

# Hot, hotter, Sudan!

On an 18-month, 50 000 km journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** crossed the border into Sudan...

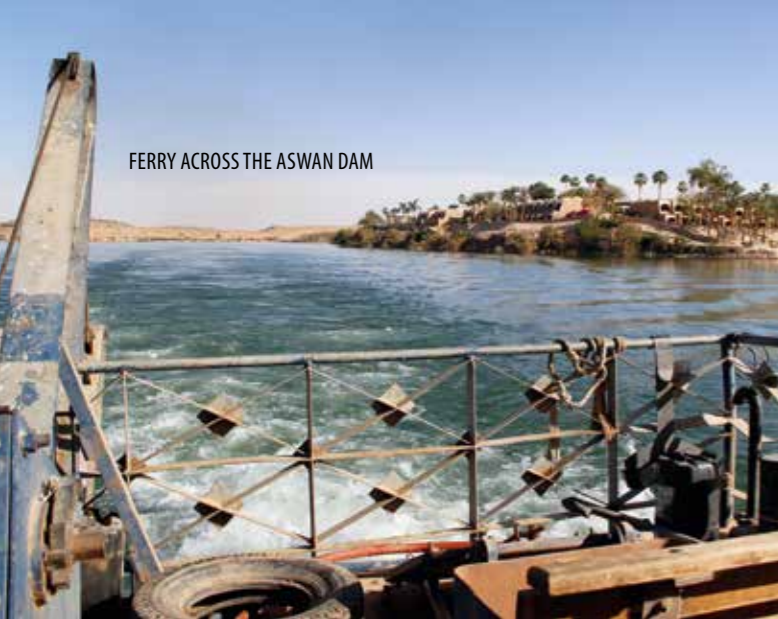
WORDS **PATRICK GURNEY**  
PICTURES **PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY**

**W**e had heard rumours that the border between Egypt and Sudan would be closed due to protests in Khartoum, but we set off anyway from Abu Simbel in Egypt, hoping things would work out. In Abu Simbel, we arranged a fixer to help us through the customs clearing process.

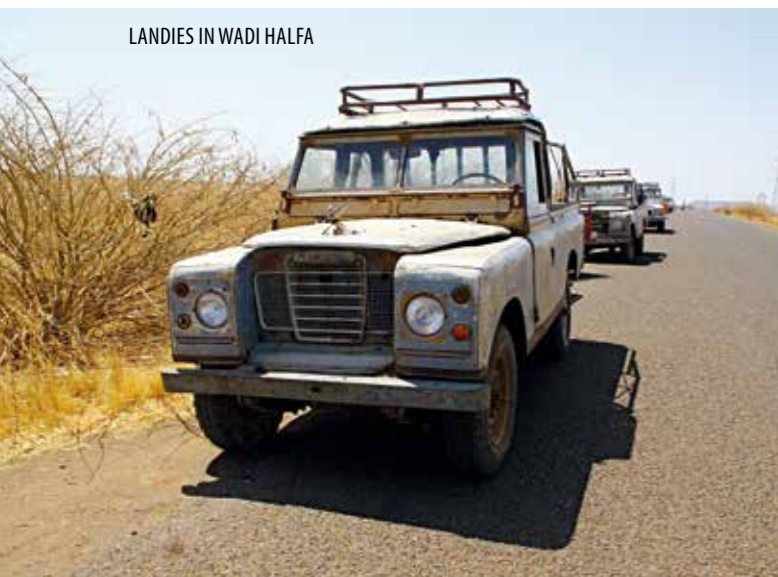
We crossed from Egypt to Sudan using the two-hour ferry across the Aswan Dam. It was pleasant to be on the water, looking back at the desert. We disembarked on the other side and drove our Toyota Hilux double-cab for another 35 km into the desert, to the border post, which is basically in the middle of nowhere.

All went smoothly. The customs officials looked for alcohol – Sudan has a zero-tolerance policy, being a Muslim state – but we had systematically polished off all our mini bottles so we had nothing to fear. The officials were actually way more concerned with 1 200 head of Sudanese cattle (60 trucks!) being exported into Egypt. We cleared both sides and were into Sudan within six hours. Brilliant!





