

Reflections on Al Ain

By Mary Ellen Rooney

Very often life's best moments occur while we're pursuing something else. This happened to me when I traveled to Abu Dhabi for the International Falconry Festival held in Al Ain. What I envisioned would be a peak life experience became fraught and blessed by curious circumstances.

The journey to Al Ain commenced in Berkshire, England two years earlier when I attended the Second International Falconry Festival however, my introduction to falconry began while I worked for the UN in Kyrgyzstan (teaching business and technical English to managers of utility companies). In England, amid a world congregation of falconers, I learned about the UNESCO application to have falconry declared an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

This caught my interest. If approved it would be a great story that I was uniquely suited to write about.

I soon followed the complex UNESCO application process and set about building international contacts. Eventually, I read the entire inscription and was ecstatic when the largest application in UNESCO history was accepted in Nairobi in the fall of 2011.

It was a wonderful story on so many levels. In this era of globalization, many forms of intangible cultural heritage are in danger of extinction due to cultural standardization, armed conflict, tourism, industrialization, rural exodus, migration and environmental deterioration. The UNESCO designation would make a huge difference, particularly with our environment dilemmas.

The next challenge was to get to the Festival in Abu Dhabi. I knew there were to be international sponsorships available for falconers but information on how to apply was vague. Since I was new to falconry, about six years, I could not give talks on subjects requiring deep knowledge in the field. My strength initially to be included would be to write about the festival

I quickly informed NAFA of my interest to attend and asked to be kept in mind should anything develop including charter flights. I was told I was first in line.

Since placing a piece of journalism in a publication can't wait until the last minute, I began the work hoping that eventually the two things would come together.

My first effort was to contact Pottinger Associates, Ltd, a British public relations firm based in the UAE. They had run the superb falconry festival in Berkshire, England. When I was there, they were impressed with my credentials and parted the seas to assist. They were experts in arranging for interviews and VIP access.

I just assumed the same working arrangement would continue for the Al Ain Festival, a most prestigious celebration---not only for UNESCO but also for Al Ain since it had been declared a World Heritage site recently. There were mutterings that J. Walter Thompson would be handling matters from offices in the UAE. I began to explore my contacts with them but eventually learned the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage would arrange everything concerning press and media.

I assumed what I offered in public relations circles was worth a great deal of money, thus entertaining grand illusions of what lay before me, if I just kept working and pursuing the right presentations.

There were indeed challenges. Dr. Nick Fox's International Falconry Festival Office in Wales was in charge of overall details of the festival itself but the Emirates' contacts they produced didn't respond to my queries. Believe me, I tried, being dogged if needed. It's a prerequisite to get a falconry license. Everyone knows that!

A timely placement in Etihad Airlines Inflight magazine with its impressive readership of 500,000 would be extremely effective. It was work though. The editor in Dubai turned me down three times, because they hadn't yet heard of the forthcoming event and had a regular stable of writers in the region. I have been in this situation before. Journalists often have a natural-born sense of timing that gives them a necessary jump on preparing a story before it breaks with the general public. That's why news is news. Yet at the same time, being ahead of schedule has its own communication issues.

Finally the editor from Dubai agreed to take the piece. I convinced her it was important, I was uniquely qualified and did not ask to become part of the regular group of local writers. Next, I prepared another story on Arab Falconry that was to appear in the NAFA Journal to coincide with the event. I was a busy bee, filled with enthusiasm of a wonderful time on the Trucial Coast. I had read Wilfred Thesiger "Arabian Sands," became a great fan of Sheikh Zayed (the late founder of the UAE) and even learned some Arabic. As it turned out, few of those dreams materialized.

There was no Pottinger PR firm available who knew how things were done with the press. The

NAFA folks, who all knew each other, had their own private agendas and communication was scarce. Still, I wrote my stories and placed them on time. However, all I received from the Festival Office in Wales was an offered spot in a tent at the desert camp—with strangers in it. So much for big dreams!

