



# MOROCCO

## A COUNTRY OF HORSES, and a Paradise Full of Opposites

Text and Photos

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**A**lmost everybody knows Morocco, but hardly anybody makes the connection to the breeding of Arabian horses. This is something that ought to change, as Morocco has always been a country of horses and, after Islam (in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AC), it became a country not just of the horses of the Berber people, but also of Arabian horses. Nowadays this continues and there is a substantial increase, with breeders and riders, shows and sports events – all of which are promoted by the Royal House. This continues the tradition of both passion and know-how that the rural population has had since ancient times. What is more, for the last ten years the new young elites among the Moroccan population have re-discovered this love for horses. They attempt to combine ancient traditions with modern technologies in horse breeding.



A deep blue ocean topped with whitecaps; the sand deserts of the Sahara; ancient royal towns and cities such as mystical Marrakech with the magicians and snake charmers; deeply religious Fès, its mosques, its Medina, a labyrinth to strangers. Snow on the 4000 meter mountains of the Atlas mountain range; the clay castles that the Berber people built; modern cities such as Rabat and Casablanca; palaces out of fairy tales, hidden in palm groves and wild gardens; cool inner courts with water basins and with their doors and windows hand-carved from cedar wood; but also a hot *tajine* sitting on the table, the national dish from the oven, brimming with couscous, lamb or poultry meat, almonds, and fruit.

Anybody who ever came to Morocco is not likely to forget the wonders and magic of this country for a long time. However, this country has to be approached on many different levels. This oriental landscape with its ancient history of man spanning more than 5000 years is located on the Western coast of Africa and has always succeeded in fascinating people with its historic heritage, the cultures of so many people: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Moors... There is the culture, there is the countryside and nature and there are, in particular, the people of this country, so ever ready to be host to you, and so highly tolerant of strangers' ways. It was travelers, adventurers, conquerors from all over the world, as well as tourists, hippies, writers, film producers, artists, horse breeders and many others, who love to accept the challenge to discover Morocco and learn to love this country.

For many connoisseurs, Morocco is presently the most thrilling country in the Muslim world. When the young king Mohamed VI mounted the throne in 1999, the „Arabian spring“ started for the population, owing to the spectacular reforms this king introduced. The indigenes of Morocco, the Berber tribes, were finally legally acknowledged as a demographic group enjoying equal rights according to the new constitution, after having lost their rights in the course of history.

When the Arabs brought Islam to Morocco by Jihad at about 700 AC, they settled mostly in the Northern part of the country. Marrakech and the South were the country of the Berber tribes. There were also a number of Moors and muslimic Andalusians who had been driven out of Spain during the early Middle Ages and who fled to Morocco with their Arabian-Andalusian horses, settling there for good. After all, Morocco was an interesting country in a geopolitically important location, so it attracted the attentions and desires of different colonial states. In the middle

