

Celebrating Horses

AROUND THE WORLD

With their enormous contribution to mankind and almost mystical attraction, horses inspire celebrations that attract people from all walks of life.



by Wendy Elks

Around the world, horses are celebrated for their beauty, power, and the enormous contribution they've made to humankind through the ages. Horses have served and beguiled people for millennia, and, though it's a subjective statement, many would agree that no other animal combines the qualities of grace, beauty, power and kindness, so perfectly.

Still beasts of burden in some countries, in others, horses have many roles: as partners in sport and recreation, loved and pampered companions, or stars of entertainment. The human-horse relationship is still evolving, in new takes on tradition such as equitation science and in new-age realms like psychotherapy.

Horses deserve acknowledgement as one of humankind's best-serving domesticated animals, and appreciation for them is expressed in unique ways that reflect the history of horse and human in each culture. While many horse-inspired festivals have mundane beginnings – sale markets are common – the spectacle and thrill that horses can provide never wanes.



Horses, Rice and History in Japan – the Chagu Chagu Umakko

Japan is a country rich in equestrian history, and while the tradition continues today in Olympic competition, amateur horse ownership and flat racing, the Japanese calendar includes ancient ceremonies largely spiritual in nature. Two that feature horses are the Chagu Chagu Umakko, and the Yabusame.

The Iwate Prefecture in northern Japan is a traditional horse-breeding district where horses are so treasured that the custom of people living with equines in the same dwelling still occurs. On the second Sunday in June the sound of bells heralds the 200-year-old ritual ceremony, the Chagu Chagu Umakko. One of the year's most awaited festivals, it is an elegant yet grandiose equestrian parade, celebrating the coming of summer.

At 9.30 in the morning around one hundred horses carrying small children led by handlers depart from the Sozen-jinja Shrine - dedicated to the deity of horses. They parade through Takizawa City and beautiful parkland before arriving at the Morioka Hachiman-gu Shrine in Morioka City, five hours later. People line the streets to watch and pay homage to the Horse's historical role in providing food.

The Chagu Chagu Umakko began with farmers taking their beloved horses, tired after a busy season, to a shrine to pray for their health and safety. Dressing them up for the journey became the custom.

The tiny riders and their leaders wear traditional garb and the horses are adorned with decorative harness and embellishments. The parade is a colourful and noisy spectacle: 'chagu chagu' is an onomatopoeic expression, representing the sound made by the bells on the horses' harness as they trot along – a sound that has been selected by the Ministry of the Environment as one of "the 100 best sonic sounds of Japan to be preserved into the future". A donut-shaped accessory hanging below the neck of the horse, intended to ward off wolves, also makes a pleasant ringing sound.



Yabusame

Yabusame, or mounted archery celebrates a style of riding in Japan dating back more than 1,000 years. Originating in military training, yabusame is now a ceremony to pray for peace across the land and a good harvest.

Until the Middle Ages, firing arrows while riding a horse at full speed was an important skill for warriors. In 1187, the shogun (military leader) Minamoto no Yoritomo, who studied and promoted the art of mounted archery, inaugurated the yabusame as a Shinto ritual at the Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine, south of Tokyo. Yoritomo's aim was to heighten the warriors' mental strength, skill and religious devotion by practicing yabusame not just as a skill but as a religious ceremony.

Yabusame requires good riding and archery skills, and the Shinto ceremony is a stirring spectacle. Riders in historical garb gallop their horse along a narrow 70-metre track and fire a total of three blunted arrows at three small, breakable wooden targets placed at intervals outside the track. If an arrow can't be shot in time, the archer must drop that arrow and pull out another for the next target. Three archers perform the ritual, watched by a crowd of onlookers.

Today, samurai-inspired archery on horseback is a popular sport around the world, including Australia. Traditionally, the festival is scored on a hit or miss system, the ultimate winner being awarded a white sash signalling favour from the gods for being the most accurate. The sporting tournaments, contested by teams of three riders, vary in scoring systems and styles. *Cont...*

Celebrating the Horse continued...

AACHEN – Celebrations of Olympian Proportion

Most Australian horse enthusiasts, particularly competitors in the Olympic disciplines know of the German city of Aachen, where Europe's most prestigious horse show has been held each May in for the past 83 years.

Situated in Soers Sport Park in the north of the city, Aachen is a celebration of equestrian sport, particularly the Olympic disciplines.

To win at Aachen means being at the top of the tree. Team World Eventing competing at Aachen as Jumping Champion Ludger it is what all work Jumping, dressage, vaulting feature at Aachen, horse-mad Europe. People the CHIO Aachen Weltfest for political, economic naturally, legions of horse of equine competition Festival, which includes disciplines.

