

Title:

The Nile Cruise - In the Footsteps of the Pharaohs

Word Count:

2404

Summary:

The quality and romance of Nile cruisers surpasses other riverboats anywhere else in the world. Cruisers offer is a very pleasant and relaxing way to get close to the attractions of antiquity, most of which are not far off from the banks of the river..

Keywords:

egypt tours,egypt safari,ancient egypt

Article Body:

Egypt is where history first emerged. It is here that we have the first pictographic record of events and persons. Hieroglyphics, the system of writing used by ancient Egyptians can be traced back to about 3200 BC. At about 3180 BC, the nations of Upper and Lower Egypt were brought under the rule of a single king titled Pharaoh. The first Pharaoh is thought to have been Menes, who set his capital at Memphis, 22 km south of Giza in today's Cairo. The Pharaohs established the systems that brought forth the highly successful Egyptian civilization.

The history of Ancient Egypt lasted for about 3,000 years. Ancient Egypt declined, was overrun and thereafter ruled by foreign powers. The Greeks and Romans who ruled after the decline were aware of the great similarity between their own gods and those of the Egyptians. They not only tolerated Egyptian religion, but also expanded existing temples and dedicated new ones to existing cults. Some of the new overlords, Alexander the Great for example, styled themselves as divine priest-kings in imitation of the Pharaohs.

Emperor Theodosius, who reigned after Christianity became the state religion in Rome, extinguished the last remnants of the living culture. The Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods - a great offense against the monotheistic religions; whose first article of faith is that there is only one God. Theodosius decreed in AD 391 that all pagan temples in the Roman Empire be closed. The Arabs, who brought Islam to Egypt in 640 AD, also had no time for deities such as Anubis the jackal, Horus the falcon god or even Amon the king of the gods.

Ancient Egypt was dead for one thousand five hundred years, until the French came across the Rosetta Stone in the nineteenth century invasion of Egypt by Napoleon. This priceless discovery was inscribed in both Greek and Egyptian, and it was the key that allowed the deciphering of Hieroglyphics by Jean-Francois Champollion in 1822. The voluminous literature produced by Ancient Egyptians was now accessible to curious scholars. This rekindled great interest in Ancient Egypt in the West that remains undiminished to this day.

Religion is the common theme running through the attractions of ancient Egypt. The diversity of gods found worthy of worship is astounding. There were over 2,000 of them of either sex and they supposedly manifested themselves to earthlings as animals. There were overlaps and the same gods could be known with different names in various parts of the country. There was hardly any part of the life experience that was not assigned a deity- digestion, mummification, sexuality, feasting, childbirth, writing - you name it. Some gods came and went out of fashion, but those connected with basic aspects of life were enduring. Such deities had cults and temples dedicated to them.

The afterlife was taken very seriously, and a lot of the monuments relate to preparation for that glorious time. Mortuary and burial preparation was so elaborate as to ensure a painless and enjoyable afterlife. The custom of mummification, for example, was seen as necessary for the soul needed a physical body to occupy in the other world. There was however great inequality in preparation for eternal life. The Pharaohs and other royals, nobles and key officials were mummified and accompanied by grave goods and great treasure. The common folk who could not afford the full treatment had to do with statuettes of mummies.

The main draw to Egypt is the legacy of the Pharaohs and the Greeks and Romans who ruled after them. Basically this legacy is associated with temples, tombs and burial places. People in Egypt from the earliest times to present have always lived along the River Nile and this is where you find the richest harvest of ancient monuments. As many travelers will testify, the best way to experience classical Egypt is by taking a Nile cruise. The cruise is a very pleasant and relaxing way to get close to the attractions of antiquity, most of which are not far off from the banks of the river. You also get a glimpse of rural Egypt where many eke out a living just as their forbearers did thousands of years ago.

The typical Nile cruiser is really a floating hotel. Amenities on board will include lounges, restaurants, bars, swimming pool, discotheque and shops. The rooms are rather smaller than those of a land based hotels but will have air conditioning, TV and enough room for twin beds, private shower, nightstand and

dresser. The quality of cruisers varies and they are graded with stars just like hotels. Top end cruisers have spacious suites and amenities almost equal to those of ocean cruisers. Generally, the quality and romance of Nile cruisers surpasses other riverboats anywhere else in the world.

