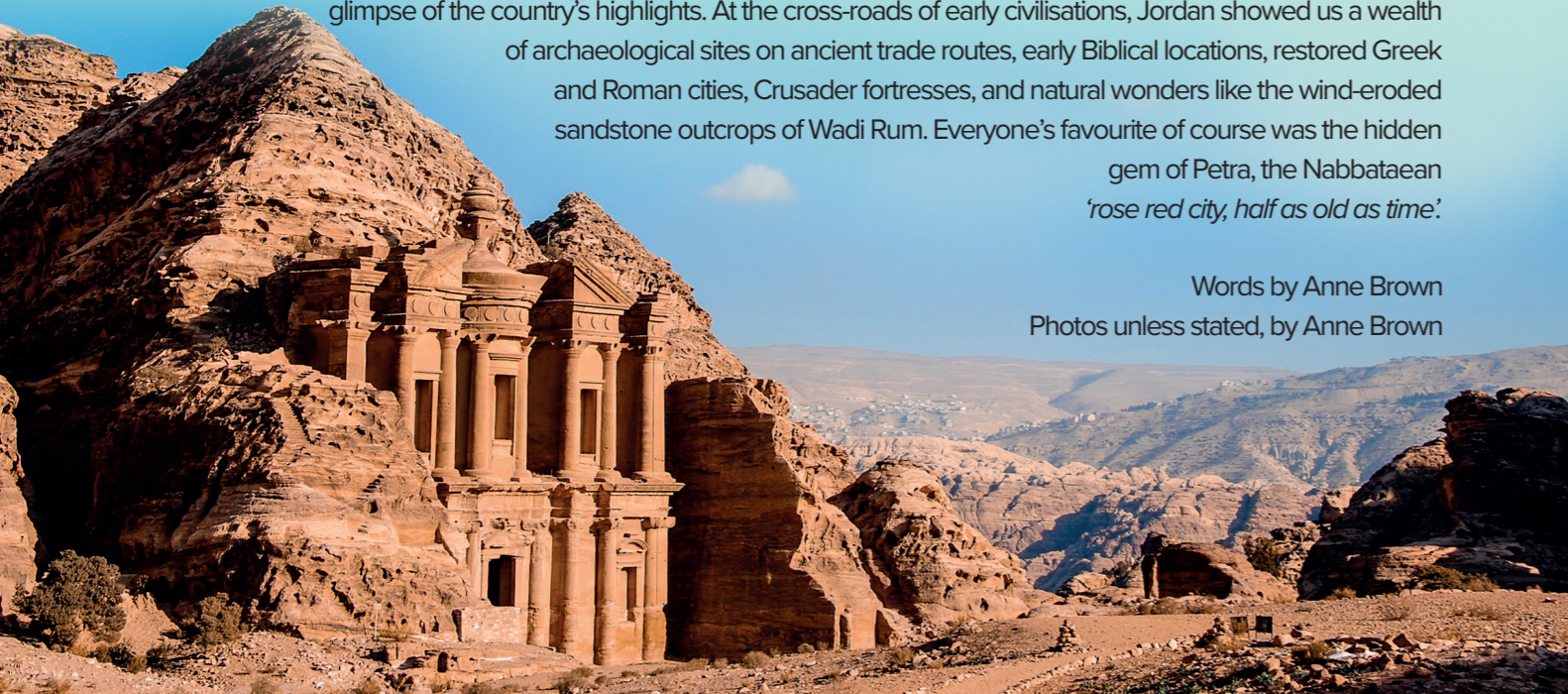


WAHO CONFERENCE 2022

At the end of the 2019 World Arabian Horse Organization (WAHO) Conference – in pre-Covid Australia – everyone greeted our AHS Patron Princess Alia’s invitation to Jordan for the next one with great enthusiasm. And what a joy to be hosted by such a warm, friendly country with a legacy of fine Arabian horses in October!

The optional tours which surrounded the formal sessions at The Four Seasons Hotel in Amman, the capital, offered a glimpse of the country’s highlights. At the cross-roads of early civilisations, Jordan showed us a wealth of archaeological sites on ancient trade routes, early Biblical locations, restored Greek and Roman cities, Crusader fortresses, and natural wonders like the wind-eroded sandstone outcrops of Wadi Rum. Everyone’s favourite of course was the hidden gem of Petra, the Nabataean ‘rose red city, half as old as time.’

