

MYSTERIOUS East



SS Sudan



Agatha Christie wasn't the first novelist to set a murder-mystery in the Middle East: she followed a noble tradition started by Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle. Harry Ring recommends some essential reading for amateur sleuths heading east.

The Middle East has long been a fertile ground for novelists writing tense novels about heinous deeds and dark secrets. The doyenne of this milieu has to be Agatha Christie. *Death on the Nile* was conceived, written and based in Egypt, and this is where all the films versions were shot. We're very lucky at Audley to work with one of the novel's central characters: the vessel on which the action took place, the Steam Ship Sudan. Inspired by a Nile cruise she took with her husband, Christie had Hercule Poirot sleuthing on the decks of this very ship. The Steam Ship Sudan was given as a gift to King Farouk in 1885 and was prominent in the fashionable era of Egyptian travel around the turn of the century. In the middle of the 20th century it was sidelined by the trend towards large, characterless Nile cruisers – hotels on water – and she was derelict until 2000, when two Frenchmen decided to restore her to her former glory. Now once more you can now tread the same gangways and cabins where Poirot sought to uncover the killer of heiress Linnet Ridgeway.

The 1978 screen version of *Death on the Nile* introduced one new character: the Old Cataract Hotel. This is actually closed at the moment for a



The deck, SS Sudan

major refurbishment, something some would argue has been overdue since Agatha Christie's first visit. When it opens again in 2010, it'll bring that fin de siècle charm back to Aswan and reclaim its place as one of the best hotels in Egypt – and in one of the best settings.

What most people don't realise about Agatha Christie is just how much time she spent in the Middle East. This was largely thanks to two men. One was her first husband: when he went off with another woman, she took it very hard. Eventually she took the decision to go to Damascus by train – spending part of the journey on the Orient Express which inspired *Murder on the Orient Express* – and then continued to Baghdad by bus. In Iraq she became hooked on archaeological digs and on a second trip she met her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan. Through him she came to spend large amounts of time in Iraq and Syria, assisting on the digs and writing her novels: a significant amount of her output draws influence, setting and characters from the region.

Agatha Christie wasn't the only author to set novels on the Nile – in fact in some regards she jumped on a bandwagon that had been rolling for

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A slideshow and itinerary idea inspired by the novels



Downtown Cairo

some time. Back at the end of the 19th century, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had penned *The Tragedy of The Korosko*. It relates the tribulations of a group of passengers on a “turtle-bottomed, round-bowed, stern-wheeler” captured by bandits. The route of the Korosko is one of the most rewarding to trace in modern Egypt, even though much of it now lies far below the waters of Lake Nasser. A Lake Nasser cruise showcases the wonderful scenery described in the novel, the “...black and sun-cracked hills, with...orange drift-sand lying like glaciers in their valleys. Everywhere one sees traces of vanished races and submerged civilisations”. This is doubly poignant since the construction of the Aswan Dam caused this valley to be flooded and UNESCO came in to rescue so many of the monuments – including Abu Simbel – and move them to safety on the shores.

The best Middle Eastern writers are increasingly being translated into English. Perhaps one of the most famous is Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. His defining work was *The Cairo Trilogy*, comprising *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire* and *Sugar Street*. I would encourage anyone with an interest in Egypt to read the trilogy, daunting as the large books may seem,

and for this reason I’m not going to say too much about the murder that is key to the transition from *Palace Walk* to *Palace of Desire*. The real joy of the trilogy is the fascinating study of one Cairene family in the turbulent years between the First World War and the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952. The books are named after Cairene streets and, if you take the time to get beneath the skin of modern Cairo, the buildings, monuments, mosques and the city’s personality that are the backdrop to Mahfouz’s work are still there for you to discover.

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FACT FILE

A two week trip to Egypt incorporating either a Nile cruise or a cruise on Lake Nasser starts from £1995 per person including return flights. For details of this or travel to Jordan, Syria and Egypt, please contact our North Africa & Arabia specialists on 01993 838 400.

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