

CAMELS MAY FLY

ONE INSPIRATIONAL GOVERNMENT FACTORY IN ABU DHABI IS CREATING ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY LUXURY PRODUCTS WITH A UNIQUE UAE TWIST. AL KHAZNAH TANNERY'S CAMEL LEATHER IS SO SUPPLE THAT IT'S FLYING FIRST CLASS

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Many of the highways in the UAE are fringed with sand, and the odd camel idly watching cars pass as it forages on the rolling dunes. On a dusty trucking route on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, however, those lanky beasts of burden are earning their keep. Camels are making their way off the front of wish-you-were-here postcards, and into the luxury goods market – as leather.

From their vital role as the ships of the desert, to a source of meat, milk and wool, camels have always been integral to Bedouin daily life and Emirati culture. While some of these uses have become less essential over time, camels continue to be highly regarded in the UAE.

The former beasts of burden are now prominent in the racing arena, as well as being a valuable source of tourism income, with camel treks, camel toys and camel souvenirs collecting visitor dollars.

Today, camel meat is consumed across the Gulf, largely as a special occasion dish. One fable goes that a traditional Bedouin wedding dish for those high up in Emirati society was a dish of whole stuffed camel. The camel was stuffed with a lamb. The lamb was stuffed with chicken stuffed with fish, and so on down the line, in a backwards version of the song about the old woman who swallowed a fly.

Whether or not this dish exists, the spindly-legged creature is making its way onto the dinner table in a number of dishes ranging from camel burgers to kebabs. The growing popularity of camel meat can be attributed to both the health benefits of this surprisingly lean meat, and its versatility – it can be seared as a steak or braised for longer periods without undergoing a change in taste or texture. All good news for the camel meat industry.

Seeing an opportunity in the market, the Abu Dhabi government set up the Al Khaznah Tannery to take advantage of one of the by-products of the camel meat industry – the hides. The tannery collects the raw leathers and processes them in an ultra-modern factory, turning them into high quality leather for what has until now been a fairly niche market. But all this is set to change.

As one of the most advanced leather-producing facilities in the world, Al Khaznah

Tannery, headed up by general manager Jean-Marie Gigante, is on a mission. Gigante has spent the last thirty years working in the leather industry for some of the largest corporations in the world. An expert in leather production, he acted as a leather consultant to the United Nations, conducting feasibility studies, seminars and training for the industry, encouraging emerging countries in particular to adopt cleaner technologies and better environmental management policies. There could be no-one more suited to spearheading the camel leather revolution.

Gigante also has prior experience with specialty leathers, working with the Hermès Group as managing director of the company's crocodile leather tannery. The transition from reptiles to mammals may seem a leap, but if anyone can do it, Gigante can.

Al Khaznah is the first tannery to produce an exclusive range of leathers tanned using the ⇒

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most advanced environmentally-friendly technologies, guaranteed metal-free, sustainable and biodegradable. "The fact that it is tanned and transformed here in Abu Dhabi is a clear advantage in terms of our carbon footprint. The entire manufacturing process is kept at national level," Gigante begins.

Unlike traditional leathers produced with synthetic oils, the natural oils used in this process consist of sustainable vegetable extracts. According to the company website: "All our products are manufactured with total respect for our environment, and their disposal at the end of their life will even enrich our soil, completing the camel's natural lifecycle."

Totally free from chromium and other metals, the leathers biodegrade in only four months. This does not mean your camel leather jacket will disintegrate: it needs to be treated with the right compost in order to break down. The real meaning is in the tannery's commitment to environmental responsibility and sustainability.

"This is a massive advantage," explains Gigante proudly, "as the product can now be safely disposed of, composted or incinerated at the end of its life. This clear advantage also applies to all the waste generated at the tannery during the tanning process."

The difficult part has been gaining market acceptance of this unusual product. One of the first industries to warm to the idea of using the camel leather was the footwear industry. "Our

Al Khaznah Tannery is working with Etihad Airways to look at the potential for camel leather on board its aircraft for items such as seat covers and headrests

camel leathers are now used in a wide range of markets: from bespoke shoe manufacturers such as Pierre Corthay in Paris, to high-end leather goods manufacturers in Europe, and also famous designers for the decoration and furniture of mega-yachts and luxury hotels and restaurants," confirms Gigante.

Add to this corporate items such as agendas, desk accessories and iPad covers, throw in an array of purses and wallets, include a few rather avant-garde handbags and you have most of the current retail range.

In its most recent incarnation, camel leather is taking to the sky. Al Khaznah Tannery is working with Etihad Airways to look at the potential for camel leather on board its aircraft for items such as seat covers and headrests.

There are a number of requirements that need to be met before the leather can be used

in-flight. For a start, it has to perform well in comparative durability tests. Seats have a five-year lifespan. The leather has to be soft and luxurious, but at the same time hard wearing.

Camel leather actually has a higher physical performance than cow hide due to the harsh environment camels call home. "The camel's hide needs to protect him against extremely hostile conditions," says Gigante. "As a result, the leather is much more durable and yet more mellow to the touch than cow."

The most challenging part of using new material on an aircraft is the certification testing. The leather goes through a rigorous assessment process, including burn testing.

At first glance camel leather may look like regular leather, but camel leather possesses certain distinct characteristics.

The camel's unique mix of hair and wool follicles creates an intriguing grain pattern with an embossed appearance. This can be eliminated in some cases by flattening the top of the leather and adding an emulsion that works a little bit like the foundation women wear as a make-up base.

On close inspection, the follicles, being so much larger than those of cattle, are visible, giving the leather a light textured appeal. "Camel leather feels and looks more authentic than most cattle leathers used for aviation applications," Gigante explains. "Indeed, the camel grain holds his own noble signature as the grain pattern compares to no other animal on Earth."

"Etihad Airways can benefit from the latest technical developments in the leather trade and would be the only airline to offer a metal-free, ethical leather onboard," Gigante concludes. "We believe that it is our mission to provide our national airline with the most advanced material with a direct reference to the Emirati cultural heritage." 🐫

