

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



THE EVER-CHANGING NEVER-CHANGING

NILE



Imagine being pampered for five days aboard a luxury, triple-decker, pool-topped cruise ship ... riding silently, hour after hour, on the wide, still waters of the Nile ... interrupted only to eat, drink or sightsee ... while the peaceful shoreline slips past in slow motion.

Imagine plots of maize and sugarcane, date and banana palms ... vivid-green against the harsh brown desert. Imagine pencil-thin minarets thrusting high above the treeline in even the smallest village ... and the sound of *muezzin* calling the faithful to prayer.

Imagine boys in leaky boats throwing fishing nets in search of a meal ... women at the water's edge washing robes and pots while their kids splash and squeal ... sun-black men ploughing rich soil with tired, plodding water-buffalos.

Imagine a thousand scenes forever-changing, and yet unchanged in thousands of years. Just imagine ...

This famous old river goes back a long way – into central Africa, winding northward through Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan ... and into



ancient history, when fertile silt washed down in the annual floods kept Egypt from starving.

It's no surprise, therefore, that countless Egyptian deities (I'd already met Osiris, Isis, Seth and Horus in Wilbur Smith's novel, *River God*) were linked to these watery cycles. And it's no surprise that the pharaohs chose the banks of the Nile for their spectacular monuments.

Back in Egypt's days as a British colony, only the nobs could afford a romantic Nile cruise. But today the river seems crammed with boats – from luxury affairs (like ours) to budget wooden feluccas (with broad canvas sails). And every tourist and his dog seem able to hitch a ride.

Our cruise was heading upriver, from Luxor to Aswan. And it was noon when





we were welcomed aboard the 5-star *Nile Romance*. After oohing and aahing and unpacking bags, we washed our sweaty underthings in the shower and hung 'em out the cabin window to dry on the warm Nile breeze.

We then pinched each other to make sure we weren't dreaming, and snuck upstairs to the dining-room. While the crew cast off and steered into the current, we ate lunch (I tasted my very first pomegranate – yum!) and took a vote on what to do next.

It gets hot in these parts (like 40° plus), and my wife opted to spend the afternoon sprawled poolside with her head in *River God*. But I chose instead to explore the first township we moored alongside. I had no sooner disembarked than I was mobbed by scruffy little urchins pleading for money: “Baksheesh?” And I'd barely got rid of them when a tall barefoot kid fell in beside me.

“I know you,” he said, faking recognition. “Where you going?” I tried ignoring him. “Excuse me,” he said. “I just want talk.”

“Well, I'm sorry, but I'm going for a walk – on my own,” I replied, hoping he'd take a hint.

“You want come to my house? For cup of tea? For marijuana? Whisky?” I shook my head firmly. “Okay. I wait here for you,” he said.

“Shukrun (thank you),” I muttered.

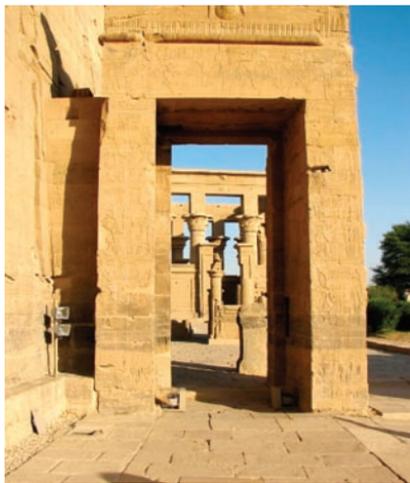
I must've looked like a first-class sucker, in my t-shirt and nerdy “*I'm From New Zealand*” cap, because on the way back to the boat – via a different route! – I was waylaid by another youngster who tried to sell me this huge grey (dead-looking) lizard.

Over dinner that night we compared stories and tried to out-do each other. But I lost to Bruce, an Australian, who confessed that he'd been offered 100 camels for his wife!





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The next few days became a delightful, jumbled blur. More ever-flowing, never-boring river ... more dusty towns (Edfu, Esna, Kom Ombo) and ancient temples (in honour of Khnum the ram-god, Horus the falcon-god, Sobek the

crocodile-god). And the memories kept queuing up, begging to be written about:

The hour we spent watching old-time artisans crafting vases out of polished quartz ... and sampling local sunbread, baked right there, out in the super-hot sun.

The night we let down our hair at the shipboard galabea party ... with yours-truly dressed up as an uncoordinated belly-dancer, and my wife as Queen Never-Ready.

The early evening when, afloat in midstream, we were suddenly surrounded by hawkers in rowboats ... shouting their offers, tossing their wares up on deck, and expertly catching our money (or their rejected goods) while balancing with their oars on the dark water.

The lazy afternoon we spent drifting on the great river in a traditional white-sailed felucca. The sky was blue ... the water was even bluer ... and sandwiched in between was the golden expanse of the Western Desert.

Ahh, yes. That's Egypt for you ... no more, no less.



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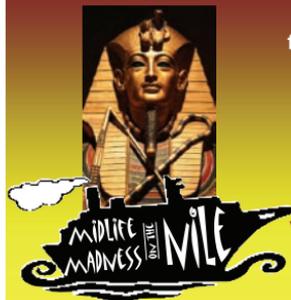
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