

Pharaohs and Pyramids Nile Cruise



Steve Heap

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Viking Pharaohs and Pyramids Cruise on the Nile

We have all probably been guilty of taking thousands of photos on an exciting vacation, and happily sharing some of them with friends or perhaps on social media. But after a while they tend to disappear and even finding a specific set of photos about a visit to a temple becomes very difficult. What I have done instead is to create an eBook that can be browsed on an iPad or tablet and is much more of a photo travel book that covers the entire trip. I can look back at a vacation and be taken back, at least in my mind, to revisit those sights and sounds we had experienced.

It can also provide future travelers with enough honest information for them to decide if this particular cruise is right for them, and then act to trigger their own memories of what they had seen if they decide to take the cruise.

This cruise was one of the most active and complex ones we have taken; both in terms of the number of tours and also in terms of the vast amount of information we were given by the excellent Egyptologists who accompany you through the entire cruise. To cover all that detail, I have structured this initial chapter to summarize what you can expect on this Nile cruise, which we took in October 2024. It includes the lessons we learned about traveling to and from Egypt and outlines the overall itinerary. I have then created day-by-day chapters which can be accessed via the Table of Contents at the start of the book, or via internal links that I have inserted when I describe that day's events later in this chapter. Or, you could simply read it from beginning to end like a printed book!

You can also click on the photos to see a larger version, depending on the size of your screen. This works even better if you are holding the device in landscape orientation.

We also took the extension to Jordan that Viking offers and I have created a similar eBook for that part of the vacation.

Most of the links you will see in the book are internal and will take you to a different chapter. Occasionally, I will link to a separate article on my own website to provide you with some additional information. I will make it clear when you are about to leave the book and venture onto the World Wide Web as you do in the next paragraph!

Before you go

Perhaps I should have started with “Booking your cruise” as we discovered a useful extra discount several years into our voyages with Viking – check out this [article on my website for more details of using a travel agent to gain some extra shipboard credits](#). There is also a big choice that you need to make about which ship to choose. Viking now has nine modern boats that are all designed in the Viking style for the cruise. They hold 82 passengers and have rooms similar to other river boats and ocean ships. We had booked (without knowing anything about it) on the MS Antares, which is a Viking owned ship that was built in 2009. This ship only holds 62 passengers, but the staterooms are enormous – probably double the size of the ocean cabins.



Basic stateroom on the MS Antares on the Nile

To the left in this photo is the bathroom with a shower inside the bath, and two large wardrobes plus a small writing desk. The ship is definitely older, but in very good condition with wood everywhere. With only 62

guests, the dining room and lounge/bar are perhaps less crowded. The downside of this ship, perhaps, was that the internet was not great in the rooms, and I don't recall any USB sockets, but we had no issues with anything else. The power sockets generally have a complex design that accept US plugs (although it is 240V). We took some European style two pin plugs that seemed to fit better and were more reliable as well as a couple of USB power blocks.

I took some professional camera gear to both Egypt and Jordan without any particular issues. My camera and lens were examined at almost every checkpoint (including in Newark on our return). Most people use phones, of course, but I did find the telephoto lens to be really useful when we were cruising along the river, and a "proper" camera is likely to be able to cope with the very dark conditions in tombs and temples as well as the pre-dawn light during the balloon ride. The big downside is the weight!

My final bit of advice for this cruise is that it is far more active than any other Viking cruise we have taken. You will walk a long way, often on uneven surfaces and so our group tended to spread out on tours, with the people less sure on their feet at the back of the group while touring each site! This was perhaps more of an issue in Jordan and the guides are always very careful in making sure that everyone is monitored at all times.

Getting to Egypt

We decided to take the optional Air Plus to allow us to select United Airlines flights for all the main legs of the trip. That gave us the Economy Plus seats with extra legroom at no additional cost because of my membership in the United frequent flyer scheme, but it is your choice as to whether to accept the initial flight itinerary if you have purchased a cruise with included airfare. The big advantage of booking your airfare using Viking is that they are there to meet you when the plane lands and will have organized transfers either to the hotel or direct to the ship as necessary. In fact, there was a Viking rep by the plane gate when we changed flights in Frankfurt to explain how to get to our next flight – which turned out to be very helpful in a complex airport like Frankfurt.

Having said that, we plan to book our own air package on a cruise to Iceland next year and had no difficulty getting to Amman airport in Jordan using Uber after staying an extra day in the city. It depends how comfortable you are in navigating new airports.

You need a Visa to enter Egypt (and Jordan) but there is no need to worry about this in advance. The Viking rep is there in Cairo to help you obtain that visa – you need \$25 in clean bills for each passenger to get the visa, which is then stuck into your passport. There was no charge for the visa into Jordan and again the Viking rep took all the passports of the group and organized the issuing of the visas on arrival in Amman.

Money and Tips

Some people on the cruise had obtained a supply of Egyptian Pounds before leaving home. There is absolutely no need to have Egyptian pounds at all (and in fact they are impossible to change back into dollars when you leave the country). Everyone and every place either take credit cards or US dollars and there is no-one we met who would prefer Egyptian pounds to dollars. It is often thought that this gives the recipient a problem with spending them, but they do seem to be preferred as a much more stable currency. So don't change money in advance and don't use an ATM to get some pounds on arrival. We took about \$80 in \$1 bills, perhaps \$40 in \$5s and then some \$20 and clean \$100 bills for emergencies. You can exchange a \$20 bill for \$1s from any trader or even from the people waiting for tips if you have visited their home (as you do in Luxor). You often need to pay to use the toilet in many places – \$1 is fine for two people, or just \$1 if you are on your own. It is probably a good idea to have some toilet paper in your pocket or purse – you can take sheets from your bathroom on the ship! The toilets were almost always clean and in good condition – the person taking the money is responsible for keeping the toilets clean.

Viking Gratuities

Viking will charge optional (sort of) gratuities to your room at the end of the cruise and charge them to your credit card. But you need cash to tip the drivers of the coaches (\$2 a day per person) although your guide will tell you if the same driver will be with you on the next day. Some people also tipped the policeman who travels with the coach on each outing. These are Egyptian policemen assigned to watch over tourists and were unfailingly helpful and vigilant, making sure that no-one is lost or left behind. Finally, although the Egyptologist/Tour Director gets a share of the gratuities collected on the ship, most people separately tipped these guides – \$20 a day for a couple seems to be the rate, but that is purely up to you. The Tour Director/Egyptologist is assigned to your coach right on the first day and you stay with that coach group (and that same Tour Director) for the entire time in Egypt, so you get to know them pretty well. As a result, they are far more involved with you than the Tour Director on an ocean ship, for instance, or for any of the other cruises we have taken.

On the boat

A big question is always – what should we pack? We almost always take too much and a couple we sat with for most meals only packed one carry-on bag each – we had one checked bag each! The cruise is pretty low key – people do wear smarter clothes for dinner in the evening, but no-one would be upset if you didn't have time to change. We found, however, that we were never that rushed – there was always time to have a shower if necessary and change into some different clothes, but to be honest, you don't need too many changes. The on-board laundry is great. A shirt cost 200 Egyptian pounds for washing and ironing, which is about \$4, and I left the bag when we went to dinner, and it was back in the morning of the following day with the clothes very neatly pressed. We washed underwear and socks and hung those in the bathroom.

My wife is gluten free, and this was the best cruise so far in terms of handling that. Each morning the restaurant manager would go through the lunch and dinner menu explaining not just which items were already gluten free, but how they could modify the other ones to make them

gluten free. GF bread was always provided and freshly made GF pancakes were available at breakfast. A great service.

As I mentioned, the internet in Egypt is not great – and I understand that some government restrictions on satellite internet are partly to blame. I went to sit in the reception area to get a better signal and connect and didn't really have issues.

Those who have been on Viking cruises before know about the freely flowing wine and beer. Both red and white wine is offered with lunch or you can have a range of beers. The wines were Egyptian, I think, and were pretty good. Wine and beer is also available at dinner and you can have as many as you like, including a final one to take into the lounge if you prefer. I have had the Viking Silver Package on some ocean cruises, which gives you a better quality and choice of wine with the meals, plus drinks from the bars around the ship. Personally, I think that might be overkill on this particular cruise.

Finally, there is very little to buy on the ship apart from the jewelry shop. Quite expensive in my opinion, at 193,000 Egyptian pounds or \$3900 for one of those gold cartouches with a name in hieroglyphics! Discounts do not really seem to be available.

So, with all that background out of the way, let's make a start to talk about Egypt!



*The shot you expect to see when visiting the Pyramids in Giza near
Cairo, Egypt*

Whenever we thought about Egypt, we thought of these pyramids and wondered how such an ancient civilization could have organized the

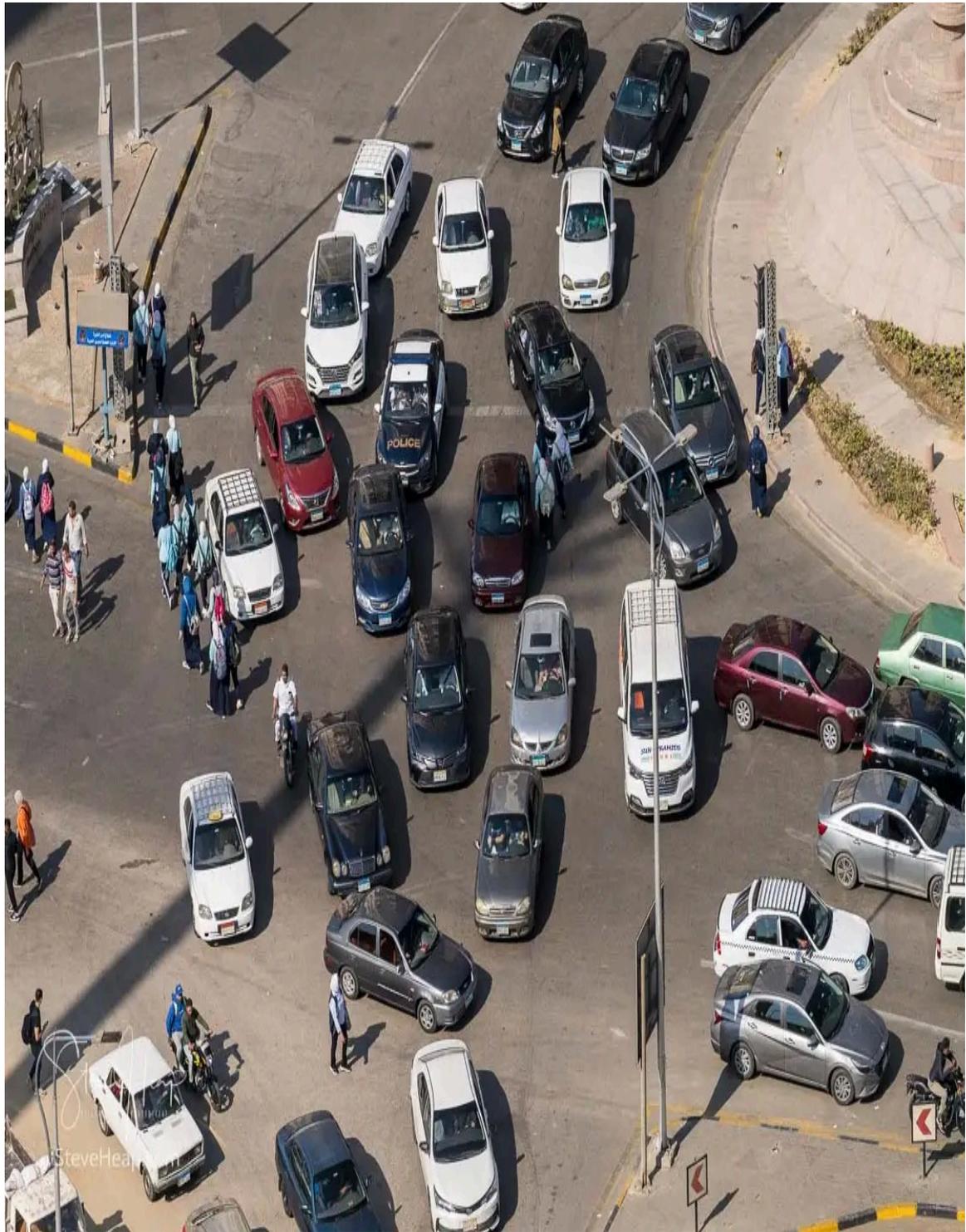
building of them. But we discovered on this cruise that Ancient Egypt is far, far more advanced than that. You could say the pyramids are just blocks of stone piled on top of each other, but what we saw in Luxor and the cities farther south were statues, carvings, tombs, temples and wall paintings that blew the mind in terms of their complexity and the sheer skill and organization needed to create such artwork. And new things are being discovered even now – in fact, an unopened tomb was found in Luxor during our visit there.

As I mentioned, this chapter is now going to give you an overview of the entire cruise and then I have written individual more detailed chapters about each day. The links to those can be found in the Table of Contents at the start of this book and are also inserted below so that you can then dig deeper as you like.

Brief Outline of the cruise

You arrive in Cairo, and I mentioned the visa process above. The Viking reps are very helpful and after collecting your luggage you are taken by coach to the hotel. We arrived very late in the evening after a few delays and the next day had breakfast followed at 8am with a get to know you meeting. 8am in Cairo is midnight in Texas and for some reason neither of us heard our alarm on the iPad. So, no breakfast, but I did make that meeting! You are assigned to one of two coaches (one of three I believe on the modern ships that have 82 passengers) and you are on that coach with the same Egyptologist for the rest of the cruise. We left at 9am, for the Cairo Citadel and the Egyptian museum before returning around 1:30pm for a lunch on your own and a welcome relaxation. We had a substantial lunch in the hotel restaurant and didn't bother with dinner that evening. The Egyptian Museum is the old one and is pretty crowded, although the Tutankhamun treasures were still there. There is a brand-new museum, known as GEM by the pyramids in Giza, and it is likely that this will become part of the agenda in future cruises (in fact, I think this GEM visit is now available.)

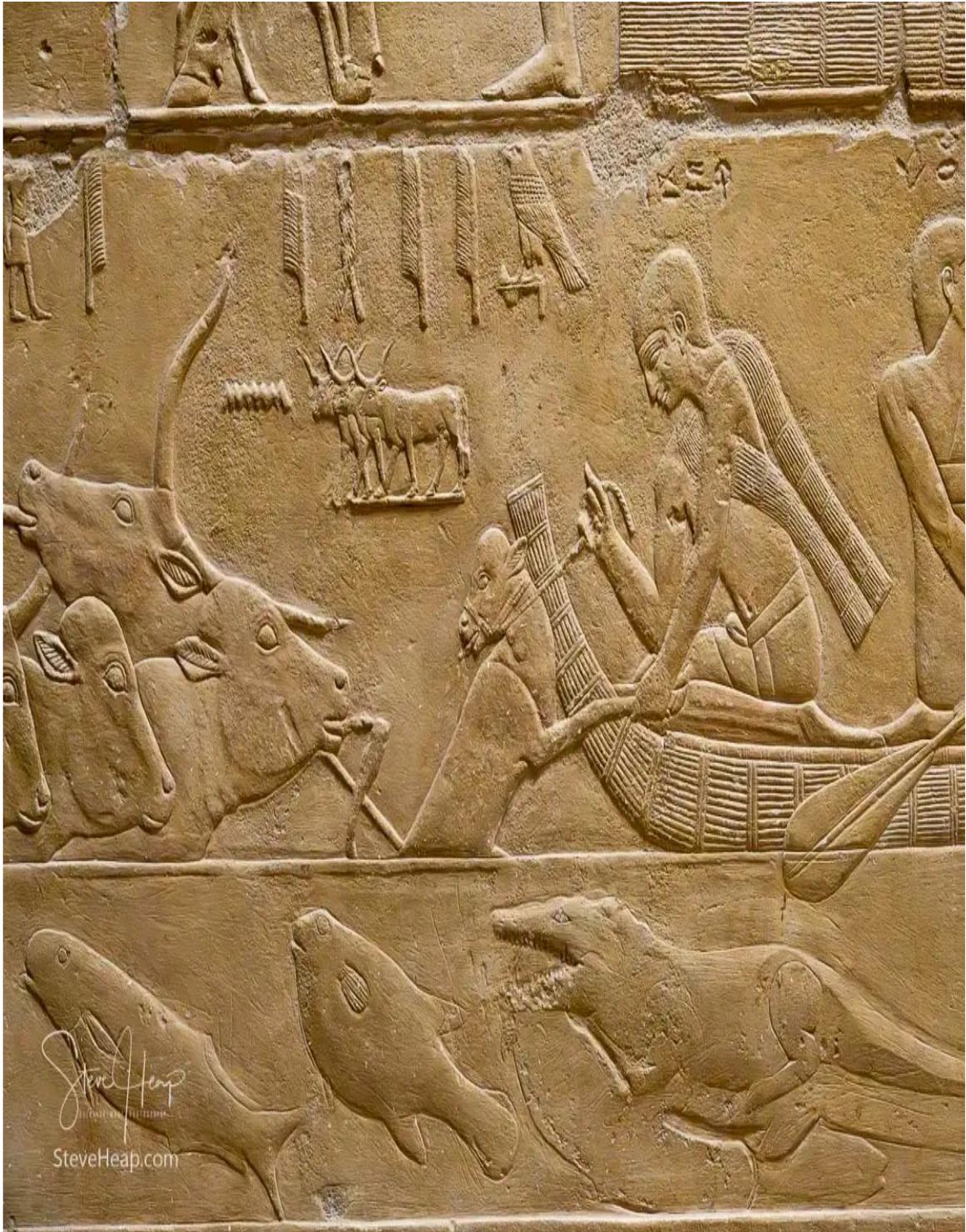
You can walk about the city around the hotel although Cairo is a very, very busy and active city:



Traffic rules are perhaps optional in Cairo

I did go out for a stroll and didn't really have any issues, although a man in the street told me about a great view of all this traffic congestion from a bridge further down the road (which was probably true) and he could show me how to get there and then see the market, which sounded more problematic. So, I walked with him a short distance and then moved swiftly into the entrance to the hotel.

The next day was a coach tour to the Sakkara step pyramid, Giza and the Sphinx. This is where your guide really comes into their own. Our guide, Younis (actually Mohammed Younis but so many people in Egypt are called Mohammed that most use their last name instead), was great at getting his knowledge across, but was fantastic in passing on his enthusiasm for what we were seeing to his group. The tombs around the Step pyramid were our first introduction to the artwork that the craftsmen were capable of. Every surface inside a temple or tomb was decorated either with hieroglyphics or images and all of them were 3-D with the original surface of the stone carved away to create layered images (which were originally then painted), such as this detail of getting a herd of cattle across a river by tying one of the calves to the boat so the cows would follow. Alligators lurked in the depths!



Detail of the carving in the tomb of Kagemni, Vizier to King Teti, around 2323 BC

The step pyramid was one of the earliest with a magnificent temple leading to it. I did wander off the beaten track in our free time and a nice

man on a horse with pony posed for me in front of the pyramid.



Start of another attempt at getting more than a usual tip at the Step Pyramid

I offered the usual \$1 for his pose but he refused (which is odd) and insisted that he could take my photo in front of the pyramid. He grabbed at my camera strap pretty firmly as I was moving away telling him I didn't want the photo, and I offered the dollar again. He then said he wanted Egyptian money, which I didn't have and so he replied that he could take \$10 and give me the change! Fat chance! So, I continued to walk away and eventually he agreed that the \$1 tip would suffice. So be a bit careful about wandering too far from the group.

Following lunch overlooking the new Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), we visited the three main Giza pyramids and then had a short drive where a camel ride had been laid on. Most people had a go at that – I preferred to photograph the scenes surrounding us, and we closed the day with a visit to the Sphinx:



The Sphinx with one of the Giza pyramids behind

You can read more about the detailed activities in Cairo here in [The Pyramids and Museums of Cairo](#)

We finally meet the MS Antares in Luxor

Another very early rise for the charter flight from Cairo to Luxor followed by a tour of the Karnak Temple and the local museum and finally we boarded our vessel. A welcome rest as there was more to come – a tour of the Luxor Temple at sunset. The lighting surrounding this temple with its enormous statues at the entrance added much to the visit. This was the start of being amazed at each new site! The scale of these statues carved from one solid piece of granite (that itself had been transported from Aswan much further south on the Nile) is difficult to imagine, but just look at the size of the people by the lower left corner!

