FALCONS ICU

Aimed to provide the best medical care for falcons in the UAE at the time of its inception, the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital has been attracting tourists from across the globe. SALIM JOSEPH meets the peregrines and saker falcons, the trusted family members of the Bedouins, who hold…a passport!

WE STEP into the large clinical examination room at the hospital and stare at the advanced anesthetic equipment. "Here we do minor procedures like application of bandages, blood sampling, coping…" the sound of Dr Margit Gabriele Muller, the director of the hospital, fades off as we look around for patients.

There comes one, sitting upright on the gloved hand of a nurse, but a bit shy and nervous, and she has asked for a pedicure! "Don't make her too nervous. She is so sensitive and can have a heart attack," warns Dr Margit as we get close around. Of course, nobody will want to have heart attack while getting one's toenails polished.

But this is no beauty saloon. It's the world's largest hospital for falcons, with a patient influx of more than 35,000, with a well-established loyal patient-base in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. And we were just about to witness coping of talons and beaks of a peregrine at the Abu Dhabi Falcons Hospital (ADFH).

"The nails can twist and it can cause injury to the feet. It would be very painful for the bird to sit on it. See, this is not for beauty, but it's being done for health reasons," says Dr Margit, who has been working with falcons for the last 15 years. When they are in the wild, they do it naturally, wear it off while tearing the meat or while sitting on rocks and cliffs. Here, they come for a 'pedicure' twice a year. A veterinary technician is about to put the bird on anesthesia. "Before we do anything we have to put them on anesthesia.

They are very sensitive to stress, which means if you just touch them, they can get so stressed and nervous and even die of a heart attack," Dr Margit points out.

"But you see, there are no special or exclusive tools or equipment for falcons. We always look around, may be in supermarkets. We have to be very creative and innovative," the doctor points out.

The ADFH had been innovative since its inception in October 1999 as an affiliate of the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi.

From a purely veterinary facility, the hospital diversified its services and the new services included tourism, pet care and veterinary externship programmes. The aim was to provide best possible medical care for falcons in Abu Dhabi and the rest of the UAE. "It was a small hospital at the beginning and we treated 1,500 falcons in the first year. Now we have grown a lot and are taking care of falcons from other GCC nations as well. We are now considered the largest falcon hospital in the whole world and a leading centre for falcon medicine."

And with a lot of veterinary students turning up for training, the hospital set up an internship programme, accredited in Europe, the USA and Australia.

Opening up for public

THE hospital, under the Abu Dhabi government, was closed to the general public in the initial years. "But we grew famous in the veterinary world and journalists have been coming over to write about the hospital. Inquiries started coming from tourists visiting Abu Dhabi and it was great they had the interest in falcons, an integral part of Abu Dhabi's culture and heritage," says Dr Margit. They had to find a way to open up and in 2007 the hospital launched guided tours for visitors. "It was just two tours a week at the beginning. But now we have two tours per day." The hospital, last year, witnessed a 72 percent increase in the number of visitors and this year it has already crossed last year's figures. "People have seen that this is unique as an institution and the hospital's reputation grew internationally. During the last one-and-a-half years, we won nine international awards for our tourism programme," she says.

Indeed, there are specific reasons for falcons in the Middle East generating huge interest locally and worldwide. When falconry remained a sport for the aristocracy in Europe, it had a totally different story to tell here in the Arab world. "Falcons which were used for hunting here were not native to this country. They were migrating birds from Europe to Africa and had to cross the Arabian Peninsula," Dr Margit is happy to provide some interesting aspects of falconry in the former times.

The Bedouins trapped them and took them to their tents in the desert. Timid and shy in the beginning, they didn't know what to expect from humans. So the Bedouins had to make the falcons accustomed to them and they did it by carrying them on their arm 24 hours a day. If one person got tired and wanted to sleep a little bit, he gave the falcon to his brother, father or another member of the family. And within 10-14 days, the falcon would be ready for hunting. "Falcons here were not sport tools like in Europe. They got integrated in the Bedouins' family as a child, like a son or a daughter and still the falcons have exactly the same position in the family. Though nobody has to survive by making a falcon hunt rabbits anymore, it's one of the few things that reconnect people to the past, a very important aspect of the national identity."

As hunting is now prohibited in the UAE, the owners of falcons take them to countries like Morocco or Pakistan. But listed as an endangered species, they need a lot of documents and special permits for making such travels. In order to facilitate the travel of falcons for hunting trips, the UAE introduced, for the first time in the world, a passport for falcons. "Here, see this passport. She's recently been to Uzbekistan for hunting," Dr Margit shows us a pure travel document. "They are the only animals worldwide which are allowed to board the passenger cabins of our Arab airlines like Etihad or Emirates. So, we are not a just a hospital for a particular bird. We are taking care of the 'children' of the Bedouins…well, that's what these falcons are!"

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Dr Margit Gabriele Muller
Director, Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital

After spending all these years with falcons, the more I see them the more I love them. They are fabulous and really incredible personalities. I chose falcons as I found them adorable. They look so big but, at the same time, they are very sensitive. If you give them the wrong food, they can die in just five hours.

Falcon care

ADFH handles between 60 to 80 falcons everyday

Has a capacity to hospitalize 200 falcons

Has a strong 52-member staff with more than 10 years experience with falcons

Facilities include modernized operation theatres with latest equipments for endoscopy, soft tissue surgery, fracture surgery, patient monitoring apparatus, ICCU, ophthalmology unit, separate falcon pox unit, individual in-patient rooms, free-flight aviaries for moulting, quarantine facilities for sick birds, laboratories and special incubators for premature babies.