

Louisa comes face to face with a falcon



# FLYING DOCTOR

When Margit Muller qualified as a veterinarian in her native Germany, she had little idea that she'd end up as the specialist carer for the falcons of Abu Dhabi – or the winner of multiple awards for her work. With an impressive 15 years working with falcons under her belt, Margit still has the bright eyes and bushy tail of a novice, full of enthusiasm and passion.

FROM THE days of the ancient Egyptians through to Native American astrology, the falcon has always been a highly regarded and majestic animal. The Egyptian god Horus – half man and half falcon – was god of the skies, appointed to look out for the people of Egypt. Native Americans considered the falcon a messenger of adaptability and openness, and those who fall under the Native American astrological sign of the falcon are thought to be strong leaders, powerful and spontaneous.

For the Bedouin tribes of the Middle East, falcons were prized as hunters; they were the providers of meat for the family. Plucked from the wild, these birds could not be completely tamed and would eventually head back to their home hunting grounds.

Tourists taking the mandatory trip into the desert may be offered a glimpse of falcons as part of their package tour. Sometimes you might see the birds being put through their paces as a sideshow at various fairs and exhibitions.

Today most falcons are bred in captivity, and opportunities to see these magnificent creatures in the wild are rare indeed.

Yet residents of Abu Dhabi, together with visitors to the emirate, are in the enviable position of being able to observe the majestic creatures up close and personal thanks to the efforts of a single-minded enthusiast who has created a rare haven for these legendary birds on the outskirts of the capital.

"The beauty of falconry is the way it cuts through all the social classes," says

Dr Margit Gabriele Muller, director and vet at the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital. "In Europe, falcons are a status symbol, just like a BMW. Here in the Middle East it is not so class specific, though the price for a falcon can range from AED5,000 to AED80,000."

The Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital is located in the Al Shamka area – which to a UAE newcomer feels literally like the

middle of nowhere. Given the risks to the falcons from the noise and bustle of city life, that's probably a good thing.

The hospital grounds are lush and welcoming, a burst of life nestled in the centre of a desolate desert landscape. The first thing you notice is the abundance of wildlife – the air is filled with the twitter of bird song.

It officially opened in 1999, but has only been accessible to visitors since last year. "Visitors were getting in taxis from their hotels and dropping in to see us. As a medical institute we couldn't have people just popping in like that," explains Margit. The centre is a hospital first and foremost, and a tourist attraction second. "We are here for the animals, that's what makes us unique," she adds.

With continuous discoveries and breakthroughs in falcon care, the hospital is kept busy performing everything from endoscopies to hair extensions – and there are even quarantine facilities on site to accommodate the well-travelled bird.

Because of its Bedouin ancestry the falcon is the national emblem of the UAE. Unfortunately these beautiful birds were on the endangered species



Margit Muller



