

Gathering in the Arabian desert for the Hegra Conference of Nobel Laureates

FEBRUARY 24, 2020



Hegra Conference of Nobel Laureates delegates pose in front of an ancient Nabataen stone-carved tomb in Madain Saleh.

TRAVEL • BY: SHARON HOGE

Even in 1001 Arabian Nights, it's unlikely Scheherazade could have invented a scenario as marvelous as the Hegra Conference of Nobel Laureates. Once upon a time in January 2020, 19 winners of Nobel Prizes, Saudi nobles, world class business executives, a renowned opera tenor, and over a few dozen other dignitaries gathered in the sands of the Arabian desert to discuss heritage and the future of the planet.

Engaged by **H.R.H. Prince Badr Bin Abdullah Bin Farhan Al Saud**, Arabia's Minister of Culture and Governor of the Royal Commission for AlUla, curator **Richard Attias** was the "genie" whose firm orchestrated three days of lectures, elaborate meals, concerts, art viewings, networking, and informal diplomacy all taking place in the fantastical northwest Arabia desert locale.

For 7000 years the magnificent red mountain region of AlUla in northwest Arabia has been a cradle of culture, a vital crossroad on the camel caravan Incense Route, bringing together people, cultures, and tradition through the ages. Like nearby Petra the capital, UAla/Hegra was also an important 1st century city of the Nabatean kingdom, a place for the elite to bury their dead in elaborate stone-carved tombs. Now an UNESCO Heritage site, it's called the world's Largest Living Landscape Museum.



Rock formations dot timeless views in the Largest Living Landscape Museum.



Elephant Rock is a popular natural formation.



Carved out of the mountains, the magnificent tombs date back to the 1st century AD.

While launching tourism as an alternative to dependence on oil, the Royal Commission for Ula is dedicated to safeguarding the area by integrating its natural and cultural heritages and prolonging its rich tradition of cultural exchange. The Hegra Conference introduced the region's marvels and history to some of the world's great thinkers in an opportunity to extend the region's heritage into the future, leading to greater understanding and humanity.

Between dialogue exchanges, delegates discovered new hotels, festivals, and other activities, all created with a fastidious sensitivity to maintaining and expanding the region's natural and cultural heritage as one living environment.



Low rise resorts nestle into the landscape.



Canyon Park Resort is a cluster of efficient tented aluminum trailers.

Conference activities were held in an extraordinary mirrored activities hall, appropriately named “Maraya” the Arabic word for mirror. Nestled on the sand, it is totally reflective, designed with its angles merging into the landscape so that it seems to disappear.

“What could they ever build that would be better than the landscape?!” a participant exclaimed. A stately column of graceful Arabian horses in full regalia stood in a patient receiving line as delegates approached for the morning sessions.



Delegates arrived from countries around the globe.



Stately Arabian horses in regalia saluted arriving delegates.



Now you see it!! The reflective Mayara Festival Hall almost seems to disappear into the landscape.



Inside-Out — the windows of Maraya showcase the breathtaking landscape.

H.R.H. Prince Badr opened the conference, welcoming the group to the ancient oasis of religion and culture to share and generate ideas to help build a future legacy. He was followed by conference creator Richard Attias who reinforced the hope that AlUla will become an icon and beacon for sustainable development, generating ideas that will be followed up as contributions to positive change. UNESCO Director-General **Audrey Azoulay** reinforced the importance of placing a value on aspects of history that can nurture education and peace.

In a stirring address, Laureate **Muhammad Yunus** warned he sees the world at a crisis point and challenged the group to deal with what he called the decade of last chance. “I feel there is no time left; now is the time for something else.”



Delegates assembled for the opening session.



Nobel Laureates posed with Prince Badr Bin Abdullah Bin Farhan Al Saud, Minister of Culture and Governor of the Royal Commission for AlUla.



H.H. Prince Badr welcomed delegates at the opening session.



Conference organizer Richard Attias delivered opening remarks.



UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay addressed the group.



