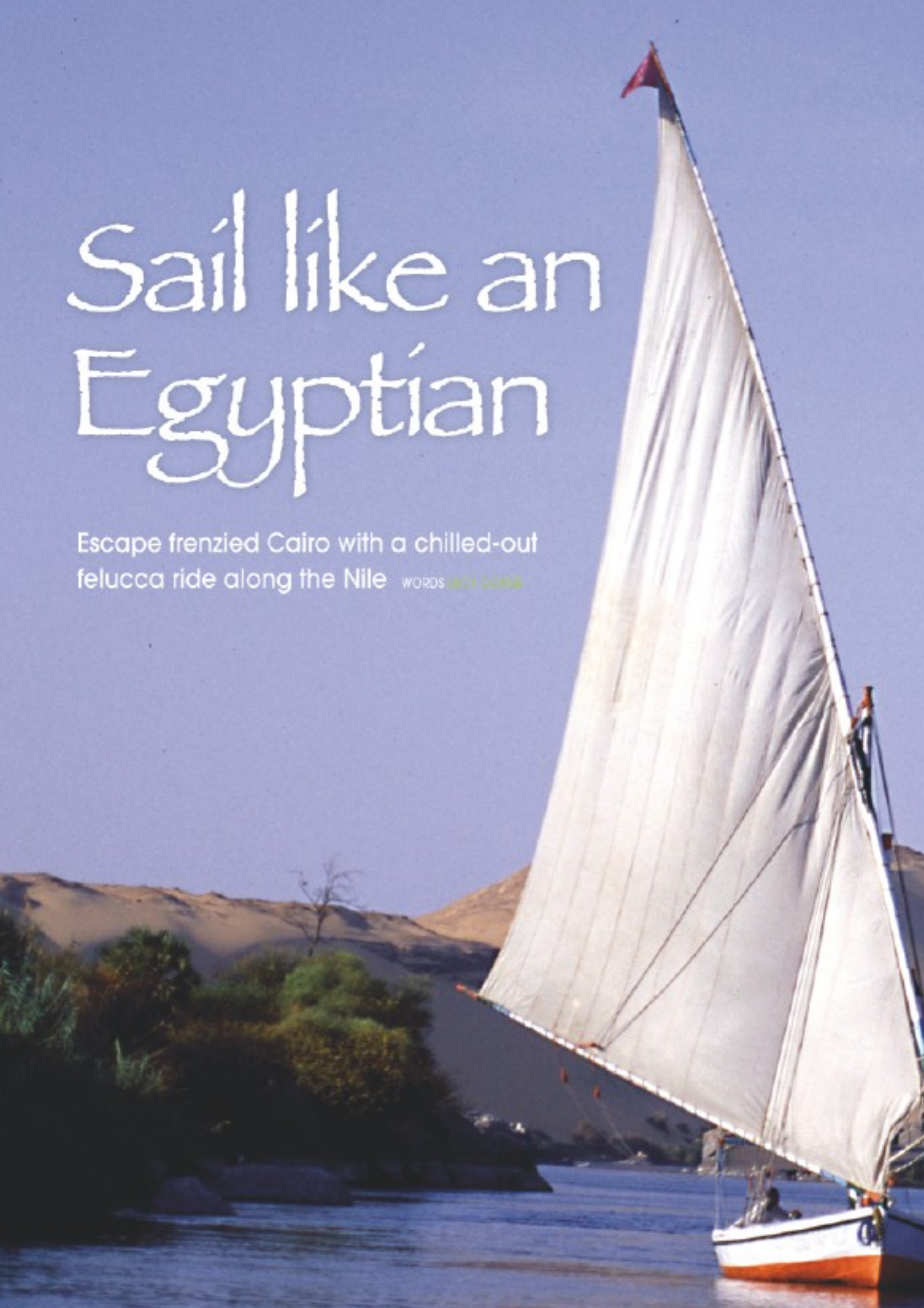


# Sail like an Egyptian

Escape frenzied Cairo with a chilled-out felucca ride along the Nile WORDS [JACK COOPER](#)



As I lie on deck listening to the gentle splashing of the Nile in the moonlight, I realise I need to get some sleep. If I don't rest now I won't have enough energy for a full day of lounging tomorrow and that would be a tragedy. Life on board a felucca is far from taxing.

These flat sailing boats are essentially giant floating beds, their decks almost entirely taken up by thin-yet-comfy mattresses. They sail for a matter of hours or days, depending on the level of stress you seek to alleviate.