Nile cruises normally take three, four or seven nights. You will be able to see the most important and interesting monuments on the shorter and more popular cruises that ply between Luxor and Aswan. The longer sail takes you up to Dendera. The boats sail both downstream and upstream and on the shorter cruises, you can embark at either Aswan or Luxor. The more adventurous travelers or those on a tight budget avoid the luxury cruisers in favour of fellucas- the traditional Nile sailboats. Though amenities onboard fellucas are very basic, those who can survive them, visit all the attractions along the Nile at a fraction of the cost of the cruisers.

At Aswan, the Nile is deep, calm and is at its most glorious. It is a good place to embark on your Nile cruise. Aswan was for long Egypt's southern frontier city and its gateway to Africa. This was the region known as Upper Egypt, being upstream of the Nile. After Aswan, the Nile passes through a section of hard rock, resulting in rapids or cataracts. Thus by nature did Aswan attain its strategic position and it has served as a garrison town for those who have ruled Egypt over the centuries. And for this reason, there are monuments here associated with the Pharaohs, Greeks, Romans, Christian Copts and Islam.

At Aswan, make sure to visit the Philae Temple. Ptolemy II started the temple when the Greeks ruled, and the Romans completed it. It was dedicated to the goddess Isis, an important figure in Egyptian mythology that was worshipped across the Roman Empire. Even after Emperor Theodosius ordered all pagan temples to cease operations, Isis was still being glorified at Philae, until about AD 550 when Emperor Justinian finally shut down the temple. The early Christians converted the temple's hypostyle hall into a chapel. For good measure, they defaced some of the pagan reliefs adorning its walls.

The temple forms an excellent backdrop for the nightly sound-and-light show. The temple was nearly lost after the Aswan High Dam was commissioned in the 1960's. It took UNESCO and the Egyptian government ten years to move it, one stone at a time, to higher ground on Agilka Island. Most people also visit Elephantine Island, which has temples and a museum. The Island has been inhabited since about 3000 BC and was an important trading and cultural centre.

Aswan is home of the Nubians, a dark skinned people, related to the people of the north of the Sudan. You can see some Nubian villages at Elephantine Island. The Nubian museum celebrates Nubian culture right from prehistoric times. Aswan

was once an important centre for Christian Copts. You can see the ruins of the once majestic Monastery of St Simeon, which was destroyed by the conqueror Saladin (Salah ad-Din) in 1173 AD.

Aswan was the source of the granite stone that the Pharaohs favoured for building temples and other monuments. The Northern Quarries are the site of the giant Unfinished Obelisk. Had the obelisk been successfully completed, it would be the single heaviest piece of monolithic stonework -reaching about 42 m and weighing over 1168 tonnes. It must have broken the hearts of the builders, who supposedly abandoned it, after coming across defects in the rock formation.

The next stop on the cruise is Kom Ombo, 48 km to the north of Aswan. The main attraction here is the Graeco-Roman temple. Work on the temple was started by Ptolemy VII in early second century BC and continued by some of his successors. The Romans Emperor Augustus built part of the temple at around 30 BC. The Temple of Kom Ombo actually consists of two separate temples, each with its own entrance, colonnades, hypostyle hall and sanctuary. The southern temple is dedicated to Sobek -the crocodile god, while the northern one honours Horus -the falcon god.

Though the two gods shared the same grounds, in mythology, Sobek was associated with the god Seth, an enemy of Horus. At Kom Ombo, the gods took the liberty to bring along family - Sobek sneaked in his consort Hathor and son Khonsu, while Horus had his wife Tesentnefert and son, Panebtawy. If you have not seen mummies before, be sure to see the mummified crocodiles in the Sobek part of the temple.

At Edfu, you disembark to see the Temple of Horus. Edfu was the cult centre of Horus the falcon god. It is perhaps the best preserved of ancient temples of Egypt. The temple standing today was started by Ptolemy III at about 237 BC on the site of an earlier Pharaonic structure. Work continued under some of the Ptolemies that followed. Appropriately, the entrance adorned by two majestic granite falcons. The walls bear reliefs depicting Horus. One scene would please any tyrant -it shows Ptolemy XII dealing mercilessly with his enemies.

