

SOARING PURSUITS

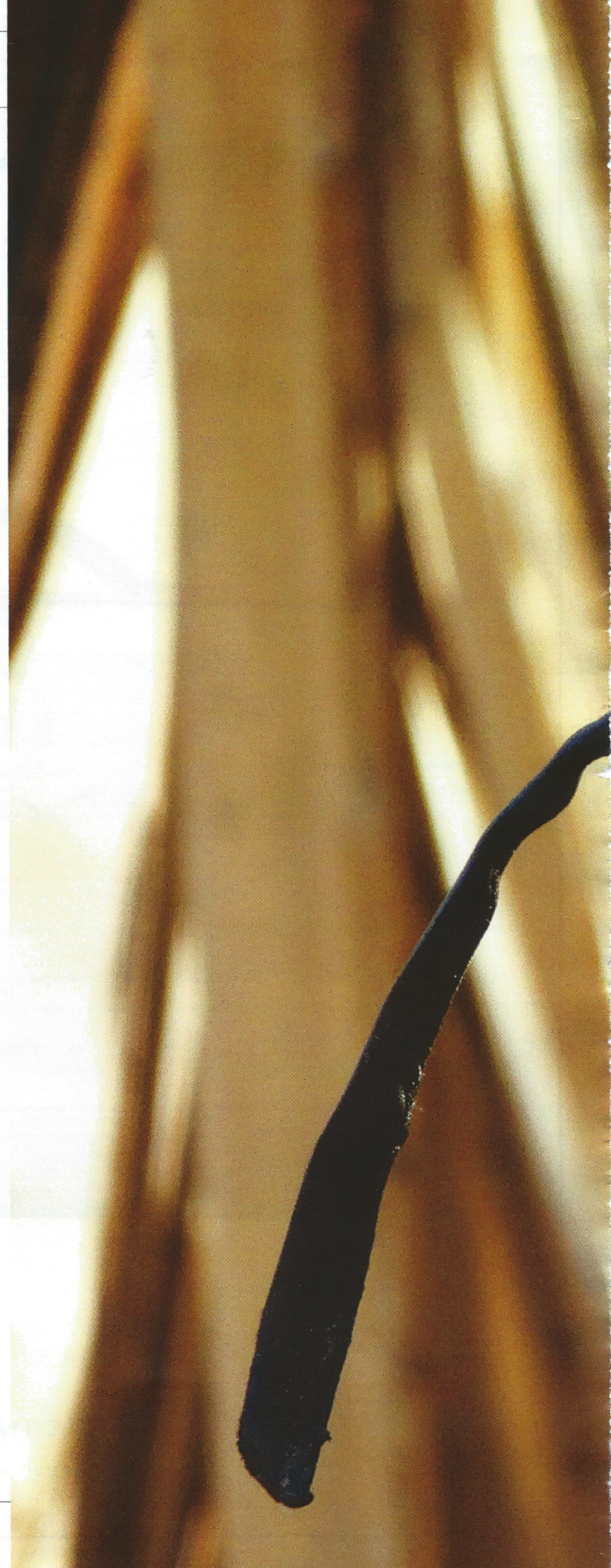
Once Hailed As The Sport Of Kings,
The Thrill Of Falconing Comes
Down To Earth

By: Gina Samarotto

In Dubai, the hours just before dawn are magical. The air, yet to be warmed by the relentless Middle Eastern heat is deliciously cool. The stillness holds a silence that is deafening and the city barely stirs as the first rays of sunshine begin to peek above the horizon. Despite a setting so languid, the wee, small hours of morning in Dubai have an exciting secret to share.

In front of Atlantis, Palm Island's iconic wonderland of desert indulgence, a sleek, white SUV pulls up at precisely 5:30am. Dressed in an electric blue polo shirt and with a smile brighter than the yet to appear sun; Hendri du Toit alights from the drivers seat with a warm, "You must be Gina! I am Hendri, and this," he says as he opens the passenger door with a flourish, "is Rouge." Hendri, it must be explained, is a Falconer and Rogue, his diminutive "wingman", a kestrel falcon. Khaimah, a greater spotted eagle perched regally in the rear of the Rover completed our unlikely foursome and despite the exquisitely early hour, I am wide-eyed with excitement. Yet, spectacular though it may be for the birds and Falconers of Royal Shaheen Events, mornings like this are a routine start to just another day at the office.