Words by Anne Brown
Photos unless stated, by Anne Brown



Horse parades and delicious Middle Eastern meals with entertainment topped and tailed the formal registry affairs and Board meetings. Arabian horse lovers from around the world re-kindled old friendships and made new ones. Especially welcome were Ian and Deb Watson, organisers of the relaxed 2019 WAHO conference in Australia, Jehangir and Nawaz Rustomjee, who looked after us so well at the Bahrain conference in 2017, and Basil Jadaan, mastermind of the brilliant Syria conference in 2007.

The exchange of knowledge and experience between breeders and riders proved as vital as talks by the invited speakers. Apparently, according to one substantial stud owner, as many as one foal in five is born with broken ribs as a consequence of squeezing through the tight birth canal. The young bones heal, but not always perfectly, which can lead to later discomfort when backed and girthed. Who knew?!

Delegates from each attending member country reported on their registry matters, including their position on contentious issues such as embryo transfers and cloning. Distressing news of the fate of their Arabians emerged from some Middle Eastern countries such as Syria and Iraq, where many horses are lost or stolen. Ukraine’s problems have put a strain on the completion of their most recent stud book. Despite crises in Lebanon, they see Arabian horses as “a beacon of hope”. Australia has bounced back from devastating fires and floods with a robust programme of endurance events and shows.

Refreshingly, France reported a mandatory programme of



Jordanian Post celebrates the WAHO Convention in Amman



Left: A WAHO group at the monumental entrance arch to the Greco-Roman city of Jerash

Below: Peter Upton and Princess Alia sign 'Royal Heritage' for Australian Barbara Gale; WAHO President Peter Pond looks on

Bottom: AHS conference delegates Karin Swanson and Natalie Meredith

genetic testing. In Poland, testing has produced almost no evidence of SCID or LFS, but a startling 11% positive result for CA (cerebellar abiotrophy). Zimbabwe’s Arab horse registry has been revived to the extent that they can take Lesotho under their wing; Oman does the same for Tanzania; and China continues to develop its stud book of imported Arabian horses. After the first formal business session, we were treated to a welcome reception with delicious regional dishes at the Jordan Heritage Restaurant. The following evening, we dined under the stars, after watching some tent-pegging heroics, a smart military band – with bagpipes played by male and female musicians - and a parade of local breeders’ horses at Amman’s Equestrian Center. The final family group of correct, athletic horses from the Madros Stables impressed me most. During the evening’s proceedings, WAHO President Peter Pond presented the 2022 WAHO trophy for Jordan to the nine-year old bay Sahwat al Wahhab AH, a successful endurance mare, owned by Tareq al Mujtaseb.

We were spoiled for choice with tours between business and talks. Those who opted for Jerash were overwhelmed with the size of this imperial Roman city, the best preserved in the Middle East. Exquisite Corinthian capitols top the marble colonnades either side of the wide avenues. A vast agora in a rare circular shape, ornate fountains, monumental entrance arches, temples and palaces are being painstakingly restored. But the area is so huge that the local town had been built over at least half of it before archaeologists grasped the enormity of their find.

As always, the conference speakers held us entranced, especially Peter Upton’s introduction to the origins of Jordan’s Royal Stud.

Peter, a long-time friend and supporter of the country’s Arabian horses, and co-author with Princess Alia of “Royal Heritage”, dashed us through the bloodlines of the seven original families. The matriarchs graced a series of stamps issued in 2021. Each conference participant received a souvenir envelope with all seven stamps, franked with 2022 WAHO Amman post-mark. Some of these original mares carried Bedouin tribesmen in the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Peter showed a very special photo of his younger self in 1992 with 94-year old Bedouin Sheikh Jweibar who had fought the Turks as a 15-year old. He clearly recalled every Arab horse and rider in the attack.



