

a **STEP** **BEYOND** *the crowds*



Cruising past the colossi of Abu Simbel

Johanna Hopes, Audley's Egypt specialist, explains how to experience more on a trip to Egypt.

Although a relatively short flight from London, the moment you step off the plane in Cairo, you genuinely enter another world. I first visited Egypt as a backpacker and was so hooked that I decided to return there shortly afterwards to study Arabic at Alexandria University for a year.

The problem many independent travellers face when visiting Egypt is the difficulty of combining a cultural and historical tour taking in the major sites, while avoiding the hordes of package tourists and tour groups. An added dilemma is that everyone tends to follow a similar itinerary and one can sometimes feel that it is impossible to see anything of the 'real' Egypt. However, during my time living in Egypt and on subsequent return visits, I picked up some exciting tips and new ways to combine the classic sites with some fascinating and less-known experiences.

I have always thought that a visit to Cairo is key to any trip to Egypt. It does not endear itself to most people, but once you persevere

with the urban sprawl, dusty streets and chaotic driving, you will be rewarded with beautiful mosques, imposing citadels, medieval souqs, unexpected garden oases and great restaurants. We use private guides in Cairo, which is unusual and ensures you have a much better chance to understand and appreciate this amazing city. When I was last there, I returned to the old Christian quarter. The peace and tranquillity of the venerable churches and synagogues in this area never fails to calm me and I hardly spotted any other tourists while I was there.

The heart of the world's greatest concentration of temples and tombs ...

After five days in Cairo, I was ready to leave the city and had a quick flight to Luxor. At the heart of the world's greatest concentration of temples and tombs, Luxor is another essential stop on a tour of Egypt. A Nile cruise is



El Moudira



The Old Cataract

The old world charm (and the old world pace of the service, and time-worn furnishings) of the Old Cataract make it a wonderful place to relax.

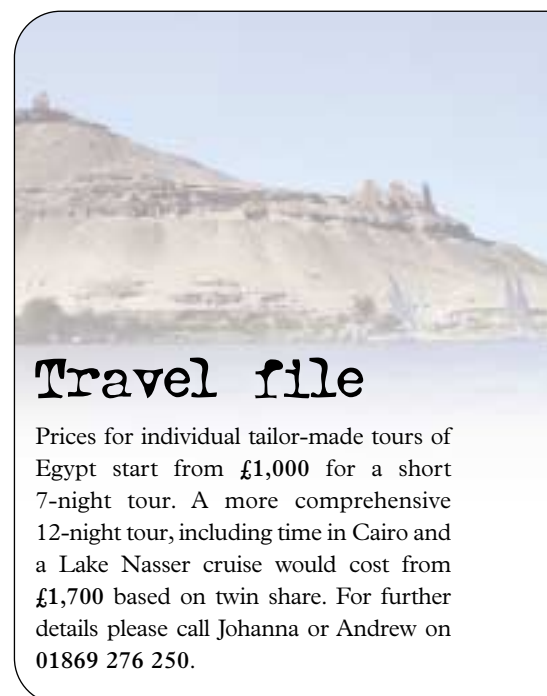
probably the most efficient way of seeing all the major sites, but for those with slightly more time or if you don't fancy the idea of a boat, I would recommend a stay at El Moudira, a small and discreet boutique hotel, located on the West Bank of Luxor. El Moudira is a haven of peace and the rooms are unmistakably Arabesque in design, reflecting the tastes and loves of its Lebanese owner. It's a welcome antidote to the large, characterless international chain hotels which dominate the East Bank at Luxor and where the vast majority of visitors end up staying.

Aswan is my favourite town in Egypt and is definitely the most picturesque, where gold sand spills down blackened rock to the blue waters of the Nile. Life in Aswan proceeds at a slower pace to the rest of Egypt and there's less need to cram excursions into a day. The old world charm (and the old world pace of the service, and time-worn furnishings) of the Old Cataract make it a wonderful place to relax, and a much better way to unwind at the end of

your trip than joining the hordes of package tourists at the Red Sea.

Gold sand spills down blackened rock to the blue waters of the Nile.

There's one thing that I'm still desperate to do next time I'm in Egypt and that's a Lake Nasser cruise (Andrew Hunt is our expert on Lake Nasser - *Editor*). At present there are only seven boats cruising Lake Nasser, compared with over 300 plying their trade on the Nile, so not only do you sail the waters in splendid isolation, but also get to visit some unusual and inaccessible Nubian monuments. The climax of such a cruise is an approach to the towering colossi of Abu Simbel, and it is only this waterborne encounter which really allows you to appreciate the awe-inspiring effect that the temples must have had on early Ancient Egyptian visitors.



Travel file

Prices for individual tailor-made tours of Egypt start from £1,000 for a short 7-night tour. A more comprehensive 12-night tour, including time in Cairo and a Lake Nasser cruise would cost from £1,700 based on twin share. For further details please call Johanna or Andrew on 01869 276 250.