

# What's On



Photos by Mohamed Radwan

Some photos from the event

AUK campus comes alive with Kuwait's old spirit

## Al-Kout Festival showcases best of Kuwait

By Chaitali B. Roy

Special to the Arab Times

Delighted with the excitement and pride generated last year, the American University of Kuwait's (AUK) Arabian Heritage Project has organized the second edition of the Al Kout Festival between April 21 - 22 at the AUK campus. Held under the patronage of Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, State Minister for Housing Affairs and State Minister of Development Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the event is open to the public from 12 pm to 7 pm. The festival features Kuwaiti organizations such as the National Museum, Youm Al Bahar, Sadu House, Dar Al-Athar Al-Isalmiya, and leading artisans in the community.

### Tradition

Like last year the American University Campus has come alive with the sights and sounds of old Kuwait with craftspeople giving demonstrations, musicians singing songs of the sea and the desert and displays and presentations of glimpses of life as it was in the not so distant past. "This year, we have a greater variety of events. Our student performances include both Western and Kuwaiti traditional-based music, we have the great "sawt" singer Salman Al-Ammari, some of the most famous Bedouin poets in the country, a women's dara'a fashion show, South

Indian Karnatic Music, and we are bringing in a women's band from Bahrain who will do a re-enactment of the "Jelwa" wedding ceremony.

"We will finish each evening with the great Kuwaiti sea bands, Bin Hussein and Mayouf," informed Dr Lisa Urkevich, Associate Professor, Musicology/Ethnomusicology and Director, Arabian Heritage Project, American University of Kuwait.

The Al Kout Festival owes its inception and birth to Dr Urkevich. An ethnomusicologist with focus on the music of the Arabian Peninsula, her years of stay in the region and research in the artistic and folk traditions of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar led her to create a festival with which time could stand comparison with the celebrated Al Janadriyah, the largest annual cultural event of Saudi Arabia. The students of AUK have been delighted with the Festival. "Many have said how proud they are that their university is taking their heritage so seriously." When asked what it felt like having given the younger generation of Kuwait an event to look forward to and claim as their own she says, "When I walk through the Al Kout Festival and I look at the faces of our guests and students, I am so heartened to see the pride and amazement in their eyes. If it were not for the Al Kout Festival many would never have seen one of the great sea bands of Kuwait live, or ridden a camel, or really listened to a Bedouin poet. The won-

derment of our students and guests as they rediscover Kuwaiti heritage heartens me deeply. I feel like a parent who has just seen her child take his first steps."

### Displays

As you walk into the campus, the sound of a piano and young voices singing, the chatter of students and guests as they went past the stalls selling eatables and other attractions, the smell of food, the Bedouin tent with the coffee pot and the camel, the beautiful displays put up by the Kuwait National Museum, the sadu stall selling beautiful handcrafted items and everything else made the event a great way to celebrate Kuwaiti folklore, music, poetry and heritage.

"This box or sanduk was used by a young bride to keep her clothes," explained Mohammed Dashti from the Failaka Heritage Village as a craftsman sat fixing beaten copper to the top of an ornately carved box. Several miniature boats and boxes are on sale. "This box is used by pearl merchants to keep pearls and records. And this is a sailor's chest. Each sailor carried his own chest on the ship. And these are mats made of palm fronds. In those days there were no tables, people sat on these mats while having their food." he explained.

A middle aged Kuwaiti lady exclaimed over a stall belonging to Hani Al Asousie. The stall had old telephones, used biscuit tins from the 1950s, match boxes and other items

used by an ordinary Kuwaiti family many years ago. "I used to enjoy this drink," she exclaimed pointing to an empty bottle called "Sabah". "I remember it having an orange flavour."

The Al Kout Festival is organized by the Arabian Heritage Project of the AUK, which had its opening last year. According to the Director of the Project, despite its short run, the Centre has accomplished a great deal. "We are moving toward some serious research and scholarship collaborations. We have had students involved in community outreach and teaching Kuwaiti traditions.

We have had a Sadu weaving workshop, lectures, heritage awards. We have also partnered on the well-received 'Flavours of Sound' concerts that merged UK musicians with regional artists. It has been a productive year for AHP," she explained. Different units on campus were on display including the student clubs and the academic programs. Also, several noted craftspeople will be giving demonstrations and there will be repeated performances by at least two sea bands as well as musicians and bands from Bahrain and India.

### Promote

The objective of the Al Kout festival is to promote and celebrate the cultural heritage of Kuwait and its trading, shipping, fishing and pearl diving traditions. An important commercial destination on the Persian Gulf,

Kuwait had a bustling mercantile economy with its fleet of ships sailing to faraway lands. It was a life far removed from the present lifestyle of the Gulf countries, driven by strong and hardy men and women who faced the harshness of the desert and long months at sea with equanimity.

The Al Kout Festival showcases the best of Kuwaiti culture, customs and traditions. "This year, the fashion show is a new highlight, and the international guest musicians (Indian and Bahraini) will give the festival a more comprehensive flavor. Also, we have added a tent of Kuwaiti hospitality where one can play old Kuwaiti games or eat Kuwaiti food," said Dr Urkevich speaking of the new additions to the Festival.

When asked if it was easier organizing the second run of the festival, Dr Urkevich responded, "In many ways, it was easier to organize the festival this year, since we had made contacts last year, and so many people had heard of us and were interested in joining this year. Regarding sponsors, early in the year we were so relieved since we thought we had all of our sponsors committed, but at the last minute, a major sponsor reneged on their offer. We are so grateful to Kipco and Burgan Bank, Kuwait Hotels, Gulf Net, and Gulf Insurance for trying so hard to come up with the remaining funds that we desperately needed. They have shown a true commitment to Kuwaiti Heritage!"