

Report

### **A step back in time: Into the desert**

By Caroline Sussex

Photographs courtesy of the Syrian Arabian Horse Society

**The final part of Caroline's report from the 2007 WAHO Conference, held in Syria, covers the post-conference tours and provided visitors the chance to truly travel in the footsteps of Lady Anne Blunt.**

#### **Sunday 29 April**

"Bedouins, Horses and Culture – Tour A1" was the one to be on if you could take the pace. The Conference was over and the excitement and expectations built for the post-Conference tours, but not one of us can have envisaged just how special and wonderful these were to be. For those unlucky not to book in enough time, they had to be happy with Bedouins and Horses. What we were about to undertake was to stay on the memory forever.

Our first stop was the historical city of Palmyra. In Lady Anne Blunt's diaries, this city is called Tadmor and some people still call it that today. We were heading North-East from Damascus and stopped for a coffee break at the famous Baghdad Café. This was nowhere near Baghdad itself, but the road to Baghdad was signed just before the Café. The city of Palmyra became a centre of trade and was the capital of the Arab Emirates of Tadmor, which stretched to Egypt and the Bosphorus strait in the third century AD during the rule of its Queen Zenobia, who challenged the Emperors of Rome itself. Walking around the ruins of this famous city to the Temple of Bel with its immense courtyard, one just had to imagine its magnificence when in one piece. The great colonnade, which stretched for more than 1,000m, gives an idea of the layout of the city. While here, the Arabs and their camels came to try and entice us aboard, but beware of the cost of a ride! All day could be spent wandering around this beautiful city. Our guide wanted us to go to the castle on the hill to enjoy the sunset over Palmyra and while the sunset was sadly not as stunning as it could have been, the view was well worth it. Dinner was at the next door Bedouin Center where we witnessed traditional Bedouin dancing and enjoyed a lovely meal.

#### **Monday 30 April**

The tour left Palmyra for the town of Deir-Ez-Zor to meet with the Aneze tribe, where we were to see a horse parade and a traditional race. Our bus was first to arrive so we got out to look at the white camels (genuine desert camels) that had been brought in especially for us to see. The Bedouin were excited to meet us and were very friendly, showing us their lovely camels. The horses were happily tethered – stallions and mares with foals running loose. We wandered around the horses and some people had camel rides and then out of the dust came the race, accompanied by much noise of shouting and of vehicles hooting their horns. Such was the excitement over who actually won and whether it was fair that our hosts forgot us temporarily in the thrilling moment of winning. This was stepping back in time and we were treated to the very best for our lunchtime meal that you can be offered – rice and mutton. Only honoured guests get this treat. It was already an amazing experience, but there was more to come.

There was no time to do much after this momentous reception except check in to the hotel and head off for the museum. We were then taken to the Euphrates Stables, owned by Wadeia Khori. Sadly, as we had to be on the Euphrates River for the sunset, the visit to these stables was rushed. The horses were presented under saddle and they were then turned loose for us to view under the trees. It was a shame that we did not have longer there, but time in Syria goes quickly and there was much for us to be shown. The Euphrates Stud has many horses of the Kehailen Nawagi strain, which we had noted for their exceptional movement at earlier studs and some of the horses from there had won in endurance. In fact, the winner of the race today had come from the Euphrates stud.

We went down the Euphrates River to view the sunset and then onto the stud of Ganama Farms at the Al Furat Stables by kind invitation of Mr Wadia Khoury, where another evening of horses, food and entertainment awaited us. Syrian country dancing is very attractive and from the way they dance, you can see the love and happiness in their way of life. This stud had horses all of Kehailen Nawagi strain. The half-light made it a little difficult to see, but the stallion Denar was the sire of two beautiful mares that we admired. The dam Zein was also responsible for some lovely stock here and in other places.

#### **Tuesday 1 May**

My diary records: "A day to remember forever and a note that I cannot honestly write in this

diary the feelings that went through our minds this day.”

On departure from Deir-Ez-Zor, we travelled through lush and rich countryside and arrived at the roadside to be greeted by an escort of Bedouins on horses and in the distance, thousands of Bedouins awaited our arrival. The pleasure on the faces of the people was immense and the excitement mounted as all five coaches drew up. It was so crowded and the people so enthusiastic to be involved that we had to have a path cleared for us to enter the reception line to meet the Tai Tribe.

What a momentous moment. The cheering, banners for WAHO and genuine excitement made us feel like royalty, with cameras flashing everywhere and mobile phones catching the moment and who knows, perhaps immediately transmitted around the world. We shook so many hands, something women do not normally do in this country, and the Tai Tribe made us feel very welcome. Speeches of welcome took place followed by a parade of Arabians and then the beautiful dancing and entertainment and once again the highest honour, the already-mentioned mutton and rice. We were guessing how many people were present and some thought 10,000 but realistically 6,000 was nearer the mark. TV crews from Dubai were there, interviewing people and asking them about the trip – how was Syria, the people and had we enjoyed it? “Yes”, the message came across – everything had been wonderful and the people so welcoming.

