



# Tea on the Nile

When you're living in the middle of the Sahara desert and the government is a military dictatorship it can be a challenge to find fun things to do

The work could be quite interesting. As the sole Canadian diplomat resident in Khartoum (Sudan) I had in 2000 a vicious civil war to report on that had cost two million lives and had been running for 17 years. And after 9/11 it fell to me to look after journalists who had come to see where Osama bin-Laden had got started. I would show them the chemists' shop where he'd once had an office and we'd go out and meet his ex-cook, who'd tell us how Osama had a taste for Basmati rice and loved small children. For good measure we would throw in a visit to the site of the al-Shifa pharmaceuticals factory that had been destroyed by American cruise missiles in 1998; the custodian would show us a piece of rocket motor on which you could make out the word "Boeing." And, although it was not strictly relevant, we'd sometimes finish the tour by having tea with a Canadian friend in the flat that used to belong to Carlos the Jackal.

But the terror-tourism became tedious with repetition. For relaxation there was nothing better than getting out on the river, for Khartoum is located at the junction of the Blue with the White Nile.

Back in the 1920s, when this was a British garrison, it occurred to the Colonel of the Regiment that a good way of keeping the young officers out of trouble might be to establish a sailing club. The first problem was that there were no boats. Indeed, there was hardly any wood to be had either, the nearest forest being about 2000 km to the south. But there was a large pile of galvanised steel that had had been hauled up laboriously from Cairo in case one of the garrison's old gunboats needed repairs. A reputable yacht designer was commissioned – Morgan Giles – and the result was the Khartoum One Design. This is a steel 18ft sloop based on a Sharpie, with buoyancy tanks, a retractable centreboard, a Bermuda-rigged mainsail and a jib. Starting in 1932, about fifty were built.

**ABOVE**  
Khartoum Ones at their moorings off the Blue Nile Sailing Club

**BELOW**  
Manhandling the heavy boat into the water

## *Khartoum characters*

The clubhouse of the Blue Nile Sailing Club (established in 1926) is similarly ironclad: H.M.S. Melik ("King" in Arabic). The Melik is one of four gunboats that were ferried in pieces past the six cataracts of the Lower Nile. They were re-assembled in situ as British forces approached Khartoum in 1898, seeking revenge for the earlier killing in the capital of General Charles Gordon (portrayed in "Khartoum" by Charlton Heston) by the messianic figure known as the Mahdi (an equally unconvincing





Laurence Olivier).

The Melik played a part in the Battle of Omdurman, where its deck-mounted machine gun was used to devastating effect, inspiring Hillaire Belloc's short poem:

*Whatever happens  
We have got  
The Maxim Gun  
And they have not*

Shortly afterwards, the Melik was key to another moment of colonial history known as the Fashoda Incident, driving a would-be French colonial force from the area and thus giving rise to the term Gunboat Diplomacy. Her swansong was as a prop in Alexander Korda's classic movie "The Four Feathers" (1939). Since that date she has been beached, listing at a slight angle, in front of Khartoum's St Matthew's cathedral.

The Khartoum One Design fleet

would race twice a week just before sunset, then there would be a longer race on Friday mornings – the Islamic weekend. For the Friday races we would often beat down the Blue Nile to its junction with the White Nile and run back against the current. My wife Jenny and I were a little nervous the first time we took a boat out on our own. The current of one to two knots would inevitably take us downstream in the direction of Cairo (about 3000km and six sets of cataracts) and while the prevailing northerly wind would tend to bring us back, late evening calms were not uncommon.

It was also clear that, should we capsize, then righting a heavyweight like the Khartoum might be challenging. The Commodore, a genial and very large man in a flowing white djellabiya that sometimes gave him trouble when going about, was nonchalant when

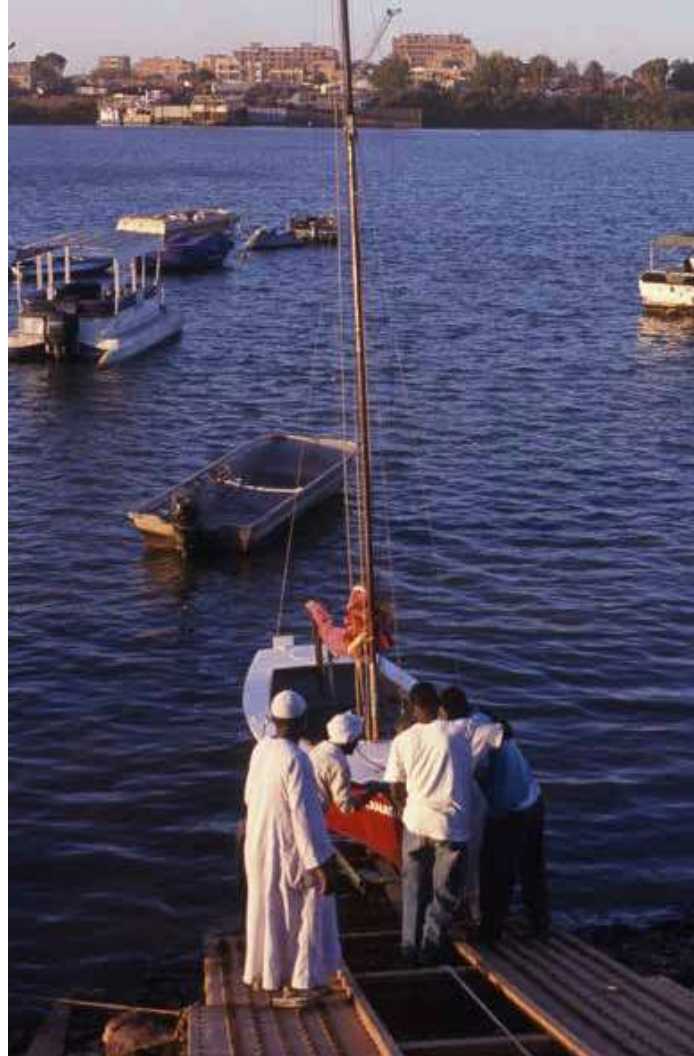
we very cautiously inquired if the club had lifejackets:

"No, no Mr Nicholas, Miss Jenny... do not worry about that. Our Nile is warm."

But he hesitated.

"There is one thing...If you do capsize, please be sure to do so on the Blue Nile, not the White....you see, there are crocodiles on the White. And....er....do not stand on the bottom of the river. There is, how do you say, Bilharzia? It is a worm; it is not good."

We were generously allocated a boat of our own. The arrangement for temporary residents such as ourselves was that you were welcome to fix-up one of the ancient dinghies – being steel they were pretty robust – as long as you bequeathed it once you left. About one third of the members were expatriates, the rest locals. Our Sudanese fellow-members would try to offset the cost of rehabilitation by seeking sponsorship – from Pepsi, or maybe the local cooking-oil company – and displaying their logos. We contented ourselves with a sparkling paint job in Canadian colours (red and white), →



**ABOVE LEFT**  
Evening on the Nile

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Launching our Khartoum One Design after a new paint job

**BELOW**  
H.M.S Melik, the gunboat has served its retirement as the clubhouse of the Blue Nile Sailing Club



## Dinghy sailing ~ Sudan

a maple leaf on the bows and the grand name “Canada One.”

### Revised racing rules

Racing around the buoys on weekday evenings was often a robust affair and we rarely did well. In theory the usual racing rules applied, but in reality the terms “Starboard!” or “Water!” were taken to mean “Get out of my way!”, and were held to be binding as long as you said it first.

The club employed two “boat boys” who served as night-watchmen, did some basic maintenance and filled in as skippers or crew when numbers were short. Farouk was in his eighties, Mohammed Bahar a few years younger but impaired by a severely crooked back. On the race-course they were demons. Of course, they knew every eddy, every spot where there was likely to be a wind shadow. Above all, they knew where the sandbanks were. A common ploy was to lead trusting “khawajas” (foreigners) such as me and Jenny over such a shoal, having very surreptitiously hauled up their 3ft centerboard without our seeing. On one memorable occasion we were thus stranded directly in front of the grand Republican Palace where, memorably, Gordon had been speared to death. It was strictly forbidden to loiter around here. The AK47-carrying soldiers who began shouting and gesticulating at us, as Jenny stepped out to lighten ship and move us off the bottom, gave us some cause for concern.

### Arabian Chinese gybe

We twice snapped our wooden mast in Chinese gybes but by next race-day Farouk had spliced the joint



**ABOVE**  
Crew neglecting the jib

**BELOW**  
Tranquility following a day's racing

together again, just making the mast a little shorter. Dents resulting from collisions would simply be hammered out. As and when we tore the sail we would take it to the souk to a little old lady, where it usually provided some amusement. But one fellow-diplomat took things more seriously. On leave in the UK, he strolled into a venerable sailmaker's on the Solent somewhere, anticipating a little quiet upmanship:

*“I'd like a new mainsail for my dinghy, please?”*

*“Oh yes sir, what class might that be?”*

*(Smugly) “A Khartoum One Design...”*

*“Of course sir...Hmmm, I do believe Mr Giles sent us a set of drawings, but I must say I don't think we've cut one of those for a while...1945 maybe? When do you need it?”*

Most clubs have their own historic annual races. One of ours, described

in the Club Rule Book, was to Gordon's Tree: long ago felled, it grew at the point on the White Nile where the relieving British force sighted smoke in Khartoum and knew they were too late to save the General. At a skippers' meeting prior to this race we were all asked to take note of the fact that a particularly aggressive hippopotamus had been seen in the grounds of the Hilton, where the Niles meet; he (or she) was “to be avoided.” Another race involved swimming to and from your dinghy; this was held to favour the expatriates, as very few locals knew how to swim. But the highlight was the overnighter to Om Dom: Crocodile Island.

We would set off in the late afternoon and it would be a leisurely run down-wind as the sun sank and the call to prayer would be heard from minarets all over the city. There'd be a bonfire on the island and then the expats would come into their own, especially the diplomats. As we were among the very few people in the country with legal access to alcohol, there was a quiet expectation that we would bring along the “tea” (the euphemism for Johnny Walker Red Label). Once that was exhausted, it would be on to the local homemade “araki” (date-based firewater); next morning's long beat home could seem tedious to some.

It was only on these morning sails back from Om Dom that we expats could finally beat our Sudanese friends, in fact. For we were experts when it came to tea drinking.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nick and Jenny Coghlan are avid sailors and adventurers based in Canada. Their voyages span from Alaska to Cape Horn. Nick has also written *Winter in Fireland*, a book about their adventures aboard *Bosun Bird*, a Vancouver 27. You can buy the book and find out more at [bosunbird.com](http://bosunbird.com)

