

## Treating Battered Horses in the Shadow of Egypt's Pyramids

By Dina Hadid and Nour Youssef

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GIZA, Egypt — In a dank stable in the shadow of the Pyramids, a stallion lay on the ground, his broken leg at an odd angle despite the cast wrapped around it.

The owner, Farag Abu Ghoneim, hovered nearby as the animal was tended by an Australian nurse known here for her horse sense — and her passionate defense of suffering animals.

The stallion had been in pain for a week, after being kicked by a mare. “He’s not going to get any better,” said the nurse, Jill Barton, who came for the Great Pyramids of Giza in 2013 but stayed to help battered workhorses in Nazlet el-Samman, a ramshackle slum nearby. “You need to let him rest.”

Ms. Barton faces strong resistance from an impoverished community that has long seen horses and donkeys as working beasts, with little sentimentality about their pain.

She often advocates euthanasia, or, as she calls it, taking animals “over the rainbow bridge.” The men want to work them to the end.

After she gave Mr. Abu Ghoneim her recommendation, his face darkened.

“It is only God who takes life away,” he said.

For generations, the men of Nazlet el-Samman have made their living by offering horses — and camels — to tourists to ride around the Great Pyramids. Or, like Mr. Abu Ghoneim, they rent their horses to prance, gaily decorated, in raucous street weddings.

The men are paid the equivalent of \$7 for an hourlong ride around the Pyramids and \$20 for a 20-minute wedding dance. Yet no matter how much the men need the animals, they work them until they collapse from exhaustion. The carcasses are then unceremoniously tossed in nearby dunes.

After the Arab Spring uprising in 2011, tourism to Egypt collapsed, to 3.3 million tourists so far this year from 14.7 million in 2010. Horses starved. Camels were sold for meat.

Alongside a veterinarian from the Brooke Hospital for Animals, which has made free weekly visits for years, a parade of animal rights groups rushed to help. One group fed horses for free until it ran out of money. Ahmed al-Shurbaji, 34, who runs a nearby dog shelter, sometimes comes by with a vet to treat light injuries.



Ms. Barton looking at an X-ray of a horse's broken leg as she tried to convince its owner to put it down. David Degner for The New York Times

Then there is Ms. Barton, 56, who became a jillaroo, or ranch hand, in Australia at 15.

On a recent visit to Nazlet el-Samman with Ms. Barton, we had a feeling that it had hardly changed since 1931, when Dorothy Brooke, an Englishwoman living in Cairo, wrote a letter to a British newspaper soliciting funds to euthanize aging World War I horses that were sold to Egyptians.

“The majority of them drag out wretched days of toil in the ownership of masters too poor to feed them — too inured to hardship themselves to appreciate, in the faintest degree, the sufferings of animals in their hands,” Ms. Brooke wrote. She later established Brooke, now a global charity.

Horses were everywhere in the slum, tied to trees and their troughs lining alleys like equine parking lots. Plenty were gaunt, their ribs showing through their skin. A foal galloped past us and sniffed at a woman walking by. Men picked up their children on horse-driven carts and carried home groceries.

When word filtered out that there were tourists at the Pyramids, some of the men took their horses and headed off.

On a recent day, Ms. Barton gave colorful pads to Mamdouh Abu Basha to wrap around the chains that stretch across his horses' noses, creating welts. She complimented their healthy, shiny coats.

Salem Abu Basha asked Ms. Barton whether she could treat his gray mare, which was suffering from a leg infection. The mare was not responding to a poultice of yogurt and starch, a Pharaonic treatment that usually worked, he insisted.

The animal was whisked to Ms. Barton's clinic. There, a sick horse lay on the ground. Ms. Barton wanted to put it down, but the owners took it back a few days later and put it to work. Donkeys clustered in a paddock near the Abusir pyramids, one of several pyramid groupings that dot the area.

A teenager wanted to know whether Ms. Barton could heal his donkey, whose hoof had fallen off from an infection. She offered to take it for six months, but the youth, Gomaa, declined. He needed the donkey to pull his cart, which he used to recycle plastic for \$5 a day.

“I rested him for a month already,” Gomaa said, leading the limping donkey away.

Then two men appeared, leading a mare bearing a sore where a saddle had rubbed away her skin.

“Doctora!” they called.

Ms. Barton's face hardened when she recognized the mare from the bloody gashes across her sides. She said the wounds were from a stallion's leg, because she had seen the men forcing the mare to breed in the evenings. Was she being punished?

In broken English, one man explained, “She do bad things, so we should — we should learn her.”

“Learning her what?” Ms. Barton said. “She does bad things, so you get the stallion to jump on her? This is how you teach her not to be bad?”



Horses giving rides around the Pyramids of Giza last month. When Egypt's tourism industry collapsed after the Arab Spring uprising in 2011, horses starved as their owners' livelihoods dried up. David Degner for The New York Times

Mr. Shurbaji, who runs the dog shelter, said Ms. Barton's approach was not entirely appreciated. "She's so tough and rude with people," he said. "Even though they need her help, nobody likes to go to her."

Ms. Barton said that when she first arrived here, she volunteered at an animal shelter but realized they were neglecting the horses and donkeys they claimed to be saving. She then used her savings and donations to open Egypt Equine Aid. The free clinic on Cairo's desert outskirts has treated around 300 horses and donkeys in two years.

Staying in Egypt was a calling. She decided long ago that she would spend her savings on animals. It was also "a debt," said Ms. Barton, who believed the pyramid horses partly descended from Australian Walers. The breed was left behind by British troops after World War I, the last conflict to use equines on a mass scale.

Most were sold to the British Army in India, and departing soldiers shot the rest, according to the Australian War Memorial. But at least hundreds were sold to Egyptians, according to the letter that Ms. Brooke wrote in 1931.

Ms. Barton said some must have survived, pointing to the curved head of a horse she was treating, which she said was typical of a Waler.

And now in Nazlet el-Samman, Ms. Barton had to bite her tongue as she spoke to Mr. Abu Ghoneim.

The horse provided the sole income for Mr. Abu Ghoneim's extended family of 12, making him around \$100 a week at Egyptian weddings. He sold his stable of 36 horses years ago, when tourism collapsed. This animal was his last.

But as the horse writhed, Mr. Abu Ghoneim agreed to euthanize it.

The next day, he changed his mind, after dreaming that his horse had recovered. While he was sipping tea, a "doctor" called and told him not to kill the horse. Another sign, he said with a grin.

But it was not a veterinarian. It was Mr. Shurbaji, who runs the dog shelter. He was against euthanizing animals and had heard of Ms. Barton's plan.

Later, when Mr. Shurbaji saw how bad the horse's condition was, he changed his mind. Too late. It took another week of Ms. Barton's cajoling for Mr. Abu Ghoneim to finally let his horse cross the rainbow bridge.

"Now it's finished," he said later. "There are no parties. There's nothing."

He said he wanted to buy another horse soon.

"Tomorrow," he said hopefully.