Time was tight so on leaving the Tai Tribe, we were taken straight to the Shammar Tribe. The Shammar Tribe was very prominent in Lady Anne Blunt’s diaries and we really took steps back in time to visualise the greeting that the Blunts must have had, which was probably rather smaller, but nonetheless friendly. On the route, we stopped by the roadside as members of the Shumar Tribe, not wanting to be left out, had, in some cases, ridden 40km just to be there at the side of the road to meet us. We went down and saw their horses including a beautiful mare of the Dajania line – where my mother, Rosemary Archer, found a mare who reminded her of an old mare of pure Blunt bloodlines that she had once seen with a lovely foal.

Sheikh Ghazi Al Jarba of the Shammar Tribe had invited us and again we were escorted in on horseback and it was more organised, but just as welcoming. We were totally overwhelmed by the attention. I have taken part of our hosts address as I feel it worth adding here:

“I greet you on behalf of myself and my Shammar Arab tribe and would like to tell you in our Shammar dialect ‘Yallah Hayhum’ – welcome. Also it gives me great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of my Islam and Christian Arab and Kurd brothers and sisters in Al-Jazireh region, to our country. The country of security and stability, country of love, brotherhood and peace, the country of tolerant religions, civilisations and noble ancient heritage, a country led by a great leader and a true human being, his Excellency President Bashar Al-Assad.”

Sheikh Ghazi went on to mention that it was the Arabian horse which brought people together and added that the revival in Syria of the purity of the Syrian Arabian was partly down to Basil Jadaan, President of the Syrian Society, who was committed to breeding the Arabian horse in Syria. Sheikh Ghazi finished by saying: “Your presence among us today, dear friends, is the clearest evidence of your dedication and devotion. I wish, once again, to welcome you and ask you kindly to make more frequent visits to our country and our tribe.” It should be noted that Sheikh Ghazi spoke on behalf of the Shammar Tribe who are found in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf’s Arab countries.

This very moving speech was greeted with great applause as we were all totally in unison on our views of the Syrian people, their kindness, love and generosity. The horse parade started, but deteriorated due to the excitement and the fact that the Bedouin encroaching on the enclosure made the space available smaller so that the horses had trouble entering and exiting. This was a shame as the first bay stallion looked lovely and we were so interested to see their horses as we had noticed Shammar horses earlier in the trip. The Shammar presented to everyone on the trip a special gift of Arab dresses and abbeya (head scarves) for the ladies and head-dresses for the men. This was a very touching thing to do and the women were dressed in the abbeya by our hosts and we put on our new clothes for the evening. Entertainment followed with more traditional folk dancing and then we adjourned to nearby buildings for a sumptuous meal.

At the end of this special day, we were taken to hotels in Qamishli and learned that we had in fact been at a place called Al Yaroubiyeh, just 2km from the Iraqi border...

### **Wednesday 2 May**

A bright and early start the next morning so we could head for the airport, but there was no aeroplane and in the end we were happy enough to drive to Aleppo, although this did mean that the schedule was changed as we arrived there at 4pm instead of mid-morning. However, it was an interesting drive and we enjoyed seeing the lush pastures and rich soil with much cultivation. This was a very good agricultural area and much of the food eaten in Syria is produced within the country itself.

On arrival in Aleppo, we went straight to the Citadel before it closed. The Citadel is the biggest and most impressive sight in Aleppo, standing on a hill in the middle of the town and the very deep moat surrounding it made it difficult to attack. The Citadel had different functions and was restored to how it is today in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The Souk in Aleppo apparently goes for 10km, but sadly we did not have time to investigate these wonderful narrow lanes and shops for more than half an hour – maybe that was just as well! After checking into our beautiful hotel and a very quick change, we were off to visit the Al Andalus Stud Farm owned by Omar Anbarji.

The stud was started in the 1960s with Dheem, a Hamdanieh Simrieh mare, and it concentrates on three strains – Hamdanieh Simrieh from the Anazeh tribe, Kehaileh Khidlieh and Kehileh Nawagi. We were treated to another lovely meal and the horses were paraded for us after.

The lovely bay mare Shaha, who was 16, sadly had been difficult to breed from, but she did have two daughters born in 2005 and 2006. The important broodmare Zein, whose stock we had seen in Damascus, had a full-sister, Ruba, who we saw here. This mare was black and considered to be very important. The grey mare Ankaa, of the Keheileh Nawagi strain, was most impressive with wonderful presence and, again, those excellent legs. Also seen was her daughter Olah and another filly, Reem, who had excellent qualities. The chestnut mares Mahmoud (Kehilen Krush), Hind (Hamdanieh Al Efri) Dheem Al Thania (Hamdanieh Al Efri) and Baghdad (Hamdanieh Al Efri) were excellent horses as was the filly Afraa out of Hiba Al Soghra; the offspring from this mare were of a high standard. In fact, this stud has many horses of interesting pedigrees.