You can read more about this day here: [The Temples in Luxor and our first day on the Antares](#)



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Statues in Luxor temple in Egypt

The following day, we took the optional excursion at 4am for the Hot Air Balloon ride. I used to own a hot air balloon in a syndicate many years ago, but this was something else! Each balloon holds about 24 people, and they are well prepared to help less agile people climb over the side of the basket so anyone can physically handle the excursion. I don't know how many balloons launched that morning, but it was a magnificent sight. The official rules say that nothing other than a phone is allowed on the balloon to avoid falling objects hitting someone on the ground, but as usual in Egypt, you are told to pack a camera in your backpack, and only get it out when you are in the air.



Hot air balloons start to rise from the desert near Luxor in Egypt just before sunrise

We were back on board at 8am to allow the Antares to depart to the north, and we were certainly ready for breakfast! Most cruise ships don't do this part of the Nile, and I think I understood that this was one of the last Viking cruises for the season as the water level in the Nile is lowered over the winter to allow dredging of the various canals and waterways. We were headed to Qena and the Dendera Temple. The sail up the river was serene – calm water, friendly children on the banks waving as we passed by – they don't see many boats on this section of the river and so it was quite the scene. Life is going on along these banks much as it has for many years and fascinating to watch.



Fishing in the Nile River

Qena

We were almost alone at the Dendara Temple, so we had plenty of time to both be escorted around to understand the background and then have some free time to explore on our own. To whet your appetite, here is a section of the ceiling of the temple with the intricately carved and painted carvings. Like many temples and ancient buildings in Egypt this had been occupied by the local people who made their homes inside the massive stone buildings, lighting fires and cooking their meals over the millennia. When the restoration work began, the ceilings had been completely black with soot and grease and only some recent restoration work with new cleaning materials have finally removed those stains to show just how the ceilings would have looked when the temple had its original purpose. Magnificent!

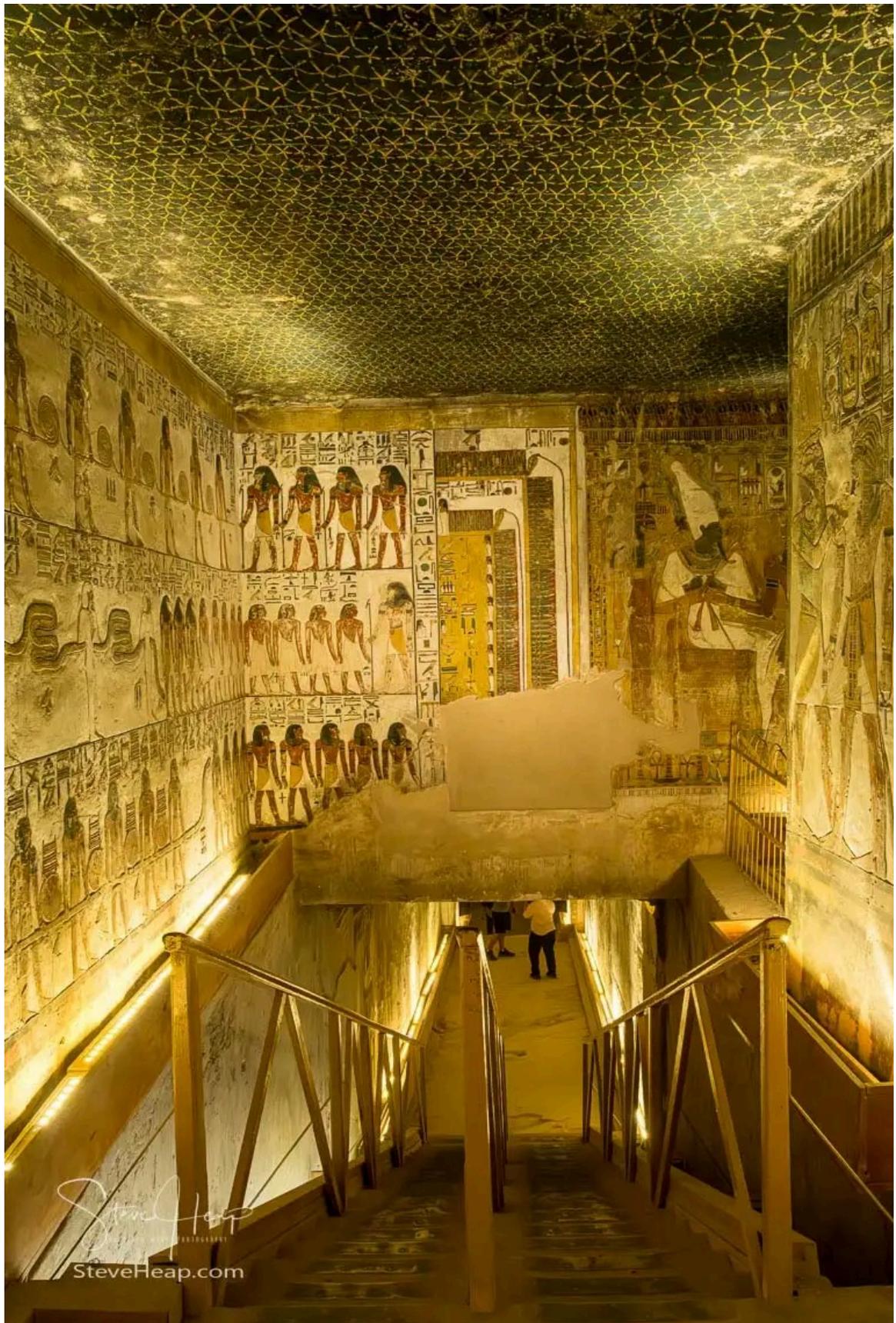


Ceiling of the Temple of Hathor at Dendara after recent restoration and cleaning work

You can read more about the [Hot Air Balloons and the cruise to Qena here.](#)

Luxor, again

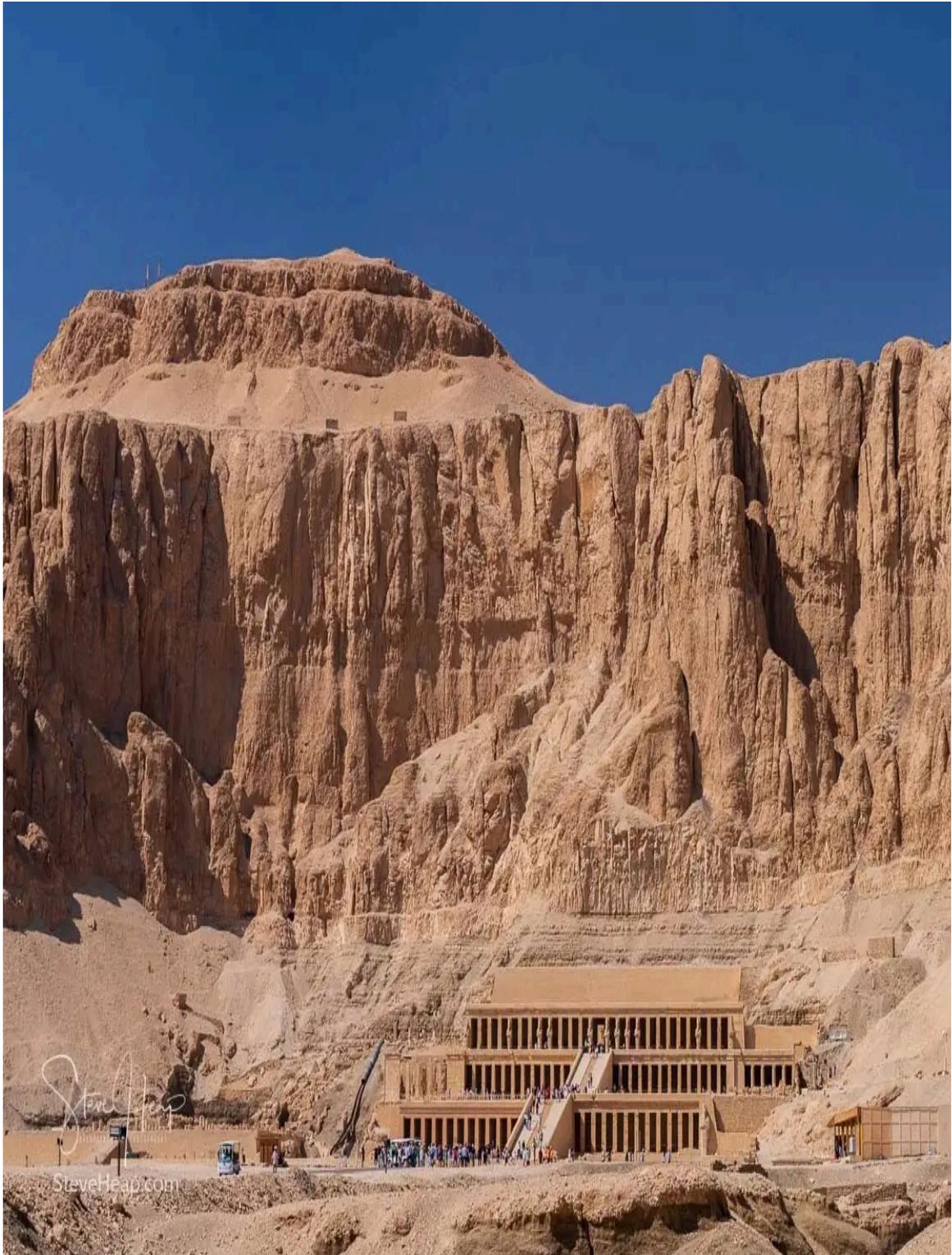
The boat sailed back to Luxor that evening so that we were ready for our next excursion at 8am to the Valley of the Kings and the Howard Carter house. There is a brand-new bridge across the Nile which makes this trip far easier than in the past, and so you have lots of time to explore the tombs. We were given tickets for 4 tombs plus the much more expensive King Seti 1 tomb but Younis explained which ones he thought we should visit. They were busy, but not too crowded and the King Seti tomb is particularly memorable and complex underground.



Steve Heap
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Interior of one of the rooms heading down into the King Teti tomb in the Valley of the Kings

The Howard Carter house is pretty interesting as well – we explored this on our own. As usual, everywhere you go there are many traders and individuals trying to sell you things! Then we were off to the Mortuary temple of Hatshepsut which is built into the hillside on the other side of the Valley of the Kings mountain range:



Mortuary temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor

This is impressive as a building but a bit less so when you actually get up close. Although it could have been that we were hot and tired by this

stage and thinking about lunch!

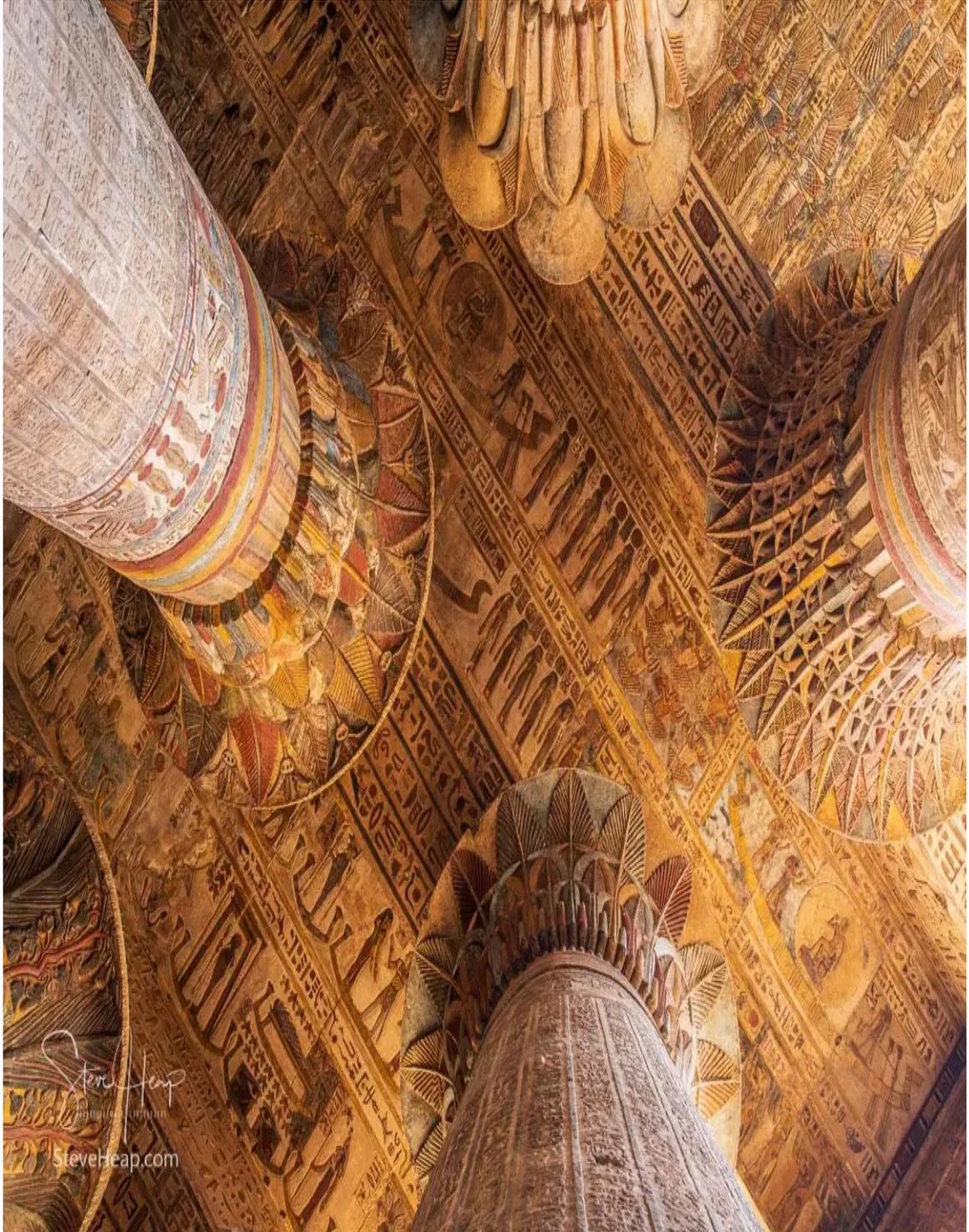
After lunch, we were sailing south to Esna. Several talks and events were organized, but the highlight was perhaps the performance of a Whirling Dervish in the lounge after dinner. It certainly makes you wonder how he keeps both his balance and his energy high for his long and involved spinning dances.

Going south there are many more cruise boats around – many of them triple parked in the ports so that passengers pass through the other boats to get ashore. We were pleased to see that Viking doesn't do that – even when another Viking ship was in port, we always docked alongside the promenade.

[You will find the detailed discussion of Valley of the Kings and the cruise to Esna here](#)

Esna

In Esna, there were two included tours. One visited the Temple of Esna, which has been excavated in the town itself, and had suffered, like the earlier temple, from being used as housing and cooking facilities, but, again, the interior has been mainly cleaned and renovated. Some work was still going on, which shows how recent this has been. The other option was a walking tour around the village to see what life was (and still is) like in the community. We took the former, although we heard good stories about the village tour albeit there were four security guards around the group on that one!



Roof and ceiling details inside the Temple of Esna, recently cleaned and renovated

One joy awaits you in Esna. Like many places, the route to any monument passes through a trading area with many stalls and locals trying to sell

you things. But here you need to buy something! There is an Egyptian night where most guests and crew dress in traditional Egyptian clothing and Esna is your opportunity to buy something suitable. We noticed that the traders had better prices when you are leaving the ship to visit the temple, and magically, the prices increase on the return journey to the ship. So, we ignored them to get back to the ship and then went back into the market with a group from another ship. The advice is to never go into their stalls, make sure you look for what you really want, and never pay more than \$15 in any market. Nothing is worth more than \$15. So, we haggled and managed to buy clothes for both of us for \$30, one of which (not mine) was actually quite a nice-looking dress!

[You can read about the Esna Temple and the cruise to Aswan here](#)

Arriving in Luxor

When we awoke, we were in Aswan – the end of the journey to the south. Some guests went on the optional tour (via air) to Abu Simbel and they had great things to say about the excursion. We stayed in Aswan to visit the dam (which is OK) and then a sailing excursion on the Nile on a traditional Felucca sailing ship. A great way to see the sights around this historic city.



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Sailing on the Nile in a traditional Felucca boat powered just by the wind

The next morning was another boating trip! This time in a small motorboat to go downstream towards the dam and the rapids that marked the end of the navigable section on this part of the Nile. The dam, has, of course, made this much less dramatic than it would have been when the Nile was a full flood stage in the summer months, but still very interesting to see how the large slow Nile river is actually quite narrow and fast moving between the granite rocks in the river. This location is where all the granite for statues and massive obelisks further north was extracted from quarries and can be seen everywhere. The small boats were ideal for birdwatching, and our Egyptologist, Younis, was also a very keen bird spotter and so every species was identified as we slowly moved up the river to the Nubian village.



I think these are red-headed Egyptian Ducks!

In the Nubian village we visited a home and got the opportunity (for \$1!) to have a small alligator on our head for a photo and also visited a school with delightful toddlers. But the day was not over yet – another small boat ride took us to an island in the lake formed by the creation of the Aswan High Dam on which a reconstructed Philae Temple has been situated. It's original location is now submerged in the lake.



Philae Temple on an island in the lake formed by the Aswan High Dam

And all that was before 1:30pm! At that point was we finally sat down for lunch, the ship departed to head back downstream towards Kom Ombo

and an opportunity to see that temple at sunset.

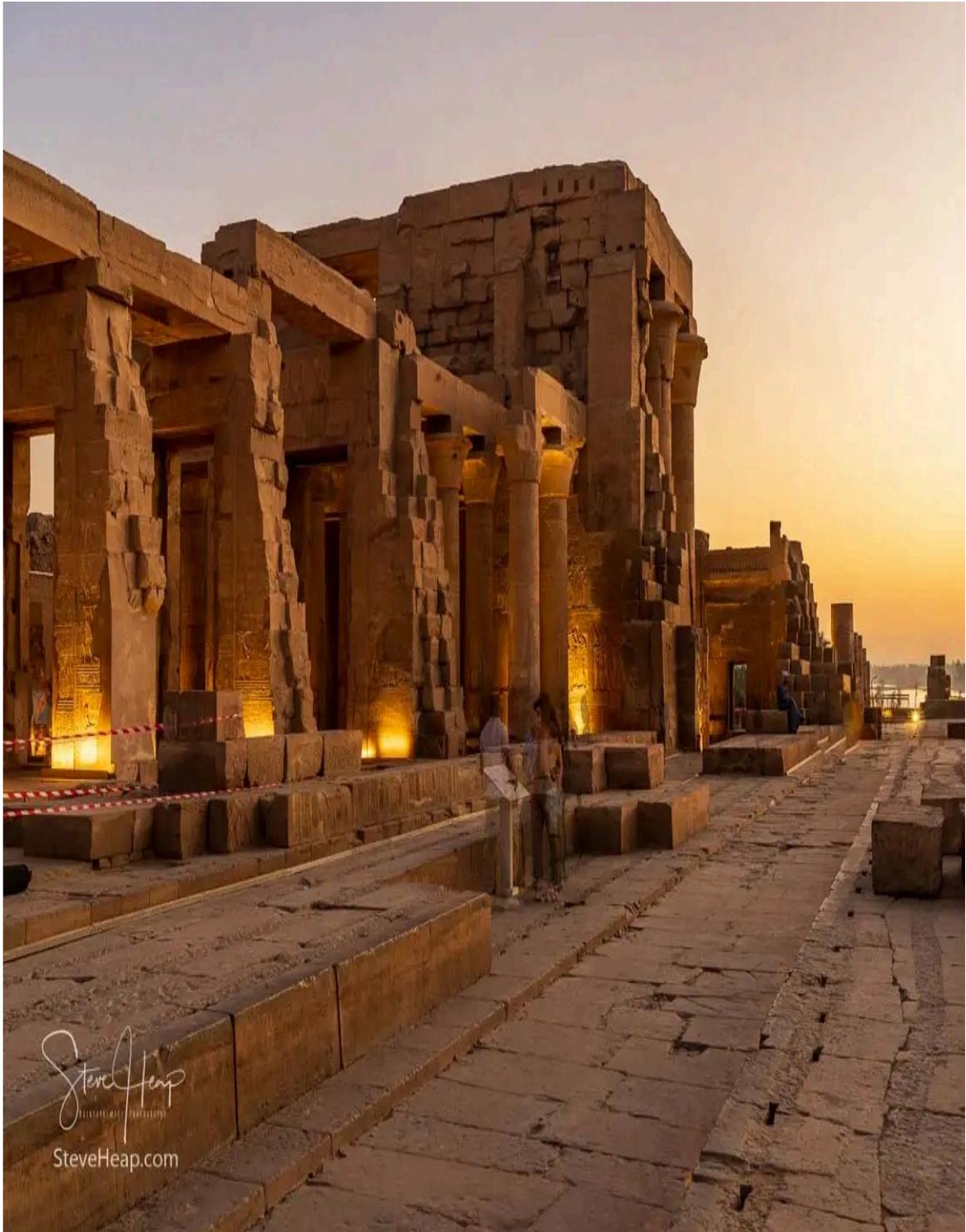
Kom Ombo

We docked pretty much alongside the temple and so it was a short walk to the site (via the obligatory shopping arcade!) and we were treated to another enthusiastic explanation of what we were seeing.



