

„Heritage is not represented solely by forts, castles and other elements of the built environment. Heritage, in its essence, may be thought of as the moral inheritance of customs, traditions, sciences, art and literature which are passed down from generation to generation.“

*Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, Sultan of Oman*

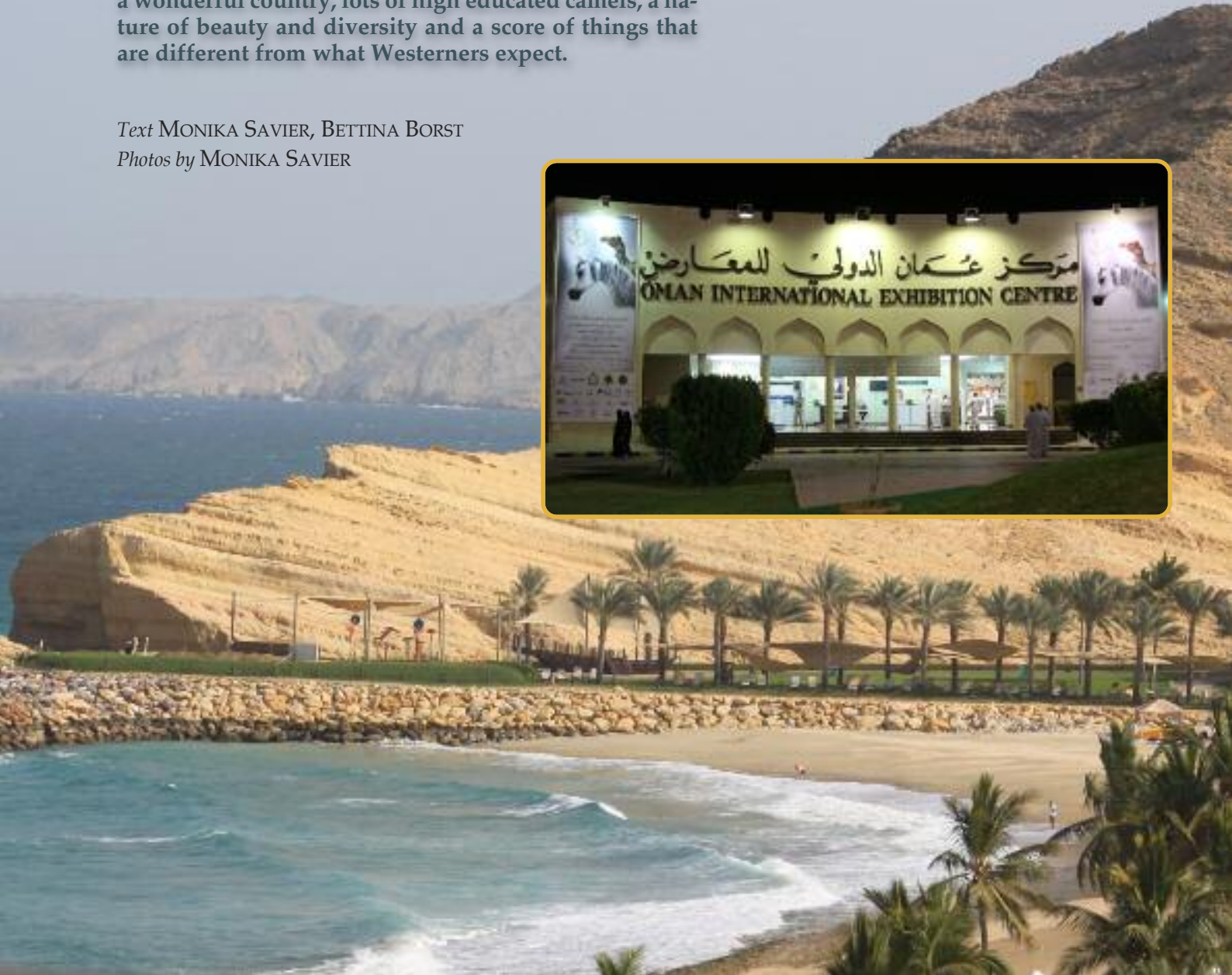
# “Ahlan wa Sahlan!”