Despite the snub, I was too committed to cancel the trip. I paid for my own flight on Etihad Air. The cost was offset some by the fee I would receive for the article but it looked as though the trip was on me. Life may not always be fair but there is often balance. Some managers at Etihad were so impressed I'd gotten space in their own very prestigious Business and First Class Journal that they decided to VIP me to Abu Dhabi. I flew business class as a VIP and enjoyed every minute of it.

I may not have been invited to the Gala Dinner, nor did I participate in the Parade of Nations because I wasn't wearing a pink wristband declaring sponsorship, but it was a fabulous time.

No, I didn't accept the tent in the desert with other people in it. A very important person needs to stay in a very good hotel, I told myself, so I reserved a lovely room at the Danat Hotel where the sponsored NAFA people were also staying. I attended many fascinating lectures, particularly those concerned with the UNESCO inscription. By now, I had acquired new friends around that project. I took excellent bus excursions to the great Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi and the largest Falcon Hospital in the world. My bus companions were all fun and fascinating as is often the case in a self-selected group. I was invited to visit falconers in Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Germany, Belgium and England. I'm still in touch with some of those people but it's a little far to travel to accept falconry flying invitations that could advance my knowledge. I enjoyed some hilarious laughter however with those who seemed like kin.

I did go to the desert camp but not to stay. I was treated royally in the festival pressroom once they saw what I had done for the event. I was even given help beyond the call of duty by a lovely young woman at the registration desk at the Rotana when I lost my only Chanel lipstick. A word of advice to any woman travelling in the Emirates: bring an extra lipstick. They are not easily replaced. The search for another was a real journey culminating in three women, including the desk attendant who actually left her post to help ultimately select the right color. It's always the people you meet, really.

More adventures included a trip to the Al Ain Zoo where I photographed the famous white tiger. As part of my VIP designation Etihad arranged a car to take me to the airport. And, since I was flying Business,

I managed to have a massage and a pedicure at the airport before heading home. This lady falconer doesn't mess around with her talons.

When boarding the plane, I was given the best seat and fussed over by the flight attendants. So much so that a Texas oilman flying home from Oman came to my seat and said, "Hey, who are you anyway?"

I told him about my article in the existing in-flight magazine. He was enthralled, asked me to autograph his copy, and had the stewardess to take our picture together. He then told other passengers about the article adding that they were sharing space on the plane with a very famous writer from New York.

At JFK, an Etihad employee was on the bus that met the plane on the tarmac. He held a small black board with my name on it. Of course, I followed. It was five in the afternoon and the terminal was jammed.

Some days later, I received an email from the oilman from Texas that said: "Honey, the last I saw of you was a little light from the heel of your shoe when you were being escorted through the diplomatic exit while the rest of us were slogging our way through customs."

Attached here is the picture taken by the stewardess, of the famous writer from New York with my new friend from Texas and Oman. It is the only photo I have of myself from the event. I may not be wearing a pink wristband but I sure had fun.

May all your journeys through life be filled with rainbows and ruby dust.



Ms. Rooney's article "Full Flight" begins on page 46 and is reprinted with her kind permission.

أبوظبي
المهرجان الدولي للصيد بالصقور

الطيران الحر

في أكبر تجمع في تاريخ الصيد بالصقور، تحل كوكبة من خيرة الصقارين بالعالم بمدينة العين للمشاركة في المهرجان الاستثنائي الدولي الثالث للصيد بالصقور.

بينما كنا في مهمة للأمم المتحدة في

قيرغيزستان بالقرب من جبال تيان شان، والتي استحوذت بجدارة لقب "جبال السماء"، كانت تلك هي المرة الأولى التي أرى فيها مثل ذلك الشخص ممتطياً سهوة جواده، ومعتماً القبة التقليدية لرعاة الماشية الرحل بلونها الأسود والأبيض، وهو راكب على سرج خشبي، مغطى ببطانية مصنوعة من الشعر القيرغيزي الملون؛ حيث كان ينزل ببطء من سفوح الجبال وفي معصمه يجثم صقر رائع. أصابني الدهول يومها وأنا أشاهد الرجل يطلق ذلك الطائر المفترس الضخم في الفضاء، وأدركت حينها بأني سأفعل الشيء نفسه يوماً ما.

