

## Adventure

# Deep in the desert in ancient Sudan

This little-visited nation has more pyramids than Egypt, and travel companies are now running great trips. By **Tom Chesshyre**

Sunset at the pyramids at Meroe in Sudan, and I have the ancient Unesco world heritage site to myself. The heat of the day (45C, no less) rises from the sandstone steps of the remains of the pyramid of Queen Amanishaketo, where I'm waiting to watch the sun slip beyond the horizon.

And so it does, in a perfect tangerine orb. The wide expanse of the Sahara stretches ahead. All around ancient tombs are bathed in gold, casting shadows in mysterious passageways.

This is one of the most sacred places of the little-known Kingdom of Kush (2,400BC to AD400) that once ruled Egypt and went on to conquer lands as far north as Lebanon. These pyramids are the remains of a thriving nation.

They also happen to be one of the finest sights in Africa. From a distance they look like a great mouth of teeth, some perfectly sharp while others seemingly in need of a filling (thanks to damage by an early 19th-century Italian treasure hunter). The pyramids at Giza may win the prize for grandeur, but Meroe's remoteness in this vast expanse of sand is incredibly evocative.

While Sudan's attractions are well off the beaten track — attracting few outside visitors — most people are well aware of the country. Not, perhaps, for the best of reasons. In recent years it has had a torrid time. In 2011, after a bitter struggle, the independent state of South Sudan became the world's youngest country. This bloody struggle had been the result of religious differences: the south is mainly Christian and animist, while Sudan is an Islamic state with a 97 per cent Muslim population.

Since independence things have not gone well for the fledgling nation. A subsequent civil war resulted in more than 300,000 deaths and the displacement of three million people. The conflict continues. Meanwhile, in Sudan, tribal conflict in the western Darfur region has been on and off since the Eighties. It is estimated that

more than 2.5 million have been displaced and 300,000 killed.

Given that Sudan has been ruled by a dictator (President al-Bashir) since 1989, whose elections are widely suspected to be rigged and who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and war crimes, you may be wondering whether you would be better off in Marbella again this year.

Sudan, however, is such a massive country that troubles in the south and west do not affect the safety of visitors to its main historical sites in Khartoum, the capital, and in the land to the north, running up to its border with Egypt. The Foreign Office says it is fine to visit (the main season is October to April, when daily high temperatures are about 25-30C) and a growing number of British specialist tour operators are offering trips.

The country is also about to enjoy the exposure of a big Hollywood film. In September Angelina Jolie will come to film *History Has Started From Here*, telling the story of a prominent Meroitic queen. The Kingdom of Kush is about to hit the silver screens. Is tourism about to take off?

Perhaps — although a holiday in Sudan remains one for the adventurous with a love of ancient civilisations. It also helps to have an interest in Britain's more recent involvement in the country. Before learning more about the latter, however, I do what most tourists do when they arrive in the capital and head to the confluence of the Blue and White Nile rivers.

Reaching this point — the reason Khartoum exists — provides a lesson in the geopolitics of Sudan today. To get there you must go through a small park, but unless you are with a guide who knows the attendant you will be stuck. This is because the park has been closed for more than a year, probably due to its sensitive location close to the national assembly building across the river.

"I have the key to the confluence," says Abdelmoneim, after discreetly distributing a few Sudanese pounds. He is holding the key to a gate that leads to the meeting point of the Blue Nile (which originates in Ethiopia) with the White Nile (formed by a Rwandan spring). And what is remarkable is that their names ring true: the Ethiopian water is indeed an inky-blue while the Rwandan flow is muddy-white.

Khartoum is full of intrigue. Our second stop is Khalifa's House in Omdurman, a series of ramshackle mud-brick buildings across the White Nile. Here the story is told of how Charles Gordon, the British military campaigner and



Pyramids of Meroe in Sudan

hero of Far East campaigns, was sent to Sudan to evacuate Egyptian garrisons in the face of attacks by local forces led by a charismatic and fierce leader, the Mahdi.

Instead of carrying out his orders to the letter, Gordon interpreted them to take charge of Sudan on Britain's behalf. Soon, however, he ran into trouble and was surrounded in Khartoum by the Mahdi. In January 1885, two days short of being relieved by troops heading down the Nile, his fort was sacked and he was decapitated.

It was a bloody deed that shocked Victorian Britain; the museum displays the rudimentary spears, shields and chain mail used by Gordon's attackers, as well as his office chair and clothing. It took until 1898 for General Kitchener to defeat the Mahdist armies, which were by that time commanded by a figure known as Khalifa, the "successor". Britain, with Egypt as a passive partner, went on to rule Sudan until independence in 1956.