Russell Ferris, CEO of Weatherbys Ltd and Weatherbys Ireland Ltd, transported us to the future, illustrating how their cutting-edge technology now registers every aspect of a Thoroughbred racehorse’s life: its birth, vet records, ownership, location, trainer’s yard, racing results, breeding activities - and a whole lot more. The AHS stud book system will soon use Weatherbys’ technology to register our own horses.

Gudrun Waiditschka whisked us through the living heritage of the state studs of Europe (some of which are now sadly diminishing), Russia and Egypt. “These tangible assets need to be cherished,” she insisted. “They are of great value to modern breeders.”



Left: Rescued de-clawed lioness, safe at Al Ma'wa Reserve

Below: HRH Princess Alia and her senior stallion, 26-year old Hlayyil Ramadan (a Kehilah Ajuz), Jordan Royal Stables



Above: Mares in arena at the Royal Stables Jordan
Below: Tack room at the Royal Stables

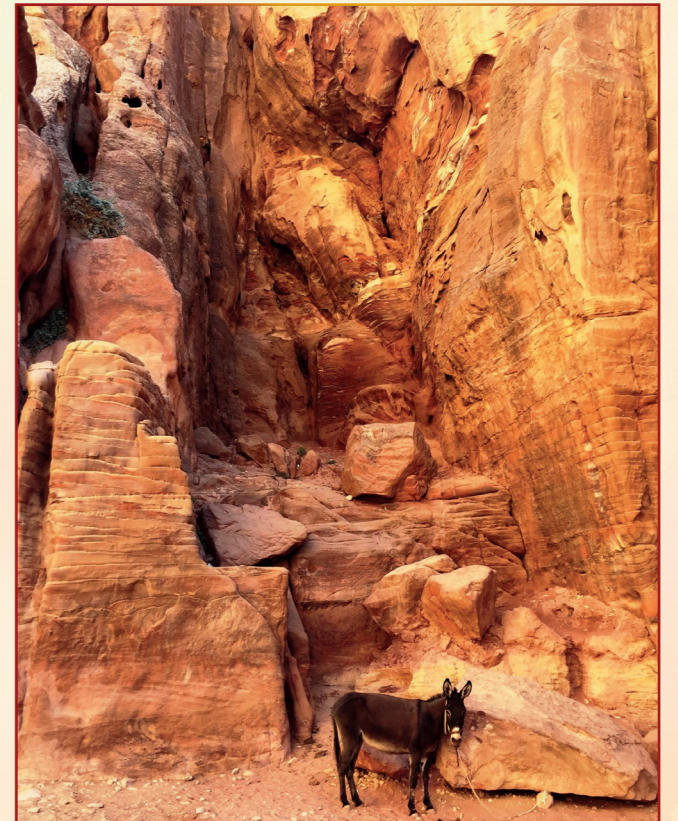


Dr Astrid von Velsen-Zerweck concluded her talk with some pertinent warnings about the welfare and treatment of horses. "The eyes of the world are on us," she stressed. "The social licence we enjoy to keep horses and compete with them will be damaged by unethical behaviour like extreme

