

I'm living the life of Luxor in the Valley of the Kings

Reporter Hilary Munro caught up with Cork woman Marie Vaughan, who's made a new life for herself in one of the busiest tourist spots in Egypt

But I'm hoping to give it all up and come back home to Cork



Marie Vaughan from Blarney in her hotel in Luxor.

WHILE the tide of emigration is again flooding across the country a woman living a life many would envy in Egypt, is thinking of moving back to Cork.

When Blarney woman Marie Vaughan's sons grew up and flew the nest she felt redundant. However, it also gave her the opportunity to live her dream and she moved to Luxor in Egypt.

Her plan was simply to set up home there — but it didn't work out quite like that.

Mara House Hotel (Mara, after Marie) lies in a sandy street of concrete-grey houses; an unfinished house lies opposite. Unfinished, but her house stands out with its smart yellow paint and brown window frames.

Today small, dark-haired Marie (53) has been standing in the street all day — her hotel front door is unusable with all the tiles taken up and new ones are being laid.

"I know I must look deranged, but I'm thrilled to see that pattern, getting a real buzz," she explains.

Marie is a long way from Tower Blarney where she had brought up her two sons alone.

It is a common thing for mothers to feel unneeded when their children grow up and have lives of their own. Most 'empty nesters' take up a job, or watch more TV. Not Marie.

She sold up and left for Luxor Egypt drawn by the legend of Scota, the Egyptian Queen, whose sons were High Kings of Ireland, and, some say

the origin of the name Scotland.

Now millions of tourists come to Luxor every year: to see the Valley of the Kings, go to Karnak and Luxor temples, cruise the Nile — but they stay for two or three weeks only.

Marie stayed, and she's been there eight years, now.

She spoke no Arabic, knew no-one, and had no plans.

She thought she was redundant to her family eight years ago, but her plucky action provided a haven for her sons.

Six years later, her son Stephen joined her when his Cork city art gallery fell victim to the financial crisis.

Together they have built up the hotel she

started, in 2006, into the 2010 top recommended hotel by TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet.

Meanwhile, younger son Jonathan, now a family man living in Ballincollig and a builder like his dad, is also feeling the cold wind of recession.

"Every single thing I ever did, everything I've learnt, everything I've experienced, I've needed here," she says. "Doing business for anyone in any foreign country is difficult, being a foreigner with very little Arabic, and being a woman, doesn't help at all."

With a flexible approach to life's chances, no risk assessment, and a habit of jumping fast, it comes

as no surprise that Vaughan fell into the hospitality business by accident.

She bought land in Luxor intending to build two apartments (sell one to pay for the other).

Marie has a shrewd instinct about people and responds instinctively to 'gut feel', and knows who to trust. As she recounts it:

"I got talking to this architect about my land. He was just doodling. Here you just give the land size and a standard house is quickly designed, apparently. He presented me with completed plans and charged LE 1,000 (€132). Well, he had put in all this work, so I took them."

Then it was down to

getting the apartments built.

"I started to price bricks and blocks — my husband was a builder so I knew a thing or two about building — and thought 'that's not very expensive. It's not that much more to build eight apartments than two'. So I did.

"I gave €50,000 to a couple of Egyptians to go down to Alexandria to buy all the steel for the foundations, it's cheaper than in Luxor — and they came back with enough for everything, including the pillars and doors."

However, only two of the subsequent apartments sold. So she started a hotel. "Things never go completely wrong. Everything you do is for a purpose," she said cheerfully.

This approach has steered her through many jobs, never lasting more than two years. "After I had mastered a job, and it became a daily

routine, I had to move on. But none included the hospitality business," explained Marie.

"I have never mastered this, and I've been here eight years."

The Egyptian queen

legend had brought her to Luxor, and it brought her first guests.

"I had my first guests

booked in — a group of 15 who had read of Scota and heard of me — but the hotel wasn't nearly finished," recalled Marie.

"With only six days to go, the staircase went in, but the plaster fell off when the holes were

drilled. And then the carpenter never came to put in skirting etc.

"A friend was going on a three day Nile cruise that day and I knew that the hotel would be finished, or not finished, whether I was there or not. So I went back and told the workmen that I was leaving them the keys and that they had six days to finish, or not finish, before my guests arrived.

"Three days later I came back. Nothing had changed, but I had relaxed. In Egypt, you need to have a sense of humour and patience.

"So when my first guests arrived I told them 'if you prefer I'll book you in a hotel'. I showed them upstairs and they looked round. They told me it was wonderful and stayed!"

Ironically, though, just as her family is regrouping in Egypt, Marie now feels that the challenge is finished. Business is fantastic, she's busy all the time, but it is beginning to be repetitive.

"If they stayed, that would defeat the purpose. Then they'll be

here, and I'll be there. That wouldn't work at all!" she says.

