

*A*fter the closing of the WAHO Conference of April 2007, in Damascus, participants were invited for a Bedouins & Horse Tour, a unique round trip of about 2000 km across Syria, starting from Damascus via Palmyra to Mesopotamia, along the Iraqi and Turkish borders to Al Qamishli and finally to Aleppo and along the ancient Silk Road back to Damascus. An unforgettable, experience for all WAHO members and for friends of the Arabian horse from all over the world.

It's said that Syria is the cradle of our civilisation, our letters, our culture – and probably also of the Arabian horse as a breed, as even 12,000 years ago human settlements have been proven to have existed in Mesopotamia, those

Syrian Tour of Arabian Horse History and Culture photo-story by Monika Savier

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About half an hour east of Damascus, in the direction of Palmyra, the country is barren and dry.

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Nomads have erected their tents in the distance. Anybody visiting them is obliged, by ancient custom, to erect a figure of stones in the desert upon his leaving. The figure is meant to bring luck.



A Syrian Beehive house out of clay, a "Qubab" house, beside a Bedouin tent made of goat hair.

Beehive houses are part of the ecological architecture of Syria's country population, their tradition said to be thousands of years old. In a region lacking trees and therefore roof construction material, dome-shaped roofs were

famous fertile flatlands in between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, today's Al Jazeera.

A truly multicultural past, consisting of more than 20 cultural epochs of different peoples during the last 3,000 years, and their tracks and traditions still alive today – that's what made the country into a "good practice model" of tolerance and hospitality.

Syria is the interface between Orient and Occident, and historically speaking, Syria knew how to use the human influence of different cultures in her brilliantly casual version of diversity management, giving rise to truly pivotal creations: the first alphabet, the first song, sophisticated inventions in agriculture and craftsmanship, in techniques and culture, and of course horse breeding.

Thanks to the initiative of WAHO (the World Arabian

Horse Organisation) and the Syrian Arabian Association, the 2006 WAHO Conference, postponed to 2007 because of the war in nearby Lebanon, took place in Syria.

Looking for the origins of our Arabian horses with the Bedouins, that's what can be termed the highlight of the two-week study visit.

Arabian horses, who are world citizens today, can look back to a truly ancient history of development. As to the exact place of origin of Arabian horses, there are different theories existing. Most of them postulate that Arabian horses made their slow development on the Arabian peninsula – as far as the Mediterranean Sea – and consolidated their physical and mental qualities by natural selection: the fight for survival alongside the Bedouin tribes of this vast barren expanse, of deserts and mountaineous regions. Many of the horse-breeding Bedouin tribes, such



built out of clay in order to close the houses to the sky. These houses have an excellent climate, protecting from heat and cold. The jutting-out bricks, giving the appearance of cactus thorns, have been built in to serve as ladders when the clay roof is in need of repairs.



Qala at ibn Maan resides above Palmyra, greeting the guests here. It was built in the 17th century, at the time of Syria's Ottomanic epoch, by a Lebanese warlord.

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SYRIA



Vendors offer souvenirs of comparably high quality to the few tourists.



Diocletian's Bath. After almost 2000 years, only a few stones are left.

as the Shammar, the Anaceh, and others, had their origins in the climatic extremes of the Nejd desert in middle Arabia, today's Saudi Arabia, with parts of them moving North and West only during the last two to three hundred years, eventually settling in the fertile Mesopotamia region.

This is why Syria, as a country hardly discovered and touched by globalised markets, was able to promise a mostly authentic view of horse breeding to her tour participants, with horses mostly stamped by the genetically pure performance potential of the original Arabian horse. So

Palmyra is an oasis. The population built her protective walls by using the stones from Roman columns. Why not, if you have this kind of "quarry" right in front of your doorstep...



These boys "work" and play within the tourist attractions of Palmyra, the temple premises. None of them is a beggar, however. Compared to our kind of affluent society, there is certainly structural poverty here, but during all of our trip through Syria, we did not see any examples of individual misery or poverty.



the tour was about the search for the tracks of the Syrian Arabian horse, of a "performance type" stamped by his environs: by nature, the climate, and the people who ride him.

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SYRIA



Looking at the ancient city of Palmyra, in the background Baal Shamin temple, built 17 years BC and consecrated to the Phoenician rain god. Up to now, only 20% of the premises have been excavated. The remaining 80% of the kingdom of the legendary Queen Zenobia, 270 AC, ruler of the whole Eastern part of the Roman Empire, are still buried under the sand of the desert. For a short time, Zenobia even proclaimed her lands as independent from Rome, but Marcus Aurelius did not think well of that. He conquered Palmyra and carried Zenobia off to Rome as a trophy of his victory. Legend has it that she preferred to die of her own hands instead of living in prison.



The Valley of Graves with the Towers of Yemliko. These premises are about 2000 years old. The dead were put to rest in the tower niches.

We leave Palmyra, driving East towards Deir Ez Zor on the Euphrates river. In the background, the Jebel Qalaatal-Hury mountain range.

The steppes and deserts of Syria are alive, and the Bedouins know that they can only live along with them, not against them. They adapt to the harsh conditions, taking their animals to follow the constant climatic changes of the desert. They live off their herds of sheep, horses, and camels, keeping just the amount of animals which nature can support.



The Anazeh Bedouin tribe is one of the most ancient and powerful tribes, living in an area covering Syria and Iraq as far as Saudi Arabia. Here, we are cordially greeted by members of the Sibaa and Fadaan Clans. They know of the coming of the WAHO delegation and have slaughtered a small herd of sheep in our honour.



