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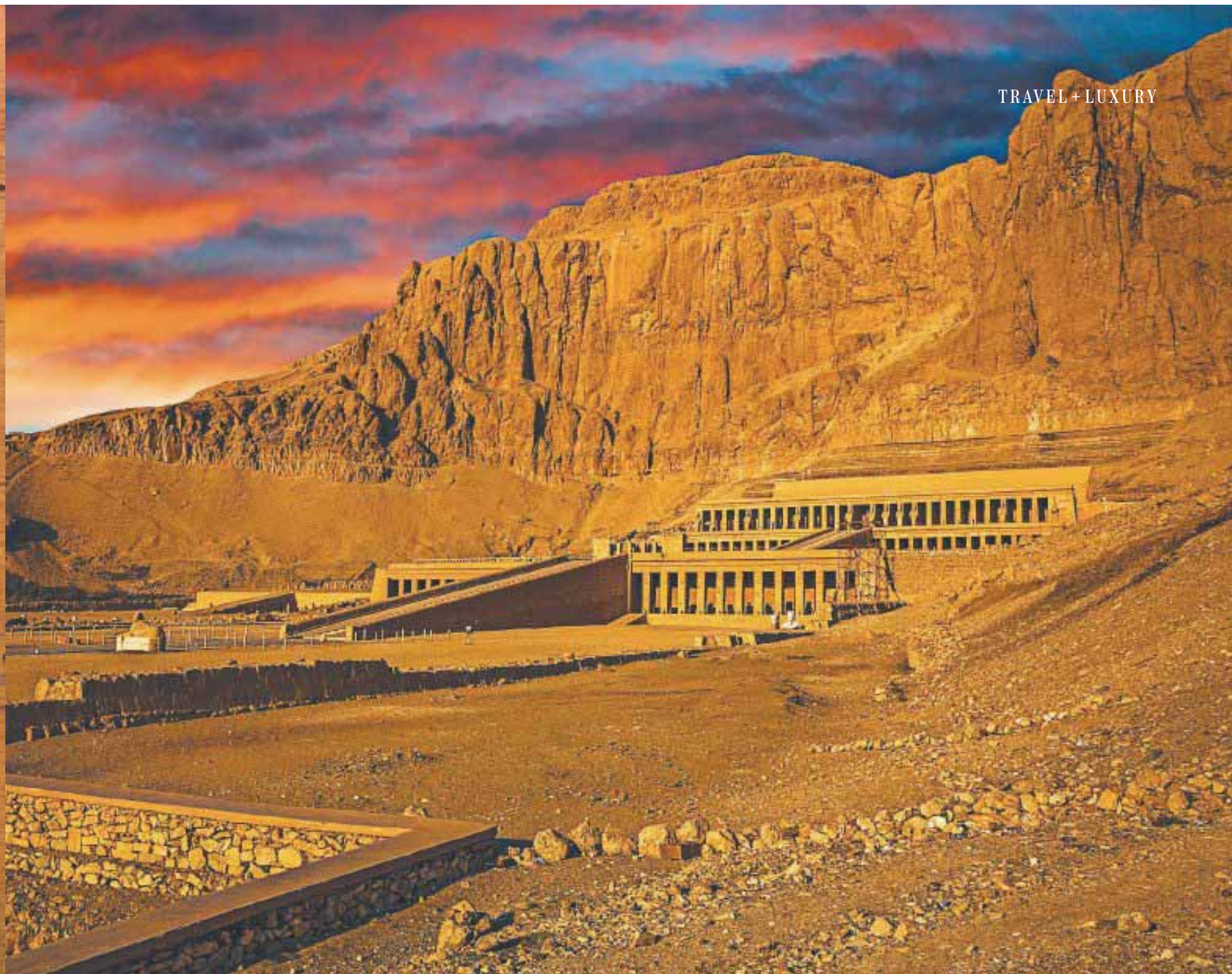
From Cairo to the Cape, this journey of a lifetime
launches forever friendships and memories

