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## Camel beauty pageant draws thousands of contestants

By DAVID E. MILLER / THE MEDIA LINE  
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Over 20,000 camels, their owners from the Gulf have converged in Abu-Dhabi to participate in the Al-Mazayin camel beauty competition.

They may not wish for world peace; but in the Emirates, camel beauty queens are at least as prestigious as their human counterparts.

Over 20,000 camels and their owners from across the Gulf have converged on Abu-Dhabi's western region to participate in the Al-Mazayin camel beauty competition in the desert town of Dhafra.

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The stakes are high as some 800 camel owners are vying for cash prizes of up to 35 million UAE Dirhams (\$9.5 million). Sheikh Muhammad Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu-Dhabi, funds the competition which takes place at periodic intervals.

"This is the only animal we love," Salem Al-Mazroui, director of the Al-Dhafra festival which hosts the beauty pageant, told The Media Line. He explained that the competition was an opportunity to show gratitude to camels.

"A Bedouin could not survive in the past without camels, so now we want to give back to them," Al-Mazroui said.

Once the main means of transport in the simmering Arabian desert, the camel remains an important cultural icon and a source of pride for Gulf Arabs.

"Camels were our first means of transport, which is why people have grown attached to them," Ahmad Kheiri, an employee at the Al-Ain company for animal feed in Abu-Dhabi, told The Media Line. "Today people mostly use camels for racing, meat and milk."

The Al-Mazayin beauty competition includes two categories: one for light-skinned camels called Asayel, and the other for dark-skinned camels called Majahim. Camels are judged by a panel of experts from Gulf countries, who use a 100 point scale to evaluate the animals. Specific physical attributes such as nose shape, head size, whiskers and ear erection are taken into account, as well as general fitness, size and hair shine.

Al-Mazroui said that camel beauty pageants were initiated 20 years ago, as cultivators began mixing species in order to breed faster camels for racing. Sheikh Khalifah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE and Emir of Abu Dhabi, endorsed the beauty pageant as a way of maintaining the pure-breed Arabian camel, Al-Mazroui added.

"In the past, people focused only on racing and speed, but no longer," he said.

On the sidelines of the beauty pageant, camel racing and camel-milking competitions are also taking place, as well as a market where camels will be traded.

A quality camel can bring its owner a hefty sum. A white rare breed named Nomas was recently sold in a camel festival in Saudi Arabia for 3 million Saudi Riyals (\$800,000), the Saudi daily Sharq reported.

According to the Sudan-based Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD), some 378,000 camels inhabited the United Arab Emirates in 2008. But in the Middle East, it is the poorer countries which tend to have more camels.

Out of a total of nearly 16 million camels in the entire Middle East and North Africa, war-torn Somalia leads by far with over 7 million camels, followed by Sudan with 4.4 million.

Muhammad Khalaf Al-Mazrouei, director general of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, stressed the role of the camel beauty pageant in preserving the historical heritage of the Emirates, despite its quickly developing economy.

"In the face of the challenges of cultural erosion, which is being caused by increasing globalization, Abu Dhabi has chosen to take a balanced approach in its attitudes towards tradition and progress," he said in a press statement.

"The philosophy of the desert holds a great draw to us; exciting us and making us long to return to it whenever we can. The desert represents our cultural roots, and signifies the values that are important to us," he said.



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