



Horses racing in the desert photographed by Dr Hazaim Alwair.



People and horses milled around as we were greeted by the Anezeh tribe.

A Syrian Adventure

< Story and photography by Sharon Meyers >

The 17th century citadel of Fakhr al-Din al-Ma'ni.



The Syrian WAHO Conference brochure stated, "We promise that you will take home unforgettable memories of your experiences in our country, of our hospitality, of our people and of our Arabian horses."

As I was intrigued by this promise and by the unique opportunity to see the Arabian horse in its homeland, I journeyed to Damascus in April to attend the WAHO Conference. I was also very keen to participate in the six-day 'Bedouins, Horses and Culture' post conference tour. (Please note: the WAHO Conference report appeared in the June 2007 issue of AHN and there is also more information up on the WAHO website at www.waho.org.)

It's a well-documented fact that many horse-purchasing expeditions from the west, along with individual travellers such as Major Roger D. Upton, Lady Anne and Wilfrid Blunt, Homer Davenport and Carl Raswan and many others from Poland, Spain, Italy and elsewhere, visited Syria in search of the Arab horse. As a result of their acquisitions nearly every stud book in the world has Syrian horses or horses tracing to Syrian ancestors amongst their foundation stock, including Australia.



A Managhi Sbeyli stallion from the best desert lines of the Anezeh tribe.



The beautiful Syrian mare Zeyn, a Keheileh Nawakieh, owner Mazen Ganama.



Tethered Arabian stallions eating breakfast early in the morning at AL-Furat Stables.

Syria's connection with WAHO began in 1984 and the country has been a Registering Authority Member since 1990, when their first Arabian horse stud book consisting of 569 horses was published. Today there are over 3,000 Arabians registered between the state stud, private breeders and Bedouin.

Riding is a popular activity in Syria and their horses are used in riding schools, for pleasure riding, showing, racing, show jumping, endurance and, in some instances, harness work in towns and farm work in the countryside. There are still Bedouin breeders that keep and care for horses as their forefathers did.

Palmyra

On Sunday morning April 29 our tour group departed Damascus by bus to travel the 250 kilometres to the hauntingly beautiful ruins of Palmyra. Also known as Tadmor, Palmyra is in the heart of the Syrian desert and was first mentioned in the archives of Mari in the 2nd millennium BC and is also cited several times in the Bible. The city was a trade centre and rest point along the ancient Silk Road.

Of interest to Arabian horse folk was the fact we were also walking in the footsteps of Lady Anne and Wilfrid Blunt, who were in Syria during 1878. They visited Tadmor on March

29 and Lady Anne recorded in her journal on April 1, "Wilfrid and I rode up (he on Tamarisk and I on Hagar) to the Kalat on the top of a rugged hill. We got off and left our mares in an accessible part of the ditch or moat below the castle, which is up and down hill, half full of fragments and rock and wild flowers. I remained with the mares while Wilfrid climbed up this piece of ruggedness and crept into the castle by a hole in the wall. Then came back and went down across the vast space covered by the ruins of the town of Palmyra, and then into the streets of the oasis or gardens to the water where our mares drank."

Our tour group spent a fascinating afternoon visiting the ruins, and viewed a spectacular sunset from the 17th century citadel of Fakh al-Din al-Ma'ni, the very same citadel Wilfrid had crept into 129 years earlier! We were then treated to a Bedouin-themed dinner along with live entertainment, a most enjoyable evening.

The Anezeh Tribe

The next morning we explored other areas of Palmyra before setting off to Deir-ezzor, 225 kilometres away. After travelling approximately 165 kilometres we were whisked off the main road onto a dirt track where we were surprised to see a line of Bedouin tents on an escarpment in the middle of nowhere! To our right was a magnificent herd of camels and on our left were flocks of indigenous sheep. I could also see horses tethered at the base of the Bedouin encampment.

As we alighted from the buses we were greeted by the Anezeh tribe, which included members of their Siba'a and Fadaan clans. Bedouin hospitality is a matter of honour and we were all welcomed, no matter what our religion, sex, age or country of origin.

Walking around the Bedouin camp soaking up the ambience was a surreal feeling, so much was happening at once. Horses and people were milling around, an exciting six kilometre race was run and won with participants riding bareback, stallions tethered in the traditional

manner were dancing and prancing, tattooed Bedouin women were happily demonstrating wool spinning and weaving, while we busied ourselves photographing our hosts, who, in turn, were photographing us with their mobile phones! It was an astonishing mixture of old and new.