SUSAN KUROSAWA

On a steamy afternoon in Cairo, as traffic whirls and horns honk like angry geese, I have been transported, in space and time, to a sanctuary of silence and reverence, peering at sarcophagi and blackened skeletons, each in its temperature-controlled glass case. The light is low, the guide's voice hushed. Clustered at my side are several fellow passengers on a Captain's Choice group charter from Cairo to the Cape. We don't know each other well yet but all that will change over the next two weeks. Little do I know that friendships to last a lifetime will be formed, and lively conversations, learning and laughter will fill our days and nights.

We are in the Gallery of Royal Mummies at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation, progressively opened from 2017-2021. There are the remnants of 18 kings and four queens, moved from Cairo's old Egyptian Museum, and much earlier from the Valley of the Kings in Luxor. It's the perfect prelude to our visit to this ancient site, the next destination on our itinerary. I am buzzing with excitement. If anyone has watched every documentary about ancient Egypt ever made, then I am that person.

Also on that memorable day in Cairo, most of us embark felucca sailboats along a short stretch of the Nile. "Try saying a 'flotilla of feluccas' after a pint of Pharaoh Lager," one wag whispers to me. I try to control unladylike snorts of laughter. Things are more sedate as we explore the Pyramids of Giza, their stories brought to life by Ibrahim, a highly trained Egyptologist and natural storyteller. That evening we return to the dunes to dine lavishly at tables set amid the sands and mooching camels as the inscrutable Sphinx looks on. The backdrop is a dazzling son et lumière presentation with accompaniment by a pink-robed young woman playing a lute. A little beyond, her fellow musicians perform unseen amid laser beams crisscrossing the sky like clashing light sabres from Star Wars. We gasp in wonder, little knowing that in a few days from now a gala event to eclipse all others will be effortlessly magicked out of thin air.



Next, to Luxor, and the first leg on our private Boeing 737-700 jet. Airport procedures are smooth at Cairo's domestic terminal, and we are presented with boarding passes for all five sectors through to South Africa. Luxe leather seats are in pairs, with footrests and generous recline, and window positions guaranteed for solo guests like me. Cabin service includes unstinting Veuve Clicquot, premium spirits and wine. Meals are light and tasty, with vegetarian and vegan options on request. It's all very "rock star", quips one of my 40 new companions.

Ibrahim is aboard for Luxor, too, and although it's a lively 47C in the desert, he shepherds us with unflagging ease as we drape scarfs around our heads and faces and festoon ourselves with sufficient water bottles to irrigate an oasis. Only our eyes are visible, and we look rather like bandits on the loose as we explore the West Bank's unyielding landscape of stone and sand in the Valley of the Kings.

It's hard to pick the highlights on a day of such rich discoveries but the Temple of Ramses V and VI (KV9) and the tomb of

Clockwise from top left: hot-air ballooning over the African plains; Hatshepsut Mortuary Temple; Angama Mara in Kenya



Tutankhamun have to be singled out, if not just for storied history but myriad conspiracy theories and conjecture around the latter. We visit the elaborately colonnaded mortuary temple of Hatshepsut and so much more. The afternoon unfolds like a history lesson but with never a dull second. But the grand reveal is yet to come. That evening, amid a private setting at the well-preserved temple of Ramses III Medinet Habu in Luxor, a banquet meal is served. Against this monument of columned halls emerges a dazzling display of whirling dervishes, laser lighting and a four-piece orchestra launching festivities with A Little Night Music. Roll over, Mozart. We can't believe it either. A description of mind-boggling barely suffices.

And so to bed. Accommodation throughout is in the best available lodgings. In Cairo, it's the well-located St Regis facing the Nile. In Luxor, the fabled Old Winter Palace of Agatha Christie fame has been rebranded as a Sofitel but needs sprucing up. Its location, however, on the boastfully broad Corniche, is excellent, with river boats jostling for position, donkeys dozing and date palms drooping.

