

Dubai Ruler visits Qasr Al Hosn



Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, yesterday visited Qasr Al Hosn in Abu Dhabi. He was shown around the fort by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Silvia Razgova / Crown Prince Court – Abu Dhabi

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focus

Qasr Al Hosn Festival

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The old guard's tales of the fort

No houses nearby, 20 rupees a month pay and his job interview was target shooting – Abu Dhabi's old fort was certainly different when Hathboor Mohammed Kaddas Al Romaihi began as a guard in 1950. He tells his tales of a simpler life to **Asmaa Saif Al Hameli and Rym Ghazal**

Sitting on palm-frond rugs, Hathboor Mohammed Kaddas Al Romaihi, 80, prepares to narrate stories of the past from his majlis. Anyone who visits Hathboor's booth at this year's Qasr Al Hosn Festival also will get to see some photos of the past that are especially dear to his heart.

They are prints of old photos of the fort.

When Hathboor was 16 he worked as a guard at the royal palace fort, when Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan was Ruler of Abu Dhabi.

"At that time, there weren't any organised training programmes as there were no schools," he recalls. To become a guard, applicants had first to seek permission from the Sheikh, who then had them trained by shooting at targets.

There were about 16 guards protecting Qasr Al Hosn from potential threats. Each man would be on duty for eight hours a day.

"There were problems with shifts," Hathboor says. "Some people would stay for just two to three months and leave."

But don't think his guard duties meant he had to stand outside the fort as still as a statue, he says. "I would stand, sit, eat, move here and there. The job itself was not difficult."

It was 1950 when the teenage boy became a guard. Abu Dhabi was a very different place, with Qasr Al Hosn dominating the landscape. "The fort sparkled, even miles away. It was extremely white back then and greenery filled the area," he recalls. "There were no houses next to the fort, they were much farther away."

For his duties, Hathboor could expect to earn from 20 to 30 Gulf rupees. "Do you know, 10 rupees was sufficient to feed my family for a month," he asks. Compared with younger generations, the eating habits and lifestyle of those from earlier days seem frugal.

"I only had one meal a day. We quenched our thirst by drinking tea and coffee. I also ate a lot of dates, day and night."

Despite his advanced years, Hathboor seems youthful in spirit and in good health. He explains his secret: "traditional medicine. I cure whatever ailments I get using herbs and traditional ways."

While that life might seem harsh and difficult today, he says the people of Abu Dhabi lived in a friendly environment.

Usually after sunset, the royals would sit around a wood fire for two to three hours and discuss important matters. Once, he recalls, there was a fight.

When the two combatants refused to reconcile, they were brought in front of Sheikh Shakhbut to resolve the matter. In one case, Hathboor's father, Mohammed Kaddas, whose position was similar to that of a judge, intervened to solve the problem.

"My father recited a poem and the issue was solved immediately," he says proudly. He still remembers the words vividly.

*Some people, by nature, do not listen
Nor do they return the greeting
Unless a law or a command by a ruler.*

Those who refused to forgive an offender were also punished, he says. They were to remain standing for 24 hours under the hot sun. "During the 24 hours, the Sheikh would command people to talk or show sympathy towards such people."

After five years as a guard, he gave up the job. It was the last time he went into the fort.

"Later on, I started exploring other fields such as electrical work, mechanics, being a fireman and hunting," he says with a smile. His favourite sport is falconry, a skill that made him famous during the time of the nation's founding father, Sheikh Zayed.

"I can make a falcon come to me and just sit next to me. People are always amazed."

His young audience at the Qasr Al Hosn festival were surprised to



Hathboor Mohammed Kaddas Al Romaihi recalls his days as a guard at the fort in the 1950s, and tells stories about life then at Qasr Al Hosn Festival yesterday. Ravindrath K / The National



Jumaa Mohammed Hathboor Al Romaihi, 76, left, is at the Qasr Al Hosn Festival recalling his days as a fisherman. He grew up in a traditional Arish home made of palm fronds, Mousa Al Marzooqi / The National. Above, the palace fort before the transformation of Abu Dhabi. Courtesy Qasr Al Hosn

learn there was a cinema in those days in Tarif near Mirfa.

"Yes, we had a cinema. Before the sunset, I would play films for people," he says. "What types of movie, uncle?" asks one of the audience.

Movies about wars, he recalls, and sometimes Indian movies with dance moves.

Long past official retirement age, Hathboor continues to work as an instructor on Al Samalyia Island, just off the coast of the city. "I teach horse riding, swimming and hunting."

Jumaa Mohammed Hathboor Al Romaihi is Hathboor's cousin and, like him, has tried almost everything at some point of his life, but with the sea his first and last love.

"I am a man of the sea, I know everything there is to know about the sea and its vessels," says Jumaa, 76, who sports a pair of gold Ray-Ban sunglasses as well as a large, perfect

smile. Sitting inside a dhow whose construction he designed and supervised, Jumaa was also invited to be one of the storytellers of the past in the festival.

The fort holds a special place in his heart, as it was the structure he would always see first as he arrived at Abu Dhabi island from the sea.

"It is a symbol of home to me. Wherever I sailed off in search of fish, I would always feel the happiest when I was back here."

Qasr Al Hosn is more than just a landmark, it is part of his life. His older brother, Shaif, was also one of the personal guards and companions of Sheikh Shakhbut and still has a lot of stories to tell about his time there.

"My brother is still alive but has suffered a major stroke," Jumaa says. "I remember him telling me it was always safe, and that a member from each tribe always had a pres-

ence in Sheikh Shakhbut's court." Jumaa and his family, four boys and five girls, lived in Arish homes made of palm fronds, until Sheikh Saeed bin Shakhbut, who was head of the municipality, built them houses.

"We were all one big family. Where everyone knew the other, and we all had small pieces of land next to each other. No one wanted too much, just the basics, and shared the rest," he said.

Marwah Island is home to the old sailor, who still goes there for the weekend and takes his grandchildren with him.

"It is never too early to become a seaman. I was 7 when I went out to sea and fished with the older men of my tribe," he says.

He worked at Das Island, he would get only two days off every month.

"We worked really hard back then. Our way of life brought us all together. Tribalism didn't matter. There was a mutual understanding," he says.

Demonstrating with his hands, Jumaa showed how a whole family would share small pieces of bread, while the men would keep a small piece in their kandura and nibble on it through the day.

"We made sure our women and children ate first, we ate the leftovers. That is how it was done," he says.

One of the things he is especially proud of is the time he was a sea captain.

"I brought in and docked the first ship, a Kuwaiti one, at Zayed Port when it officially opened," recalls Jumaa, who by then was a captain.

"That was back in 1972 when Sheikh Zayed inaugurated Mina Zayed, the city's first deepwater port."

He says he is one of the men who suggested to the late founding father that a heritage club should be set up to preserve the art and crafts-

manship of making dhows and knowledge about the sea and its sailors.

"We have to save our heritage, and make our new generation love and live it. Not enough to just talk about heritage. It should be a way of life," he says. "It still is for me. I would rather sleep on a dhow any day over sleeping inside a house," he says, pointing to a rough bed made of ropes as part of the dhow.

"The more senior slept up here, the rest slept on the floor of the dhow," he laughs.

Neither of the Al Romaihis would like to go back to the old days. Both recall "hard times" where there was barely any food and water.

Nonetheless, they have fond memories of the old friends, and a time where taking up any profession was possible.

"I tried everything," says Hathboor. "As my name implies, Hathboor means a free soul."

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