تأثر إحساسي الداخلي بالمهرجان الدولي الثالث للصيد بالصقور، والذي سيقام بمدينة العين في الفترة من ١٥ وحتى ١٧ ديسمبر، بذكريات حية من رحلتي الطويلة في ذلك اليوم المحتوم، والذي كان سبباً في جعلني صقاراً مرخصاً ومحترفاً، لكنني أدركت أن مدة الثلاثة أيام ليست كافية حتى للبدء في اكتساب المعرفة التي يتمتع بها الكثير من أولئك الذين سيصلون إلى مدينة العين خلال هذا الشهر للمشاركة بهذه المناسبة الخاصة، إذ سيجتمع مجموعة من أفضل الصقارين في العالم من ثمانين بلداً في معقل التراث الإماراتي، مشكلين بذلك أكبر تظاهرة للصقارين منذ ولادة رياضة الصيد بالصقور، والتي تمثل اتحاداً فوق العادة بين الإنسان والطيور الجارحة، ويضطر عدد كبير من الحضور إلى قطع

مواسم الصيد الخاصة بهم من أجل الحضور إلى هنا لتبادل الخبرات. انطلق المهرجان الدولي للصيد بالصقور في إنجلترا قبل حوالي خمس سنوات، وأقيم أول مهرجانين في عامي ٢٠٠٧ و ٢٠٠٩ بالقرب من مدينة ريدينغ بإنجلترا. ومنذ ذلك الحين، انتشرت هذه اللقاءات، والتي حققت نجاحاً هائلاً، لتصبح تجمعات عالمية ضخمة، وحرصت شخصياً على حضور مهرجان عام ٢٠٠٩ عندما علمت بمشاركة صقارين من قيرغيزستان.

في نوفمبر ٢٠١٠، أضافت منظمة اليونسكو الصقارة إلى قائمة التراث الثقافي غير المادي، وفي يوليو من هذا العام، تم اختيار مدينة العين كمقر للمهرجان، لتصبح بذلك أول موقع تراثي عالمي في إمارة أبوظبي. وقد ظلت دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة مساهماً رئيساً في المهرجان الدولي للصيد بالصقور، وتدعم حضور الصقارين من أماكن نائية، فضلاً عن تبنيتها للعملية المعقدة للتجارب مع اشتراطات اليونسكو. وقد تقدمت لليونسكو ١٢ دولة للمشاركة في هذا المهرجان؛ ليسجلوا بذلك العدد الأكبر للدول المشاركة في تاريخه، الأمر الذي يتطلب تعاوناً كبيراً وتنسيقاً بين البلدان المختلفة.

وقد درست دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة عدة نماذج للإدارة الفعالة



يجتمع مجموعة من أفضل الصقارين في العالم من ثمانين بلداً بمدينة العين في أكبر تظاهرة للصقارين منذ ولادة رياضة الصيد بالصقور

للحياة البرية في المنطقة، كما أن الإماراتيين بطبعهم حريصون على المحافظة على بيئة الصيد بالصقور، وهناك حاجة ماسة للاعتراف بهذا العنصر التراثي، وضمان استمرارية هذه الرياضة حتى تصبح مستدامة. ويكمن العنصر الرئيسي لإبقاء هذا الإرث حياً في الحفاظ على الأراضي المفتوحة. وقد أخذت التصورات والرؤى المضمنة في برامج دولة الإمارات للحفاظ على البيئة تتبلور على يد المغفور له الشيخ زايد، مؤسس دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة، الذي لم يكن هناك شيء أحب إلى نفسه من قضاء بعض الوقت في الصحراء مع الإبل، والخيول، والصقور، والسلوقي. وقد وضع الشيخ زايد مبدأ الاستدامة على رأس جدول أعماله منذ البداية بقوله: "ليس من المهم ما تصطاد، بل ما تتركه وراءك".