Kom Ombo temple on the banks of the Nile River in Egypt

I took my tripod to this site (without any issues) and captured some early evening views with a few ghost tourists around!



Evening at the Kom Ombo temple by the banks of the Nile

You can read more about the

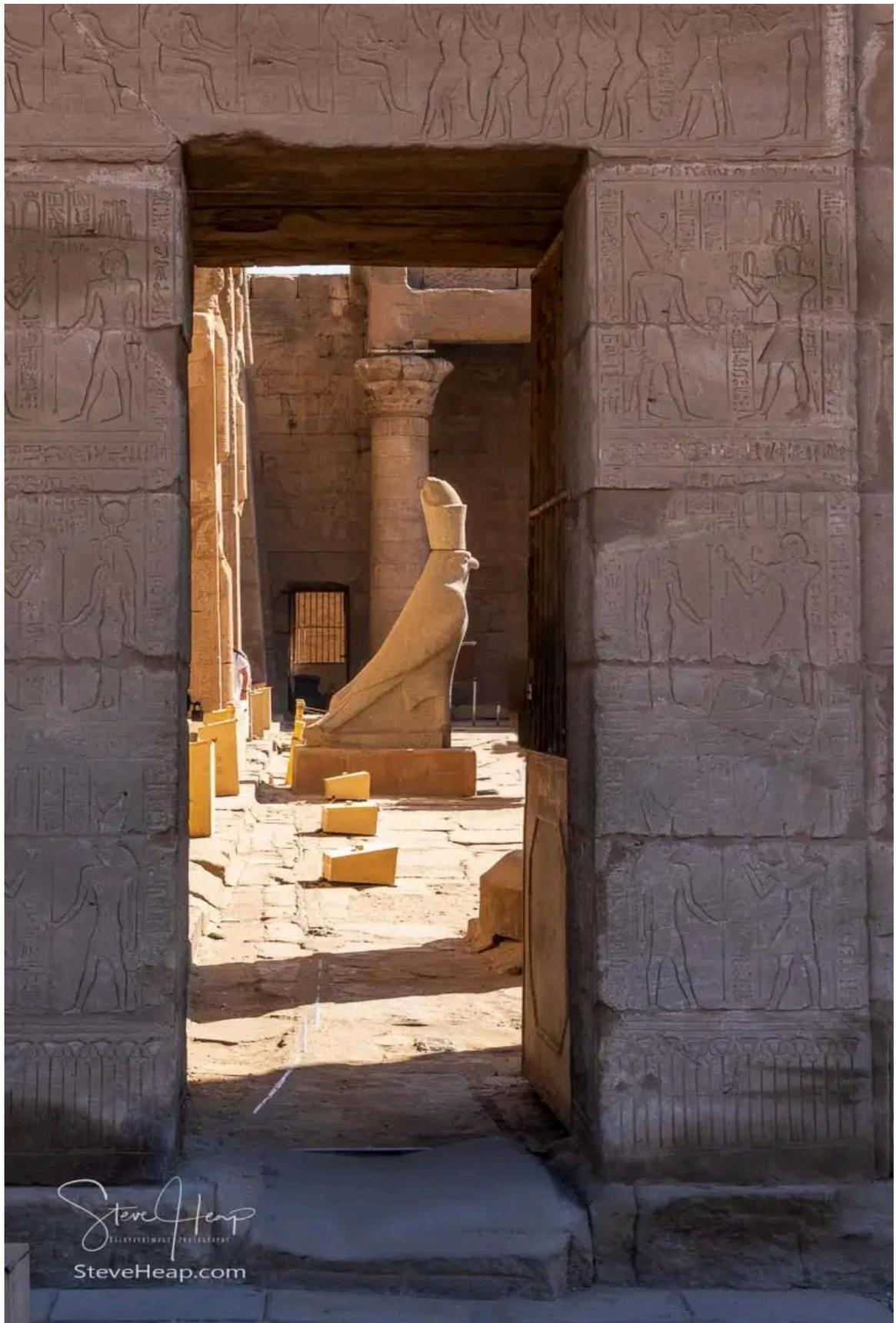
[Aswan Dam, Felucca cruise and bird watching trip to Nubian Village in this article](#)

and then the

[Temples at Philae and Kom Ombo can be found here.](#)

Edfu

At dinner, the ship departed for Edfu and our last excursion on this cruise. Another magnificent temple laid out over many acres in the center of the city.



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Detail of one of the statues in the Temple of Edfu in Egypt

This time the boat departed at 10:30am for an afternoon of scenic sailing back to Luxor and our departure for the airport to fly back to Cairo (this time to a high-end hotel nearer the airport) and our final goodbyes. You can read more about the [Edfu Temple, Esna Dam and the end of the cruise in Luxor in this article.](#)

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The Pyramids and Museums of Cairo

After our long flight from the USA (via Frankfurt in our case) we started the cruise with two days on land in Cairo. We stayed in the Sheraton in Cairo, which is very close to the center of the city, but to be honest, we didn't do anything around that location. After a very late arrival, a very early start on the next day and then the organized tours, we didn't feel much like exploring. Cairo is an extremely busy city and while I think it is probably safe to walk about in the area we were in, it is difficult to be absolutely sure. We were content to eat in the hotel and take in the view from our room – which was quite spectacular!



Sunset from our hotel room in the Sheraton over the Nile to downtown Cairo

The first outing was to the Citadel and the Alabaster Mosque. The mosque itself is very interesting and beautiful inside, but the views from the

terraces are always worthwhile. It isn't very obvious from this image, but the pyramids are "sort of" visible through the smog over the city if you really look!



View from the terraces at the Citadel in Cairo

What always fascinates me about Cairo is just how crowded it is. I'm no city planner, but just imagining how basic things like power, water and sewage gets to and from these neighborhoods is mind blowing! And the city is in constant motion day and night.



View over Cairo from the terrace at the Citadel

From there we were off to the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities – the home of most of the ancient artefacts from the time of the Pharaohs since 1902. While this is a building full of interesting things, it is not the easiest of buildings to get around and some areas are massively congested. The line into the Tutankhamen exhibit was long and the room completely full of people. I had seen these treasures before when they were displayed in

London and so I decided to give that room a pass – the chances of picking up some sort of infection seemed quite high! The treasures that are there are magnificent though. This famous statue called Khafre Enthroned really shows the skills that these craftsmen had in 2550 BC. To carve something as fine as this out of a massive block of anorthosite gneiss, a valuable, extremely hard, and dark stone brought 400 miles down the Nile River from royal quarries and get this detail and perfection is amazing. This was really the start of being amazed every day as we thought of what was happening elsewhere in the world at this time. Yes, in Britain they were moving big blocks of stone to make Stonehenge, but the quality of the workmanship is no way comparable.



Head of Khafre Enthroned statue in the Cairo Museum

After some time wandering at leisure (if you can call that museum leisure!) we all met up again by the cafeteria and gift shop, ready to be taken back to the hotel for a late lunch and a rest.

The Step Pyramid at Saqqara with the tomb of Kagemni

The next day was an early start again (for those from the USA at least) to see what we all think of as Egypt's treasures – the pyramids. I've seen the main pyramids before, but the step pyramid site was a bit of a surprise. After a climb down into our first tomb with the hieroglyphics covering every available wall in the underground space, we visited the far more impressive tomb built for Kagemni, Vizier to King Teti. The walls here are covered with fascinating scenes of everyday life and originally would have been painted as well as carved out of the limestone.



Interior of tomb of King Teti in Sakkara Egypt



Life in ancient Egypt including oxen crossing a river following a calf fastened to a canoe with an alligator hiding under the surface of the Nile

The skill is obvious once again as they would have started with a plain surface of limestone and then carved into it to make these 3-D figures where a hand might be at the top level, then the body is underneath that at a lower level in the stone, then the other arm, a boat below that until you get to the final flat surface forming the background. I think about what would happen if you chiseled a little too deeply – replace the entire block in the wall? And how would you do that?



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Paint remaining on the carving of a man inside the Kagemni tomb

Although you see the step pyramid in the distance from these first tombs, I was not expecting the massive wall that originally totally enclosed the site:



Entrance through the massive stone wall enclosing the step pyramid

And then you learn that these grooves in the structure were created after the wall was built – it was far too easy to build it with these vertical panels at the start! Inside the door was a massive room full for stone

columns that originally would have had a stone roof covering the entire area. And the door here is far too small to take the funeral procession when Djoser died, and so a large ramp up and over the wall would have been needed. The architect here was Imhotep and he certainly seems to have set the standard for the larger pyramids in Giza that we were going to see next!



The step pyramid of Djoser

As you can see it wasn't too busy here, although I am often the last person in our group to leave so that I get the place to myself.

The Carpet Factory

There must be a nice little kickback to Viking (or the guides?) with the trips to see various things being made – in this case carpets being knotted in really nice, well-lit, air-conditioned rooms.



Young boy working on knotting threads into a carpet near Saqqara



Detail of a partially finished rug or carpet on a loom in the factory

Call me cynical, but when you see the range and sizes of carpets in the upstairs showroom, I find it hard to believe that they are made in such comfortable conditions! We spent the next 45 minutes trying to avoid the

eye of the salesmen watching for any sign of interest in a particular carpet!

The Real Pyramids!

After lunch alongside the new Grand Egyptian Museum, we headed off to see the "real" pyramids. This one shot shows that even here it wasn't too busy, but also shows where the new museum is compared to the pyramids:



People coming in through the entrance center to the three main pyramids in Giza

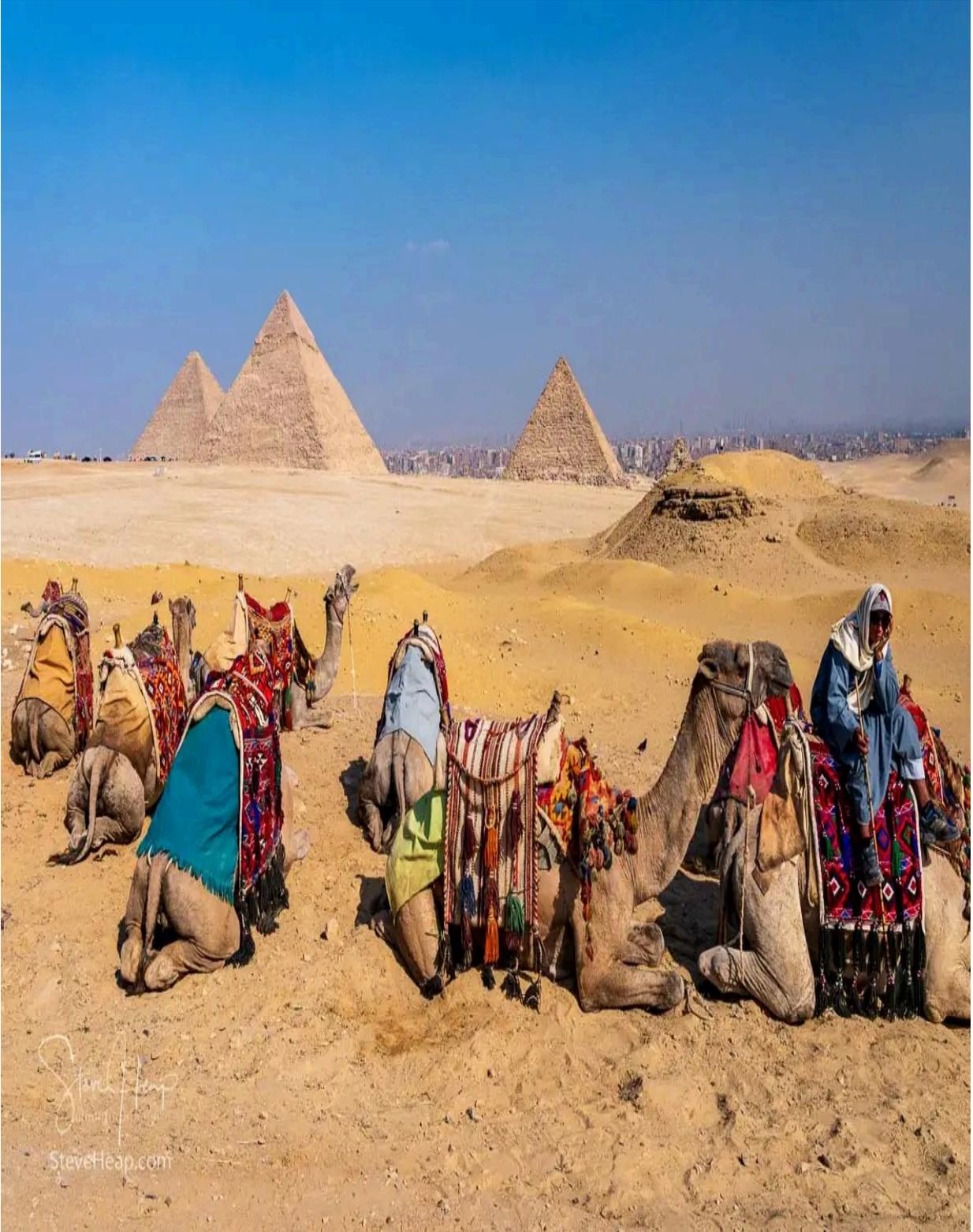
What is funny here is how people queue up (as I did for this photo) to climb up a bit of the pyramid and walk along some blocks and then back down to earth. I guess I can say I have climbed up the pyramid!



The sun peeks over the Great Pyramid of Giza

Our next stop (via the coach) was the camel riding excursion. Again, included in the Viking price, we could get on a camel and be led across the sand for a photo op with the pyramids in the background. I chose not

to do that, partly because I have ridden a camel before, but mainly because I wanted to get some nice photos of a camel with the pyramids as my photo op. I also got this nice shot of a camel driver waiting for his next customers. I don't think they are very busy at the moment.



Camel driver waiting for his next fare!



The money shot of the proud camel in front of his home



Camel rides across the sands of the Sahara with pyramids in the background

Then, after a visit to the Sphinx, which is very interesting in its own right, we headed back into Cairo to arrive around sunset for our final night before the early morning flight (3am alarm call) to Luxor and the start of the cruise proper.



The Sphinx looks out across the sand

Early rise the next day as we head to the airport in Cairo for our flight to Luxor and our arrival on our boat.

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The Temples in Luxor and our first day on the Antares

After a busy day at the [Pyramids and Museums of Cairo](#), we were awoken early the next morning around 3:00 AM to take the coach to the airport ready for the flight to Luxor.

Cairo Airport is large and seemingly full of security checks and other opportunities to spend time waiting for the next step in the process. It is worth noting that men and women are separated for the security checks - separate lines and scanning devices. The guides and Viking staff do a great job making sure everyone makes it through the stages, but it is worth taking a book to read as you do seem to spend a lot of time sitting in small waiting rooms gradually getting closer to the time when you take a coach out to the aircraft on the airfield. In this case, our plane was a Bombardier CRJ-900 and was reserved mainly for our group although there were a few other passengers going to Luxor as well.



Our plane from Cairo to Luxor to meet the Antares

The flight only takes about an hour and on landing and collecting our luggage, we were driven to our first tour of the day – the Karnak temple.

The Karnak Temple Complex

The Karnak Temple Complex is one of the largest and most significant religious sites in the world. Constructed over a span of 2,000 years, it served as the primary place of worship for the Theban Triad, particularly the god Amun-Ra. The complex features a vast array of temples, chapels, pylons, and obelisks, showcasing the architectural prowess of ancient Egyptian civilization. Notable structures include the Great Hypostyle Hall, with its 134 massive columns, and the Sacred Lake, although the latter wasn't as impressive now as it probably was in the past.

As usual the tour to the temple is part guided and then part wandering at your own speed and our guide, Younis, was both knowledgeable and great at explaining exactly what we were seeing in this temple.



Ram headed Sphinx with a human figure under its chin – hundreds of

these statues line the long pathway that link back to Luxor Temple

The Avenue of Sphinxes, also known as the King's Festivities Road or Rams Road, is a remarkable 2.7-kilometer-long pathway that connects the Karnak Temple with the Luxor Temple in the ancient city of Thebes, now modern Luxor. This ancient road is flanked by hundreds of sphinx statues and ram-headed figures, creating a majestic and awe-inspiring sight. Originally constructed over 3,000 years ago, the avenue was used for ceremonial processions and religious festivals dedicated to the gods.



Some of the sphinxes lined up inside the temple



Looking back towards the main temple area. I did remove a couple of people from the photo, but it wasn't crowded at all

In the temple itself there are beautifully detailed columns holding up what would have been the roof of the temple in earlier years. The temple itself was not particularly crowded, and you can basically wonder between the columns and take in the views and just think about what it would have taken to build these massive structures.



Designs and carvings on some of the 134 columns in the Great Hypostyle

Hall



Detail of the designs on one of the stone blocks held up by the columns

After the tour we were taken back into Luxor to visit the museum complex and shown a short film in the basement about Luxor and the surrounding areas which was a good introduction to what we were going to see over the next day or two. And, of course, there are clean restrooms there as well!

We meet the MS Antares

With that it was time to finally meet the Antares itself docked alongside the Nile in Luxor. The Antares is a much older ship than all of the other boats that Viking uses on the Nile as it was built in 2007 and renovated in 2018. It has a truly magnificent interior with everything decorated in distinctive wood – reminiscent of the Agatha Christie story, Murder on the Nile! The rooms themselves are much larger than you'll find on a traditional Viking cruise boat.



Our cabin on the Antares. Off to the left is the dressing area with two wardrobes and small desk plus the bathroom

As this picture shows you get the bedroom and a sitting area, but also a dressing area including two wardrobes and a desk for writing your letters

home and a bathroom with a step into bath rather than a separate shower.

Lunch was served on arrival and as is common on these types of boat everyone sits and eats at around the same time. The dress code is reasonably relaxed especially during the day and if you are late coming into dinner because you have only just got back from a trip it seems to be perfectly acceptable to have a quick wash and then turn up in the restaurant in your regular outdoor clothes. The Antares only holds 62 guests, and we were split into two groups for all of our tours and excursions, and you stay with the same group of thirty people or so for every excursion. This is great because you really get to know the people in your group as well as the guide who escorts you and stays with you on every excursion throughout the tour in Egypt.

The Temple of Luxor

After a rest in the afternoon, we were out again on a coach in the late afternoon to visit the Luxor Temple which is at the other end of the long path from Karnak.



The Avenue of Sphinxes heading towards Karnak Temple at sunset

The timing of this visit was to see most of the temple in the last light of the afternoon and then continue the visit after sunset when the temple is illuminated against the dark night sky.

The Temple of Luxor was constructed around 1400 BC and was dedicated to the rejuvenation of kingship. It played a significant role in the Opet Festival, where the statues of Amun, Mut, and Khonsu were paraded from Karnak to Luxor. Unlike other temples in Thebes, Luxor Temple was not dedicated to a specific deity but rather to the divine aspect of the pharaoh.

