

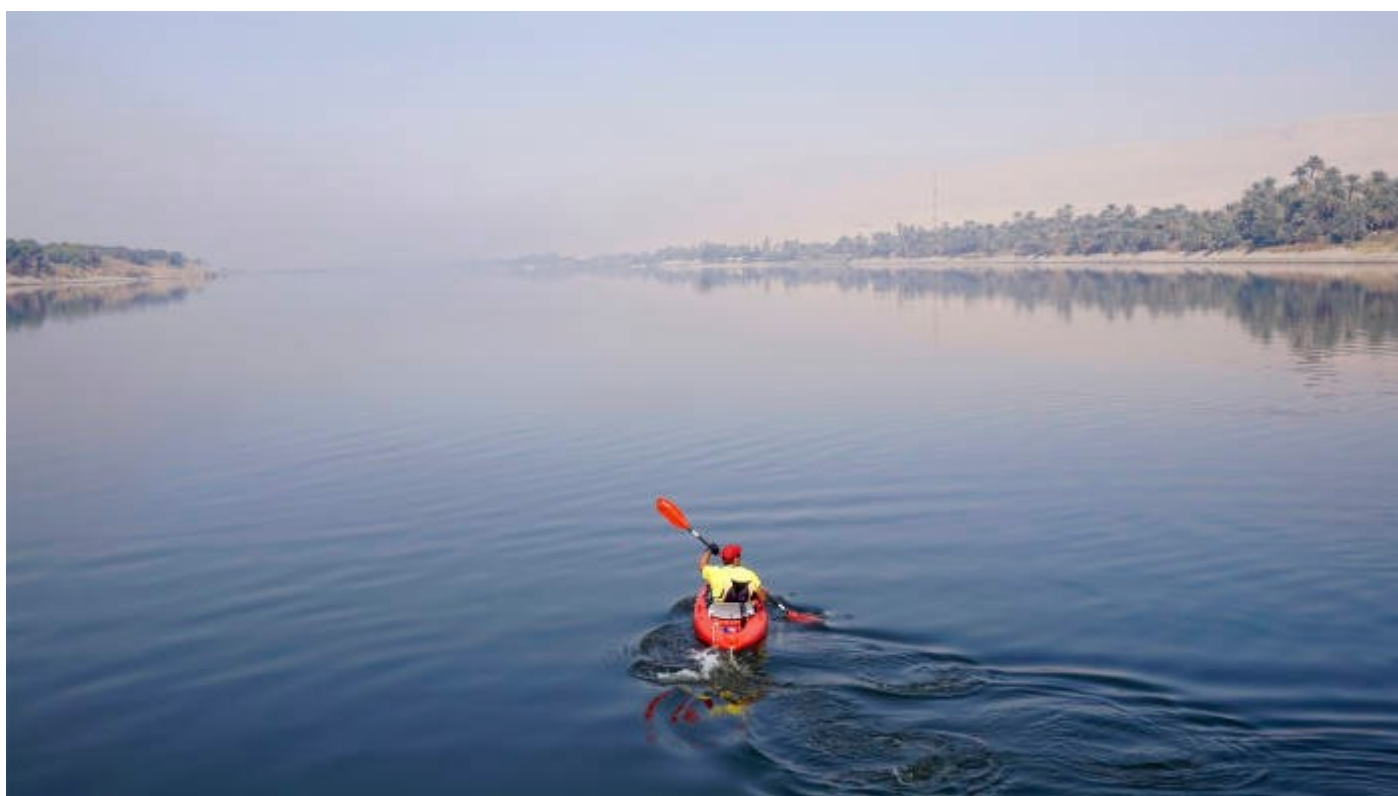
By continuing to use this site you consent to the use of cookies on your device as described in our [cookie policy](#) unless you have disabled them. You can change your [cookie settings](#) at any time but parts of our site will not function correctly without them.

[Sign In](#)[Subscribe](#)

Africa Holidays

Blazing paddles: kayaking on the Nile

A new company is offering a more adventurous alternative to the traditional Nile cruise



Kayaking on the Nile © Ahmed Nayer

FEBRUARY 16, 2017 by: Patrick Scott

Our small troupe of kayakers had just glided down a glossy blue stretch of the Nile in southern Egypt, steered on to a sandy strip of shoreline and climbed up into a grove of mango trees, when we were suddenly confronted by a robed Egyptian.

Wael Basheer, who was leading our impromptu trespassing party, called out in greeting: “*As-salam alaykum!*”

Because kayaks are a rarity in Egypt, Wael and Ahmed Nayer, another of our tour guides, had to explain that we were travellers in plastic boats and that we had stopped to visit this beautiful patch of greenery.

Instantly, we were welcomed. The farmer ushered us past a row of lemon trees to a clearing. He and his workmates gave us a tour of a pen filled with goats and served us glasses of sweet, black tea, while evidently perplexed by our water shoes and neon-coloured tops. Farmhands dragged in stalks of sugar cane from the fields; we peeled back the bark and gnawed on the sweet fibre.

