

# Inside the world of million-dollar beauty pageants – for camels

October 26 2018, by Jaime Gongora And Mahmood Alamri

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Camels need 'pendulous' lips to be beauty queens. Credit: Mahmood Al amri and Jaime Gongora, Author provided

When you hear "beauty pageants" you probably think of human women (and men) competing. However, a series of pageants on the Arabian

Peninsula celebrate the beauty of the dromedary, or one-humped camel.

Interest in [camel](#) beauty competitions has grown since the boom of oil production during the 20th century, as camels became associated with status and wealth.

These pageants have become massive. In 2017, some 30,000 camels competed in the [King Abul Aziz Camel Festival](#) in Saudi Arabia, which has a [prize pool](#) of around AU\$45 million. The winners in six categories each get roughly AU\$7.5 million, along with the crown of "[Miss Camel](#)".

The lure of these glittering prizes has also led to cheating. Earlier this year 12 camels were [disqualified](#) from a camel beauty pageant in Saudi Arabia after receiving Botox injections to improve the look of their lips and noses.

So what constitutes a prize-winning camel?

## **Omani camel contests**

Many breeds of camels compete in pageants across the Arabian Peninsula, so they are all assessed differently. I have worked with the Omani Camel Racing Federation to help develop a new scoring system, which aims to improve transparency and fairness.

A requirement of Omani beauty contests is that only pure-bred camels from Oman may participate. Camel owners must testify under oath to the authenticity of their animals' pedigree, or they are banned from taking part.



Camels need 'pendulous' lips to be beauty queens. Credit: Mahmood Al amri and Jaime Gongora, Author provided

Local committees of experts assess and rank the camels, which are categorised by age after a teeth examination. They look for:

- Coat: a natural appearance with shiny hair of a clearly definable colour. The brighter the hair, the more beautiful the pageant entrant is considered to be. No hair-colouring, tattooing or other cosmetic modification is allowed.
- Neck: must be long, wide, and elegant and lean, neither overly

full nor skinny. The area between the neck and the hump should be long and strong.

- **Head:** should be large and upright as well as proportioned to the rest of the body. Lips are pouty and pendulous, with the upper lip being cleft, chin is visible from the front and side, and eyes are wide with long, dark lashes. Ears are long, furrowed and pricked up, and also keep the sand out.
- **Hump:** large and shapely, in the usual position close to the back – a good posture and a large hump may increase a camel's chance of winning.

## **How competitions happen**

Pageant contestants are housed away from the sun and fed milk, wheat, honey and dates before the competition. During the contest itself, a handful of judges appointed by Omani Camel Racing Federation inspect the camels, consult with each other, and rank the animals. The whole scoring process is qualitative, and at no point do the judges write a score or explain the reasoning behind their decisions.

The increasing popularity of camel beauty contests has caused some dissatisfaction over the absence of a formal scoring system.

While studying the genetics of a range of animals as diverse as crocodiles, platypuses, oryxes, wild pigs and peccaries, I agreed to take on a project to define criteria for competitions, based on the traditional judging system.



Ears should be nicely pricked up. Credit: Jaime Gongora, Author provided

We began with a simple question: "What features make a camel beautiful from an Omani perspective?" We then developed a numerical scoring card to help judges explain their decisions.

We identified 22 body measurements across the head, upper body, front and rear, as well as general appearance and colour. Each of these is scored to give a maximum total of 100 points. The judges we have consulted are happy with the outcome and are looking forward to validating the system in upcoming major contests across Oman.

We are also assessing overall genetic patterns of the pageant contestants

and their association with beauty traits. We will be extending our genetic studies to camels used for racing, milk and meat in Oman.

The scoring and ranking of camels during beauty contests can be a challenging business. We hope giving judges a numerical system will lend support to their decisions and help keep the owners and the general public, and consequently the pageant contestants, happy.

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