

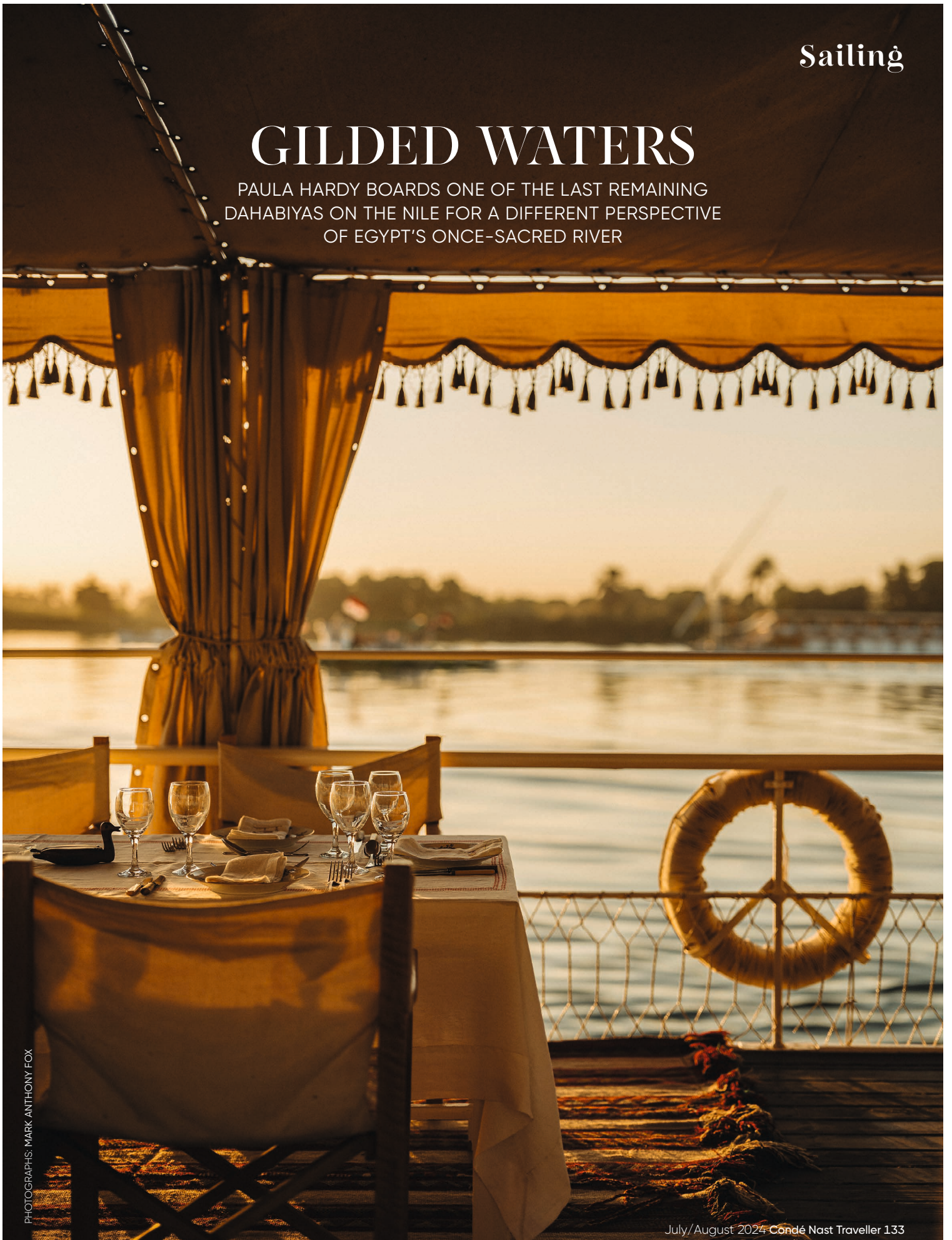


Set Nefru's 12-metre-high sails. Opposite: a dining area on the double-masted houseboat

Sailing

GILDED WATERS

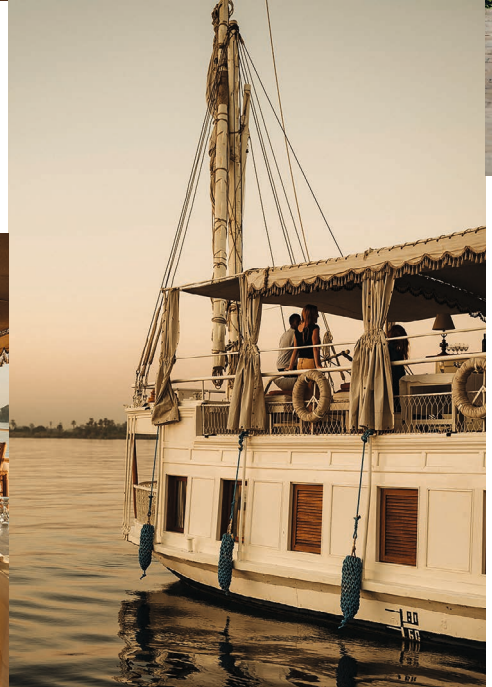
PAULA HARDY BOARDS ONE OF THE LAST REMAINING
DAHABIYAS ON THE NILE FOR A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE
OF EGYPT'S ONCE-SACRED RIVER



