

LEFT Sailing the Nile aboard
a traditional *felucca* near Aswan

Ancient WONDERS

On a cruise down the River Nile, **Sarah Riches** discovers
that Egypt's pharaohs still have the power to amaze

It's 5am – still dark and cool – as boys tug at my elbows, bodies jostle against mine and men shout instructions in Arabic above the roar of flaming gas. This is a rude awakening, not the tranquil hot air balloon ride I'd anticipated.

But the chaos dissipates the moment we drift upwards into the sky – a moment I almost fail to notice as I'm so distracted by the beauty of my surroundings.

As dawn breaks, casting a glow like burning embers over the land, our basket soars 600m above the Valley of the Kings.

Like Egypt itself, this valley to the west of Luxor is bisected by the world's longest river, which shimmers in the early morning sun. But here the Nile isn't the star of the show, as it's fringed by sugar cane and alfalfa fields draped in a veil of mist and ancient temples emerging from a dusty, barren plain.

The pilot, Mohamed Aboud, points to the ruins of a necropolis and a temple cut into the limestone cliffs. "Look," he says. "You can see Medinet Habu and the Temple of Hatshepsut."

My ears pop as flocks of great cormorants fly over farmers' fires, the smoke curling like incense into the sky. I too have a birds' eye view, and I glimpse a horse and cart, clothes drying on the roof of a whitewashed house and motorbikes scurrying along desert tracks like ants.

It's a truly memorable experience, and definitely one of the highlights of my 11-night Pharaohs & Pyramids cruise with Viking, which begins with three days in Cairo.

CAPTIVATING CAIRO

As the world awaits the opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum – which is 11 years overdue – we peruse the existing Egyptian Museum, home to more than 170,000 ancient artefacts. You could spend days here, but to avoid feeling overwhelmed we dip in for just a few hours.

My Egyptologist guide, Yomna Salama, does a good job of focusing on a handful of exhibits, such as a golden sarcophagus and a seven-centimetre statue of Khufu – the pharaoh behind Giza's great pyramid. We also inspect a 20m papyrus scroll – the longest ever found – which depicts

the ancient Egyptian belief in the journey to the afterlife.

"You can see the earliest form of Tupperware too," jokes Yomna, pointing to vessels used to store food. "And did you know the Egyptians also invented camping chairs and taxes?"

Three days is enough to explore Cairo's museums and markets, see the pyramids and have a camel ride. Then we fly south to board the ship at Luxor.

ATON, THE SUN GOD

Named after a sun god, *Viking Aton* is the line's newest ship. With its passenger capacity of only 82 – and just 62 on my trip – I'm soon on first-name terms with many of the guests. There's Paul and his partner Gwyn from South Africa, who graciously allow me to gatecrash their romantic dinners each night; Robert Davidson, a solo traveller who regales me with stories of the 90 countries he's visited; and the family of four from Portland, Oregon, who get on so well that I can't help wondering if they're really related at all.

Viking Aton's Scandi-chic decor reveals the line's Norwegian heritage, with a palette of wolf grey and sky blue that lets the floor-to-ceiling windows take



“I have a 360° panorama of the palm trees that fringe the Nile, and I wave to local children”

centre stage. My cabin, a spacious veranda stateroom, comes with plenty of storage space, and a table that extends all the way to the balcony. Sliding my patio doors open, I pad outside and bask in the sun, the only sounds being squawking birds and waves lapping against the hull. Until, that is, men row up to the ship, tossing pashminas on to my balcony in the hope that I'll buy them.

Once they've rowed away it's tempting to linger, but I'm drawn to the rooftop's rocking chairs and sofas beneath their shady canopy. From here, I have a 360° panorama of the palm trees that fringe the Nile, and I wave to local children on the riverbank.

Mary Jo, a guest from Virginia who's brought her own binoculars, points out a northern lapwing. “You might also see European bee-eaters and Eurasian spoonbills,” she says.