Royal Shaheen Events is one of Dubai's preeminent falconry services companies, the passion and brainchild of its founder and president, Peter Henry Bergh. Providing everything from VIP falconing experiences to falconry training for competitions around the world, to "on-camera" talent for film production and photo shoots; Royal Shaheen has catapulted the ancient art of falconry into the center of a very modern spotlight. My initial







introduction to the group had occurred six months earlier when visiting the legendarily posh Emirate for the first time. Despite planning to spend my last day in Dubai enjoying the beach, I abandoned my frozen drink and chaise lounge after noticing a “Live Falconry Demonstration” listed on my resort’s event calendar. A sound decision as it turns out, leading to my serendipitous meeting with Royal Shaheen. And after a morning spent watching the practiced movements of Falconer Werner Calitz and the peregrine falcon he was partnered with that day, I was hooked. With my flight back to New York leaving in just a few hours it was with real regret that I said goodbye to the Falconer and his charge. Six months and several email exchanges with Peter Henry Bergh later, I found myself back in Dubai but this time, my schedule was designed to allow me my long coveted day in the desert.

Driving from the Palm to the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, where Royal Shaheen is one of just a handful of operators who have been granted permission to set up camp, can be considered an event in and to itself. With the hooded birds swaying gently and the sun finally bringing the landscape to light, Hendri took a route that showed me a side of Dubai rarely experienced by tourists. As morning broke, we passed racing camels being exercised by still sleepy trainers, vendors setting up wares in countless outdoor markets and as we drew closer to the desert, Oryx delicately picking their way through sandy dunes. All the while the birds napped peacefully in the moving SUV, slightly cocking their hooded heads now and again as if to taste the scents carried on the morning breeze. Finally reaching the gated entrance to the Conservation Reserve, we’re waved through by guards before Hendri stops the

SUV; getting out to partially deflate the tires – a trick that allows vehicles to cross the desert without bogging down in the powdery sand. Several minutes later and we’re at Royal Shaheen’s “camp.” Marked by a lone, scrubby tree and a rustic reed fence designed to ward off desert winds, the camp consists of a brilliantly hued rug upon which Hendri’s colleague and fellow falconer, Sarab, has laid out a welcome breakfast of thick Arabic coffee and sweet dates. The collective effect of the simple meal served against the pristine desert landscape is stunning. So much so that at first, I failed to notice the collection of raptors all perched, all hooded, and all waiting patiently for their turn to soar.

Before long, Peter and yet another Royal Shaheen falconer, Erin Human arrive and to my delight, it’s time for the main event. Khaimah, my winged travel companion, is freed from his hood. His brilliant black



eyes quickly take in his surroundings before he takes off in the direction of a perch set up in the distance. Sarab puts on a heavy leather glove and takes a piece of fresh quail in his hand before raising his arm. In a split second Khaimah has left the perch, slicing through the sky at breakneck speed before landing squarely on Sarab's arm to collect his prize. Time and time again, the eagle hits his mark on Sarab's outstretched arm and each time, the awe I feel takes my breath away. "Are you ready to give it a go?" Peter asks and struck mute with excitement, I nod while awkwardly thrusting my arm into the heavy glove before mimicking Sarab's motions to raise my arm and accept Khaimah. I could feel the air stir from the eagle's approach before he reached me, flinching just the tiniest bit when his massive wings briefly enveloped my head before coming to rest at his side. And then there he was, in all his glory.

An eagle had "come to glove" on my arm while I stood in the middle of the Middle Eastern desert and in that moment, I realized that I had just experienced something so life altering that I would carry it with me forever. I believe that when you travel, there are of course memorable moments. But then there are the moments so awe inspiring that they seem to indelibly etch upon your very soul. It is the thrill of those indelible moments that fuels my own, personal passion for travel - and I had just experienced one of the most thrilling moments of all.

The morning continued with more flights. From little Rogue, who reminded me of a kid playing tag as she shot from her perch to my waiting glove to Cersei, a beautiful, tawny toned owl whose approach when flying was completely silent, but whose trademark screech when she cried out to a herd of antelope

grazing in the distance seemed to shatter the quiet desert morning. My delight never abated; the thrill never lessened. Throughout the morning the falconers continue to work with the birds, showing me everything from how modern advancements including drones are used to help train and condition, to explaining how unchanged the burqas and tethers, falconry's most basic accouterment, has remained despite the sport's millennial history. Falconry as a sport is a stunning example of ancient history melding with modern technology. Falconry as an experience is one unlike any other. It is primal and primitive, so much more than simply an opportunity; it's truly a gift - and one that indelibly etched upon me.

*For more information on the art and sport of falconry and Royal Shaheen Events, please visit their website.
<http://www.royalshaheen.ae>*