This, of course, could well have a direct relationship with how long you've spent in Cairo. The capital has many pluses – exquisite bakeries and superlative shopping; amazing architecture and welcoming residents. But the city is also awash with maniacal drivers and more haggling, honking and hawking than even

the hardest traveller can bear.

Fortunately it only takes a few hours on a felucca to return your tension to pre-Cairo levels. I ponder the day we've had – a midday departure from the southern city of Aswan, an afternoon nap as the Nile gently carried us northward, a surprisingly delicious dinner on board and a couple of cold beers as the sun set over the river. We sleep anchored to the river bank and awake to a typical breakfast of strong, sugary tea and hard-boiled eggs.

#### ROAT MY BOAT

With the pace of the trip set, we settle in for a day of utter relaxation peppered with the occasional brush with local culture.

Our skipper, who calls himself 'Captain Hubbly Bubbly', thanks to his love of the hookah pipe, abandons ship mid-morning to do a little essential shopping for his

passengers. His list is an unusual one featuring just two items – toilet paper and camel meat (the latter perhaps necessitating an increased supply of the former). His replacement appears from nowhere, opts not to introduce himself and promptly embraces felucca life, falling asleep at the back of the boat.

#### DIVE IN

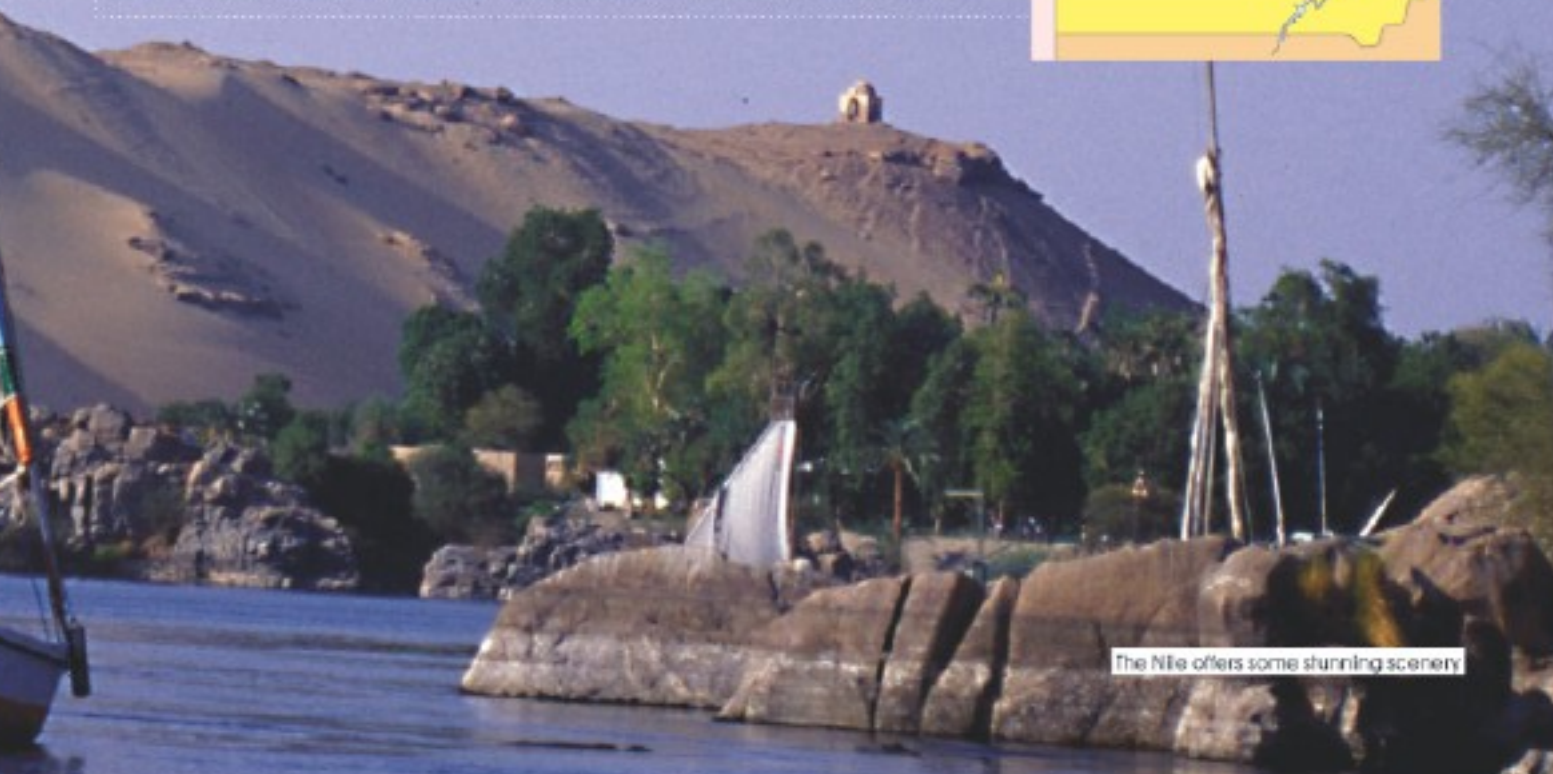
Luckily the ride is not a rough one and we take turns at the helm between naps and sips of Egyptian Stella beer. The river banks pass by, sometimes fringed with palm trees; other sections punctuated with whitewashed houses or the occasional mosque. After lunch we anchor to await the return of Captain Hubbly Bubbly and my eye catches the comical sight of two teenage boys attempting to bathe a cow that is clearly happier out of the water.