## An Omani Horse and Camels Festival

The First National Championships for Arabian Horses according to ECAHO rules, the Royal Cavalry of Oman, a wonderful country, lots of high educated camels, a nature of beauty and diversity and a score of things that are different from what Westerners expect.

*Text MONIKA SAVIER, BETTINA BORST*

*Photos by MONIKA SAVIER*







“Ahlan wa Sahlan!” (which means: “you came as friends, and may life be gentle on you”) was the first thing we heard from Sulaiman Ali Al-Hattali when we arrived at Muscat airport. It was a heartfelt welcome from him, upon meeting our team again, as all of us fondly remembered our visit in Oman in 2009, when the country did such excellent work in hosting the WAHO Conference. Once more, we experienced that this Omani greeting was not just a set and empty phrase, but something our hosts, the Royal Cavalry, really meant and implemented in a perfect way with all their energy.

In a down-to-earth manner, no pomp, using lots of competence and experience, and not trying to save expenses in the wrong places, one of the things they implemented were the 1st National Arabian Horse Championships in Muscat, the capital of Oman, in mid-January. The location was a roofed-over congress centre, with an arena for the horse and camel shows made from extra-fine imported quartz sand and surrounded by tables for everybody. There were stalls offering a colourful mix of local activities for the population, for example, a drawing competition in which women and children took part as well as men. There was local cuisine offering excel-

lent local food with dates, almonds, and Arabian spices, there were horse and camel sports goods for endurance, racing and beauty competition like shows, and of course, the extensive activities of the Royal Cavalry of Oman were presented.



## 1 A PIVOT: THE ROYAL CAVALRY OF OMAN

This Royal Cavalry of Oman has been in existence since 1974. It was founded at the bid of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, the enormously beloved and successful Sultan of Oman, who is strongly dedicated to breeding Arabian horses and highly active and involved in preserving different horse breeds and promoting equine sports. Which is why the Royal Cavalry stables a colourful selection or rare horse breeds, from toy horses to pink Akhal-Tekes, from Kladrub carriage horses to Hanoverian dressage horses. The soul of the Royal Cavalry, however, is breeding and training Arabian horses. The Royal Cavalry is affiliated with the Ministry of Royal Court Affairs (<http://www.rca.gov.om>). They are the biggest horse organisation in Oman, and also the biggest horse organisers – they do horse and camel races, horse shows, and traditional Arabian riding presenting particularly athletic and also artistic approaches. In addition, the Royal Cavalry encourages all citizens to take part in horse events and organises horse education and riding classes for Oman nationals, so even children have access to horsemanship training from an early age on. Many foreigners would not expect that, in a traditional Arabian country, girls and women are professionally trained and equally skilled,

The Gold Champion mare Rafa'a at the Royal Cavalry.

but they are, making up a great part of the jockeys and riders even in the acrobatic mounted games, ridden at tearing speed, that in Western countries might be considered dangerous stunts indeed. At the beginning of every year, the Royal Cavalry organises the Annual Royal Horse Racing Festival on their own racetrack near Muscat. In addition, the Royal Cavalry make themselves responsible for a great event taking place every five years, the Royal Equestrian & Camel Festival – a date not to be missed. All of these festivals take place under the patronage of His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos Bin Said of Oman. They say that this king is an “approachable king”, one for whom it is everything but uncommon to go and be close to his people. Quite often, he will sit among his fellow countrymen on the grandstand of some Omani racetrack, watching the races with silent enthusiasm and without his entourage. Occasionally, he will make an appearance for some great horse event in Europe. Some years ago, he made a gift of three Arabian broodmares of his own



## 2 ON JANUARY 15 AND 16, THE 1<sup>ST</sup> NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS FOR ARABIAN HORSES WERE HELD ACCORDING TO ECHAO RULES.

Breeding Arabians for showing is something that's quite unknown in Oman. The Royal Cavalry are the only substantial horse owners with several show horses at their disposal, horses who are known internationally as well as nationally, and who are used for breeding as well.

Many of the horses presented were more of a classic race horse type: rather large-framed and with a good conformation, sometimes lacking somewhat in type, but not in Arabian noblesse. As an excellent example of classic beauty, there was impressive AL Wishaahe, 24 years old and bred in the Royal Stud of Jordan by princess Haya Al Hussein. He had well earned being made Senior Champion Stallion. The Gold Champion of the mares' class was Rafa'a (IM Bayard Cathare x Holyah), born and bred by the Royal Cavalry, a „modern beauty“, meaning a horse with an excellent type such as can be seen on many of the big shows in Europe.

