



WOODEN BOATS OF EGYPT

by James Michael Dorsey

In my ongoing investigation of wooden boats around the world, I am still trying to answer the age-old question of which came first: the kayak or rowboat? This time my journey took me to Egypt, thinking surely the Nile River, being the longest in the world and very slow moving, would be a haven for serious paddlers, and might be home to ancient kayaks, but surprisingly, that was not the case.

I traveled from Aswan to Cairo on a small riverboat, eyes constantly peeled for a kayak, and never spotted even one. Rather ironic when you consider it was on this very river in 1949 that John Goddard made paddling history by being the first person to kayak the entire length of over 4,000 miles. What I did find was the strangest assortment of patched up and homemade boats I have run into anywhere.

There is no shortage of fishermen on this game-rich river, and as I talked to more and more of them, it finally became clear that one reason alone has prevented this great waterway from becoming a paddler's paradise—crocodiles!

From the middle of the river they are barely visible, blending in with the mud and papyrus, but through binoculars I saw more than a few great beasts approaching 20 feet slide under the surface as we passed by. This brought to mind an old photo that Goddard had given me of a croc killed after it had attacked his kayak on that epic journey.

Fishermen told me they all know their personal areas and mostly stick to them when working. They know where resident crocs live and areas they are likely to be feeding, but a kayaker traveling a great distance would necessarily follow the current of the river, and uncertain of the terrain, would be a natural target for these massive carnivores.

Occasionally even the fishermen have to contend with a hungry croc determined to be lazy and contest the man's catch rather than hunt for its own. Fishermen usually work in groups, figuring safety in numbers, and will begin a workday by smacking the water with their oars in hopes of scaring the crocs away. Paddlers in the know have realized over the years that the Nile is no safe place to paddle.

Lacking kayaks, I focused my search on the local boats of the fisherman, and they were a joy to visit. More often than not, they would row out to our boat attempting to sell their fish, and I had great opportunities to see them up close.

Like most third world fishing boats, they are constructed locally using tried and true methods such as bending the wood over an open fire and using tongue and groove or peg inserts rather than cost-prohibitive nails. The more wealthy, who actually had small sails, made them from cast off clothing, pieced together in bright patterns.

Their most striking features were the innovative ways in which they were jury-rigged to keep them afloat. Most of these boats are now in their third or fourth generation of ownership, and rather than spend money, owners keep them usable by whatever comes floating down the river. I saw large sheets of plastic, sections of old tires, and one particularly inventive young man took old plastic soda bottles, slit them down the middle and bent them into flat sheets to cover leaks. All of these methods last only a day or two as you might imagine, but then there is always something else floating by that will take its place. Each boat is a constant work in progress. More than once I watched as fishermen tied up to our river cruiser and exchanged fish for large sections of cardboard or an old panel of wood that would normally be discarded. Everything is a prospective boat patch.



One of these men told me he uses strips of local papyrus which grows everywhere, to jam into leaks, claiming the papyrus expands in contact with the water and acts as a natural caulking. Another told me he uses sections of crocodile hide, as it is naturally waterproof!

The most interesting craft were operated by Nubian boys at an isolated village on an island in the Nile southwest of Aswan. They paddled out in tiny rowboats with flat sterns that seemed to be cut in half, to intercept boats full of tourists coming to visit their village. The boys would dive from the boats into the river to retrieve coins that the tourists threw into the water. Their boats, while strange in appearance, were extremely maneuverable—one reason that these children have not all been eaten!

Jumping into a river full of crocodiles may seem foolhardy to most readers, but I will add here that the Nubians are known for their knowledge of crocodiles and have hunted them for centuries. They keep them as pets in their village and probably know the local crocs like you and I know our pet dogs. Having said that, is diving for coins in a river full of man eating beasts foolhardy? ABSOLUTELY!

I never saw a real set of oars. Mostly the boats are rowed with old 2 x 4s, sometimes two nailed together for length. Instead of oarlocks, strips of goat or camel hide are nailed onto the sides of the boat in loops for the oars to pass through.



Fishing is done with a large circular, hand thrown net that will often snag a passing croc unawares. When this happens, the fisherman instantly lets go, losing the net rather than challenging a wild animal that is most probably larger than his boat. Like the boat itself, their nets are made from all manner of debris from rubber bands to rotten pieces of string.

One ancient looking fisherman told me he could not go out for three days when an immense croc hauled out and laid on the shore right next to his boat. Since that time, he always cuts off the heads of his catch and throws them into a cove where he knows this local croc lives, and that has effectively established a truce with the great one who allows the man to fish as long as he makes his regular offering.

I am sure many of the stories I heard were nothing more than fish tales for the benefit of the tourist, but that in no way detracted from the wonderfully colorful and entertaining journey along this river. These boats are a tribute to human ingenuity and imagination, and a symbol of man living in harmony with his environment.

I am now planning my next journey in search of that elusive missing link between kayak and rowboat. ⚓




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