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Camel Trekking in Jordan: Between Oriental Perception and Authentic Tourist Expectation

The colour of the Orient, the smell of the Orient, its remoteness, its mystery, its glory. Another life, another dream of a life.

(Georges Clairin cited in Lemaire 2005)

The Prince invited me to keep him company on the journey. He led me to a small fire some distance from his tent, where his slave was preparing sweet black coffee in my pot. His riding camel was kneeling beyond the fire, and he forced my camel to kneel there too. Beside the fire a wooden stand about twelve inches high was driven into the sand and upon it sat a falcon with a red cap on its head. When the slaves had finished loading all the stores and the Prince's tent, the scribe brought forward a war mare and tied it by the rein to the camel's saddle girth, while Nuri took the stand with the falcon, put the bird on the back of the camel's saddle, and thrust the stand into the saddle bag.

(Alois Musil: *In the Arabian Desert*, 1930)

Tourism to the Arabian region has long been encouraged by the visitor's desire to experience adventure, unveil the mysterious, seek escape, or live the western fantasy about the East. Images of camels in the tourism industry have played a significant role in propagating the traditional perceptions of the Arabic region in the mind of the western tourist. Camels, the ancient ships of the desert, play a vital role in keeping such traditional visions alive. This article will discuss camel trekking in Jordan's desert areas as a unique tourism experience for those who are attracted by the oriental flair of the desert. This exploration is qualitative and based on the observation of participants and conversations with numerous tourists in recent years. This study will also explore the possibility of marketing Jordan's most attractive tourist destinations successfully by addressing the tourists' oriental fancies about the region in general and the desert in particular.

INTRODUCTION: THE TOURIST SHIP OF THE DESERT

The role that preconceived notions, fantasies and un-lived dreams play in the tourism industry has been explored in several studies with an eye to the extraordinary travel experiences tourists seek in their holidays (Macbeth 2000, Laing/Crouch 2005, 2009, Prideaux et al. 2004, Correia et al. 2007). Exotic adventures are a soothing balm for emotional deprivation or dissatisfaction by means of realizing the three Fs of the tourism industry: fantasies, feelings and fun (Holbrook 2000, Sheridan/Teal 2006). Adventure tourists want to be thrilled, but not necessarily endangered (Cater 2006), whereby "the reward for those who seek adventure lies in the discovery and unveiling of the hidden and unknown" (Weber 2001:59). The mysterious and unknown do not necessarily produce a sense of danger, but do carry an embedded sense of risk. Since risk has to be present for an adventure to take place, tour operators sometimes inject it by offering exciting activities to fulfill the tourists' desires and subconscious expectations. Camel trekking in isolated desert areas is commonly perceived as an exciting way to explore the dangers of the desert and the unknown regions of Arabia. Since tourists usually experience destinations subjectively, it is interesting to take a closer look at the role camels play in the tourist's mental images about the East. few studies explicitly address how tourists impose their preconceived notions about a geographical location onto their tourist destination and how their fantasy aids in constructing a

successful tourism experience (Hirschman/Holbrook 1982, Light 2010). The body of criticism generally lacks studies that link the tourists' mental images about the East to tourism business in the Middle East. This study will explore the significance of the camel not so much as a tourist attraction in itself, but as the epitome long stored images in the western collective unconscious about the East.

Camels have long been connected to Arab life and Arab poets have often sung the qualities of the "ship of the desert".¹ They are considered an important cultural icon and source of pride for Arabs. Camels appear in stories, tales and legends of the East and have become an indispensable image when describing the desert regions of Arabia. They have long played a significant role in Arabic culture (Ripinsky 1975) signifying patience, endurance, wealth, the beauty of women riding on top of camels and the pangs of loss when the caravans carry away the poet's beloved. Explorers of the region have long recorded the presence of this desert animal in Arabia and have described its habitat, qualities and responsibilities (Wright 1927, Musil 1927, 1928, Doughty 1936). Arabs have used camels for transportation and trading and, more recently, for the tourism industry and creation of niche markets. Several studies testify to the importance of camels as tourist attractions (Chatelard 2005, Çalişkan 2009, 2010). Camel trekking and camel safaris in remote semi-arid regions of the Middle East or the deserts of Arabia have become a basic part of tourism packages. With the more recent surge of tourists to Jordan especially after Petra was declared one of the seven modern wonders of the world in 2007, camels have been brought to the attention of tourists in the Badia, the Jordanian desert. Camel trekking adventures have become a means fulfilling tourist expectations by creating adventure tours with an oriental flair.

