



Egypt

Women of the Nile

Egypt can be tricky to navigate for solo female travellers, but this luxury cruise is the ultimate way to go it alone, writes Jenny Hewett

Gentle is the river that gave life to ancient Egypt. Its onyx-like surface is so glossy that I'm sure if I popped my head over the rail I would see my elated reflection. As we glide north to the Upper Egypt city of Aswan, the only stir to the stillness is the wake of our riverboat, the Nile fanning out like a sheet of rippled black satin to meet swollen desert mountains and wildly coiffed date palms. When I next look up a few hours later, the Nile's curves have narrowed. The banks are cinched in close now, their lushness magnified, flickering with reeds and bursts of greenery. Neatly swept homes pass by slowly as cattle feed in ankle-deep marsh.

There are many gods and deities to wrap your head around when visiting Egypt for the first time. Among them is Hapi, the Egyptian god of the Nile. The god is representative of the river's annual flooding and depicted as an androgynous figure with a male head and a female torso to symbolise the fertility of the river.

You can't visit Egypt and ignore the strong feminine themes that underpin the beliefs of this ancient civilisation. It may not have been perfect, but near-equal status and power were anchors of this culture; women in ancient Egypt had the right to rule, divorce, own land and represent themselves in court. Female pharaohs such as Cleopatra, Nefertiti and Hatshepsut are as widely known as their male counterparts.

So it seems fitting that our local tour guide on this luxury four-night cruise from Luxor to Aswan aboard *Sanctuary Nile Adventurer* is a woman. Mervat Salah wears a hijab and oversized sunglasses, and her wealth of knowledge is further uplifted by her

gregarious disposition and sense of humour. And yet she is the sole female tour guide we encounter on our trip.

"In the ancient world, it was accepted for females to rule in Egypt. But now, by law and constitution, the president of Egypt must be a man," Mervat says matter-of-factly. "You see the difference between how women were then and now?"

Throughout our trip, I watch on as Mervat is hassled for her ID when entering sites, queried in Arabic about what she is doing. She is used to it. As one of the few female guides in her industry, her courage and honesty is refreshing. As a 157cm female travelling to Egypt solo, and for the first time, I find comfort in her tenacity. I know many single women who long to travel to Egypt. The one thing they say they are consistently burdened with is whether it's safe to travel alone. This is not, by any

means, an issue specific to Egypt, but I too initially had reservations. It may look different as a backpacker, but if you have the means to do it in guided comfort, then it will end up being one of the most memorable trips of your life.

My 11-day itinerary with Australian-based Africa specialists Bench Africa starts at the mighty pyramids in Cairo and finishes in Aswan, with a four-night cruise

included. At every point along the way, I'm met with a driver and an English-speaking escort who accompanies the driver, and then a guide if relevant to the day's activities.

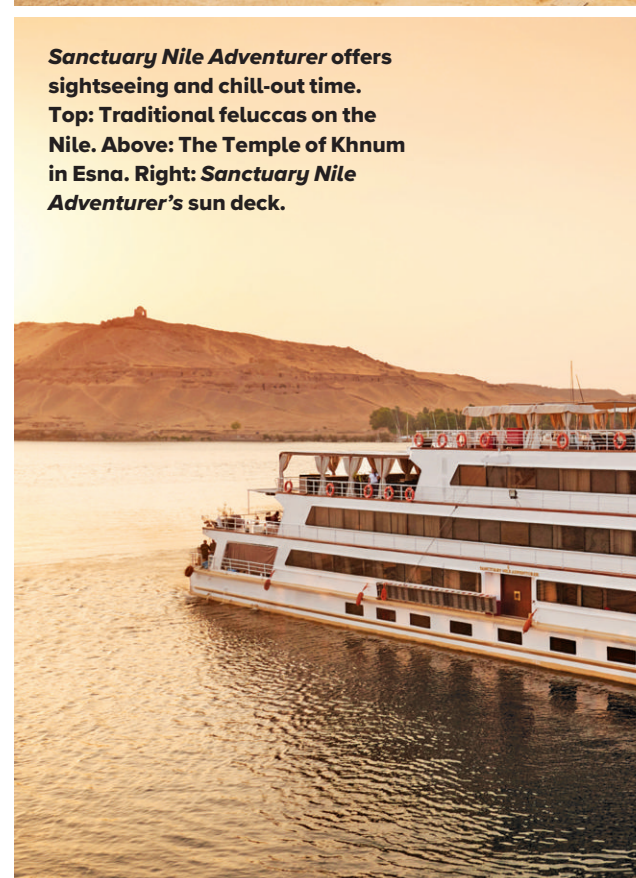
From a tipping point of view, it can get expensive. But the trade-off is that I never once feel uncomfortable or like I'm being hassled. My guard is down, I can sit back and relax, and truly immerse myself in the landscape and the Egyptian people.

