

Now Arriving at J.F.K.: Horses From Iceland and Dogs From the West Bank

The ARK, a 14-acre facility at Kennedy International Airport, is often the first stop for animals of all kinds arriving in the United States.



By Claire Fahy

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When the cargo plane touched down on the tarmac at Kennedy International Airport on Friday afternoon, a cacophonous barking could be heard coming from the hold.

Maad Abu-Ghazalah stood on the runway below, anxiously waiting. There were exactly 69 dogs onboard, all from his shelter in the West Bank. The hold opened and a set of eyes caught his through a crate door: It was Lucas.

Then came Jimmy, Carlos, Farouk, Zoe, all of whom Mr. Abu-Ghazalah had cared for at Daily Hugz, the rescue facility he set up in Asira ash-Shamaliya, outside his hometown, Nablus. The dogs were mostly abandoned, many were feral and a number of them had lost legs after being hit by cars.

The shelter had been “like paradise,” Mr. Abu-Ghazalah said. But in December, as conditions in the West Bank deteriorated amid the Israel-Hamas war, he decided he could no longer keep it running. So he called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals International. And the S.P.C.A. called the ARK.

The ARK at J.F.K. is something Noah himself could not have imagined: a privately owned, round-the-clock operation at New York’s largest airport built to accommodate a range of guests with a variety of needs, from purebred racehorses to exotic zoo animals.

The facility, which encompasses 14 acres and 178,000 square feet, prepares animals to fly around the world, making sure they are calm, traveling at comfortable temperatures and equipped with enough food and water. It also receives animals when they arrive in New York, quarantining them if necessary and preparing them for the next steps of their journey.



Workers at the ARK’s “pet oasis,” a full-service kennel, processed all the dogs sent from the West Bank.
Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

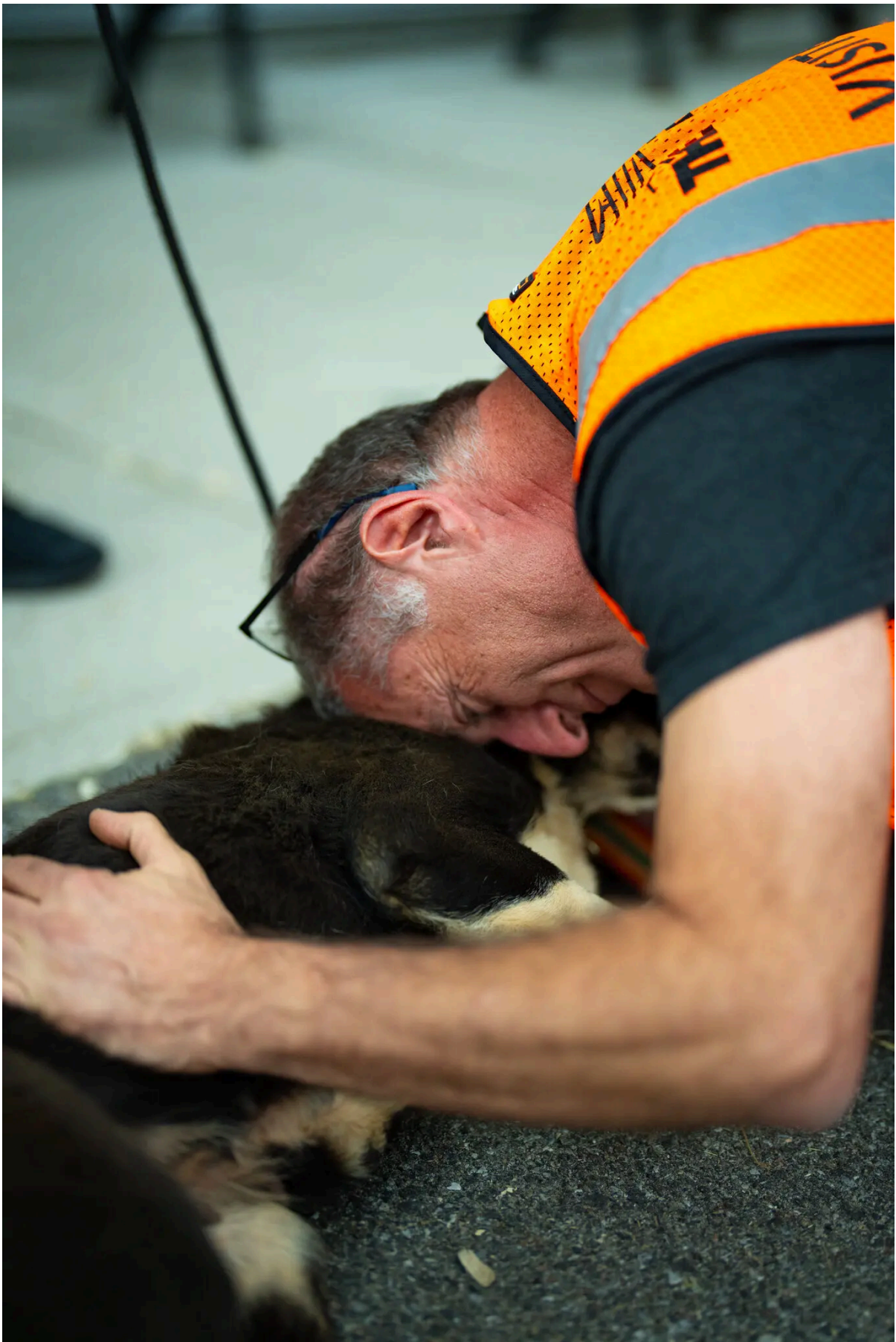
Lori Kalef, the director of programs for S.P.C.A. International, said that in the seven years the ARK has operated out of Kennedy, 90 percent of the 1,300 dogs and cats she has rescued from overseas have come through the facility.

