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The Journal

www.journallive.co.uk/shop

As a single girl, I never feared travelling. By the time I'd hit 25, I'd toured Italy, Spain, Greece and Yugoslavia, backpacked in France and gone to gigs in Germany. I'd even driven from Florida to Atlanta through the night. I used to pack within minutes, getting through airports was a breeze, and I'd done it all without a second thought.

Then I became a single mother and suddenly travel became a daunting prospect. I didn't just have myself to consider.

My married friends would invite us camping with their children in Scotland - and there I would lick my wounds in the comforting knowledge that my son Christyn would play with their children, while I lounged in a semi-vegetative state with a glass of wine.

I longed to travel abroad, but I wanted more than sun, I needed conversation with those in a similar position. So after surfing the net, I found the Small Families website at www.smallfamilies.co.uk. I wouldn't have even considered going to Egypt alone with my son, but the idea of being in a small group with other single parents, and having the support of a full-time holiday host, definitely appealed.

Christyn was growing up, and at 12 had a strong interest in Ancient Egypt. He had been tugging at my shirt sleeves begging me to take him somewhere like that for years. It might not be what I would have chosen as a single girl, or even as part of a married couple, but as a single mother with a child tiptoeing on the edge of adolescence, it was the perfect adventure.

So, daunted but excited, we set off. As we were flying from Manchester, we travelled there the day before by train from Newcastle direct to Manchester Airport and stayed at the airport's Travelodge. There was a free shuttle bus connecting the airport to the hotel, so no need for taxis.

The flight was about five hours from Manchester to Luxor. Although I'd dreaded it for fear he became bored, Christyn was so taken with his backpack I'd filled with goodies, including colouring pens, computer magazines and plenty of paper, what with the in-flight movies and the meal, the trip passed painlessly.

On arrival at Luxor Airport, we were met by our Small Families representative Cheryl Wood and other members of our group.

At this point, had I been alone with Christyn, I might have panicked, but Cheryl helped us get our visas and pass through immigration control quickly and easily. It's best to pay for visas on arrival at Luxor Airport and they cost about £15 each. You can pay in Egyptian pounds, but sterling is preferred.

We then took the 20-minute bus ride from the airport to our hotel. The sights we saw proved a good ice-breaker for the parents and children, who immediately started chatting. And so it was that I found myself at the Maritim Jolie Ville resort in Luxor for my first foray into the wider world as a single mum, but I felt reassured because I wasn't alone.

Once at the hotel, our group was met by the hotel staff with a welcome drink of hibiscus. It was a real thirst-quencher for all as the temperature outside was soaring. After dumping our bags in our



HOT STUFF Egypt's deserts offered many different and unusual sights.



TRAVEL FACTS

Aranda Garrard travelled to Luxor, Egypt with Small Families and stayed at the Maritim Jolie Ville resort with direct scheduled flights from Manchester Airport.

The seven-night holiday cost £866 for an adult and £680 for a child. Prices for 2009 are still to be finalised.

For more details, call (01763) 226567 or visit

www.smallfamilies.co.uk or www.singleparent.travel Holidays are also available to Sharm el Sheik, Egypt, from 2009. Open return train fares from Newcastle to Manchester cost £44.50 each.

Deposits of £100 per adult and £50 per child are required to secure booking with balance payable eight weeks before departure.

Egyptian adventure

Aranda Garrard and son thoroughly enjoy a holiday for single parents in Egypt.

rooms, which were very comfortable and well air-conditioned, we explored our new surroundings.

You needed a map to get around the giant campus. With three restaurants, two swimming pools, tennis courts, bikes for hire, a jogging track, football field, zoo, health spa, kids' club and gym, there was a lot to take in.

The main children's pool, next to the Infinity pool, was great fun for the younger ones with its brightly coloured slides and water jets. There were plenty of activities to take part in during the day too, from camel rides to donkey rides around the resort, aqua aerobics and water volleyball. It meant Christyn had a ball and I had a rest.

In the evening, there were resort activities, such as a chance to sail the Nile in a traditional felucca boat, try traditional dancing and see a snake charmer in the Fellah's Tent.

