hall looked very Moorish, for there were dull red and white arches everywhere. The décor very much reminded me of the Mosque/Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain. I spoke to a man in an office, who pointed me in the direction of the outdoor eating area and the nearby bar. After a little bit of confusion, during which I discovered that the eating area was reserved for staying guests, I went into the bar and ordered a glass of freshly-squeezed mango juice (E£ 250, about €5, which was covered by the ticket) and sat in the outdoor area belonging to the bar. Here it was delightfully peaceful, for in front of me was a secluded bay full



of expensive-looking boats and yachts; it was as though I had been magically transported from the bustling city to this enchanted spot. Eventually my glass of mango juice arrived; it was deliciously cool. I was just settling down to enjoy this haven of peace when several ladies from our group arrived. They asked me if they could join me, and I told them that they could. They then set about ordering expensive alcoholic drinks to get the best value from their tickets, for some of these exclusive drinks cost a small fortune. A couple of the ladies ordered drinks that totalled a little more than the €19 that they had paid.

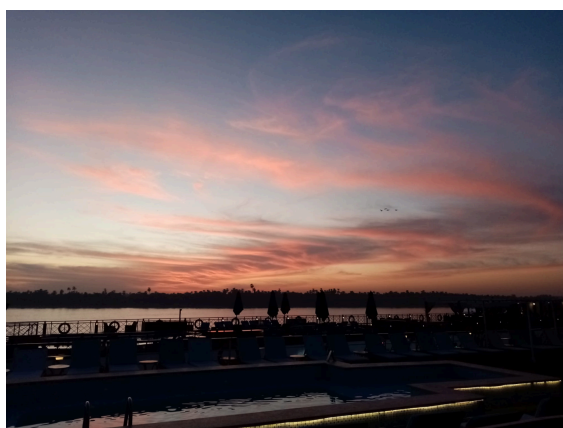


*Inside, and at the back of the Old Cataract Hotel, Aswan*

After a while I left them and went wandering around the entrance lobby and some adjoining areas, taking photographs. I also took the opportunity to make use of the exclusive gents' toilets. I asked a lady if it would be possible for me to see the room in which Agatha Christie wrote her novel, but she told me that it would not; only those who joined a tour at 4 p.m. were allowed into the room and some other areas of the hotel. (I later discovered that the group of ladies who had visited the hotel during the previous day had gone on this four o'clock tour, which had been organized by a man in Dublin who worked for the company.) On my way to the outdoor area once again, I stopped to look at the old lift, which was no longer being used. Back with the ladies, I ordered a pot of camomile tea. As this took rather a long time to appear, I had to drink two cups of it quickly as we had to return to the ship by 1.30 p.m. By now most of the ladies had left, leaving just two of them with me by now. I therefore said goodbye to them and hurried off.

Back at the ship I noticed that a Christmas tree was being set up in the lobby. I went to the restaurant on the floor above and had a light lunch of fish, rice and vegetables, washed down with a glass of Kate's Sakara beer. The ship did not set sail until 2.30 p.m. After the meal I hung a damp pair of washed socks at the back of one of the chairs on the deck, then returned to my room for a much-needed siesta.

I woke shortly after four o'clock and went up to the deck with my copy of *Brideshead Revisited* and sat down to have some afternoon tea with cake, then applied myself to my book, which I read with renewed pleasure. Shortly afterwards the light began to dim and yet another magnificent sunset appeared. I took some photographs of it, wandered over to chat to Melissa and a friend, and later photographed the ship, along with other ships, docking at Kom Ombo.



*Top: sunset over the Nile; bottom: docking at Kom Ombo*

When I eventually left the deck and went downstairs, I stopped to look at some clothing on offer in one of the little shops, and found what looked like men's check scarves. When the man in charge confirmed that they were for men, I selected one and he wound it around my head in the traditional manner. I bought it for €3, for we were expected to dress up for this evening's dinner.



*A little bit of madness*

I then returned to my room, where I wrote my diary until it was time for dinner. I put my scarf around my neck, went up to the restaurant, and once again asked the man to tie the scarf around my head. I then ambled into the restaurant, greeting everyone in Arabic: '*áhlán wa sáhlán*', and sat down at one of the tables. This evening I decided to start my meal with a bowl of soup; although I had no idea of what type of soup it was, it tasted quite good. Next I had a starter of various items taken from the salad section, then filled a plate with chicken, rice and vegetables for my main course. With this I drank a glass of chilled white wine. I finally chose some slices of cake for my dessert. Throughout the meal I chatted to two ladies who were sitting on the other side of the table; one of them had worked in the same television station, RTÉ, where I had worked. She told me about Hilary Mantel's novel about the French Revolution, *A Place of Greater Safety*, which she had read and recommended.