Moments later, after some group photos, we were back on the wide river paddling downstream.

“Come here! Come here!” a crowd of children at a riverbank village cheered in Arabic as we drifted past fishermen in rowing boats and headed towards the opposite shore. A teenage boy dived in and swam out to our kayaks. In the middle of the river, a four-storey cruise boat rumbled by, its wake sending us bobbing in the undulating water.



Feluccas in Aswan © Patrick Scott

People who visit Egypt and take a trip on the Nile typically travel comfortably above the river on tourist ships like these, most often on the 200km stretch of the storeyed waterway between the ancient cities of Aswan and Luxor. We were on that same belt of water, but experiencing life on the river in a way that tourists rarely ever do — as part of an adventure tourism excursion that is new to Egypt and had its inaugural runs last

month.

Six of us — three Americans and three Egyptians — booked the five-day paddle downriver from Aswan to Luxor with the Nile Kayak Club. It was launched in April as Egypt's first kayaking tour company, leading recreational paddles in Cairo, then shifting to the warmer climes of Upper Egypt this winter to offer what are essentially floating camping trips.

We alternated our time on the water between our agreeably stable three-meter-long kayaks and a 15-meter boat that served as our campsite. On the lower deck it had a kitchen with a cook, and two tiny bathrooms with cold showers. On the upper deck we stored our gear, ate our meals, sang ear-piercing karaoke and slept on mats.

Led by Ahmed, and another of the owners, Nouran Ashry, we paddled in the morning, afternoon and evening, usually for some 15-30km, for three to five hours each day. The weather was nearly perfect — in the daytime, anyway — with hardly any wind and temperatures in the low 20s.



And you didn't need to be an extreme athlete. Two of our group, Al Waleed al Shamy and his son Khaled, 16, had kayaked only once before. There were no headwinds, no rapids. We proceeded with the steady current, and sometimes just sat back and went with the flow, like driftwood. In the evening, we weren't exhausted or sore; just famished, and our freshly prepared fish, meats and stews, along with okra and oranges from farms along the way, couldn't have tasted better.

My main worry was getting baked by the sun, so I wrapped myself in scarf and hat, looking like a bandit. I was slightly concerned that five days on the river would be monotonous. And to tell the truth, during the final hour in my kayak I couldn't wait for a night in a Luxor hotel. But the rest of the trip was an endless parade of stunning landscapes and soothing sunsets, of curious scenes and dramatic temples, of rhythmic paddles and bracing swims.

Our journey began in Aswan, where our boat docked next to a Nubian village with brightly coloured domed houses and spice stalls. I had flown from Cairo, where my wife and I moved in 2015, with our oldest daughter Jenna, 28, who was visiting from America. After a briefing over grilled pigeon and a tour of a botanical garden, we burrowed into sleeping bags in the cold air on the upper deck.

In the morning, the crew steadied the kayaks as we climbed off the side of the boat into the open cockpits. The air here is clean, the water is clear and the river is studded with large, smooth boulders called cataracts. They create little whirlpools, and we glided into them, twisting and shifting as if skidding on patches of ice.

What struck me most about the first day was the constantly changing textures of colour and light. At daybreak, the river was still and dark, and the rising white sun seemed to burn a hole into its surface. In the afternoon, the water turned blue and rippled in the slight breeze. And in the evening, it glimmered silver as the fiery sun sank behind a tall stand of reeds. “I kept thinking I was floating in a basket like Moses,” Jenna said later.

That night, we docked at Kom Ombo, the first of several pharaonic temples on our itinerary. We marvelled at the intricate hieroglyphics on the walls and the huge, mummified crocodiles in the museum.



The temple of Kom Ombo near Aswan © Alamy

“You can kayak anywhere, but you can’t kayak anywhere and then go visit a 2,000-year-old temple,” said the other American on our trip, Julie Fischer, a retired embassy officer living in Egypt. “This is mind-blowing.”

The second morning, about 50km north of Aswan, I needed coffee and found Mohamed Fuad, the boat’s mechanic, leaning over the side washing our mugs in the river. Hmm, I thought, rinsing mine in the little sink. Mohamed told me he had been drinking the water of the Nile all of his 64 years. He plunged a glass into the river, held the clear water up to the sunlight and drank it down.

“Maybe it’s the fountain of youth,” Julie said as she passed by.

After breakfast of *fuul* beans, *fitar* bread and white cheese, Ahmed and I set off on a power paddle ahead of the others.

“Egypt is full of opportunities,” he said as we churned along.

He and Nouran and another friend, Charif Khedr — all of them thirtysomething engineers and adventure travel junkies — launched the Nile Kayak Club with seven

boats. They now have 24 — proof of the rising popularity of recreational sports in Egypt. After the uprisings in 2011 and 2013, clubs for running, cycling and triathlons started taking hold, and now rowing, wakeboarding and kayaking are part of the trend.