I must admit it was a real thrill to see the Anezeh desert-bred horses in the flesh. One thing I noted immediately was the variety of different types among them. These horses were leaner than the ones we saw at the state stud and in the hands of private breeders, although one would expect this as the Bedouin horses are kept under completely different conditions. Their hooves, although untrimmed in many cases, were of good size, round and rock hard, their legs were generally sound with 'dry' tendons, their temperaments unflappable and they looked extremely tough. The Syrian desert is very rocky and hard underfoot, so horses need to be sound, tough and nimble to survive there. Many of the Arabians were tethered, including mares with foals. This of course is the traditional Bedouin way of keeping horses as in the desert there are no fences!

As a result of strolling around the picketed horses and watching their owners handle them, it became very apparent to me that the Bedouin have a deep love and pride for their horses. It also really brought home to me the reason why our own Arabians in Australia have such people-loving temperaments and are easy keepers and why they are tough, tenacious and generally sounder than many other breeds of horses.

Just as our hospitable hosts invited us to join them for a succulent lamb lunch, a small sand storm whipped up out of nowhere, blanketing the area. It could easily have been a scene taken from Lady Anne Blunt's journal or out of one of Carl Raswan's books!

A word about our lamb meals. I believe it's customary for one lamb to be slaughtered for each guest who will be attending a feast. The cooked lamb is served on large platters, heads and all, along with rice and Syrian bread. Now I must admit, at first I was very dubious about eating such a dish, especially with my dinner looking back at me, but I was greatly surprised at how tasty the lamb was and how much I really enjoyed it.

I would dearly have liked to stay another couple of hours at the encampment but alas that was not to be, as all too quickly it was time to move onto our next destination, Deir-ezzor.

Arabians along the Euphrates

We were driven to our hotel at Deir-ezzor, a green oasis on the Euphrates riverbank, also known in Syria as the Al-Furat River. Late afternoon we departed for Al-Furat Stables,



AL-Furat Stables' 1991 Syrian mare Al Haidaria (Ammar x Safia), a Keheileh Nawakieh from the Siba'a clan of the Anezeh Tribe. Three of her sons are racing champions.

owned by Mr Wadia Khoury. As our bus squeezed through the stud's front gates we were astounded to see on our right ten or more stallions tethered in such a manner that they could almost nuzzle each other!

These stallions seemed to rejoice at the prospect of being patted, prodded and photographed by 84 people – all at once. I must admit, though, the one thing that shone through time and time again with the Syrian horses was their superb people-loving temperaments, so their impeccable behaviour

should not have surprised me. This picturesque stud is situated on the banks of Euphrates River and the horses are used for racing and endurance riding. They are all of Syrian blood as no imported lines have been used. The horses also appeared to be kept in traditional Bedouin style.

As the fiery red sun began to set romantically behind us, we were ushered aboard boats that took us up the Euphrates to our next destination, Ganama Farm, established in 1946 and owned by the founder's son, Mr



Mashour (Sadan x Haifa) is one of AL-Furat Stables' stallions and he is of the Keheileh Nawaki strain.



Part of the Tai tribe who greeted us on our arrival in Al Qamishli.



The Tai stallion Al Komet (Al Ashhab x Khansa'a Fahr) of the rare Managhi Al Aqra'a strain.



The Shammari's stallion Al Naif Al Hadi.

Mazen Ganama. Unfortunately I managed to leave my camera's flash behind in Australia and as a result was unable to successfully photograph any of the night-time horse activities. Mr Ganama was a gracious host providing a wonderful meal and folklore show for our entertainment before parading his fine Arabians, which included some very pretty Syrian mares and youngsters that would be competitive in the show ring.

Early the following morning a small group of us hitch hiked back to Mr Wadia Khoury's Al-Furat Stables for a second viewing of his horses, giving me the great opportunity of photographing them. After Mr Wadia Khoury showed us his horses we had the most memorable breakfast of Syrian bread, fresh

yoghurt and homemade butter on the banks of the Euphrates, joined by some of the stud's delightful mares.

We then scurried back to the hotel just in time to catch our bus as it departed for Al Qamishli, a city in northeast Syria on the border with Turkey and close to Iraq, a journey of 275 kilometres: where the Tai and Allied tribes were gathering to meet us.

