

# *Sand* and stirrups

Having grown up in the Bedouin desert, Ali Al Ameri realised in his teenage years that he had a special gift for curing “problem” horses, as **Heba Hesham** discovers

*Photographs:* Darryl Visscher







**R**ATHER LIKE A MAGICIAN WITH his wand, Ali Al Ameri's moves are being mimicked by a horse that has never been trained. It runs with him, stops with him, and rears up when he waves his wand in the air. Except that this wand is just a small wooden stick that he uses to catch the horse's attention and the magic is really many years of experience and bonding with horses.

"Animals are our life, I've always lived with them. I have a villa but I live here with the horses," says Al Ameri, a Bedouin from the Al Ameri tribe in the United Arab Emirates. He grew up with camels, cows and goats, but, perhaps surprisingly, not many horses, as they were rare in the UAE at the time.

"People say horses are part of our heritage. It's not true. We had camels, but only rich people had horses; they brought them from neighbouring countries." Money brings everything, he says, whether it's horses, cars or the tallest building in the world.

"Before the discovery of oil, we were among the poorest people in the world and we struggled >

*Above and left: while working on his farm, Al Ameri favours the look of a Texan cowboy over the more traditional Bedouin dress*



**Right:** Al Ameri says that horses are the most forgiving of animals, which will not revert to previous bad habits, once corrected

every day just to survive. I was about 12 the first time I saw a horse. We were just kids playing around and I said, ‘Oh, horses! Look at that.’ I was amazed,” Al Ameri recalls.

It then struck him how “beautiful, strong and fast” these creatures were, and from that day onwards, he dreamt of horses, often sitting and watching them from behind a fence. “They

were graceful, the way they moved. Set a horse off and look at how it gallops, so athletic and powerful, like art. You can talk about horses all day.”

In his late teenage years, Al Ameri started working with the country’s Royal Guards’ stables, where he had a friend. It was the start of a lifelong equine love affair, although he doesn’t know exactly how long this particular affair has lasted. “I have no idea when I was born. There were no hospitals or birth certificates. It was in the desert—some say 1964, others say 1966.”

Although he didn’t start working with horses until he was a teenager, Al Ameri had been working with camels from a much earlier age, about 10 or 11, he recalls. Soon he discovered the special talent he possessed for dealing with difficult camels, an animal which is a real challenge because, unlike horses, it never forgives.

“I’m not a scientist, but from my experiences, horses have a good memory,” says Al Ameri. “They scan everything. You take them to the same place twice, and the second time they’ll stop in front of anything that wasn’t there yesterday.” Although they have a good memory, once they’ve been cured of their foibles or bad habits, horses will forget and move on. “They’re very forgiving.”

The camel, on the other hand, is smarter because it thinks and, apparently, plots: “Camels remember for life and will never forgive you even after 10 years. When you sleep they’ll try to hurt you.”

With this disturbing fact, Al Ameri describes how life in the desert depended on camels. “I travelled on camelback from day one, probably from the day I was born, with my mum. We moved from camp to camp, chasing the rain, and wherever there was grass for the animals to graze on. We would settle for six to seven months, then move elsewhere.”

Having spent his childhood entirely in the desert, he didn’t know what the sea looked like. “When I first saw the beach in Abu Dhabi, I thought they were lucky to have so much water. I thought it was for drinking! We had come from the desert near Al Ain, where potable water was hard to find, but that was before the oil.”

Today, after 20 years of fixing problem horses, Al Ameri has earned an international reputation for his remarkable results. His clients come from around the world and include royal families, among others.

His skills have also brought him to wider attention, featuring in films such as *The Young Black Stallion* for Walt Disney and television commercials such as the Asian Games. “We were filming for the 15th Asian Games and they wanted an ‘around-the-world’ advert, so we had to film in Shanghai, where the horse had to go through fireworks, flying dragon streamers, swaying dancers and run up narrow stairs. It took three days to shoot this. Next week we were in Thailand, and the horse had to gallop under the bridge in five inches of water.”

Similar scenarios were repeated in India and Morocco and, in four weeks, the shooting was done, without any rehearsals, according to Al Ameri. “With helicopters above, and in open spaces without fences, the horse could have run off. That’s why the horse needs to see me all the time. If I lose that eye contact with them, they are gone. Every sign I make means something to them. So although »

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*Above: Al Ameri, who dislikes the term “horse whisperer”, says that he has never failed to cure a horse*

the horse appears to be doing everything alone on camera, I’m there every step of the way.”

