

Footsteps of the pharaohs



PIPE
DREAM:
Jan and
her
shisha

JAN DISLEY is dazzled by
Egypt's monumental past

THE god Osiris, so legend has it, was chopped into 14 pieces by his jealous brother Set, who scattered the remains throughout the land.

Heartbroken wife Isis unearthed 13 of them, but the last, his... ahem, male member, had been cast into the depths of the Nile where it was polished off by a hungry catfish.

As a result you won't find the cursed catfish on many a menu in Egypt.

What is on the menu

though is, culturally, a veritable feast.

This is the land of the mummy, the home of the pharaoh kings. The pyramids and Sphinx may be icons

but the less well-known monuments dazzle too.

We start our trip in Cairo - a cosmopolitan capital where the boats

are lit with gaudy fairground lights and the city bustles.

It's a gentle introduction - a tentative go with a shisha pipe, listening to the evening call to prayer, drifting down river on a dinner cruise as two female singers give us their rendition of Abba's Dancing Queen.

It ends, far more promisingly with one of the country's top belly dancers and a dizzying performance from a whirling dervish - a man who turns on a sixpence, spinning his massive skirt about him.

There are seven of us - nearly half the usual number for a trip

like this - and Sam, our guide and personal Egyptologist.

On day one he drags us out of bed at 4am for not one, but two, flights across the Sahara desert to visit the twin rock temples of Abu Simbel (entrance 80LE).

Even in a land that specialises in the spectacular, these stand out - they were moved at a cost of £26million to prevent them being drowned by Lake Nasser after the building of the Aswan Dam. Discovered by accident by an Italian explorer in the 1800s they are jaw-dropping tributes

to the Pharaoh Ramses and his wife Nefertiti. On just two days a year - Ramses' birthday and his coronation - the sun bursts through the entrance to shine on his stone face in the inner-

most chamber. Needless to say, on February 22 and October 21 you can't move in Abu Simbel.

We constantly run the gauntlet of local traders (never catch anybody's eye unless you really do want a granite paperweight in the shape of a cat) before flying north to Aswan.

Here we hop on a traditional felucca to sail

across the Nile and eat a late lunch at a local restaurant. Local in this case means no alcohol.

After a night at the city's luxury Basma hotel we head to Luxor by minibus and thank God for a driver who knows the roads.

Officially there's a speed limit but nobody seems to take any notice.

We stop off en route at the temples of Kom Ombo (30 LE) and Edfu (50 LE) before reaching Luxor and the temple at Karnak with its grand avenue of sphinx and colonnades.

Luxor is lush and green from the Nile and more geared up for tourists than Aswan - although the sound and light show at

Karnak may prove a tad too Hollywood for some.

Our rooms at the smart Iberotel overlook the Nile and the pool offers views west to the Valley of the Kings.

Archaeologists have already unearthed 63 tombs here and know of at least eight more.

An 80LE ticket gives admission to three and for an extra 100 (about £12) you can stare upon the unveiled face of the boy king Tutankhamun.

Fascinating - but the final resting place of Ramses III is, at 125 metres, far more impressive. Take sturdy shoes and water. In August the temperature can hit a sweltering 56C and even in November it's in the high 20s.

From Luxor we take the sleeper train back to Cairo - 10 hours by rail to see the famous pyramids and the Sphinx.

It's certainly more comfortable than the trek I make later into the small burial chamber in the heart of Pyramid 2 - not for the claustrophobic.

There's a lot to take in so travelling with a specialist operator like Exodus makes a lot of sense. It also feels more safe - despite the X-ray machines and armed guards that proliferate.

In fact the biggest danger seems to be of lugging home a dancing camel. The most useful phrase in Egyptian? "La shukran." It means 'No thank you'.

THE SUN SHINES ON THE STONE FACE OF RAMSES



Time zone: GMT +1hr

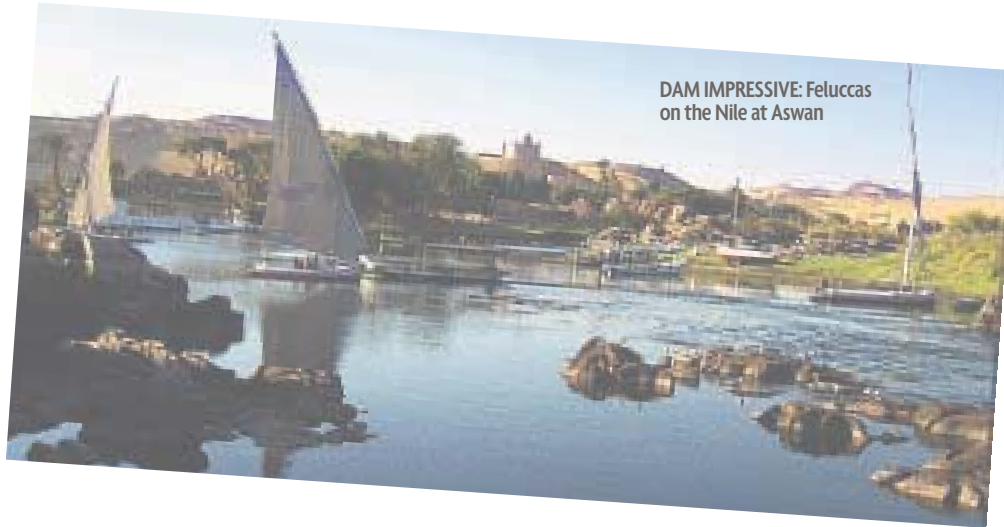
Currency: Pound £1= 7.63LE

Best time to go: Beat the heat in spring or autumn

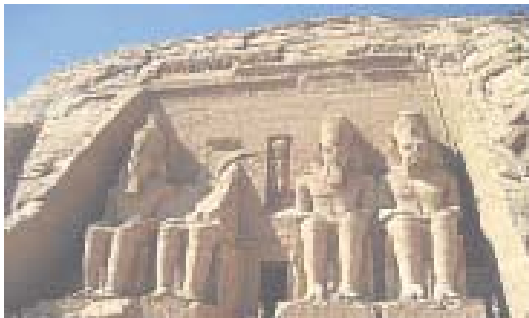
GET THERE

EXODUS, www.exodus.co.uk, offers an eight-day trip including Cairo, Luxor, Aswan, a night on a Nile felucca and two nights on a sleeper train from £849. Highlights include the Valley of the Kings, Karnak and Luxor temples and the Giza Pyramids.

Getting there: bmi offers regular return flights from Heathrow to Cairo from £300. For further information, visit www.flybmi.com.



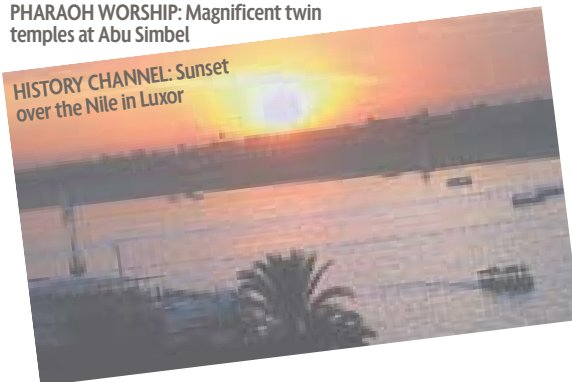
DAM IMPRESSIVE: Feluccas on the Nile at Aswan



PHARAOH WORSHIP: Magnificent twin temples at Abu Simbel



GROOVY CAT: Pyramids and the Sphinx at Giza



HISTORY CHANNEL: Sunset over the Nile in Luxor