Graphic displays illuminated the sessions.



Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus warned that time is running out.

Applying lessons from past heritage to generate a humane future was the theme for the next two days as ecologists, archaeologists, historians, medical doctors, Saudi officials, scientists attended sessions and interactive dialogues dealing with issues facing the world.



Former Polish President Laureate Lech Walesa in a session on Mending History.



Delegates exchanged ideas in a series of Interactive Dialogues.



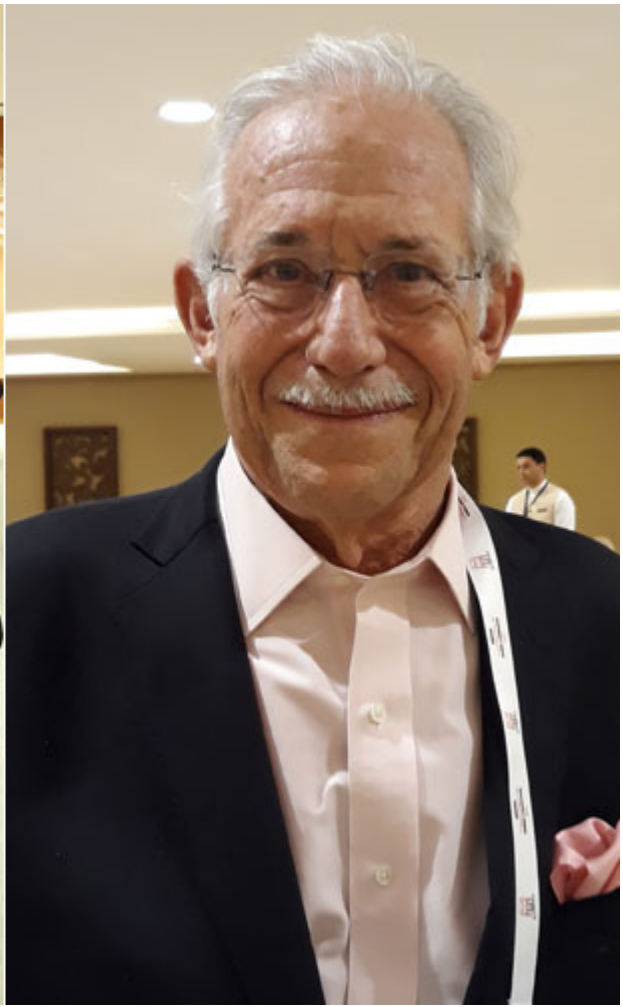
Calling for women's empowerment Laureate Leymah Roberta Gbowee asked everyone to cover one eye — seeing only half — as a metaphor for the world without women in the political process.



L. to r.: New Yorker Ambassador Josette Sherran, President and CEO of the Asia Society, warned not to repeat past mistakes in the future; Sir Martin Sorrell, Executive Chairman, S4 Capital, led a Dialogue on the Theoretical Principles of Sustainable Development.



L. to r.: Marie de Foucaud, Chief of Marketing and Communications Officer at Richard Attias & Associates; Isaac Applbaum, Radius Corporation.



L. to r.: Epidemiology scientist Dr. Yasmin Altwajjri and Lebanese chemistry professor and ecologist Najat Aoun Saliba; New Yorker William A. Haseltine, head of ACCESS Health International, was among experts discussing science's contribution to common cultural heritage.



L. to r.: Head of the Antiquities Coalition Deborah Lehr pointed out that protecting heritage is also a way of protecting the tourist economy; Conference organizer Richard Attias.



H.E. Dr. Abdullah A. Al Rabeeah, Advisor – Royal Court & Supervisor General, King Salman Humanitarian Aid & Relief Centre.



L. to r.: Cecilia Sarkozy Attias launched a Foundation for Women to help actualize activities that champion the cause of women's equality and well-being; Founder and CEO of Women One Dayle Haddon advocated for the world's 65 million women unable to go to school.