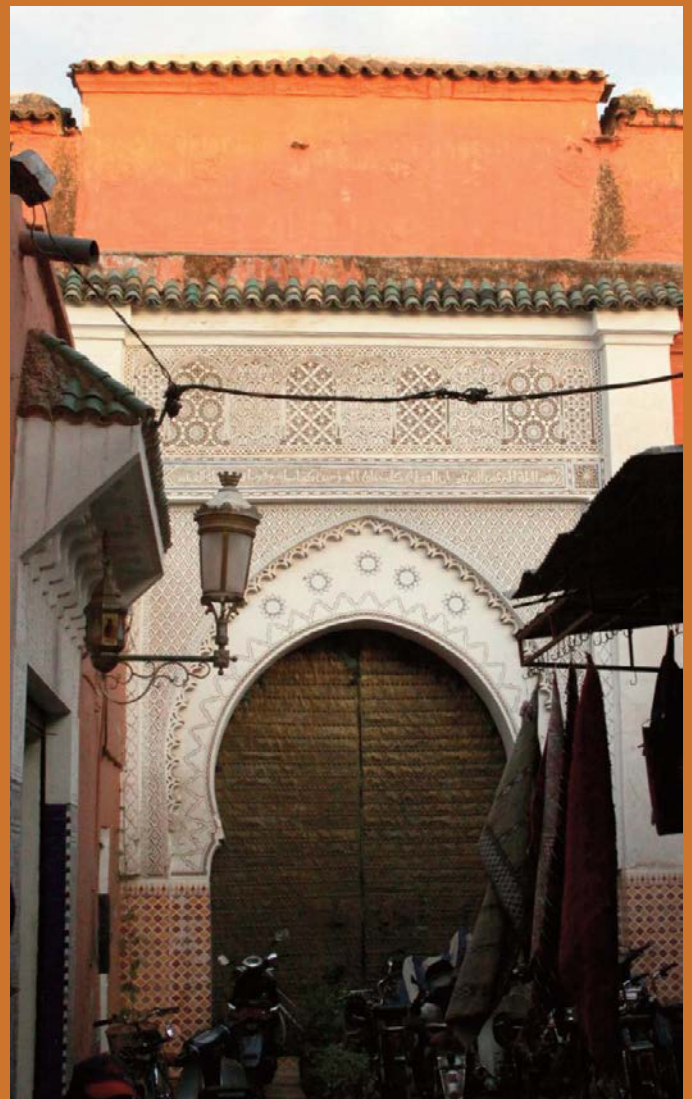






ages, these were the Spanish and Portuguese, and later on, the French and the English. All of them would, in the course of time, meddle with the historically grown power structures of the country, find allies, destroy adversaries, establish new hierarchies. However, they would not only build castles, cities, and defensive structures, but their cavalries left horses in the country.

After all, Morocco has always been a country of horses. The climatic conditions, apart from the life-defeating sand deserts of the Sahara in the South of the country, are quite ideal for keeping horses. In many parts of the country, it is possible to feed horses outdoors all year round by keeping them in herds, together with sheep and other grazing animals. Moroccan transport depended on the backs of horses for many centuries. Every Moroccan person from the country side would know and still knows how to handle horses. The berbers had horse breeding of their own, with their horses being strongly built and with a less noble head, but







## Al Jadida





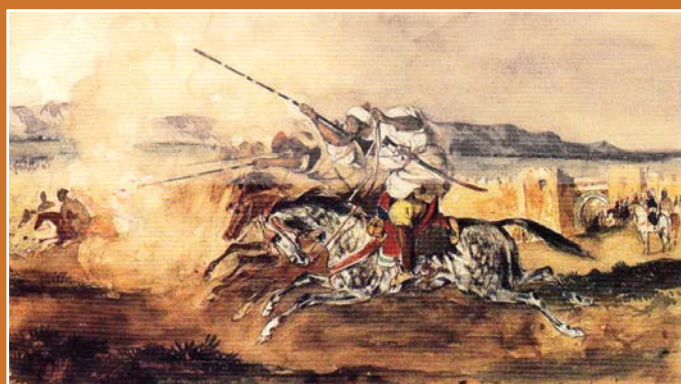


with good legs and enormous stamina and speed. After the Arabs had settled in the country, mixed breeds started to emerge. Up to today, Barb horses display a high percentage of Arabian horse blood in their genetic makeup.

Around the beginning of the 19th century, France started to enforce her colonial interests in Africa, occupying large parts of the North. In 1830, Algeria was conquered and occupied by France. The Moroccans offered resistance, of course, but step by step the Europeans established their economical interests and dominated Africa's North on a whole number of levels. Language, culture, French cuisine – there were numerous places where the different cultures met and developed together in some sort of harmony. From the beginning of the 19th century on, Morocco became the chosen destination of artists, painters and authors in number. The fascination of Marrakech would impress the European adventurers as a kind of „light“ version of the Orient, as the hospitable Barbs were open-minded and interested in the peaceful strangers – a tradition that is noticeably present with all population groups of this country today.

