

# *Into the ancient desert*

On an 18-month, 40 000-kilometre journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick Gurney** and his wife **Marie** cross the border into Egypt – land of pyramids, temples, the Nile – and *baksheesh*.

**W**e always knew that Egypt would be difficult, and that countering the culture of *baksheesh* (bribery) would be one of our daily challenges. Reading online overlander forums, we knew that the border crossing could be laborious, we'd encounter hagglers everywhere, and security might be an issue. We also heard that self-driving the Sinai Peninsula was a no-no, and that the Oasis Route (a scenic desert route in the west, which takes you from one oasis town to the next) was out of bounds – or we'd need a military convoy at best.

But somehow, things just worked out for us. We put it down to a positive attitude, and a respectful roll-of-the-dice...

We received our 30-day visas within one hour from the Egyptian consulate in Aqaba, Jordan. We put our Toyota Hilux double-cab (2001 3.0 KZTE model) onto the ferry to Nuweiba, on the east coast of the Sinai Peninsula. The ferry had comfortable reclining seats and the food and refreshments were a surprise. On arrival, all tourists were singled out and privately ushered off. So far, so good!

Our load was lightened when our beloved 10x50 binoculars were confiscated – deemed "military grade" by an inquisitive official, who even asked if I could "switch them on". I was given a receipt and told that I could have them back when I exited via the same port. (On the off-chance that we'd ever return that way.)

There were a few tense moments where we were obviously being asked for *baksheesh*, with bogus claims like, "This paperwork is incorrect" – but we simply said, "Okay, let's go back and start again." This approach worked: After 12 hours at the border post, we had our Egyptian number plates and we were off.



MARIE ON THE FERRY TO EGYPT



SCUBA-DIVERS, DAHAB

## First stop, Sinai

The Sinai Desert has a rugged beauty. We visited Dahab, which is the laid-back sister town of Sharm El-Sheikh, the big Red Sea resort town. We arrived with chilly weather so there was no swimming just yet.

After Dahab, we drove to the southern tip of the Sinai, for a day trip into Ras Mohammed National Park, where we did some spectacular snorkelling. Ten metres from the beach is a “wall”, where the reef drops away into deep water – at least 40 m into the blue. We saw turtles, game fish and some hard and soft corals.

From Ras Mohammed, we drove up the west coast of Sinai towards the Suez Canal. We were interested to witness this mega engineering feat, but it was all highly secured, which meant we couldn't see a thing from the road. There are a few bridges crossing the canal, from which we hoped to snap a few photos, but thanks to our “expert” navigation skills, we managed to find the only tunnel going *under* the canal. We never even got a glimpse!

The tunnel is 1,6 km long and it was chock-full of cars, trucks and buses. It's surreal to think that an oil tanker could be sailing past above all that traffic.

On the other side of the canal, we motored onward towards Cairo, where we'd scheduled a few days to visit the sights and sort out our visas for Sudan – the next country on our itinerary.



