

Building on UAE history



Abu Dhabi's oldest fort is getting a facelift ahead of next month's Qasr Al Hosn Festival, reports *Reem Buhazza*

Flanked by skyscrapers in the heart of Abu Dhabi stands Qasr Al Hosn, the capital's oldest architectural structure.

Also known as the White Fort, the iconic building was constructed as a watchtower in the mid-1700s by the Bani Yas tribes, and later became the first royal palace of the ruling Al Nahyan family.

A team of historians, architects and conservation experts are now working to remove the gypsum and cement that was applied to conserve the historic fort in the 1980s: the aim is to reveal the original coral and sea stone used in its traditional construction.

The secretive project will be unveiled by Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority at this year's Qasr Al Hosn Festival, where parts of the historic structure will be open to the public for guided tours.

"Before we can take the steps to conserve the site, we have to investigate how the fort developed over time, identify what the conservation issues are, outline a conservation management plan, then figure out the necessary strategies and policies," explains archaeologist Peter Sheehan, who has been involved in the Qasr Al Hosn project since 2007. "To value something, you first need to understand it. When the public becomes familiar with historical buildings such as Qasr Al Hosn, they will start to value and look after them."

"We are very keen to keep people informed about historical sites such as Qasr Al Hosn. There are 150 historic buildings in the Emirates, which most people don't know about. The oldest structure in the country is a

neolithic stone hut from 5000 BC that lies on Dalma Island. There is also a seventh-century monastery built by monks on Bani Yas, and whole villages from the Bronze Age in Al Ain."

Along with a chance to witness the renovation of the fort, one of the main

attractions at this year's festival is equestrian stage show 'Cavalia', created by Cirque du Soleil co-founder Normand Latourelle. The production, which has toured worldwide since its inception a decade ago, features more than 40 trained horses alongside a cast of performers and musicians.

"This show has drawn more than four million spectators worldwide, and will be making its Middle East debut at the Qasr Al Hosn festival," Normand tells 7DAYS. "The show is a unique theatrical experience that features a mix of performance art and equestrian art. "The show has undergone a natural evolution in the past 10 years, but this is the first time we have adapted the show to a local culture. UAE culture is very rich, and horses are an important part of the culture, so I welcomed the challenge. We integrated Emirati culture into the show with Arabic songs, dialogue and even Emirati-inspired costumes. I think people will fall in love with this unique production."

This year's Qasr Al Hosn festival runs from February 20 until March 1. Tickets for Cavalia start at Dhs250. For info, see cavalia.net and qasralhosnfestival.ae.

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FACELIFT: The cement applied in the 1980s to protect the fort is now being removed, with festival visitors given the chance to watch the conservation experts at work

