

Saudi Arabia's \$31m Beauty Pageant

A camel beauty contest in Saudi Arabia is grabbing attention globally even as it sees increasing participation from across the Gulf, pushing up tourism receipts for the kingdom and contributing significantly to its economic vision.

The stage was set for the beauty pageant and almost 30,000 models lined the ramp. Held in Rimah, a governorate of Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh, the participants came from all over the GCC including Kuwait, Qatar and the U.A.E. The location might seem to be quite unconventional in this respect but not when the models are camels and the scene above is a grab from King Abdulaziz Camels Festival, a heritage festival solely dedicated to camels and the Bedouin culture. The beauty pageant, also referred to as Miss Camels globally or as King Abdulaziz Camels Competition, is an integral part of the festival which has grown significantly since it was first held.

The event was first conceived in 1999 when a group of local Bedouin decided to host a competition for the most beautiful camel. Fondly called the 'Ship of the desert', camels played a crucial role in Bedouin life doubling up as transportation and nourishment for the inhabitants of the desert. The competition, initiated by a small group, soon gained the support of Saudi Arabia's royal family and became popular among the masses. With such popularity, the event transformed into a heritage festival with people travelling from across the GCC to showcase their finest camels. Today the festival apparently attracts thousands of camels and owners while bringing in droves of visitors to the venue. According to the show organizers, the event saw about 10,000 visitors to its 2017 edition. The increase in visitor numbers was largely due to a fast track counter for visa collection, set up only for festival attendees. With such massive participation, it is also part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which looks to various pillars to enhance economic diversification. Meanwhile the festival is also seen as essential to generating awareness for Islamic cultural traditions and heritage among the Arab youth who have not roughed it like their forefathers.

"Today there is very little Bedouin life remaining but the attachment to camels remains strong on several levels: personal ownership, economic commodity, and sport," says Dr. Talal Al Torifi, a historian and specialist in Bedouin practices and close advisor for the festival. "In the past camels were very focal in Bedouin life in terms of food and transportation. Previously seen as the 'ship of the desert', a main source of transport, a loyal friend, sturdy worker, shady spot to lean, a reliable supply of milk, and even a supply of food and leather - the festival touches on all aspects of the camel and people's relationship with them throughout time and today."

Al Torifi says that assistance from the royal family has helped expand the scope of the festival vastly. "Thanks to support from the Saudi royal family, it has expanded into a broader heritage exhibition covering 30 sq km (12 sq miles) of the ad-Dhna desert. For 2017, we are extremely proud and excited to showcase interactive additions that reflect all that is important to us in the region. With more activities than ever and an eclectic mix of traditional happenings, combined with fresh concepts, the festival is sure to intrigue and

educate all attendees from children, to families and tourists.” Held from March 19 to April 15, King Abdulaziz Camels Festival is not just limited to the camel beauty contest. A large market, tents of the camel owners, impressive lights, elaborate decorations and an array of newly announced entertainment activations were also part of the latest edition of the show. The festival also includes a heritage market consisting of an expansive souk, a planetarium that shows how important astronomy was when navigating the desert, a camel auction, a camp where visitors learn the art of camel riding and a children’s festival that helps them to grasp their rich Bedouin heritage.

Miss Camels

Although the heritage festival has an array of activities, its main attraction puller has always been the camel competition. In its 2017 edition, about 30,000 camels competed for the prize money of \$31 million that was given out over 270 awards to various camels. The beauties were judged over their age, breed and group by a well-qualified panel of experts.

“Judges are on the look out for untouched natural beauty, with prizes awarded throughout the festival. Camels are assessed, according to breed, color and then within a single or group heat,” says Dr. Al Torifi. “Judged by a committee of selected Bedouin who are considered experts and fully immersed in the ways and culture of Bedouin life and traditions, winning camels have become highly desirable, fetching millions of pounds in price whilst also leading to a momentary jump in prices of camels across the stock market. From the Wadah white camel to, the Al Majahateer dark camel and the Al Homor reddish, brown camel, various features considered most beautiful to each breed are closely assessed to determine the deserving winners. These include; the size of the camels’ head, whether the lips cover the teeth, the length of its neck, to the roundness of its hump, the size of it’s eyes, how long the lashes are, how the nose droops, whether the ears stand back, how high the hump is and where the hump sits.”

Among the participants 80% of camels were from Saudi Arabia while the remaining 20% were from other GCC countries. The competition, which was much bigger than its previous editions, has also undergone a rebrand this year, reveals Dr. Al Torifi. “As well as the changes to the setup, size and entertainment offerings - the competition is also much bigger in terms of prize money, now offering the biggest amount in prize money for a festival/camel competition of its kind. Over \$30.3 million will be awarded for camel beauty awards alone. The festival is much more organized and with lots of additional criteria for 2017 there is much more opportunity for camel owners to enter and participate.

“For 2017, we have also officially changed the name of the festival from its ancient name of Mazayen Al-Ibl to King Abdulaziz Camels Festival, The festival has expanded thanks to the royals and there are now family activities and a diverse range of heritage entertainment.”

As the desert’s beauties retreat to prepare themselves for the next year, the festival indeed leaves an indelible mark on the society as it revives the Bedouin culture immersed in the sand grains of the Gulf countries.

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