

My Syrian Adventure



Mr Bilal Ekriem and his Syrian mare Fatenet Al Areen.



Azem Palace was built in the Ablaq architectural style.

The Old City of Damascus.

Words and photography by Sharon Meyers

The festival's name is derived from Bilad Al Sham which is the heart of symbolism for Syria, the fertile crescent and the Arabian horse. Syria is the cradle of the Arabian horse and these horses are an intrinsic part of the country's history and culture. It's a well-documented fact that over the centuries, many horse-purchasing expeditions – along with individual travellers such as Major Roger D Upton, Lady Anne and Wilfrid Blunt, Sherbatov and Stroganov, Homer Davenport and Carl Raswan, and many others from Poland, Spain, Italy and elsewhere – visited Syria in search of the Arabian horse. As a result of their acquisitions, nearly every Arabian Stud Book in the world has horses tracing back to Syrian ancestors.

My first visit to this magical country was in happier times during 2007, when attending their remarkable World Arabian Horse Organization (WAHO) Conference. Tragically, since 2011, Syria has been embroiled in vicious armed conflict but just as the Phoenix of mythology did, so Syria is now rising and renewing itself.

This war has taken a terrible toll on the country's equine population with Arabian horses being displaced, kidnapped or killed. It's estimated that around 3,000 horses disappeared, about a third of their Arabians.

Heart-breaking stories have surfaced, such as Syria's oldest Arabian horse breeder Mr Mohammad Hisham Ghoreib having 250 of his treasured horses stolen. His lifetime's work, shattered! A breeder I

I was honoured and excited to attend the Al Sham International Arabian Horse Festival held at the Old Damascus Showgrounds in Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, from 16-20 April 2019.



Al Sham International Arabian Horse Festival 2019



The shrine in the Umayyad Mosque reputed to enclose the head of St John the Baptist.



Arabic coffee pots at a souq.

My Syrian Adventure



The Jollanar Dance Theatre entertained us nightly.

visited in 2007, whose stud flanked the Euphrates River at Deir ez-Zor, had to flee for his life, forced to leave behind his beautiful pure Syrian horses. He was lucky as the Syrian Arab Army eventually found three offspring from his breeding programme, and with the help of the Office of Arabian Horses, they were returned to him. Fortunately freeze branding is universally used, making for easier identification of stolen or lost horses.

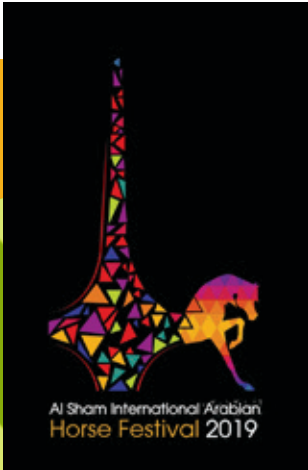
A distinguished year for the Arabian horse was 2018 when the members and committees of the Office of Arabian Horses contributed in the re-control and relocation of the movement and registration of the Arabian horse in Syria in cooperation with the breeders and owners, even in most of the war-torn hot spots. Between 2016 and 2018, three visits were made to the eastern region of Syria and the province of Hasakah and Qamishli, source of the Arabian horse that continues to be found among the Syrian Badia (Bedouin) tribes including Shammar, Tai, Jabbour, Ikaidat, Noaim, Sharabeen and the rest of the Arab tribes. A total of 2,200 horses have been freeze-



People lined the roads to see the parade.

branded during the three years. This was great work by the Registry Office members.

The number of horses freeze branded in 2018 amounted to 1,022. Three stud books were printed and the partial international ban on the export of horses was lifted. There were 72 stolen horses recovered, mainly in 2017/2018, with 22 going to the Basel Al Assad State Stud and the rest to breeders. A festival featuring Arabian horses was held, Arabian racing continued and horse shows resumed after an absence of seven years. Despite the overwhelming challenges of war, racing only ceased between 2011 to 2014. The number of registered Arabian horses is 8,668, with 800 foals born in 2018.



One of the children who took part in the festival.