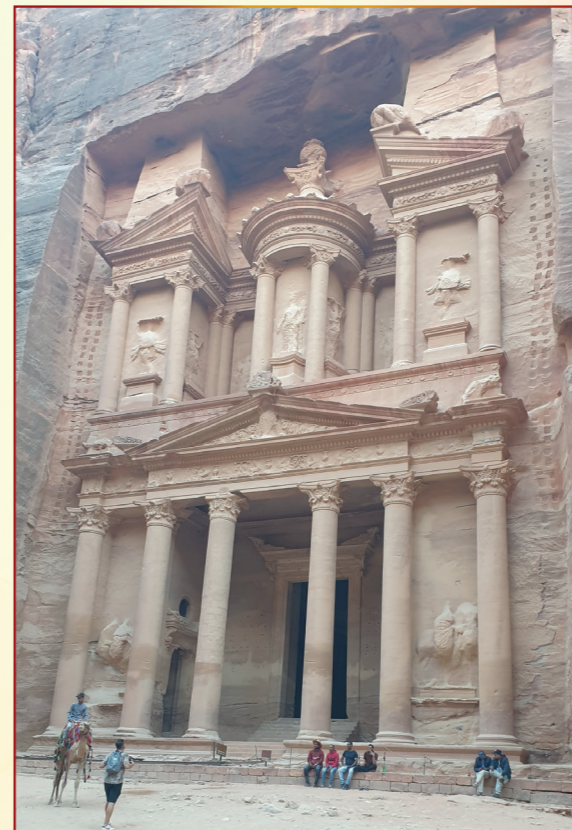
show handling, or abuse of endurance horses in the desert." The speakers' full reports will appear on WAHO's website: <http://www.waho.org/>
An exclusive invitation to a parade and lunch at the Royal Stables followed the lectures - such a treat. HRH Princess Alia, our host, Peter Upton and Marek Trela provided a commentary as family groups floated into the arena, with Mark Gamlin in fine form as an invited handler. These horses came straight from the paddocks and had not been prepared for the ring - although many could beat any opposition at a show. The native Jordanian lines produced powerful-moving yet gracious horses, although some, as Princess Alia admitted, with peaky rumps or long backs.
Two stallions have changed that look. Senior stallion, 26-year old Hlayyil Ramadan (a Kehilah Ajuz), has sired daughters who, crossed with the dark bay show winner Monarcos DD (Psytdel x Monogrammed Lady) imported from Belgium in 2006, have produced ethereal grey mares of exquisite beauty. The glorious 14-year old Almasa typifies this success, gaining



The Toyota herds invade Wadi Rum



Donkey dwarfed by Petra's mighty sandstone cliffs



The Treasury of Petra, carved from sandstone by the Nabataeans 2,000 years ago



Camels in Wadi Rum



maximum 20s by all five judges at the national show. She led the ‘escape party’ in the arena, then stayed with her dam Jawaahir and her sisters to graze while we lunched and gazed and snapped and marvelled – and gazed some more.

A forest fire which swept the hillside above the stables in June, miraculously leapt over to the opposite hill, leaving the buildings untouched. However, many of the horses escaped on to the nearby highway, much to the consternation of motorists, who found themselves sharing the road with galloping horses, nostrils flaring, tails flying, until they were caught and safely returned to the Royal Stables.

Managing the Stables is just one of Princess Alia’s commitments. The Foundation she started many year ago does so much good in Jordan. One project protects stray animals from shootings and poisoning. Another helps young people with autism through interaction with gentle Arabian horses. A third has vastly improved slaughter-house conditions.

The scheme we visited - the Ma’wa Foundation run by Marek Trela in a forested hillside not far from Amman - rescues captured wild animals from abuse and neglect by commercial and private owners and from illegal zoos. The traumatised animals now live in safety with others of their species. We watched Baloo and his plump bear chums scrump fruit from the trees in their spacious enclosure, rare Asiatic lions lazily sunning themselves, and hyenas and wolf-dogs loping around – looking for tourists to eat?

In her book, ‘Small Miracles’, Princess Alia tells many of the

animals’ stories, from gory captivity to care and shelter within the reserve. The Princess signed copies during our visit to the Royal Stables.

As Oscar Wilde wrote: ‘Yet each man kills the thing he loves’. How aptly this reflects tourism! In our eagerness to experience the silence of the desert, the drama of Wadi Rum, the delicate beauty of the Treasury at Petra, sheer numbers overwhelm them with our babel of excitement and clamour for photographs. Our WAHO group was no exception...

We poured into Petra, approaching through the narrow half-mile long Siq between towering multi-coloured cliff faces. At the last turn, the ornate Treasury rewards you with a façade so perfect, yet so ancient, you wonder at the skills of the Nabataean society which created it. We devoured the intricate temples, tombs and passages, carved from the sandstone rock, and climbed to vantage points to absorb the enormity of the site. Rich through trade over 2,000 years ago, the inhabitants catered for hundreds of camel trains every day. The Bible referred to this ancient Silk Road city as Sela, capital of Edom. Where Indiana Jones raced his horse through the gorge in ‘The Last Crusade’, we now walk - although camels, horses and buggies offer an alternative for weary feet through the rest of the site.

