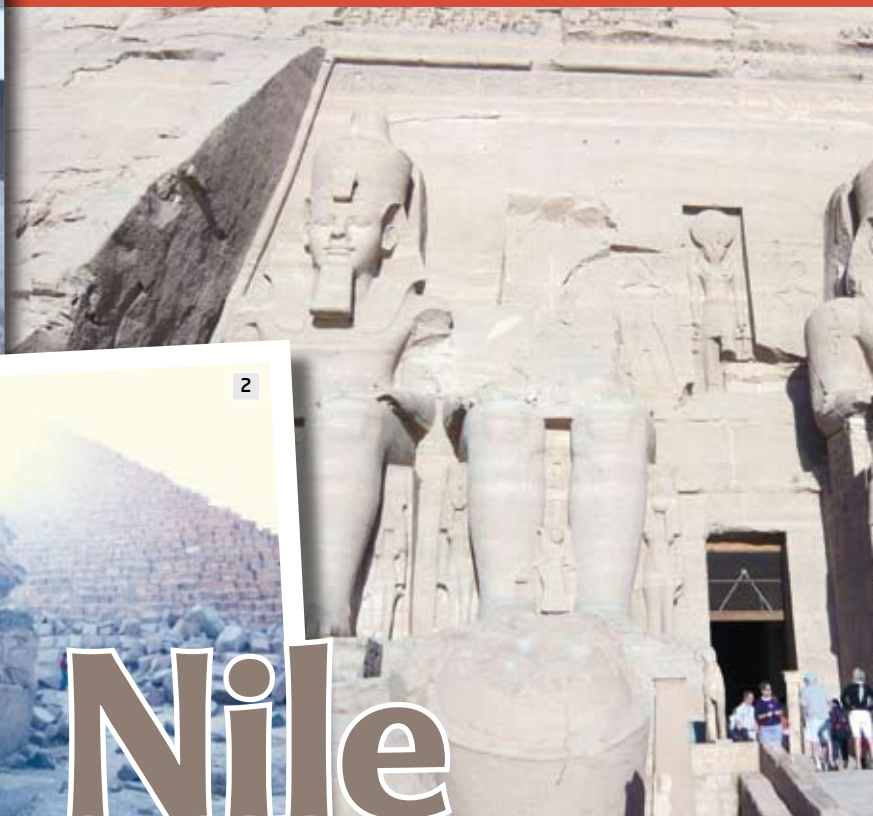


Western
Desert

Hauntingly empty deserts, bustling life along the Nile River, millennia-old majestic temples and pyramids, breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, belly dancing, bazaars and friendly folk - **NELLIE HUANG**, guided by a camel owner, a Bedouin desert guide and a felucca captain, falls in love with Egypt's many faces.

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Nile and void

AS WE SWAYED BACK and forth on our camels, bumping against their humps, we were warmly greeted by an unobstructed view of the majestic **Pyramids of Giza**. In front of us lay the sprawling Giza Necropolis where the only remaining Ancient Wonder of the World sits. The mighty pyramids were constructed as tombs for the ancient Pharaohs and their wives. We continued on our camels until we reached an elevated sandy patch that provided a panoramic view of the pyramids aligned in one straight row.

Next to the pyramids lies the **Great Sphinx**, a sandstone figure with the face of an ancient King, and a lion's body, built over 4,500 years ago. The camels slowly carried us to the foot of the biggest pyramid, the Cheops. As the afternoon's rays shone over the peak of Cheops, we took in the inspiring beauty of this architectural masterpiece in the desert heat.

This was the first of our many rides through Egypt. Our first day in Cairo, and here we were, riding past the World's oldest monument.

Ancient capital: Memphis

Dismounting from the camels, we drove further south to Memphis. Once the ancient capital of Egypt, it was believed to be an extensive city. In the Museum, the gigantic limestone



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statue of one of the most important Pharaohs in history, King Ramses II, impresses by its sheer size.

The most monumental site in Memphis was undeniably the world's oldest standing step pyramid - **Saqqara**. Used as an important complex for minor burials and ceremonies for 3,000 years, the Saqqara is the burial ground of the first Pharaoh of Egypt, King Menes. Cut from rock, the gallery of tombs, known as *Serapeum*, looked like the setting of Star Wars.

Nile River dinner cruise

After a day of exploring the Egyptian Museum and the grand souk of *Khan El-Khalili*, we relaxed on a Nile River dinner cruise, enjoying a stunning night view of Cairo, a sumptuous spread of authentic local cuisine (buffet style) and entertaining belly dance performances.