FERRY ACROSS THE ASWAN DAM



LANDIES IN WADI HALFA



CAMPING NEXT TO THE NILE RIVER

## The wild north

Our first stop in Sudan was Wadi Halfa, a dusty border town and home to a huge family of ageing Series III Land Rovers. Our first job was to get local SIM cards, eat lunch and register our visas with the police.

We were introduced to the national dish of *foul* (mainly beans), which was delicious the first couple of times we ate it, but quickly became boring. Food shopping in Sudan can be expensive, unless you're happy to survive on onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and sweet green melons. Tinned items like tuna are pricey – about R40 for a very small tin.

We set out to find a camping spot on the shore of Lake Nubia (the name for Aswan Dam in Sudan). In the process, we managed to get stuck in deep sand, but doing so perfectly levelled the Hilux – and our rooftop tent – so that was our campsite sorted! We tucked into sunset snacks and decided to sort out the stuck car the following day.

We used Google Maps extensively on our journey, but Sudan has somehow blocked this app from being able to navigate a route, so we used Maps.me, which was brilliant. Maps.me also has an offline mode and you don't need cellphone reception, provided you've downloaded the country map.

As in Egypt, the Nile River is a lifeline for much of Sudan. People are heavily reliant on this artery of water. There turned out to be one exception: Where there is gold to be mined, people will live in the harshest conditions to extract it. This is true of the Northern State of Sudan, where illegal gold mining is rife. At one point we ran low on diesel and found a pump at a semi-permanent mining camp. The fuel was a lot more expensive than elsewhere, but we were happy to pay as our options were limited.

Traditional tourist camping doesn't really exist in Sudan. We camped wild everywhere. We prefer the solitude and the sense of adventure that comes with doing so. Wild camping always brings a few onlookers, but the Sudanese people we encountered were respectful and generally kept their distance.

Because of the heat (we were there in May 2019; most days were 45°C) we had to restructure our daily routine. If we wanted to complete any activities, like going for a walk, we had to do so before 10am. After that, we found shade to rest in until 5.30 pm. Even the wind was hot: It felt like the oven door was left open.

Bottled water was difficult to find, but the Sudanese have come up with a far better solution. Every few kilometres along the main tar road, in every little village, we found trees or shade structures under which stood large, earthenware pots filled with naturally cooled water. This local water-supply system offers free water to the community – and to travellers like us. We regularly filled our water tank, adding a few purification drops just to be safe.



SAT ISLAND

## The Kingdom of Kush

After a night in Wadi Halfa, we headed south for 200 km to a tiny village called Farka, on the eastern bank of the Nile. The Nubian architecture we saw along the way is so beautifully simple in its execution: sun-dried mud bricks, plastered with a mixture of mud and straw. The structures keep their occupants cool, even in the 45°C heat.

Having found a good spot to camp, we settled in for three nights. We took out the hammocks and made a little "home", soaking up the wildlife: mostly birds, but also crocodiles (we never saw one in Egypt), and even a snake.

I bought a sword at a village market – a Nubian-forged blade with a leather sheath – perfect for the office wall back home in Joburg. We ate and drank with various families in Farka, taking crash courses in Nubian bread-making and coffee-roasting.

After our short break, we carried on south towards the town of Abri, where we loaded the Hilux onto a ferry and popped across the Nile for a night on Sai Island. The island is home to thousands of tombs and a fortified city that was originally built between 1500 – 1000 BC by the Egyptians. (Back then, Egypt and Sudan were part of the same pharaonic sphere of influence.)

The following morning, we crossed back to the eastern side of the Nile and drove a few kilometres further south to the Temple of Soleb. This sandstone temple was built during the reign of King Amenhotep III, who was the ruler of Nubia at the time. Soleb is on the western bank of the Nile – after some difficulty, we arranged with a local villager to take us across. Still, we had to walk far through fields and palm plantations until we found it.