Over the centuries, various pharaohs, including Amenhotep III, Tutankhamun, and Ramesses II, contributed to its expansion and embellishment. During the Roman era, the temple complex served as a fortress and administrative center. From the Middle Ages, the population of Luxor had settled in and around the temple. Due to this, centuries of rubble had accumulated, to the point where there was an artificial hill some 50 feet in height. The Luxor Temple had begun to be excavated in 1884 but were sporadic until 1960. Over time, accumulated rubbish of the ages had buried three quarters of the temple which contained the courts and colonnades which formed the nucleus of the Arab half of the modern village. Not only was there rubbish, but there were also barracks, stores, houses, huts, pigeon towers, which needed to be removed in order to excavate the site and there still exists a working mosque within the temple which was never removed. This temple is dominated by two enormous marble sculptures of King Ramesses II which sit on thrones on either side of the entrance to the temple. [Courtesy of Wikipedia]



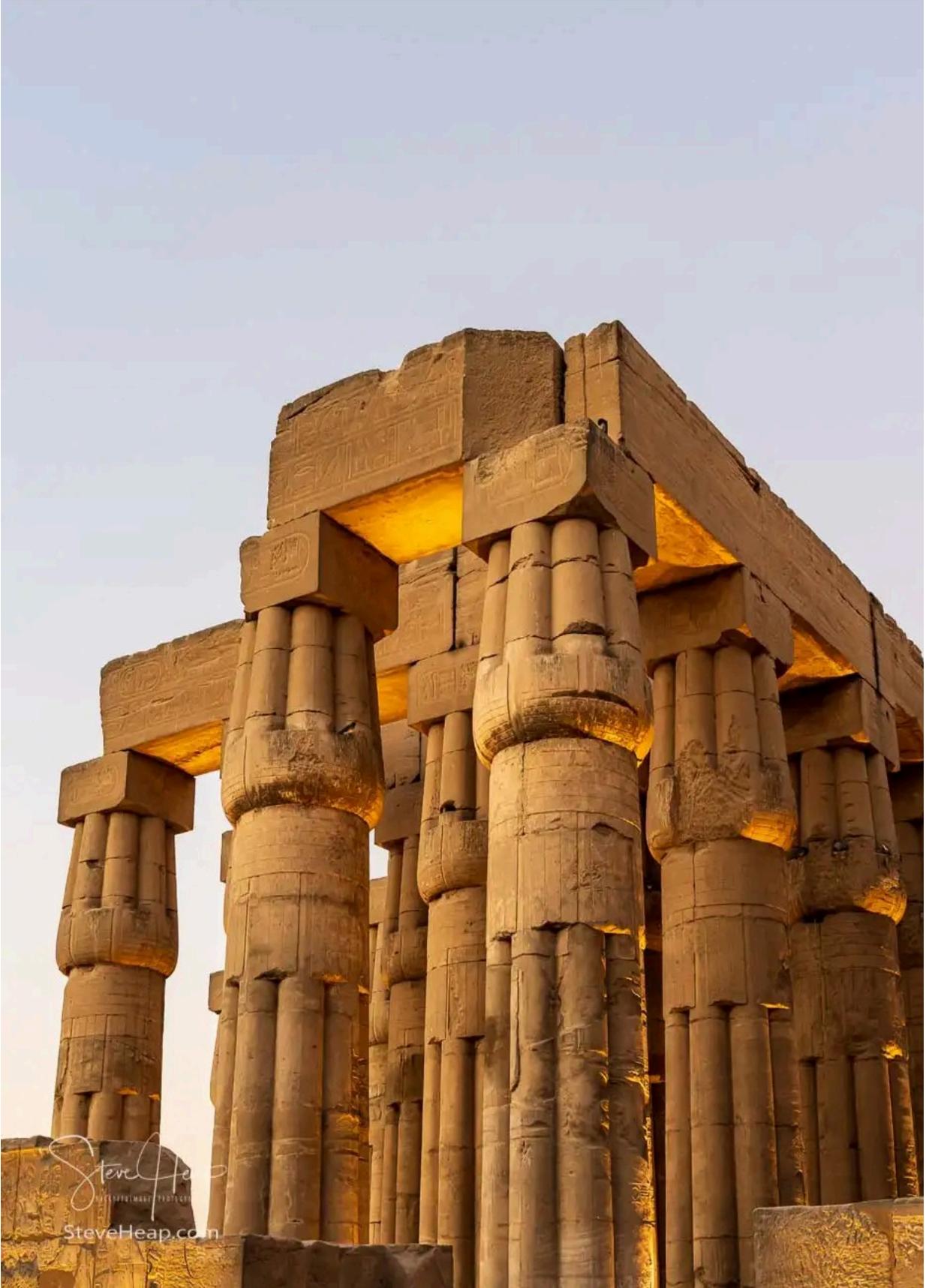
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You can judge the size of the statue by the tiny figure in the bottom left



A massive stone statue of Ramesses II stands in Luxor temple, showcasing intricate carvings under the warm glow of the setting sun.

What amazes me about these statues is that they are carved in one piece in hard stone brought many miles up the Nile. And the detail of the anatomy is fantastic – you can see the sinews and muscles carved into the limbs of the king.



Columns holding up the massive stones forming the roof of the temple

The columns of the temple are extremely well preserved with carvings covering every surface. It is certainly dramatic as the light levels fall and you start to see these objects lit by spotlights from below.



Columns illuminated at night falls

Alongside the front wall is also an Obelisk carved with symbols. The matching one to this is in Paris.



Hieroglyphics cover every surface of the massive obelisk by the front wall
of the temple



The final scene before leaving the temple of Luxor

A fantastic end to the day seeing this temple at night and we returned to the boat to a well-deserved dinner that evening. And, as is not unusual for this cruise, an early start awaits us for the hot air balloon ride before dawn!

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Hot Air Balloons and the cruise to Qena

The title above only gives a fraction of what we did this first full day on the MS Antares! Of course, we awoke early (3am sticks in my mind) for the balloon ride over the tombs and monuments on the West bank of the Nile River. This is one of the more expensive excursions and there are certainly cheaper ways to book the same activity through local travel companies, but timing is pretty tight as the ship sets sail for Qena as soon as the group is back on board. We didn't think it was worth taking that risk.

Ballooning over the desert

The usual coaches take you a few miles up the river to clamber into small boats that chug (sometimes a lot of exhaust fumes!) across the river to catch the small modern coaches that drive you to the enormous landing field used to launch balloons every day of the week. I don't know exactly how many balloons take off each morning – perhaps 30 or so – and so the number of small vans used to transport people to the site must be around 100. Even though there is nothing really to do on arrival but wait until final approval is given for that day's flight, the bus drivers still feel the need to overtake each other in the 20-minute drive to the field. The Viking baskets hold 24-28 people plus the pilot and you are helped to climb over the edge of the basket either under your own steam or with as much help as you like.



Awaiting your turn to climb into the basket for the pre-dawn take-off for the hot-air balloon ride over the desert

You are told that no cameras other than phones are allowed (the risk of dropping a heavy camera on someone below is probably the reason) but you are allowed to take a small backpack with you. Of course, you know the next step – you can take out a camera from the backpack once you are airborne. Definitely not before! I found a 24-105mm lens to be perfect for the wider shots plus closer focus on individual sights below. It is very dark when you take off though – it will stretch the technical capabilities of a camera.



Hot-air balloons rising into the air from the take-off site

The pilots seem to have a great ability to turn the balloons in the sky to give everyone a good view of the various sights and also choose to fly at different altitudes to both move into that good position and also get a much broader perspective over the same area. Having had a share in the

hot-air balloon many year ago, I know how difficult it is to try to go in a particular direction – the wind is in charge! There is some heat from the flames as the balloon is climbing, but it is not too bad. We took hats, but really they were not necessary, and we look a little stupid in the photos and videos that you are offered by the professional team that film you from leaving the boat all the way through to a landing. They splice previously taken footage of the sights you see from the balloon into the video, and you can get a USB stick as well as online access the next day. Very well organized and not too expensive.



The row of white vans that are used to transport you from the river to the launch site and also back to the boat after the flight



Balloons in flight as the sun rises over Luxor and its warm light illuminates

the mountains

You are in the air when the sun rises, but I've never found that to be particularly interesting – there is smog in the distance and the sun comes up, but nothing very magical happens when that occurs. The more magical part is the light giving you much more interesting views towards the mountains, in my view.



The Temple of Hatshepsut is quite close to the launch site and almost every balloon gets somewhat close to it



With increasing altitude, you see over the first mountain range to the Valley of the Kings immediately behind and further west into the Sahara

Landing in a hot air balloon can be a bit tricky with the wind taking it wherever it wants, but not here! The farmland surrounds the area between desert and river is used for landing, but the teams that helped launch the balloon are there with their trucks and grab hold of a rope dropped by the pilot and pull the balloon into a smoother area and then the team pulls hard to bring the balloon down to earth so gently you hardly know you have landed. Then it is more help to disembark and get into the vans for the return to the ship which uses one of the brand-new bridges across the Nile to make good time as by then we are ready for breakfast!

Sailing North to Qena

This will not apply to everyone taking this cruise. We were the final cruise in 2024 (end October to early November) to sail downstream (north) to Qena as the river level is lowered in the winter to allow dredging and clearing of canals and other waterways and so later cruises use coaches to drive up to Qena. There is nothing you can do about it, but I found this stretch of the river to be interesting almost all the way between the cities. For some reason it is much calmer which gives many reflections, but also the people along the river don't see cruise boats very often and so are more excited and interested in watching us sail by!



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Landscape & Nature Photography
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Reflections of a small sailboat distorted by the wake from our ship

Everywhere you look, things are going on, on the banks and on the river itself. There are no crossings away from the larger cities and so small rowboats with impossible heavy and clumsy oars are everywhere being used for transport, fishing and just enjoyment.



Crossing the River Nile in the section between Luxor and Qena



Catching the fish with a long net dragged behind the row boat

The Temple of Dendera

By midafternoon, we were in Qena and the coaches met us once again to take the short drive to the Temple of Dendera. Here is what my AI co-pilot has to say about it!

The Temple of Dendera, located in the Dendera Temple complex in Egypt, is one of the best-preserved ancient Egyptian temples. Dedicated to Hathor, the goddess of love, music, and motherhood, the temple's construction began during the Ptolemaic period under Ptolemy XII Auletes in 54 BCE and continued through the Roman era. The temple complex features a series of structures, including the main temple of Hathor, a sacred lake, and a sanatorium. The site also contains inscriptions and reliefs that provide valuable insights into the religious practices and daily life of ancient Egyptians. The Dendera Temple complex stands as a testament to the architectural and artistic achievements of ancient Egypt, attracting visitors from around the world.

That is close enough to what I remember our guide telling us!

This is one of the less well visited temples and that afternoon, we were the only ones in attendance (besides the usual shopkeepers that are always present at these monuments).



Walkway to the Temple of Dendera near Qena in Egypt

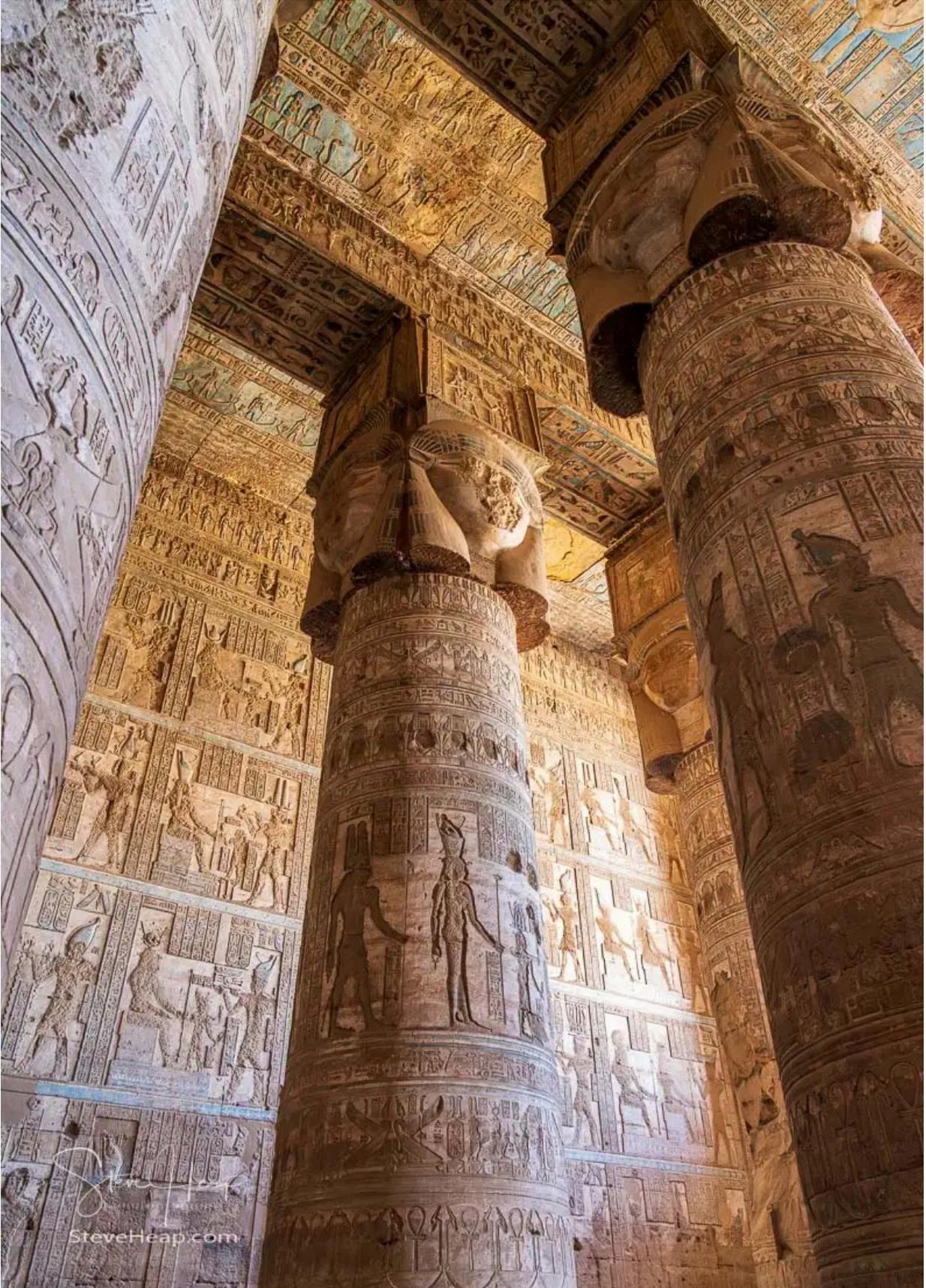
This temple has a fully enclosing roof and is fully decorated on all surfaces. What is amazing here is that for centuries, local people have just used this building as a place to live and cook away from the elements

outside and so when it was excavated, most of the interior was black – covered with the smoke and burned fat from countless fires and meals in the building. It was only a few years ago – less than 10, I think, that the conservators in Egypt finally worked out a way to remove the smoke and grime without damaging the carvings and paintwork underneath. This image of part of the stone ceiling shows a small black square that was left untreated and then the rest is the paintwork that hasn't been seen for over 2000 years.



The carvings and paintings on the ceiling of Dendera with one square left uncleaned

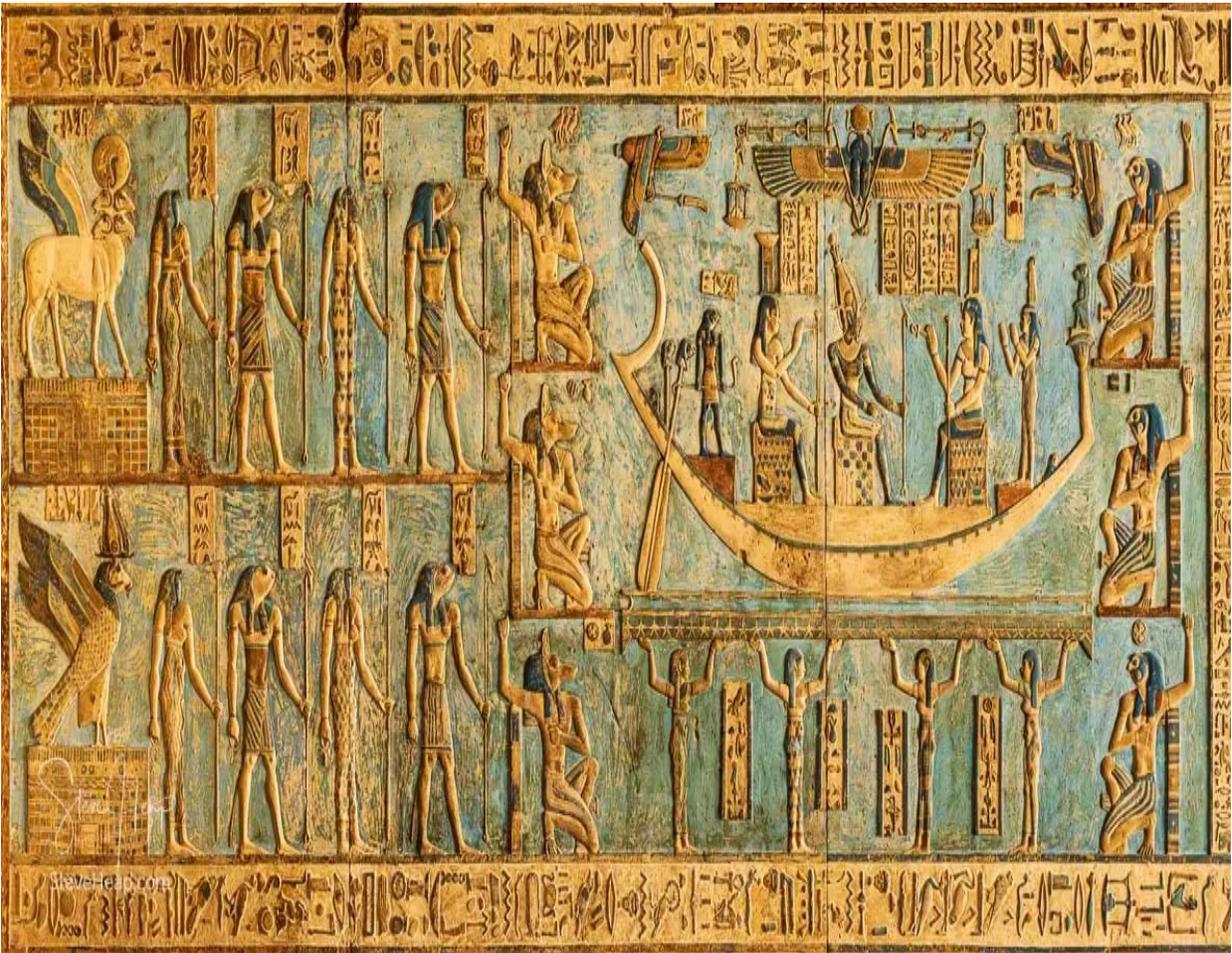
And now the temple is magnificent with solid carved columns and these wonderfully decorated ceilings:



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Columns and decorated walls leading to the magnificent ceilings

Besides the obvious questions about how on earth they got these massive pieces of stone to site and then constructed into this solid building, they then had to carve and paint all these surfaces (including the ceiling presumably lying on their backs). And they had to do this in almost dark conditions with just oil lamps for illumination!



Detail of one section of the ceiling running the length of the temple

Having braved the merchants and their \$10 offerings, we were on the coach and back on the ship around 5pm ready to sail back to Luxor overnight. Even then, in the slowly developing twilight, there were things to see on the river – the lifeblood of Egypt:



Watching the world go by on the MS Antares



An evening spent fishing at sunset



Reflections in the water as we slowly slipped upstream towards Luxor



The end of a great day on the river

For the photographers among you, many of the river shots were taken with a 100-400mm lens – it really came into its own in this section of the cruise. After the sun finally set, it was time, once again, for dinner and great discussions about everything we had seen in a very long day.

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Valley of the Kings and the cruise to Esna

Another fun packed day on the Viking Antares as we spend the day touring the Valley of the Kings and then make our way upstream on the River Nile to Esna.

For the first time in what seems like forever, we don't have to get up at 3am! This morning was far more leisurely as the coach to the Valley of the Kings didn't depart until 8am! With the new bridge over the Nile, the journey is now much shorter, and we were at the entrance to the tombs in less than 30 minutes. After showing our tickets and passing through the normal security arrangements, you are taken on large golf carts to the tombs themselves. To say this is a dry and unforgiving area is an understatement. You can see why the Ancient Egyptians had such an out of the way place for their burial tombs although with teams of builders living their lives creating these tombs, it must have been hard to keep it a secret.



