

# Chance to get up close to history

Visitors can see the 250-year-old stones of watch tower during Qasr Al Hosn Festival from Feb 20 to March 1

**Silvia Radan**

ABU DHABI — The 250-year-old stones that went into the construction of Abu Dhabi's oldest building, Qasr Al Hosn Watch Tower, will be seen for the first time in decades,

during the second annual Qasr Al Hosn Festival.

Daily guided tours of the inner courtyard of the historical fort will give visitors an understanding of the history of the building and the restoration work that is being done.

"I really can't tell how many years it will take to complete the restora-

tion. It is a complex business! We are still understanding the building and just started the execution process," said Peter Sheehan, historic buildings manager at the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (ADTCA).

ADTCA began the process of returning Qasr Al Hosn to its former glory in 2007. In these past five years, teams of researchers, architects and historians mostly tried to understand the building and what might be beyond the facade.

"We have some indications that there is a building under the ground, built by Shaikh Shakhboub bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and this is one more thing we have to look into," mentioned Sheehan.

Only recently, parts of the outer wall of Qasr Al Hosn and a strip of the 18th century Watch Tower had the cement removed.

"This was added in the 1980s for conservation purposes, but it had a bad effect on the structure. Because the building is very close to underground water, the cement walls retains moisture and it is too strong for the original materials used in construction — corals and sea stones," explained Sheehan.

During the Qasr Al Hosn Festival, visitors will see for the first time these original stone structures.

Taking place from February 20 till March 1, the festival will follow much into its inaugural 2013 outline. The Emirati heritage will be celebrated outdoors with exhibitions split into Desert, Sea, Oasis and Abu Dhabi Island areas, showcasing live demonstration of dhow building, handicrafts, and exhibition of traditional medicinal herbs, pearl hunting or desert nomad living.

"Qasr Al Hosn celebrates over



The 250-year-old stones on the wall of Qasr Al Hosn's Watch Tower.

tion. It is a complex business! We are still understanding the building and just started the execution process," said Peter Sheehan, historic buildings manager at the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (ADTCA).

ADTCA began the process of returning Qasr Al Hosn to its former glory in 2007. In these past five years, teams of researchers, architects and historians mostly tried to understand the building and what might be beyond the facade.

"We have some indications that there is a building under the ground, built by Shaikh Shakhboub bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and this is one more thing we have to look into," mentioned Sheehan.

Only recently, parts of the outer wall of Qasr Al Hosn and a strip of the 18th century Watch Tower had the cement removed.

"This was added in the 1980s for conservation purposes, but it had a bad effect on the structure. Because the building is very close to underground water, the cement walls retains moisture and it is too strong for the original materials used in construction — corals and sea stones," explained Sheehan.

During the Qasr Al Hosn Festival, visitors will see for the first time these original stone structures.

Taking place from February 20 till March 1, the festival will follow much into its inaugural 2013 outline. The Emirati heritage will be celebrated outdoors with exhibitions split into Desert, Sea, Oasis and Abu Dhabi Island areas, showcasing live demonstration of dhow building, handicrafts, and exhibition of traditional medicinal herbs, pearl hunting or desert nomad living.

"Qasr Al Hosn celebrates over

250 years of Abu Dhabi history! It narrates the story of Abu Dhabi and the festival is a golden opportunity to learn about this history," said Mubarak Al Muhairi, Director-General of the ADTCA.

#### **Other attractions**

Apart from the fort itself, the National Consultative Council Chamber, adjacent to Qasr Al Hosn's walls, where many historical decisions were made, will also be opened to the public for the first time.

The nearby modern Cultural Foundation, built in the 1960s style, where some of Abu Dhabi's first theatre stage, art "cinema" (a video room, in fact) and art exhibition space took shape, will also be open during the festival, staging some of the live performances, poetry recitals and films made by emerging Emirati artists.

A permanent exhibition will open at the start of the festival, at the Qasr Al Hosn Centre, showcasing the fort's history, and the history of

the island and its people through old photographs and oral narratives.

And then there is Cavalia, the special show considered one of the main highlights of the festival. Created by Cirque du Soleil co-founder Normand Latourelle, Cavalia will bring on a special stage — built in one of the world's biggest tents that will be set on the festival grounds — 50 horses and 50 performing artists, executing every equestrian trick there is in the most artistic and acrobatic manner.

*silvia@khaleejtimes.com*



Qasr Al Hosn Festival's 'Sea' area with the Cultural Foundation in the background. — Supplied photos