The well-experienced ECAHO team may have been somewhat oversized for a small show like this one, but they were effective and successful:

The judges Christianne Chazel, Renata Schibler, Koenraad Detaillieur, and Ann Norden, were able to tune in on the different horses of the show with lots of empathy. The ring steward was Hassan Valsan, with his wife Asya Valsan responsible for music and Dominik Briot for control marks, and Stephanie Fernande as official scorer. As DC's, there were Dr. Abdel Wahab, Vivian Van Eertrn and Dr. Elias Nicopulosi. Special thanks for a successful events need to go to Sulaiman Ali Alhattali, and of course, to the technical adviser, speaker of the event, and contributor to the Royal Cavalry, Frank Cibios from France, who has been active as a kind of interface between Europe and the Royal Cavalry for a long time now and has been able to set quite a lot into motion in this function.



Al Wishaahe Gold Senior Stallions Champion



Rafa'a Class Winner and Gold Senior Female Champion



Tohfah Class Winner and Gold Junior Female Champion

breeding to the State Stud in Palermo, in the Sicily region of Italy, in order to enable them to further improve the influence of Oriental Arabian bloodlines there.

The Royal Cavalry is an active member of a good number of renowned international horse organisations such as WAHO (World Arabian Horse Organisation), AHRA (Arabian Horse Association), ARF (Asian Racing Federation), IFARA (International Federation of Arabian Horse Racing Authorities), IFHA (International Federation of Horseracing Authorities), and, as of late, FEGENTRI (International Federation of Gentlemen and Lady Riders), for whom Oman organised the FEGENTRI Horse Racing Cup this year. In 2009, the Royal Cavalry hosted the WAHO Conference in Muscat, Oman.

The Royal Cavalry play quite a lot of roles, of which their main functions probably are:

- Managing and developing equines of various types, including health supervision, equine nutrition, and horse breeding.
- Provisioning of horses as per requirement

- Training of horses, and qualifying and training of Cavalry recruits
- Maintenance of detailed equine records and pedigrees, which includes the Horses Registration Department for recording and coordinating such matters with national and international equestrian organizations and centres
- Participation in and planning for local, regional, national and international races according to stipulated policies, detailed recording of race results included.
- Developing the jockeys's skills in races, ceremonies and Equestrian event management and coordination.

The overall management of the Royal Cavalry is a modern institution entirely capable of dealing with the exceedingly varied requirements of breeding and riding on the most challenging levels imaginable. Particularly impressive is their committed involvement in professional education and training in equine sports for everybody – not only related to horses, but also to camels.



Zahwah Al Adeyat, Class Winner and Silver Junior Female Champion



AJ Nofah Reserve Class Winner and Silver Senior Female Champion



Tohfah



Alfارشah Class Winner and Bronze Senior Female Champion



Sakheyah



Lammah Al Awali Reserve Class Winner



Atyaf Reserve Class Winner



Belquis Al Adeyat Reserve Class Winner



Alfارشah



Noir El Jamaal Class Winner and Silver Senior Male Champion



Al Yaseer Reserve Class Winner



Fattah Al Shakhoura Reserve Class Winner and Bronze Senior Stallion Champion



Asya Valsan, music show



Hassan Valsan, ring master, Ann Norden, Christianne Chazel, Koenraad Detaillieur, Renata Schibler, judges and Dr. Abdelwahab Amira, Vivian Van Eertern DC



Franck Cibois, Speaker, and Dominik Briot



Major, Mohammed Saoud Al Balushi  
Director of racing activities at the Royal Cavalry



### 3 INTERVIEW

The show for Arabian horses had the status of a National Championship, as it was organised according to ECAHO regulations.

Asking Sulaiman Al-Hattali, responsible of the Stud Book Authority, Royal Cavalry of Oman, he explained to me:

**Savier:** Mr. Al-Hattali, as head of the Oman Horse Registry, you are a busy man and particularly one who knows a lot about horses and people in Oman. Can you tell us what was the reaction of the Omani people to the first National Arabian show?

