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HOUSE & GARDEN



AN INTERIOR LIFE

Actor RICHARD E GRANT, *photographer* MARTIN PARR,
chef SALLY CLARKE & *Brora founder* VICTORIA STAPLETON

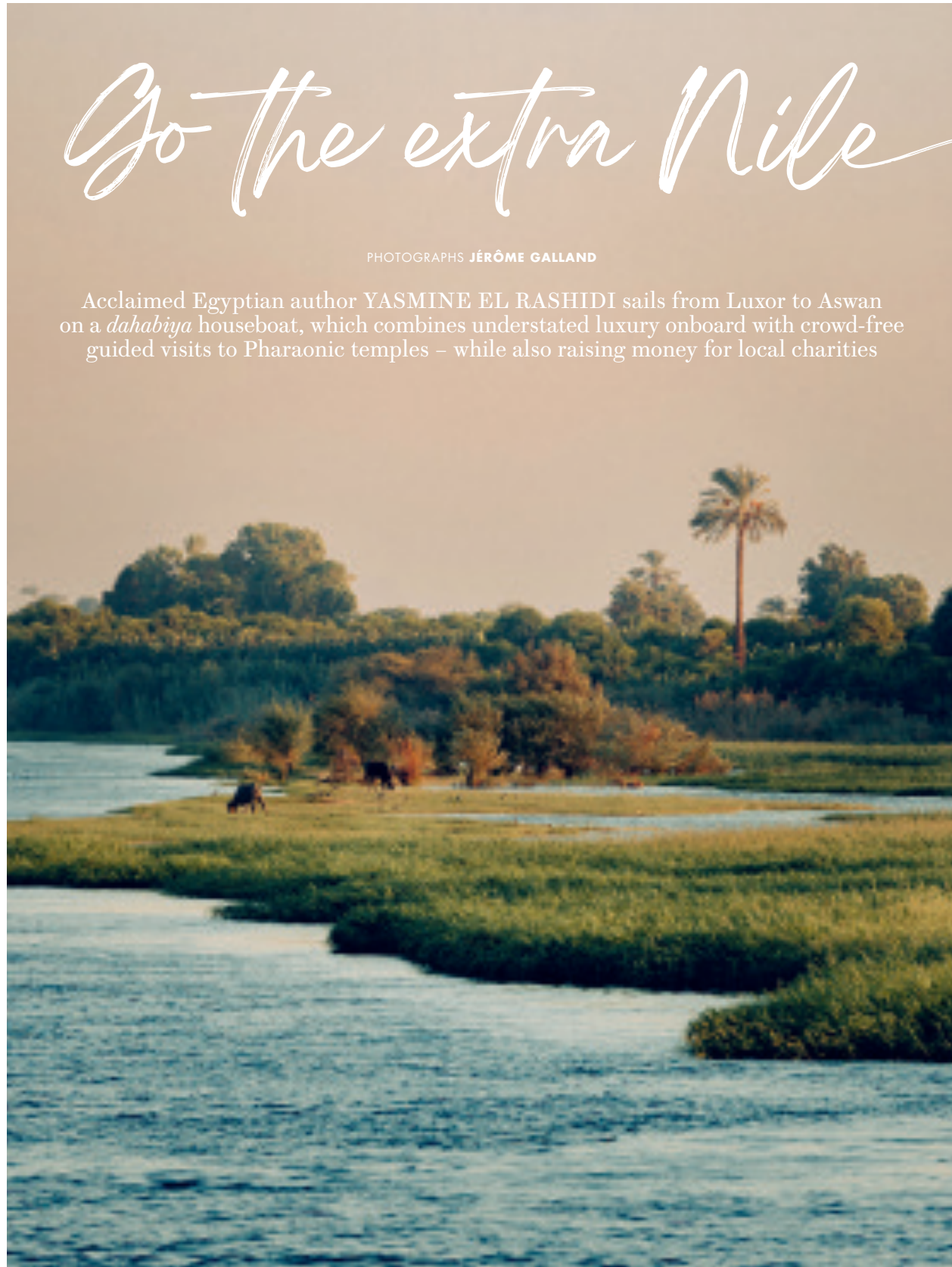


HOUSE & GARDEN

travel guide

EGYPT | TUSCANY | RAJASTHAN | SARDINIA
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EDITED BY ARTA GHANBARI

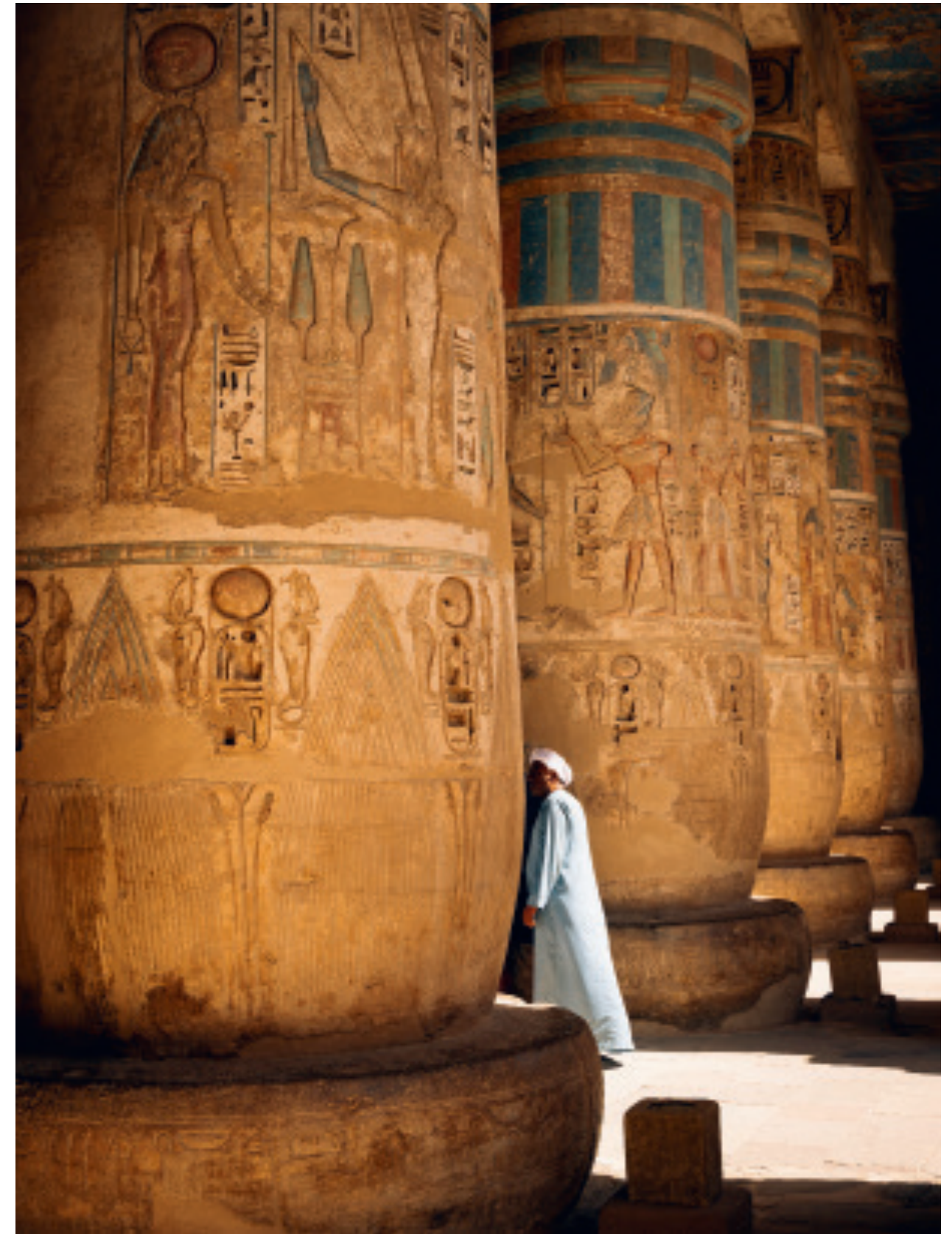


Go the extra Nile

PHOTOGRAPHS JÉRÔME GALLAND

Acclaimed Egyptian author YASMINE EL RASHIDI sails from Luxor to Aswan on a *dahabiya* houseboat, which combines understated luxury onboard with crowd-free guided visits to Pharaonic temples – while also raising money for local charities

ABOVE The marshes edging the Nile between Luxor and Aswan provide fertile ground for growing sugar cane, guavas, citrus fruits and dates. At intervals along this lush green beltway, livestock can be seen grazing, giving a glimpse of life in the Egyptian countryside