On Friday morning, a group of workers and volunteers from her organization gathered around a conference table at the ARK's offices to discuss crates and harnesses. They had encountered many logistical challenges as they worked to move the dogs from the West Bank, and the flight had been delayed several times.

But then, the call came in that the dogs would be arriving soon, and the group walked anxiously toward the ARK's "pet oasis," a full-service kennel for cats, dogs and the occasional goat. Ms. Kalef played "The Final Countdown" out loud on her phone.

Once the dogs landed, they were brought directly to the oasis, where all 69 of them would rest for the night before continuing on to their new homes.

Mr. Abu-Ghazalah, who lives in Wilmington, N.C., said that he would not feel relaxed until all the dogs were settled into their new homes across the country, but he was grateful that their first stop was the ARK.



Maad Abu-Ghazalah, who owns Daily Hugz, was reunited with one of his dogs after it was unloaded from a cargo plane at J.F.K. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

“Would you have thought about how there’s got to be a place to get them to after they’re off the plane?” he said. “You would have thought you’ll arrive in the U.S. and distribute them magically. But the ARK has been amazing.”

John J. Cuticelli Jr., the ARK’s founder, and Elizabeth A. Schuette, its chief executive, consulted closely with Cornell University’s renowned veterinary program and Temple Grandin, the noted animal scientist, while designing and building the operation.

There are dozens of kennels, three horse barns and a veterinary clinic. There are rooms that could be set aside for avian quarantines, and areas that look like empty showers, which are designed to be filled with water and frozen in case a penguin comes to stay. In short, this ARK was built to handle anything.

There are two main components to the ARK’s business: equine import and export — it sees around 5,000 horses shipped each year — and small animal care. All horses that land at Kennedy must go through the facility, but since many pets travel with their owners, rescue operations make up a significant portion of the small animal activity.

The ARK works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Agriculture and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to safely transport the animals. The agencies have different protocols and safety expectations, so sometimes workers have to make difficult calls.

For example, the ARK once received a group of venomous reptiles for shipment, stored in crates, that had flown in from another country. The shipping agent expected them to be loaded on a passenger plane — an idea Ms. Schuette didn’t agree with.