Walkway to the main tombs in the Valley of the Kings

We were here in early November and the weather was pleasantly hot, but as you can see, there is not a great deal of shade around. As usual, Viking provide a lot of bottled water! We were provided with tickets that let you

in a certain number of tombs, plus the much more expensive Seti I tomb. Our guides did a great job suggesting which tombs to choose and in which order, after which you are on your own. Of course, the tomb of Tutankhamun is a favorite and still includes his mummy in a glass cage. The attendant will shine his torch on the mummy (for a tip) which certainly helps with the lighting.



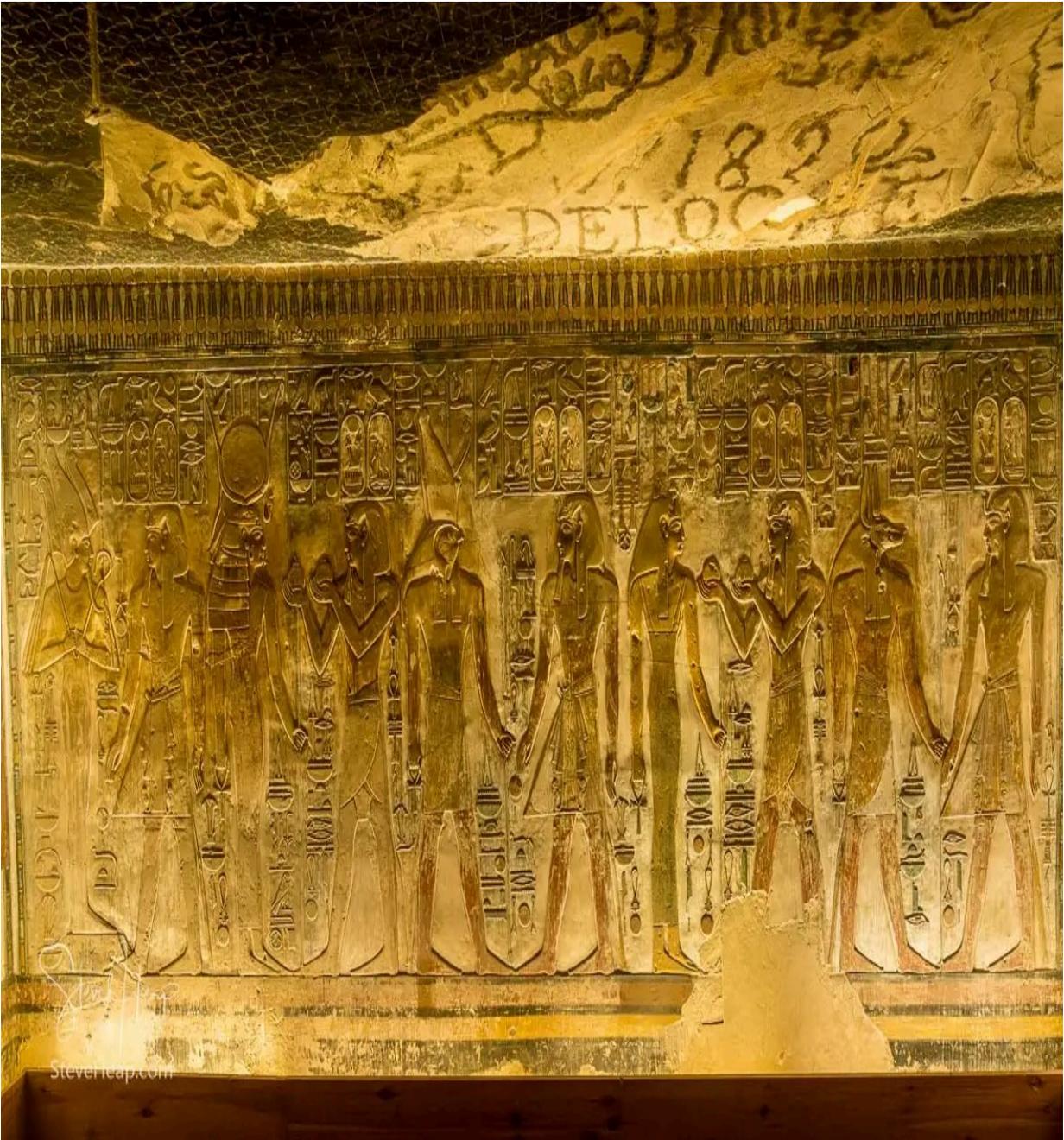
Mummified head of Tutankhamen in display in his royal tomb Valley of the Kings

The decorations in the tomb are perhaps not as extensive as some of the others and Tutankhamen died after only 9 years on the throne. He had commissioned his tomb using an existing one as the starting point, but the workers still did not have much time to create something massive. But, as we all know, the tomb was found undamaged in 1922 and was full of all the items that would have been buried with a Pharaoh in those days.



Painted decoration in KV62, royal tomb of Tutankhamen. He is the one in white at the left and right

The tomb of Seti I is by far the most extensive that we visited (and it is an extra charge that Viking paid to keep the visitors down). The decorations in here are far more complex with both carved figures on every wall as well as paint on all wall surfaces.



Wall engravings in Seti I tomb in the Valley of the Kings. This one has the added graffiti of some of the initial explorers in 1820



Detailed ornate wall painting on walls and ceiling of KV17 royal tomb for Seti I in Valley of the Kings in Luxor

Incidentally, the light levels in all the tombs is pretty low. All of these images were taken at an ISO of 12800 for the photographers among you. And, even now, work continues to explore and restore these tombs:



KV 11 is the tomb of Pharaoh Ramesses III and archeologist works behind plastic sheets to restore carvings

After a couple of hours at the site of the tombs, we left in the coaches to visit the home of Howard Carter, the archeologist who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen after years of exploration. It is small, but pretty interesting, with lots of his original work on the walls and in his office:



Antique desk and belongings of Howard Carter who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun in Luxor

Then we were off to visit our next massive temple – the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut which stands majestically against the dramatic cliffs, on the other side of which is the Valley of the Kings.



Tourists walk to the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut which stands majestically against the dramatic cliffs

This perhaps looks a little more impressive than it is (although to be honest it is hard to believe that all of this was built so long ago). There is much less of a building into the rock face and so the rooms at each level are not actually very deep. However, the scale of some of the statuary is very impressive.

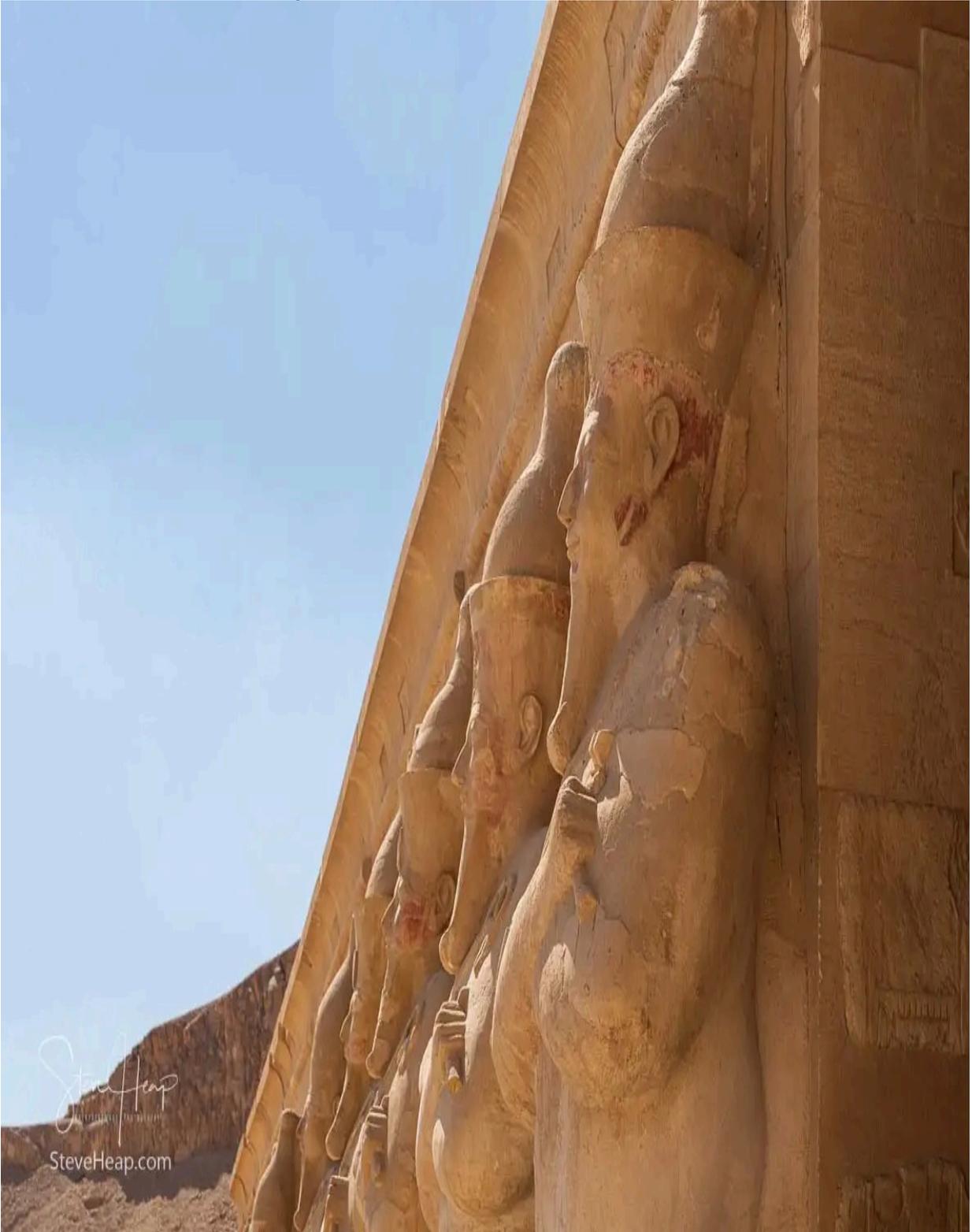


Sphinx statue in the grounds of Hatshepsut temple near Luxor, Egypt with stray dog inn the shade



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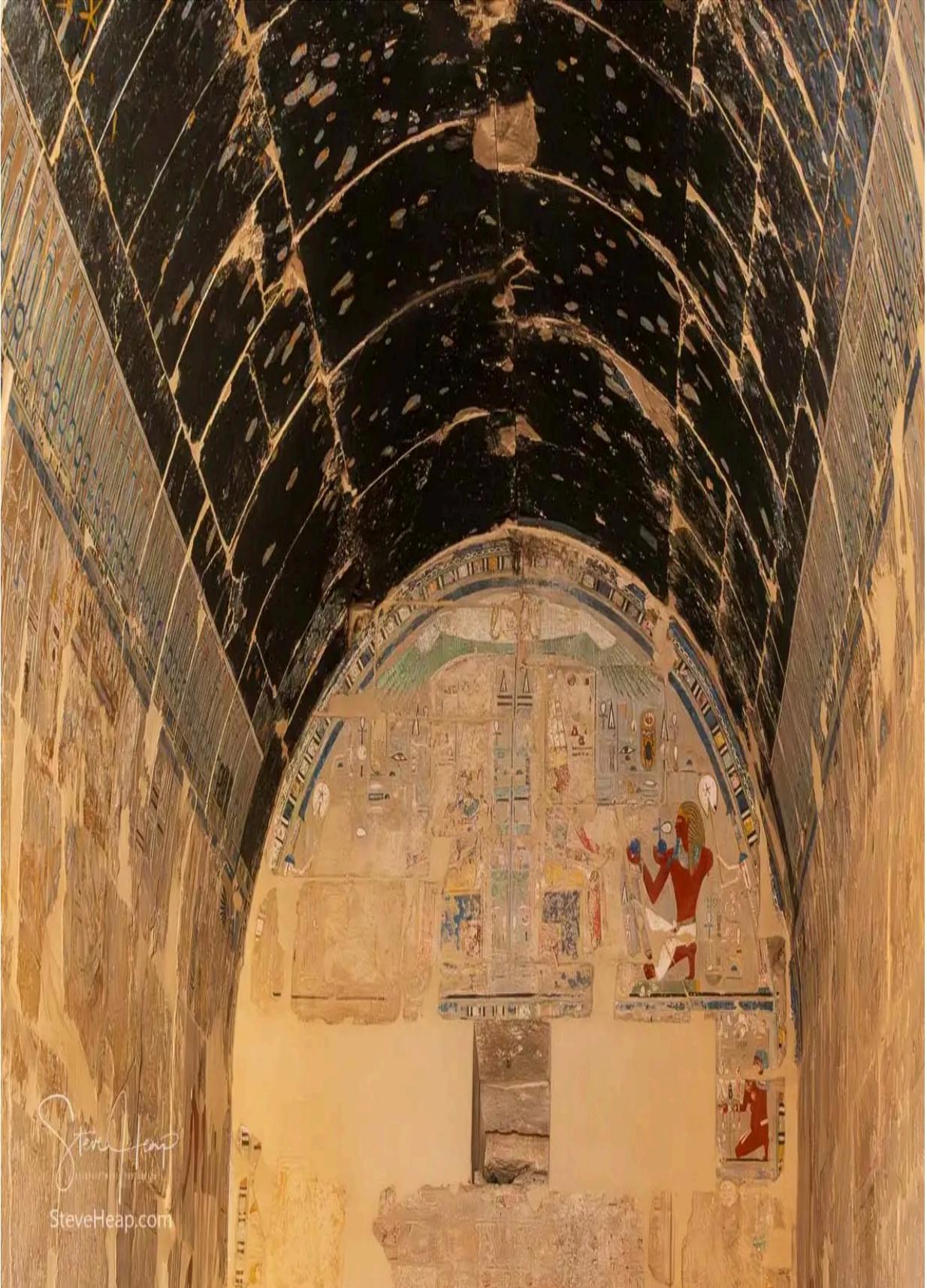
Large statue of Falcon god Horus at Hatshepsut Temple near Luxor Egypt
by the columns of the Mortuary



Side view of large statues of pharoahs at Hatshepsut Temple near Luxor

Egypt by the columns of the Mortuary

The heart of the temple is the “holy of holy” room that only the top priests would have entered. You have to line up a bit for it, and if you want to miss the line, this is what it looks like (you get to see through the spaces left by others in front of you!). Nothing like as impressive as what you have just seen in the tombs!



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Detail of the wall paintings and ceiling of the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut near Luxor, Egypt.

But wait, there is more... as the old TV adverts used to say. We then went to look at the Colossi of Memnon which are all that are left of yet another massive temple. They are a bit battered now, but still very impressive.



The Colossi of Memnon are two massive stone statues of the Pharaoh
Amenhotep III

We were then driven back to ship for 1:30pm and lunch as the crew prepared to leave Luxor and start the afternoon sail to Esna on our way to Aswan. This is usually my time to wander the top deck, looking at life on the banks of the Nile. We were docked alongside a Viking sister ship – the Sobek, one of the much more modern designs of ship that Viking uses on the Nile:



Viking River Cruises ship Sobek is docked on Nile River in Luxor, Egypt

Viking always pays extra to be docked alone alongside the waterfront. Not so for other cruise lines on the Nile:



Many Nile River cruise ships are docked alongside each other along the shore of the Nile River

As we sailed south, I think some of my fellow passengers were perhaps taking a much-needed relaxation time in their cabins:



Top deck of the Viking Antares as we sailed south along the River Nile

There is always something to see along the river as it seems that everyone's life revolves around the water. This father and son had rowed a long way downstream while fishing in the river and were eyeing our boat looking for an opportunity to hitch a lift back home:



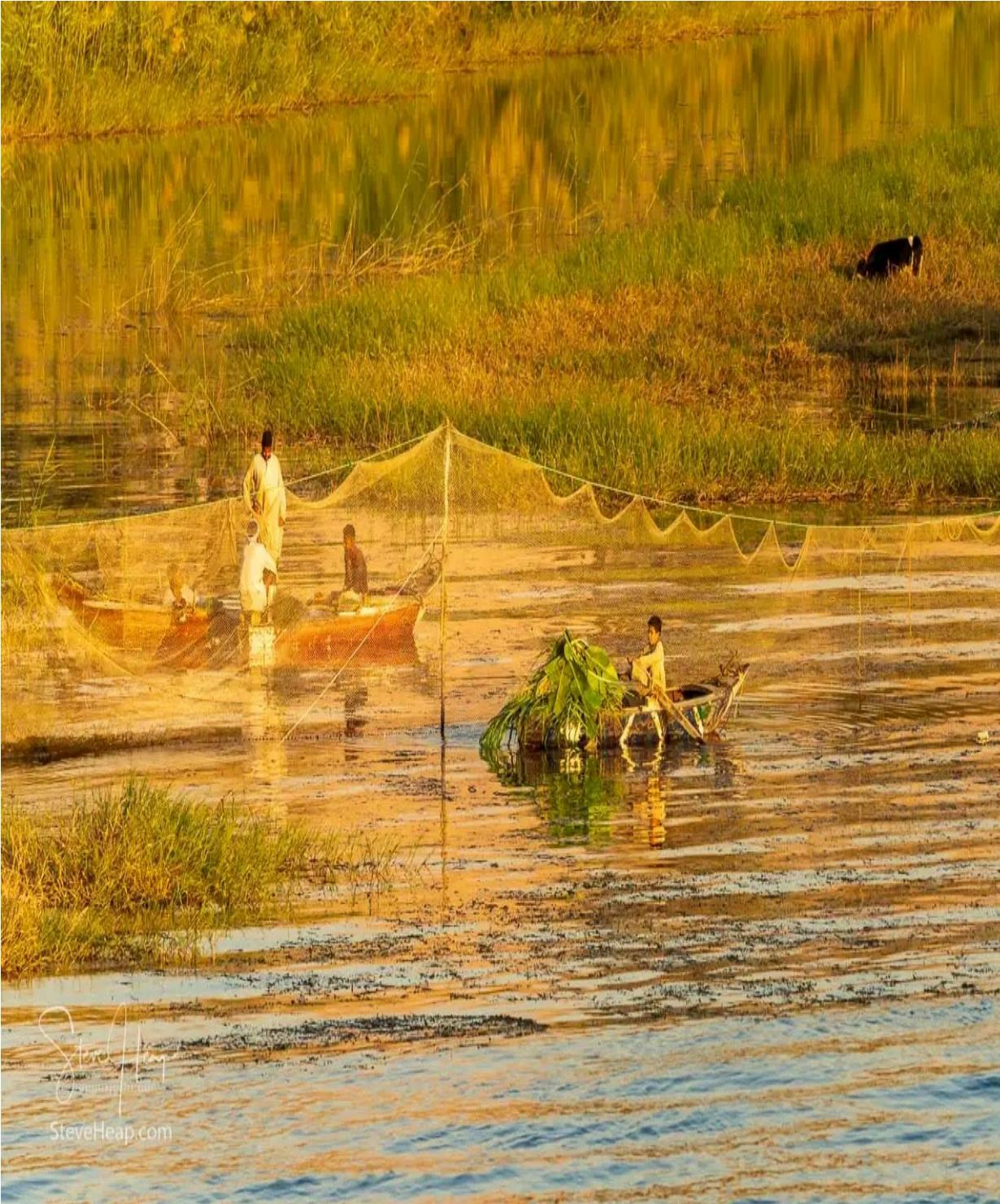
Father and son in rowing boat after an afternoon fishing on the River Nile

And then with a skillful toss of their rope, they managed to snag a hold on the lower deck and settled in for an assisted ride up the river to their home village:



Hitching a ride to sail against the river current back to their home village

Everywhere there is activity – this small boy rowing a boat packed with grass for the family’s animals as the sun started to set:



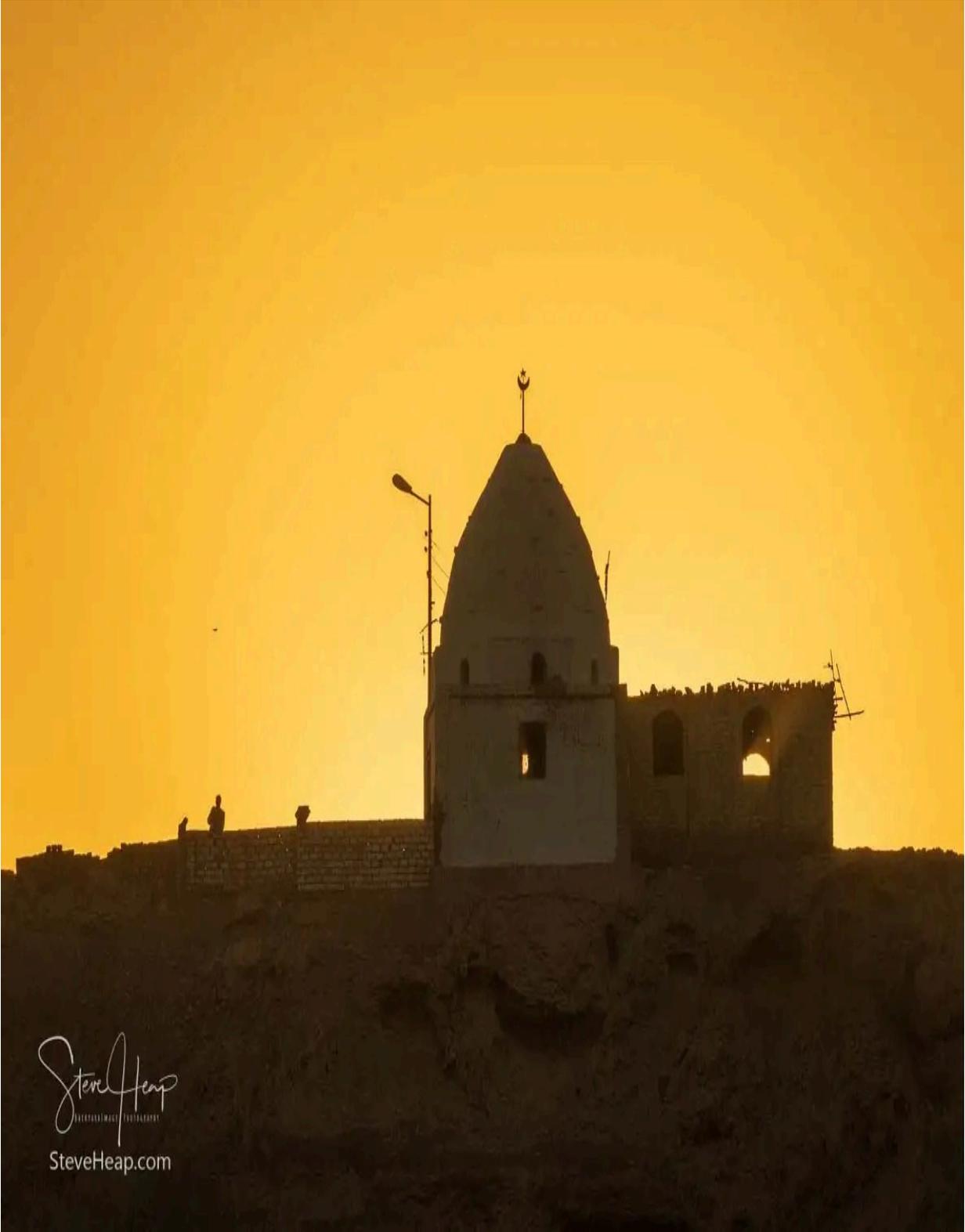
Small boy rowing a stack of grass and vegetation back to the family farm

And another small rowing boat with a child at the oars as the father relaxes against the pile of vegetation they have gathered:



A relaxing evening rowing the day's catch back home

And, finally, as the sun headed below the horizon, a chance to capture two interesting silhouettes against the bright orange sky as we readied ourselves to arrive in Esna for the next day's adventure!



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Hilltop mosque silhouetted against the setting sun on the Nile



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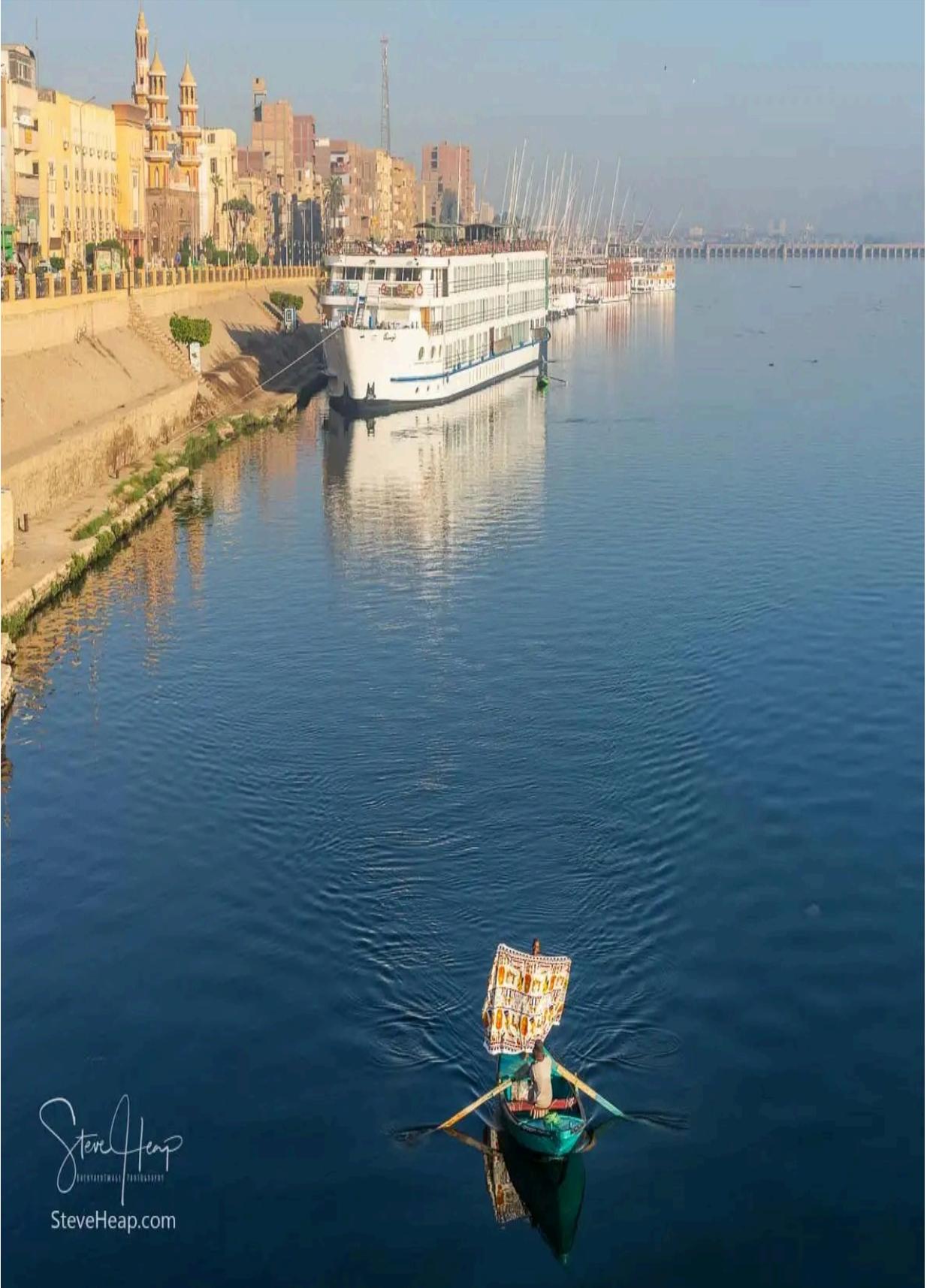
The sun finally sets behind a minaret on the banks of the Nile River

We awoke the next day docked in Esna ready for our tour of the Temple of Khnum and the sailing upstream on the Nile towards Aswan.

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Esna Temple and the cruise to Aswan

So how does a morning begin on the cruise. On this day, a relatively leisurely breakfast to be ready for an 8am departure on our tour. But of course, there is always something to see outside the boat – the arrival of a vendor in his rowing boat hoping that someone wants to buy a scarf!



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Landscape & Travel Photography
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The first vendor of the day shows off his wares to the passengers on our ship docked in Esna

The choice this morning was between a walk through the village to the Esna Temple or a walk deeper into the village to see life in this ancient place. On the second tour, you walk past the Temple (which is set deep in the ground in the center of the village having been submerged in sand for hundreds of years) but then continue (with your armed guards) into other areas of the place. We did the Temple tour, but feedback on the village walk was also very good. Some people have seen enough temples by now, although this one is one of the best-preserved temples that you will be seeing on the cruise.

The evening entertainment was going to be the Taste of Egypt and then the Nubian show, and most people are planning to dress in appropriate local clothes, and so the first part of each tour is a stroll through the market that was directly opposite the ship. We are told that if you pay more than \$15 you have paid too much, and prices did seem to be lower on the outward walk. We decided to ignore the traders on both outward and return and then we tagged along with another ship's tour and did our negotiation as though we were on the outward leg. Not sure it made much of a difference, but we did get our two costumes for \$30!



Some of the clothing on offer in the market opposite the ship in Esna

We took a slight detour on the way to the Temple to see the local tailor ironing his creations with a foot iron:



Using a foot iron to carefully press the local clothing

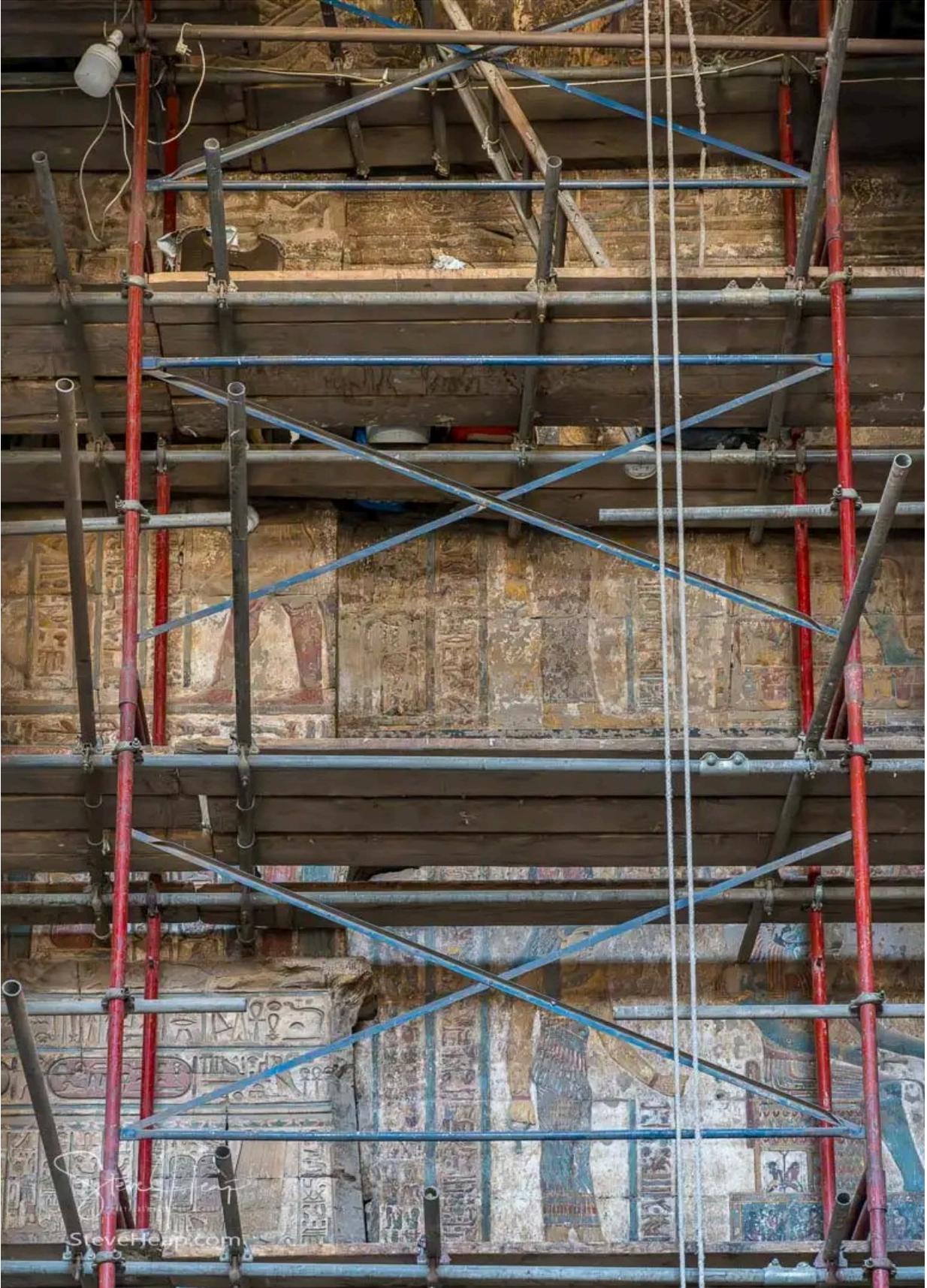
What was really impressive was how he could take a small drink of water and then spray it very finely from his lips onto the fabric to turn his iron into a steam version!

The temple is perhaps 15 minutes walk from the ship and was completely surrounded by more modern buildings. It is still being excavated, which does mean demolishing some of those adjacent buildings as originally the temple would have been in grounds as large as Dandara. Construction of this Temple of Khnum, the ram-headed creator god who fashioned humankind on his potter's wheel, was begun by Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–45 BC). The Romans added the hypostyle hall which is the only part of the temple that is excavated and can be visited today, with well-preserved carvings from as late as the 3rd century AD. As such this is significantly different to the much earlier places we had visited on previous days of the cruise.



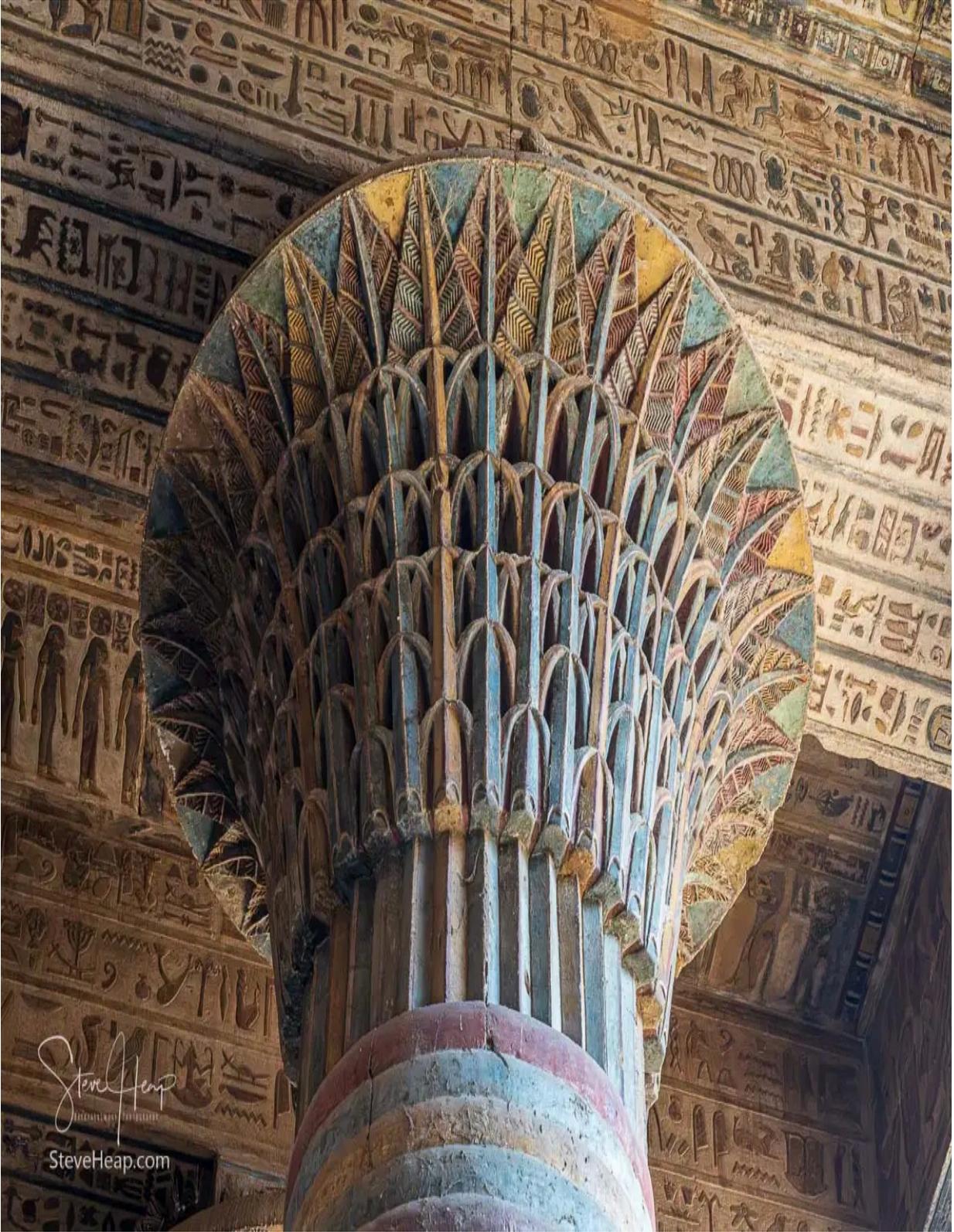
Temple of Khnum or Esna Temple still being excavated in the center of the village

The floor of the temple is about 9m (10 feet) below the current surface of the town and had been filled with sand and other debris. Of course, people lived in there as well and so the walls and ceilings were black with smoke and grease but have now largely been restored back to their original colors. Work is still going on inside cleaning and restoring some of the walls.



Restoration work continues in the Temple of Esna

Inside the temple is decorated still with hieroglyphs but with very ornate tops to the columns holding up the stone ceiling, which itself is highly decorated and painted.



Detail of the top of the columns holding up with enormous stones supporting the roof of Esna Temple



Each column has a different design in the Esna Temple

And little details are everywhere – here is a bas-relief carving of a woman giving birth to a baby on one of the walls of the temple:



Childbirth in Ancient Egypt

We had to be back on the boat ready for cast off at 10am but this still gave us plenty of time for that second trip across the road to buy our Egyptian clothing. I was happy with the basic nightshirt design, but my wife wanted something a little more special. You will have to wait to see the results!

The cruise upstream was accompanied by our friendly water-borne vendors hitching a lift on our boat so that they could sell to other boats heading down into Esna:



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Hitching a lift on our boat to get the vendors upstream ready to join new cruise boats heading to Esna

But that didn't stop them offering a special price on their wares as they sped up the river. You need to beware of looking at all interested as a folded scarf will be landing at your feet!



Tagging along with our cruise ship and still offering his wares as we cruised upstream from Esna

There was plenty of choice of new ships to sell to as we started our journey upstream and our vendors had no trouble finding a new home for the return journey.



A collection of cruise boats making their way downstream into Esna



A good aim and a steady partner are essential as they maneuver close to the paddle wheels of this cruise boat

The rest of the day was spent cruising up the river. There are, of course, some activities such as learning to make Falafel and visiting the bridge of the ship, but there so seem to be things happening all along the way:



Colorful homes (and stables?) along the riverbank just outside Esna



Ferry boat across the Nile with passengers waiting in the shade



Young boy riding his water buffalo as he leads the others up along the bank towards home as the sun starts to set



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Time for the Egyptian Dinner and Dance!

And finally, it was time to try on our Egyptian clothing and make our way to the special dinner in the restaurant celebrating Egyptian food and the performance by the Nubian Dancers who had enough enthusiasm to get everyone involved in the dancing!

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Aswan Dam, Felucca cruise and bird watching trip to Nubian Village

This breaks a little with tradition because I am covering one full day in Aswan and part of the second in this chapter.

Why the change – well, the first day of our stay in Aswan was not actually very busy, at least for the people who chose not to take the optional excursion to Abu Simbel. Those that took that tour were really impressed, I must admit. It involved a 7:30am departure to the airport, a flight to Abu Simbel airport to see the temples, which have been rebuilt stone by stone in an artificial mountain following their removal from an area that was going to be flooded by the damming of the Nile at Aswan. So, I can't personally make a recommendation as we didn't do this one, but I think it was a big mistake to not take this optional tour. Every bit of feedback I have seen and heard was very positive and a not-to-be-missed opportunity.

Instead, we were taken on a coach tour to the Aswan dam. To be honest, it is a dam – big and impressive, but not ever so interesting. This is the place where they are going to stop any photographer with a long lens – I'm not too sure what you are not supposed to photograph as the power station is right by the viewing area.