Riders of Arabian and berber horses were a dominating factor in the streets at that time, even in the cities and towns. It was the *Fantasia* in particular that would fascinate the visitors from the North: an unruly mounted game accompanied by singing and good food. Riders in their traditional tribal clothing would simulate a mounted attack, executing a „sliding stop“ by command and shooting their rifles into the air. In the 16th century, the Flemish painter *Vermeyen* (1500-1559) drew a *Fantasia* ridden in Morocco. Initiated by Napoleon's campaign in Egypt (1798), the Arabian horses of the Orient became models not only of power and stamina, but also of beauty for the Europeans. Pictures of them were much in demand in Europe. However, many of the „orientalists“ among the painters would only make it as far as Morocco when searching for models of Arabian horses to paint – this country was comparatively easy to reach and appeared to be less dangerous than some others. For the French painter *Eugène Delacroix*, 1832 was the year when he saw his first mounted festival in Morocco. The famous watercolor he painted from that after coming back to





Eugene Delacroix  
*Fantasia ou Jeu de la poudre*  
1832

Eugene Delacroix  
*Moroccan Saddling his Horse*  
1855



France has a place in the Louvre in Paris today. He was one of the most impressive painters of his time, and many of his works depicting Arabian horses and riders originated during his travels through Morocco, which is easily recognized from the traditional Moroccan stirrups and saddles shown – even if some of his students would later use these pictures as prototypes for paintings of historic events with any Arabian horses, transferring the Moroccan tack to Bedouins in Arabia or to Mamelukes in Egypt.

The experiences that Emperor Napoleon had won with Arabian horses during his campaign in Egypt had long-term positive effects for Morocco, too. When he came back to France, he decided to go on breeding these Arabian horses for his army, keeping them pure – not to provide the painters in Paris with authentic models for their work, but because of their power, their stamina and their will to perform. When the French conquered the North of Africa, their cavalries would again introduce Arabian purebreds into Morocco. However, already there in Morocco was a well-structured breeding concept in existence and centered in the Royal courts. There was the earlier influence from Arabian horses from southern Spain, mostly crossbreds with the Limousin breed, as well as from English Thoroughbreds that had been introduced by the British during colonial times, when they had brought them to the racing tracks of Tangier. All of these influences played an important role in the country in addition to the ancient Berber horse breed, but with the purebred Arabians, there was

their elegance, their beauty, their refined and noble heads with the big nostrils and the round black eyes, and their proud tail carriage, all of which made them particularly enchanting to the nobles and kings, who would establish separate breeding concepts with closed studbooks. Alongside the Berber horses, Arab-Berbers evolved, combining the power and speed of the Berber horses with the elegance and willingness to perform of the Arabians, but also with their attachment to man. That way, Morocco developed a successful sports horses for show jumping. In 1927, the national stud of Morocco stabled 130 purebred Arabians for breeding, in addition to 50 Berbers and 67 Arab-Berbers. The passion that the Moroccans have for their horses kept on, unbroken. During the early 1970ies, almost 500,000 horses were registered, with most of them working in agriculture. After that, however, there were several long draughts and transport was modernized, so the number of horses of different breeds went down to 180,000. The national stud, which is under the immediate direction of the king, decided to develop a breeding strategy that could afford to put quality first. This resulted in pure-bred breeding stock being promoted and supported. Competitions were organized, of different kinds, on different levels and in all parts of the country, all of them intended to make sure that positive selection would take place. The Royal National Stud, the place that took the responsibility for improving the breeds, is present in five regional studs located in Bouznika, El Jadida, Marrakech, Meknès and Oujda,



respectively. They are the most important players in the quest for improving and organizing the breeding work in the country. They write out identification papers, control the pedigrees, and keep the studbooks of the different breeds. In addition, they provide home-bred stallions of the breeds that are being supported, making them available to the regional breeders.