Ready to join the parade.

On Monday 15 April, I arrived from Australia and travelled out to the Old Damascus Fairground to see how things were shaping up for the official opening the next night. There was a hive of activity, putting finishing touches to the traditional handcraft fair and the traditional food fair pavilions plus other sections, including the stage where the Jollanar Dance Theatre entertained us nightly with energetic folklore shows. These exhibitions and activities are important drawcards for the people of Damascus to visit the festival, where they could rekindle interest in their heritage and their Arabian horses. The festival's organisers did a sterling job pulling it all together, as they only had a few short weeks to prepare for the event. Two weeks prior to my arrival, the grounds were covered in rubble that took 500 truckloads to remove!

I admired the impressive Arabian horse murals painted by local artists on the back wall

There were Arabian horses of all colours.



My Syrian Adventure

of the fairground. Plus, I was surprised to see a popular TV morning show filming a cooking programme in a tent next to an arena where Arabians horses wandered freely. What great promotion for the breed!

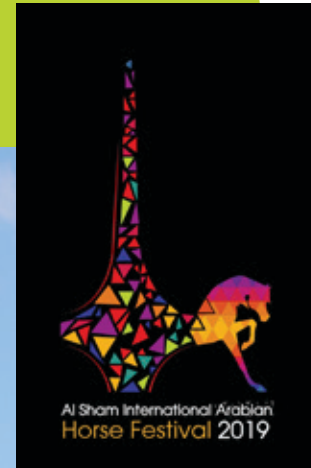
Next morning, a group of us visited one of my favourite destinations, the ageless city of Old Damascus. Founded the 3rd millennium BC, Damascus has a wealth of historical sites and is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. We did a fascinating walking tour where we soaked up the city's ancient ambiance while pondering whose foot-steps we were walking in.

We visited the medieval tomb of Saladin (1137 – 1193), the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria who led the Muslim military campaign against the Crusaders in the Levant. Next, we saw the impressive Umayyad Mosque, one of the earliest and most important Islamic religious structures in the world. This beautiful mosque is where a shrine is purported to enclose a relic honoured by Muslims as well as Christians, the head of St John the Baptist.

While meandering through souqs, our senses were aroused by colourful displays of spices and food along with a plethora of other intriguing merchandise. At the Al-Buzuriyah Souq, we dropped into the Khan As'ad Pasha, a caravanserai where travellers and their animals



Kanz Al Khair, a Syrian Arabian stallion paraded.



We visited Saint Sarkis at Maaloula.



rested after a day's journey. It is one of the finest khans of Damascus, built in the Ablaq architectural style involving alternating rows of light and dark stones. We then spent time at the glorious Azem Palace, an early example of Damascene domestic architecture on a grand scale. Both were built circa 1749 by As'ad Pasha al-Azem, the governor of Damascus.

That evening saw the official opening of Al Sham International Arabian Horse Festival, a grand affair which included a flamboyant folklore show about a stolen Arabian horse and how it was found and retrieved, creatively performed by the Jollanar Dance Theatre.

Without doubt, an exciting and eagerly-awaited event of the



Two stallions at the festival.

festival was The Grand Sham Arabian Horse Parade held early afternoon on the Wednesday. The Old Damascus Showgrounds sprang to life as trucks and vehicles transporting 250 precious Arabians rolled in from Syria's 14 provinces – a record attendance. Horses danced and pranced as they were unloaded, people darted here and there carrying eye-catching, multi-coloured saddlery, some proudly brandishing antique swords handed down through the ages.

Many of the men, women and children were dressed in traditional costumes while their horses were festooned in Syrian saddlery, making for a kaleidoscope of colours. Also, as a show of solidarity with the Syrian people, and to express their love for the country's exceptional Arabian horses, several international visitors borrowed Arabians from the Police Equestrian Club and private breeders to take part in the parade.

