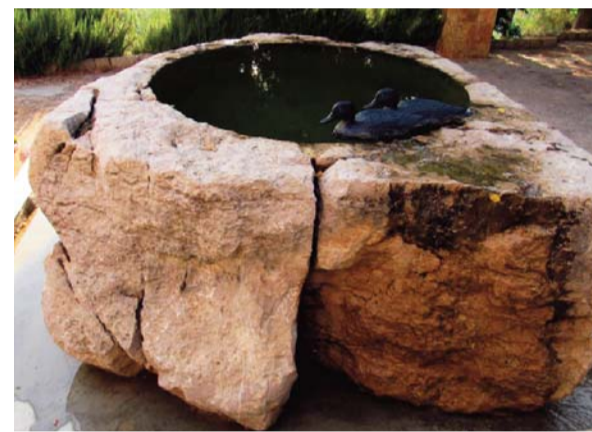


Photos show the village of Assaf in Chouf District, Mount Lebanon governorate. — Photos by Ayoub Khaddaj

Lebanon's Assaf village: A marvelous location in Chouf district



The village of Assaf in Chouf District, Mount Lebanon governorate, is a haven for culture, outstanding natural scenery, and arts. From meticulously carved sculptures, houses built from natural stones, as well as the abundance of trees and vegetation, Assaf village is one of the locations that would surely leave visitors marveling in awe of what they have experienced and seen. — KUNA



Skyscraper-filled Dubai burnishes arts scene with new opera

Already filled with towering skyscrapers, Dubai will soon offer soaring arias inside a new opera house. The city-state is opening the Dubai Opera on Wednesday night, in the shadow of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. This isn't the first opera house built on the Arabian Peninsula, as Oman opened the Royal Opera House Muscat in 2011. But the arrival of the performance center comes as part of a greater push by the United Arab Emirates, already home to engineering marvels, into the world of the fine arts.

"It certainly couldn't be said that Dubai has no culture; it's got an enormous amount of culture," Dubai Opera's chief executive Jasper Hope told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "What it hasn't had is a world-class stage, a world-class facility to display that culture." "What Dubai Opera offers is an opportunity now for people to know that there is a home - a true home - for world-class culture here in Dubai." The opera house resembles a dhow, the traditional wooden boat that can still be seen plying the waters of the Dubai Creek. Its glass bow rises up to a point looking out at the dancing Dubai Fountain, and a multi-story glass chandelier resembling a fishing net hangs in the lobby. The building sits near the 828-meter (2,717-foot) -tall Burj Khalifa and the nearby Dubai Mall in the city-state's chic downtown.

Inside, individual air conditioning vents beneath the 2,000-some seats are designed to quietly cool the auditorium during the desert city's boiling summers, when temperatures exceed 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit). The auditorium can be reconfigured for gala events and other performances. Emaar Properties, which is partially owned by the Dubai government, developed the opera house. It refused to say how much the structure cost when asked by the AP.

Those on hand for a dress rehearsal Tuesday of the opera "The Barber of Seville" also stopped journalists and those gathered from taking pictures outside of the building, as migrant workers rushed to finish constructing a set of exterior stairs. The opera will open Wednesday night with a performance by famed Spanish tenor Placido Domingo.

The Dubai Opera offers a new draw for planned Emaar high-rise residential towers downtown, and could bring concerts and events out of the cavernous, air-conditioned halls of the city's World Trade Center. The arrival of the opera house comes amid a push in the seven-sheikhdom United Arab Emirates to increase its presence on the global arts stage. In the country's capital, construction continues on the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the forthcoming Emirati branch of the famed Parisian art gallery. A branch of the New York-based Guggenheim Museum is also planned. And in Dubai, a fledging art district has sprung up among the factories and warehouses of its Al Quoz industrial area.