Waterborne tradesmen who offer tablecloths, towels and shawls to passing boats © Jenna Lee Scott

“We broke a lot of taboos in 2011, so people believed in themselves,” said Charif, who started an Egyptian hiking club that year. “They wanted to do something different.”

Swimming was not part of our programme but one day north of Aswan I couldn’t resist putting on a wetsuit and pulling alongside the kayakers — my fastest 2km ever, 20 minutes, thanks to the current. The ripples in the sandy bottom were visible from several feet above. The water was tinted green below and steely blue on the surface.

The river turns darker and more polluted as you travel north and more factories and settlements appear. What remains constant is the traffic, or the lack of it. On any given day, we’d see six to 10 cruise boats, a dozen rowing boats, a few tugboats and sailboats. Before the uprisings, the river and its monuments were packed with tourists and ships. Nowadays, you move from one sphere of serenity to another.

One afternoon, we drifted silently past the palm trees lining the riverbank watching a

distant mountain range reflected in a grand tableau on the water. Another day, at Gebel el-Silsila, we floated on a flat, empty river towards an ancient temple where it's too shallow for cruise boats to stop. We mostly had the place to ourselves, and Philippe Martinez, a French Egyptologist who was documenting the interior, graciously gave us a tour. The temple is named after Pharaoh Horemheb but there is evidence that it may have been built earlier for Queen Hatshepsut in the 15th century BC, he said. The reliefs, sculptures and hieroglyphics all tell the story of how the gods helped the king control the annual flooding of the Nile. Martinez's team is gaining deeper insight into the origins and purpose of the rock-hewn temple, he explained, "but I'm sure we don't understand it all."



Philippe Martinez gives a tour inside the temple of Pharaoh Horemheb © Patrick Scott

We put ashore on an island about 50km south of Luxor that appears only in winter when the river is low. Our crew set up tables on the beach for a lunch of pasta salad, wedged potatoes and rocket fresh from the fields. A farmhand took one of our kayaks for a spin over to his friends fishing in rowing boats.

The fishermen, we learnt after several encounters, started at 5am, stringing out nets in a circle in the middle of the river before hauling their catch of whitefish to a village market. In the evening, fathers and sons ran their nets along the reedy shore. All the

while, white egrets, herons and smaller black birds fluttered over the shimmering water, whistling and laughing in the wind.

Over the course of the trip, our troupe became a little family. We bonded meditating in a floating row of red kayaks at sunset, telling stories of engagements and marriages over dinner, and haggling with peddlers who tethered their rowing boats to our moving, bigger boat and tossed up towels and tablecloths.



© Ahmed Nayer

The night before we reached Luxor, Al Waleed and I stood at the stern under a dome of stars. “This is perfect,” the entrepreneur told me, going on to explain that during the trip he had his teenage son had become friends as well as parent and child.

In our final moments on the water, our destination, the Ahti Resort Luxor, came into view. The manager and three serenading musicians in pink robes waited on shore to greet us. We had kayaked a total of 115km. None of us fell in the water. All of us were happy.

“Two hundred meters to go, guys!” called Ahmed.

“And then the showers!” Wael shouted back.

Details

The [Nile Kayak Club \(https://nilekayakclub.com/\)](https://nilekayakclub.com/) offers paddling tours for 5,200 Egyptian pounds (£242) per person, including meals and a double room at the Ahti Resort Luxor on the final night. Sleeping bags and tickets to historic sites are not included. The company will offer Aswan-Luxor trips in February and March, and from November to March 2018, including a more luxurious option sleeping on a sailing boat with private cabins. It also offers day tours in Cairo

Photographs: Ahmed Nayer; Patrick Scott; Alamy; Jenna Lee Scott

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.

Latest on Africa Holidays

Africa Holidays

Postcard from . . . Cameroon

Bamoun isn't a tribal theatre for tourists, but a community devoted to its traditions

Africa Holidays

The promised sands: could Madagascar be the new Maldives?

A much-anticipated island resort hopes to pioneer a new type of indulgent but adventurous beach break

Africa Holidays

In search of gorillas in the Ugandan rainforest

A new programme allows visitors to spend hours alongside the animals in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest

Special Report Investing 2.0: Unlocking Yield**Emerging market debt investors brace for ‘Trump slump’**

President’s actions will have knock-on effect for corporate borrowers globally

Special Report Technology & Society**Frankenstein fears hang over AI**

Artificially intelligent systems must not replicate human bias

Latest in Travel**Travel****A new ‘skiers’ airline’ offers a fast-track to the Alps**

PowdAir will operate direct flights to Sion, Switzerland from six UK airports

North America Holidays**Shortcuts: updates from New York and Sydney**

The home rental company expands to holiday properties; Qantas to offer free streaming

Asia & Australia Holidays**A Geographer’s Notebook: the world’s biggest snowfall**

Measuring is a challenge for meteorologists because snow settles, melts and is moved by wind

Follow the topics mentioned in this article

Travel

Egypt

Life & Arts

[Take a tour of myF](#)