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IN THE PHARAOHS'
FOOTSTEPS: A Mud-brick
Home in the Lap of Luxor

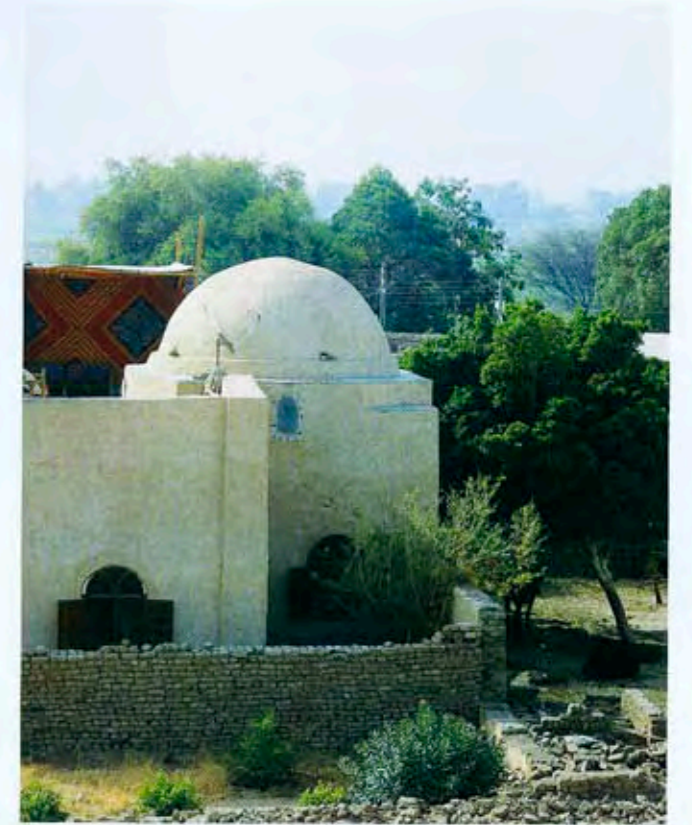


SANDS OF TIME

Built recently of mud bricks on the west bank of the Nile, artist Hugh Sowden's Luxor home sits on the site of a pharaoh's palace. Beyond its palm and fig trees, traditional Egyptian customs and farming methods continue – for now. But the tranquility of this ancient hamlet looks soon to be eroded, as Olivia Temple reports. Photography: Tim Beddow



Hugh sits outside with members of a local family who provide him with milk, eggs, cheese and bread and take care of the grounds. In the distance are the Theban hills and the Valley of the Kings. The mound in the middle distance is considered sacred for its power to relieve gout and arthritis. To benefit, the patient is buried in the sand for half an hour on three or four consecutive days.



Left: the tented roof terrace spans the length of the house, and is covered at one end with local hand-printed cotton fabric. Top: the perimeter wall is made of mud bricks, and gives protection from sand. Above: outside the kitchen a Bedouin widow tends a traditional mudbrick bread oven, using a wooden paddle to turn the loaf as it is baked



This page, clockwise from top: a wild sycamore-fig tree grows in the inner courtyard; the salon is furnished with early 20th-century dark-wood furniture and a gold Louis Farouk-style marble-topped table. Two pharaonic-style alabaster pots bring symmetry to the arches, as do landscape studies by Hugh; looking towards the inner courtyard from the hall. Opposite: the dining table's cloth was worked by Hugh's grandmother. He acquired the bentwood chairs and hand-blown goblets locally. A reed roof allows sunlight to filter through and keeps the room cool



Left: this guest-room's beds were made from local palm wood, and the mattresses are stuffed with cotton buds gathered from nearby fields. Artefacts found in the Royal Canal are arranged on the cabinet. Top: the main bedroom boasts a locally made embroidered eiderdown. Above: a Djed symbol on the left side of an archway was painted by Hugh



'I AM LIVING at the very end of an era. Life here has been the same for centuries.' So says Hugh Sowden of his remarkable home in the desert on the west bank of the river Nile. Here, at ancient Thebes, the powerful Pharaoh Amenhotep III, grandfather of Tutankhamun (*Wol* Nov 2010), established his court during the New Kingdom (1386-1349bc). The huge complex consisted of the king's own palace, the estates of the nobles, temples, military training camps, embassies, schools and the dwellings of the ordinary population involved in trade and commerce.