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK ANTHONY FOX



The 100-year-old Set Nefru dahabiya adrift on the Nile. *Opposite:* Al Moudira's courtyard; a luxury suite in the hotel; its main pool



Sailing



A BLUE TUG DRAWS OUR VINTAGE DAHABIYA OUT into the prevailing wind and our captain unfurls its distinctive 12-metre-high sails. As the fabric billows, the tug sets the double-masted houseboat adrift. The water slaps against the hull and frogs croak in chorus. As the sun sets, the Nile turns to liquid gold, reflecting pink plaques of drifting cloud; originally, the boat, too, would have been covered in gilding – dahab means gold in Arabic. We glide by papyrus islands sheltering yellow-footed cattle egrets and black moorhens, where water buffalo wallow and farmers tend groves of mangoes and fields of sugarcane. The sky turns vermilion then lilac then deepest indigo behind palm trees whose gently swaying fronds look like the raised arms of temple supplicants.

Like a carriage on the Orient Express, the 100-year-old *Set Nefru* is exquisitely crafted. There are fewer than five of these beauties left on the Nile and all the others are privately owned, one by Parisian shoe designer Christian Louboutin. *Set Nefru* is the recent acquisition of Al Moudira, a hotel-home filled with Middle Eastern antiques tucked away from the mayhem of the major monuments on Luxor's rural west bank. It is a worthy caravanserai for the "great Nile road", where a cosmopolitan crowd of travellers can find respite on their journey south.

Designed by Egyptian architect Olivier Sednaoui, in collaboration with hotel owner Zeina Aboukhier, Al Moudira's fanciful arrangement of airy domed rooms around a labyrinth of discreet patios, where fountains sing and the scent of jasmine hangs heavy in the evening, earned it a place in the exclusive Relais & Chateaux club last year, making Al Moudira the first Relais member hotel in Egypt. A serendipitous extra, *Set Nefru* can be hired for bespoke three- to five-day cruises all the way to Aswan. On a conventional cruise, you're stuck with rigid schedules and potluck companions, but sleeping just eight to 10 people (there's one bunk room), *Set Nefru* is perfect for family and friends who want to go their own way.

The vessel has an elongated dagger prow and a top deck furnished in extravagant style with cushioned day beds, kilims, rattan sunloungers, a linen-dressed dining table and a miniature bar that serves up gin and tonics, fine French wine and an endless supply of watermelon smoothies. Likewise, our period cabins are utterly charming, painted glossy antique

ivory and kitted out with box beds, brass lanterns, piles of books and smoky mirrors that offer the ultimate romantic filter.

The large master cabin at the stern has a semi-circular balcony from where you can almost touch the water and, with the run of the boat, everyone can gather in this usually exclusive space for coffee, card games or bird watching. We set sail from Esna after a tour of the frescoed Temple of Khnum and the vibrant local souq. The next morning, a fisherman rows up offering buckets of still-flopping tilapia. Each day there's a new adventure: a Ptolemaic temple to explore, a visit to El Kab, Egypt's first capital, or the sandstone quarries of Gebel Silsila, where the stone for the pyramids was cut by 13,000 masons. Afternoons are spent in riverine islands, swimming in the fast cool current of the Nile. This is the Egypt I've longed to see: wild, unfiltered and far from the tour buses.

I can't pretend to remember the soap opera cast of the Egyptian pantheon that Ahmed Hammam, *Set Nefru's* learned guide, introduces us to, but he knows how to tell a story and turns history into something vivid. The conversation ranges over astrology (his latest field of study), religion, bread baking and hieroglyphs, deftly knitting the past and the present so we understand that history itself is like a river.

On shore at Al Moudira, I'd sat in the dappled shade of the hotel's glorious two-hectare palm grove with Lakvush, the hotel's yoga master, being coached in pranayama, a practice believed to improve longevity. Each evening on deck, I remember to still myself and breathe deeply – my prana now more mindful of the fleeting moment I have in this historical river drama.

On the last day, I find myself standing at the prow with our captain, Najdi Memdouh, as he guides his crew with deft hand signals. I ask him about the hardest part of being a captain. "Slowing down," he says. "This cruise is about quietness and you have to adapt to the boat but stay aware of the changing environment." He exudes the same otherworldly stillness as Lakvush – as if he has communed with the other side. Even if you don't worship Isis or Osiris, this gilded voyage down the Nile and the perfect tranquillity of Al Moudira have a spiritual dimension you won't forget. **📍** *Al Moudira offers bespoke cruises aboard Set Nefru; moudira.com*