I soon fall into a routine of daily excursions and lunch at the Aquavit

Fast FACTS

82
guests

48
crew

2
restaurants

1
grand piano



FROM LEFT A local's home in a Nubian village near Aswan; hieroglyphics in Dendera temple

Terrace. Some afternoons there are lectures in the lounge bar, on women's rights or Egyptian medicine, before dinner in the main restaurant. After dark, we're entertained by a resident pianist playing jazz, and local drummers and whirling dervishes who spin faster than Olympic figure skaters – making *Viking Aton's* lounge bar perhaps the only place in the world where you can sip Champagne, do the conga and see hieroglyphics depicting circumcision without anaesthetic.

TEMPLES AND TOMBS

Like London's museums or Kyoto's shrines, each temple on the itinerary is unmissable.

In Qena, we visit Dendera temple to see columns adorned with red and blue hieroglyphics. “The red was made from crushed pomegranate, and the blue from ground lapis and turquoise stone mixed with oil,” explains Yomna.

Built around 2500BCE and taller than a three-storey house, it feels special yet we have it to ourselves – thanks to the Romans, who caused smoke damage, and to a professional thief. “In 1821, a French mayor paid the thief to pretend to be an Egyptologist and cut a zodiac out of the ceiling,” explains Yomna. “He left a copy in its place so Egyptians wouldn't notice. The original is now in the Louvre.”

Next, we explore the Valley of the Kings, a royal burial ground

House and hieroglyphics – Sarah Riches



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE *Viking Aton* on the Nile; Sarah dining on *koshari*; Aswan market

pockmarked with more than 60 tombs. With no time to see them all, I make a beeline for one – the one with King Tutankhamun's mummy.

Nearby, the Valley of the Queens is the final resting place of more than 70 high-ranking souls. I'm lucky: I get to see Queen Nefertari's tomb, its walls adorned with hieroglyphics as colourful as contemporary street art, just hours before it is unexpectedly – and indefinitely – closed at midnight for restoration.

THE LAND OF GOLD

After stopping in Esna to see its sunken temple and shop for hand-embroidered *galabeya* gowns at its market, we call at Aswan. This is known as the Land of Gold, and



Ship – Viking Cruises; Sarah and Aswan market – Sarah Riches

while you can buy gold in its souk, the two-kilometre market is mostly lined with shops selling rugs, woven baskets and mounds of spices. It's a heady experience, as the scent of dried lemongrass and mint mingles with *shisha* smoke from hookah pipes.

A trip to the nearby 111m high Aswan Dam is enlightening. “It was built in the 1960s to prevent flooding, create hydropower and store water in Lake Nasser,” explains Yomna. “But it also led to the loss of silt, a natural fertiliser, which has been replaced with chemicals. Seven temples had to be relocated to avoid being flooded and many Nubians – an ethnic minority in Egypt – were displaced.”

The next day, we hop aboard motorboats to visit a Nubian village, West Suhail, spotting buffalo on the banks of the Nile along the way.

We sip hibiscus tea at a local's home – which has a glum-looking crocodile confined to a small enclosure – then visit a school to teach three-year-olds the English numbers one to 10 and learn the Arabic equivalent in return. I sit on a tiny chair next to Malika, who wants to work in a mall when she grows up. The school accepts donations, and I wish I had some notepads or alphabet flashcards to give, too.

The trip comes full circle as we return to Cairo to marvel at the 20 royal mummies in the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation. Dark brown and shrivelled like dates, many still have hair, toenails and teeth

If you've been to Egypt, what was your highlight? Tell us at *World of Cruising* on X, Facebook and Instagram



MY VERDICT

Great for Learning first-hand about ancient Egypt's pharaohs, temples and mummification.

Don't miss The ancient medicine lecture, during which you'll see hieroglyphics depicting cataract removal.

Best spot on the ship The shady rooftop, which you might have to yourself.

Value for money International and domestic flights, daily excursions, Wi-Fi and onboard tips are all included in the fare.

Saving the planet The rooftop has large solar panels and you can refill your water bottle in reception. So remember to take one!

Star rating 5/5

as good as your grandpa's. They may not be a wonder of the world, but I can't help wondering what their lives were like, 3,500 years ago.

Get on board

Viking's 11-night Pharaohs & Pyramids cruise aboard *Viking Aton*, return from Cairo via Luxor, Qena, Esna, Aswan and Edfu, departs on 9 October 2024, from £6,945 including all flights. viking.com