



RETURNING TO EGYPT

The wonders of the ancient temples at Luxor were Dr Elizabeth Frood's academic passion. But after a horrendous illness which left her disabled, she thought she might never see them again. Jane Wynyard, her cousin, tracks with words and pictures, their poignant trip back to Egypt

THREE YEARS AGO my cousin Liz Frood, an academic Egyptologist in Oxford, went into septic shock after contracting a blood infection of unknown origin. It caused catastrophic damage to her body. Liz lost both legs below the knees, the hearing in her right ear, internal structure of her nose and, the most devastating blow of all, almost all the function in her hands.

A vibrant, energetic woman with an 11-month baby who travelled regularly to Egypt to study ancient graffiti scribbled on temple walls, Liz suddenly found herself in the ICU at Oxford's John Radcliffe Hospital fighting for her life. The sepsis turned her limbs black and her organs collapsed one by one as the infection raged through her body.

But Liz, 43, is a fighter with an indomitable spirit. She defied medical odds and after five months in hospital and more than eleven major surgeries to try to rebuild her body, she began a difficult but determined effort to get her life back on track. She returned to work at Oxford University, learnt to walk again on prosthetic legs, to drive a specially adapted car, and to adjust to her new life as a disabled woman, academic, mother and wife.

The question, however, of whether she would ever return to her fieldwork in Egypt hung heavy like a black cloud. Liz had been forced to abandon her major five-year research project in Luxor where she'd ▶



been recording and analysing graffiti on the walls of the temple complex at Karnak on the east bank of the Nile. Although she'd made enormous strides since her illness, the prospect of returning to the heat, dust and gruelling work with prosthetics and a wheelchair seemed impossible. For the longest time, New Zealand-born Liz glumly believed her project had come to an end.

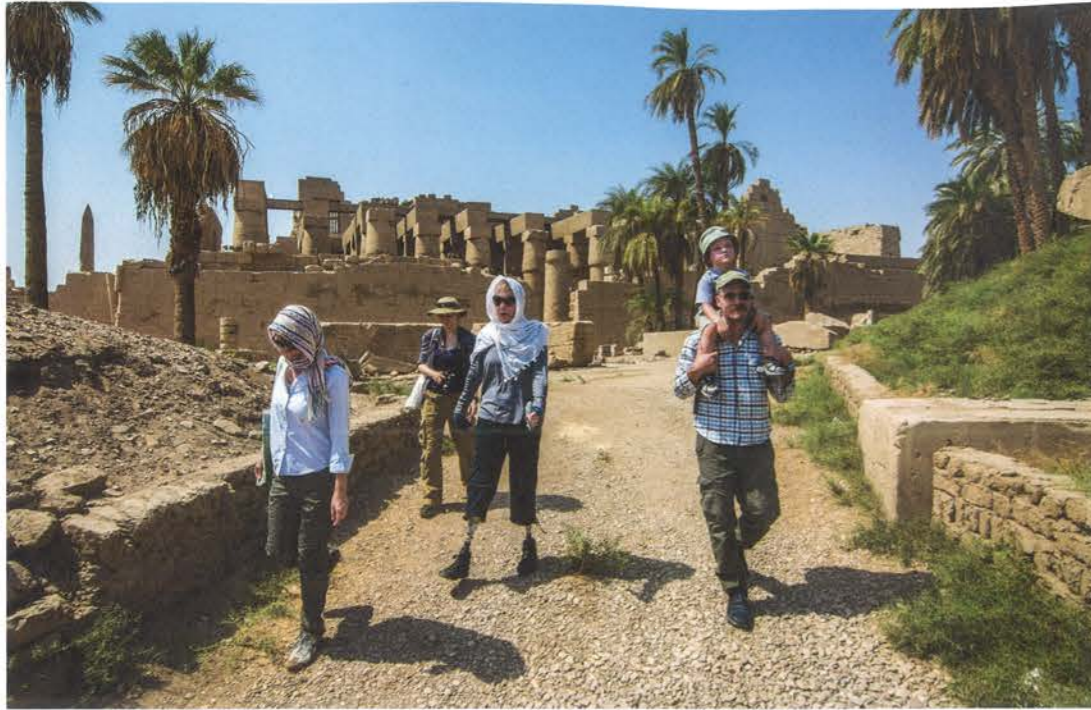
But as the amount of time she could spend wearing prosthetic legs gradually increased, Liz began to feel that Egypt might be feasible. She tentatively explored different possibilities as to how she might work once she was there and once her mind was made up, assembled her team: archaeologist husband Christoph, three-year-old son Emeran, two research assistants Chiara Salvador and Ellen Jones, and me. As a professional photographer, I would be on hand to document the expedition.