The people of Damascus were in high spirits as the parade coincided with the Syrian Independence Day of 17 April 1946. Groups lined the streets to see the horses as they snaked along the six-kilometre route. The Syrians were rediscovering their equine companions across the centuries in both war and peace. They remembered that Syria's warriors rode to glory on

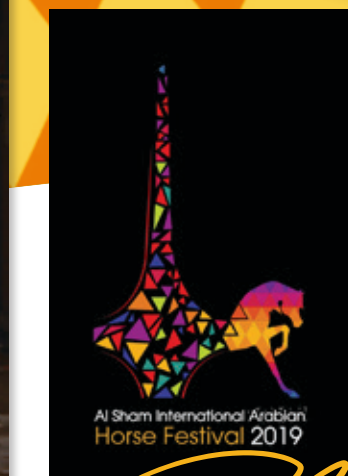
battlefields with their magnificent Arabian horses while defending their land and their dignity. Interaction between spectators, riders and horses was indeed heart-warming. Horses soaked up the attention, receiving masses of loving pats while stalling in hundreds of selfies. Syrians are the king of selfies! The parade was sensational.

That evening there was a presentation of horses by local breeders, where we saw a variety of pure Syrian Arabians. These Arabians were strong, beautiful and functional with people-loving temperaments. While watching them, Dr Hazaim Alwair's talk at the 2007 WAHO Conference sprang to my mind. His knowledge of Syrian Arabians and their strains is prodigious: "They (Bedouin) had to breed the best, they had to breed the most powerful, they had to breed the horse which would survive this harsh and sometimes very hostile environment – the heat, lack of food and lack of water. Purity was of the utmost importance to them because they found there was nothing to improve on these horses as they survived in this harsh

My
Syrian Adventure



Basil Al Jaadan with Bint Shamkha, a pure Syrian Arabian mare.



My Syrian Adventure



Safaa Al Sahraa was the highest priced horse at the auction.



Taj Al Khair, a stallion at Al Jaadan Stables.



Samar, a filly at Al Jaadan Stables.

environment. So, it was important for them to keep them pure and not to introduce any foreign blood to them which would weaken them.”

One grey mare, Sohaila and her filly were of the famous Shweimeh Sabbah strain. Dr Alwair noted: “Sultan Ibn Suwait, the Sheikh of al-Dhafeer tribe said that the Shweimeh strain belonged to the Fudul tribe, that she is descended from the Keheilat Ajuz and she can be bred ‘in the darkest nights’. That means you don’t have to worry about purity, and Shweimeh Sabbah mares can always be bred from. When Lady Anne Blunt met Fares Al-Jarba, who was the Sheikh of the Shammar tribe in 1878, he was riding a bay Shweimeh Sabbah mare. Lady Anne Blunt described this young man as one of the most charming and generous men she met in the desert. Some of Syria’s best horses come from this strain, including ones that are direct descendants of that bay mare which Lady Anne Blunt saw in the desert.”

Thursday morning saw us travelling out to the scenic countryside to visit Maaloula, where a Western Aramaic language is still spoken. We visited two monastic complexes. The first was Saint Sarkis that houses two of the oldest icons in the world, and where we listened to the 24th Psalm sung in the melodious Aramaic language by a young woman; Jesus and his disciples primarily spoke Aramaic. Then we walked to Saint Thecla via a narrow, steep gap through a mountain. This monastery holds the remains of Thecia, a pupil of St Paul. A short drive away at Saidnaya, we went to the very old Our Lady of Saidnaya Monastery. This



Pure Syrian mare Dahmaa Amer at Al Jaadan Stables.

remarkable fortress-like convent rises high above the town and has many ancient associations with the Holy Bible. It is noteworthy that these monasteries are visited by many pilgrims, both Muslim and Christian. I would also like to mention here that on our last day in Syria, we were whisked 113 kilometres out of Damascus to the southwestern province of Sweida (Swaida), spending the day visiting several fascinating Roman sites.

Thursday afternoon saw an auction for pure Syrian Arabians that created lots of interest with spectators. Three horses sold with the highest price being US \$10,000 for the 10-year old chestnut mare Safaa Al Sahraa (Beebars x Shamet Al Dara'an) of the Keheileh Jreishieh strain. I was pleased to note a couple of the sale horses were sired by stallions or were from mares we saw at the Basel Al Assad State Stud in 2007, which was destroyed at the time but is up and running again. One was the grey 2009 stallion Ghamer Al Ghootah



Rain didn't dampen the Arabian racehorses' spirits.