The ARK recently processed a shipment of 12 Icelandic horses and prepared them to travel across the United States. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

The regulation governing the transfer was narrow, she said, and focused on the health of the animals, not the people they could come in contact with. No one was stepping back and looking at the entire situation, which could end badly if, well, the snakes got loose on the plane.

Once the airline found out, it canceled the shipment. Now, the ARK had a bunch of venomous reptiles — half bound for Texas, the other half for Florida — with nowhere to go; the ARK finally helped the broker figure out alternative ground transportation.

The experts at the ARK are also called upon to handle various crises that arise at the airport.

A few years ago, a frantic call came in from a passenger flight that was being unloaded. A large box of bees had come loose and rogue bees were escaping, but all the shipping instructions were in Spanish and no one knew what to do. The ARK's handlers drove across the tarmac and used netting to secure the bee enclosure.

The episodes highlight the range of problems the facility's workers may have to solve on a given day.

"I think it gives a comfort level to our customers, and also to other brokers and agencies that are sending animals to us," Ms. Schuette said. "We're going to do it right."

The ARK began as an unexpected venture for Mr. Cuticelli, after a career building a family real estate business, creating a private equity fund and specializing in buying bankrupt companies.



After the Icelandic horses were unloaded from a cargo plane, handlers at the ARK secured them in stalls at the facility's import barn. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

He began negotiating with the Port Authority, which operates J.F.K., to take over its animal terminal in 2011. It would take three years, almost \$2 million in legal fees and the work of 11 law firms to sign the lease, and another three years and a \$65 million investment for the ARK to open.

Mr. Cuticelli and Ms. Schuette, his wife and business partner, had no background in animal transport and had not initially planned to operate the facility themselves. But after years of planning and research, they changed their minds.

“We were determined,” Ms. Schuette said.

“Insanity,” Mr. Cuticelli called it.

After a rocky start involving a \$426 million State Supreme Court lawsuit over exclusivity rights, the ARK began working to secure agreements to handle the animals transported by every airline that operates out of Kennedy.

While it now has agreements with many of the airlines, Ms. Schuette's goal for this year is to finalize contracts with the remaining holdouts.

Mr. Cuticelli said he estimated that the ARK currently owns about 60 percent of the equine import market in the United States, a number he expects to increase to 70 percent by the end of the year.

On a recent foggy morning, an Icelandair cargo plane landed on Runway 4 at Kennedy and taxied directly to the ARK's back door. Among the cargo unloaded by groundskeepers were 12 Icelandic horses — purebred, top-of-the-line, valued for their versatility and docility.



The Icelandair cargo plane that brought the horses to New York taxied right to the ARK's back door after landing at Kennedy. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

After a foot bath, a hose-down and a two-day quarantine, six would head to Vermont, four to Kentucky and two would take a road trip to California.

Each horse had a tracking number, a medical history and, crucially, a passport. Christian Rakshys, the broker overseeing the shipment, closely monitored the import and confirmed each horse's details.

Mr. Rakshys, a managing partner at Global Horse Transport, had a special interest in the Icelandic horse. He and his son, who has special needs, are planning a trip to Iceland this summer to pick out a pony, because the breed is especially valued for therapeutic riding.

On the other side of the ARK, on the same day, Stella, a St. Bernard puppy, patiently waited in the pet oasis. A Lufthansa airline strike had left Stella stranded after her owner had flown out, but she was bound for a reunion in Germany and would board a red-eye later that night.



Stella, a St. Bernard puppy, was stranded at the ARK after her Lufthansa flight to Germany was canceled because of a strike. Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

Until then, Stella bunked with the other oasis residents, mainly a rambunctious group of beagles employed by government agencies for airport security.

The beagles are some of the facility's only permanent guests. The rest — a group that over the years has included lions, parrots, eagles, badgers, sloths, a capybara, a bearcat and an anteater — are usually just stopping through.

“You can ship pretty much everything,” Ms. Schuette said.

A correction was made on March 17, 2024: An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Stella, a puppy waiting at the ARK at Kennedy International Airport. Stella is a St. Bernard, not a Bernese Mountain dog.