Stone commemorating the opening of the Aswan Dam with the Nile river continuing northwards towards Aswan city

We then went to a traditional market area in Aswan and to a spice shop to be given an educational talk (ie sales talk) about the different spices they have available. It is certainly colorful, and they have an endless variety, but we thought that although it sounded reasonably priced, things did cost considerably more when it came to the weighing and checkout. So beware and make sure you know what you are buying.



Colorful spices in the traditional market in Aswan

You can also look around the market here, but the roads are narrow and busy with traffic. Our police guard worked hard keeping us safe from the

passing traffic here and so we didn't spend much time outside the spice shop before reboarding the coach and heading to the water.

Down on the riverbank in Aswan our group boarded a couple of Felucca boats to sail under wind power around the narrow harbor in Aswan. Downstream of here, the Nile is wide and slow, but from Aswan south to the dam it gets narrower and faster with large granite outcroppings rising above the surface.



Working hard to raise the sail on our Felucca boat for the cruise around
Aswan



The felucca has seen many years of service, I think!

As the picture shows, these boats appear to have served for many years but overall, this was an interesting and informative way to see Aswan from the water. Going upstream was relatively easy with the wind driving us along the river.



Moving rapidly upstream with the wind filling the sails of the felucca

One interesting thing to note in this photo is the stacked cruise boat on the right. This seems to be the normal way that Nile cruises dock in Aswan – very different from the approach that Viking take as you will see shortly. As we sailed south, we passed the famous Old Cataract Hotel. The **Cataract Hotel** was built in 1899 by Thomas Cook to house European travelers to Assouan (as Aswan was then known). Its guests have included Winston Churchill, Howard Carter, Jimmy Carter, Princess Diana and Agatha Christie who set portions of her novel Death on the Nile at the hotel.



Felucca sailing past the dock for the Old Cataract Hotel in Aswan

Wherever you look on this cruise, there are colorful scenes. This was on the opposite side of the Nile on one of the islands in the river.



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Colorful tourist ferry and felucca docked on an island in the Nile in Aswan

The journey back to the dock was slower as the felucca tacked from side to side very professionally to make their way back against the wind and finally, we took the coach back to our boat for lunch. That was then it for the day – a relaxing afternoon with the Abu Simbel travelers arriving back around 3pm.



Viking Antares docked on its own in Aswan

The next morning was the start of a much busier day with a bird spotting tour in a small boat heading to the Nubian Village, then the Philae Temple

and Papyrus Institute followed by our departure down the Nile towards Kom Ombo. In this article, I'll just cover that first boat trip.

Our guide was also a very skilled bird photographer and so was able to spot and name birds as we sailed up the riverside. I'm not sure just how well other guides would have handled that, but I heard no complaints from the other group in their boat.



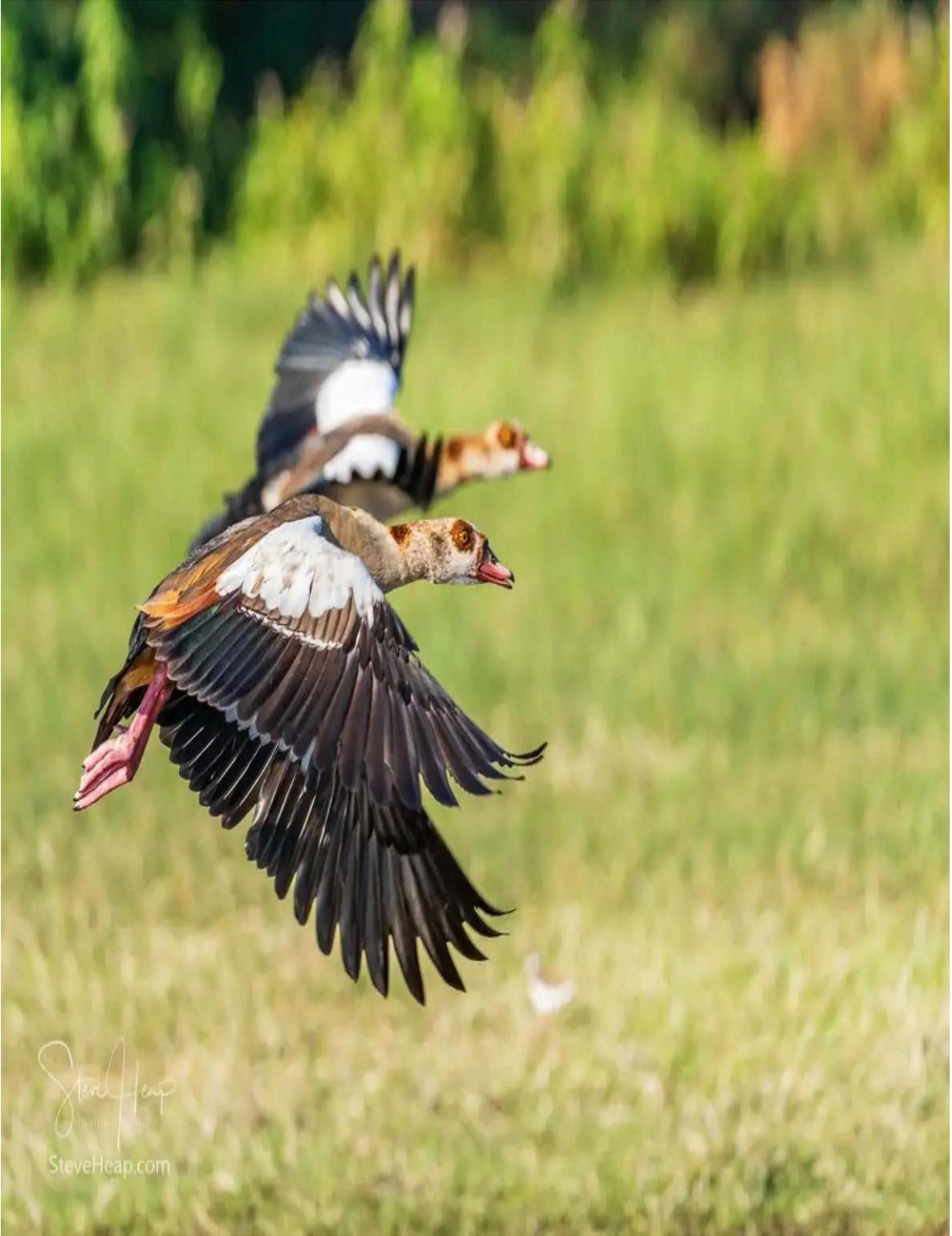
Departing on our bird watching trip to the Nubian Village

We had a smaller boat with an outboard motor that was difficult to start after each stop for a little bird watching. The Nile gets pretty fast moving as you will see, but each time the motor eventually started with a blast of fumes, and we managed to safely get to our destination!



Riverside view of the MS Antares docked in Aswan

Although we were on this cruise before the main arrival of birds on their migrations, we still managed to see quite a range of birds as we slowly sailed up the riverbank. Whenever we spotted some interesting birds, we would stop the engine and float slowly to avoid disturbing them, and my longer 100-400mm lens really came into its own for these images.



Two Egyptian geese taking off from the river Nile



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PHOTOGRAPHY

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Two Egyptian geese on the riverbank of the Nile



Grey heron resting on the rocks by the riverbank



Water kingfisher on small branched by the side of the Nile river



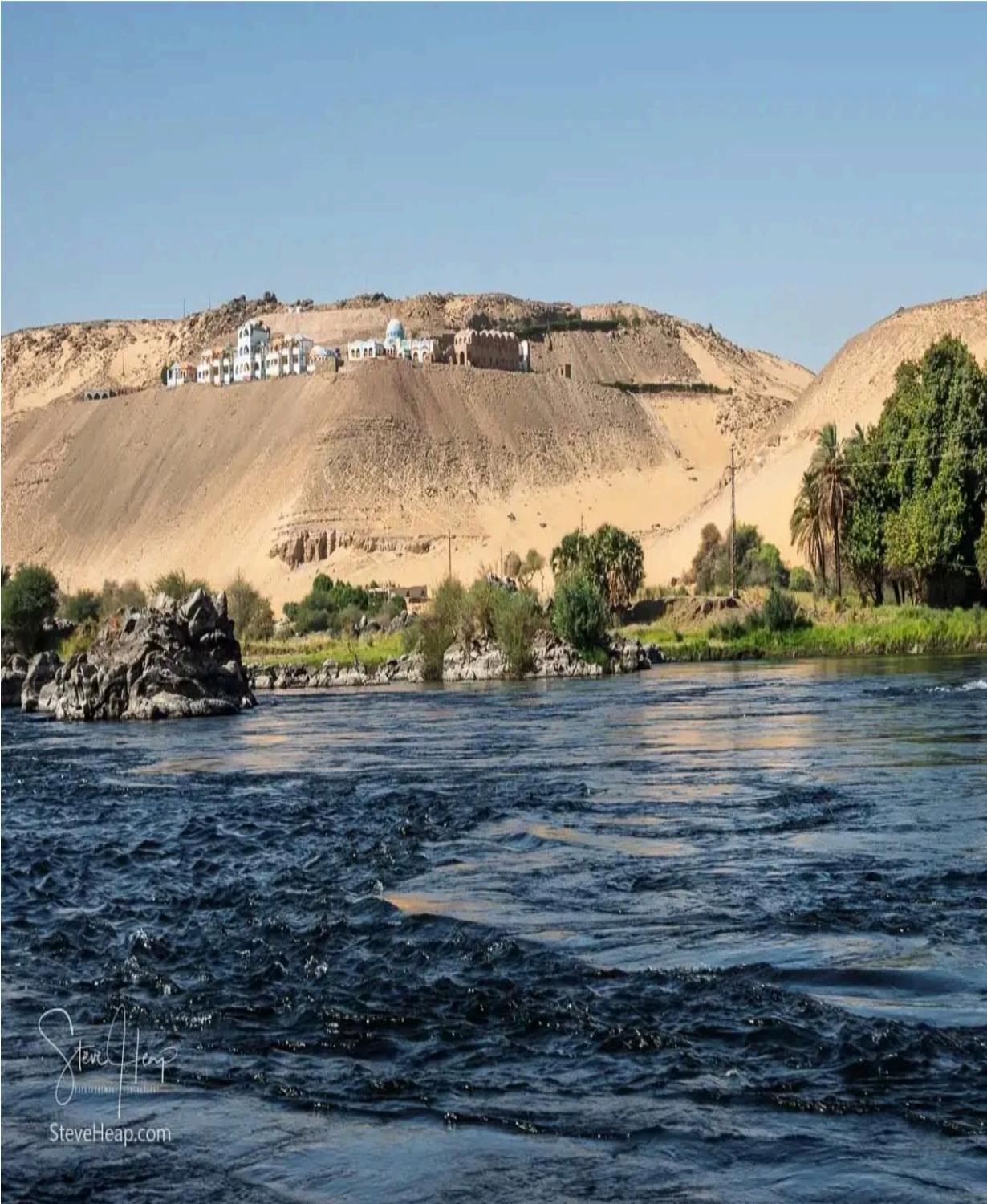
Purple heron hiding in the tall grass by the Nile river in Aswan



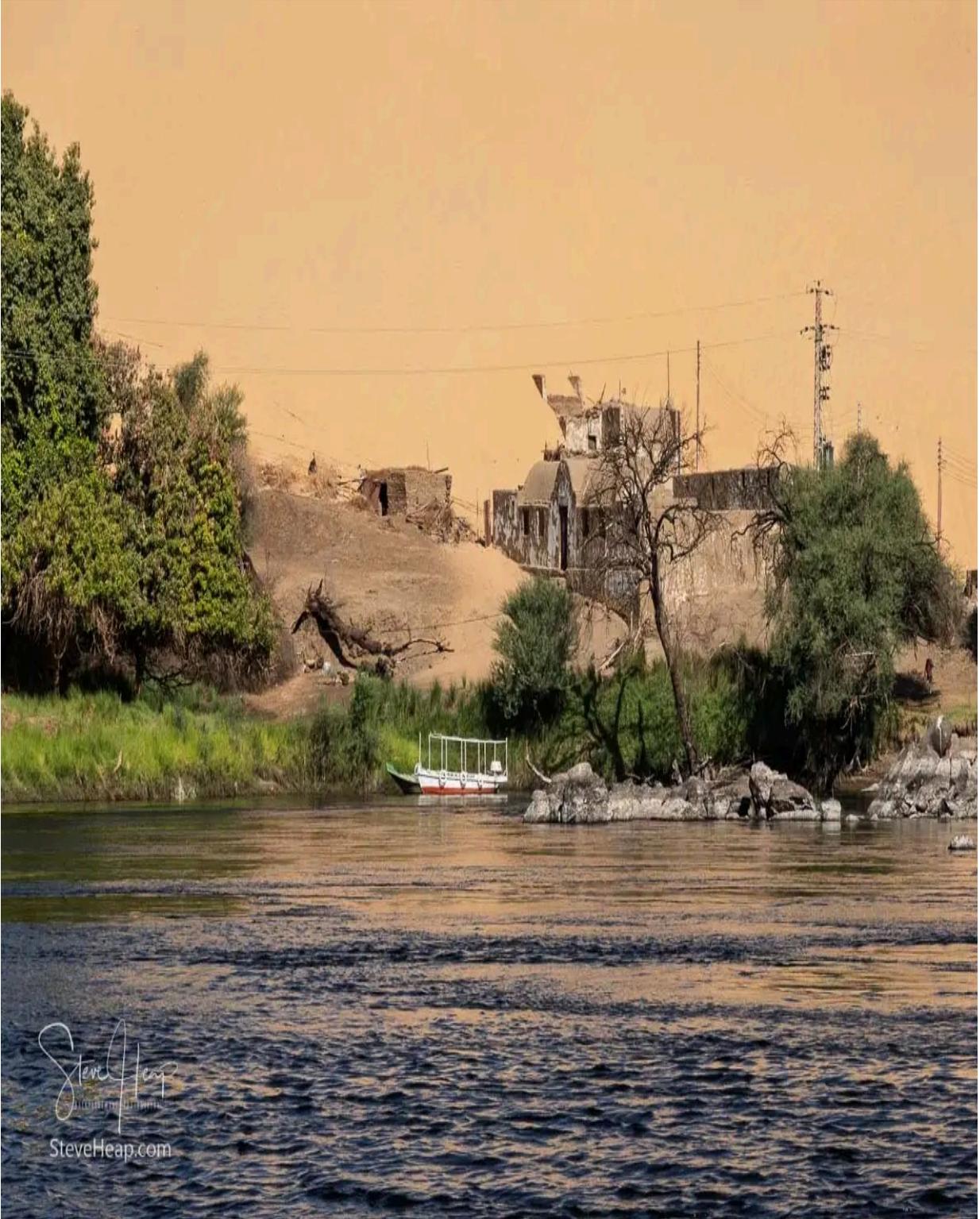
Grey heron taking off as we approach in our tour boat

As we sailed further upstream, the river become narrower and more turbulent with views of a tourist resort high on the sandy hills alongside

the Nile:



Rapids in the Nile river with a tourist resort high on the hills



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Small buildings on the shore dominated by the sand of the Sahara



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Even here, there are opportunities for a little shopping!



Or a camel ride, although the one on the left seems a little bored



The other half of our group as we approached the Nubian village

Finally, we approached the Nubian village and the next part of our adventure – meeting the crocodiles and then on to another temple!

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Temples at Philae and Kom Ombo

I've already covered a little of Day 2 in Aswan in the previous chapter where I talked about the bird watching cruise as we were headed towards the Nubian Village in the more rapidly flowing part of the Nile River. Many of the Nubian people originally lived further upstream alongside the Nile, but their villages and homes would be flooded as the Aswan high dam was constructed and so the government at the time arranged for new villages to be built around Aswan and this visit was for us to see what life is now like (as far as that means anything with tourists walking around your village every day!)

We landed and first visited a Nubian home to see the crocodiles that they have an affinity for. You might be pleased to note that the crocodiles here are actually quite small and have their jaws securely fastened – good enough for a photo opportunity!



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PHOTOGRAPHER
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Crocodile on the head in the Nubian home near Aswan

The homes here are decorated with impressive wall murals that perhaps show life as it used to be:



Wall mural painting on the inside wall of the Nubian home we visited

There were some interesting views from the rooftop balcony of the river which at this stage is far from wide and slow moving – it now flows quickly with many rocky islands blocking its progress. After this visit

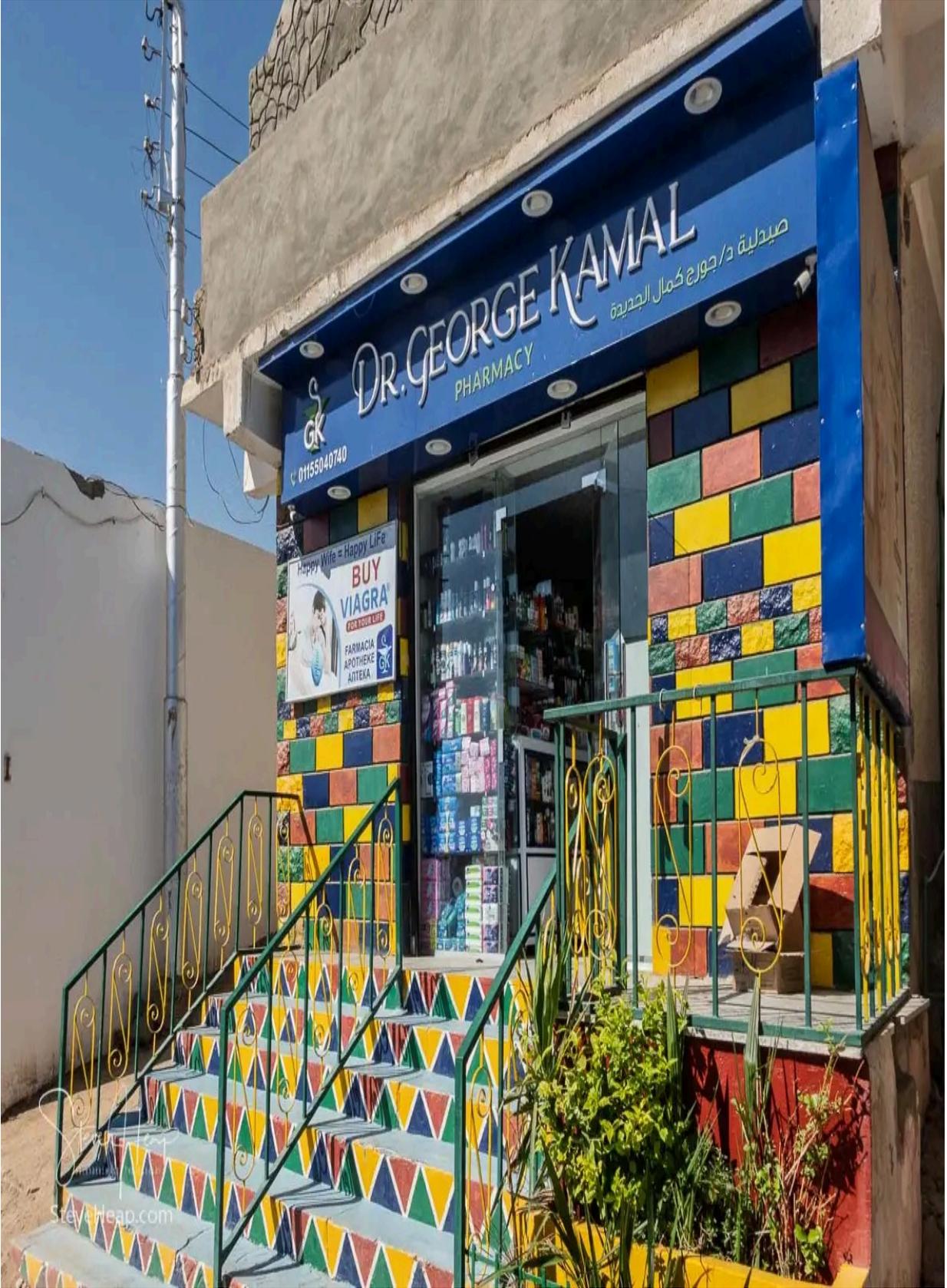
(dollars happily accepted and change given if needed!), we made our way down the main shopping street towards the school. Not much time to stop and shop although that didn't stop the shopkeepers from trying. Interesting to see some locals making their way through the town on camels as we walked along:



Steve Heap
PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER
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Locals riding camels as they made their way down the main shopping street in the village

And very interesting to see a brightly colored pharmacy – not for the tourists, I'm guessing, with some interesting posters for useful medications:



The local pharmacy offering various medications for improving life in the Nubian village

With that, we reached the school and were entertained by the children demonstrating their learning and were lucky to have a priest with our group who was more than happy to lead the children in some songs in Spanish!