The royal stud in Bouznika, the most significant of the five national studs, uses the buildings of an ancient caravanserai and is home to the purebred Arabians kept by king Mohammed VI and his wife, princess Lalla Salma. Both of them are passionate horse breeders, just as their ancestors have been. They saw to the foundation of SOREC (*Société Royale d'Encouragement du Cheval*), an organization that promotes horse breeding, and not only by financial means. Their main aim is to support Arabians and Thoroughbreds headed for the racetrack, but in cooperation with ARMEC-

PSA (*Association Royale Marocaine des éleveurs des chevaux pur sang*), they also organize shows according to ECAHO rules: the regional championships in Meknes, Al Jadida and Bouznika, the Nationals in Bouznika, and the international A show in Al Jadida in October each year. (<http://salon-ducheval.ma/>). The father of today's king, who was Hassan II, was a passionate breeder who stabled, in Bouznika, straight Egyptian Arabians for breeding purposes. Even if the Straight Egyptians are registered in the studbook of the purebred Arabian breed and don't have some special position as to their performance in sports or with Arabian shows, still they are reputed to be closest to the original Arabian breed, the breed that the Arabian and Egyptian pashas and kings kept. This is why many of the world's breeders combine the maintenance breeding they do for the original Arabians, with the passion and enthusiastic breeding work they do with the straight Egyptians. In Mo-



## Marrakesh





rocco, there was hardly any breeding of straight Egyptian Arabians to be found during the last century, apart from king Hassan II.

Fanaticism as to pedigrees seemed to be less present there than in some other places, and that original love of Arabian horses apparently did not leave much room for unnecessary differentiation. With increasing influence from breeders' media and social networks on the internet, however, some Moroccan breeders have become interested in the straight Egyptian Arabians by now. Fans in Qatar and Kuwait, and also in Egypt, make passionate models for this sub-group of purebred Arabian horse breeding, even if quite a few of them know the pedigrees of the horses better than they know the actual breed. Nevertheless there are many breeders in Morocco who are on the lookout for information and experience as to breeding strategies, new markets, standards of quality, and the role that show horses play in breeding today.

In this context, the Laghzal Family and some interested friends of Moroccan breeders' invited, in May 2014, the president of WAHO (*World Arabian Horse Organization*), Dr. Hans Nagel from Germany, to El Jadida. There were almost 60 interested breeders from all over the country taking part in the conference in this beautiful city on the Atlantic Ocean that has made a great name for itself in recent years by hosting successful shows for Arabian horses.

There was a good deal of interest in discussing the points that make for successful Arabian horse breeding. In his slide presentation, Nagel explained about different strategies in Arabian breeding, starting with Bedouin breeding as done on the Arabian peninsula and covering the state studs of Europe as well as private studs that had a strategic approach to breeding and years of experience under their belts. Using examples, terms such as in-breeding, line-bree-





## Breeders Conference in Al Jadida



ding and cross-breeding were explained. Also genetics were a big topic in the context of improving characteristic traits in phenotype as well as in genotype, and of taking a strategically planned path towards long-term success in show

and riding horse breeding. The event concluded with an animated discussion and presentation of the new breeders' handbook written by Dr. Nagel: *The Arabian Horse, Nature's Creation and the Art of Breeding* ([www.nawalmedia.org](http://www.nawalmedia.org)).



As a supplement to the conference, three impressive studs were visited. To the north of Al Jadida on the Atlantic coast, the town of Azemour is located. There, bordering the sea and surrounded of a vast palm grove, **Issan Stud** has made its home. It covers 56 hectares of land there. The premises have been built with the natural requirements of horses in mind: big paddocks, run-in sheds for all the horses including the stallions, all of them placed around the main stables. There are between 40 and 50 horses living on the well-kept grounds, most of them straight Egyptian Arabians. There is a fine selection of sires with the best pedigrees one can think of. The horses that impressed me in particular were *Mahboub* (*Ansata Safeer x Mahabbah by Madkour I*), *Rayyan Al Naif* (*Ashhal al Rayyan x Ansata Aya Nadira by Jamil*), *Imperial Bisaam* (*Imperial Bareez x Imperial Safilla by Ibn Safinaz*) and his son *Shahada Adib*, out of the Spanish mare *Argolida des Pins*. Presented in top condition, and displaying really beautiful offspring, there was also the brown stallion *Rafahag* (*Authentic Khazim x Maresha Al Kidir by Al Kidir*), an import from Italy.

The foundation mares, presenting their new crops of foals, were also interesting and impressive for all the audience.

