River Nile

The River Nile is about 6,670 km (4,160 miles) in length and is the longest river in Africa and in the world. Although it is generally associated with Egypt, only 22% of the Nile’s course runs through Egypt.

In Egypt, the River Nile creates a fertile green valley across the desert. It was by the banks of the river that one of the oldest civilizations in the world began. The ancient Egyptians lived and farmed along the Nile, using the soil to produce food for themselves and their animals.

Trade and Transportation on the Nile River

You might be tempted to ignore the stubby structures of frontier Aswan, known in Ancient Egypt as Swenett. You might focus on the more impressive pillars of Cairo and the temples of Giza – but there would be no pyramids and no shrines without little ol' Aswan and the Nile River.
Aswan is hot. It receives essentially no rain. Ever. Daytime temperatures hover over 100 degrees six months out of twelve. The only source of water is the Nile, less than half a mile in width. But Ancient Egypt considered Aswan **indispensable** for its special granite, a rock called Syenite.

Rough-hewn blocks were chiseled from raw stone, loaded onto barges, and **shipped** down the placid Nile River to the halls of the god-king pharaohs. During flood season, this trip would take about two weeks, for there was not a single cataract to delay the trip. During the dry season, the same trip would take about two months. Ships would return bearing cargo and men, their sails fattened by northern trade winds.
The Nile River was Ancient Egypt's highway. There were no semi-trucks, no Amazon Prime 1-day shipping offers. There was only water. **No bridges** spanned the Nile's girth in ancient times. Only boats could plow the surface and skim across the channel measuring 20-40 feet deep.

Around 4,000 B.C., the Ancient Egyptians first lashed bundles of papyrus stalks together to make **rafts**. Later, craftsmen learned to build **wooden ships** using local acacia wood. Some of these boats could carry cargo up to 500 tons. That's as much as 125 elephants! Where boats could no travel over desert sands, Egyptians rode camels from one hidden cistern to another.

### Flora and Fauna of the Riverbanks

**Animals**

Of course, most Egyptians rarely saw the Nile from its center. The farmer of the Middle Kingdom would have stood at the water's edge and peered across two miles of silvery blue. In the summer, those two miles might expand to five or ten. Torrential spring rains in Ethiopia and
sub-Saharan Africa would cause the Egyptian Nile to overflow its banks for 4-6 months, inundating the surrounding flood plain in black silt.

*The Nile River plain was a suitable living environment for a variety of animals.*

The two largest *herbivores* are the hippopotamus and black rhinoceroses, both of which are now nearing extinction. Blue herons and white ibis birds scope out the shallow waters for small fish, eels and snakes. The Nile River contains more than 30 species of *snakes*, and more than half are venomous. Not for nothing did Cleopatra, the great Queen of Egypt, die from the bite of an asp.

© Lucas - *Depictions of Snakes, Wadjet Amulet*

This annual flooding cycle enticed water-loving *amphibians*, reptiles and birds to come dwell in the Nile. The most common reptile is the Nile crocodile, a grayish beast that grows up to 1,500 pounds. It
waylays unsuspecting gazelles and small mammals who come to feed at the riverbanks.

_Nile Crocodile Facts_ - The **Nile Crocodile** has been a major component of the Egyptian culture and way of life since the first Egyptians settled along the fertile banks of the Nile. Most Nile Crocodiles are approximately 4 meters in length, although some have been reported as longer.

They make their **nests** along the banks of the Nile River, where the female may lay up to 60 eggs at one time. Some three months later the babies are born and are taken to the water by their mother. They will remain with her for at least two years before reaching maturity.

© Cloudtall - Nile Crocodiles

**Farming and Food**

Although Ancient Egyptians relied on fish for animal protein, they obtained most of their food from the earth. The rich topsoil of the Nile basin can measure up to 70 feet deep. It is a farmer's utopia. After Ahket, the season of Inundation, villages planted the first seeds.

During Peret, the growing season, which lasted October-February, farmers tended their fields. Shemu was the season of harvest and
abundance. They would either carry water by hand, by camel, or would dig irrigation canals from the Nile River to water the rich black kemet of the fields.

Farmers cultivated all manner of crops: barely for beer, cotton for clothing, melons and pomegranates and figs for an evening meal. But three crops stood out: wheat, flax, and papyrus. Wheat was ground into bread, flax was spun into linen, and papyrus dried into a paper substitute.

Spirituality and World View

The Nile River, for all its importance to the Ancient Egyptian, had no deity. It didn't even have a name. Most simply called it "the river," or "aur," which means black. The closest thing to a god assigned to the Nile was Hapy, the god of the Inundation. Hapy had no temple. He was a fat, jubilant deity praised at the beginning of every flood cycle and mentioned only in passing the rest of the year.
Yet even though the Nile did not play a central part in Ancient Egyptian spirituality, it was the center of their *social world view* They oriented themselves in reference to the south, from whence the river came. The east bank, where the sun rose, was the side of birth. The west bank, where the sun set, was the side of death. All Ancient Egyptian tombs and pyramids were constructed on the west side of the Nile.

To Egyptians, flooding was normal; rain was weird. They called the downpours of other cultures "the Inundation in the sky". Their 365-day calendar rose and fell with the waters of the Nile. In fact, a poor man was symbolized as having no boat. And when a Pharaoh was entombed, a small *boat* or model of a boat would be buried with him so that he might "pass to the other side", that the cold waters of the Nile would bear him, the symbol of Egypt, in death as they had in life.

**River Nile Facts**

*How long is the Nile River?*

- The Nile River is actually *6695 kilometers* (4184 miles) long. With such a long length, the Nile River is speculated to be the longest river in the world.
- It winds from Uganda to Ethiopia, flowing through a total of nine countries. While the Nile River is often associated with Egypt, it actually touches Ethiopia, Zaire, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan, as well as Egypt.
- It's only recent that the first known navigation team successfully followed the river from beginning to its end.

*How did the ancient Egyptians use the Nile River?*

- The Nile River has played an extremely important role in the civilization, life and history of the Egyptian nation.
One of the most well known river Nile facts is the river's ability to produce extremely **fertile** soil, which made it easy for cities and civilizations to spring up alongside the banks of the Nile.

The fertile soil is created by the annual spring floods, when the Nile River overflows onto the banks.

Much of the Egyptian nation consists of dry desert land. Throughout most of the year, very little rain falls on Egyptian deserts. This has remained true for thousands of years. The abundant Nile River provided much needed irrigation, even in ancient times.

This waterway also provided a source of drinking water, as well as papyrus reeds that could be used for a variety of purposes such as paper and building materials.

*Today,* exotic and sophisticated cities like **Cairo** grace the banks of the Nile River, as they have for thousands of years. Individuals interested in experiencing the Nile up close and personal can journey along the famous river aboard riverboat cruises that depart from numerous cities along the bank.