From Khalifa's House, it is a short walk past the Mahdi's domed-topped tomb to the souk at Omdurman, not far from where Kitchener won his decisive battle (a complete mismatch in which 10,000 Sudanese died). The souk, the largest in Sudan, is labyrinthine and full of everything and anything, including bright fabrics, fish, fruit, bongo drums and delicate wood carvings. In a shop selling crocodile-



skin handbags and snake-skin shoes, a shifty looking man comes in while I am visiting and shuffles to the stallholder. He whispers something and soon elephant tusks are out and negotiations begin. The ivory trade is alive and well in Khartoum. So too is Sufism, the mystical wing of Islam. One evening I attend a get-together of whirling dervishes at the tomb of the 19th-century Sufi leader Sheikh Hamed al-Nil. These are held every Friday before sunset, with a great circle of Sufi followers watching trance-like dancers on a dusty plot, some gesticulating wildly and wearing cattle horn headgear, others draped with beads and hopping as though treading on hot stones. Only a few "whirl". Incense wafts in the air. Cymbals clash.

Drums beat. Crowds chant "Allah! Allah! Allah!" I chat to the only other holiday-maker, a Japanese woman. However, before I know it I am confronted by a stocky man in a tracksuit who exchanges words with my guide.

"He is secret police and he doesn't like you," says my guide after the man goes away. The secret policeman had questioned my notebook. I am travelling on a tourist's visa rather than a journalist's visa...and reporters are regarded with great suspicion in Sudan.

From Khartoum we drive through baking desert to Meroe, staying at the brilliant Meroe Permanent Tented Camp. We use this as a base to see the pyramids — there are about 200 in the country — as well as a fine reconstructed temple at Naqa devoted to Apedemak, the Kushite lion god.

This was built in the 1st century. What is striking is that its depiction of Queen Amanitore shows her with wide hips and curly hair. She is also the same size as her husband. Queens on ancient Egyptian tombs are much more slender, with straight hair. While earlier Kingdom of Kush works aped the Egyptian style of idealised figures, the Kushites had by this stage developed the self-confidence to introduce homegrown art that reflected local Nubian people. It is also interesting to note the importance of powerful women.

None was stronger than the legendary Queen Amanirenas, whose troops defeat-

The Mahdi's tomb in Khartoum



ed Augustus in AD24. This is who Angelina Jolie will play in *History Has Started From Here*. We visit the queen's almost destroyed Victory Arch at the Royal City of Meroe, where she buried a bronze head of Augustus taken when the Kushites sacked Aswan. The idea was that her followers could trample on Augustus. This bronze

was dug up by a Liverpoolian treasure hunter in 1911 and is now in the British Museum in London.

It is a long, hot drive across the Bayuda desert to Karima and the mountain of Jebel Barkal, facing a bend of the Nile. We are staying next door at the lovely Nubian Rest House, with its domes and bougainvillea and perfect lawns (described in my guidebook as "Sudan's only boutique hotel").

Jebel Barkal was the epicentre of Kushite rule when King Piye attacked Egypt in 720BC; his son, King Taharqa, later extended the domain to Lebanon, before Syrians pushed the Kushites back. The highlight of the mountain is a tall column of rock resembling a cobra. At its foot is a temple-cave in which Kushite queens gave birth. At sunset I climb to the top before sliding down the giant sand dune on its western side.

My final day in the desert is spent visiting the Third Cataract — rapids where a controversial dam may soon be constructed — seeing 10,000-year-old carvings of lions and boats on boulders in a wadi, and stopping at Kerma, the original Kushite city from 2,400BC. To think that the giant mud temple here dates from so long ago is mind-blowing. The Egyptians destroyed the rest of city in 1,500BC during a raid.

We finish our tour in Khartoum with two marvellous visits. The first is to the national museum, full of treasures recovered from the sites, including statues,

stone figures from King Taharqa's tomb and a "Meroitic Venus" from the Royal City of Meroe.

Then we drive through a shanty town — home to South Sudanese refugees — on the edge of the capital to watch a Nubian wrestling bout. This is held in an oval arena with hundreds of spectators screaming and urging on the muscle-bound participants, who have four minutes to topple their opponent: the first knockdown wins.

The atmosphere is raucous. Victors are raised triumphantly on shoulders. Losers (usually) grin and shrug shoulders. It is electrifying. Policemen with batons pace by, maintaining order. The sun beats down. And, not for the first time during my trip to Sudan, I'm the only tourist.



Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 3642 0861, coxandkings.co.uk), which has an 11-day, 8-night escorted tour to Sudan from £3,045pp, including flights, transfers, excursions and hotels with breakfast and most other meals. For the latest Foreign & Commonwealth Office travel advice, see gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice



The Roman kiosk at the Temple of Apedemak (Lion Temple) in Naqa