JORDAN: LOCATION AND CLIMATE FOR CAMEL-CENTERED TOURISM

Jordan is a relatively small country in the Middle East with a diversity in terrain and climates that make it attractive for tourists all year round. Western Jordan enjoys a Mediterranean climate and much fertile land especially in the Jordan valley, which is warm in winter. The south and east of the country is mainly Badia or semi-arid areas.

Despite the harsh climactic conditions with a scarcity of water and extreme temperature differences, large parts of the Jordanian Badia are inhabited by Bedouin and their variety of livestock.² These Bedouin belong to a variety of tribes which have been roaming the Jordanian desert for centuries. Many have turned away from a nomadic life-style, encouraged by the Jordanian government to settle down in villages. Even though many have done so, they still keep goats and sheep for their dairy products and meat and camels for tourism services. The traditional Bedouin lifestyle is disappearing rather quickly, so traditional pastoral nomadism has become increasingly rare, not only because of the closed borders with neighboring countries but also because of rapid urbanization. Many of these Bedouin have come to welcome tourism as a substitute or additional source of income.

During the past decade, the local government has paid great attention to developing tourism strategies in selected areas. It plays an important role in Jordan's economic sector and has developed into one of the largest productive sectors even though it can offer less infrastructure and resources than other competitors in the region. The strategy outlined by the Jordanian Ministry

¹ Since pre-Islamic times, camel convoys have traveled from southern Arabia to Mecca and from there to the Levant in summer and winter trips carrying pilgrims and goods. They were called "ships of the desert" by locals since they were the only means of transportation for people and goods across the Arabian Peninsula. Early Arabic poetry is rich in references to camels, describing their nature, life, shape, stages of growth, and habits. Du Al-Rummah (696–735 CE), one of the Umayyad poets describes the camel as "the ship of the land" in his poem *When we once passed Myyah's house*.

² The term Bedouin scientifically means a camel-herding tribal member, but it has more commonly been used to designate nomadic Arabs (Kay 1978).

of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA) targets developing niche markets such as eco-tourism and adventure tourism in areas such as Wadi Rum³ and Petra. According to the MoTA statistical department, eco-tourism and adventure tourism receive the highest rating among tourists (MoTA 2010). In response, Jordanian tourism operators offer adventure tours and serve tourists by promoting romantic perceptions of life in the East and adventures in the desert. Many operators offer Bedouin treks in Wadi Rum and Petra for groups of five then visitors. The desert adventures offered usually range between three to eight days of desert experience including trekking and camping.

ORIENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE ARABIAN DESERT

For centuries the Orient has exercised an irresistible fascination over the European mind. Stories of distant lands, mesmerizing desert scenes and romantic eastern cities have captured the imagination of many Europeans ever since contact with the Orient has been established even though contact was kept to the minimal through trade and military campaigns.

For decades, Edward Said explored the projection of the East by the West as its 'Other.' In *Orientalism* (1978), Said explains that the West has created an image (and thus a stereotype) of the Orient not from facts and reality, but from preconceived notions which were antithetical to the West. Raymond Schwab (1984), in line with Said, argues that the Western imagination depicts the East as a land of fantasy and self-rediscovery – an “Oriental renaissance”, in which the European mind finds its rebirth in an idealized East. The Occident, which created the notion of the Orient as the strange “Other” with the intention of asserting European power and superiority, “orientalized” the Orient, resulting in “one-sidedness, or even untruthfulness” (Liu 2009). These biased notions of the Middle East in particular and the Orient in general are still very much alive.

The Orient has long been a place of fascination and fear, attraction and rejection. Such notions still linger in the subconscious of the European travelers seeking novelty and adventure by traveling east. Stripped of the tiring shells of civilization and the burdensome routine, the visitor to the Arabian Desert yearns to enjoy the pleasures of the slumbering Orient, as opposed to the fast and stressful life in western cities: Arabian scents, exotic food, and hot desert sands. A *Time* advertisement from 25 April, 2011, invokes the Eastern images constructed by operators for consumption by tourists. A henna-painted female hand points out of an airplane window at six camels walking the lonely desert dunes. The caption reads: “Here silence is serenity. The quest for stillness is found amidst tranquility. And the vastness fills you with unforgettable peace.” These images address the tourist’s desire to escape to the far regions of the East, to “unchartered worlds . . . where every day dawns with the promise of a new beginning.” The camels in the advertisement play a vital role in stimulating the Oriental perceptions of the East in the Western mind.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE JORDANIAN DESERT

Since 80 percent of Jordan has a desert climate, we find nomads with their camels in the northern, middle, and southern Badia, the Jordanian desert. It is largely underdeveloped land with an annual rainfall of less than 200 mm (Allison et al. 1998). Bedouin in the area mainly live from breeding livestock and from tourism. Since Petra and Wadi Rum have been designated as tourist attractions on the world tourist map, the local government and international agencies have shown interest in developing these areas of the southern Badia.