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHEN TO GO** Spring and autumn are the best times to visit. The summer months are OK for sun lovers if you stick to the coast, but interior towns such as Aswan can get unbearably hot.

**GETTING THERE** Egypt Air ([egyptair.com](http://egyptair.com)) has return flights from London from £300. Thomson ([thomson.co.uk](http://thomson.co.uk)) has excellent fares to Luxor, Aswan and other locations from £150 return.

**IS IT SAFE?** The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has said that it is still safe to visit Egypt, in spite of violent protests a few weeks ago in which 12 people were killed in Cairo. The violence is being perceived as an isolated incident. The FCO has told tourists to exercise caution if they are travelling on the road between Ras Sudr and Abu Rudels in South Sinai, where Bedouins have been protesting.



The Nile offers some stunning scenery



If only life was like this everyday



Captain Hubbly Bubbly loves it

After a 15-minute struggle to lure the animal into the river they admit defeat, leave the cow to its own devices and go for a swim. They approach our boat and wave to us to jump in. Eyeing the murky water and thinking of all those travel ailments I foolishly read up on before leaving home, I'm hesitant but once my fellow passengers take the plunge I don't want to get left out.

## “We settle in for a day of utter relaxation”

Wading in fully clothed (a swimsuit seems wholly inappropriate in rural Egypt) I'm shocked to find the Nile a pleasant place to swim and we float around until Hubbly Bubbly returns with an armful of loo roll and a bag overflowing with utterly unappetising meat.

### CAMEL ON THE BARBIE

That evening, our second and last on board, we party on the river bank. Barbequed camel turns out to be not only

bearable but actually tasty. To celebrate his culinary success, Captain Hubbly Bubbly breaks out his goblet drum. Along with his introverted crewmate and the skipper of a neighbouring felucca, they put on an impromptu but impressive show of Egyptian music and dance.

I try to enjoy, but I know what's coming next – that heart-sinking, four-word phrase that turns an enjoyable cultural performance into the thing of nightmares: “Now it's your turn!”

Between a dozen of us we fail to find a single song we know more than three lines of and after attempting two Bob Marley tunes and a Queen classic, we settle for a cringe-making rendition of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”.

Hubbly Bubbly rescues us and everyone joins together in a round of “She'll be coming 'round the mountain”, with improvised verses including “She'll be riding my felucca” and, of course, “She'll be smoking hubbly bubbly...” A fine evening caps off a wonderful day and we retreat to our floating mattress.

The next morning as the felucca nears Kom Ombo, home to a stunning riverside



Wow...The Colossi of Memnon

temple and the place where we have to bid farewell to Hubbly and his boat, I feel ready for a bit of a haggle. In fact, if the occasional fling with a felucca is the prescribed antidote to city life, it won't take much persuasion for me to emigrate to Cairo.

**Monumental Egypt** ➡

### NEXT WEEK: MALAWI

Scuba diving and cycling

## DIVING AND DAIQUIRIS

### THE RED SEA RESORT OF DAHAB

Open-air restaurants line the beachfront, where backpackers, sun worshippers and scuba divers congregate to sip cocktails or lassis and munch on the free appetisers each establishment uses to attract diners. The Red Sea laps just metres away, its abundant waters a magnet for divers and snorkelers from around the world.