In Zimbabwe, the Victoria Falls Hotel delights with its deep sense of history, but it has a certain wonkiness that doesn't please all of our party. Old-world charm is all very well, but random service and underwhelming food are not. Nonetheless, all grumbles turn to squeals of delight as each experience unfolds, even if in some destinations, such as Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, we are split between various hotels and lodges due to limited room capacity and I sense a bit of unease about who got the most desirable options. And it's worth noting that the 2025 itinerary includes some changes to the accommodation mix, with Hilton Luxor Resort & Spa a new replacement; and for Victoria Falls, access will be from the Zambia side of the Zambezi, using the Anantara-branded Royal Livingstone, known for knockout views and zebras casually roaming its gardens.

From Luxor, our private jet, with its jolly Australian and British cabin and flight crew, takes us to Nairobi, where we prompt-

ly transfer on to a chartered light plane to Maasai Mara National Reserve. Herd animals kick up gauzy sheets of dust as we come into land on a dirt airstrip. Accommodation at Angama Mara, in chic and comfy tented pavilions on an escarpment, proves the most beguiling of the trip. Scenes from *Out of Africa* were filmed up here and the temptation to go the full khaki or wrap up in Maasai checked fabrics proves irresistible. Our stay covers a generous three nights (a laundry necessity for many of us) and this is the most personalised and longest stop on the trip, with a takeover of the whole camp and myriad opportunities to gather for meals, drinks and sharing of stories tall and small.

Many in our group go hot-air ballooning at first light and all of us have drifted into friendship circles, found our "tribe". I am drawn most regularly to James and Flavia, and Adrian and Judy, and several others who socialise easily, but no one is excluded among the broader group and true camaraderie prevails. Tour leader Suzanne and husband Gordon are amazingly organised and forever cheerful, while Carla and Margie of Captain's Choice are warmly helpful and pillars of discretion as is delightful tour doctor Julie, always with good advice and medical kit to hand. From the Maasai Mara it's back to Nairobi to be reunited with the private jet and our crew, and onwards to Kigali, capital of Rwanda. The city is a surprise package with its floral roundabouts and well-swept roads and a sense of busy, determined enterprise.

Then onwards to Kinigi to tour the Ellen DeGeneres Campus of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and learn about the work of the Gorilla Doctors team of volunteer veterinarians. The following day is nothing short of extraordinary as we rig up in protective bush-coloured gear, don gloves as big as gorilla paws and enter the cloud forests of the Volcanoes National Park, climbing with guides and trackers through densely bunched vegetation and up pretty steep inclines. To be standing beside a silverback barely seems credible and we travellers sleep long

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COVER STORY

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and well that night and wake next morning to wonder if it was simply a dream. We have the photos as proof, though, generously shared by most of us via a WhatsApp group, often with hilarious captions and observations.

If there are bumps behind the scenes as the trip progresses, then none of us feels, or knows, a thing. And if a catastrophe does occur, it's all about the handling. After arriving in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, and spending two days enjoying cultural tours, scenic helicopter hops and viewing those famous thundering waterfalls, we return to the local airport to rejoin our trusty private jet, bound for Johannesburg's Lanseria airport, close to Pretoria. But the paperwork needs a final signature by a bureaucrat in South Africa who's either AWOL or having a lengthy lunch, or is just plain disinterested. Hours pass as we sit in the departure hall. Then we are allowed to board. Seatbelts are fastened; the wine connoisseurs debate the merits of the four South African labels on offer. And then we are told to disembark. Still no signature. The flight and cabin crews line up and wave us goodbye. Who knows when this day will end, and where.