SPHINX, GIZA



COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE, CAIRO



MUHAMMAD ALI MOSQUE, CAIRO



OLD KOMBIS IN CAIRO



ENTRANCE TO RAS MOHAMMED NATIONAL PARK

## Cairo traffic

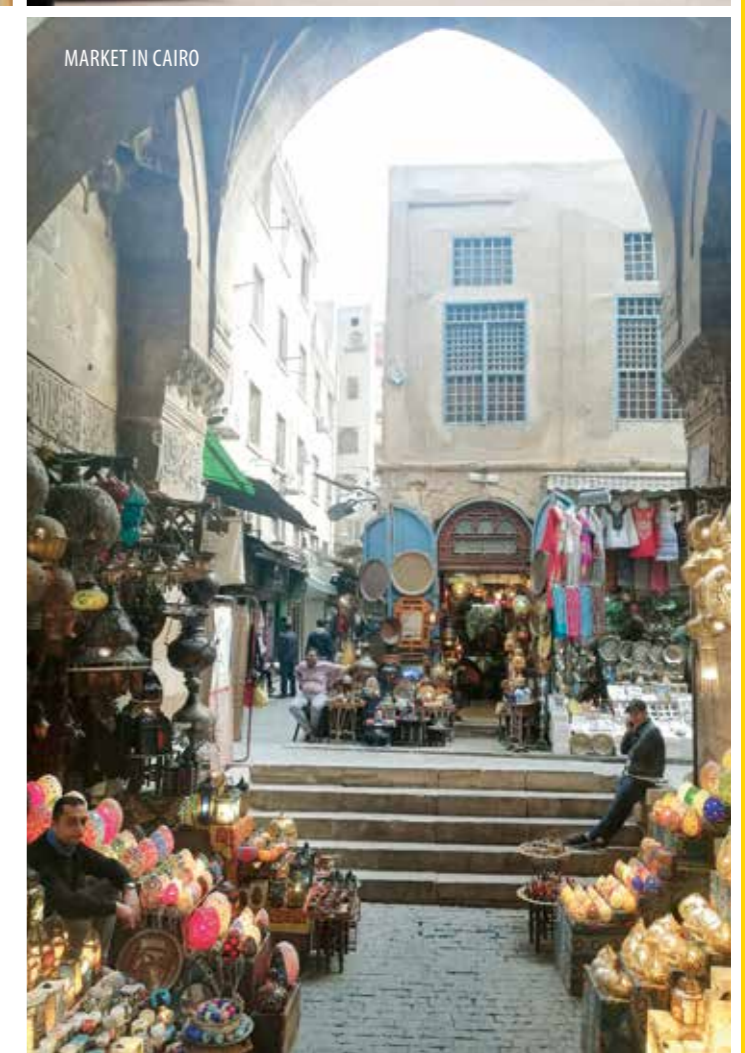
Everybody had warned us about traffic in the Egyptian capital, which 20 million people call home. We soon worked it out: Lanes mean nothing; hooting politely tells someone what you plan to do; watch out for pedestrians, who just wander into the game whenever they please; and never worry about who's behind you. If you're a risk-averse driver, rather take a taxi around the city.

Daytime driving in Cairo might seem frightening, but night driving is another story. For some reason, Egyptians don't use headlights. If you do use yours, an oncoming car will alert you by flashing their lights. Madness!

We stayed in a great little hotel just off Tahrir Square – the epicentre of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. We ate at all the local spots we could find and tried some really interesting – and terrible – dishes. Stuffed, deboned pigeon was quite tasty; Molokhia soup – a slimy concoction of jute, garlic and coriander – less so... A dessert called Om Ali was delicious – it's a bread pudding with a blend of pistachios, coconut flakes, raisins and plenty of sugar and milk.

Colonial architecture dominates dusty downtown Cairo. Although the frenetic development of the past 30 years has been unkind to the city, there's still some beauty that shines through.

We visited the grand old Cairo Museum, the Pyramids of Giza, and some of the oldest mosques and shopping districts.



MARKET IN CAIRO

## Oasis-hopping

From Cairo, we headed south-west into the desert, towards Bahariya Oasis. (We didn't have time to drive the full Oasis Route, which starts further north, so we took a short cut.) Oasis towns like Bahariya are self-contained pockets of life, with the exception of cellphone reception and diesel. (Diesel is no problem for us: We have two tanks with a total capacity of 105 litres – a range of about 850 km.)

In the oasis towns, mud-brick building is still a thing, date palms are everywhere and inhabitants lead a simple life.

Between Bahariya and Farafra is the White Desert National Park, named after the striking chalk formations eroded by sand and wind.

We had no idea how to enter the park and we were afraid we'd somehow miss it. We noted a track leaving the tarmac at one point, and we followed it. About 20 km into the desert, we set up camp. Half an hour later, a park official arrived to charge entrance fees, which we were only too happy to pay because we thought we were about to be ejected for camping wild.

The scenery was breathtaking. We spent three nights camping in the middle of nowhere and had the desert all to ourselves.

Dakhla Oasis has a little village called Mut, where you'll find an ancient fortified town, mostly abandoned, full of narrow passageways. Kharga Oasis has the Temple of Hibis, which is well preserved.

Marie had to fly back to South Africa for business, so we headed to Luxor. We planned to meet up in Aswan further south, which left me on my own for a week.

