What Took You So Long? BY AHMAD DIALDIN



HOT CHOCOLATE FOR BEDOUINS?

Ships of the sea.
That was the very first thing I learned in school about camels. They are the ships of the sea, sailing the great desert expanses of the country. I didn't even see my first camel up close until I was fifteen, and I know I'm drawing upon the exaggerative qualities of one's long-term memory, but that camel looked huge, towering above me, so ungainly with those long legs and yet, paradoxically, so graceful. I'm not much of an animal person, but the one thing I took away from interacting with that camel and considering all their traits? They are majestic creatures that deserve a lot of respect.

I'm not the only one who feels that way. I came across this foundation, What Took You So Long (WTYSL), whose most recent project took its crew across 18 countries, from Mongolia to Morocco and so many more places in between, all on a hunt for camel cheese and milk and their role within each culture, and coming out of it with so much more.

WTYSL have an exciting mission. They pick a project each year and travel the globe, capturing the untold stories of people living their lives in some of the most remote areas of the world and of grassroots NGOs doing amazing work with those people. Their main tool is that of film, so much so that it is part of their mission, "Film, educate and connect."

Sebastian Lindstrom and Evan Fowler created the foundation in 2008, with Alicia Sully providing the vision of using documentary as their tool for social change, and Philippa Young rounding out the core team as director and writer. With each project, the foundation adopts a vibrant team of volunteers and interns, each one providing their time, effort, unique skills, and a whole lot of passion and dedicating it all to the project.
I'll be honest, I know nothing of camel's milk, which is why it surprised me to learn of all the amazing benefits and advantages it has over cow's milk. From what I've learned, it doesn't curdle in the stomach; it's chock-full of iron; it's five times richer in vitamin C than cow's milk, lower in fat and cholesterol and with none of the allergens, thereby making it friendly for all those lactose-sensitive or –intolerant.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Philippa Young through email and discuss WTYSL, camels and the cultures they visited.

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What was the inspiration behind the camel cheese project? Or did someone simply say, "You know, I have such a craving for some camel cheese," because I think that would be a wonderfully random origin.
Actually, your imagined quote is pretty close to the truth! There was a love of cheese in there, a wish to search for unknown cheeses, and the fact that camel cheese is almost impossible to make — so we obviously wanted to taste it even more!

What was your first reaction to a camel?
Personally, first time I saw one, I couldn't believe its size. Alicia says "tall", but she's pretty short, so that stands to reason. We have seen two-humped, one-humped, small skinny brown camels and huge black camels, from Mongolia to North Africa. As for a lasting impression, it was hard to believe camels could really be in beauty competitions until we saw the black Saudi camels competing at Al Dhafra festival in Abu Dhabi!

Talk about your experiences in Egypt and UAE. How were the people, the events, and the camels? What have you taken away from Arab cultures?
Egypt had probably the best food and most hospitable people out of all the countries we visited, not just out of Arab countries. However, there wasn't a sense of camels as a part of people's heritage like there is in the UAE. The camel meat market outside of Cairo was one of the saddest places we've seen. Many were beaten badly and we saw one camel die from mistreatment.

The UAE, conversely, was the first place we saw the reinvigoration of the camel as a valuable animal for its racing, beauty and milk. Despite the cars and cities that make up a modern lifestyle, Emiratis remain proud of their heritage and connected to their animals and the land. The pride and respect for traditional life has meant that the camel has not lost its value and not lost its importance. So we took away something very important for us personally and for our film: the idea that the camel can be saved in other cultures by making it relevant to young people. We hope that proper marketing of camel milk and milk products, plus a beautiful film, can help this process.

What do you do with everything you learn and capture from a project in general? With the camel project, what has been the game plan to disseminate it to the world and educate about it?
We have different methods of pushing out films and the information around them: through the internet, organisations, screening and discussion tours. We also work a lot with social media to create a flowing movement around the dissemination of that information. We also wrote the camel milk Wikipedia page! The camel film is the first we plan to take to film festivals and more mainstream distributors, and we're partnering with a production company based in Abu Dhabi to make this happen.

What can you tell us about Hot Chocolate for Bedouins? How was the reaction to the documentary premiere last May?
Hot Chocolate for Bedouins was produced for The Camel Conference at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies). It's a 50-minute piece and not the final film — in fact we still have more filming to do! We showed it in London to camel experts and at an independent cinema in Sweden — the reaction was great at both screenings! Most people want to learn more about the medical aspects of the milk, so we could see how that is one factor a lot of people can relate to.

What's it like being global nomads? High points, low points, benefits, challenges?
We always say the highs are high and the lows are low. We love being on the road — you are constantly moving, meeting new people, expanding your horizons and understanding of the world. Another major benefit on this project was getting camel milk all the time! The biggest challenge for us is that people often don't understand why we do enjoy it so much, and why we feel that it's important to work the way we do.

Are there any new projects that might have emerged from this long trip? What's the future holding for the foundation?
Right now we're in Liberia filming a different project and after that we'll be filming in Kenya. WTYSL is an organisation respected for a particular kind of film work — cause-based, and focused on stories that aren't being addressed. We are also dedicated to building a platform for others to do the same and contribute to the enlargement of film and media across the world. Right now we are looking for institutional or corporate partners to build what will bring people together to work on film projects connected to causes, CSR projects, and positive stories coming out of lesser known places.

I remember reading something that Philippa said in an interview with Abu Dhabi's twofour54 creative lab that truly sums it up: "The project's grown from 'Camel Cheese' into something much more substantial. If I had to encapsulate the project in its current avatar in just three words, I'd go with 'Respect the Camel'."