



GAZELLE

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مجموعتنا وثني للتاريخ والطبيعي



Akhal-Teke Horse. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrenčič

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Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Sonja Lavrenčič, Christine Verreydt, Mairead Porter, Judy Roberts, Rowland Browne, Valerie Chalmers, and MaryAnne Pardoe

Members' Night: Our Next Speakers

Angela Manthorpe – “Diving – more than just pretty reefs”
Stephen Manthorpe – “Tajikistan”

Stephen & Angela Manthorpe first arrived in the UAE in 1992, lured to the Emirates by the photos of wadis and waterfalls in the book “Dubai – Gateway to the Gulf” that they were handed by their prospective employer. One of the first organizations they joined on arriving was the DNHG, which opened up the interesting world of the UAE's desert and mountains and, in the same year, they took up scuba diving. Firm believers in the fact that ‘you only live once’, they have interspersed their working lives with occasional ‘travel breaks’ – setting off with their rucksacks to explore the world. In late 2009 they quit their jobs in Dubai and embarked on a 2-year break, with the intention of seeing some of the world's best natural scenery, historical and cultural destinations and to dive the top scuba diving sites. The December talks will cover 2 aspects of this most recent trip – diving (but not just on pretty reefs) and travels in the Central Asian country of Tajikistan.

Gary Feulner – “Living and learning in the hill country of Nepal”

DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner is the sponsor of an English medium primary school in the hill country of Nepal, where he now visits for 2-3 months each year. The school was founded by former DNHG member Narayan Karki and was our host for DNHG field trips in 2012 and 2013 aimed at exploring the hill country environment and experiencing village life.

Gary will talk about hill country life and environment and about the start-up of the school.

Member News: Stamps!

Dubai resident and artist Judy Roberts, who designed the DNHG's gazelle logo more than 25 years ago, has recently produced a Limited Edition collection of the first-day covers of the stamps which she designed for the UAE. The collection is limited to 15 of each design. The theme is natural history and the stamps include birds, wild cats, wild flowers, insects and butterflies. Anyone interested in purchasing one of these collections, mounted with GPA information sheet (AED 650 each), should email Judy at jerdx@hotmai.com and/or visit her site at: www.artslant.com/global/artists/show/49450-judy-roberts.



Above: Stamps designed by Judy Roberts. Photo Credit: Judy Roberts

Akhal-Teke Horses in Turkmenistan

As a horse lover, the highlight of the trip to Turkmenistan was a visit to the Akhal-Teke horse stud ranch. At first the ranch seemed to house only brood mares heavy in foal, many of which were in old and in poor condition. After being greeted by the owner who welcomed us in typical Turkmenistan style of generous hospitality, he showed us the “cream of the crop” at the stud ranch: the Akhal-Teke youngsters and stallions. These horses were fine specimens of the pride of the nation, with their fineness of bone, natural high noble heads which they carried distinctively and with an astonishing “metallic” sheen to their coats.

They were bred for their ability to adapt to the severe climatic conditions typical of Turkmenistan and they are renowned for their speed and endurance. This breed was historically used in the final fruitless battle against the might of the Russian invasion in 1881. During the Soviet occupation they were considered too delicate to be used as working horses and were interbred with sturdier Russian horses or used as meat.

To preserve the breed many owners released the horses into the wilderness. The breed is now slowly recovering, although there are currently still only about 6,600 Akhal-Teke horses in the world. The cost of a purebred is about 25,000 USD. Due to their natural athleticism and sage temperament they are now used as sport horses (for example, in dressage, jumping, eventing and endurance).

Contributed by Rowland Browne



Above: Akhal-Teke Horse. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrenčič



Above: Clay Pot found buried at the site. Photo Credit: Mairead Porter

Margush Archaeology in Turkmenistan

This Bronze Age site is located at the northern end of the Oasis in Mary in east Turkmenistan – and it is one of the largest in Central Asia. Margush (lowland) or Margiana (Greek name) has been excavated since the 1970s and is a well preserved site beneath the desert sands. Professor Sarianidi argues that this complex was a major centre of ancient civilisation and that it may have been the birth place of Zoroastrianism. Climatic change and progressive desertification caused the abandonment of the area.