Turns out sailing along the Nile is ideal for that. My itinerary is bookended with bucket-list accommodation at two of Egypt's

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***Sanctuary Nile Adventurer* offers sightseeing and chill-out time. Top: Traditional feluccas on the Nile. Above: The Temple of Khnum in Esna. Right: *Sanctuary Nile Adventurer's* sun deck.**





From top: Light show at the Temple of Luxor; the writer at Luxor; crocodile mummies at the Crocodile Museum; Sofitel Legend Old Cataract hotel.



Photography: Jenny Hewett (crocodile mummies)



ESCAPE ROUTE

GETTING THERE

> Emirates flies from Sydney to Cairo with a stop in Dubai, with return fares starting from \$2622. emirates.com/au

> Bench Africa's 11-day Wonders of Ancient Egypt itinerary starts in Cairo and includes a private driver, first-class hotels and a four-night cruise on the Nile. Prices start from \$8075 per person. benchafrika.com

best-known hotels, the Sofitel Winter Palace in Luxor and the Sofitel Legend Old Cataract in Aswan.

On my first night in Luxor, the car arrives to deliver me to the Temple of Luxor for the sound and light show. I get goosebumps as the columns and hieroglyphs are dramatically lit up and narration booms through the site. Even more captivating are the friendly stray dogs that unfurl themselves playfully across the ancient statues like modern deities in motion, totally oblivious to the magnitude of history under their paws.

Though our itinerary is relatively packed with excursions to temples and tombs, we do have time to chill out on the boat. The swimming pool and breezy cabanas on the top deck are a necessity in June when I visit. Temperatures reach the mid-to-high 30s during the day, but the upside is less crowds. Watching the landscape flow by from here puts me in a meditative state, and it's an antidote to the overload of information I'm absorbing. My double cabin is super-comfortable, and the perfect size for one.

Sundowners are routinely taken on the shaded sun deck, with quality meals served in the dining room on the level below. I'm quickly adopted by an Australian group, and whether they like it or not, I'm now a welded-on addition to their holiday.

Outside of meal times on board the ship, my eyes devour every detail. On day two, we dock up on the west bank and make the short walk to the Temple of Khnum in Esna. Khnum was the ram-headed god of creation and his temple dates back to around the third century BC (ie, it's very, very old). Once buried under sand and silt, it lies in a 9m pit. Not a centimetre of space has been spared, with well-preserved carvings scrawled up the soaring columns and on the ceilings – the eye of Horus, scarabs and scenes of divine birth. It nearly moves me to tears.

There are more highlights than seems humanly possible for one trip. But among the many temple visits is something slightly more offbeat. On day three we set off for the Temple of Kom Ombo, a 150BC-era site, half of which is dedicated to Sobek, the crocodile god of fertility, and the other half to Horus, the god of protection. Crocodiles are no longer found in this part of the Nile (they inhabit the river to the south of Aswan), but their significance in ancient Egyptian mythology can be observed in

the nearby Crocodile Museum. The reptiles were sacred to ancient Egyptians and the museum contains 22 mummified crocodiles discovered at a nearby archaeological site, with the largest reaching 4.3m.

We get a closer look at life on the Nile when we reach Aswan and hop on a traditional felucca just before sunset, taking in the poetic rock formations and lively scenes.

Aswan is Mervat's home base, and she kindly invites me to her flat the next day for a traditional Egyptian meal. Sadly, my itinerary doesn't allow for it, so we connect on

Instagram. She's one of three new female friends I have collected on my journey through Egypt. Society may have changed, but the sisterhood of ancient Egypt is as powerful as ever.

The writer flew at her own expense and travelled courtesy of Bench Africa.



Jenny Hewett is a Sydney-based travel writer who despite living in the UAE for nearly seven years, never made it to Egypt, until now. She loves the Middle East and North Africa, particularly Jordan and Morocco.