Some 120 km south, we entered a village called Kerma, and explored the Kingdom of Kush, an important trading centre during Egypt's Middle Kingdom. Kerma is reputed to have been inhabited non-stop for 9000 years and counting. It has two monumental mud-brick temples, known as *deffufa*, which are some of the oldest and largest mud-brick buildings in Africa. We also visited the famous Black Pharaoh statues in the museum at Kerma. (This was the name for pharaohs of Nubian origin.)



NUBIAN ARCHITECTURE



TEMPLE OF SOLEB



### *Pyramids and a petrified forest*

There are more than 200 ancient Nubian pyramids in Sudan's Eastern Desert. These are smaller than their famous Egyptian cousins, with narrow bases and steep sides. We slept in the town of Karima, about 240 km south-east of Kerma, which is located next to Jebel Barkal mountain where we saw five pyramids. The Temple of Mut is at the same site, and we visited its tomb section for just a few extra bucks. Entrance fees in Sudan were much cheaper than in Egypt.

A few kilometres south of Karima, our GPS indicated a petrified forest. There was no signboard, just a barely visible dirt track. We turned off and drove about 10 km into the desert. Slowly, the fossilised tree trunks started to emerge from the sand. Huge trunks were scattered as far as the eye could see. Marie just had to have a meditation session there; she has meditated in several special places along our route.

El-Kurru's Nubian royal cemetery was our next stop. It contains a fascinating grouping of tombs, some of which can be visited – if you can find the guy with the darn keys! Marie was certainly not impressed, sitting in a tiny piece of shade while I spent an hour trying to find the chap in the nearby village.

Finally, it was time for Meroë, Sudan's most famous historical site. We headed down a disused track towards what seemed to be an entrance office. One man on a camel, one lady selling tickets, that was that. No other tourists!

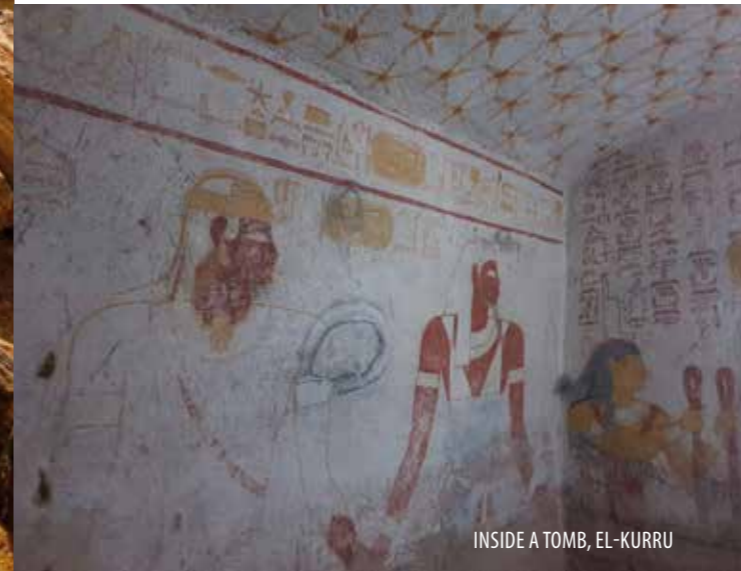
It was late afternoon, so we decided to visit early the next day. We paid our entrance fee so long and set up camp one dune away from the pyramids. The following day was a breathtaking foray among more than 30 pyramids. Some have been partially restored but others are disappearing into the desert.



