

## Winter equine adventures in Morocco

Arabic equine life through the eye of a German dressage rider, conversation with Nadine Theis

I have spent the first days of the year in the land of the Arabic horses, ancestors of sport horses today. In the city and the nearby of Marrakesh I came across many horses, mules and donkeys mostly working animals. They carried products or carriages with tourist, clapping trough the stones of the old pavement of Marrakesh. I only spent a few days in the country, thus I could not gain a thorough insight into the equine life but I found a wonderful stables at the shore of the Atlantic Ocean by Essaouira, where I participated in a special horse-riding by the shore. To my greatest surprise our guide was a blonde haired, fair skinned girl, of whom it soon turned out that she is a German dressage rider who studies equine science and does her professional training there. During our ride we immersed into a conversation about her life in Morocco and her equine experiences, that I now would like to share with the readers.

**What does a German dressage rider do in a Moroccan riding school by the ocean shore?**

I'm taking care of the Ranch horses. I did horse riding all my life but after finishing school I packed my backpack and moved to Asia. That's how I started working with horses all over the world, I guided horse treks in Cambodia, gave riding lessons on a pony farm in Laos and took care of amazing dressage and showjumping horses in Japan. The horses enabled me a awesome way of living and working abroad so combining travelling and horse riding got my lifestyle the last three years. In February 2018 I went on a roadtrip through South Europe and North Africa in my 40-years old VW-bus accompanied just by my dog and that's how I came to Morocco first time. A few weeks later I visited Ranch Diabat as a client however I fall so in love with the place and especially the horses that I decided to stay. At the beginning I just helped with the daily stable routine but since three months I'm permanent employee.

**Could you tell us about the horses at your stables? What kind of work they do, what are they mainly used for?**

The horses are mostly used for treks to the beach with clients of all levels. The Ranch also offers several day treks called Randonnes for example through Sahara desert, along the Atlantic coastline or in the mountains and riding lessons are given in the arena. New horses are getting trained by us guides for a long time before we make them available for the clients that's how we ensure safe rides on well-adjusted, calm, experienced horses. The work embraces ground work, longing, riding in the arena and the diverse countryside of Essaouira, the beach, the mountains or the forest.

**It should be pretty difficult as a female rider in a traditionally male focused society. How could you make yourself accepted and recognised by your colleagues, how could you reach their respect as the sole woman in the stables?**

Respect is something you need to earn especially as a woman in a male-dominated world as in North Africa. Sometimes I still have to prove myself and my competencies and of course in a different way a Moroccan man would ever need to. It's the time that showed them that they can count on me not only as a responsible colleague but more important as a trustable friend. I gained their acceptance, trust and respect by working harder and longer than them. By not hesitating to do hard physical work, by riding the difficult horses, by dealing with problems when they appear, by not giving up doesn't matter how hard a day was and by helping them. I'm the first one in the morning to feed the horses and usually the last one in the evening. I don't want to get treated differently just because I'm a girl from Germany. I'm doing the same job as the ranch boys, we're eating the same food, getting the same salary and if we keep combining our knowledge about horses we're building the best team for the Ranch, the clients and especially the animals.

**What kind of horses do you keep in the stables? Could you tell us about the Arabic horses, their temperament and physical attributes?**

Ranch Diabat keeps the traditional Arab-Berber horses, a breed that combines the fiery, energetic temperament of the Arab horses with the rugged, strong Berber horses. These horses usually stand around 1.47-1.57 m but appear to grow bigger the last years of breeding. They are extremely persevering, able to work many hours the day without getting tired, carrying riders of all weight (but of course we have a maximum weight of 90 kg for the riding) and can walk in different terrain such as the beach, the steeply, stony mountains or the forest. Especially the typically attentively stallions are perfectly suitable for Randonnees of several days while the mares which are congenitally provided with strong characters are great companions for nice beach rides for riders of all levels. Ranch Diabat is the only ranch in the region of Essaouira that keeps stallions as well as mares and also practices continuous breeding. We respect all our horses in their needs and nature so we can present the clients happy and relaxed horses.

**How do you see the equine life of the country? Is it for the rich only or average people can also do it?**

I see Morocco as a very proud equestrian nation that loves to introduce strangers in their way of keeping and riding horses. Especially the stallions used for the famous show "Fantasia" get admired and venerated for their beauty, elegance and pride. Also on Ranch Diabat our clients can find some former Fantasia horses and riding this amazing, beautiful and sensitive horse was a life-changing experience for me. Horse riding just practiced as a hobby is very rare in Morocco and reserved for rich people. The average people owning horses use them to earn money such as farmers, carriage-drivers or tradesmen and not as a partner in sport or even a companion like in my country. Many families don't even have enough money to survive and send their children to school so of course it's beyond all questions to keep animals for fun.