لا شك أن ذكرياتي الغنية من قيرغيزستان ستتعزيز بعدد لا

ديسمبر ٢٠١٢

FULL FLIGHT

In the largest ever gathering in the history of falconry, the world's finest falconers are descending upon Al Ain for the extraordinary International Festival of Falconry

IT WAS WHILE ON A U.N. MISSION IN KYRGYZSTAN NEAR the Tien Shan Mountains – “Mountains of Heaven” – that I caught sight of a figure on horseback. Wearing a traditional nomad herder's black and white hat, the man was sitting on a wooden saddle blanketed with colourful Kyrgyz felt. He was descending slowly from the foothills with an eagle perched majestically on his arm. I watched, transfixed, as he released the huge raptor to the skies. I knew in that moment that I would do the same one day.

My anticipation for the Third International Festival of Falconry, which will be held in Al Ain from 15 – 17 December, is coloured with vivid memories of that fateful day, which sparked my own long journey to become a professional licensed falconer.

Yet three days isn't enough time to even begin to acquire the knowledge of many of those who will arrive in Al Ain this month for this special gathering. Several thousand of the world's finest falconers from eighty countries will descend upon the UAE's heritage heartland, representing the largest gathering of falconers since the birth of falconry – that extraordinary union of humans and wild birds of prey. Many attendees have cut short their beloved hunting seasons in order to come and share their expertise.

The International Festival of Falconry was born in England around five years ago, and the first two festivals were held in 2007 and 2009 near Reading. Since then, these enormously successful gatherings have mushroomed into huge global convocations. I attended the 2009 Festival when I learned that the falconers from Kyrgyzstan would be coming.

In November 2010, UNESCO added falconry to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and this July declared the festival locale of Al Ain to be Abu Dhabi's first World Heritage site. The UAE has been a major contributor to the International Festival of Falconry, supporting the attendance of falconers from remote places, as well as fostering the complicated process of pursuing the UNESCO inscription. The twelve-nation submission was the largest in UNESCO history and involved tremendous cooperation among diverse countries.

The UAE considered several models for effective wildlife management in the region. The Emiratis are avid falconer-conservationists and there is a growing urgency



“IT'S NOT WHAT YOU CATCH THAT'S IMPORTANT, IT IS WHAT YOU LEAVE BEHIND.”

both to acknowledge the tradition and to ensure that the sport continues to be sustainable. The key to keeping the practice alive is the preservation of open land. The visionary perspectives embedded in UAE environmental and conservation programmes began with HH Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the late founder of the UAE, who loved nothing more than to spend time out in the desert with camels, falcons, horses and salukis (desert dogs indigenous to the region). Setting sustainability on the agenda right from the start, Sheikh Zayed once stated: “It's not what you catch that is important, it is what you leave behind.”

My rich memories from Kyrgyzstan will be enhanced by the myriad views on display at the festival's daily ▶



يحصى من المناظر والمشاهد التي سيتم استعراضها من خلال العروض اليومية في ساحة المهرجان. وقد تضمنت المهرجانات السابقة فعاليات مثل الصيد بالصقور في سهول آسيا، ورياضة الصيد بالصقور الملكية اليابانية، ورياضة الصيد بالصقور بأمريكا الجنوبية وأسبانيا، وعروض السلوقي الإماراتية، والرماية، وصيد الطرائد، وتبشر عروض هذا العام بإثراء هذا الإرث الغني. كما تعمل القيم الأخلاقية للمهرجان بالإضافة إلى مرامي ومقاصد اليونسكو على صون هذا العنصر الهام من عناصر الثقافة الوطنية، وضمان نقله إلى أجيال المستقبل. وسيخصص اليوم الأول من المهرجان للأطفال والفرق المدرسية. سيشعر الطلاب والمدرسون على وجه الخصوص بفائدة تلك الزيارات أكثر من غيرهم نظراً لربط المناهج الدراسية بمواد تتناول الاستدامة والصيد بالصقور.