Camel breeding (in the case of Syria they are dromedaries) provides the Bedouins with meat, milk, and camel wool. In addition, camels are excellent beasts of burden, doing without water for up to five days and carrying 150 kg on their backs besides. And with wood being scarce in the desert, their dung can be used for coffee brewing, which is practical.

A female camel gives birth every two years, nursing for at least nine months. The Bedouins use camel urine, it being effective against lice, and for hair washing.



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Traditionally, grazing the animals is a men's affair with the Bedouins. The men turn them out to pasture, often being on their way for days. Even as children, they learn to interpret the language of the desert with all of her animals and plants.

Blood relationship is the basis of the village society for the Bedouins. Their oldest males are their leader.

But even with the Bedouins, the information society is entirely present. All of them have a cell phone and are passionate users of the photo shooting features.

The Bedouins are just as proud of their own pure (asil) pedigrees as of those of their horses and camels.



A horse race was held in our honour. The distance was more than 10 km and consisted of the connection between one tent village and the next. The only gait was a canter, which increased enormously to a gallop during the last two km. Here, the winner enters the homestretch.

Riding was done without a saddle, most of the horses wore no more than a kind of halter.

All horses were inspected upon coming in. The hardships of the ride are hardly apparent, neither on the horses nor on the riders. Their condition is excellent.

The Bedouin is sitting his animal as supplely as if physically attached to the uniform manner of moving of his horse. With their elastic short backs, Arabian horses are apparently able to carry weight without tensing up. It's probably those round, harmonious movements, connected through from back to front, that make them so comfortable to ride and easily enable their riders to keep their balance – even at high speed.



A Bedouin tent is divided into three areas. The fireplace is in the men's area. Then there are the women's and children's area, and the kitchen area.



The Bedouin woman is the lady of the house, but most of the great burden of daily survival work rests with her.

They love tattooing their faces according to tribal tradition.



They make wool, make cheese, sew and erect the tents, cook, wash, cure leather, sew clothing... get water... the men brew the coffee, still.

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SYRIA



We have arrived in Deir Ezzor on the Euphrates river just in time for the sunrise.



The horses, on the other hand, are a men's affair.



If you live too far away to ride your horse home, you use the open truck as a horse transporting box.



In Al Fourat Stables, located on the shores of the Euphrates river, the horses are presented to us.



After crossing the Euphrates river, we have reached Mesopotamia. The countryside is getting ever more fertile. We have now arrived in the area in which the European purchasing commissions of the royal houses of Weil, Marbach, Babolna, and others looked for and purchased horses 200 years ago.



Riding their horses, the Tai Bedouins come in from the vast reaches of the country in order to greet us.



In their black tents, an Arabian show and a banquet are waiting for us.

They want to personally present their horses to us and it's a pity we don't understand their language.



Every breeder presents his horse himself. His breeding is the pride of his heart. The horses can hardly be said to represent uniform breed characteristics. Traits that are common for the breed are mainly united in the performance and pedigree aspects.

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After that, it's the big feast. A hundred lambs had to be slaughtered for that. The guests are the first ones to eat, with the next eaters standing in the second row, as those who have had their fill will rise and leave their seats to the hungry ones. Everybody takes care to leave enough meat for the last people in the hierarchy. Bedouins eat with their right hand only.



Several thousand people are enthusiastic visitors of the horse show.



We are with the Shammar Bedouins. The tribal lords with their falcons greet us in their comfortable men's tent, presenting coffee.



Even the children of the Shammar Bedouins give a centered and self-assured impression.



For them, seeing so many people here on the Iraq border, all of them interested in their horses and their fathers, is enormous fun.

We leave the Shammar Bedouins, promising to come back some day.



The plane that was to take us to Aleppo fails to come. So we are lucky and get to have a bus tour of hundreds of kilometers, passing through fascinating Mesopotamia with villages of clay houses and with the brilliant colours of the spring landscape.



The iron gates of the Aleppo citadel give testimony of a history of resistance.



Some say that the Soukh of Aleppo has a total of 50km of market lanes, both above and underground. Is it true? At any case, it's not only the visitors who tire with all of the fascinating wares presented.



The horse markets of Damascus and Aleppo were famous destinations for the Europeans. One of the three foundation stallions of the Thoroughbred breed, Darley Arabian, is said to have been an Arabian from Syria. This is what made many British, among them Lady Blunt at the end of the 18th century, start enquiries in Syria, in order to find and purchase race horses of a comparable quality among the Arabian horses. Today, all you find here is a diversity of scents and herbs of the desert.



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Hama, is an impressive old town located on the Orontes river – unfortunately, there is heavy damage from a bombing in 1982. The Norias, power-generating waterwheels made of wood, are her landmark. They were erected as early as in the 5th century AC. The Norias still existing today are from the 13th century. They are more than 20 meters high.



To the south of Hama, the Greco-Roman colonades on the Al Ghab plateau of Afamia (Apamea) can be seen from far away. They were founded for Alexander the Great in 300 BC and later on integrated into the Roman Empire. Afamia was important enough for Marc Antony, accompanied by Cleopatra, to come visit the town. Noble mosaic floors, boulevards of several kilometers (Cardo-Decumanus) and a beautiful landscape make this area a fascinating meeting point with the history of civilisation.



Three out of the group Cynthia Culbertson, horse breeder, DH staff writer, USA; Basil Jadaan, horse breeder, president of the Syrian Arabian Association, one of organisers of the WAHO tour; Monika Savier, Italy, horse breeder, staff writer of Desert Heritage magazine and author of this photo story.