



EGYPT

Along the River Nile

*The Nile, forever new and old,
Among the living and the dead
Its mighty, mystic stream has rolled.*
~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Infused with a sense of permanence and continuance, Egypt is an eternal blend of two elements: the constancy of the Nile and the labors of its people. Five thousand years of history have been fashioned from these elements. Like the gigantic bird migrations that sweep up the valley, storming foreigners (Persian, Greek, Arab, Turkish, British) have swept across Egypt in magnificent spectacle. But in their wake, the country has remained essentially unchanged.

The River of Life

Journeying through Egypt by road or rail, you miss the grandeur of the Nile. It is only by air that you get a bird's-eye view of the mighty river, and the strip of cultivation to either side. However, when you sail along the Nile there is the clear sense that you are traveling along a valley, seeing sights that have not changed since time immemorial, a mixture of ancient and modern, biblical and secular. Many of these ancient sights can only be accessed from the river.

In the early stages of the journey from Cairo to Aswan, the Nile cuts through rock and cliffs on either side. These then fall away into the distance and only fields can be seen with villages and vegetation -- children swimming, animals cooling down in the water, and people going about their daily life washing their clothes and pots and pans in the river.

Agriculture is very important to the economy of Egypt. Crops of all sorts are grown in the fertile Delta and along the cultivated strips either side of the Nile. There is sugar cane, maize, and *barseem*, the clover fed to animals. Rice is grown, as is a variety of fruits and vegetables. Date palms proliferate, ranging from nearly black to pale yellow, either hard or soft, sweet or tart. Mango plantations and citrus groves are everywhere.

At all times, one is reminded of how the river has forced its way through the desert and carved its passage through rock, bringing life to its banks. Life is also brought to the people of Egypt as a result of the trade on the Nile. Barges plough up and down the river, carrying their cargoes of stone and other valuable commodities which are cheaper to transport by river. Feluccas (small vessels propelled by oars or sails) also ply their trade, not only in tourist towns and cities, but also as a time-honored means of transport, traversing the river, from one side to the other.

The pharaohs regarded the river with reverence, and their myths and beliefs are all intertwined. The Nile is indeed the artery of Egypt -- a living, working river -- the lifeline of the country today, as it was in the past.

Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt

The Nile River, the longest in the world, flows from south of the Equator to the Mediterranean Sea in the north. Throughout Egyptian history, a distinction has been made between Lower Egypt, the land of the Delta where tributaries flow to the sea, and Upper Egypt, where the desert and mountain encroach upon the Nile Valley with its narrow band of cultivation. Lower Egypt, then and now, has been more cosmopolitan, more exposed to foreign influences. Upper Egypt has always been more agricultural and rural. Standing near the junction of the Delta and the Nile Valley is Cairo, long ago replacing ancient Memphis as the entrance to Upper Egypt.

Cairo is not only the largest city in Africa, but also the political and cultural pivot of the Arab world. Its population of about 18 million has grown five-fold within a generation as *fellahin* (Egypt's peasantry) have poured in from the countryside in search of opportunities. The most modern part of the city lies close to the Nile. Further east is the medieval city of splendid mosques and thronging bazaars. To the south is the now ruinous Fustat, the earliest Arab settlement, built when the Arabs invaded Egypt around 641 AD. Westwards, beyond the sprawl of Giza, the pyramids glow gold at sundown against the Western Desert as they have done for thousands of years.

The Nile Valley: Luxor to Aswan

The name **Luxor** is loosely applied by travelers to include three distinct places on the Nile: the city of Luxor on the east bank; the village of **Karnak** and its immense temple on the same bank; and the Theban necropolis on the west bank of the river. At the height of its glory during the 18th and 19th Dynasties, Thebes covered all of what is now Luxor and Karnak, and may have had a population as high as one million. The Nile Valley narrows south of Luxor, and the desert impinges more closely on either side. The ribbon of cultivation seems more fragile, and the debt that life in Egypt owes to the river becomes more striking.

Like a string of citadels extending Alexandrian power towards Nubia, the Ptolemies built temples along the Nile at Esna, Edfu, and Kom Ombo. At Silsileh, south of Edfu, the Nile passes through a narrow passageway. Now there are only hills on either side, but there was probably once a cataract (steep rapids). The bedrock of Egypt changes here from limestone to the harder sandstone that was used in almost all New Kingdom and Ptolemaic temple building. During the reign of Ramses II, the Silsileh quarries were worked by no fewer than 3,000 men to build just this one pharaoh's memorial temple.

In Aswan, the layer of sandstone covering Upper Egypt from Edfu southwards is ruptured here by the thrust of underlying granite, which the river has sculpted into the rocks and islands of the First Cataract, where the river tumbles over boulders jutting out of the river bed. Throughout history, this is where traffic on the Nile stopped, where cargoes had to be transported around the rocks. Although there are sights to explore, the town's tranquil atmosphere and the beauty of its surroundings are more conducive to relaxation. The town stands brightly on the east bank, and a great wave of desert rises on the west. Islands, feluccas, and granite outcrops seem to fill the Nile here. There is something restful yet exciting about this place, as if you have finally reached the tropics, and your destination.