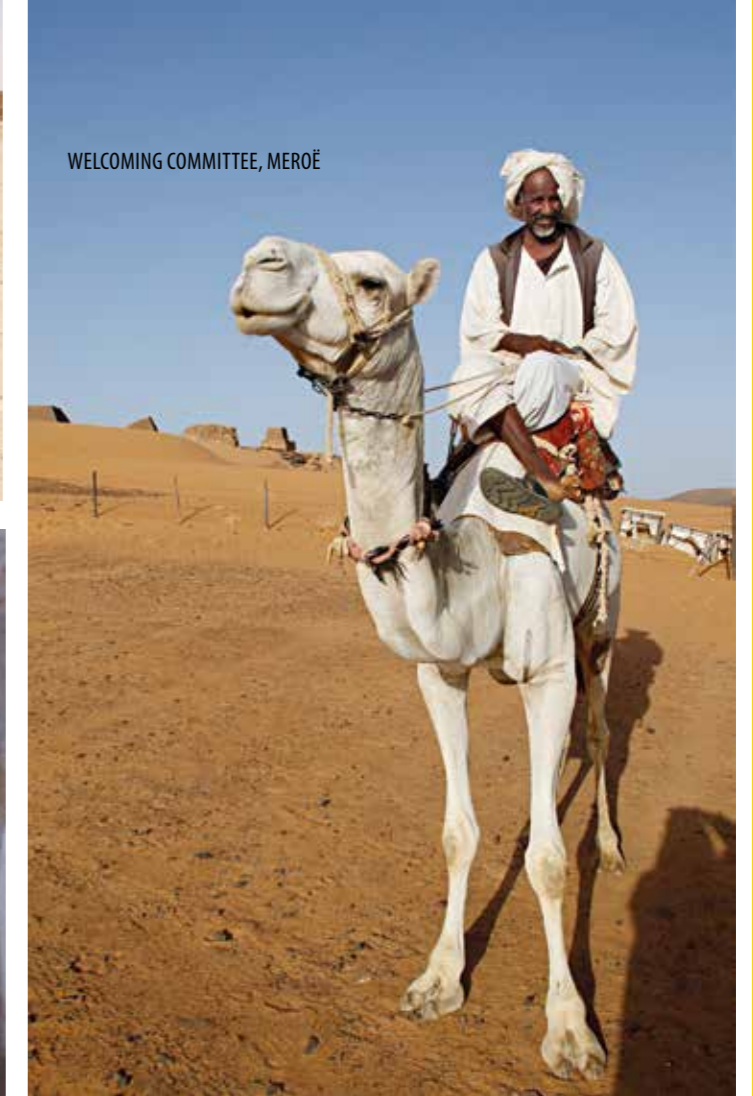
PETRIFIED FOREST



EL-KURRU



INSIDE A TOMB, EL-KURRU



WELCOMING COMMITTEE, MEROË



MEROË



CAMPING NEAR MEROË





KHARTOUM

## *Khartoum time*

Khartoum is the capital of Sudan, at the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile. As a result, it's really two cities: The section west of the Nile is known as Omdurman; Khartoum itself is between the Blue and White Nile.

Arriving in Khartoum, it felt even hotter than the rest of Sudan. We always research weather patterns in advance and we had expected this, which is why we pre-booked an Airbnb apartment with aircon. The apartment was on the Khartoum side of the Nile and we spent four days escaping the worst of the heat.

Things were politically "hot", too. Pro-democracy protesters were everywhere, as was the army, but the atmosphere was more excited than anxious. (This changed after we left Sudan: In June 2019, a paramilitary unit killed dozens of innocent people during an attack.)

Khartoum's traffic made Cairo's busiest day seem like naptime. There are only a few bridges crossing the rivers, which cause terrible bottlenecks. We wanted to see the biggest camel market in Africa, in Omdurman, where camels are apparently bought and sold in their hundreds, but we got horribly stuck in a traffic jam and never got there. It took us two and a half hours to move 1,5 km.

Back in Omdurman later that afternoon, we attended a Sufi ceremony at the Hamid el-Nil Mosque, which takes place at dusk every Friday. Most of the Sufis wear colourful patchwork robes, dancing to the beat of drums, twirling and stamping their feet until they go into a trance.

It was the start of Ramadan, and we were invited by a local family to the "first breakfast" – a meal enjoyed at around 6.30 pm to celebrate the first day of fasting. We were separated, women on one side and men on the other. We ate a delicious traditional soup and drank *karkade*, a drink made from pink hibiscus flowers.

We also visited the confluence of the White Nile and Blue Nile, and spent time in coffee shops where we drank fresh Sudanese guava juice. After picking up supplies, we gave the Hilux a wash, trying to get rid of the dust we'd collected over the past 2 000 km from Aswan.