في أواخر نوفمبر، وصلت فرق من خبراء الصيد بالصقور إلى مدينة العين لإعداد الطيور المطلوبة للصقارين الزائرين لعرضها كجزء من تراثهم الثقافي. وتعمل إحدى الفرق المتخصصة بالصقور مع الطيور في حديقة الحيوان بمدينة العين بحيث يتمكن الصقارة الضيوف من التعامل معها، ما يمثل تحدياً كبيراً للفريق الدولي. فالتعامل مع الطيور التي تعيش في الأسر في حديقة الحيوانات يختلف تماماً عن تدريب الطيور البرية اليافعة أثناء هجرتها الأولى. سيتم خلال الأيام الأربعة السابقة للمهرجان إنشاء مخيم صحراوي خاص خارج مدينة العين وذلك بغرض توفير مساحة للتطبيق العملي والتدريب على الطيور التي ستستخدم في ساحة الحدث.



سوى القليل جداً فيما يتعلق بالطرق المستخدمة في الصيد والتدريب والمطاردة بالطيور البرية الجارحة؛ إذ لم تكن هناك حاجة لتغيير المفاهيم الأساسية لأنها كانت سليمة منذ البداية.

يخلق طائر الصقار دائماً في مكان ما في العالم. ففي الوقت الذي يسكن فيه الصقار الكوري طائرته ليلاً، يستعد الصقار الفرنسي للتخليق بطائرته في ذلك اليوم. ولأن رياضة الصيد بالصقور تنتشر ضمن ثقافات شتى، وفي تضاريس متنوعة، فقد أفرزت مجموعة رائعة من الطقوس المتباينة، وظهرت لغة خاصة بالصقارة وجدت تعابيرها الفنية طريقها إلى الأدب، والشعر، والأمثال، والحكم، والأغاني، والنحت والرسم. وسيشهد مهرجان هذا العام معرضاً للفنون، والتصوير، والموسيقى، والرقص، مما له صلة بالتراث العالمي لرياضة الصيد بالصقور. كما سيتم عرض المصنوعات اليدوية التقليدية مثل "الدرس" اليدوي (الشريط الجلدي الرقيق الذي يستخدم لربط الباز أو الصقر)، والبرقع، والمقود، والجرس، والقفاذات القوية التي يتوجب على الصقار ارتداؤها عند التعامل مع الطيور.

سيتم تقديم هذا الكم الغزير من المعارضات على خلفية مهرجان مدينة العين، المدينة التي يعتبرها الكثيرون العاصمة الثقافية لدولة الإمارات، والمكان المثالي للمهرجان. وبوحداتها السبع، تعرف المدينة باسم "غاردن سيتي الخليج"، وظلت هذه المدينة مأهولة باستمرار منذ أواخر العصر الحجري.

لا شك أن الصيد بالصقور قد قدم لي خبرة تعليمية متنوعة ومثيرة للفضول. فهذه الرياضة التي اكتشفناها أصلاً على طريق الحرير تقودني الآن إلى الطريق التجاري القديم الذي امتد من بلاد ما بين النهرين قبل أكثر من 4 آلاف سنة، لذلك أفكر ملياً فيما سيهيج النفس في الأيام المقبلة لأنني أعرف أنه عندما يتم إطلاق الصقر، ويأخذ في التحليق، سيكشف لنا سحر الطبيعة، وهو ما سيكون بالتأكيد في مدينة العين.