'What you see today are the dry foundations,' explains Hugh, 'the occasional broken column base and mounds of pottery lining what were once the banks of the royal canal.' His house, Malkata Palace, stands within this complex, half an hour's drive from Luxor. The journey takes you past a giant statue of Memnon, a lonely sentinel in the middle of nowhere, and through sugar-cane fields whose verdant tops are as high as an elephant's eye. The hamlet of Malkata was taken over by a Bedouin family 150 years ago and there is an ancient Christian village and monastery nearby.

The house is nestled, like a small observatory or a little Medieval castle, on fairly hilly ground in a curve of the desert. It is surrounded by mature palm, fig and desert pine trees, with the Theban hills hazily present in the distance. The sand in this area is said to have special powers and is used for healing purposes, especially against rheumatism and arthritis.

'I came upon the house while out walking with friends in 2003, and took up residence in 2004,' says Hugh, who has lived in Egypt for 25 years. This artist and architect, with a passion for gardens and interiors, saw here an opportunity for another of his 'three-dimensional paintings', as he calls his desert homes, which have just as many rooms outside as inside.

This page: wearing a Turkish tarboush, or fez. Hugh works in his first-floor studio on a painting of the house. Behind him in an alcove, a pharaoh stands guard. Opposite: the kitchen courtyard is scented with pots of basil and screened by the pale branches of henna trees

'I kept dreaming about it. It was only half built, made of mud bricks and had only one dome. Then one day I had a phone call from the Egyptian who was building it, who said: "So, I hear you love my house." He was running out of money and his German wife found it too remote. So after a lot of negotiating, we struck a deal that I would take it off his hands and have a long lease in exchange for completing the work. In fact, the man died soon after that and I had to negotiate all over again with his family, which took a long time,' says Hugh, laughing. 'But how could I resist living in a mud-brick house built on the site of a pharaoh's palace?'

Traditional life and skills, crafts and farming methods still continue in the immediate vicinity; the thick, sun-baked mud bricks for the house were all made within walking distance. Baking, milking cows, collecting eggs, drying corn cobs, washing clothes in large aluminium bowls and feeding goats and buffalo all take place around the hamlet. The men greet their guests under the fig trees and share a shisha pipe while drinking sweet mint tea from glass tumblers.

You enter the house through an archway that leads into a small courtyard with traditional Egyptian furniture made from date-palm wood, colourful cushions and clay pots of basil and rosemary. Henna trees, with their spindly limbs and silvery-grey leaves and bark, cast a mottled shade. As with his other house near Dashour (*Wol* Sept 2003), Hugh has gathered a mixture of furnishings. They include 20th-century 'Louis Farouk' pieces in the dining room and salon, Arab benches that double as beds for a siesta, and date-palm matting in the courtyards and kitchen, along with old windows and wooden shutters rescued from destroyed buildings.

The upstairs terrace is perfect for evening reflection while the sun goes down. Here coffee is served in a tented area of hand-printed fabric of Islamic design, and traditional clay pots provide cool water drawn from the well. Also upstairs are two of the five bedrooms, each with coloured mosquito nets draped on poles and a chrome paraffin lamp for the occasional power cuts. The three downstairs bedrooms have domed ceilings, and to encourage the air to circulate at night all doors are left open. From the windows there is an enthralling view of the distant Theban hills and Valley of the Queens, lit extravagantly by a million stars and a copper-coloured desert moon.

Each day, when the 80-strong community leaves the hamlet to harvest sugar cane, work the fields and go about its business, Hugh paints upstairs, opposite the terrace, in his studio overlooking a mysterious primeval mound. 'As a silence falls in the early morning,' he confides, 'when everyone leaves for most of the day, a little chorus strikes up. I know it sounds mad, but the animals – sheep, goats, hens and cattle – start singing to one another, and quite a melodic tune can be heard mixed with the desert wind and birdsong.' This magic is reflected in Hugh's paintings of gardens, visions of regeneration inspired by the underlying pharaonic belief that death is a time of resurrection and an appreciation of the senses.

But an ever-deepening shadow hangs over this timeless and peaceful existence. There are rumblings that the Egyptian authorities have a new vision in mind for the area round Luxor. It would become a modern state, where the restoration of pharaonic sites would be incorporated into a commercially desirable theme park for tourists in air-conditioned transporters with tinted windows; a wall would be built, circumnavigating the Theban hills, separating villagers from their livelihoods. If the development goes ahead, their village life and traditions will become a distant memory, and the hamlet of Malkata, including this enchanting house, might disappear ■

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