After the meal I said good night to the ladies and returned to my room. I then went out to check at what time we needed to be up on the following morning, and found Kate talking to the manager. She introduced me to him and we expressed our general satisfaction with everything aboard the ship (despite the fact that certain things could have been improved). Later I asked Kate about the following morning's plans but, as she was not sure of the arrangements, I wandered into the noisy bar and asked some of the ladies there. They assured me that the first thing would be breakfast 'at the usual time'. Back in my room I finished writing my diary, with the sound of loud music coming from the bar, and screams of delight from the dancers and onlookers. Fortunately the noise died down later and I managed to fall asleep.

Sunday, 8 December

I slept well, but was woken very early in the morning by the sound of people in an adjoining cabin having showers, opening and shutting doors, then talking in the corridor. Eventually they left and I drifted off to sleep again, though I was woken



again by the call to prayer bellowing from a nearby mosque at 5 a.m. When this had finished, I slept fitfully for another while, then finally got up. After the usual morning ablutions, I sat down to read a little more of *Brideshead Revisited*.

Shortly before nine o'clock I made my way to the restaurant for breakfast, only to be told that the place was about to close! I apologized to the members of the staff, grabbed everything that I wanted to eat, and sat down to gobble up all the food while chatting to one of the ladies.

As we were sailing back to Luxor this morning and as nothing had been planned, I went up to the sun deck and found a deckchair in the shade. Shielded from the strong wind that was blowing, I sat down to read more of *Brideshead Revisited*. It was very pleasant being able to relax and literally watch the world go by. When we passed small towns, I often saw men on tiny flat boats, one paddling and the other either winding or unwinding a fishing line. For most of the journey, however, the river was bordered by trees on both sides, but soon a range of sandy-coloured mountains appeared on the western side of the river. I guessed (correctly, as it turned out) that the Valley of the Kings was nestled between them and that we were heading towards Luxor.

Later, as we approached the city and sailed past an unfinished bridge that spanned the Nile, we found ourselves approaching a second bridge and a lock. As we sailed towards it, lots of boys and teenagers paddled towards our ship and, holding up large sheets of material with rather garish designs on them, shouted to us, 'Hello! Hello! You like to buy this?' Their way of delivering these products to buyers (or potential purchasers) was to throw them up to the top of the ship, sealed in plastic bags so that they did not get dirty or wet if they landed in the paddling pool, or if their customers threw them back into the sea. A few Brazilian girls, who were now travelling on the ship, bought some, though I did not know how they managed to pay for them.



*A ship passing through the lock at Luxor*

Standing now at the stern of our ship, I watched two ships to our left slowly sinking to the lower level in a lock, one after the other. After a long wait, they finally left the lower level and two more ships moved towards the lock. The ships in front of us also moved on, and soon the one directly in front of us moved into position. Finally it was our turn; the ship sank down to the lower level and eventually continued its journey.

We finally docked at the harbour in Luxor at about midday and then, at one o'clock, we went into the dining room for lunch. After the meal I went to my room to rest for a while, though I did not fall asleep. By 2.30 p.m. I was in the lobby, where I waited to pay for the following morning's adventure in a hot-air balloon and also for a tour of two temples in Luxor this afternoon. A man whom we had met previously now appeared with a small electronic device that accepted money from debit cards; several people who had run out of euros, including me, paid by card, even though we knew that we would have to pay an extra 4% in tax. When one of the women calculated that she had been charged 6% tax, she turned on the man and complained vociferously, but to no avail. (I was told later that she used to work as a tax inspector!) However, when we boarded a coach shortly afterwards, she laughed at what had happened.

We now set off in the coach and drove along the familiar rough-and-ready dual carriageway towards Luxor, where we would visit the city's two great temples: Karnak and Luxor. When we arrived in the city centre, we passed the second one and drove for some distance beside the ancient road, the Avenue of Sphinxes, that connected the Luxor temple to the Karnak Temple Complex, about 2.7 kilometres away. As we approached the Karnak Temple, we had to leave the street that ran beside the ancient road in order to approach the temple and its car park.

When we got out of the coach, Dodi gave us entrance tickets and we went inside. When we were all together at the other side of the electronic gates, Dodi set off and we followed him towards the famous temple, mingling with the many tourists who had flocked here. Construction of this vast and impressive mix of temples, pylons and other buildings had begun during the reign of Senruset I (1971–1926 BCE) in the Middle Kingdom (2000–1700 BCE), though most of the buildings dated from the New Kingdom (1570–1069 BCE). What we would see today, the Precinct of Amun-Re, was just one of four main temple enclosures that make up this immense Karnak Temple Complex. This Precinct was dedicated to the principal god of the Theban Triad, Amun, along with his consort Mut and his son Khonsu.