As the reality drew near, however, Liz understandably became fearful. Her fieldwork was still part of her old life, a part she hadn't fully dealt with yet. "Oh my god, I can't believe I'm actually going," she wrote to me a few weeks before we were due to fly out. "I can't get my head around it. I feel sick more than excited."

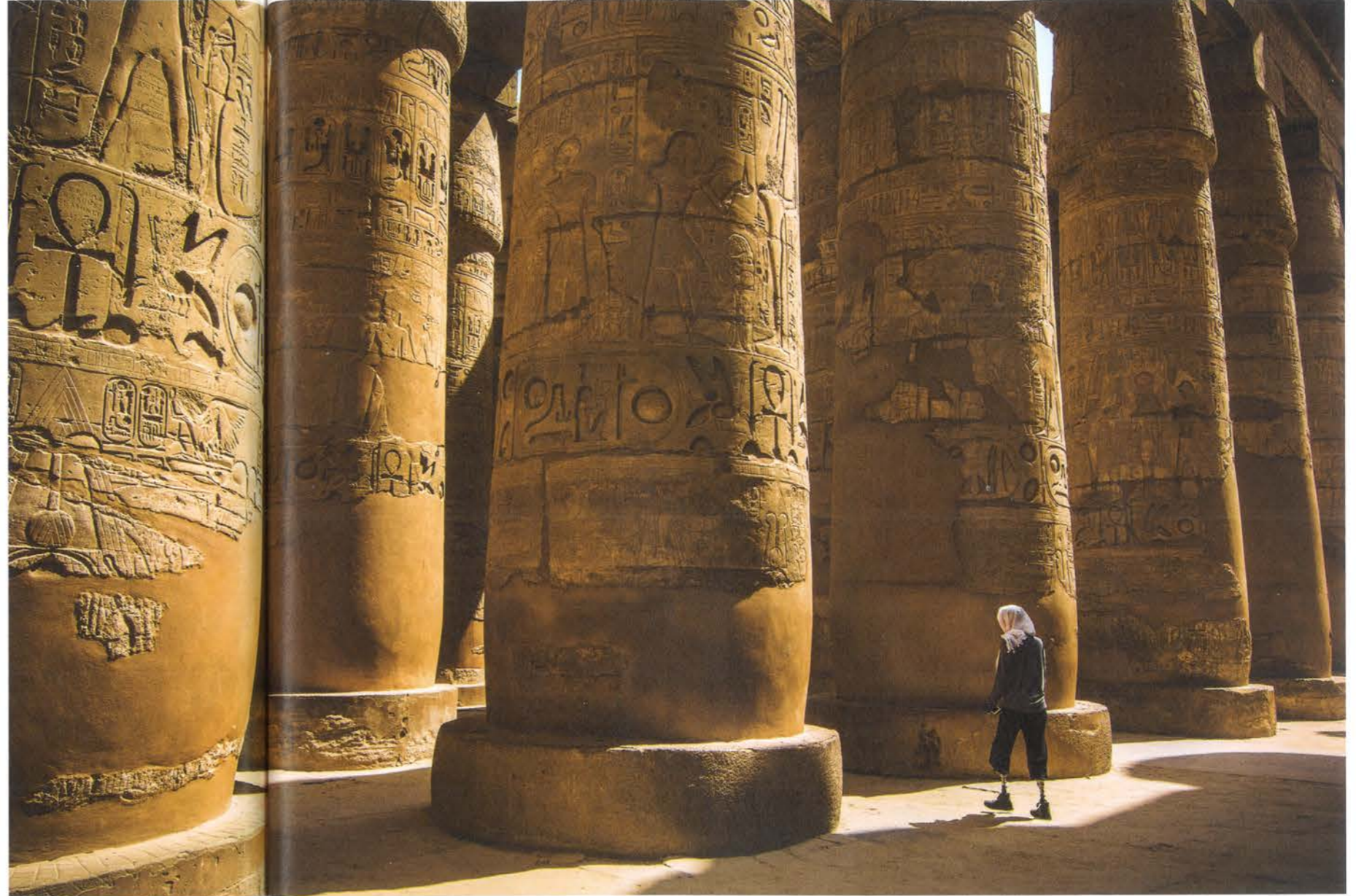
And then all of a sudden there we were, standing on the roof of the French House in Luxor staring at the towering gateway to the Karnak Temple Complex, a vast mix of decayed temples, pylons, chapels and other buildings. It was such an emotional and surreal