In contrast with ancient Egyptian culture, affluent locals reflected modern-day Egypt. Dressed to the nines, they openly enjoyed their feast and danced along to the Middle Eastern rhythm.

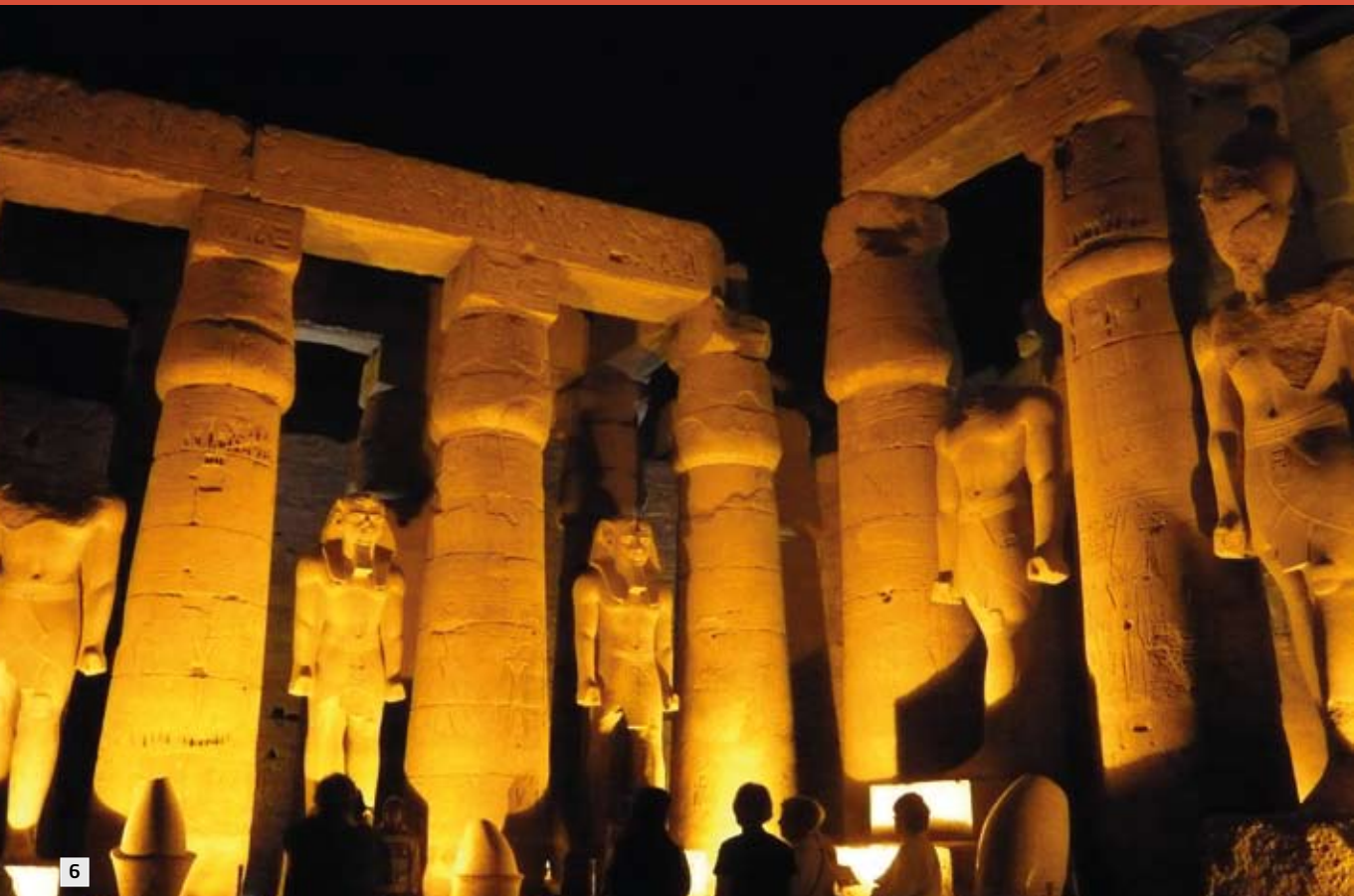
Desert adventures on a 4x4 jeep

With a vast part of Western Egypt covered by desert, we ventured away from the city into the heart of the country. Arriving at the bus terminal of **Bahariya Oasis**, we transferred to a jeep with two fellow backpackers and our guide Mohammed.

Trekking through the Crystal Mountain, we were stunned by odd rocky formations. Frolicking in the sand dunes and the Black Desert, we passed varying landscapes, one after another. In the evening, we found ourselves driving through the legendary **White Desert** where chalk formations create an intriguing phenomenal environment.

