

April 14, 2011

By Michelle Sutton, Staff Reporter,

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/brand-of-the-nation-new-cash-cow-1.792151>

## Brand of the nation: New cash cow

The falcon may be the national emblem of the UAE, but it's the camel that's fast emerging as its unofficial brand ambassador. XPRESS details how the ship of the desert has outstripped the king of the skies

Dubai: Camels aren't generally known for their speed, but they have raced ahead to become the symbol most associated with the UAE.

According to marketing experts, the camel has become a brand icon of the UAE in recent years, overtaking the falcon - the UAE's national emblem - as the animal best representing the country.

American University of Dubai chairman of marketing Tarek Mady estimated that the national worth of camels runs into millions of dollars, taking into account the products, merchandise, brand value, jobs and associated businesses.

"It comes down to a-country-of-origin effect," said Mady.

He said the camel was something at the heart of the UAE which expats and visitors could see, taste and experience first-hand and then buy the T-shirt.



According to him, the camel managed to steal the thunder from the falcon because it seemed more fun and playful. "Icons are usually associated with the government so [they] are a bit more serious," he said.

Once restricted to the desert and races, camels today are to be found everywhere ranging from coffee cups and shot glasses to chocolate and milkshakes. Even its urine and milk are being studied by Arab scientists for claims that it can treat diseases, including cancer and various other health conditions.

As Dubai tourists and expats get a taste of all things camel, global demand for camel products continues to spiral.

### **Global market**

Some products are already being exported to GCC countries and Europe, and other countries also want a bite of the camel.

Local House Restaurant in Bastakiya, Dubai, which made camel burgers a worldwide name as a healthy, low-fat food, is struggling to keep up with local and international franchise inquiries.

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Marketing Consultant Ramesh EK told XPRESS that the first franchise is due to open in Abu Dhabi, and negotiations are underway for franchises in Oman, Egypt, Germany and Los Angeles.

However, Ramesh said the restaurant first wanted to establish a firm foothold in the UAE market before it branched out, as it had to work hard to keep up with up to 100 tourists arriving daily to get a taste of the camel.

Like the animal, camel burger prices have also hit a hump or two more than doubling from the original Dh20 (\$5.45) to Dh40-Dh60 (\$10.89-\$16.34) with each burger containing a quarter pound meat pattie.

Marcus and Sabine, from Germany, who dined at the restaurant last week, described the patty as tasting like beef, while adding that the camel was the first animal they associated with the UAE, followed by the falcon.

Tour host Jackey Hirzel, from Arabian Adventures, seconded the statement, saying most tourists felt the camel best represented the UAE followed by the falcon and the horse.

But Dubai's starring dish has always been the camel, she said.

Perhaps it explains the new menu soon to be launched at The Local House, with ice cream, cakes and patisseries - all made from camel milk, of course - adding to the camel shawarma, soup and milk already on offer.

The restaurant goes through about 200kg of camel meat a week which it sources from the Abu Dhabi government.

Dubai Tourism and Commerce Marketing Deputy Director Abdullah Bin Suwaidan said camels were worth millions of dollars to the country's tourism sector alone and had created business and jobs for hundreds of Dubai companies.

Just as the UAE's founding tribes couldn't have survived without them in the desert, today's generation is also reliant on them, said Bin Suwaidan.

According to him, camel merchandise and products were among the favourite UAE items for tourists since they best symbolised the country's tradition and heritage, representing the early beginnings when the Bedouin tribes rode camels through the desert.

"Emiratis feel proud that this animal has been part of their tradition and today the camel is a trusted identity," Bin Suwaidan said. "The UAE people can't live without the camel, even today. It is like a national brand ambassador."

XPRESS came across hundreds, possibly thousands of products in Dubai trading off the camel's back.

### **Business sense**

British expats and camel devotees Helen Howat and Susan Walpole are two businesswomen possibly leading the pack.

Both have stores in Dubai's major malls filled with camel goods. Howat, who set up a camel merchandise enterprise, The Camel Company, in 2004, said she - and the UAE - were celebrating the camel rather than taking advantage of it. "The UAE is celebrating the beloved camel that has provided transport, food and the sport of the Bedouins for centuries."

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It was one reason she chose the camel rather than another animal to start her business.

Sales have doubled since 2006 and within five years she has managed to open seven stores in Dubai's major malls - ample proof of the camel's enduring popularity among tourists, even in the face of a financial slowdown.

Her company sells around half a million camel products a year designed by its in-house team, (the company employs about 40 staff) and exports its products to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and other GCC states.

"The camel has become the national icon of the UAE and we should be proud of it - such a noble animal," she said.

### **Numbers say it all**

- 1 UAE camel population is 250,000 less than 5 per cent of world population
- 2 Some 190,000 milking camels are reared in the UAE
- 3 Camels are used to produce about 1,700 tonnes of meat in Abu Dhabi annually

### **CAMEL CURE?**

The camel is under the microscope for its healing abilities and food possibilities. Every other month, some scientific discovery is made in relation to the camel, or a new product is launched.

The UAE is at the centre of it all, with studies underway at various universities - a professor predicts a new camel cheese is months away, and a ground-breaking medical study on camel milk is soon to be launched in Dubai.

Virologist **Renate Wernery** gave XPRESS a guided tour of the internationally renowned Central Veterinary Research Laboratory in Dubai, which studies camels and other animals. The German expat revealed that clinical studies on the effect of raw camel milk in treating autistic children are expected to begin within a year.

"It's well documented that autistic children drinking camel milk show amazing improvement in their behaviour and it has also removed some symptoms. However, trials must be conducted first to determine this," she said.

Anecdotal evidence showed camel milk helps treat Crohn's Disease as well as diabetes 1 and autism, said Wernery.



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It fitted alongside other research by CVRL, which led to the development of the Camelicious milk brand launched in the GCC four years ago by Emirates Industry for Camel Milk and Products. The venture which started off as a pilot project at CVRL today includes a state-of-the-art production facility in Umm Nahad with about 750 milking camels producing the desert's 'white gold'.

Camel milk, Wernery said, was the easiest way for humans to tap into the camel's powerful immune system, with several stories of raw milk treating incurable diseases where western medicine failed.

According to her, the animal's immune system was an amazing scientific resource where dozens of discoveries were waiting to be made. Studies have shown camel meat has low fat and cholesterol levels, and the milk has less than half the fat of cow milk, with half a litre providing the recommended daily dosage of Vitamin C.

"Camel milk is extremely well adapted to human requirements and its composition is the closest to mother's milk," she said.

However, Wernery said Camelicious has yet to receive European Union accreditation for export to Europe. "The science around the health benefits is all relatively new, so the medical proof is unknown, but much more will be done about that in the near future and this, I don't doubt."

#### **RIDING ON THE CAMEL'S BACK**

- 1 Food: Products made from camel meat and milk include burgers (pictured above), salads, soup, milkshakes, milk and chocolate.
- 2 Souvenirs: Camel souvenirs including fridge magnets, cuddly toys, jewellery and charm bracelets, pens, puppets on-a-string and clothing, milk soap bars
- 3 Health: Products based on extracts of milk and urine from the camel's immune system