

OFF TO MOROCCO

A Study Tour Organized by the *Pyramid Society Europe and Shahada Stud*,
Featuring the Egyptian Horses and the Culture of Morocco.

Text and photos

MONIKA SAVIER

Lay-out

MARIO BRUNETTI



A hundred years ago, travelers through the Orient were admired by the people at home for their curiosity and their love of adventure. The main functions of traveling then were education, exploration, and science. It took industrialization and the ascent of the middle classes to coin a new type of traveling: the „no-purpose“ recreational trip.

Members of the new executive board of the Pyramid Society Europe, however, organized a study tour in the old fashion. Tying in with the traditions of historic study tours, and accepting the occasional adventure, this was the name of the game. With a slight difference, however: traveling would be meant to be as comfortable and pleasant as possible, at the same time offering maximum flow of information and the international exchange of experiences with local Arabian breeders.



Morocco has Always Been a Country of Horses

Almost 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 was introduced in the 8th century AC, not only a country of the horses of the Berbers, but also of Arabian horses. And their number is on the increase, just as is the number of breeders and riders, of shows and sports events – promoted by the Royal House, but also carried by the passion and know-how that the country population has had since ancient times when it comes to horses. What is more, for the last ten years the new young elites among the Moroccan population have discovered their love for horses. They attempt to combine ancient traditions with modern technologies in horse breeding. Moroccans got the opportunity to do so during the „Arabian Spring“ when the young king Mohammed VI mounted the throne in 1999, introducing spectacular reforms. It was not only women who

now received equal rights, but also the indigenes of Morocco, the Berber tribes, who were finally legally acknowledged as a demographic group enjoying equal rights according to the new constitution.

When the Arabs brought Islam to Morocco by Jihad at about 700 AC by way of their Arabian horses, 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 Muslim Andalusians who had been expelled from Spain during the early Middle Ages and had fled to Morocco with their Arabian-Andalusian horses, settling there for good. However, Morocco was an interesting country in a geopolitically important location, so it attracted the attentions and desires of different colonial powers. The Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, 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, ci-



ties, and defensive structures, but in the course of the centuries, their cavalries also left different gene pools of horse breeds 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, kept in herds together with sheep and other grazing animals. The horses were used as riding animals right from the beginning, and for many centuries, Moroccan transport depended on them. The Berbers had horse breeding of their own. 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. From about that time on, Morocco

became the chosen destination of European artists, painters, and authors in number. Finally, the Europeans dominated Africa's North on a whole number of levels, so that even today, there are numerous fields where different cultures meet and developed together, such as in language, culture, and cuisine.

The Arabian Horse in Morocco

The Moroccans' passion for their horses has kept on, unbroken, since the earliest times. 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, promoting pure-bred horse stock, that could afford to put quality first. Competitions are intended to make sure that positive selection takes place. The Royal National Stud is present in

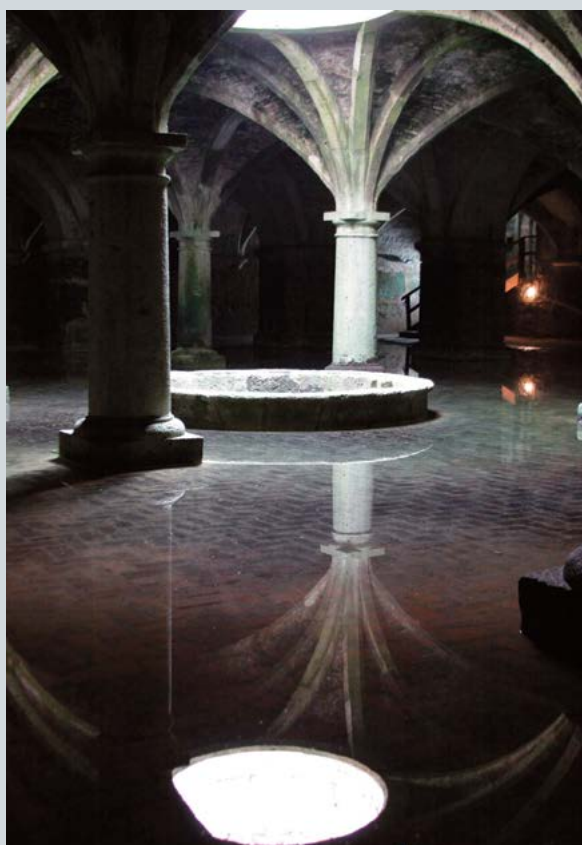


five regional studs located in Bouznika, El Jadida, Marrakech, Meknès and Oujda, respectively. They are the most important players in the quest for improving and organizing the breeding work in the country.