We were truly amazed at the remains we could see. There were double ovens, one for sacrifice and the other for regular cooking, a fire temple, a palace complex with a throne room, a burial preparation room and a necropolis with 3,000 burials plus other more elaborate tombs and one large grave with chariot wheel and bronze jar which may have been a royal tomb. There were thousands of clay pots plus the kilns with slag where these were made.

Contributed by Mairead Porter

Field Trip Report

Kow Ata Cave in Turkmenistan

One of the highlights of our trip was the visit to an underground cave with a sulphurous lake that maintains a constant temperature of 33 to 37 deg C all year. Kow Ata, meaning Father of the Lakes, is situated in the mountains about an hour outside Ashgabat city and we were able to swim in the (supposedly) medicinal, somewhat malodorous, waters. The high sulphate content turned all my silver bracelets black within a few minutes, but they have gradually resumed their original colour since. To access the water we climbed down numerous steep steps, hastily cut into the rock to allow minimum interference to the population of 400,000 bats - unfortunately the latest estimate puts the bat population at only 10% of this figure now. Cleansed and refreshed, we returned to the surface for lunch amongst the population of small round-faced Turkmeni cats in the local restaurant.

Contributed by MaryAnne Pardoe



Kow Ata Cave. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrenčič

Darvaza Crater in Turkmenistan

The highlight of our trip was camping in the Karakum desert next to Darvaza burning crater.

The entire area is rich in natural gas and during Soviet drilling in 1971 the ground collapsed, exposing a hole of approximately 70 meter diameter leaking methane gas. To dispose of poisonous gas that threatened an ecological catastrophe they decided to burn it off, estimating that the fire would die naturally in few days.

The gas is still burning today, more the 40 days later. Apparently the government has some half-hearted plans to extinguish the fire and start exploiting the gas, but no concrete plans were made until now. In the middle of the desert and at 260 km of a bumpy partially off road drive from Ashgabat the place has limited touristic potential.

The sight of the crater is spectacular, especially at night and justifies



Above: Darvaza Crater. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrenčič

the local nick name: The door to hell. At the site we met a National Geographic team that was undertaking some "experiments" and trying to establish if there are any live organisms, such as methane eating bacteria, at the bottom of the crater. Interestingly enough they've measured that the maximum temperature at the center of the bottom of the crater is 45 degrees C while at the upper edge of the crater it reached 100 degrees C – which might be explained by the movement of the air inside the crater.

Contributed by Sonja Lavrenčič

Nokhur Village in Turkmenistan

Rural Nokhur village lies so close to the Iran border that an additional permit is needed to visit the village. Not more than a couple of hours drive from the capital Ashgabat Nokhur remained isolated in the mountains that separate Iran and Turkmenistan, preserving the traditions and a specific Turkmeni dialect. Rural inhabitants claim their ancestry from Alexander The Great and do not mingle – villagers traditionally merry among themselves, even when closely related. The name of the village has entered the vocabulary as synonymous for everything backwards and rural. Despite the reputation the village is quite rich, the old decaying mud brick houses are being replaced with ostentatious villas, the villagers have financed new tarmac road connection with the main Ashgabat road and the closely knit community is often compared to that of Jews.

There are no hotels in Nokhur and we stayed with a local family of 'kinomekanik Gaib' who used to be the cameraman in Soviet film industry, hence the nickname. Now retired, he gladly hosts small groups in his traditional 4-bedroom house. The house has hardly any furniture, apart from a vividly hand-painted wardrobe in the master bedroom and ubiquitous flat-screen satellite TV on the main room wall. Traditional life is lived on the floor, covered with colourful traditional Turkmen carpets. Home-cooked meals are served on a big tablecloth spread in the middle of the room. In the evening rooms turn into bedrooms by rolling out flat mattresses and blankets.

One of the main attractions of the village is the local cemetery. The inhabitants are Muslim. Islam is one of the two official religions in Turkmenistan, the other one being Christian Orthodox. All other religions are banned and prosecuted. However, the cemetery reveals the animistic side of people. Wooden tomb columns are characteristically decorated with mountain goat horns, often more than one and decorated with colourful handkerchiefs and scarves. The horns are protecting the deceased from evil



Above: Tomb Columns in Nakhur Village. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrenčič

spirits, but we didn't manage to decipher the meaning of the scarves. A short walk up the hill is a 'Muslim' shrine of Qyz Bibi, a small cave in the side of the mountain. Despite the small size of the cave, villagers believe that it served as a hiding place of local virgins during the Alexander's incursions. Qyz Bibi is also worshipped as the pre-Islamic patroness of women and goddess of fertility. The branches of the shrubs near the cave are covered with knotted pieces of fabric, signifying a wish for a child. Intriguing is a small collection of stone fossils in front of the cave. Villagers believe that these are sacred stones brought by hiding virgins and make no connection with fossilized remains of prehistoric animals.