Children in the local school in the Nubian village near Aswan

Back on the coach, we headed this time to the old dam that had been built across the Nile around a century ago to visit the Philae Temple. This monument has a most unusual history. Built on a small island near the first cataract of the Nile, it was threatened with submersion when the British built the Low Dam in Aswan in 1902. This dam was raised a couple of times and so by the 1930s, the temple was submerged in the lake for much of the year, only reappearing when the sluices were opened in the dam. The construction of the High Dam between 1960 to 1970, the temple would have been totally lost and so a rescue effort organized by the UNESCO member countries awarded contracts to take the temple down stone by stone and move it to a newly leveled and nearby island of Agilkia. The renovated temple monuments were cleaned and are now available year-round for visitors. You get there in smallish boats that leave constantly from the harbor near the Low Dam, but as you can see from this next picture, this was far from the busiest it can get here and shows how tourism has been impacted by the troubles in the Middle East:



Small boats awaiting the arrival of more tourists to the Philae Temple and the nearby resorts in the lake

You first see the temple from the water as you approach, and it does look magnificent in its new location.



Philae Temple near the Low Dam in Aswan Egypt

You land on the piers by the island and I think we had around 90 minutes here. As usual, we start with a tour with our guides and then we can explore at leisure. I'm always looking for interesting little details and here

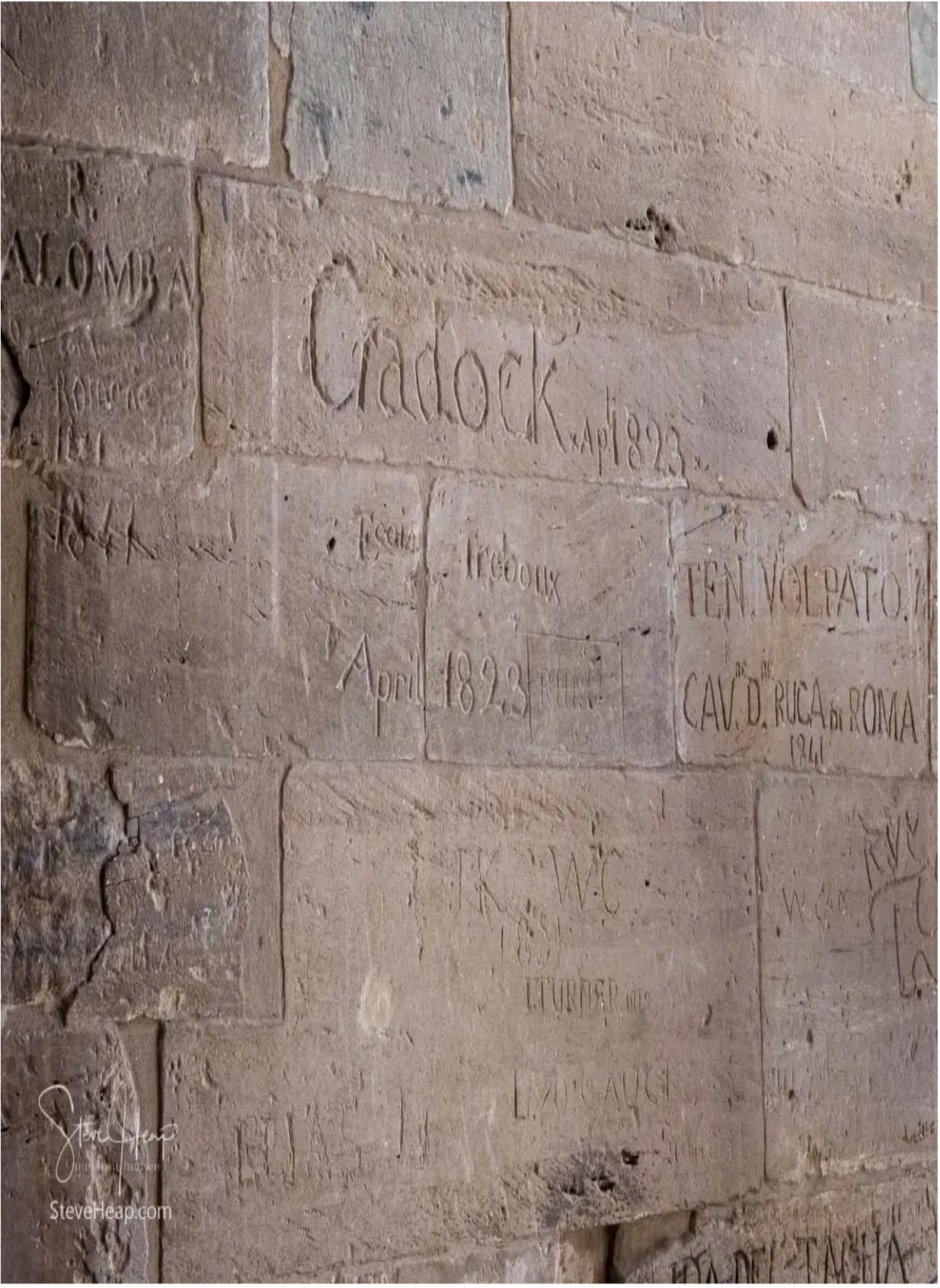
is a bird that found a nice use for one of the holes in the surface of the facade!



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Bird in its nest in the wall of the Philae Temple

Another intriguing detail was the section of the temple inscribed with the names of the visitors from the 19th Century. Graffiti artists have always been with us, I guess.



R.
ALOMBA
1814

Craddock April 1823

1044

Frederick
Frederick
April 1823

TEN VOLPATO
CAV. D. RUCA DI ROMA
1841

TK WC
1851
LUTHER

L. V. AUG.

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TAZIA

Names of visitors from the 1800s scratched and carved into the walls of
the temple

As usual, these temples turn out to be significantly larger than you
expect:



Facade of the Philae Temple in the lake formed by the Low Dam of the Nile at Aswan

Also on the island is a separate temple, known as Trajan's Kiosk after the Roman Emperor in about 100AD. It had also been on the island of Philae and moved before the final flooding:



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Trajan's Kiosk named after the Roman Emperor in around 100 AD

After a quick trip to the restrooms under the gift shop (\$1 needed!), we boarded our boats and headed back to the coaches. There was a stop at a Papyrus museum (store) where we did learn how papyrus is made and why it lasts so long, but there is plenty of time to buy one of the many styles on display! Then back to the Antares in time for the departure at 1:30pm downstream towards Kom Ombo.

If you think you have seen temples, there are more! The cruise north is quite pleasant and restful, and we arrived around 4:30pm. The Kom Ombo temple is located alongside the Nile and so you see it as you approach the small town:



The Temple of Kom Ombo alongside the Nile

Here we docked a short distance from the Temple itself, and our plan here was to visit as the sun started setting so that we would have the final part of our tour at sunset and dusk. The temple has some dramatic elements as it is lit by the low sunlight:



Side view of the Temple at Kom Ombo as the sun starts to set

Inside there are some wonderfully preserved carvings on the walls showing the gods and goddesses around the Pharaoh:



Detailed carving of the gods and goddesses around the Pharaoh

By now we should be able to recognize them! I think we have Horus, Sobek and Isis in this particular carving. The people here were very taken by the crocodile god, Sobek and the temple is dedicated to him.

The sunset was as nice as we had been promised, and I did take my tripod on this trip to capture the temple with the lovely orange colors in the sky after the sun had set over the Nile:



The Kom Ombo Temple after sunset

There was an opportunity to visit a museum about the artifacts found here – a real one. The shops selling their own artifacts were a necessary part of the journey back from the museum to the ship!



Mummified crocodiles in the museum at Kom Ombo

And, finally, back to the ship for dinner. The little town of Kom Ombo was much busier as many more cruise boats had arrived to see the temple after dark:



The scene at Kom Ombo as we made our way from the dockside to journey north on the Nile to Edfu

This departure for the final leg of our cruise takes us one more step towards the conclusion. But there is one more temple to visit – an even larger one at Edfu!

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Edfu Temple, Esna Dam and the end of the cruise in Luxor

It had to arrive – after a uniquely interesting cruise on the River Nile, we have reached the final day of this extended story of the Viking Pharaohs and Pyramids Nile Cruise.

We awoke reasonably early and as we had sailed through the previous evening, I went up on deck to see where we were. A very busy place!



Sunrise over the swimming pool on the MS Antares – with another boat attached to us!

The clue is here in this picture. For the first time on the cruise, we were actually docked alongside another ship! And looking along the side of the ship gives you a view of what this small port of Edfu is actually like early in the morning:



Boats as far as the eye can see in the small town of Edfu with horses and carriages awaiting passengers from some of the cruise lines

We left the ship at 8:30 to head in our coach to the Edfu temple. Once again, it was not far as it is another of those temples that was partially buried for years under the town which helps to explain its good condition now. The entrance was much busier than any of the previous temples, and this next image might make you think this was going to be massively overcrowded, but I think many of these tourists were, like us, taking advantage of the shade to hear the initial story of the temple from our guides.



Tourists hearing the story of the Edfu temple from their guides

Inside actually turned out to be much calmer (except perhaps for the small sanctuary in the center of the complex) and we were able to admire the craftsmanship of the carvings on the many walls of the temple. I picked this next image to show the multiple levels of carving around the heads and arms of these figures to get the correct 3-D effect. It is hard to imagine that you start from a flat piece of stone and slowly carve deeper and deeper into it to reveal the top layer that will be visible, perhaps the forehead of the slaves, and then you go deeper to show the nose and eyes, deeper to show arms that are underneath other arms and then make it look as though there are about 4 slaves standing side by side and carrying this boat. One mistake and you start the whole thing again! I'm not sure, but I imagine that these were carved after the wall was actually constructed. Think what a mistake would mean then!



Many layers of stone removed to create the 3-D effect of these slaves
Once again, the local wildlife had made its home in some of the carvings!



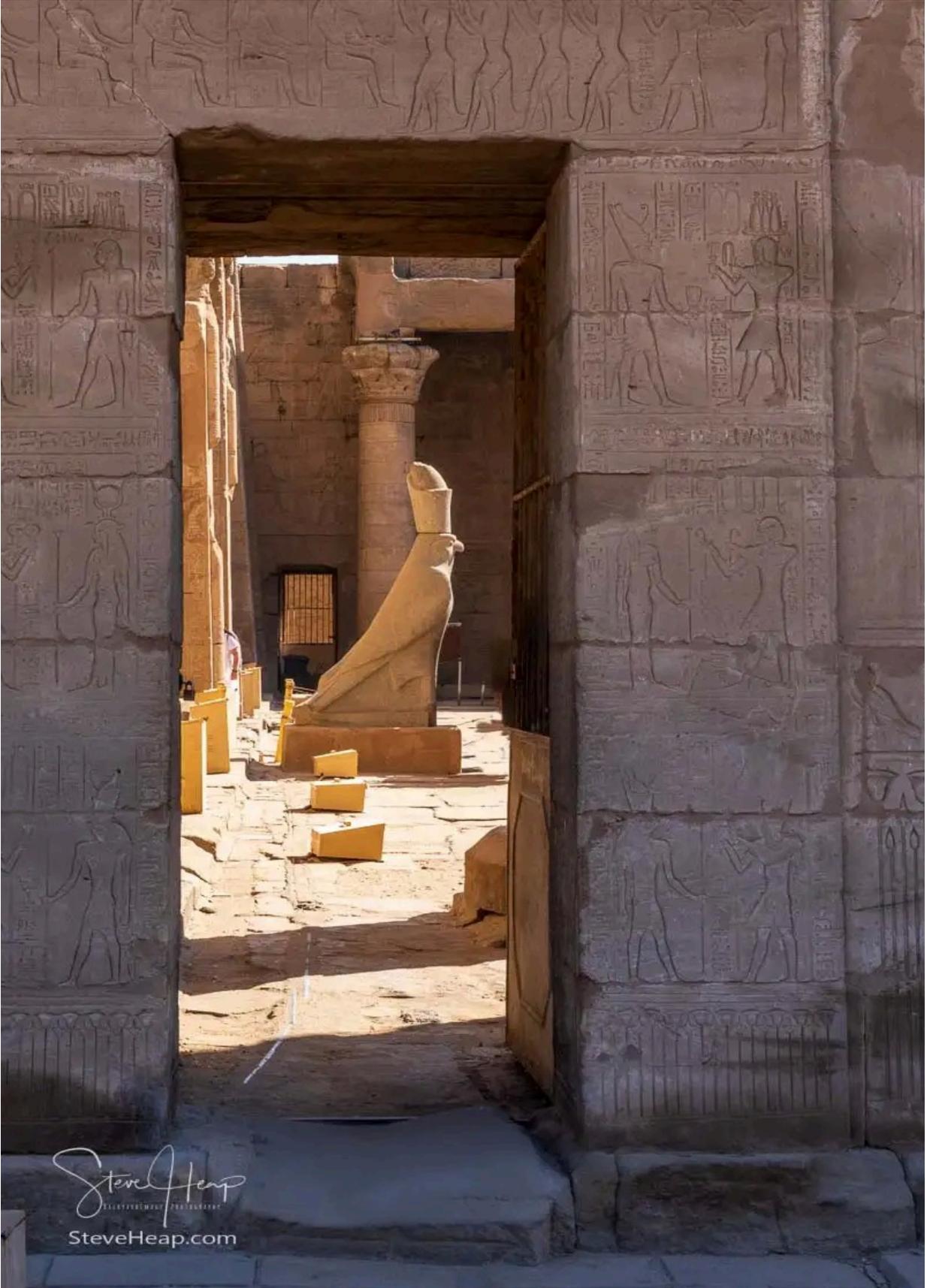
Small bird making its nest inside the head of a desecrated god

If you wonder why these carvings have been destroyed by hammers and chisels – blame the early Christians who decided that depicting these ancient gods was blasphemous and set about chiseling the faces away. There were a few gods that they liked, but this happened up and down the Nile.

Standing proudly outside the main entrance (which I think is called the Pylon) are two massive granite birds representing Horus. A powerful image indeed.



Granite statue of Horus outside the Pylon of the Temple of Edfu



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LIVING WITH THE PAST
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Horus seen through the doorway from the outer wall

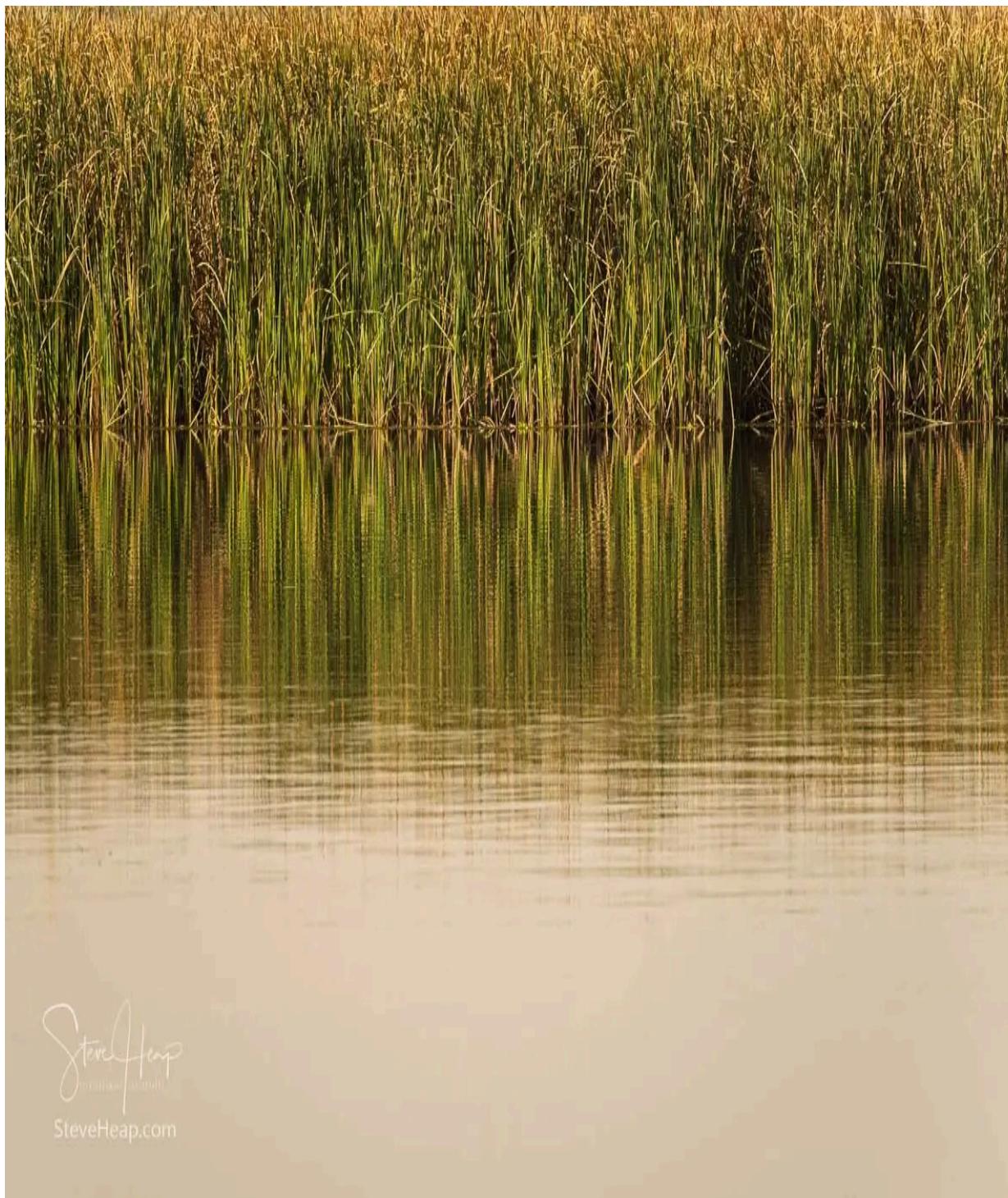
After spending maybe 90 minutes around the temple, we started to make our way to the exit (and the shops that always stand between the exit and the coaches) and by now, it is much less busy that you might have expected.



Exterior of the Edfu temple

Our boat then departed Edfu to make its way north towards Luxor with a chance to relax (or pack up the cases) ready for departure the following morning. As usual, there was plenty to see along the banks of the Nile – I was particularly taken with this artistic rendition of some reeds along the

riverbank reflected in the still waters of the Nile. Perhaps a print for my wall!



Reeds along the riverbank of the Nile reflecting in the still water of the river

I did see some local fishermen striking the water with a long stick – I think to either stun the fish or surprise them into swimming into the submerged net – I didn't see any actual fish but they were certainly making a lot of noise.



Fishermen hitting the water with a stick to make the fish swim into their

nets perhaps

But there was some excitement to come. We had traveled through the Esna lock on the Nile overnight on our journey south, but now we were about to go through the old lock and dam (which is now just open) and on to the new one that can handle more, and larger, boats:



Walkway across the old lock and dam across the Nile at Esna



The preceding cruise boat sinking lower in the Esna lock as it continues its journey north on the Nile

But finally, we arrived back where we had started, in Luxor. It was just in time to see the evening sunset hot air balloon rides above the desert on

the far side of the river which brought back very happy memories of our own adventure in the balloons!

That evening was our final dinner on board and many people had to complete their packing of suitcases ready for an early departure to the airport and back to Cairo. The flight was with the same people as before and we had breakfast bags to take to the airport (although it gets very confusing going through security with these bags and several people lost them along the way!

Once in Cairo, we were taken to the Intercontinental Hotel Citystars, which is relatively close to the airport. There were two optional tours that afternoon – to the Coptic Quarter and alternatively to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization. We were pretty tired by now and thinking of the next day's adventure and so just stayed in the hotel. We had our final buffet dinner that evening and farewells to our fellow passengers. Some people had flights late that evening, others mid-way through the night and I think we left the hotel around 4am for our flight to Jordan and the extension there.

But this is the end of the very extended story of our Nile Cruise with Viking on the Antares. I hope you have enjoyed the entire series (or just happily dipped in and out of it!)

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