On another occasion, his stallion Liberty was brought into The Dubai Mall for the opening day—an experience that went smoothly despite the noise of the crowds. “It was the idea of Nakheel, the developer,” recalls Al Ameri. “I’ll do whatever the director and storyboard want, to a reasonable extent. I can’t get the horse wings to fly, but if they want it to gallop and rear, it will.”

There was nothing easy about it, he says, and again, there were no rehearsals. “We had to get the horse into the lift, up to the second floor and to the audience. He reared in the mall and followed me around like he was shopping, but people didn’t know the horse was with me.”

**“I work with horses almost all day so, in the evening, I light a fire, relax and look up at the stars. There’s no noise here in the desert”**

While Al Ameri can read the body language of horses, he doesn’t like to be called a horse whisperer, saying it’s a commercial term that doesn’t hold truth. “The horse cannot talk, it doesn’t speak English or Arabic or Chinese. So how can you whisper to it?”

“I’m not the best or worst horseman,” he declares, “just a different one because I use very old techniques. Maybe I’m the quickest horseman.”

Indeed he is quick, for to catch a wild horse in the field, break and ride it out in an hour’s time is hard to believe. Yet this is a reality witnessed by everybody who has worked with Al Ameri; he claims he has never been let down by a horse.

“Last time I was in England, they had horses that were going to be put down. They went through fences, full of cuts, and were tripping over people. In the same day they were all sorted. They won competitions, coming first or second, and they have a good life now.”

Most people can develop horsemanship skills, says Al Ameri, but only to a certain point. “If it’s not in you, you’ll never master it, so it must be in you.” One of the most common oversights he’s seen by owners and trainers is giving the horse the wrong commands, and that’s why it refuses to respond, because it gets confused.

As much as Al Ameri loves horses, especially thoroughbreds, which are known to be sharper than other breeds, he assures me that no horse is actually clever or else we wouldn’t be riding them. “It would ask you: why are you on my back?” he says, half-jokingly.

With so much time spent working, Al Ameri rarely gets a chance to relax. His three sons are growing fast—one is already mastering camel racing, and the other two enjoy horse “trick riding”, occasionally working with

him. When he does get some time off, it’s all about enjoying the little pleasures around him. “I work with horses almost all day so, in the evening, I light a fire, relax and look up at the stars. There’s no noise here in the desert. I hate the city. If I didn’t really have to go for a meeting, I wouldn’t go. Every big city is the same for me—people living in boxes and looking miserable. Here in the desert we help each other and smile.”

Away from the desert, Al Ameri would still ride horses. Out of all the places he’s visited, South >



America left the biggest impression on him: “I love riding in Chile, Argentina and Brazil, especially the Amazon. It’s virgin land and people still live like they did in ancient times. We once spent six weeks in the Andes Mountains, riding, fishing and hunting. The animals and birds came so close as they’d never seen a human. I also enjoy Australia, for the sights and open spaces, and the English countryside is beautiful.”

If he wasn’t a horse master, what would he be doing? Al Ameri finds it hard to come up with an alternative. “I guess I’d be a gardener, because I cannot do anything else! I’m good with shooting and hunting, but anything related to modern life I don’t know.”

Many authors have proposed writing a book about Al Ameri’s horse-training secrets, but his answer has always been that he’s not ready for that. “I cannot lie and tell people ‘do that and it’s going to work’. The methods are not fixed and some techniques

might not work for every horse,” he says. However, a documentary about his life, *Bedouin Horse Master*, will be released soon.

While he still learns from horses every day, he says there are few authentic horsemen left today; there were more in the past, when kingdoms were built on horsebacks and cars didn’t exist.

Speaking of cars, Al Ameri is happy with anything that’s “comfortable and safe”. But he would love to get behind the wheel of one particular car that falls into a more powerful category—the new Aston Martin V12 Vantage S, which he says he would like to use to round-up a group of horses running wild.

“Cut them loose and we’ll chase them down. I could even single out one horse from the pack and make it rear up in front of the car,” he suggests excitedly, adding that he “really could make this happen”. And considering all his achievements, who wouldn’t believe him?

*Above: a quiet moment with one of the horses on his farm, deep in the desert in the United Arab Emirates*

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