

MAGIC ON THE NILE

STEP ONTO THE STEAM SHIP THAT INSPIRED AGATHA CHRISTIE'S FAMOUS NOVEL AND HEAD DOWN THE NILE: NOTHING YOU HAVE READ OR SEEN COMPARES TO THE REAL THING.
BY PAULINE WEBBER.



For the next five days, you must think of yourselves as princes and princesses." That's what we're told as we step aboard the Steam Ship Sudan. Given it's a boat that belonged to a king, we should be able to adapt ourselves. But why stop at royalty? We seem to have stepped through a magic portal into a glorious past where we can just as easily become an explorer or a great diva, a French novelist or indeed, a dapper Belgian detective from an Agatha Christie novel, exercising his little grey cells.

The ship was built in 1885 for the Egyptian King Fouad and it is a masterpiece of the Belle Époque, with the wood-panelled cabins, timber decks, etched glass, cane furniture and gleaming brass planter pots evocative of the era.

In the first decade of the 20th century, it served Thomas Cook's rapidly

growing number of well-heeled European tourists taking luxury cruises on the Nile and visiting the wonders of ancient Egypt. Agatha Christie, who travelled on the SS Sudan in 1933, was inspired to set her famous novel, *Death on the Nile*, on just such a vessel. You can see the ship in all its glory in the TV version that starred David Suchet as Hercule Poirot, filmed on board in 2004.

The steam ship plies the classic route between Luxor and Aswan, with stops along the way to explore the ancient world of the pharaohs. This trip is up-river, so we board at Luxor and are shown to our cabin, named the Gustave Flaubert. I had hoped for one of the more romantically named cabins – Oum Kalsoum, after the legendary Arab diva, or Alexandre the Great – but I'm reconciled to Gustave as soon as I step inside. The spacious, wood-panelled

room is furnished in grand style, with a big brass bed, marble table, carved chairs and a walk-in wardrobe. The bathroom – all wood, glass, brass and marble, even has a bathtub.

The great temples of Karnak and Luxor and the spectacular Valley of the Kings are all reached from this port, so we are to stay moored here overnight while we make our shore excursions. But first, lunch.

In the dining room – fine linen, sparkling glassware, bone china and a phalanx of elegant waiters – we get a chance to observe our fellow royals. The SS Sudan is owned by French company Voyageurs du Monde and, of the 34 passengers, all but 10 are French. *Pas de problème*: we are to have our own English-speaking guide. The ship will provide one even if there's only one English-speaking passenger and the crew are all at least tri-lingual;

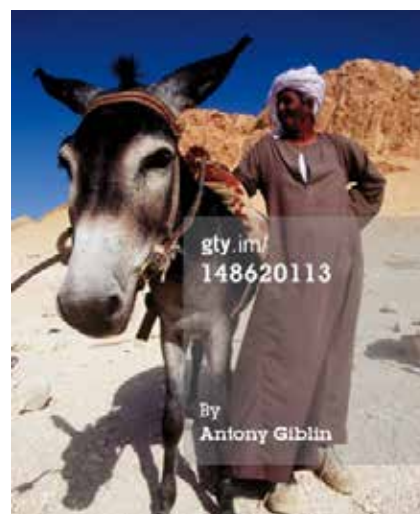
just a small example of the sensational service we enjoy over the course of the cruise. They're not kidding about the princes and princesses.

On day two, we must be up by 5am to reach the Valley of the Kings before the burning desert heat sets in. Luckily, we have a mosque on the river bank right alongside; the call to prayer at 4.30am renders our cabin attendant's gentle knock on the door somewhat redundant.

Cleopatra, Ramses, Nefertiti, Tutankhamun – the world of the pharaohs is familiar to us all from dozens of films, hundreds of books, thousands of websites. But nothing can prepare you for the real thing. Their great age alone would give these monuments grandeur, but they have something else, too: a presence, a sense of spiritual depth. It's a feeling we can savour because,



Time travel: (opposite page) the SS Sudan; (this page, clockwise from top left) the Avenue of Sphinxes at Luxor, Thebes; Deir el-Bahari Temple, Luxor, dating back to the 15th century BC; one of the SS Sudan's Belle Époque-inspired suites; locals at the Valley of the Kings; riverside bliss on a deck of the SS Sudan.



in post-revolutionary Egypt, we are almost alone here.

Where once tourists had to queue to shuffle past these treasures, we can wander at will, pressing our noses up against the wall paintings, lingering in the shade of the great temple columns, listening to the desert wind.

By late morning, we're back on the boat and underway, idling away the hours watching Egypt slip by to the gentle rumbling of the steam engine and the splish, splash of the giant wheel as it churns through the blue water. The Nile really is blue.

Mealtimes roll round with reassuring consistency. With the exception of breakfast (basic French-style bread and condiments), the food is always good, occasionally sublime – a burnt-skin fish and couscous eaten in the soft glow of candlelight is a standout, while a fragrant prawn risotto at lunch has me swooning.

We've soon taken the measure of our fellow passengers: four family groups (we're there during Europe's school-holiday time), honeymooners, Londoners taking a luxury break from busy careers. A couple of entertaining colonial-era throwbacks, whose last holiday may have been an elephant shoot, are taking their second SS Sudan cruise. Alternative shore excursions are arranged for them when they don't feel like revisiting temples and tombs they saw last time – all part of the SS Sudan service.

The days slip by in a haze of fine food, gracious service and beautiful surroundings reminiscent of the great age of travel to which this Scottish-built vessel belongs. We explore the temple complex at Edfu; we drink tea and watch the landscape around us turn from fertile plains to desert as we near Aswan. Feluccas drift by, fishermen row against the current, pushing out and pulling in

their nets. Classically shaped mosques and minarets give way to the rounded mud-brick domes of Nubian churches. Date palms and wild reeds fringe the water. We visit Kom Umbo, a temple from the second century BC dedicated to a crocodile god, and the temple of Isis at Philae. Every building amazes us afresh.

We check out the SS Sudan's engine room, with its steaming cast-metal boilers and heaving piston arms.

On our last day on board, everyone is subdued. We are all a little in love with this fantasy and no one wants to leave it behind. We are going south into the desert and, as we board the felucca taking us on up the river, we take a last look at the SS Sudan, gently at rest and gleaming in the morning sun. For a brief few days, this majestic lady has allowed us to be part of a lost world of leisure and luxury, outside of time and away from the modern world.

TRIP TIPS

When to go

Between October and February, when the weather is cooler.

Where to stay

Spend the nights before and after the cruise at two of Egypt's wonderful colonial-era establishments – the Mena House Hotel, Giza, next door, literally, to the Pyramids, and The Old Cataract Hotel on the Nile at Aswan. In Cairo, the exquisite Le Riad Hotel de Charme is perfectly located in a restored medieval street in the Islamic Quarter.

What to wear

Channel the 1920s and '30s – flowing, comfortable dresses, scarves and wide-brimmed hats for women; a panama for men. Take a warm jacket, cardigan or shawl for the cool winter evenings and sturdy sandals for shore excursions.

More information

steam-ship-sudan.com/en/

away from the modern world. It's an
experience we will never forget

MAGIC ON

What to eat

Essential