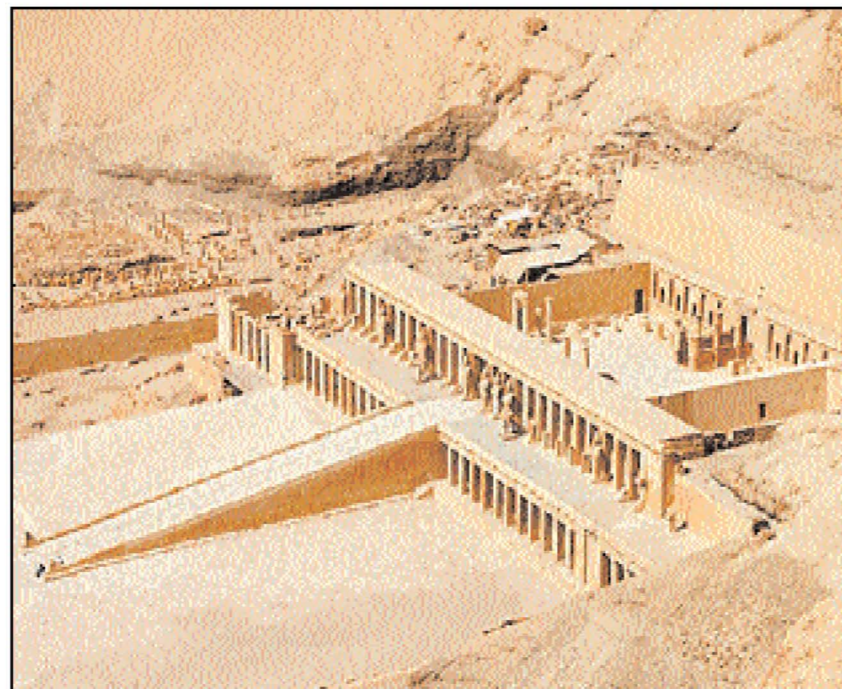
"I miss my grandchildren and I like the predictability of Ireland — I never thought I would say or think that. This is why it's time for me to go home — I've got to the stage when I start to speak Arabic to foreigners."

But Stephen is also thinking of moving back to Cork, and investing in a business. "There's nothing to tie me down here, and there are chances now in Cork. It's coming good again," he said.

"I need to go back home while prices are low. Maybe not immediately into the art world yet, but perhaps a restaurant or a bar."

If the Vaughans are right, the worst is past, the bounce back is beginning.

Leaving a successful business in Luxor for the chance of catching the start of a rising tide back home in dear old cold and wet Cork? If it's nothing else it's a No vote of confidence in the future for us all.



62 elaborate tombs of ancient kings, and their closest attendants, have been discovered in The Valley of the Kings.

Gateway to ancient Egypt

THE Valley of the Kings lies on the west bank of the River Nile at Luxor (Ancient Thebes) and after the pyramids is the most famous archaeological site in Egypt.

The valley draws hundreds of thousands of tourists each year, who marvel at the 'new style' tombs of the pharaohs and a litany of ancient temples and other artefacts.

The Valley known as Biban el-Muhuk, 'doorway or gateway of the Kings', is actually composed of two separate branches. The main, eastern branch, The Great Place, is where most of the royal tombs are located, and in the larger, westerly branch where only a few tombs were cut.



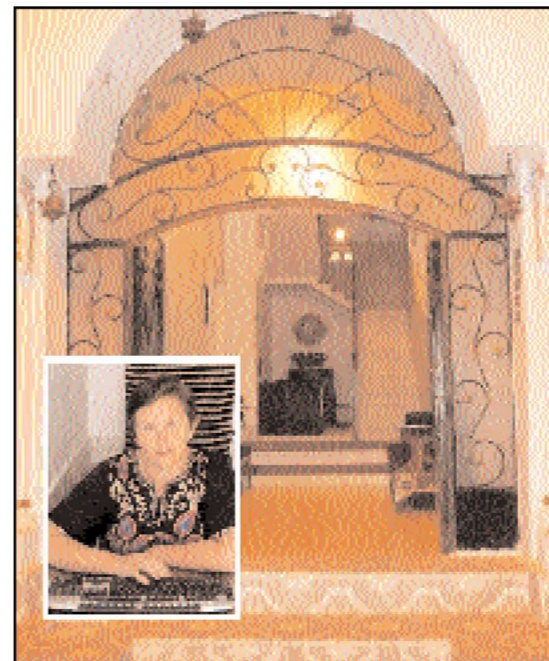
The Valley of the Kings is one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world.

The Valley is hidden from sight, behind the cliffs which form the backdrop to the temple complex. The valley contains 62 tombs to date, excavated by Egyptologists and archaeologists from

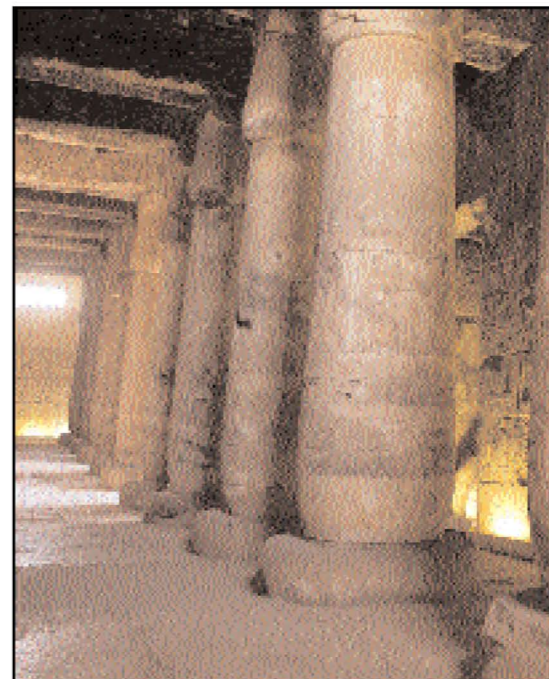
many countries. Not all of the tombs belonged to the king and royal family. Some tombs belonged to privileged nobles.

However, all are fascinating archaeological sites, historians and tourists for centuries.

It is in the context of this setting that Marie Vaughan set up home, and hotel — which she is now thinking of giving up in favour of the Rebel County.



The newly re-tiled entrance to the Mara Hotel and, inset, Marie inside.



Inside the Abydos temple at Karnak.

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