

# COMPASS



**NILE HIGH CLUB**

Newly available for private charter on the Nile is *Set Nefru*, a meticulously restored dahabiya.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FELIX BRÜGGEMANN

New directions in the travel world: the latest news, views and trends

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## QUEEN OF THE NILE

Only a handful of dahabiyas – classic wooden sailing boats – still skip around the fabled waters of southern Egypt. One has made a splashy return to form.

By **Gisela Williams**

It takes three hours to drive from Luxor to Aswan in Egypt, but recently I travelled that same distance on *Set Nefru*, a five-cabin dahabiya – a traditional wooden sailing boat with two sails – and it took almost four days. Gliding along the Nile at such a languorous pace was both restful and rarefied. Originally built almost 90 years ago for a member of the Egyptian royal family, *Set Nefru* has been gloriously reborn. Its new owners spent more than two years restoring the

vessel to its former Art Deco-era glory with vintage French colonial furniture, Limoges china, antique silverware, and the finest Egyptian bed linens. With a staff of 11, no request was denied us. Even Cleopatra might have felt pampered.

A legendary river that gave birth to one of the world's most sophisticated ancient civilisations, the Nile appears not to have changed in at least a millennium. We floated by lush papyrus and palms, mango trees and banana plantations, and fishermen in rowboats splashing the water with spears to scare fish into their nets. "The idea of drifting on the Nile inspires the imagination," noted French designer and hotelier Christian Louboutin, with whom I spoke before my voyage. "It represents a journey of desire and beauty that moves at a different, slower pace, one where you are carried by the river and the wind." For some time now Louboutin has called Egypt his second home: he has owned a dramatic abode of mud bricks designed by Olivier Sednaoui on the West Bank of Luxor since the late '90s, as well as his own dahabiya. Recently, many other creatives have gravitated here, too.

My own adventure in Luxor began at Al Moudira, a palatial resort with manicured gardens and water fountains, also designed by Sednaoui and founded by the perfectionist Italian-Lebanese hotelier Zeina Aboukheir. Two years ago, the German lawyer and entrepreneur Florian Amereller acquired the property and also bought part of *Set Nefru*, which is now available for private charter and can be rented

by hotel guests. The typical journey starts at Esna, a small, dusty city south of Luxor with a remarkable temple. Admiring its towering columns, returned to their original jewel-toned colours, prepares you for exploring the country's enthralling pharaonic past, while walking to the city's small port through its fragrant souks and by mirrored high-rises is a window into modern Egypt.



### FLOW CHART

Clockwise from left: Exterior detail; the convivial deck; the master cabin with its private balcony; salon detail; lunch on a riverbank.



**SOCIAL COLUMNS**  
The pool at Al Moudira, and its courtyard (right). Clockwise from top: Nile views; G&Ts at the ready; Temple of Khnum at Esna.



Soon after the boat departed, a family-style lunch was served on a long table dotted with vases of flowers and arrayed with dishes such as tahini with fresh pita bread, cumin-spiked vegetables, and salads made with ingredients grown along the Nile. (Dinners were more formal affairs – three-course meals masterfully arranged on antique plates; one night the main course was duck confit and another evening it was chicken served atop a bed of freekeh.) After lunch everyone reclined on daybeds scattered on the Persian-carpeted deck, putting down our phones to observe the restorative sights.

The hypnotising sound of the muezzin call to prayer wafted in from a small city surrounded by drowsy palms – no building is higher than the trees – as a gust of wind filled the 12-metre-high sails. We drifted by an island of bulrushes, ibises flitting in and out of nests hidden in the grasses. Often, in the

distance, I could see tombs cut into sandstone cliffs or undulating sand dunes that stretched for miles. At sunset, the sky became suffused with citrus shades, while our thoughtful butler, Elia Eithab Mettry, prepared lime-spiked gin and tonics. That evening, I slept like a baby on a bed dressed with cool cotton sheets in the master cabin lined with vintage books.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of something knocking on the glass doors of my semicircle-shaped balcony. I pulled back the curtains and was greeted by a beautiful black bird, perched on the railing, looking directly at me. If I hadn't managed to take a picture, I would have thought it was a dream. I headed to the elegant salon – with brass lamps, black and white photographs hand-selected by Amereller and wrap-around banquettes with embroidered pillows – where I was served a generous breakfast of fresh fruit and yoghurt, warm flatbread, a fava bean stew called *fūl*, falafel and egg dishes made to order. A staff of three, headed by the talented chef, catered to all our culinary wishes.

Each day there was always at least one excursion. One afternoon the crew docked to set up lunch under the shade of a mimosa tree; another day we visited the dramatic Edfu Temple, built of sandstone blocks between 237 and 57 BC and dedicated to the falcon-headed god Horus. Ahmed Hammam, our knowledgeable and humorous guide, walked us through the sacred site, which over the centuries had been covered by sand. On our last day before arriving at Aswan, we stopped at Gebel el-Silsila, a striking but little-visited temple next to an important ancient sandstone quarry. "This is actually one of my favourite sites on the Nile," Hammam told us. "It's not as dramatic as Edfu Temple, but it's the source of its building materials, and explains how sophisticated the engineering was at the time."

Back on the vessel, I was inspired to go for a quick dip in the river; its current was swifter than I had imagined, its waters cooler and cleaner than I expected. Elia was waiting for me on board with a smile and a soft towel. As I dried off, I noticed that the groups of visitors at Gebel el-Silsila kept glancing at the elegant *Set Nefru*, which stood out among the other larger cruise boats like a glamorous Hollywood actress. I put on my sunglasses and headed for lunch on deck, already planning for my next Nile cruise. ■

