

Winter sun in an ancient craft



The felucca has barely changed for centuries and is still fiendish to sail!

Hilary Munro learns to sail a felucca on the Nile at Aswan

Our Nubian felucca captain Gelal picked us up early from our hotel on the banks of the Nile. We cast off and tacked downstream. The prevailing Nile wind is from the north. With the river flowing in the opposite direction, you beat with the current and run against it – very convenient.

The basic layout of the felucca has barely changed for centuries and is quite simple. There is a

mast, boom and yard, with a triangular cotton lateen sail. The sail is lashed to the yard and the boom. Sail area is adjusted by a topping lift, controlled at the stern. The boom is controlled by a sheet from the stern.

However, no one could accuse the felucca of being easy to sail. She is heavy on the helm, sluggish to turn and short-tacking on the river is tricky with a lateen rig. In strong wind these boats can move and there are numerous pleasure craft and ferries to avoid.

How to do it yourself

There are some 700 feluccas on the Nile between Aswan and Luxor. In Aswan, most captains congregate at the Panorama restaurant. Talk to some until you find one you like.

Make sure you get agreement to you sailing their boat. Do not accept substitute captains at the last minute. Felucca trips around Aswan cost between LE25-35 per hour (£2.50-£3), more in the Christmas and Easter seasons.



Sailing history: book a felucca trip by the hour



Hilary at the helm with the felucca's captain

Hilary Munro

Hilary, 57, learned to sail dinghies in Dar-es-Salaam harbour as a child and has since sailed all over the world. She crewed in passage races off Singapore and won the 1979

Ladies Helm at Changi Sailing Club. She owned an Enterprise in Dun Laoghaire, Ireland, a Laser on Lake Capchugai, Kazakhstan, and another on the Caspian Sea at Baku. Living with husband Colin in Cairo, she is a magazine editor.

But don't underestimate the sheer joy of sailing these graceful craft on one of the most famous rivers in the world. There is also the predictable winds and constant sunshine. Aswan itself is a bonus – Egypt at a different pace, more intimate. The Nile narrows here with a set of cataracts and islands.

Still getting the feel of the boat, we practiced some tacking, before turning south (upstream) on a run up the quieter

West Bank channel. This is more constricted and fast flowing currents, as well as rocks lurking just below the surface, added to the complexity of navigation.

The felucca's shallow draught allows her to beach. There are lots of choices, ranging from the botanic gardens, the West Bank tombs, Nubian villages, ancient Coptic monasteries and Pharaonic quarries. Preferring to spend our day sailing, we chose only a brisk walk up a high sand dune for a view of the river below. Others

had climbed the same way: there were tracks of two scarab beetles. We ran back down to the boat with the lovely feel of cool sand between the toes.

With their large sail areas, feluccas are exhilarating on a reach, but my heart was in my mouth as we sailed through channels so close to rocks I could touch them. Our captain Gelal reassured me: 'All my fathers before me have been felucca captains, our blood is the Nile. I feel every

change in the channels and the sandbars, I know all the rocks.'

We enjoyed lunch at Gelal's house on Seheyl Island, before turning back upstream into the wind. This required much tacking in constricted water, but at least the considerable current was now with us.

That evening, at the aptly named Sunset Café, the river lay at our feet like a map. Feluccas flew in all directions in full sail and the desert stretched out from the West Bank. It had been a wonderful day.



The sails are reefed by hauling in on the clewline

PHOTOS: HILARY MUNRO