Ayda J with her filly Maleka at Al Jaadan.



of the Hamdani Ibn Ghorab strain. His sire was the handsome Ma'roof, a grey stallion who impressed us in 2007 with his admirable conformation, good bone, short cannons, well-shaped neck, beautifully shaped ears, lovely deep jowls and dark expressive eyes.

Late morning on the Friday, photographer Gudrun Waiditschka and I visited the Al Jaadan Stables owned by Basil Al Jaadan. Basil is an industrious and passionate supporter of the breed, both home and abroad. A few of his equine duties include being a member of the Executive Committee of WAHO, member of the Syrian Arab Horse Association and President of the Organising Committee of the Festival. Basil's encyclopaedic knowledge of Arabian horses and Syria is a reflection of his enthusiasm and love for both. He



Clever feats of horsemanship was performed by members of the Police Equestrian Club.

Riding at the gallop.



My Syrian Adventure

was another breeder who had his beloved horses stolen during the war, but was fortunate, as a couple of horses of his breeding were kept safe with family members. These horses are now the foundation for the stud's current breeding programme.

Basil's picturesque farm has mountain backdrops and features an elegant stable complex made from beautiful stone taken off the property. Regrettably, the weather was against us as it was freezing and raining on and off, in truth, closer to snowing!

Disappointingly we only had time to photograph a few of the pure Syrian Arabians there. First photographed was a gem

Events were documented by a local TV station.



Anna Sokolska from Poland giving an archery display.



within the herd, the grey mare Dahmaa Amer (Shadeed x Murrah). To Basil's knowledge, she is one of two mares left worldwide of her strain Dahmaa Amer. Next came the handsome grey stallion Taj Al Khair (Johar Adeeb x Mansora), an Obayan Seheili that is an important strain for the Shammar tribe, taken in battle from the Sharif or King of Mecca. He was followed by an attractive dark grey filly named Samar (Bishir Al Jameel x Shams Al Khair), also of the Obayah Seheilieh strain.

When Basil's horses were stolen, one precious young foal of the Keheileh Mimrahieh strain was left behind and was aptly named Ayda J, which translates to the one that came back. She has grown into a splendid mare and now has a pretty filly at foot named Maleka. Such a pleasure photographing her.

Then it bucketed with rain! We hastily retreated to the stables where we were able to photograph Nassar J (Omar Al Khayam x Sohaila), a chestnut stallion of Shwaiman Sabba strain and the grey mare, Bint Shamkha (Shadeed x Shamkha), of the same strain. Both posed beautifully for us in front of the charming archway to the stables.

In the afternoon, we attended the Arabian races at Al Demas. It continued raining, turning the track to liquid mud! It even snowed on nearby mountains, but this did not deter Syria's courageous jockeys and horses from participating in the seven races. As the last race was run and won, the sun started shining! This was just in time for the exhilarating Equestrian Martial Arts Show, where Arabians and their riders from the Police Equestrian Club performed awe-inspiring feats of horsemanship.

