

Turkmens and Their Leader Go Crazy for Horse Day

April 28, 2011



President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov riding a horse with a dove on his shoulder in Ashgabat on Sunday. **Alexander Vershinin**

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — Wearing a blue caftan and shaggy sheepskin hat, Turkmenistan's president looked every part the accomplished horse-riding tribesman as he effortlessly cantered on his jewel-adorned stallion before cheering crowds. The crowning touch came when a white dove gracefully landed on his right shoulder.

Turkmenistan holds its slim and graceful Akhal-Teke horse breed in hallowed regard, a cultural trait enthusiastically embraced by President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov.

Last weekend, the country was whipped up into a frenzy of equine-mania that featured a grand horse show and, more soberly, an academic conference.

Festivities culminated with the opening of four new lavish racetracks. Broadcasts of opening ceremonies in cities across Turkmenistan were shown on a giant screen in the capital, after which Berdimukhammedov delivered an address beamed to the new hippodromes.

The horses have always been popular in the former Soviet republic, but the pitch and scale of enthusiasm is something new.

Shortly after Turkmenistan gained independence, eccentric late President Saparmurat Niyazov banned the export of Akhal-Teke horses in an effort to preserve the breed, although many still found their way to Russia and the West.

Berdymukhammedov, 53, who came to power after Niyazov's death in late 2006, has not reversed that ban, but instead has taken a different tack in attempting to amplify the horse's cultural status.

By performing before hundreds of cheering and flag-waving spectators at the presidential equestrian complex before a prize-giving ceremony Saturday, Berdymukhammedov once again cemented his well-worn action man credentials.

And as state media helpfully noted, the landing of the dove on his shoulder is "an ancient symbolic omen of a blessing from above."

Horses similar to the Akhal-Teke have been used by Central Asian peoples for thousands of years and are believed to have been ridden by the armies of Alexander the Great. The purity of the breed has long been a source of pride among the nomadic tribes that occupied the desert lands now covered by Turkmenistan.

Including a fifth new racetrack set to open later this year, the government has plowed more than \$300 million into creating sumptuous racing venues.

Last weekend, cars were handed out as gifts at the third annual horse show, dubbed a beauty contest, in which the animals were evaluated for elegance and purebred qualities, as well as fineness of movement and ability to obey a variety of instructions.

International experts from countries including the United States, France, China and Russia gathered in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat, for a scientific conference devoted to discussing the latest efforts to develop the breed.

On a less ambitious scale, Berdymukhammedov this year ordered a series of competitions in which contestants had to weave and sculpt the most skillful likenesses of Turkmen horses.

According to the state-run Turkmen Atlary equine association, the country boasts about 3,000 Akhal-Teke horses, of which 500 are owned by the president.

Berdymukhammedov is not normally distinguished by a florid turn of phrase, but breathless enthusiasm filters through clearly in an epigraph penned by him in a newly issued book about the Akhal-Teke called "The Flight of the Heavenly Horses."

"We shall not allow attention toward our horses to falter by one iota, for they are our pride and glory, the source of our inspiration," he wrote.

Ovlyaguly Sheripov, a prominent Akhal-Teke breeder and the owner of Saturday's horse show winner, said Turkmen horses could in the future be auctioned off to international buyers.

"That said, the best stock will always remain in Turkmenistan," Sheripov said.

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