Luxor has an incredible concentration of ancient temples, tombs and palaces, constructed over a span of 4 000 years. Knowing that I would probably only see the Valley of the Kings once in my life, I bought tickets for every conceivable attraction. The basic entrance fee allows you to see three tombs, but you can buy extra tickets to see special tombs like Tutankhamun's. Most of the tombs are spectacular (Tutankhamun's less so, actually) – make sure you purchase the photo ticket, which allows you to take photos inside the tombs. It's also worth hiring a really good guide.

During my time alone, I sought out unique interactions with local mud-brick makers, mattress makers and potters. Some interactions were touch-and-go: One night, while trying to find a quiet camping spot, I ended up taking a road into the hills, only to find a team of five Sudanese gold miners who were very happy to see me... It was dark and I couldn't turn around. We sat and had Nubian coffee (made with ginger – delicious) and I cooked them dinner. I asked if I could set up camp and they said, "No problem, no police come here, we shoot police." This was, uhm, reassuring.

Much later, a massive argument ensued: One of the miners didn't want me to stay, but he later settled down. When I heard another two vehicles arriving at 3.30 am, I took out Marie's Taser and almost shocked myself in the process. In the miners' defence, they did come running to my tent shouting, "Hassan, Hassan!" (my adopted Arabic name), to find out what had made the terrible electric noise. Nevertheless, the next morning I was out of there as quickly as possible.



