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AFP | Abu Dhabi

Ed al-Qobeissy’s two birds perch majestically in the waiting room of Abu Dhabi’s falcon hospital, awaiting a routine check-up ahead of their hunting trip to Azerbaijan.

Like other well-travelled residents of the United Arab Emirates, the falcons will make the journey with their devoted owner on a well-worn route from a country where the creature is both a national symbol and treasured tradition.

“This has been a hobby of mine since 2007,” said the 26-year-old, gently stroking one of the prized birds of prey, which wear leather hoods to keep them calm and quiet.

After waiting in the pristine white-marbled reception area of the animal hospital, the falcons will undergo blood tests in order to complete paperwork for the trip.

They are among about 11,000

falcons the hospital treats annually, a number that has more than doubled in the past 10 years.

“Falcons have a very special place in the heart of the Emiratis,” said the hospital’s director Margit Muller.

“Here, falcons are not considered birds, they are considered children of the Bedouins because, historically, falcons were used to hunt meat, allowing the Bedouin’s family to survive in this very harsh desert life.”

In 2010, UNESCO added falconry to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Talons and training

The Abu Dhabi facility is the world’s largest falcon hospital, frequented by falconers from across the Gulf

region.

As well as check-ups and routine trimming of talons, it also conducts complicated surgery and offers a training programme for veterinary students from more than 40 countries to learn about avian medicine.

“The very complicated procedures are either broken legs or broken wings, or when a falcon has a really messy accident that results in big injuries,” Muller said.

“Very long surgeries... can take up to three or four hours. That is the longest we can keep a falcon under anaesthesia.”

Opportunities to take a falcon hunting are limited in the

UAE, where it is only permitted in designated reserves.

That means that for many birds, the hospital is an essential stop-off before heading to popular overseas hunting destinations including Morocco, Kazakhstan and Pakistan.

Emirati falconers are only legally allowed to own captive-bred birds, which must have their own passports that comply with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) for transport.

Animals other than guide dogs are not usually allowed in the cabins of the UAE’s main carriers, but for falcons exceptions are made.

Abu Dhabi’s Etihad permits falcons in the cabin or as checked baggage, and Dubai’s Emirates allows birds to travel alongside their owner to certain destinations in Pakistan.

“The most popular destination for falconers travelling with their falcons in the passenger cabin is Pakistan,” an Emirates spokeswoman said.

While the hospital has its own programme and facilities to breed falcons that can be purchased, most of the birds are imported to the UAE from breeders in the Americas and Europe.

“They stay with the falconer for as long as they live,” Muller said. “They will not be released because they are captive-bred falcons.”

Muller added that the most sought-after and expensive falcons are females, which can carry up to five times their own body weight. They are also considered the

most beautiful.

“The female is usually one third bigger than the male, and more powerful,” she said, adding that captive-bred female falcons can cost upwards of 100,000 euros (\$108,000).

For falconer Salem al-Mansouri from Abu Dhabi, the tradition is much more than an expensive pastime -- it is a symbol of Emirati culture.

“Falcons were used to hunt, and you can say that it was the only method for hunting for survival, especially when travelling long distances hundreds of years ago,” the 30-year-old said.

“We inherited it from our grandfathers and fathers, who taught us, and now we teach the next generation.”

UAE falcon hospital a window into Emirati tradition



Falconry is a treasured tradition in the United Arab Emirates

Washroom-on-wheels: India firm turns buses into women’s toilets



Finding a clean and safe toilet in parts of India is a challenge



Attendants sell sanitary napkins and diapers

Pune | India

Like many Indian women, college student Suvarna Dongare dreads getting caught short when she is out and about, with hygienic public toilets in short supply across the country.

So she was pleasantly surprised to find a pink women-only “washroom-on-wheels” in a public park in western India -- one of several facilities dotting the city of Pune, where a pair of entrepreneurs have transformed run-down buses into hop-on toilets.

“I came to the park and wanted to visit the bathroom urgently. These toilets are very comfortable and felt safe,” 18-year-old Dongare said.

For a relatively affordable five-rupee-fee (seven US cents), any woman can board the toilet to use the facilities, breastfeed babies or purchase sanitary napkins and diapers.

Launched in 2016 by entrepreneurs Ulka Sadalkar and Rajeev Kher, the “Ti Toilet” project -- “ti” means “her” in the local Marathi language -- has 12 mobile washrooms, on average used by more than 200 women daily. The buses are powered by solar panels mounted on top of the vehicle.

Sadalkar said the pair, who run a portable sanitation business, came up with the idea as part of a series of projects focused on improving hygiene in the city.

“We believe women deserve access to clean and safe washrooms and it is their basic right,” she said, adding that the duo wanted to open 1,000 toilets across India in the next five years.

“We focused a lot on aesthetics in refurbishing these buses and provided clean toilets,

television sets, temperature monitors with an attendant in tow.”

Manisha Adhav, 40, who operates one of the toilets, said she felt “proud working here as we are doing something for women”.

“Women bless me ... as they come here from far away areas as well because there aren’t enough public washrooms around.”

Even as India went on a building spree constructing millions of toilets as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s flagship “Clean India” programme, experts said the lack of water or electricity meant many remain unused.

State governments have struggled to maintain public toilets, which are often poorly lit, un-manned, and reek of urine and faeces.

These too are mostly used by men, with women -- fearing for their safety -- going long hours without using such facilities.

Modi in October declared India free of open defecation and said 600 million people had been provided with access to toilets.

But experts questioned the claims and said sanitation and safety remain intertwined for millions of Indian women.

Finding “clean and safe washrooms in public spaces is not easy during emergencies. We are trying to change that,” Adhav said.

Pink buses provide a safe and clean toilet for some Indian women