نص ماري ايلين روني

وستتاح الفرصة للصقارين من ثقافات أخرى للحضور إلى ذات المكان كي يتعرفوا على بعضهم البعض، ويتجادوا أطراف الحديث في حفلات السمر، بل والتحضير لرحلات صيد مستقبلية. وفي الوقت نفسه، سيتخلل هذا الحدث، والذي سيستمر لمدة ثلاثة أيام، انعقاد مؤتمر في فندق روتانا العين، يستقطب أشهر المتحدثين من جميع أنحاء العالم لتنظيم ورش عمل حول الرعاية البيطرية، وتراث الصيد بالصقور، والحفاظ على الطيور الجارحة، وأنواع الطرائد، وإدارة مناطق الصيد، وخطط عمل اليونسكو. سيختتم كل يوم بموكب كبير للدول المشاركة، أصبح تقليداً راسخاً في المهرجان، فالانضمام لجموع المشاركين أقل ما فيه المشاركة الوجدانية ورفع مستوى الوعي؛ فهي تجربة أشبه بالحفلات الأولمبية عندما يدخل الرياضيون إلى الملعب دفعة واحدة، غير أن طابور الأمم بحيويته وتنوعه الكبير يختلف عن طابور الألعاب الأولمبية لأن المشاركين هنا لا يتنافسون ضد بعضهم، بل تربطهم العلاقة القديمة بين الإنسان، والطيور البرية الجارحة، والطبيعة. وعلى الرغم من التقدم التقني الذي تحقق في هذه الرياضة مثل التياس عن بعد، إلا أنه، وعلى مدى آلاف السنين، لم يتغير

ABU DHABI
INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF FALCONRY

arena demonstrations. Events held at previous festivals have included falconry of the Steppes of Asia, Royal Japanese falconry, South American and Spanish falconry, UAE saluki demonstrations, archery and mounted game hunting. This year's demonstrations promise to build upon this rich legacy. The ethos of the festival and the spirit of UNESCO's intention combine to safeguard this important part of national culture and ensure that it is passed on to future generations. Thus, the first day of the festival will be dedicated to children and school parties. Students and teachers will be able to appreciate their visits all the more because school curricula have been linked to material about sustainability and falconry.

In late November, teams of falconry experts arrived in Al Ain to prepare the required birds for visiting falconers to display as part of their cultural heritage. One such team of eagle specialists is working with the birds at the excellent Al Ain Zoo so that guest falconers can handle them; quite a challenge for the international team. Handling a captive bird that has lived in a zoo is very different from training a young bird caught in the wild during its first migration.

During the four days preceding the festival, a private desert camp will be set up outside Al Ain to provide space



to train and practice with birds being used for the arena events. It is here, too, that falconers from other cultures can come to know one another, talk around campfires and arrange hunting trips for the future. Meanwhile, at a conference being held at the Al Ain Rotana hotel during the event, famous speakers will present workshops on veterinary care, falconry heritage, conservation of birds of prey and quarry species, managed hunting areas, UNESCO action plans, and many other topics.

Each day will be brought to a fitting finale with the Grand Parade of Nations. The moving parade has become a veritable festival tradition and is an emotional and enlightening experience for all involved. Yet the colourful and richly diverse Parade of Nations is unlike, say, the Olympics parade because the participants are not competing with one another. Rather, they are linked by an ancient relationship between man, wild raptor and nature. Despite advances in technology such as telemetry,

over the millennia little has changed in the ways used to capture, train and hunt with a wild bird of prey. There's been no need to alter the basic precepts; they have been right from the start.

A falconer's bird is always flying somewhere in the world. As a Korean falconer settles his bird for the night, a French falconer prepares her bird for the day's flight. Since falconry is practiced by so many cultures and in varied terrains, a fascinating range of different rituals has developed. A special language has evolved and found artistic expression in literature, poetry, proverbs, idioms, songs, sculpture and painting.

This year's festival will exhibit art, photography, music and dance that relates to the global heritage of falconry. Traditional handicrafts, such as handmade *jesses* (the thin leather straps used to tether a hawk or falcon), hoods, leashes, bells and the sturdy gloves that falconers need to wear when handling the birds will also be on display.

This rich bounty will be offered against the backdrop of Al Ain, which is considered the UAE's cultural capital, and is the perfect setting for the festival. With seven oases, the city is known as the Garden City of the Gulf and has been inhabited continuously since the late Stone Age.

Falconry has certainly given me an intriguing and diverse education. The sport I had originally discovered on the Silk Road now leads me to the ancient trade route that ran from Mesopotamia over 4,000 years ago. I mull over the delights ahead. For I know that when a falcon is released and takes flight, nature's magic is revealed. So it will be in Al Ain. 🌟

WORDS MARY ELLEN ROONEY. Falcons have taken Mary Ellen all over the world. Their in-flight entertainment is great.