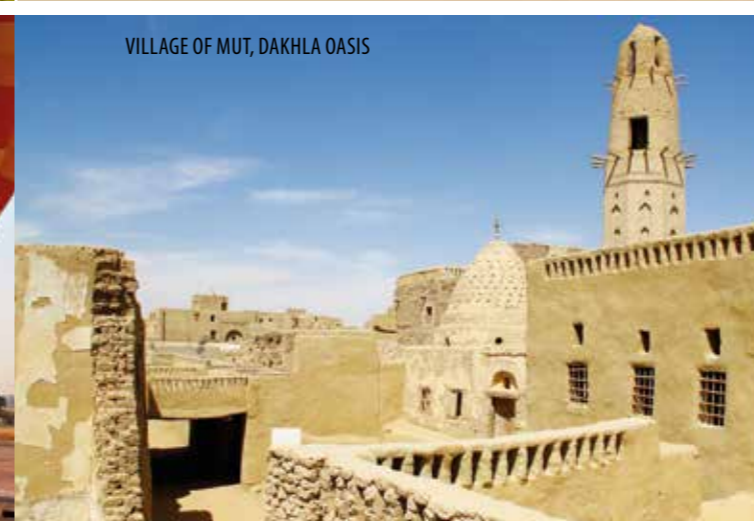
VILLAGE OF MUT



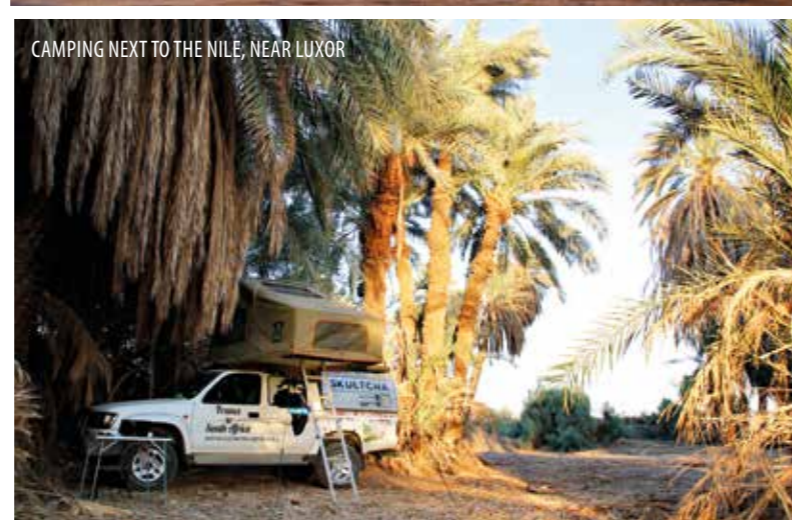
WHITE DESERT NATIONAL PARK



HOT AIR BALLOONS, LUXOR



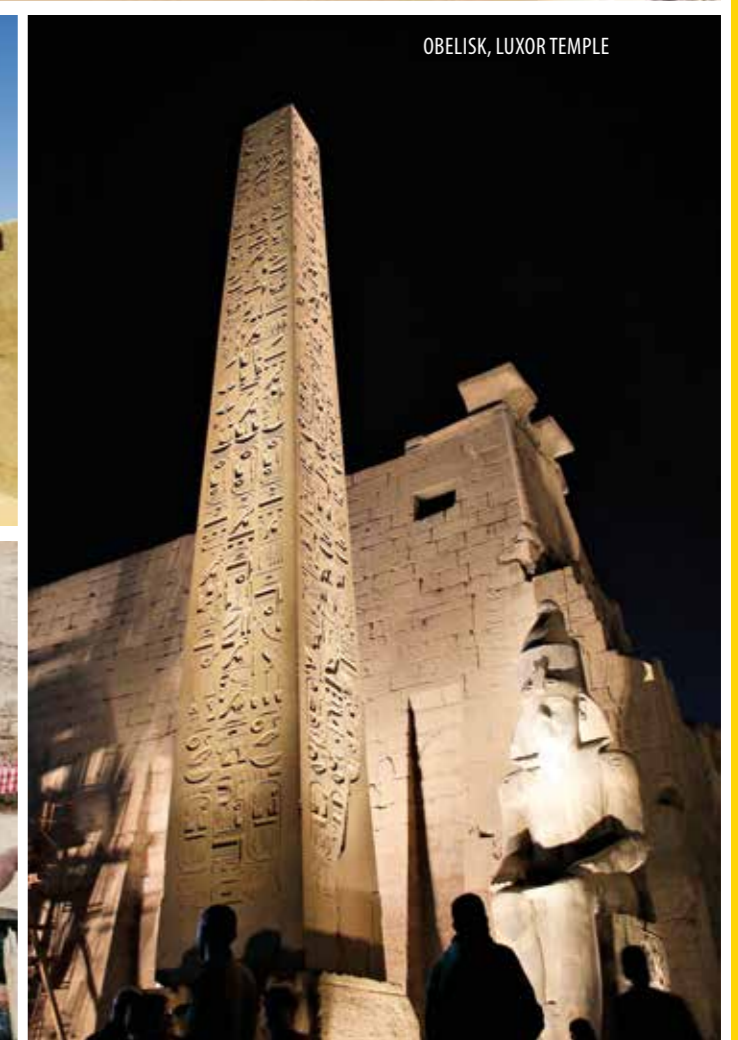
VILLAGE OF MUT, DAKHLA OASIS



CAMPING NEXT TO THE NILE, NEAR LUXOR



SUDANESE GOLD MINERS



OBELISK, LUXOR TEMPLE



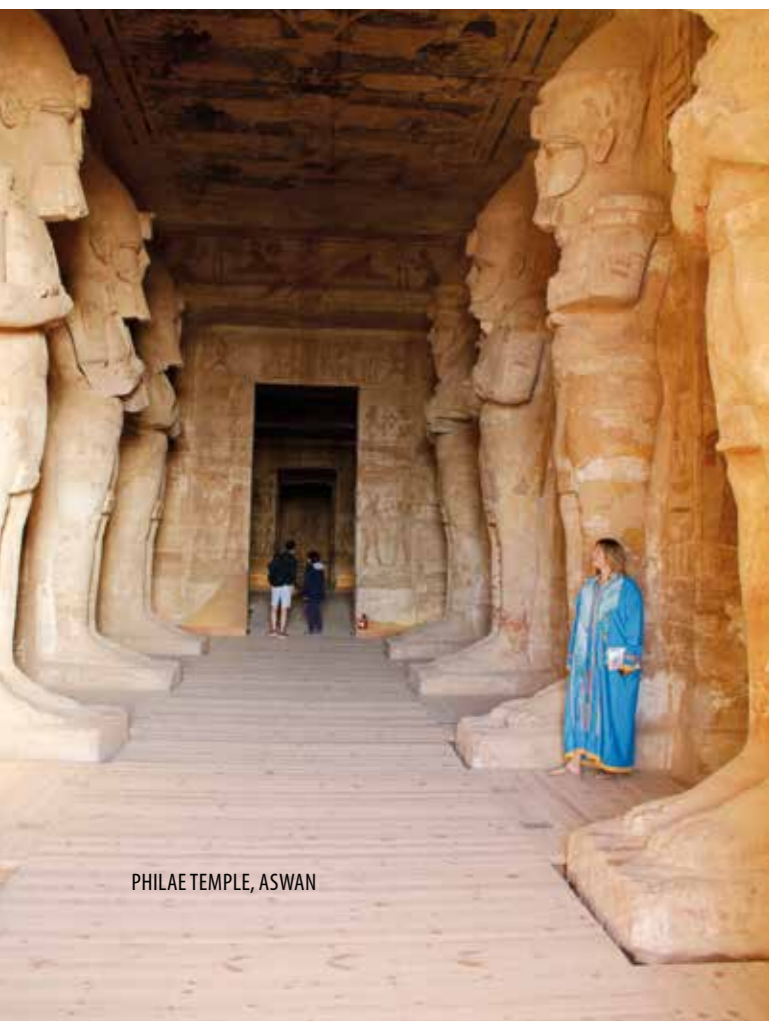
FELUCCA ON THE NILE



PART OF THE PHILAE TEMPLE, ASWAN



ABU SIMBEL



PHILAE TEMPLE, ASWAN

### Further south

I met Marie in Aswan. It was fascinating to see the Nubian-influenced architecture as we moved south. In Aswan, we visited the Philae temple on an island in the Aswan Low Dam, and the unfinished obelisk, which is just outside the city. We sailed for four hours on the Nile, on a felucca all to ourselves.

Abu Simbel was our last stop in Egypt. When they built Lake Nasser (the Aswan Dam) in the 1950s and '60s, entire temples had to be relocated from the Nile Valley to higher ground. This task was as mammoth as building the Giza Pyramids from scratch.

We camped in the parking lot of the temple complex, along with three packs of dogs, and we were visited early each morning by the coach drivers ferrying their tourists. On our final morning in Egypt, we celebrated Marie's birthday – us and all the bus drivers – singing "Happy Birthday" in Arabic. Later, however, we realised that we'd jumped the gun: Marie's birthday was actually only the next day!

I guess that's what happens when you've spent nine months on the road.

### IS IT SAFE?

Because there have been attacks on tourists in the recent past, the Egyptian police are serious about their job. This means constant roadblock checks, where your vehicle licence and passport will be scrutinised and vehicle searched.

We only had to travel with a police escort three times. It's a bit irritating because they don't allow you to stop where you please to take photos.

You can request to sign a disclaimer that waives your right to an escort. This is not standard practice at every roadblock, so ask.