**Sulaiman Al-Hattali:** As you say, it was the first National competition held in Oman and was on a pleasingly good level. Our horse owners were happy to have this kind of contest set up in the Sultanate and were glad to attend, and the audience was quite obviously very happy, too. Our horse heritage is an important element of our lives in Oman.

**Savier:** Is there a special reason for the Royal Cavalry to decide to enter the ECAHO Show world with their horses?

**Al-Hattali:** The Royal Cavalry of Oman is the main engine for horse breeding in Oman. Taking part in ECAHO shows is a way of advertising Omani breeding. Horses, and particularly Arabian horses, must have beauty, and shows according to ECAHO rules serve to highlight this quality for all interested parties around the globe.

**Savier:** Does this fit to the extraordinary quality of riding skills and riding performances in your country?

**Al-Hattali:** As you know, the Royal Cavalry of Oman judges equestrian festivals in Oman and in some countries in the world. We can have a positive impact that way, and these festivals feature actual riding and equine sports. Also do not forget that the Royal Cavalry has sponsored horse races with Arabians all around the world, for example in the United Kingdom. So, we are taking riding skills and performance seriously.

**Savier:** Is the show horse, that is, the particularly beautiful horse, only a "side effect" of the breeding



work you do at the RC, or are you selecting special bloodlines for their beauty?

**Al-Hattali:** Horse type is certainly important for us in the selection of horses and breeds. In addition, some of our horse owners put particular emphasis on that aspect, to good effect. But what we are going for is Arabian type, and with the other breeds we are caring for, breed-specific type.

**Savier:** Are there private breeders who start to breed show Arabs in Oman?

**Al-Hattali:** The first institution to start breeding beautiful horses in Oman was the Royal Cavalry. We used natural matings for that, but also artificial insemination.

**Savier:** How do you see the development of Arabian horse breeding in the future?

**Al-Hattali:** Future breeding of Arabian horses is on the incline, in numbers as well as in quality. All around the world, they talk about Oman with an emphasis on purity of blood. We have a lot of world famous-horses, and everyone is proud of them. Horses are part of our national heritage and our everyday culture, and they are always going to have a prominent future in our country.

**Savier:** Mr. Al-Hattali, thank you for this interview.

# 4

## CAMELS

Where they present their horses, the Omani will also present their camels. This horse-and-camel symbiosis is an ancient one from the traditions of their Bedouin culture, one which strongly influences the way the Omani people perceive their own culture up to today. These different animals have a strong

connection, with the horse standing for speed and the camel for strength and endurance. Two thirds of Oman are made up of desert, steppe or mountains, with a hot and dry climate. In this landscape, camels were an elementary part of Bedouin life, even more so than horses, which is why they were equally honoured on the occasion of the Horse Festival.





Due to His Majesty's great appreciation for camels as an integral part of Oman's heritage, the Royal Camel Corps was founded in 1989, and given the task of preserving and fostering the camel as a "cultural asset". Camel races are hugely popular in Oman, and breeding of camels as well as acquiring professional qualifications are supported in the Sul-

tanate. It's young people in particular who are passionately engaged in the breeding of camels or Arabian horses again, re-connecting themselves to ancient traditions of their country. Particularly the Bedouins of Oman are masters of camel breeding and training, so it was in co-operation with them that the Royal Camel Corps set up clear-cut aims for

themselves, namely maintenance of camel pedigrees; promotion of camels in sports, particularly camel races, but also trail riding and mounted games with acrobatic elements performed on camel-back and beauty competitions; and last not least, modern methods of reproduction in camel breeding. The Sultan owns 600 camels which are mostly used

for breeding, but many of them on the racetrack as well, in addition to pulling coaches in ceremonies, and to taking part in public events as dancing camels. The first time a camel dancing show was performed, it was in the Sultanate of Oman. This performance displays the intelligence and ability of camels to respond to humans, and to perform all actions that they are trained for. Camels are known to be loyal and obedient to their owners and trainers. So, through patient trials and experience on the trainers' part, camels can be taught various skills.