There were, in particular, the mares *STM Aziza*, who is a daughter of *Classic Rashman*; the great mover *Angelina KA* by *Marquis I*, who has some show successes under her belt already; there was *Serene Farah* by *Ibn Nejdy*, whose last present to the stud was a beautiful filly by *Ansata Nile Echo*; but there were also *Fay Halima* by *Or Ibn Halima* and *Lagiada Yaminah* by *TB Yasir* who presented themselves in excellent type and condition.

Mostapha Benlafkih is the man who owns Issan Stud. He loves his horses. His passion of Arabian breeding is somewhat of a family tradition: „My grandfather used to take his Arabian mare for transporting goods to his small shop, 6 miles away, every day. He lived in between 1880 and 1920. At that time, it was a big privilege to own an Arabian mare. My father also always kept horses on his farm. That was in the 1960s, up to the 1970s, we grew up alongside the animals and handling horses was just what you did, nothing special in it. When I bought my farm in 1982, there were 16 mares already stabled there. They were from the racetrack. From 2012 on, I decided to breed Straight Egyptian Arabians exclusively, as I would like to take as a criteria for breeding not only perfection and beauty, but also the pedigree – I would like to involve the genetic pool more strongly.“



savier



savier



ISSAN HIBA  
(Rafahag x Grea Amira)



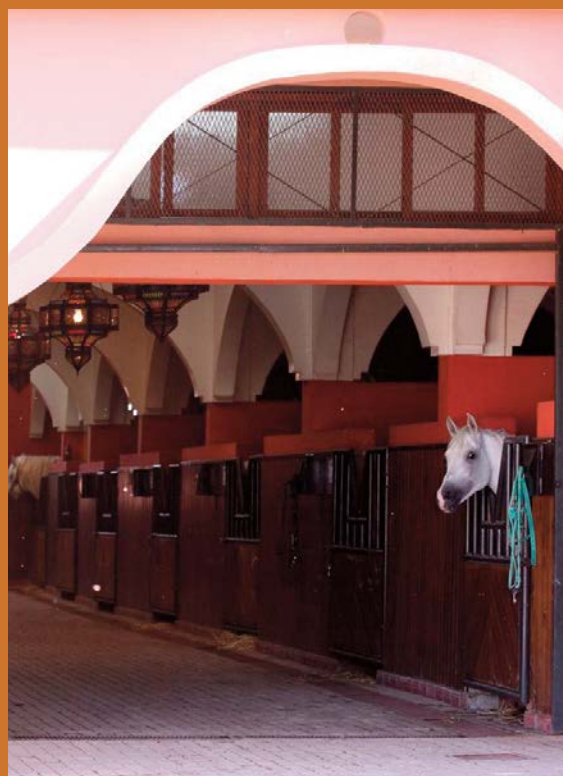
RAFAHAG  
(Authentic Khazim x Maresha Al Kidir)





Mostapha Benlafkih's brother Karim Benlafkih, is another passionate breeder of Arabian horses. His beautiful **Menara Stud**, located on vast premises and housing more than 40 Arabians, is also located in a far-flung palm grove, but more than 200 km to the South of Azemour, in the country behind Marrakech. He is another breeder now concentrating on Straight Egyptians, after breeding horses for shows in his first years as a breeder. Karim Benlafkih is not only an aficionado of noble Arabian horses: in his well-designed stables, we also saw old stallions covered with scars, but otherwise trim and alert. His stud manager told us that Karim will often buy carriage horses who are almost ready to drop, when he sees them in the streets of Marrakech. He feeds them until they have flesh on their bones again, and then they can stay out their lives on his farm, kept in bounty.

If you study the horses' pedigrees at Menara Stud, you can quickly find that he is closely cooperating with his brother Mostapha and with the French-Moroccan Shahada Stud. This is another place where to find offspring of *Imperial Bisaam*, namely the typey stallion *Shahada Al Hafez* out of *Ghazaliyah Bint Alishah*. There is also beautiful offspring of the stallion *GR Monet* by *Classic Shadwan* owned by Shahada Stud. Two daughters of the Italian stallion *OR Walkir*, who are *Mireya* und *Wanisa Bint Walkir*, prove themselves to be great movers with lots of type when they are presented to us. And there is the stallion *Rafahag*, out of Issan Stud, who has some very nice foals here. Anybody who visits the stud ought to take the time and look at the authentic objects and the art exhibition – American pop art starting in the 1950s – located in the first storey of the main building.