In general, we found Sudan to be a cracking place to travel through. It's far from the decaying war zone that the media portrays (recent abuses of the government notwithstanding). We met the nicest people. If someone was eating, they almost always beckoned us over and offered us to join them.

Due to the heat, however, we were keen to get out of Khartoum and make our way to the cool highlands of Ethiopia. Heading towards the border, we wanted to visit Dinder National Park, but we couldn't find the entrance, so we camped wild 20 km from the border post, at Matema.

That night, sleeping in our hammocks, a huge sandstorm ripped through the desert and we said our final goodbyes to Sudan.



NEAR KHARTOUM



OZONE COFFEE SHOP, KHARTOUM

### WHAT WE LEARNT

Sudan is very, very hot.

We always felt safe and the people we met were friendly. It's better to camp next to the Nile – when you venture further away, sandflies become a problem.

Your credit card will not work – take cash (US\$).

Wear modest clothing.

### WHAT WE LIKED

We got invited into people's homes all the time.

Sudanese culture is generally respectful.

There was freshly baked pita bread and the sweetest melons in almost every village.

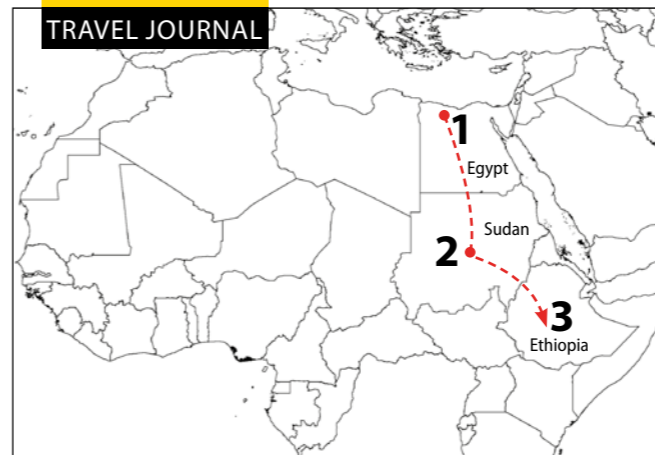
### PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

The Gurneys set off from Valence in France (Marie's home town) on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving back to their home in Johannesburg over 18 months. By the time they reached Sudan, they'd been on the road for 11 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt.

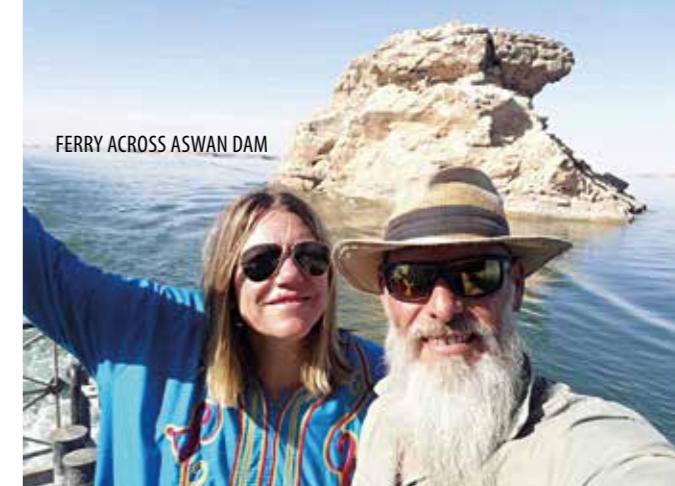
Marie is a sustainability consultant specialising in biodiversity management, and Patrick works in marketing.

They undertook this journey to re-think their definition of culture, looking for inspiration from humanity to guide their future personal and career decisions.

**MORE INFO:** You can e-mail them at [info@skultcha.com](mailto:info@skultcha.com) if you have questions about their trip, or visit [skultcha.com](https://www.skultcha.com). Facebook [skultcha](https://www.facebook.com/skultcha); Instagram [@skulcha](https://www.instagram.com/skulcha)



Next month: Patrick and Marie explore Ethiopia. Read about the Egypt leg in go! #158.



FERRY ACROSS ASWAN DAM



CAMPING WILD, NILE RIVER



RAMADAN MEAL, KHARTOUM