But, somehow, our resourceful leaders manage to charter a commercial Fastjet aircraft that happens to have a crew with hours to spare and they can fly us to Johannesburg's main OR Tambo International Airport. The fate of "our" private jet crew now lies in the hands of

paper pushers. From Johannesburg airport we are taken on coaches (spirited from where, we wonder) to a field outside Pretoria, where Rohan Voss, owner of Rovos Rail, awaits our arrival in the tall grass. By now it's very dark and Voss has lined up his staff with hurricane lamps and torches to light our way. There's a ditch to negotiate and a bit of trepidation about how to get hoisted aboard the vintage train. Most of us, though, view it as an adventure and one more Captain's Choice miracle of reorganisation and alchemy.

Voss inaugurated the rail service in 1989, buying up heritage rolling stock and honouring the feel of a bygone era of plush travel. The chartered train will be our home for the next three nights as we edge 1600km southwest to Cape Town. It's a start-stop-shudder of a journey that doesn't quite fulfil expectations but there's lots of polished wood and gleaming brass, and even if it's not the Orient-Express, the food is excellent, including local specialties such as bobotie and kingklip fish. Drinks come cool and fast, and the deeply comfortable old-style decor in the lounge and dining cars is just perfect. Chintz fabric, wing-back chairs and the anti-macassar were well overdue for such a return to favour.

We traverse the goldfields of Witwatersrand with ostriches racing alongside like outriders, hop off to tour the Diamond Mine Museum and view the Big Hole chasm at Kimberley, historic capital of the Northern



Victoria Falls Hotel, above left; the Old Winter Palace hotel in Luxor, above; zebras in the Maasai Mara, Kenya, below

Cape. Our trusty train rattles across the vastness of the semi-arid Karoo. The landscapes are leached of colour; I imagine I can hear the caws of carrion-eating crows. We explore the Victorian-era village of Matjiesfontein with its transport museum, chapels and old-world pubs. One night there's an African-themed dinner aboard and a few jolly souls dress up. Delightful cabin attendant Ephenia winds a colourful length of fabric I bought in a Luxor market around my head, turban-style. Would a protea behind the ear be too much? We giggle at the result.

In Cape Town, the itinerary is flexible but most of us



IN THE KNOW

Australian-based operator Captain's Choice celebrates its 30th anniversary this year and will introduce a new Airbus A319 jet (pictured) on its 2025 itineraries, accommodating 44 passengers, all in business class seats with fully flat recline. The 16-day African Adventures by Private Jet & Rovos Rail from Cairo to Cape Town departs on September 2, 2025. Some inclusions and accommodation may differ from the 2024 itinerary; \$78,900 a person. Other 2025 options on the African continent are available as well as Antarctica and destinations in South America, Asia, Europe, UK, South Pacific and Australia. captainschoice.com.au/2025



Cape Town at sunset, top; Rovos Rail train, right; whirling dervish in Luxor, left; sunrise at Victoria Falls, below; KV9 Temple, below right



opt for the obvious. Catch the cable car up Table Mountain, do guided walks of the city, join a coastal excursion by coach that includes a seafood lunch at Harbour House on Kalk Bay as great waves surge and smash on rocks beneath. Our deeply comfortable hotel, Fairmont Cape Grace, proves a convenient base for wandering around the boutiques, bars and restaurants of the V&A waterfront precinct.

But my lasting impressions of such a grand gallivant are not just about scenery and unique encounters but

the great care with which each facet of the journey has been handled. There are dedicated Captain's Choice hospitality desks in many of our hotels and invitations to "dine around" onsite restaurants of choice, all charged back to our leaders. This generosity makes for convivial groupings and no awkwardness about splitting bills.

On our final night, after a private guided tour of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, a banquet is served on its top-level function space with wide views of the city. Amid candles and masses of white flowers, a local youth choir sings like angels. And then they rove the room, chanting and gently coaxing us to form a conga line. It's wildly joyous and, after a fortnight of exceptional events, is nothing less than we'd expect. This is how we rock and roll. We started as strangers in Cairo and farewelled each other as friends at the southern tip of the African continent. Many of us, me included, shed tears as we part company. Journeys that stay forever in the heart are made of this.



Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Captain's Choice.