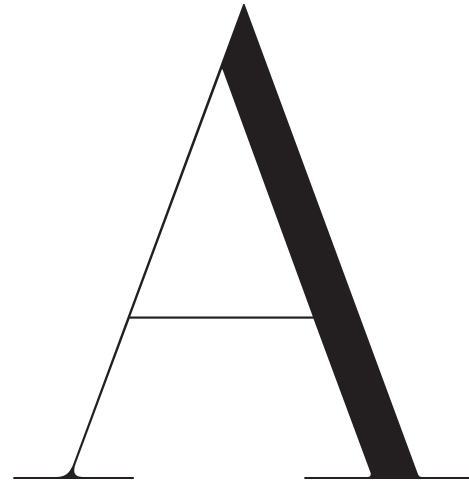


ABOVE Situated near the foot of the Theban hills on the West Bank of the Nile in Luxor, the Mortuary Temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu is distinguished by the strikingly well-preserved colour and detail on its painted stone columns and friezes



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A cosy area in the boat's main living space, where the walls are lined with parchment. *Yalla Nile* in full sail. A bathroom in one of the two main suites. The rear deck with its traditional *mashrabiya* screen is the perfect setting for sunset tea

ABOVE A vintage, hand-stitched appliqué tapestry, known as a *khayamiya*, adds an authentic decorative touch in one of the boat's four junior cabins. Made using a technique dating back to Ancient Egypt, it echoes the warm tones of the teak floor and beams



As the sun descended on the Luxor Temple, once the largest and most significant religious centre in Ancient Egypt, the doves that were nestled in alcoves above its many pillars took to the sky, forming a perfectly choreographed, dotted V against the deep coral of the horizon. They rose and fell in unison, repeatedly circling the site. We were told that the birds take flight at the same time each day and that their droppings never fall within the temple's bounds. Tracing their path led our gaze towards the majestic Avenue of Sphinxes, which is lined on either side with mythical ram-headed statues and historically ran more than one-and-a-half miles in order to connect the temple to Karnak. The avenue was used during festivals to celebrate the generosity of the gods in delivering to the people of the New Kingdom all their needs, including the fertility of the Nile during harvest. This was our first evening in Luxor and it was an appropriate beginning to our journey: a reminder of the origins of the Ancient Egyptian ideas of creation and the higher powers that the Pharaohs revered.

The Pharaohs' worshipping of their gods became the ongoing theme of our trip, as we visited the temples among the sands, dunes and verdant fields on either side of the Nile. Immense blocks of limestone and granite soar high in magnificent structures, all intricately chiselled with friezes depicting scenes of the mysterious ancient civilisation that seemed to have a knowledge of science and engineering beyond its time. Not a square centimetre is left unadorned. Tombs dug deep into the earth, stretching for up to 200 metres and consisting of as many as 120 separate chambers, are carved and painted in uncompromising detail and striking colours. How did they build these structures? How long did their artisans have to chisel away to produce perfection on such a vast scale? How did they paint thousands of tombs across hundreds of years with such refinement and skill? Why do the birds seem to keep these sacred spaces clean? 'The Pharaohs knew something we don't,' our guide Amr Talaat kept repeating. ▷



ABOVE With its antique mirror panelling and vintage chandelier, the elegant dining room offers an intimate setting for atmospheric meals. Its generous porthole windows ensure that guests can still enjoy views of the passing scenery from the marquetry table

FROM TOP Canvas umbrellas with hand-stitched motifs provide welcome shade for the inviting seating area at the front of the boat. The woven palm-frond loungers on the sundeck are positioned to make the most of the sights during the day's sailing time

The synchronicity of natural life and the ancient sites was a constant source of wonder. Even in the seemingly harsh and arid landscape of the quarries around Gebel El-Silsila, where the labourers carved out their stone, palm trees sprout in quintets to form natural places of shade. The temples are also surprisingly breezy, defying the high temperatures elsewhere.

Our riverboat, *Yalla Nile*, blended fluidly into this narrative of exceptionalism, beauty and the serendipitous. Known as a *dahabiya* in Arabic, the elegant, newly built 50-metre, double-masted boat was conceived by a billionaire Egyptian patron to help to support two local charities and was designed by the Egyptian rising star architect Tarek Shamma. Having been given carte blanche by his commissioner – and a tight 10 months to complete the project – Tarek says the vision for what the boat would be immediately came to him. ‘I’d been on two *dahabiyas* before and I knew exactly what I wanted for *Yalla Nile*,’ he says. ‘We built from scratch, hull up.’

