

A STABLE COMPANION

One of the oldest horse breeds in the world, the majestic Arabian is a treasured part of UAE heritage



WORDS BY SCOTT BIRCH

Noble, distinctive and highly prized, the Arabian horse is an important part of the UAE's heritage. Famed for their speed and stamina, these horses were a significant part of Bedouin life, living alongside their human masters in much the same way we see the role of camels in desert life.

The Arabian is easy to recognise thanks to its distinctive wedge-shaped head, wide forehead and high tail carriage. Arabians also have a small raised area between their eyes (called the *jibbah* by the Bedouin) which is believed to aid breathing in the arid desert climate. Although many Arabians appear to be white, and are often perceived as such, they are in fact grey.

One of the oldest horse breeds in the world – evidence suggests as old as 4,500 years – the Arabian horse naturally originated in this region. The horses lived in close proximity to, and with reliance on, their human owners. But it was not just one-way traffic – the nomadic Bedouin required these horses to protect their way of life.



Myths and legends

Arabian horses have been the subject of many myths and legends down the years. One story from the Bedouin says that Allah created the Arabian from the south wind, with the following words: “I call you Horse; I make you Arabian and I give you the chestnut colour of the ant; I have hung happiness from the forelock which hangs between your eyes; you shall be the Lord of the other animals. Men shall follow you wherever you go; you shall be good for flight as for pursuit; you shall fly without wings; riches shall be on your back and fortune shall come through your meditation.”

Another story tells how Muhammad chose his horses through a test of courage and loyalty. After a long journey through the desert, Muhammad let his horses free to race to the oasis. Before they reached the water,

Muhammad called them back. Five dutifully responded and became his favourites – Al Khamsa, meaning “the five”.

Best of breed

Arabian horses have spread across the world by trade and warfare to now have their bloodlines in most breeds of horse.

Arabians were bred to be war horses and aside from their stamina, their good nature and intelligence were also key factors. Indeed, it is this combination of brains and brawn that has endeared the Arabian to horse owners and breeders around the world.

Living and working alongside the Bedouin for centuries in harsh conditions created a resilient breed that was also comfortable with humans. In harsh desert conditions, the horses became accustomed to depending on their human masters for food and water, and sometimes even fed on dates and milk.



“A love for horses runs in my blood. Don’t forget that horses have been bred for centuries by Arabic tribes, they were used for hunting and fighting and they symbolise our history. Horse riding is more than merely sitting on a horse’s back. It is nobility and chivalry,” Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai



PHOTOGRAPHY: ASTRID HARRISSON

The Dubai International Arabian Horse Championship is a three-day celebration of purebred Arabian horses, showcasing their beauty, agility and heritage. The event will be held from March 15 to 17 at the Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Centre, and entry is free of charge.



This ‘domestication’ distilled down generations of Arabians to create a breed that is good natured but that also commands respect.

Enduring appeal

Arabian horses have dominated the sport of endurance riding in international events that often cover more than 160 kilometres. Arabians have not just excelled in endurance, but have also competed successfully in showjumping and eventing.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai and UAE Vice President and Prime Minister, is well known in equestrian circles for being the driving force behind the Godolphin stables, which have been successful in horseracing since their formation in 1994. As well as racing horses, Sheikh Mohammed is said to be involved in more than 700 endurance horses.

However, Sheikh Mohammed is also an accomplished rider and has excelled in endurance racing around the world, both as an individual and as leader of the UAE national team. Sheikh Mohammed’s sons Sheikh Hamdan and Sheikh Rashid have also topped the world ranking in the sport.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

International equestrian photographer Astrid Harrison travels the world photographing horses. From the foothills of the Andes to the plains of America’s Wild West, she has captured the spirit and character of the beloved creatures in a range of locations, including the UAE. Her work is on display in Dubai at The Majlis Gallery (04 3536233 or www.themajlisgallery.com), online at www.astridharrison.com and in a new book written by Tamsin Pickeral, *The Majesty of the Horse*.