The Shammar Tribe blended with Anazeh had been seen throughout the trip to have consistent horses. The Keheilen Nawagis also were an interesting group and the Hamdanieh Simri's showed the quality that we would expect. However, strains are just ways of identifying Arabians in the desert and we must not get ourselves into a way of thinking that one strain is better than another, although certain families within particular strains may stand out as especially.

Wonderful entertainment had been arranged for us – seven whirling dervishes and the lovely Syrian folk dancing. Sadly, we had to leave before it was all over, but there were plenty of other guests who enjoyed the show.

#### **Thursday 3 May**

We were to leave Aleppo straight after breakfast and some of us tried to find some shops open, but it was too early so we checked out of the hotel and drove the relatively short distance to Hama. En route, we saw orchards of pistachio nuts, which is a major crop in the area.

The mayor of Hama wanted to meet us so the schedule changed slightly to accommodate seeing the mayor, mosque and church before the very famous water wheels of Hama, which were used for power. These massive wheels were in good working order although I do not think they are used for power any more.

Today we were to meet the Al Hasena Tribe by kind invitation of Sheikh Abdul Elah Tamer Trad Al Melhem. Here, we were treated to a full show of horses from this tribe and again, there were some lovely animals present. The Bedouin showed their horses with their saddles and lovely bridles on.

The lines were a mixture of strains and included a lovely mare, Al Shahra, born in 1989 and unbeaten in Bedouin endurance races. She had spectacular movement and a wonderful tail carriage. A beautiful Hamdanieh Simrieh liver chestnut mare with a lovely head and enormous eye and with a very good filly foal at foot was obviously very proudly presented. We also saw a very good mare who is unregistered, but will still be bred from. Finally, we saw a really lovely chestnut colt, a Keheilan Nawagi of the Anazeh tribe. We were entertained again in very relaxed surroundings and even asked to join in the dancing until our meal was ready.

We departed for our hotel in Hama and were taken out for the final evening of the Hama Spring Festival where there was to be a horse parade. Unfortunately, it seemed the crowd were more interested in the singers than the horses, so we had a private viewing down on the ground before departing. The horses seen here were in race training and so were presented at the track.

#### **Friday 4 May**

Our last day of the tour was purely sightseeing and we went to the very famous site of Apamea. Here, we stopped briefly at the caravanere where travellers in the past stopped with their horses and stayed overnight. The old castle stood out on the mountain top and we were deposited one end of the famous old ruins of the town of old Apamea, with its magnificent colonnades, to walk along its length. This was a lovely expedition and much enjoyed.

We returned to the highway and were about to see probably one of the most famous Crusader Castles and certainly one in outstanding condition: Crac Des Chevaliers is situated on a hillside just a few miles from the road near where Syria borders the Lebanon. This stunning and

magnificent castle was a wonderful end to a memorable trip and after a superb lunch at the nearby restaurant with views of the castle, we were shown and then wandered around this ancient fortress for the remainder of the afternoon. The views from the top were stunning and the walls and position so strong, it was not a surprise to learn that it had never been captured. Our last stop was at the three St Georges Churches nearby to Crac, one of which was very old. We arrived back in Damascus in time for dinner.

### **Saturday 5 May**

The last day in Damascus was for final-minute shopping before leaving for the airport. Some people had enough time to visit the stud of Basil Jadaan before flying out and as we had already seen some of his lovely horses on the tour, this was a great way to end the trip.

I cannot finish this article without a very big thank you to our Syrian hosts and in particular, to Basil Jadaan for looking after us all; by the end of the trip, he was tired, but fired up by the amazing experience we had had. He coped with all different nationalities and temperaments and made us all so welcome, always smiling and dealing with the constant changes that had to be made to schedules due to timings etc. Thank you Basil and all your helpers and to all of those who made this trip so special. I hope I have mentioned them all, but if I haven't, I apologise. Memories of this WAHO Conference will remain with us for always. No one should try and beat this. Every country has something special to offer, but for breeders of Arabian horses, to go to the place where most of the original imports came from, Syria, and see the horses still being bred in the desert was just a dream come true for me and we wish the Syrian Arab Horse Society much success in its continuing breeding programme.

Now is the time to read Lady Anne Blunt's *Journals and Correspondence*. Having been to the country makes her journeys in the desert become even more alive and I recommend this book to anyone who has been to Syria and even if you have not, the descriptions of the country are excellent and, as she was able to speak Arabic, her encounters with all the tribes are fascinating. Thank you Syria.

**To order the unofficial DVD of the WAHO Conference in Syria, including the post-conference tours, visit [www.ivymediaproductions.com](http://www.ivymediaproductions.com) or call +44 1508 530060.**