**Let's talk about those horses who do tough work for their owners to get by. How do those dozens of horses, mules and donkeys live whom I see in front of the carriages?**

Working animals such as horses, donkeys and mules exist to do their job. Many of them are in a horrible condition and suffer a lot of pain everyday. I saw a lot of donkeys in front of carriages in the crazy, busy traffic of Marrakech risking their lives everyday, I saw mules carrying weight that's double of their own up the steeply, high

mountains and I saw horses spending all their pitiful lives working under the hot sun on the fields without any access to water. And still it's easy to judge their owners but it's difficult to find a good solution for this poor animals as well as for their poor owners. So back to the actual question, yes, the owners of this animals respect their animals as long as they are able to do their job properly.

**How do you see in such a traditional equine nation, which part is in majority, those keeping horses for sport, hobby or those who keep them for work?**

Mostly all of the horses in Morocco are kept for working, to make money for their owners. Also the horses from our Ranch are working animals because they carry riders during riding lessons, beach rides or long treks and the clients in turn ensure their food and the staff's salary with their money. Though with the difference that we respect our horses, enabling them on one hand the exercise they need and on the other hand enough breaks especially after injuries. But because the majority of the Moroccan folk are low-paid, hard-working people struggling to feed their own families, horse riding as a hobby is very rare and as mentioned before mostly reserved for rich people. Nonetheless horse riding builds a big part of the Moroccan history so the methods and secrets of breeding and riding proudly pass from one generation to the next.

**What do you think, what a European person, such as you can teach and show to Arabic horsemen?**

I never intended to teach anyone because I know about the experience of Moroccans with their horses but I think I did unconscious. I showed them my daily training of lunging and riding the horses. I showed them how important it is to give horses free time for their self-development by letting them run freely with their friends on the paddock. I showed them my way of handling the horses doesn't matter if stallion, mare or foal, and the respect I give every single one of them. Of course sometimes the ranch boys are a bit irritated by my intense love for animals but I think and hope that they understood that I relate to horses not only as my colleagues but more important, as my friends. This work is more than just a job for me, it's my passion. At the end of the day I hope I showed them that they can do everything in life if they just really want it and are willing to work hard for it.

**What could we, European people learn from their knowledge and experiences?**

In contrary to Germany where you pay huge amounts of money for potentially "good" horses, high stable rents and incredibly expensive riding equipment, the equestrian life in Morocco is ordinary and simple. Almost all of the horses from Ranch Diabat are coming from local animal markets and the saddles and bridles we use are mostly second-hand but good quality material from Germany, France and Italy. We don't have the perfect riding arena, warm water showers for the horses, a horse solarium, high-fashion equipment or potential jumping or dressage horses but we always make the best out of the situation for the horses and for us. So what we can learn from the Moroccans is that horse riding is less about success in competitions, expensive riding equipment or potentially "good" or "bad" horses, it's about respect, love and a trustful relationship between rider and horse. And finally no money in the

world can buy you this relationship because it comes from the hours of time and the love you give to a horse.

**When you return home to Germany, what will be the greatest, most remaining experience, knowledge or conclusion that you bring with you and keep for your life?**

Morocco changed my life completely, I had to leave a part of my German perfectionism and habits behind while I learned to adopt to a new, unfamiliar culture. I made many amazing experiences, I accompanied the Rondonnes with our great stallions, slept next to the horses under the starry, beautiful night sky and galloped along lonely beaches of the Atlantic coastline, I met amazing people from all over the world and had the honour and pleasure to guide them on horseback around Essaouira and became part of their holiday in Morocco. I trained wonderful horses, had to go through many setbacks and progress during the training but realized that with enough confidence and patience you can achieve almost everything with your horse. So finally I learned something really simple, to not only believe in yourself and your riding skills but furthermore in your horse.

And indeed, from Nadine, who always wears a smile on her face, such energy, will for life, respect and love for horses radiate that can only come from a person who saw and experienced many things in the world, and humane values got into their places. It was a great experience to chat with her and an eternal memory to gallop by the ocean shore.

We thank for Nadine the conversation and for sharing her Moroccan equine experiences and knowledge with us. We wish her further exciting and colourful adventures in the various spots of the world.

The interview and the photos were taken by: Eszter Kövesi ([www.eszterkovesi.com](http://www.eszterkovesi.com))