



Christopher 'Kit' Villiers, son of the famous Australian mariner, adventurer, author, and photojournalist Alan Villiers, looks at traditional wooden boats anchored in the dhow harbor in front of the Dhow Builders Diwannia. His father sailed from Yemen to East Africa on a Kuwaiti sailing boom from 1938-39 and wrote a book about the voyage called 'Sons of Sindbad.' It is a moving documentary of Kuwait's age of sail, from an Australian point of view.

SPECIAL REPORT

Amid their masts and memories, in moments precious a collapse of time

Story and photos by Claudia Farkas Al Rashoud

Special to the Arab Times

A recent meeting of hearts and minds among men at the Dhow Builders Diwannia transcended time, place, and culture. The seeds of their relationship were sown in 1938-39, when Australian master mariner, adventurer, author, and photojournalist Alan Villiers joined the crew of a Kuwaiti dhow in Yemen and sailed with the monsoon winds to East Africa and then back to Arabian Gulf ports and Kuwait. His epic voyage became the subject of his wonderful book, *Sons of Sindbad*, published in 1940.

On November 30th, 2019, the son of Alan Villiers, and the son and grandson of Kuwaiti seamen who had sailed with him, spent a memorable morning together. In Kuwait for the opening of an exhibition of his father's photographs at Dar al Athar al Islamiyyah's Amricani Cultural Center, Christopher "Kit" Villiers was delighted to meet Dr Nasser Al Nejdi, grandson of the renowned sea captain Ali Bin Nasr Al Nejdi, and Abdul Aziz Al Qallaf, son of the ship's marine carpenter, Khaleel Bin Rashed Al Qallaf. The Diwannia's Workshop Manager Sadeq Ali Hasan Al Qallaf, and dhow builder Mohammed Fadhel Khalaf Al Qallaf, both cousins of Khaleel; and Hussain Al Nejdi, grandson of Dr Nasser, were also present.

The visit of Kit Villiers to Kuwait was made possible by the Australian Embassy, in partnership with Dar al Athar al Islamiyyah and the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters.

Kit Villiers was eager to learn about the Kuwaitis' traditional methods of shipbuilding and the different types of vessels. His father had been fascinated with sailing ships from an early age, having gone to sea when he was fifteen years old. A natural seaman, he gained experience on a number of ships and wasn't daunted by the extremely tough and hazardous conditions. In 1934 he bought a 400-ton full rigged sailing ship, renamed it the *Joseph Conrad*, and sailed it around the world with a crew of young amateur sailors, thus pioneering the concept of sail training.

Alan Villiers realised the age of sail was coming to an

end and wished to document its final days. So he turned his attention to this part of the world, writing in *Sons of Sindbad*: "having looked far and wide over a seafaring lifetime, that as pure sailing craft carrying on their unspoiled ways, only the Arab remained."

Villiers went to Yemen where a member of a prominent Kuwaiti merchant family, Ali Abdul Latif Al Hamad, introduced him to Captain Nejd. The Kuwaiti *nokhadha* agreed to take Villiers on board his ship, a trading boom called *Bayan*. During the nine-month voyage the Australian mariner shared the poop deck with Captain Nejd and other senior crewmen.

Villiers wrote, "I did not mind the head wind or the length of the passage to our first port, for life in the big dhow soon proved most interesting and I had much to learn. I established myself on my six feet of bench aft of the starboard side, and proceeded to learn as much as possible."

In present-day Kuwait, Kit Villiers was also given a privileged seat on a wooden bench, next to Abdul Aziz Al Qallaf, in the dhow builders' workshop. He only had a couple of hours to learn about how Kuwait's graceful sailing ships were constructed, but like his father, he was determined to make good use of his time and paid close attention to Sadeq Al Qallaf's explanations.

"In our workshop we make models that are exact replicas of Kuwait's traditional sailing ships. Kuwaiti shipbuilders have always used only simple hand tools. They served the purpose well for centuries and we still use the exact same tools today," said Sadeq.

Picking up a bow drill he demonstrated how the cord of the bow is wrapped around the shank several times and causes the drill to rotate first in one direction and then the other as the bow is drawn back and forth. This ancient tool has been in use since the Bronze Age.

The Workshop Manager pulled more tools out of his old shipbuilder's bag made of woven palm fronds: a hand saw, an adze, iron nails, a plumbob attached to a small

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