

SAILING IN STYLE

Photographs: Faouzi Massrali



The dahabiya, the internationally recognizable icon of the Nile, occupies a special place in the Egyptian heart. Tourists and travelers from all corners of the globe come to spend a short while in these beautiful boats and take time out to move at the slower and more leisurely pace of earlier less stressful times.

The one featured here is not an old craft. The owners who are Egyptian chose not to refurbish an old or second-hand vessel, but to build a new one on the old lines.

The *Nubia* has three levels: the lowest contains the bedrooms and the area for the staff and the kitchen. Above it is the main deck which is divided into a terraced area and an indoor living space divided into a lounge, dining area and guest toilet. On a traditional dahabiya this would have been the top deck and been much smaller. Above the main deck on the *Nubia* but in the stern is the topmost openair deck or viewing area.



The *Nubia* is a modern version of the classic *dahabiya*. It was designed and built by a Egyptian couple who wanted to experience the joy of sailing on the river and savor the nostalgia associated with this traditional craft.

This *dahabiya* provides the solution to all their requirements with the additional advantage that it is a home that is not rooted in one place.

It is a big step from viewing the *dahabiya* as a temporary abode during a short river trip to making one into a permanent second home. But this is what the owners decided to do.

They use it on the stretch of the river south of Maadi, Cairo. It moves in the same way as a traditional *dahabiya* under sail, but is more usually pulled by a small tug-boat because Nile winds are often light and the *dahabiya* is under-canvassed.

Eklego Design was responsible for the furnishings and finishing of the entire boat. It certainly celebrates the best of Egyptian workmanship and design.

Right: This deck is an innovation for, on a traditional *dahabiya*, this would have been the topmost deck with a simple canvas awning. They used this level for a spacious lounge and an indoor dining-room.

The long sofas, by Eklego Design, have a Scandinavian look, but the two small tables and the two seater sofa are typically Egyptian. In the left corner is a white-washed bar decorated with the traditional Islamic *muqarnasat* pattern.

The wall sconces are handmade alabaster and sourced from Upper Egypt.

The hand-woven rug is locally manufactured by Egyptian artisans while the chest is from a Cairo antique dealer.

The awnings can be adjusted to suit the time of year.









The classic *dahabiya* was made entirely of wood and had accommodation for only three passengers. It required frequent maintenance.

By contrast, this vessel was built with modern low-maintenance materials and, though designed to resemble a traditional *dahabiya*, has double the amount of space and includes features such as modern plumbing, well sealed aluminum windows and air-conditioning.

The decision to build a new craft offered a challenge and opportunity, for the design and finish had to satisfy the owners' high standards without introducing features that would spoil the traditional line of an authentic *dahabiya*.

This vessel is a traditional concept updated for the 21st century.

The owners called her *Nubia*, a clue to the inspiration for the interior design and reminder of a region beside the Nile in Upper Egypt south of Aswan.

Traditional Nubian houses are furnished in neutral colors which act as a foil and contrast to their highly textured and colorful fabrics with geometric designs used in the cushions and throws.

Left: The locally made outdoor dining set, Scandinavian in appearance, is by Ivanco and available at Eklego Design.

The brightly colored aqua antique door adorns a wall and is echoed below in the pale green hand-woven wool rug made by Egyptian artisans.



Above: At the back of the main deck, and visible from the dining-room, is a small lounge area - the perfect place to enjoy a chat at any time.

Right: The topmost deck situated in the stern is a favorite place for star gazing, being simple in layout and open to the sky.

Vignettes from history:

Several refurbished traditional *dahabiyas* are still in service in Upper Egypt and in the nineteenth century they were the principal means of travel from Cairo to Aswan. The return trip took about 60 days depending on how many stops to visit the monuments were made on the way. The earliest *dahabiyas* were small, but large enough to accommodate five people.

In the 18th century travelers from Europe arriving in Cairo would spend days in Bulaq port negotiating with the *rayis* or captain of the *dahabiya* the cost of the journey. Supplies had to be bought and elaborate preparations made for ensuring the river-worthiness of the craft. One traveler recalls that in order to rid the *dahabiya* of vermin, the craft was first submerged and then dried out and cleaned.

In order to cater to the needs of its passengers, the crew had a large shopping list which included tea, coffee, sugar and staples such as flour, tinned food. Also included were vegetables as well as biscuits, fruit and live chickens capable of either laying eggs or being used in the pot. The *dahabiya* would be the floating 'hotel' for the entire trip.



Modern times:

In 1870 Thomas Cook introduced a steamer service which was quicker (it cut the time by half), decidedly more comfortable and more economical than a *dahabiya*, and allowed many more people to travel together. Some of the old *dahabiyas* were adapted for steam, but the Thomas Cook service meant that more travelers or 'excursionists', as they were called then, were able to afford the journey and do it according to a regular and reliable timetable. This innovation was the start of mass tourism to Egypt.

Thomas Cook's Nile Service 'package' included food, accommodation, guides and four-legged transport required to reach the pharaonic sites from the river. The *dahabiya* didn't disappear but it lost its prominence as the principal means of traveling up the river.

Today it has regained some of its old reputation as the means of travel for those with the time and money to enjoy a leisurely journey up the Nile.

The main deck consists of a hot tub, a large sitting area, a bar and an outdoor seating space. A fanciful touch, the popular Egyptian colorful wooden Moulid horse, appears to be gazing out at the view. The simple white-washed outdoor wooden sofas from Eklego Design are vitalized by the colorful patchwork pillows from Markaz which are beautifully handmade by Egyptian women in Sinai.







Upon entering the main enclosed living space, you will find 'Lotus' - a modular set of lounge sofas by Eklego Design - which can also double as day-beds with their exaggerated depth and *tanged baladi* comfort, the local upholstery style. Ornaments from different places in the world give the room a homely touch.

The Egyptian mirror and the scatter cushions are a reminder of traditional forms of decoration and the charming beauty of local crafts.







This room demonstrates Eklego Design's taste and expertise. The choice of colors and furnishings is characterized by a sophisticated appreciation of what constitutes good design and decoration.

The indoor dining-room is on the main deck and looks out onto the outdoor sitting area. For the diners, there are superb views of the river from all vantage points.

Around the simple, long white-washed dining table are modern classic chairs upholstered in a neo-pharaonic patterned textile. The ceiling lights are set behind handcrafted panels in traditional arabesque patterns.

The color scheme is subtle and confined to several natural colors. These colors are a perfect background for the delicate hand-stitched patterns of the cushions.

What brings all the spaces together is their common view of the Nile. The outside and inside appear as one because the large glass windows and the white-washed floor boards minimize the dividing line between the two spaces.

'*Shaabi Chic*' or 'popular style' is the keynote feature that the overall appearance of the boat conveys.

This lovely floating home evokes the elegance of a bye-gone age, while giving the feeling of a thoroughly contemporary environment where comfort, style and design are at a premium.