L. to r.: Guatemalan Laureate and activist Rigoberta Menchu spoke on feminism and the human rights of indigenous peoples; Nobel Laureate Baron David Trimble discussed peaceful solution of conflicts.



Dr. Badr AlBadr, CEO of the Misk Foundation hosted a closing session on *A Shared Vision for the Future*.

Opening the region to visitors, the Royal Commission has inaugurated annual “Winter in Tantora Festivals,” twelve weeks of hot air balloon rides, hiking, cycling, polo, celebrity performances, horse races, open-air living experiences. Visiting midway through “Tantora’s” second year, the Nobel Conference delegates sampled festival events.

A tour to the remarkable tombs was essential. Archaeologists recounted how wealthy Nabataeans would purchase a site and engage carvers who would work from the top down creating a façade with five steps leading up to heaven and inside shelves or floor chambers to receive remains. Within nine months these magnificent facades would be completed to last through eons to come.



Surveying the magnificent historic landscape.



The tombs are carved down out of the solid rock.



An archaeologist recounted excavation of the tomb sites.



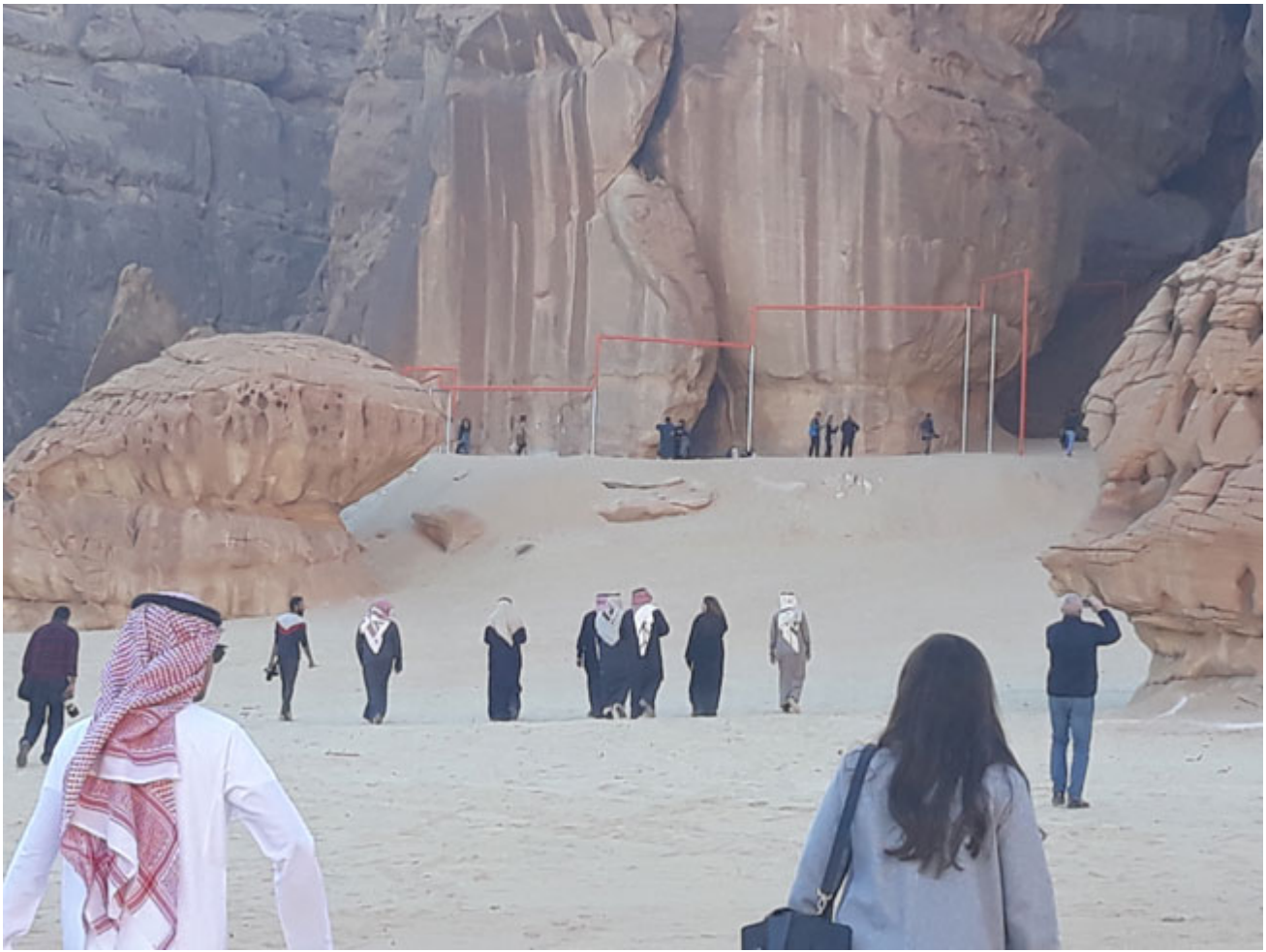
Richard Attias, Fahad M. Hamidaddin, Chief of Investment, Strategy and Tourism Marketing, Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, and Sir Martin Sorrell.