Your next stop and highlight of the cruise is Luxor. The range, magnificence and diversity of the monuments in the Luxor area is unsurpassed in all of Egypt. Known to the Greeks as Thebes, Luxor became the capital of Egypt at around 2040 BC. The city survived the sacking by the Assyrians in the 7th century BC, but steadily declined, and was finally destroyed by the Romans in the first century BC. Among the celebrated monuments dating from Luxor's heydays are the necropolis complexes at the Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens and Tombs of the Nobles. You will also come across some outstanding temples scattered in the region.

The Egyptians buried their dead in the direction of the setting sun and the west bank at Luxor was the final resting place of royalty and high officials. The Valley of Kings is where the rulers of the period historians refer to as the New Kingdom period (BC 1550-1070) awaited the afterlife. The Pharaoh normally picked the spot for his tomb and had it built in his lifetime. Tomb building for royalty and high officials was very serious business and it supported a battery of architects and craftsmen, who had a settlement in the valley. The valley contains over 60 tombs that have so far been excavated.

The tombs have suffered in recent years due to increased number of visitors, pollution and the rising ground water that has come with the Aswan High Dam. For this reason, not all of them are open to the public at any one time. Unless you are a scholar, visiting three or four tombs should be sufficient. Among the best tombs are those of Ramses I, Tuthmosis III and Ramses VI. Tutankhamun's is today the most famous - though he is not considered a significant Pharaoh and he died at only nineteen.

Treasure hunters had over the years looted most tombs in the valley. But Howard Carter, the British archeologist, discovered Tutankhamun's tomb almost intact in 1922. The treasure that was found here is truly amazing- statues, chests, chariots, beds, weapons, and many items he needed for the afterlife. The main item today at Tutankhamun's tomb is his mummy. About 1700 items recovered at the tomb are now at display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The most outstanding of the collection is the 11 kg solid gold death mask. Imagine then, what the looters carried off from the bigger tombs of the more illustrious Pharaohs!

On the other side of the Valley of Kings is the Temple of Deir el-Bahri, built by Queen Hatshepsut. Hatseput. The temple is very impressive from a distance and is a great place to take photos. The name Valley of the Queens is misleading, as both male and female royals and some high officials were interred here. About 80 tombs have been identified, of which the most famous is that of Queen Nefertari. Take more photos at the Colossi of Memnon -two huge statues that are the sole legacy of the temple of Amenhotep III.

Amenhotep III also built the Temple of Luxor on the east bank. The temple was dedicated to the god Amon, though inside you also find a shrine dedicated to Alexander the Great. The temple's entrance is lined with Sphinxes, and inside you find colonnades, courts, obelisks and wall murals. The mosque of Shaykh Yusuf Abu al-Hajjaj was built on top of part of the temple. You can also visit the Luxor Museum, which has interesting exhibits from the area.

The incredibly impressive Temple of Karnak is a huge complex that was dedicated

to the god Amon. In the New Kingdom period, this was the most important temple in Egypt. It is probably the largest religious building ever and it can carry no less than 10 average Christian cathedrals. Some of the interesting structures within the complex are the gigantic hypostyle hall, the Kiosk of Tarhaka, statue of Ramses II, temple of Ramses III and the sacred lake.

The best time to take a Nile cruise is over the cooler months of November - March. These are also the peak months and to avoid crowds, always start out early each day. October, at the end the hot season is tolerable, especially when you factor in that it falls with off-season period: it is cheaper and less crowded. When visiting the monuments, you are advised to hire a guide who will explain the historical context at each site. If you are on a Nile Cruise package, the services of a guide will usually be included.

You do a lot of walking, and you need to bring along suitable shoes. Other items you are encouraged to pack are: sunglasses and sun screen lotion. Remember also to carry bottled water and photographic film, which you can buy at the cruiser or at a bazaar. Light clothing is generally recommended though you may need a sweater and jacket for winter evenings.