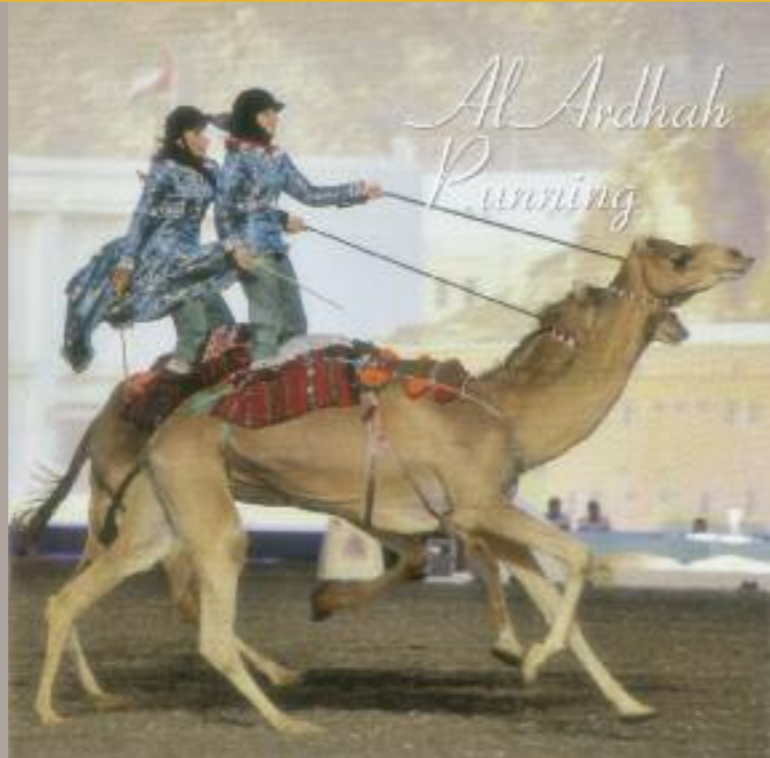
Basically, all of that was more or less known to us, from our work with Arabian horses, but the things we experienced at the First National Championship of Arabian Camels and Horses definitely topped everything we had ever seen Arabian horses do in shows or perform in sports events. The dancing camels actually danced, and they did it with enthusiasm and with passion, presented on a double lounge by their trainer. The camels appeared to us to have an ear for music, too. Their dancing was accompanied by two singers performing ancient Omani Bedouin songs and chants who produced a powerfully fascinating atmosphere, sending shivers down our spines and making the whole event an unforgettable experience.



## 5 MOUNTED GAMES AND FAR-SIGHTED POLICIES

The mounted game the Omani people are famous for is the Rakd Al Ardah, in which two riders gallop along a track side by side and perform every conceivable kind of trick on horseback (or on camelback, by the way), including standing on the horse's back. And in Oman, this means that riders can be both men and women, and that many of the horses actually belong to their riders and are beloved family horses. And even though all kinds of "classic riding" such as dressage and show jumping are taught in riding schools all across Oman, most of the riders in the mounted games sit their classic Omani saddles with bare feet, as these saddles are used without stirrups. They resemble a big colourful cushion, but with a horsehair-filled ridge in front, which serves as a kind of stop in front of the horse's neck. And the traditional Omani garb the riders like to wear is usually highly colourful as well.

While the colourful spectacle of the Rakd al Ardah is one of the most famous aspects of the Omani as a horse-loving people, what hits foreigners most on travelling through the country of Oman is the kind of living most of the people can enjoy. Oman may be located farthest from Europe of all the countries of the Near East, but nobody should make the mistake of thinking this location makes it a backwardly country. In contrary to most of the other Arabian countries, in the Sultanate the aim is to give every citizen, whether city dweller or desert nomad, access to electricity and water, and later on, to sanitary drainage and waste water treatment. Five-year-plans give structure to the implementation of these aims, which have been carried through in many of Oman's governorates already.



Photos Royal Camel Corps

The sultan's visions don't stop with everyday necessities, however. It's clearly evident that in Oman, modern-day thinking is promoted: Women are definitely encouraged to "realize their potential and take a more active role in leadership". The Sultanate is to be transformed into a knowledge society, and a knowledge-based economy is to be built up. Which other Arab country can claim to have a website similar to "Knowledge Oman", a knowledge-based community platform?

So, many of the Western clichés of what life in the Orient is like don't fit Oman. This country rightfully holds a special place among all of the Arab countries. It's hardly surprising, then, that the first National Championships for Arabian horses should be something special as well.