Even the father of today's king, who was Hassan II, was a passionate breeder who stabled, in Bouznika, straight Egyptian Arabians for breeding purposes, knowing that the Straight Egyptians are reputed to be closest to the original Arabian breed. 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 Morocco, there were hardly any or no breeders of straight Egyptian Arabians to be found during the last century, apart from king Hassan II. Fanatism as to pedigrees seems to have been less present there than in some other places, and that original love of Arabian horses apparently did not leave much room for differentiation based on parentage. 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. Horse fans from Qatar and Kuwait, but also from Egypt serve as models for this

sub-group of the purebred Arabian horse, even if many of them display more know-how of the pedigrees than of the breed proper. However, there is a growing number of breeders in Morocco who are on the lookout for networking opportunities, information, and experience as to breeding strategies, new markets, standards of quality, and the role that show horses play in breeding today.

When successful French hotel manager Youcef Laghzal decided, in 2011, to move to Morocco, the country of his parents, together with his wife Lise and their son and relocating Shahada Stud as well, it was the first opportunity ever for Moroccan breeders to experience an exclusively Egyptian breeding concept, and its successful implementation. Youcef Laghzal became an interface for Arabian breeding between the cultures of the two different continents, Europe and Africa. His ideas for breeding, as well as his successes as a trainer and handler on the occasions of national and international shows in Morocco, opened up fresh perspectives for many young breeders. Pyramid Society Europe was able to benefit from that. When in the spring of 2015, he developed the concept for the *Morocco Study Tour* with me, many breeders were enthusiastic and offered to accompany the tour or to present their horses.



The Study Tour

The group met in Casablanca. The *Mazagan Beach Resort*, about a hundred kilometres south of Casablanca in the port town of El Jadida, proved to be a luxurious and comfortable base during the tour.

El Jadida is a city on the ocean that was originally a Portuguese colony and still has an interesting historic core, a citadel, and a Soukh. It has one of the five decentralized facilities run by SOREC (the Société Royale d'Encouragement du Cheval) for advancing horse breeding. This year, new extensive facilities for horse fairs and for sports events, located along the beach, were inaugurated, featuring the Moroccan A Show (ECAHO) and a Breeders Cup (AHA). The concept is highly impressive overall, making obvious that the government definitely supports the breeders' initiatives.

Qualidia is a fascinating fishermen's village on the Atlantic coast, to the south of El Jadida. It was the sultan El-Qualid who founded it in 1634. The ancient walls of the kashba can still be seen. The village is famous for its beautiful beaches and the inner lagoon, its shores not only featuring seafood of all kinds, but also rare waterbirds to be watched.

Marrakech, that thousand-year-old city of the Berber people in the south, is irresistibly attracting travelers from all over the world. In the medina, palaces sprung from "Arabian Nights" were built which today are elegant hotels with green palm gardens and cool inner courts behind the ochre-colored city walls. Famous Jemaa El-Fna plaza features snake charmers, storytellers, and acrobats. This pearl of Morocco is at the same time a myth and a place everybody desires to visit – but what is it that makes for the mystic attraction and the mysterious atmosphere of this city? What is it that spells the locals just as much as the foreigners? For the participants of our study tour, one thing became clear: no matter whether it's in the winding lanes of the soukh or during the famous film festival of Marrakesh- there seems to be a finely tuned balance existing between the modern party world and the oriental traditions in the city.



The Arabian Horses

There are thousands of Arabian horses in Morocco. However, it is rare to have them pooled in some big representative stud. Mostly, it is many small breeders with just a few horses each who try to present the results of their breeding at the regional shows. Straight Egyptian horses are still rare. In the bigger studs, the Egyptians and other lines of Arabian horses are often kept alongside each other.

Shahada Stud

Not far from El Jadida, there is Shahada Stud, a place where they breed with a stock of 30 to 40 Straight Egyptian Arabians.

The beautifully landscaped premises are spacious and intelligently styled. A cool, well-shaded inner yard with roomy box stalls for the stallions, surrounded by paddocks with run-in sheds, is located in the southern part of the premises. In the northern area, there are barns for the mares and foals, also with a well-shaded inner yard and surrounded by pastures and paddocks. Many of the horses are broken for riding and trained by the Laghzal couple themselves, with Youcef Laghzal being his own show handler. Four capacious bungalows, built from natural stone and nestled into the green of the palm trees and the colors of exotic plants, wait to serve as a base for horsey tourists intent on discovering the country.