"The prospect of returning to the heat, dust and gruelling work at the temple complex in Karnak with prosthetics and a wheelchair seemed impossible"



Liz was accompanied on this trip by her husband, two helpers, her 4-year old son, and her cousin Jane Wynyard, who took the photos and wrote this story



experience that Liz and I promptly burst into tears. Three years ago, Liz had been near death in the ICU of an Oxford hospital, and today we were STANDING together in Luxor!

Egypt is not a place for the faint-hearted. It's fast-paced, noisy, dusty and, since the revolution of 2011, suffering economically due to the lack of tourists and a recession. Walking around the pyramids of Giza free from the normal throng of tourists was a blessing for visitors but a curse for the Egyptians who rely on tourism for their source of income. Despite us being there in boiling September, out of the usual tourist season, we were pleased to see several enormous, glitzy Nile boats unloading tourists in Luxor. Maybe Egypt's misfortunes were starting to turn around.

For Liz, returning to her beloved Egypt with such a severely damaged body was both physically and psychologically challenging. Over the next two weeks, we watched in awe as she triumphantly crossed the uneven and sandy ground on her prosthetics to reach the project site, a small temple dedicated to the god Ptah bearing many hundreds of graffiti. Over sweet tea and dates during the morning break, she would berate herself about her daily struggle

to reach the temple and yet the next day tackle the steep, dark and claustrophobic stairs inside a massive temple gateway. She was that determined.

She remained calm as colleagues cried when they saw her injuries for the first time, and upbeat while being interviewed by a BBC reporter about her former life in Egypt. Talking about the days when she could scale ladders, climb narrow staircases and draw hieroglyphic texts in ancient Egyptian temples and tombs can't have been easy, but Liz soldiered on in suffocating 40 degree heat. Her positive outlook and determination dumbfounded us all.

Of course it wasn't as easy as it sounds; Liz's grief returned to hit her with the full force of a sledge hammer. Her 'robot' legs, as she calls them, and curled, disfigured hands are a constant reminder of what she has lost. She cried a lot and at first felt completely and utterly useless.

As the days stretched on, however, things got easier. She was able to strategise with her team, talk things through and find ways in which she could work with her disabilities. She became more and more confident and began to see why coming back to Egypt



PHOTOGRAPH: JANE WYNYARD

was so important to her and the future of her project.

We celebrated Emeran's fourth birthday in Luxor with a party on the Nile resplendent with a whirling dervish and belly dancer whom Emeran sweetly referred to as a 'Princess'. Liz walked her first 'gang plank' in prosthetics when we hired a boat to travel up the Nile for a dinner cruise, and even got to fly a kite on the river bank for the first time. A huge highlight of the trip was when one of her researchers discovered new yellow painted graffiti in an area that Liz had identified back in 2014.

We left Luxor two weeks later, exhausted, dusty but completely elated. Mission accomplished! For Liz it was a major milestone, a step in the right direction and a realisation that despite her injuries, she could still return to Karnak, to her beloved Egypt and continue the work she thought she'd lost. It was an extraordinary mission by an equally extraordinary woman.

Jane Wynyard is a photographer and writer living in Africa