*The First Pylon of the Karnak Temple Complex, Luxor*

The first thing that we saw as we approached the huge complex was the large, though incomplete First Pylon or entrance; the path to this was lined by small stone sphinxes. When we got to the other side of the pylon, Dodi drew our attention to lots of mud bricks piled up against one of the inside walls, which gave a clue as how the high walls had been constructed. Here we made our way through an area consisting of tall columns, the remains of decorated walls, and a small temple built by Ramesses



III. A carving on a wall inside depicted the pharaoh slaughtering captives, watched by the god Amun-Re.



*The Great Hypostyle Hall, Karnak Temple Complex, Luxor*

We then approached the Second Pylon, which was built by Horemheb near the end of his reign (c. 1290 BCE) and only partly decorated by him. When we walked through the entrance, we now found ourselves in the Great Hypostyle Hall. Covering an area of 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> (54,000 sq ft), it contained 134 very tall decorated columns in sixteen rows that once supported a roof; Dodi pointed out that the two middle rows, which were 10 metres (33 ft) in circumference and 24 metres (79 ft) high, were higher than the others. This Great Hall, we were told, was an outstanding example of ancient Egyptian art and architecture. Over the centuries, numerous monarchs had added to the temple's extensive collection of beautiful carvings, each with their own distinct creative style. The columns and walls here were decorated with bas-reliefs that depicted religious events, military conquests, and royal exploits.

From here we emerged from the hall through the reconstructed Third Pylon and found ourselves in a narrow court between this pylon and the following one, where we saw three tall obelisks and a small one. By now the sun was beginning to set and it was getting a little dark. At this point, most of the others went back to the entrance but

I lingered a little and made my way back slowly, stopping here and there to take some photographs. As many of the tourists were leaving, it was now a good opportunity to take some extra pictures. En route I met a couple of our people who were lingering here and there, and suggested that they return to our starting point as soon as possible.



*An obelisk near the Third Pylon, and columns in the Great Hypostyle Hall*

When we were all together once again, we left the site, returned to our coach, and drove to the Luxor Temple close to the east bank of the River Nile. By the time we reached the temple, it was floodlit and looking really spectacular. Unlike the other temples in ancient Thebes (the former name of Luxor), this one was not dedicated to a cult god or a deified version of a pharaoh in death; instead it was dedicated to the rejuvenation of kingship. This may have been where many of the pharaohs had been crowned in reality or conceptually. Parts of the temple had been built by Tutankhamun and Ramesses II during the New Kingdom and, like the Karnak temple, it had been dedicated to Amun, his consort Mut and his son Khonsu. During the Roman era, the temple and its surroundings had been used as a legionary fortress and the home of the Roman government in the area; a chapel originally dedicated to the goddess Mut had been transformed into a Tetrarchy cult chapel, and later into a church.



*The First Pylon, Luxor Temple*

The view of the first pylon, with huge statues and an obelisk in front of it, was quite stunning, now that it was dramatically floodlit. Originally there had been two obelisks; the second one had been removed and placed in the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Beyond the pylon was a large area full of tall columns and a more modern mosque (which looked completely out of place). At the rear of the temple we saw chapels built by Amunhotep III of the 18th Dynasty and Alexander the Great. As in the other temples that we had visited, there were carvings on nearly all the stone surfaces, and there were traces of paint and some later Coptic painting to be seen here and there.



*Columns and statues in Luxor Temple*

As people were now drifting back to our starting point, I kept my eye on Eoghan, who was taking his time looking at various things in the temple. I gently reminded him that we were supposed to be leaving, and kept with him until we came to the square where the other members of our group were waiting. All of sudden, however, Eoghan put on a spurt and began walking in another direction, along the Avenue of Sphinxes, away from our fellow travellers. I followed him, asked him where he was going. When he suddenly realized that he had headed off in the wrong direction, he turned around and I brought him back to the square that we had left, where we joined our companions and were driven off in the coach.

When we had arrived back at our ship, I organized some things in my room as most of us would have to be up early on the following morning, then went to the restaurant at seven o'clock for dinner. This evening we had a set meal that began with



a bowl of soup. The main course was chicken with potatoes and vegetables. I finished with a dessert consisting of chocolate cake, then left for my room and went to bed early.