As the sun set, our *Bedouin* guide set up a tent in the middle of the desert to prepare for a barbecue dinner and a night under the stars. With a campfire, Mohammed dished out juicy roast chicken and tomato stew, as we shared tales and laughter in the cold desert air. Snuggled in our sleeping bags, staring out into an endless sky of sparkling stars was a surreal experience that remains etched in my memory.

- 1 Gigantic statue of King Ramses II at Memphis.
- 2 The sun lights up the peak of Cheops.
- 3 The stunning entrance of Abu Simbel.
- 4 A water-buffalo grazes the fields by the banks of the Nile.
- 5 Exploring the Western deserts on a 4x4 Jeep.



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6 Luxor Temple by Night.

The shimmering Luxor Temple by night

After a sleepless night on the creaking train, we were embraced by our new host in the city of Luxor, and guided to his hostel. The genuine hospitality of the Egyptians was heart-warming.

Standing grandly in the heart of town, **Luxor Temple** is a sacred religious ground dedicated to *Amun* (God of Creation) and *Mut* (Mother Goddess), greeting pilgrims with two colossal statues of King Ramses II at its entrance. As night fell, the lit-up temple shimmered gloriously in a mystical golden glow as we walked through its wide pylons (monumental gateways).

Along the Corniche, we were spoilt for choice as restaurants line the boulevard overlooking the Nile River. With an elegant breezy atmosphere, Egyptian food was served in the form of *Seleq* (lamb stew with rice), and pistachio *cous-cous* (Arabic rice). It was the perfect setting to unwind under the Arabian moonlight.

Sailing a felucca along the Nile

Seizing the cool evening breeze the next day, we embarked on a lazy journey on a felucca to catch the sunset. These traditional Egyptian sailboats have been used since antiquity and are symbols of Egypt's past and present. Our captain Ahmad was eager to show us a personal side of the Nile, sharing his tales of growing up on its banks. Along the way, we waved to village boys, saw buffalos busy at work and camels resting by the river. With Ahmad's anecdotes, Arabic tea and fragrant *shisha* (Middle Eastern water pipes), we witnessed the flaming sun setting against the backdrop of the bustling Nile River.

Sunrise at the Abu Simbel Temple

A two-hour train ride away, **Aswan** exudes a quiet charm that is missing from the other cities. On the rooftop of our budget hostel, we had a stunning view of the El-Tabia Mosque on one side, and the southern tip of the Nile River on the other.

Waking up at 3am for our day trip to the UNESCO World Heritage sites, we set off in a police-escorted convoy (required by law). Barely awake, little did we know that this last destination would be the highlight of our journey through Egypt.

As we reached **Lake Nasser**, the flaming sun rose gloriously over the regal Abu Simbel Temple. Originally carved out of a mountainside, the Abu Simbel is one of the 'Nubian monuments', built as a lasting monument to *Pharaoh Ramses II* and his wife *Nefertari*. The temple was precisely built in such a way, that the sun's rays illuminated its sanctuary on the king's birthday and coronation day.

The day came to an end at the **Temple of Philae**. The unique temple, built on an island in the Nile River, is accessible only by boat. As we approached by water, the colonnades, pylons and palm trees, looked like a dreamy mirage. Like the temple, this incredible journey through Egypt felt like a mystical ride through time. Magical and mysterious - it was impossible not to fall for Egypt's charms.

7 The Souk of Luxor.

8 Temple of Philae.

9 An elevated view of the Nile River and el Corniche in Aswan.



When to Go:

The best time to visit Egypt is from mid-October to May, when temperatures are not too high. But it also means jostling with more tourists. Avoid the 'Khamsin wind', a warm desert wind that blows between March and April, bringing with it sand and dust!

What to Bring:

Hiking shoes and thin clothing are essential for the hot weather and terrain. Ladies need to dress more conservatively to respect their Islamic culture.

What to Buy:

Every city has a souk (local bazaar) that sells a wide range of Egyptian souvenirs and products. Scour through the stalls to find the best Arabic tea, preserved dates and shisha (water pipes) for keepsakes.

How to Get There:

Qatar Airways offer some of the best and cheapest airfares to Cairo. Turkish Airlines and Emirates also fly from Singapore to Cairo. Train travel within Egypt is highly convenient and affordable.

Where to Stay:

Accommodation in Egypt is relatively cheap. Budget hostels cost around US\$10 a night for a double room. The best location to stay in all the major cities is along the Corniche (Nile Riverside). [IS](#)