

This is the English translation of the article by Vajda Boglárka which first appeared in the April 2011 edition of [Lovas Nemzet](#) the Hungarian equine magazine.

Through Hungarian eyes

On an Arabian horse in the Jordanian desert

Is there any rider who does not desire to try an Arabian thoroughbred on its homeland, amongst the sand dunes of the Middle East? The dream for me became true: I had one week on horse in Jordan in the Wadi Rum desert.

Preparations for a nomadic week

Packed everything for the desert? On the eve of the tour at Abu Hassaran, the camp of the tribe Zilabia, it is no use wondering at it any more – there is no phone signal, so what about a supermarket. Anyway, checked in head: headlamp, sleeping bag, sunscreen, scarf, beside the usual rider and travel kit. I am sitting cross-legged in the Bedouin dining tent next to the fire while drinking the unusually sweet tea to the European taste, but yet I cannot still take on the local rhythm of life. My mind is still on that I can hardly wait till morning to get the chance to see the horses – The Arabian horse that was born here in the desert sand and graveled field, living in sweltering heat and night frost, coping with sandstorms and fox attacks, to canter beside the camel caravans and goat herds.

The location is an area about 720 sq km, also known as Valley of the Moon, from which the Red sea is only 50 kilometers. The landscape is ruled by the fascinating and colorful sandstone formations and granite rocks emerging from the yellow, red or white sand, scattered by some drought-resistant shrubs. The local population are the Bedouins. The traditionally nomadic people flexibly adapts to the modern world: they run tourism businesses offering a jeep safari, scrambling, camel riding etc, keeping their own culture and their permanent motivation to move on. Horse riding is open only for experienced riders, as they horses are spirited, forward-going and well-trained. There is no fixed itinerary, just a rough plan, that can change depending on the weather, the riders' and horses' condition. The tour guides have an excellent knowledge of the terrain, they were born, grew up there, so their knowledge is unquestionable. The group can number up to ten people, but in this case – since February is still considered dead season –, only an English rider, Tim shares this unforgettable adventure with me (the company's first Hungarian guest).

My little bay horse, Sheriff

After breakfast, we go out to the stables, and first we have a tea at the rest stop next to the saddle room, before the horses will have distributed. I see about 15 horses in a large paddock, on one side there are some shelters providing shade for them when needed. I get a young, bay, 6-years-old gelding, Sheriff – he looks nice at first sight. Tim has a chestnut mare with a stripe and three socks. The tour guide's horse is similar, a striped chestnut gelding with two socks. First, all the horses are tacked up by the grooms to show what they expect from us in the future. The equipment is in English style, they use synthetic Wintec tour saddles in good condition. Martingales are on each horse, and two saddle pads are put on each other – to make more comfortable for the horse, they say. The upper one has a pocket behind the saddle on each side to carry what is needed during the day, like a small bottle of water, sunscreen etc. The bridles are put over the halters in order to make the tying up easier during the stops. Tim

is not familiar with using martingale so he asks help for tacking – and all over the week he is well served without any problems. Fortunately, I am allowed to handle my horse – I prefer do it myself.

We leave after nine o'clock in the bright sunshine, we lead the horses for a few minutes by foot to warm up them. We cross a railway going under a low and narrow tunnel – the horses follow us without hesitation –, we tighten the girth and we mount the horse. Our tour guide, Salem tells us a few things: trot, canter, gallop are also verbally indicated before starting, each horse is well trained, ready to react to the aids, so none of them needs special instruction. The first day is for getting harmonized the horse and the rider. Sheriff at once finds his way into my heart, he has a very good, active walk, he is forward-going, spirited, attentive and obedient, taking over immediately what I am asking. He also has confidence in me, soon he asks for permission to pee – it is given. Second day is for the first canter, and the third afternoon is for the first fast gallop. He reacts excellent both for lengthening and halting. I feel that in some cases he may overtake the guide's horse, Mishmish (means "apricot" in Arabic), but instead, he is remaining behind nicely according to my request. Smart and skilled, fast and fit, hard and perky – I loved Sheriff.