Just a few miles away from this bustle lies the ‘suburb’ of Little Petra, a carved rock city in miniature. It suffers none of the commercialism of its neighbour, and is probably far more in tune with its original purpose as a watering point for the caravans. Rare and precious water was channelled and stored in vast cisterns cut deep into the rock.

Next stop: the former wilderness of Wadi Rum, a two-mile wide sandy valley guarded by huge cliffs like layer cakes with the icing dripping down the sides. Sadly it has been colonised by pseudo Bedouin camps of plastic ‘bubble’ rooms sheltering under many of the wind-carved sandstone overhangs. The

Left: To Aqaba! Monument commemorating the 1916-17 Arab Revolt beside writer Anne Brown, former AHS Hon President



Below: Line to nowhere - train abandoned in the desert by the Ottomans over a century ago



Night falls on Amman’s Roman amphitheatre

herds of Toyotas bouncing us - and a thousand other tourists - over the soft sand almost out-number the camels, but enough true magnificence remains to marvel at the mighty rock formations and striations. That evening, we enjoyed a traditional Zarb dinner of food roasted on metal racks over hot coals in ovens buried under the sand. We lounged on cushions, Bedouin style, low to the ground in tents, then set off to star gaze under the clearest of night skies. The excellent astronomer had his four powerful telescopes trained on Saturn’s rings, Jupiter’s four large moons (first spotted by Galileo in 1610) and other galaxies and nebulae. We learned why the Polestar always retains its alignment with Earth, how to spot Vega and how to locate the seventh sister of the Pleiades.

“To Aqaba,” roared Peter O’Toole in David Lean’s epic ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ as he urged his camel through Wadi Rum ahead of the Bedouin tribesmen intent on driving out their Turkish rulers. And on to the Gulf of Aqaba we travelled in our more prosaic coaches, to the luxury of the Movenpick Hotel with its exotic gardens and many pools and waterfalls.

An afternoon snorkel in the warm waters over the depleted coral reef came with a warning. Swim too far south and you surface in Saudi Arabia, too far west, and you’ll be in Egypt, and too far north, in Israel. At one point, we could see all three of the countries which jostle Jordan at this north eastern tip of the Red Sea. As the country’s only access to the open ocean, Aqaba has developed a busy port, yet has managed to preserve some sandy shore-line to develop an ever-increasing number of resort hotels.

The border with Israel is so close across the Dead Sea, that my phone pinged off a tower and “welcomed me to Israel!” However, the Sea itself is shrinking at an alarming rate; it has dropped the height of a house since my last visit 30 years ago. Experts estimate it will have dried up completely within the next half-century.

The River Jordan has not been ‘deep and wide’ for a long time. In places, it has reduced to a mere trickle as agriculture, industry and other human needs on both banks siphon off the water. One of our tours took us to Mt Nebo, high about the dramatic river valley, reputed to be the spot where Moses viewed the Promised Land, and where he is buried. A basilica holds some of the country’s finest mosaics, both sacred and secular. For centuries, craftsmen in nearby Madaba have created intricate mosaics to decorate their Byzantine churches, the most treasured, a vivid map of the Middle East from the 6th century, now in the Greek Orthodox Church of St George.

The country’s hospitality is known world-wide - but just consider this. Of a population approaching five million, at least half of whom live in Amman, almost two and a half million are refugees or immigrants escaping hostile situations or removal from their land, yet adopted by Jordanians. In the complex politics of the Middle East, countries may show their Arab allegiance to one another with similar flags. Palestine and Trans-Jordan were one nation earlier in the 20th century, under the flag depicted by the warrior in the memorial to the 1916 Arab Revolt in Aqaba. With independence, Jordan’s added a seven-pointed star to the red triangle.

One community of grateful immigrants - Circassian refugees who arrived from Russia in the late 19th century, after genocide and war - settled in what was then part of Ottoman Syria. They have kept their culture and traditions, and above all the budding John Travoltas’ energetic, almost Kossak-style dances. They treated us to displays at their Nadi al Jeel al Jadeed open air restaurant, and again at the concluding Gala dinner at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Thanks are due to the organising team in Amman, and especially to HRH Princess Alia. It was the 24th conference since WAHO’s foundation 52 years ago, and certainly one of the most enjoyable and successful ones. ☺