

Rail travel: Night train to Aswan

You don't have to embark on a classic rail journey to have a memorable train trip. Liz Vercoe takes her family on a sleeper in Egypt.

By Liz Vercoe

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I promise that this train journey will be an experience," said our Egyptian guide with a grin. "Whether you will enjoy it, I cannot say. But the children certainly will." How true his words turned out to be.

This was our introduction to the alternative way to travel up the Nile from Cairo. Not for us one of the slow-boat cruises, stopping off to take in the temples in the company of motivated adults. No, we, in a group of families with children ranging from eight to 14, were taking the overnight sleeper to maximise every minute of child-friendly time between tomb-raiding in Cairo, Luxor and Aswan.

Trains are fun.



A local man watches as the Aswan train goes by Photo: Alamy

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And so we found ourselves, after two crazy days in Cairo, which had included riding camels, making papyrus, crawling into the heart of a million tons of pyramid, taking silly photos of ourselves walking like Egyptian wall paintings and soaking up ancient history, standing on Giza station's platform at 7.30 in the evening. The children were already loving Egypt. And so were we.

Our train, one of the two sleepers that make the 11-hour, 600-mile journey to Aswan each night, was due at 8pm. At 8.30pm the giant diesel hauled into the station (Giza is deemed easier to use by novice Egyptian tourists than central

Cairo's confusing Rameses station) and we piled into our pre-booked compartments.

The carriages were refitted in the early Eighties (when the train carried chefs) and today, although still billed as four-star luxury, nothing has apparently been updated over the intervening 15,000 journeys (a rough estimate). Not even, one suspects, the beaming but decidedly elderly steward. The bottoms of curtains are frayed by the sun, and everything, but everything, is sand colour.

Still, as the train swung out southwards into the Egyptian night, the children were delighted with the sleeping arrangements: opening cupboards to find wash basins and handtowels, skittling through interconnecting doors and choosing bunks (two to a compartment). Dads were delighted to discover that cans of cold Luxor beer were available; everyone was relieved to see crisp white cotton sheets and soft pillows. The WC was the same as any old train lavatory and as clean as the last person left it.

Dinner was served on trays in our compartments: meat stew and rice, pasta bake or fried fish, hummus, bread, cake. It looked like a Sixties school dinner but tasted OK. On the door, a very faded notice invited us to "visit the club car for a belly dancing competition" after dinner. So in due course we set off to explore.

The club car turned out to be empty except for a bar displaying a few bottles, a threadbare carpet and a scattering of seats. Caught between cultures and worn by time, it could offer neither a cosy bar-room fug nor a happy shisha-smoking non-alcoholic hubbub. Dancing, belly or otherwise, seemed unlikely. Still, getting there, lurching precariously between the carriages, deafened by the noise of the wheels, was fun. And through the train window we saw a new moon in the inky sky over the Nile. It was a spine-tingling symbol of Egypt, Africa and the Middle East and tomorrow we would be in Aswan, frontier town to the great continent.

Back in our bunks even the adults were rocked to sleep like babies. Dimly aware of an occasional, unscheduled halt, we discovered that pulling back the blind simply revealed endless desert darkness.

In the soft dawn light, we looked out on fishermen casting their nets into the shallows of the Nile and kiln-shaped mud houses that bore the protective Eye of Horus, unblinkingly facing the lifeless desert that drifted to the far horizon on the other side of the train.

Three hours after breakfast – bread, cheese triangles, passion fruit jam and olives – and a stop to let passengers off and on at Luxor (where we, too, would be in a few days' time, visiting the Valley of the Kings and the floodlit Temple of Karnak), the train pulled up at the buffers in Aswan station.

What lay ahead? A gorgeous swimming pool on our island hotel certainly, but also travel by donkey, sailing on a felucca to a school (where pencils, notebooks and biscuits were gratefully received before they thrashed us at football) and sitting on the floor, having the best meal of the whole trip, served steaming from clay tagines.

One of the joys of train travel is covering vast distances in a way that allows you to adjust to changing climate, geography and culture. And it was no doubt thanks to the train that children, who four days previously had been more at home ordering hot chocolate in Starbucks, were quite at home kicking a ball in the dust with Nubian schoolchildren.

Train 84 from Cairo to Aswan may not pass muster as one of the world's classic train journeys, but it was still a great trip.

GETTING THERE

On The Go tours (020 7371 1113; www.onthegotours.com (<http://www.onthegotours.com>)) offers a 10-day Classic Family Adventure from £570, including flights to and from UK and sleeper train. **The Sleeper Train** (00 202 2574 9474; www.sleepingtrains.com (<http://www.sleepingtrains.com>)) and costs £32 per person sharing; £43 single occupancy each way Cairo-Aswan.

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