Trip in three à la Bedouin

We allow the horse walking a lot, while we are gazing the stunning landscape, the rock formations. Narrow canyons are replaced by the vast, flat, sand fields and then large stones are turning up again. The ground is ideal for the three horses, they do not sink into the elastic sand, it keeps them. Sometimes we get a rocky, graveled part, but no one lasts long. The yellow, red and white sand rules mostly the terrain, scattered by some scrubby shrubs. Over here, there is no reason to fear bumping in a bending branch – that is for sure. During the tour, we are accompanied by Aziz, Salem's agile Persian greyhound from the ancient Saluki local breed, and its dog fellow – they chase lizards, birds, play together meanwhile. Two support jeeps carry the riders' and horses' stuff, their drivers, Faraj and Fawaz prepare us the midday stops and the overnight camps, and bring the necessary infrastructure, tents, food for people and animals and our luggage. In the evenings, Saleem, the leader of the Bedouin travel agency, visit us by jeep with his wife or a friend, talking, giving company to us, playing music by the campfire.

In the mornings we spend 2-3 hours sitting in the saddle, then we get a longer rest around midday followed by another 2-3 hours ride till dusk. The horses get to eat three times a day: hay, wheat and oats. Tying up is ingenious: as sand is everywhere, a cca. half meter long metal rod is beaten down by a hammer vertically into the ground, and a 2-3 meters long, plastic covered chain is attached it – that is switched to the halter. For many tough ground in Hungary this would be less functional, but here this is perfectly good. Horses get rugs for the night, although the air is not so cool, the minimum temperature is around 5 °C in these February times. Daytime we have up to 20-25 °C. We get only a few drops of rain falls, on one night (since we are at the end of the rainy period), but the next day the desert gives us – as a present – some beautiful white, rose and yellow flowers. Once, we encounter some mud on the floor left from a flood, and the horses are drawing back – it seems that they rarely walk on a slippery terrain.

Fox attack by night, sandstorm by day

I prefer spending the nights outside the tents, next to the campfire. My dream is kept by the billion stars and bright moon lighting that is twice stronger than at home. And, by the dogs as it turns out: on Thursday after midnight some sharp barking woke us, the horses are excited

and trotting around. Our leaders look at what's happening: fox eyes are flashing in the dark. The dogs do what they are for, they drive away the intruders – who are attracted by the rest of the food. In the morning we see a lot of fox tracks around the camp, as an evidence that I did not dream the whole thing.

In the middle of the week, one morning the wind is getting stronger, carries the sand, and a depressing haze is descending upon us after the former brilliant sunshine. The permanent covering of the bowls immediately becomes rational to us. The day's riding route is flexibly redesigned and shortened by the guide. We tie a scarf in front of our faces like the local people do, but I still find some sand between the teeth. The horses do not become nervous, they get accustomed to this type of weather that is unusual for the Europeans, they are steadily going forward, resting up at midday turning the buttocks towards the wind and sand. The next day, fortunately, wind is gone, good weather returns. We are already able to appreciate it.

One afternoon, we meet some local people who are driving up their camels to find some field to graze. Their dogs run towards us, ready to defend the herd from us. The horses and camels do not get upset, they almost ignore each other, but the dogs insist to follow us and constantly setting on Salem's dog. The guide has enough of that, turns back galloping towards the dogs, trying to keeping away them, but they do not retire. Tim's horse and my Sherif are staying calm and we can handle them without any problem, although they are dancing a little under the saddle. Salem finally indicate canter, then gallop for us, so after a while the foreign dogs do not get a chance to keep the pace with us – except Aziz.

Adventures in the Bedouin desert in my dear Sheriff's saddle... It was a truly memorable riding tour. Despite that it lasted only one week, the experience is for a lifetime.

Vajda Boglárka

Text in the blue box:

For the export of horses from Jordan, it is necessary the agreement of the immigrating country, the health book from Jordanian veterinary with blood test, vaccines, detailed description of the horse. In Saudi-Arabia, the procedure is similar: owner or carrier fills "Quarantine application form" exports permit indicating the date he/she wishes to send his animal(s). According to the request, the stables available etc., the veterinary advisor to the CVO (Chief Veterinary Officer) on horses' import/export assigns the horses to quarantine stable, working on the principle of all in-all out. Horses are introduced in the quarantine stable, representative official of federal government carry out identity check, copy of passport kept at the office. Schedule of testing and sampling performed by private veterinarians taken to laboratory. Results are sent to Import/export Office, and the Health Export Certificate is signed by CVO. The required documents include the passport, the application form for the health tests, the laboratory results, the certificate of the required vaccinations, request form for the health certificate and the identity check.