Monday, 9 December

This morning I was woken by my alarm at 4.15 a.m., and the phone rang fifteen minutes later. I was ready shortly before 5 a.m. and joined a group of my companions and some other people in the ship for the hot-air balloon experience. I had decided to do this simply because I had never been in a hot-air balloon before. A young man introduced himself in not particularly good English and, after giving us some instructions, led us outside to a couple of minibuses. Most of us squeezed into one of them, including me, and three more went to the other little bus.

Off we set in the dark, crossing the Nile; heading westwards, we returned to the area near the mountains and the Valley of the Kings. Eventually we drove into a large parking area that was full of minibuses and people (most of whom seemed to be locals), and finally stopped in a section where we saw more foreign tourists like ourselves. We clambered out and watched as gangs of lads began to inflate the balloons, which had been lying flat on the ground; I had seen these large pieces of material and had wondered what they were for! Bit by bit the balloons began to take shape and slowly rise from the ground. When almost fully inflated, they were attached to large square wicker baskets, into which we climbed. Several lads held the baskets down until everything and everybody was ready, then let go.



Slowly our basket, and the other ones nearby, began to rise into the brightening sky. As we drifted heavenwards, we looked down at the dark landscape and at several

other balloons that had started to rise. Up and up we drifted, and our wicker basket began to rotate so that we were treated to a wonderful panoramic view of the countryside and the mountains beneath us, and also of the Nile in the distance. More and more balloons began to rise, and then we began to descend after a little while. The man who was controlling the balloon with blasts of flaming heat then announced that we were about to see the sun rise. To speed this up, he made the balloon ascend quickly. Looking towards the east, the bright red ball of the sun suddenly appeared over some distant hills beyond the river. Everyone gasped and cameras were pointed in the direction of the sunrise. I switched my phone to video and recorded a couple of short sequences.



*Hot-air balloons, near the Valley of the Kings, with the Nile below*

Once the sun had risen, the orange colour in the sky quickly disappeared and the landscape became illuminated in normal early morning light. Looking down from the balloon, we could now see temples, local people's houses, farms, fields, roads, and canals. At one stage we dipped down very low, then gradually went up again.

After wandering around a little more in the sky, we eventually descended. As there was no knowing where the balloons might land, coaches, cars and other vehicles were driving along rough roads at great speed, trying to keep up with the balloons. We eventually touched down in the middle of nowhere, squatting inside the basket and holding on to the sides, as instructed. All of a sudden, several familiar-looking strong lads appeared and held down the basket so that it could not rise again. We clambered out and watched the hot air being released from the balloon. When there was little or no air left in it, the lads folded it up, squeezing out the last of the air in the process. Soon it became nothing more than a large square of folded material.

Shortly afterwards our coaches arrived and, after some photos and a video had been taken of us all, we got into one of the minibuses and were driven back quickly to our ship. As soon as I had jumped out of the door, I made a dash for my room to use the bathroom and to avoid the photographers who had come back with us. Afterwards I quickly got my luggage together, checked that I had taken everything that belonged to me, and left my bags in the lobby. I then went to the reception desk, where I handed back my key and paid for all the drinks that I had had during the past few days. Our fascinating cruise up the Nile and the return journey had now come to an end.

Once all this had been done, we left the cruiser, walked to a waiting coach, identified our luggage, and finally set off for the last part of the trip: three nights and two days in the seaside town of Hurghada by the Red Sea – a place that I would happily have skipped if it had been possible.

First of all we headed northwards, along the road on the east bank of the Nile, following a canal that ran parallel to the river. Here we passed lots of unfinished and crudely-built dwellings, and saw lots of rubbish thrown into a narrow channel between the road and the houses. When we eventually reached the large and scruffy-looking town of Qena, we turned to the east and headed out into the desert. Although we saw hills now and then, the scenery was spoiled by the presence of electric pylons everywhere. As usual, I sat up at the front with Rosaleen, who would insist on talking to me even though I felt very sleepy by now.

At about midday we stopped to eat our packed lunches, which had been given to us on the ship, in a wayside café. When I pushed a straw into a small carton of apple juice, the liquid squirted out and landed on my trousers. Although they dried quickly in the heat, a noticeable stain was now visible.

When we finished eating, we once again boarded the coach and continued the journey. Although Rosaleen continued to talk, I eventually managed to nod off and she finally fell silent.

Later, when I woke, more mountains began to appear as we approached the Red Sea. When we eventually reached the coast, we turned northwards and headed towards the city and holiday resort of Hurghada. From a distance it did not look particularly inviting. The final part of our holiday was about to start.