Looking for noble stallions as sires and for improving Shahada Stud's breeding, the Laghzal couple traveled Europe and ended up in Kuwait, where they bought the colt Ajmaal Sahaab (Ajmal Al Kout x Ajmal Sahaabah) from Mr Mohammed Al Marzouq. Today, Ajmaal Sahaab is the leading sire of the stud, with extraordinarily beautiful offspring to his credit. Another stallion who is frequently used as a sire on the farm and elsewhere is GR Monet (Classic Shadwan x Mareekah). The classic beauty Mahlim, a son of Maysoun out of Bint Moufisa, came from Sicily. Two years ago, the typey chestnut Exotic Sadiiq (Shagran Al Nasser x Simeon Sarice) arrived from Germany. There are two successful home-bred stallions, Shahada Ibn Juray (Muharib Al Rayyan x TB Jumanaa) and Shahada El Fayed (Ajmal Sahaab x Fayza KA), both of them show winners. In addition to the stallions, more than 10 broodmares with their last two to three foal crops live in the stud. Ten years ago, Youcef Laghzal bought a filly in Italy, TB



Jumanaa (Ramses x Sulifah). Today, TB Jumanaa is a foundation mare featuring successful offspring. She was followed by Mona El Naarah (Masri El Sallaam x Bint Mofisa I) imported from Germany, and later, by Alajneha Nahme (Anaza El farid x Nadima), a Dahman Shahwan mare bred by Judith Forbis (USA). Fillies out of the latter, from 2014 and 2015, were also presented and enchanted the spectators, just as did the rest of the youngstock, such as the young mare Shahada Ajayeb (Ajmal Sahaab x Shahada Alima). She had made Junior Champion Mare during the 2014 Breeders Cup in El Jadida.



Ajmal Sahaab (Ajmal Al Kout x Ajmal Sahaabah), the leading sire of Shahada Stud.



Shahada El Fayyed (Ajmal Sahaab x Fayza KA), Gold Champion at the Breeders Cup, El Jadida.



Four spacious bungalows on the premises of Shahada Stud stand by to serve as a base for tourists and horse fans for discovering the country and for workshops.

Mashallah Arabians

Much influenced by the role of women in Morocco, that's Mashallah Stud owned by Mrs Quaisse, a horse fan who has been monitoring the international Arabian scene for quite some time and is trying to develop her own breeding approach. The stud is located in Azenmour, to the north of El Jadida. As to the Straight Egyptian Arabians, breeding is still in its beginnings, but already there is offspring from some internationally renowned show stallions such as Kahil al Shaqab and EKS



Alihandro. Her scenic stud with box stalls surrounding her house was ideally suited for presenting horses. There were also some smaller breeders bringing their horses in order to show them to an international audience. Moroccan National Television did not miss the opportunity to film the presentation and interview some of the participants. Later on, Mrs Quaisse invited the more than a hundred guests for an extraordinary buffet of the most refined Moroccan cuisine in her house.



Mrs Quaisse, owner of Mashallah Stud, and friends



Samael Savage (GR Monet x BFA Angelina), owner Mr. Mestari Chawki, Assala Stud



Mr. Mohamed Oumlazz and his mare Meryem

Selman Stud

Just behind the red city walls of Marrakech, there is Selman Hotel, a historic palace converted into one of the noblest guesthouses of the city. The surrounding green park, lined with watercourses, is home to a luxurious stable complex for Arabian horses and goes by the name of Selman Stud. Living there



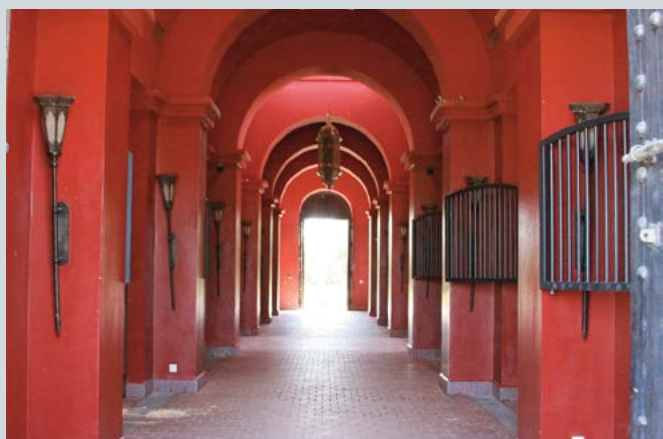
Dr. Hans Nagel, part of the group of visitors, is known worldwide, as breeder and WAHO president emeritus.



Sandhiran, European Champion and Winner of the All Nations Cup

SHOWS AND EVENTS

is a collection of noble stallions, partly of world-wide fame such as All Nations Cup winner Sandhiran. The mares are just as hand-picked and of top quality, and the same goes for the premises that have been built with every detail of horse welfare in mind.



The study tour was not just exciting, fascinating, and interesting with respect to horse breeding, but there were also the discoveries made in the landscape and in Moroccan cuisine which convinced most of the participants that they would return to Morocco, the land of horses, quite soon.