FARIDA VA  
(DF Nashwan x Savanna)



RIAD  
(Maghribi x Tharoua de Bouznika)

**Shahada Stud** was a traditional stud of straight Egyptian horses based in Normandy, France. In 2010, Youcef Laghzal, a successful French hotel manager whose family once had migrated from Morocco to France, decided to move to Morocco with his wife Lise and their son, and to „export“ Shahada Stud there as well. Young people from Europe are recently motivated to settle in this country and entrust their future to it especially since the economy has been developing favorably – with the reforms that the king has introduced. Everywhere, start-ups are springing up, featuring innovative jobs and education centres, many of them aimed at leading the young people of Morocco into a new future. These developments encouraged the Laghzal family to take this step, and they told me they never felt remorse they did it.

In the area of El Jadida, they found a suitable piece of land and built a farm there for themselves and the animals. It is easy to see, when looking at the premises, that there are many years of experience behind the design. They know how much room good horse breeding will take. The spaces for the horses are no less vast and well-designed than the buildings for the people who live here. A cool, well-shaded patio with roomy box stalls for the stallions, surrounded by paddocks with run-in sheds, occupies the Southern part of the stud. In the Northern part, there are the barns for the mares and foals, also with a well-shaded arena in it and surrounded by grass fields and paddocks. There are well-designed riding arenas and a round pen, all of them in use, many of the horses are being broken and trained to saddle and other work by the Laghzal couple themselves. Youcef Laghzal will train his horses for shows and even handle them himself for presentation. When they were looking for noble stallions to further improve their breeding, they did not only travel most of Europe, but also to Kuwait, where they bought the colt *Ajmal Sahaab* (*Ajmal Al Kout x Ajmal Sahaabah*) from Mr. Mohammed Al Marzouq. Today, *Ajmal Sahaab* is one of the top sires in the stud and has a lot of exceedingly beautiful offspring to give proof of his position. *GR Monet* (*Classic Shadwan x Mareekah*), a stallion brought in from Germany, is frequently used as a sire, and not only on Shahada Farm. From Sicily, there is a classical beauty here, the stallion *Mahlim*, who is a son of *Maysoun* out of *Bint Moufisa*. Only a year ago, the typey chestnut stallion *Exotic Sadiq* (*Shagran Al Nasser x Simeon Sarice*) arrived in the stud, also from Germany. Some more horses to be mentioned are two home-bred typey





young stallions, *Shahada Ibn Juray* (*Muharib Al Rayyan x TB Jumanaa*) and *Shahada El Fayed* (*Ajmal Sahaab x Fayza KA*), both of which have been successful as show horses already. In addition to the stallions, there are more than 10 broodmares and parts of their offspring, covering 2-3 years, in the stud. Ten years ago, Youcef Laghzal bought a filly in Italy, *TB Jumanaa* (*Ramses x Sulifah*). Today, she is one of his foundation mares with successful offspring to her credit. The next horses to come were *Mona El Naarah* (*Masri El Salaam x Bint Mofisa I*) and the chestnut mare *Fayza KA*, (*Marquis I x Matisse KA*). Later, there were *Alajneha Nahme* (*Anaza El farid x Nadima*), an important broodmare once imported from the USA, tracing to the Dahman Shahwan tail line, as well as the mare *WGC Sarah*, daughter of *Ansata Shaamis* and other

successful broodmares. As a kind of interface between cultures, the Laghzal family is well trusted by many of the Moroccan breeders and are often asked for their advice. The success and the beauty of the Shahada Arabians is a motivation for them, enticing them to put their emphasis more in the direction of well-planned breeding that takes genetics into account and is bound to be the most powerful and sensible path to take in the long run. This is the background for the conference, which was also very informative for the breeders. There are plans to offer more clinics covering important topics in Arabian horse breeding, and to further improve the cooperation between breeders from all over the world.