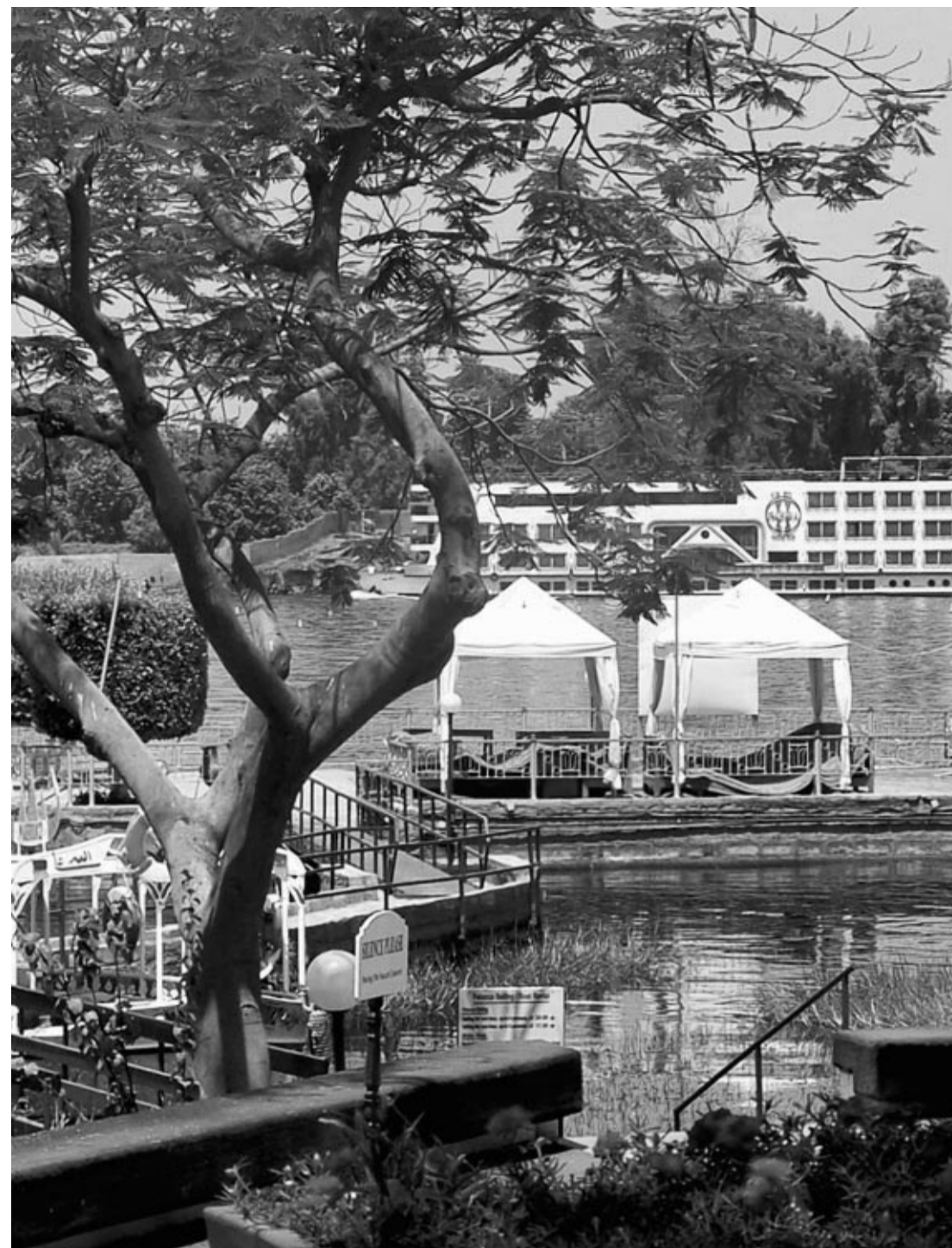
The weather and the company were ideal, and by the end of the week we had become a close-knit

family. Christyn struck up friendships with all the children, swapping email addresses and phone numbers.

Meanwhile, the adults shared parenting tales and gave each other tips on going it alone. I was sure I'd made the right decision to go and for once, I felt I had support on holiday from people who understood what I was going through.

Evenings - which could have posed a problem - fell into an easy pattern. Some of the younger children had a siesta afternoon so that they could join us for dinner without feeling tired. The restaurant wasn't too formal, allowing the children to sit together on one table, while the adults ate at another.

The buffet-style affair, with its huge number of dishes was the perfect answer. There was a different theme each night, from Italian to Asian cuisine, and the waiters dressed in traditional outfits to suit whichever country's food was being served up. A nice touch. The children could eat as much or as little as they liked. There



LIVELY BASE A view of the Nile from Aranda's hotel at the Maritim Jolie Ville resort.

was everything from pasta to rice dishes, stews to chicken and fish. But even if young taste buds weren't suited, the staff were happy to go back into the kitchen to serve up pizza and chips.

A musician played outside on the verandah in the early evening as the sun went down over the mountains, and fidgety children headed for the games room. Two Egyptian pounds (20p to you and me) kept them entertained at the billiards table for two hours. After that, adults and children would end the night with a game of charades before bedtime.

With all the children happily in tow together, the adults had the perfect excuse to go sight-seeing and "do" the mammoth temples of Karnak, Luxor and the Valley of the Kings. All excursions were exciting for the youngsters too - thanks to an excellent local tour guide called David who got on famously with the kids.

There was even time for the optional hot air balloon flight for those who managed to get up at 5am - before some serious shopping afterwards.

Although we had been told things were relatively cheap in Egypt, this wasn't the case. First, you had to be careful not to venture off the beaten track, and second, if you were willing

to part with your cash, a small trinket could set you back up to 100 English pounds. Even after bartering, I didn't feel I'd come away with any bargains.

Due to the heat, our tours only lasted until noon, by which time it was sweltering and the children were ready for an afternoon by the pool - which worked out quite nicely.

The hotel served up every flavour of ice cream imaginable, from walnut and honey to cherry, chocolate and lemon. It was a delicious afternoon treat.