New York publicist Jon Marder with Nobel mini-grants Laureate Muhammad Yunus.

There was an excursion to Desert X, an open air exhibit of contemporary sculptures installed on the sand. A chance to see horse races was preceded by an elaborate luncheon served in the equestrian clubhouse. One highlight was a concert with renowned tenor **Andrea Bocelli** singing in the auditorium of Maraya Festival Hall.

Enriched by the exchange, delegates parted the Conference aware that the roles of heritage and culture are crucial in approaching the future of the planet.



Delegates visited Desert X, an open air exhibit of art installations.



Contemporary sculptures were installed around the dunes in the world's largest open air gallery.



Luncheon was served in the race course club house.



Buffets featured dishes of lamb, chicken, beef, seafood, in recipes featuring local ingredients.



An elaborate dessert was festooned with local sweetmeats.



A full symphony orchestra and chorus await Bocelli's appearance.



Renowned tenor Andrea Bocelli performed.



Bocelli's concert was part of the winter festival.

Madain Saleh: One of Saudi Arabia's Hidden Treasures



When he was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States, Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir gave me an extended visa. He had two good reasons for doing that. One was professional. I am the Executive Vice President of the Huntsman Cancer Foundation, where one of my missions has been to build alliances with ... Continue reading



New York Social Diary

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Feb 24

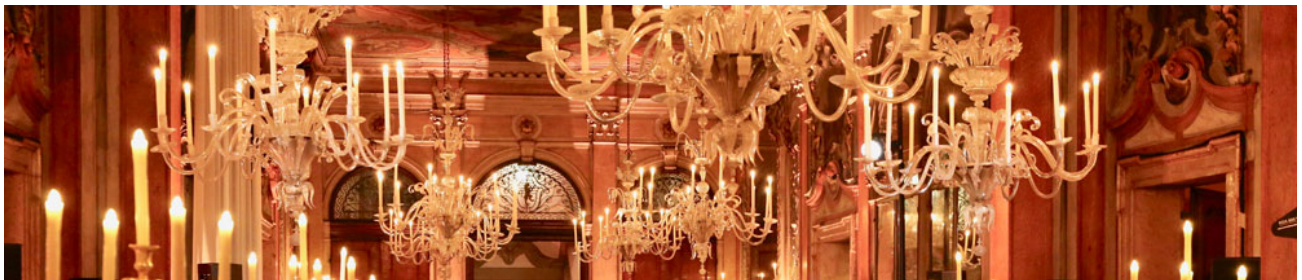
The Spring social season is sprouting its beauty appropriately at last Wednesday's annual Orchid Dinner at the Plaza benefiting the New York Botanical Garden; plus the Society of MSK Associates kicked off the 29th annual "Bunny Hop." [Read More...](#)



HOUSE

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Feb 25

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