This is Dahab, an ideal spot for a gentle transition into hectic Egyptian life

– the country's laidback and beautiful answer to Koh Samui. Oceanic pursuits take centre stage in this largely budget resort but those who come to take their PADI course or sample the superlative snorkelling action often end up lingering a lot longer than planned.

There's more to this resort perched on the edge of the

stark and striking Sinai region than diving and daiquiris though. Day trips take in the swirling patterns and iconic rock formations of the Coloured Canyon, while overnight camel treks stop off for a little nomadic culture in a Bedouin camp. And whether you're religious or not, taking the midnight hike to the biblical mountain's 2285m summit in time for a desert sunrise is a must-do.



# MONUMENTAL EGYPT

There are many reasons to visit Egypt – friendly people, fine weather and awesome people among them – but nothing draws in visitors like the array of temples, statues, obelisks and tombs found across the country. After the demonstrations in Egypt earlier this year only a trickle of tourists is visiting, so get there soon to enjoy a little monumental sightseeing without the usual crowds.



## THE PYRAMIDS

**Where?** On the western outskirts of Cairo.

**What?** The Pyramids of Giza need no introduction. However many pictures you've seen, however many tourists you have to share them with, the experience of getting up close with the Great Pyramid is one of travel's magical moments. Get there early to beat the crowds and shun organised tours in favour of a DIY experience, or you might spend half the day in surrounding papyrus factories and perfume outlets. The nearby Sphinx has taken a beating since it was first carved in 2500BC but it's still an awe-inspiring site. Be prepared to get hassled by men encouraging you to take a camel ride.

## THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS

**Where?** Luxor's West Bank

**What?** The Valley of the Kings was the last resting place of many pharaohs, including a few you're bound to have heard of such as Tutankhamun. His tomb isn't the largest or the most spectacular – its fame stems from its late discovery and the fact that the crypt had not been ransacked when it was unearthed. In fact Tut's tomb is pretty humble compared to those around it and if you've seen the sparkling treasures found within (housed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo) you can only imagine the riches plunderers found in the far larger tombs nearby.



## ABU SIMBEL

**Where?** South of Aswan, close to the Sudanese border

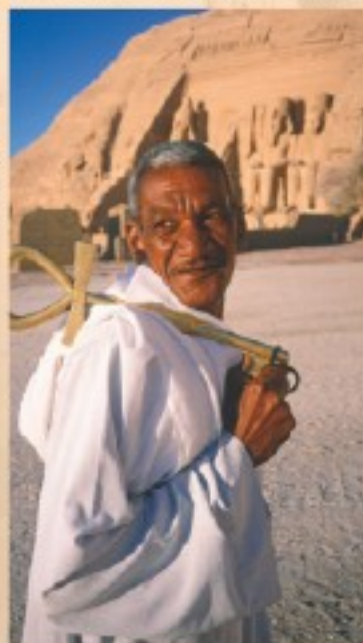
**What?** There's not a monument in Egypt that isn't awe-inspiring, but Abu Simbel simply outshines them all – even, for many, the Pyramids themselves. As if this temple carved out of the hillside and the four 20m high statues of Ramses II weren't impressive enough, the whole immense complex was dismantled and moved in the 1960s to avoid destruction from the rising waters of Lake Nasser.



## LUXOR TEMPLE AND THE TEMPLE OF KARNAK

**Where?** Luxor's city centre

**What?** Sitting squarely in the city centre, the Luxor Temple is one of the country's most accessible. From here follow the Avenue of the Sphinxes northeast towards the Temple of Karnak. The statues peter out after 100m or so, but they once stretched the full 2.7km to magnificent Karnak and a project is underway to restore the avenue. Allow half a day to explore the myriad obelisks and sanctuaries of Karnak, a temple that was altered for more than 1600 years.



## SUBMERGED SIGHTS, ALEXANDRIA

**Where?** Alexandria

**What?** Alexandria is home to a couple of well-known monuments, including Pompey's Pillar and the Kom-ash Saggafa Catacombs, but its real intrigue lies not on land but beneath it. The city has sunk several metres since its architectural heyday so many monuments lie under the Mediterranean. Sub-aquatic sightseeing is gathering pace in the city, with a couple of Scuba companies offering dives to explore old Alexandria. If you're not a diver, you can see some excavated items in the city's museums.