



WATER WORLD

On the Nile, architect Tarek Shamma has crafted an extraordinary houseboat that draws upon diverse eras in Egyptian history

Words MARK C. O'FLAHERTY Photography BILLAL BARUK TARIGHT



A sitting area with a Loto sofa by Tarek Shamma and parchment-covered walls. Opposite page: the 50-metre Yalla Nile in full sail



Clockwise from top left: a porthole view into the front master suite; the rear master suite's private balcony; papyrus-and-teak walls adorned with Pharaonic-inspired brass sconces; a reading nook with custom-made Hermès cushions

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hile the pace of life in Cairo and Giza is as frantic as anywhere you could find on the planet, the Nile remains a constant, languorous thread through Egypt. Thousands of tourists cover its length every year, and city dwellers use it as a weekend retreat. Passing through the southern stretch, between Luxor and Aswan, is a reason to visit the country in itself – drifting by palm trees and sunsets in a way that's changed little in over a century, through a landscape that's remained static for much longer. All of this inspired Tarek Shamma to create the shape and interior of Yalla Nile, a 50-metre, two-masted riverboat with six bedrooms – and a timelessly elegant vessel.

Shamma – best known for his work creating highly stylised private and commercial spaces for Christian Louboutin – approached the project as an art director would a film. He wanted the materials and imagery evident on the boat to conjure up moods from diverse eras of Egypt's history. "I wanted the style to be totally Egyptian, but to me that means Pharaonic, Roman, Coptic, Ottoman, Islamic and modern," he explains. "One of my favourite things with any interior is to combine objects in a way that means you don't know what was designed by me and what was old and found. It's like when I designed a folly in Portugal for Christian, which looks like an architectural anomaly and makes you wonder: when was it built?"

A key inspiration for the boat was the landmark museum in the capital city. But not the flashy new Grand Egyptian version; the 19th-century original, with its battered Victorian wooden cabinets. "It's one of my favourite buildings," says Shamma. "I feel like Indiana Jones every time I walk in. Nothing looks out of context. I love patina; for the bar on the boat, I found beautiful old Baccarat crystal and Christofle silver that wasn't too shiny, so that when you are on board, you wonder how long it's all been there."


As well as being a private craft for the owner and his friends, the Yalla Nile was conceived to be a partly commercial cruise ship, with profits from the operation going to two charities: Professor Magdi Yacoub's Chain of Hope Foundation, which treats children from developing and war-torn countries with heart disease, and The Littlest Lamb, a community home for orphaned and at-risk children in Cairo. This is a special, wholly Egyptian project and piece of design. When an individual commissions a boat, the result is often what Shamma dismisses as "a floating mansion in the shape of an iron without any point – placing you so high up above the water, you don't experience any kind of voyage." Shamma's client wanted something boutique and beautiful, so the designer put the guests close to the horizon, with no futurist architectural quirks. "We built it entirely from scratch, because we couldn't find a suitable hull," says Shamma, "but it feels like it's been sailing for years."

The project also represented a homecoming for Shamma. He built his career in London, working with Zaha Hadid and David Chipperfield before founding his own studio. "I didn't think I'd be back in Cairo over 20 years after leaving," he says, "but it presented a nice set of challenges. It's difficult to find the right people here for projects. Everyone talks about Egyptian cotton all the time, but it's actually hard to find because it's all made for export. I worked with a lot of artisans to create a thick 'duck' canvas for sails, and embellished it with details. I had a jacquard created, and a sofa made with the pattern of an old Egyptian rug I particularly liked."

The owner specified six cabins with two suites that are full-beamed, and four comfortable doubles. "It wasn't built with selling rooms in mind," says Shamma. "It was about comfort and experience and creating the right graphics. The bedrooms are at water level, and one of the suites is positioned right at the front, so couldn't have a 180-degree vista. I drew a trompe l'oeil landscape to suggest depth rather than literally depict what is outside, and I had it realised with *khayamiya*, which is an appliqué technique done only by Egyptian men, who traditionally used it to decorate tents. I was telling a story of the flora and fauna of the Nile, while also using it to conceal the cupboards."

Shamma worked antithetically to the design of most existing Nile cruise ships, which customarily have a main sundeck, often too chilly to use in the more popular winter months. "You usually end up with a small sitting room that is uncomfortable," he says. "We created a superdeck with a passage all the way around, an area partially shaded with *mashrabiya* latticework, and a sun deck at the front, decorated with two large parasols, so it feels like you're sitting under a real palm tree. The idea was to have breakfast at the front, dinner at the back." Another essential specified by the owner: a sauna cabin in the middle section. "He has a sauna twice a day," says Shamma, "so it was a must."

Many elements of the designer's past work with Chipperfield's studio were channelled into the Yalla Nile décor. "I have worked a lot with the lighting designer Arnold Chan in the past," he says. "And Arnold said to me once that a hotel is all about drama. Residential space is one thing, but if it's a hotel, or in this case a boat, the user is there for such a small amount of time, there needs to be theatre. It needs a homey feel, but it also needs to be fun."

The Yalla Nile is, ultimately, more cinematic than theatrical, because the connotations of the landscape and a cruise through it are inescapable. "I still wanted that Agatha Christie aspect," says Shamma. "And yes, I always want to watch *Death on the Nile* on a cruise. We have a drop-down screen with a projector in one of the bulkheads. You have to have a movie night."  tarekshamma.com

In the front master suite, a trompe l'oeil tapestry depicting a Nile scene is rendered in the *khayamiya* appliqué technique, and conceals closets. The brass-and-glass lighting and teak-and-alabaster coffee table are by Tarek Shamma

“I DREW A TROMPE L'OEIL landscape to reference the outside and had it realised in KHAYAMIYA, AN APPLIQUE TECHNIQUE done only by Egyptian men”





Tarek Shamma-designed furniture, including satin armchairs and a Karnak table, looks towards the custom bar cabinet at rear left. Opposite page: the sun deck with its rattan loungers

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One of the Yalla Nile's bedrooms, with its teak-and-rattan ceiling and 800-thread-count Egyptian cotton bedding. The brass-and-glass wall sconces are by Tarek Shamma and the rug is a vintage piece