

# HEAD OVER HEELS OVER HUMPS

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MADINAT ZAYED// Sheikh Mohammed bin Sultan Al Nahyan cast his first gaze at the towering, dark-haired beauty as he stepped into the makeshift desert enclosure.

A day earlier the Sheikh, 24, an Abu Dhabi royal, had seen the camel's photo and paid Dh15 million (US\$4.1m) for the animal.

"It's very beautiful," said his father, Sheikh Sultan bin Hamdan Al Nahyan, who is an advisor to the president and the chairman of Emirates Camel Racing Federation. "This is one of the best."

A male, named Mabrukan, it was also one of the most expensive camels in the world.

It was one of two Majahim, or dark-skinned, purebred camels that Sheikh Mohammed bought earlier this month. He paid record prices for them: as well as the Dh15m for Mabrukan, he paid Dh10m for a female, Muraia.

These hefty sums broke the former record, set just a day before, by Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed, Crown Prince of Dubai, who bought a female camel called al Haiyer for almost Dh10m. The unprecedented purchases at the Mazayin Dhafra Camel Festival may be a sign of things to come, as purebred camels attract investment on a level that would have previously gone to thoroughbred horses.

"We are planning to have camel prices like horses," said Sheikh Mohammed, referring to the extended royal family, including the country's leaders. "We have to encourage, to help the industry. That's why we are buying the camels."

Camels have long been a central part of Arabian culture and are prized as measures of a family's wealth, along with falcons and horses. The market is growing rapidly, according to the directors of the Mazayin Dhafra festival, which was organised by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage and ran for almost two weeks earlier this month.

The festival, held in a windswept, barren stretch of desert in the country's Western Region, was extended due to popular demand. "Camels reached up to three times more in two months," said Salem Ebrahim al Mazrouei, director of operations for the festival.

"A camel used to be worth Dh3m last month, now it's worth Dh10m," he said.

The reason for the increased appeal is clear to Mr Mazrouei.

"Prestige," he said. "The prestige of having something that is number one. It's not about money."

But there are other reasons as well. As in any speculative market, there are investors who will later seek to "flip" their asset and make a profit.

Added to the game is the changing nature of the inventory. A camel's coat can change colour and darken, Mr Mazrouei said, and become more valuable. "Some camels will change colour if you take care of them. People who know will say that this is a nice camel but it doesn't look good now, but if I look after it, in three or four months it will completely change," he said. "You might sell it for five or six million."

The Mazayin Dhafra festival included a beauty contest that judged the purebreds on several qualities: curvature of the ears, size of the chest, the size of the nose relative to the face, fullness of hump, the length of the neck, glossiness of the coat and depth of its colour.

More than 17,000 camels from across the Gulf competed in the

contest, which was one of the wealthiest and largest events of its kind. In previous years there have been other, smaller contests, but this was the first held under the auspices of the country's rulers.

More than Dh35m in prize money, as well as 100 brand new four-wheel-drive vehicles, were up for grabs at the Mazayin Dhafra festival. During the first week of the event alone more than Dh100m changed hands.

The average price for a camel at the contest was Dh2m to Dh3m, said Mr Mazrouei. Less attractive, non-competitive camels sell for just Dh10,000 to Dh20,000.

Some camels at the festival were so valuable that their owners refused to sell them, but relented if the buyer was a royal. "They got offered Dh7m or Dh8m but they didn't sell it," Mr Mazrouei said. "The royals paid them and they sold them."

Salah al Mansour bin Aziz al Mansouri sold Sheikh Mohammed the Dh10m camel, Muraia.

Mr Mansouri, an Emirati from the nearby town of Liwa, said he knew his prized possession would fetch the price that it did.

"It's worth it, more even, but I wanted to give it to Sheikh Mohammed as a gift," Mr Mansouri said, as he gently caressed the camel's dark brown coat. In the past camels were traded "by the sword, knife or gun", he said, to the amusement of several Emirati men gathered around him near Muraia's enclosure. "There was no money." He added, wryly: "Now it's better."

Mr Mansouri has hired 15 handlers to tend to the 400 camels he keeps on his farm, an operation which costs him Dh5m a year. He has sold other camels to wealthy Saudi sheikhs for up to Dh11m. "It's expensive to keep camels," he said, "but it's what my grandfather and his grandfather did."

Qatar and Saudi Arabia also hold annual camel festivals.

In addition to beauty, camels are prized for their speed. Camel racing is not only hugely popular, it is an increasingly lucrative sport in the Gulf. With more than 20 racetracks in the country, the prize pools have grown into the millions of dirhams.

The vigorous participation of royal families, both in the UAE and elsewhere in the Gulf, has fuelled interest, as has good, old-fashioned competition.

“Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed is the biggest competitor and he loves camels and the sport,” Mr Mazrouei said. “The Qataris want to compete with Sheikh Hamdan. They’re paying a lot of money to win and Sheikh Hamdan is buying more and more.”

For his part, Sheikh Mohammed bin Sultan said he was not planning to race his camels at any time soon.

“I only considered their beauty,” he said.

Mabrukan and Muraia are the young royal’s first two camels, but he was keen to add to his herd.

He also wanted to encourage more people to invest in an animal that is central to Emirati traditions.

“This is my beginning,” he said. “God willing, next year many people will be buying like this,” he added, referring to his record-breaking purchases. “This is part of our culture,” he said.