Maritim Jolie also had a fantastic health spa with friendly staff where you could escape for a soothing massage, makeover or a manicure for under £10. The mums (and dads) took it in turn to go for some pampering. This is something I would not have even contemplated if I'd been a single mum on my own.

Being in a small group and staying at such a family-friendly hotel complex, with facilities for children, sports and restaurants all on site, gave me bags of confidence. I'm no longer afraid of holidaying so far from home. Christyn is rather proud of his mum and described his trip as "a real experience" on the flight back.

Maybe next year we'll do Morocco with Small Families. Who knows?



ADVENTURE The Hatshepsut Temple. Aranda, centre right, and son Christyn, right, with friends from Small Families.

PASSPORT

ALTHOUGH the falling pound has sent prices for winter ski holidays in Europe 2008/09 up by around 10%, many skiers are trying to avoid the rises by avoiding half-term crowds in mid-February and by taking more short breaks.

Marion Telsnig at Crystal Ski says: "Anybody not bound by school holidays should travel before Christmas, in mid-January or mid-March, when prices are more reasonable. Seven nights' half-board in a three-star hotel in Seefeld, Austria, from January 10 starts at £392, plus a £20 supplement from nine regional airports."

Alison Wills at Lagrange Holidays, specialists in self-drive and self-catering packages to the French Alps, says: "Despite the credit crunch, families are determined to get to the slopes without spending a fortune. For self-drivers, for instance, French-owned SeaFrance offers £98 return Dover-Calais crossings for a car and up to nine passengers in December, January and February, rising to £122 at Easter."

At Ski Weekends, two nights' half-board in Brides les Bains, in the Trois Valleees, and return coach travel departing on Thursday or Friday evenings is only £179.

Directski, which keeps prices low by not having a brochure or big marketing budget, urges beginners to try resorts like Pas de la Casa in Andorra or Pamporovo in Bulgaria, where equipment hire and tuition are cheaper.

It offers seven nights' self-catering in Pamporovo from £309, including flights and transfers, with a learn-to-ski pack from £159.

● Lagrange (0207) 371-6111 and www.lagrange-holidays.co.uk;
www.Skiweekends.com (0870) 442-3400; Crystal Ski 0871 231-2256 and www.crystalski.co.uk; Directski.com 0800 358-0448.

READER TRAVEL

Nile cruise, Cairo and the pyramids. Five star hotel and cruise, eight days from £959pp, departures May - September 2009.

- Full-day tour to the Pyramids of Giza and Saqqara.
- Full-day tour of Cairo, including the Egyptian Museum.
- Tour of Luxor including the Valley of the Kings.
- Three nights hotel accommodation in Cairo, bed and breakfast, plus lunch on days two and three. (Single room supplement applies)
- Four nights Nile cruise on the 5-star Beau Soleil, full board.
- Return flights.
- The services of a Newmarket Tour Manager.

Connecting flights are available from Newcastle/Durham Tees Valley Airports to Heathrow for a supplement of £150pp

To request a complimentary colour brochure telephone The Journal Reader Travel Department on (0191) 201-6000 or Newmarket Holidays on (0845) 226-7751 or log onto www.newmarket.travel/nec or call into our front reception, Groat Market, Newcastle.

The Journal Reader Travel



Lincoln Christmas Market
2 days from **£79** - 6th December, 2008

Bath Christmas Market and The Cotswolds
2 days from **£75** - 30th November, 2008

Christmas Crafts and The Cotswolds
2 days from **£85** - 15th November, 2008

Edinburgh Christmas Shopping Special
2 days from **£75** - 22nd November, 2008
2 days from **£89.95** - 15th November, 2008

Christmas Shopping at Castle Howard
2 days from **£89.95**
Christmas shopping in Leeds 29th November, 2008

Scarborough and York Christmas Shopping
2 days from **£79.95** - 16th November, 2008

Yuletide Festivities at Warwick Castle & Worcester Christmas Fayre
2 days from **£89** - 29th November, 2008

Germany's Christmas Markets
6 days from **£219** - 2nd or 8th December, 2008
Includes return overnight DFDS crossings from North Shields and visits to the Christmas Markets of Cochem and Koblenz

Christmas Carols in York Minster
2 days from **£99** 12th December, 2008

Christmas Carols in Chester Cathedral
2 days from **£85** - 6th December, 2008

Christmastime on the London Eye
2 days from **£95** - 14th December, 2008

Brussels and Bruges Christmas Markets
3 days from **£125** - 5th December, 2008
Includes visits to Brussels and Bruges Christmas Markets

Christmas Markets - Black Forest, Switzerland and Alsace
7 days from **£299** 8th December, 2008
Via DFDS overnight from North Shields

Austrian Lakes and Mountains Christmas
7 days from **£329** - 22nd December, 2008
Includes 4 nights at a hotel in the Salkammergut region of Austria, evening meals in Austria

New Year in Paris
4 days from **£259** - 30th December, 2008

New Year in The German Valleys
4 days from **£179** - 30th December, 2008

4-star New Year in Amsterdam
4 days from **£259** - 29th December, 2008
Via DFDS overnight from North Shields

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