The new development has proven divisive at times. Many in the art world have criticized Abu Dhabi's penchant for franchising existing names, and human rights groups have raised concerns about the conditions faced by migrant workers. But Hope said the building of the opera house wouldn't mark the end of Dubai's efforts at drawing cultural events, but rather its beginning. "This can inspire all kinds of performance - amateur and professional," he said. "It can inspire the next generation to really understand what world-class live entertainment is all about. And that deserves something of this scale." — AP



Singers perform on stage yesterday during a dress rehearsal of Gioacchino Rossini's opera "The barber of Seville" at Dubai's new opera house, on the eve of its official opening in the Gulf Emirate. A boat-shaped hulk of steel and glass at the foot of the world's tallest tower, Dubai's new opera house is set to boost the cultural life of the Gulf's business hub. The ultra-modern 2,000-seat venue was developed by Dubai-based Emaar Properties, which also built the Burj Khalifa, and can transform into three modes, operating as a theatre, concert hall and a flat-floored hall suitable for banquets and weddings. — AFP



Opera singer Rocio Ignacio, left, performs the role of Rosina as singer Domenico Balzani, right, performs the role of Don Bartolo in a dress rehearsal of "The Barber of Seville" at the new Dubai Opera in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.



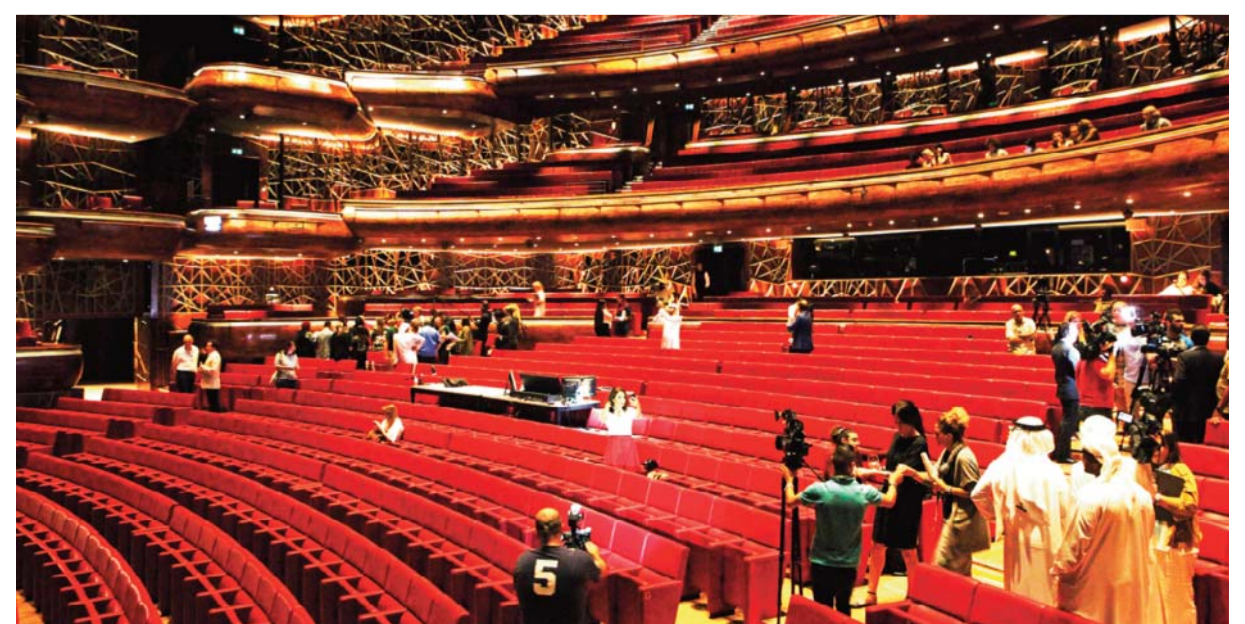
Opera singer Rocio Ignacio performs the role of Rosina in a dress rehearsal of "The Barber of Seville".



Singer Domenico Balzani, center, performs the role of Don Bartolo as singer Massimo Cavalletti performs the role of Figaro in a dress rehearsal of "The Barber of Seville".



Massimo Cavalletti, left, performs the role of Figaro as Bogdan Mihai, right, plays the role of Il Conte d'Almaviva and Rocio Ignacio, above, performs the role of Rosina in a dress rehearsal of "The Barber of Seville".



Journalists and onlookers stand during the intermission of a dress rehearsal of "The Barber of Seville".