We bought local SIM cards and gave these numbers out to police at each roadblock, only to be called at the strangest hours as the officials tried to track our movements through Egypt. All told, we felt safe everywhere – except for the night that Patrick spent with the Sudanese miners...

### CAMPING TIPS

Wild camping in Egypt is not easy. No-go military areas are everywhere, and then you have the Antiquities Authority – the members of which think you're a team of tomb robbers if you venture anywhere within a 10 km radius of an archaeological site.

Because of this, sneaking off the road to find a spot for the night is tricky. There's not much to hide behind either, and there are hectic desert winds and deep sand. As a result, there are only a few quiet spots to camp in Egypt, mainly in the Nile Valley.

### PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

They set off from Valence in France – Marie's home town – on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving to Johannesburg where they live. They'd been on the road for nine months already by the time they reached Egypt, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

They decided to do this journey to re-think their definition of culture; they were looking for inspiration from humanity to guide their future decisions – in their personal lives and careers. (Marie consults for the IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature – and Patrick works in marketing.)

**MORE INFO:** E-mail [info@skultcha.com](mailto:info@skultcha.com) if you have questions about their trip, or visit [skultcha.com](http://skultcha.com)  
Facebook: [skultcha](https://www.facebook.com/skultcha)  
Instagram: [@skulcha](https://www.instagram.com/skulcha) (spelled slightly differently)



TRAVEL JOURNAL



NEXT MONTH: Patrick and Marie tackle Sudan.



MARIE AND PATRICK GURNEY



FELUCCA ON THE NILE



CAMPING WILD IN THE WHITE DESERT