Contributed by Sonja Lavrenčič

Upcoming Field Trip

Discover Georgia—25th to 31st May 2014

DAY 1.

Start exploring Georgia from Dmanisi - the place where hominids (the oldest links to modern man found outside Africa) lived 1.8 million years ago and also see the fossils of endangered animals.

The same day you will also visit the Antique period Cave-town Uplistsikhe (IX c. BC. – XV c. AD.) with its impressive infrastructure.

DAY 2.

Tbilisi... with its charm, history, festivals, events... and what else not! Explore it yourself on the holiday of Georgia's Independence Day!

DAY 3.

Highlands in Caucasus... Mount Kazbegi (5034 m)...

Gergeti-Trinity (XIV c. AD) ... Stunning views... Wonderful dinner... Just enjoy!

DAY 4.

Kakheti – the birthplace of wine...

In Tsinandali - enjoy walking in the Dendro-park, see the museum and taste the wines from the winery...

In Telavi - taste the traditional mountain beer at lunch under a 900 year old plane tree...

In Ikalto - see the ruins of the ancient Academy where students were taught viticulture and enology next to other sciences...

At the farmer's house - make Georgian dishes yourself and taste home-made wines...

Feeling happy? You are in Kakheti!

DAY 5.

Let's escape in the nature today.

Hiking in the forest along the river up to the 40 metre waterfall (12 km. to and back).

And enjoy the picnic in the wonderful environment...

DAY 6.

Time for summing up Georgian tour...

What's left?

Some more interesting historical places with wonderful views... (Nekresi- IV -XVI cc)

Some more wine tasting in a unique tunnel-winery hewn under the rock...

Some more time for relaxing at the Ilia Lake ...

And... a farewell Dinner in the castle above the lake.

DAY 7.

Good-bye, Georgia...

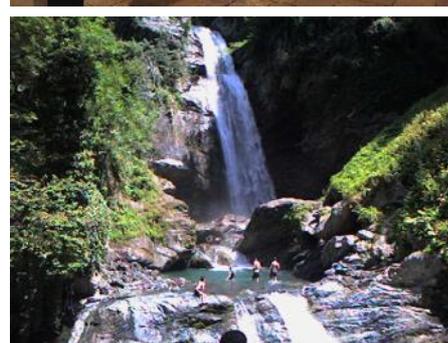
Departure

Maximum amount of people in the group: 12/14

Price per person: 780 Euros

If you are interested, please contact Christine Verreydt who will be the coordinator for this trip at christineverr@hotmail.com (her mobile number 050 8974625 will only be in use from 20 December 2013 onwards as she is currently abroad).

Itinerary and accompanying photos provided by Christine Verreydt



DNHG Recorders

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Seashells, Birds and Mammals - Recorders needed!

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Are You a Techie with Time?

The website sub-committee would like to find volunteers who can help with maintenance of the on-line newsletter, and to upload the wealth of information and photographs from past *Gazelles*. Full training will be given. Contact any Committee person - we will be very pleased to hear from you!

Additional Photos



Counterclockwise, starting above: Caucasian Mountains; Mt. Kazbegi; Tblisi; Picnic in the river; Kakheti Wine Tour.

Photos provided by Christine Verreydt



Below: Darvaza Gas Crater. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrenčič



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, 7.30 for 8.00pm

Dec 08 Members' Night: Gary Feulner, Angela and Stephen Manthorpe

Upcoming Field Trips (Members Only)

Georgia (Details TBA)

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email circular

DNHG COMMITTEE 2013

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to: gazelleeditor@gmail.com
(Arial 10 justified).

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. Membership is valid from Sep 2013 to Sep 2014. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to **HSBC** account no. 030100242001. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Payment can also be made by cash deposit at a bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE90020000030100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.