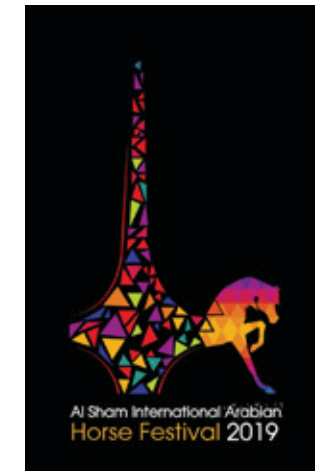
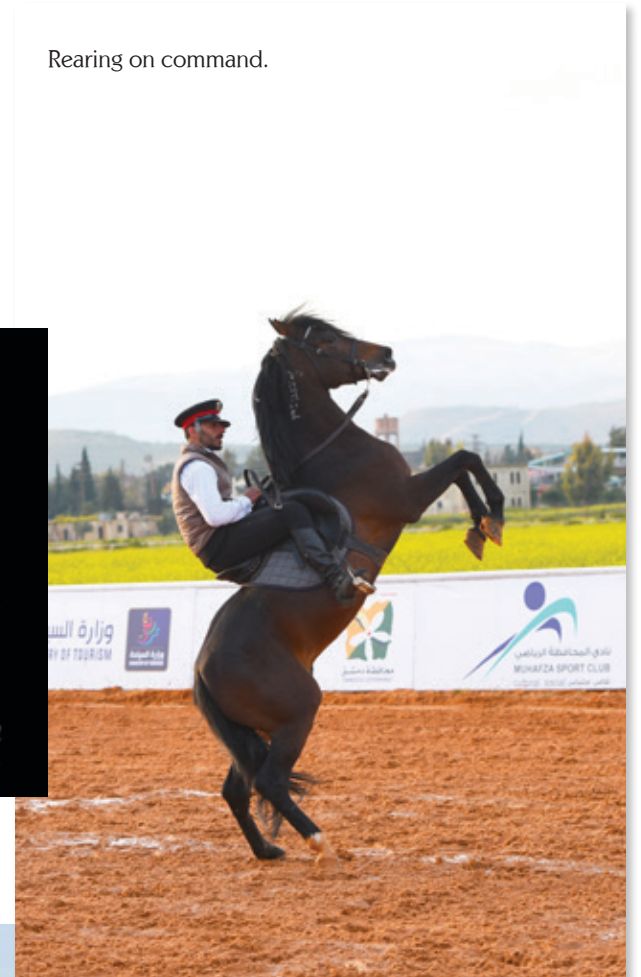
A surprise event was the international archery display on horseback performed by Ali Ghoorchian (Iran), Anna Sokolska (Poland) and Walid Khawashkieh (Syria), riding Arabians borrowed from the Police Equestrian Club.

My Syrian Adventure

Tent pegging.



Rearing on command.





Members of the crowd holding and feeding carrots to one of Adnan Azzam's two Arabians.

We were also lucky to meet Adnan Azzam, the intrepid horseman who, along with his two Syrian Arabians, was leaving the next day on his Syria World Journey, riding from Damascus to Moscow. The planned route for his epic trek was via Iraq, Iran and Azerbaijan.

The next morning, we strolled from our hotel to the huge roundabout at Umayyad Square to bid farewell to Adnan Azzam and his two lovely Arabians. Upon arrival I was amazed by the large mass of people, TV crews and photographers gathered there. I had to stand on my tippy toes to actually find the horses in the melee! Eventually I spotted a pair of white ears flickering above the crowd. An impossibility pushing through, so I made my way around the back where I literally ran into the horses' hindquarters. Chaos reigned with flapping flags, a band playing and a swarm of spectators patting the horses and feeding them carrots while taking selfies. The horses nonchalantly took it all in their stride. Eventually we waved goodbye as Adnan, his Arabians and the crowd disappeared down one of Damascus' busiest peak hour roads, accompanied by a medley of loud honking car horns.

That evening the closing ceremony for the Festival was held, a highlight being the poignant plays, dances and songs performed by Syrian children from around the country, while films from the past eight years of conflict were shown on a large screen behind them. It brought home how wars affect and traumatise the most innocent and vulnerable people of

all, the children.

Al Sham International Arabian Horse Festival was certainly a welcome and fabulous celebration for Syria's jewel in the crown, the Arabian horse. An equine that transcends both religion and politics while giving immense joy to thousands of enthusiasts around the world!

I would like to congratulate the Organising Committee comprising the Syrian Arab Horse Association, Syrian Equestrian Federation, Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, Ministry of Tourism, Police Equestrian Club, Muhafza Sport Club and the Damascus Governorate for arranging such an outstanding Festival.



Our group at the beautiful Azem Palace.



Adnan's Arabian held by WAHO President Peter Pond, with groom and Jenny Pond.

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