The Tai and Allied Tribes

During this journey we stopped at a service station for a coffee and toilet break only to be confronted by a carload of policemen who were keen to know who we were and where we were heading. No need for alarm! They only wanted to escort us to our meeting with the Tai.

As we drove into Al Qamishli there were people lining the streets waving as our bus sped onwards. There was also an amazing impromptu mounted escort that met us on the outskirts of the town. Riders and their Arabians were calmly navigating the chaotic traffic, many of them mares with foals running at foot. These clever mares seemed to be able to dodge cars, avoid ditches and rubbish along the verges, keep an eye on their foals and look after their riders all at the same time, a real tribute to the true Arabian temperament.

At a rough guess I would say there were around 6,000 members of the Tai and Allied Tribes that had congregated to meet the WAHO tour group! As we pulled off the main road onto a narrow side road we could see thousands of people and row upon row of vehicles along with numerous beautiful Arabian horses and several Bedouin tents. Our bus was immediately surrounded and guided by the groups of welcoming horsemen and their glorious Arabians. We were overwhelmed by it all.

Walking towards the Bedouin tents we were met by a musical band consisting of school children, Bedouins with vintage guns and a line of Tai dignitaries. The Tai delighted us with a parade of their Arabian horses and the festivities included a colourful folklore show.

Once again there was quite a variety in the type of Arabian horse presented to us. They were obviously the pride and joy of their owners and were in wonderful condition. We were also privileged to see the famous one-eyed stallion Zain Al Khayl (Ghaseeb x Raghdanah), born in 1994 of the Kehailan Al Rabdan (of the Tai) strain. He has been an excellent sire for the Tai. Strains were always announced, many of them exactly the same as the strains acquired by the Blunts and others on their journeys to the Syrian desert so long ago.



Mares and foals from the Tai tribe.

Bedouin hospitality is legendary and our hosts kept with tradition by offering us a lamb feast before we were on our way again, this time to meet the Shammari tribe literally a stone's throw from Iraq, near the border town of Al Yaroubiyeh.

The Shammari

While travelling to the Shammari our bus stopped for a rendezvous with members of the Sherrabeen Tribe. They had ridden over 40 kilometres to give us the opportunity to see some of their lovely mares, foals and stallions. It was a real treat for us. Several horses caught my eye including a beautiful bay mare with her foal and a handsome bay stallion that was putting on quite a show for everyone. Many of this group were of the Kehaileh Dajanieh strain, well known to Lady Anne Blunt through her 1867 mare, Dajania, whose dam came from the Siba'a Anezeh and her sire a Kehailan Nawaki, another strain from which we saw many representatives.

As our bus rolled on to meet the Shammari we were greeted by horses and riders who seemed to appear out of thin air. It was an awe-inspiring sight as they galloped to the left and right of us with the warm glow of the setting sun behind them.

We were welcomed Shammari-style with a group of tribesmen brandishing swords and singing. Unfortunately when it came time to parade the horses it was dark, although this did not prevent us from appreciating their beauty. The Arabians paraded were athletic with all the hallmarks of the Arabian breed. A standout for me was the masculine bay stallion Al Naif Al Hadi of the Kehailan Ibn Rabdan strain, as in many respects he reminded me of the Royal



Author Rosemary Archer with a Kehaileh Dajanieh from the Sherrabeen tribe. The mare is by Al Khalidi from one of the most famous mares in the desert, Niomeiah.

Domino iid UK descendants here in Australia.

After the parade each of us were presented with a gift of traditional clothing, something we will always treasure. Arabic music and more festivities followed before we were ushered inside one of the buildings for a delicious meal of lamb. It was early morning by the time we arrived back at our hotel at Al Qamishli, exhausted but happy. The entire day had been a magical experience.

Part two of "A Syrian Adventure" will appear in the December edition of AHN.

In the meantime, if you would like to see for yourself what we experienced at the WAHO Conference and during the Syrian tour there is now a DVD available for purchase. The very talented Mohamad Ojeh from Dragonfly Production in the USA was the exclusive videographer for WAHO's 2007 Conference and tour. I recently received my copy from Mohamad and thoroughly enjoyed watching it. It's an amazing record of Syria and its horses. If you would like to order a copy please visit www.dragonflyproduction.net/waho.htm. ❖❖

Part of the Shammari tribe upon our arrival.