The entirety of Egypt’s history is embodied onboard in small and large gestures, from the papyrus- and parchment-clad drawers and walls, to the tapestries that are hanging in the cabins. Intricate lattice woodwork known as *mashrabiya* makes an enclave out of the rear dining deck, while a panoramic Egyptian appliqué tapestry depicting the Nile and its lush banks forms a trompe l’oeil of sorts in one of the boat’s two larger suites. ‘Egyptian history is always reduced to the head of Horus, a lotus, maybe the key of life and, of course, the pyramids,’ Tarek observes. ‘But there were Greeks, Romans, Copts, Arabs, different Islamists and Turks. Some motifs were carried across these civilisations.’ At several of the temple complexes we visited, such as Philae, built over hundreds of years, we saw symbols of several civilisations and systems of belief etched and scratched out and then re-etched in the same stones.

The boat accommodates 12 and has four double cabins and two grand suites, which all sit just below the waterline, so that the Nile is like the horizon at eye level. In Pharaonic times, boats were used to transport goods and materials, and were believed to carry light through the sky and gods from the heavens to the earth and back. Waking up on *Yalla Nile* felt like a journey of this kind. The stillness of the Nile on the 130-mile route from Luxor to Aswan is rarely interrupted. *Yalla Nile* has no motor – a tug boat pulls her from a good stretch in the distance but is so far ahead you forget that it is there. At night, if we were not sailing, the boat docked at islands far from anything manmade and we woke up to the sound of the birds, or perhaps a view of a distant water buffalo bathing in the Nile.

Our days were split in half. Rather than indulging in a leisurely breakfast and setting off for sites around 9-10am, we opted to visit them early in the morning and head out at around 7am, just as the temples opened and

before the crowds arrived. After long mornings walking through tombs and temples – each one more exquisite than the one before (the unusual double temple of Kom Ombo was a highlight) – we returned to *Yalla Nile* to indulge in feasts prepared by the chef and his team in the downstairs galley kitchen. These took the form of buffet-style brunches or lunches, depending on the length of time we had spent at the site, and included stewed tomatoes and okra, Egyptian baked rice, fish marinated in local herbs, guava and sweet potato salad, and filo pie topped with tahini and local molasses. ‘It was important to me that there would be a proper dining room on the boat,’ says Tarek. ‘I toiled over the menus.’

Almost all of the boat’s accessories and fittings have been handmade in Egypt. Carved alabaster basins complement hand-poured tiles and local grey-veined white marble in the bathrooms, and the floors throughout are stained teak. Vintage Egyptian-themed Hermès scarves have been made into cushions. A sauna is tucked away off the sitting room, with its handwoven rugs, custom-designed sofas and bar with ancient-eye-shaped legs. The sumptuous dining room features a vintage chandelier, antique mirror-glass cladding, a mint-green ceiling and a long dining table with marquetry that forms a motif we recognised in the Tomb of Roy on Luxor’s West Bank.

Visiting the sites, we spotted many things that had obviously inspired elements of the boat’s interiors. The star-shaped pattern on the ceiling of one of the suites echoes the motif on the ceilings of tombs, such as Seti I’s, and temples like the one at Karnak. At the temple of Edfu, I saw columns and carvings that must have influenced the elegant bespoke lighting that accents *Yalla Nile*’s living areas and cabins. Even the brass loo-roll holders are shaped like the Pharaonic serpent we saw carved on many a temple wall, including most notably at Kom Ombo.

It is hard to grasp how long these tombs and temples have survived. It is difficult not to ask, at times, if the murals in tombs are real and original, or whether they have been restored to some extent. The answer is always that they are original – so skilfully made that they have withstood thousands of years. *Yalla Nile* evokes a similar mystique. There is no real sense of how long she has existed, or whether her many layers were tailor-made to fit like a glove or simply found and given new life □

WAYS AND MEANS

‘Yalla Nile’ is available for charter through Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk) from £55,800 for 12 people, full board, for a four-day journey along the Nile, typically travelling between Luxor and Aswan, including flights, transfers and all activities. All proceeds after deductions for the running costs of the boat will be donated to two Egyptian charities chosen by the boat’s owner: Magdi Yacoub Heart Foundation and The Littlest Lamb.



ABOVE Once the largest and most important religious complex in Ancient Egypt, Karnak was constructed over a period of 1,000 years. Its rich history and diversity of architectural and artistic styles has ensured its place on the Unesco World Heritage List