The Nations Cup events are emotion-stirring finals in eventing, dressage, show jumping and four-in-hand, as only one team from each country may compete; the show jumping Nations Cup televised on to massive audiences on prime time TV.



JEREZ – Horses, Sherry and Flamenco

Further south, Spain's native horse, the magnificent Andalusian takes precedence over sherry and flamenco (although there's plenty of these too) for seven days every May in the southern city of Jerez. A 500-year-old tradition, the Jerez Horse Fair began in the Middle Ages as one of two commercial livestock fairs held each year in the capital. The spring fair featured the sale of horses, and the local wine, sherry, was drunk to toast the deals made amongst the local horse breeding families and those who purchased their magnificent animals.

Horse breeders attending the sale set up temporary casetas (elaborate tents) to socialise, pass the time and no doubt lubricate deals. From 1941 the fair took on more translucent shades of Spain's signature yellow and red as local wine makers set up stalls to showcase their sherry vintages.

Some provided entertainment to enhance the convivial atmosphere. Andalusian sevillana, a form of flamenco dancing and guitar, completed a winning trifecta of wine, entertainment and equine aristocracy.

Today the Jerez Horse Fair is one of Spain's biggest festivals, with around a million visitors flocking the streets to see parades of elegantly attired Andalusian horses and riders, carriages, a city of casetas, carnivals and equine competition from dressage to polo, and bullfighting.

There are additional side-feasts for horse lovers, as Jerez is also home to the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art; and many local bodegas (vineyards) hold equestrian events.



THE MONGOLIAN NADAAM: Archery, Wrestling and Horse Racing

Each July in Ulaanbaatar on the Mongolian Steppes, huge crowds of locals and tourists gather for the annual Nadaam festival. The major event of the Mongolian calendar, this festival dates back to the times of Genghis Khan.

Originating from the nomad hunting and wedding extravaganzas of the ancient Mongol Army, the dates for the Nadaam festival – July 11 – 13 have more recently been aligned to the independence of Mongolia, which occurred in 1921. The Naadam has UNESCO World Cultural Heritage listing and literally means ‘the three games of men’ – wrestling, archery and horse racing. These days, women compete in both horse riding and archery, though the glass ceiling of wrestling is yet to be smashed.

Parades, traditional games and Mongolian folklore are showcased and celebrated, but the ‘three games’ dominate. After a ceremonial beginning each morning, the day’s events begin.

At Ulaanbaatar around 1,000 of the

small, sturdy Mongolian horses and their riders gather for races across the grassy steppes. There is no set course, and many of the riders are children, as the horses can go faster with less weight on their backs.

A ritual song takes place before each race (which may be kilometres long), sung by both jockeys and public, before a spectacle of stampeding horses, dust and shouting. Mongolians love their ancient breed of horse and each race’s winner is celebrated more than its jockey. The fastest five horses are revered in poetry and music, while the winning rider receives the title ‘tumny ekh’ (leader of ten thousand). The last horse to finish is titled bayan khodood (‘full stomach’) and sung a song wishing it better luck next year.

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Celebrating the Horse continued...

Australia's own Horse Festival

For duration and variety, nothing beats Australia's own celebration of all things Horse - the Scone and Upper Hunter Horse Festival. Held each May in Scone, the proclaimed horse capital of Australia, a simple street parade has, in its twelve-year history evolved into the seventeen-day long, whole-town and regional festival it is today.

Celebrating the Horse's varied roles in the development of modern-day Australia, and encompassing the far-flung industry that goes with all things equestrian, a mosaic of events include the 2-day King of the Ranges Stockman's Challenge and Bush Festival and a full program of competition in equestrian sport and related activities, many with a true Australian flavour. Horse sports include polo and team penning, horse sports for schools, vaulting, rodeo, flat racing, and Olympic disciplines.

Along with the famous street parade are various educational opportunities to learn

about keeping and riding horses. And for less horsey partners, there's golf, entertainment, an antiques fair, fun run, art show, trivia night, market, picnic, dog trials and a pub Calcutta. So there's something to interest everyone, and many make an annual holiday of the festival, coming from all over the country.

Being involved in equestrian pursuits isn't for everybody, but most non-horsy people appreciate these animals for some reason: simply for their overall magnificence, as romantic window into another world, a link to the past, a dream of freedom or symbol of nobility. As anyone lucky enough to own a horse will know, they have an almost magical power to inspire.