³ Wadi Rum is a valley cut into the sandstone and granite rock in the south of Jordan. It lies 60 km to the east of Aqaba and is the largest Wadi in Jordan. On June 25, 2011, the Wadi Rum was registered as a new Unesco World Heritage site, making it Jordan’s fourth World Heritage site after Petra, Qusair Amra, and Um Ar-Rassas (<http://whc.unesco.org>).



Graph 30: The Badias of Jordan's desert (map courtesy of Mr. Muwaffaq Bataineh, cartographer of the Faculty of Archeology and Anthropology, Yarmouk University).

ESTABLISHED CAMEL TOURS IN THE SOUTHERN BADIA

At 36,750 sq. km the southern Badiya forms the largest part of the Jordanian desert (50%). It is characterized by its mountainous landscape and arid climate with an annual precipitation rate of ca. 50 mm. Wadi Rum is the favorite and most targeted tourist attraction in the region, having been inhabited by many civilizations since prehistoric times. Evidence of human population in this part of the Jordanian Badiya can be found in the form of rock paintings – some showing camels, the preferred means of transportation in the area. Rock inscriptions mark the site as one of the caravan stations. However, currently, Western tourists may know Wadi Rum best for its connection with the British officer T.E. Lawrence, who was stationed in the desert during the 1917–1918 Arab Revolt. The 1962 epic movie of Lawrence's heroism in the Arab desert, encourages many tourists to follow the footsteps of this remarkable figure in the still and silent desert of Arabia (Caton 1999). It is interesting to note that most local Badiya dwellers are not familiar with the movie, though some have heard of its hero and know him as "the friend of Arabs."

Wadi Rum, also known as Moon Valley⁴ (see picture 52), is home to a number of tribes. The most well-known is the Zalabia Bedouin tribe, which has made tourism its main source of income. Tourism operators who draw on the historical and natural significance of this tourist destination consider Wadi Rum the perfect place for foreign visitors. Popular activities in the Rum area include camel trekking, mountain climbing on the fascinating rock formations, camping and hiking. Bedouin desert dwellers have come to realize that their established presence is of interest and attraction to the Western world. They have learned to read the demands of the recent tourism market and, despite their limited resources, have geared these towards pleasing tourists. Despite the fact that most Bedouin in the area have already settled down in villages and have houses and cars, in response to the demands of the tourism market they stay all year round in tents and follow their traditional lifestyle. In addition to being a source of social prestige and a symbol of wealth, camels have become a second source of income. In the southern Badiya they have been institutionalized as commodities through the establishment of NGOs geared toward the selling of the camel image for tourism. However, the commodification of cultural emblems like the camel may lead to a merging of tourist images and self-images and the identity concepts of the toured (Comaroff/Comaroff 2009:26). The desire to return to a semi-nomadic life-style or the wish to use camels for transporting tourists indicates the desire to revive or preserve the

⁴ James Irwin, one of the Apollo 15 astronauts of the fourth American lunar landing 1971 was quoted as having told HM the late King Hussein during a trip to Wadi Rum that this is the closest to what he saw on the moon. According to Senator Biltaji, this was the origin of the name.

cultural heritage for the sake of pleasing tourists. In Petra, the Bdoul Bedouin who use camels to transport tourists emphasize that anyone who not have a camel or an entry permit for one⁵ has a souvenir shop.

Recently, due to the rapid pace of tourism development, the number of visitors to the Wadi Rum area increased enormously. In the 1980s there were no more than a few dozen a year (Chatelard 2005:197) while in 2010 there were over 285,000 (MoTA 2010). In these three decades the private and governmental sectors of the tourism industry have adjusted the marketing image of the Wadi Rum area from one suitable for adventure tourism, to a heritage site, then to a nature preserve, and more recently to a site where the Western tourist will be able to live his suppressed fantasies of the Orient or create new ones performed by the theming of the tourist industry. The image of the Bedouin changed from the savage to the noble savage civilized by colonial powers to a more romantic representation by amalgamating the Oriental images of Eastern men and the masculinity seen in Arab desert dwellers.

Tourists have pre-tour understandings of their destination, partially the inherited stereotypes about the Orient and the Middle Eastern desert life with princes and Sheiks and imagined scenes of distant romantic lands far away from the stress of civilized life. Tourists also acquire information from tour brochures and other sources which target at times the existing expectations and dreams of tourists and at others produce them (Bruner 2004). Tourism materials such as guidebooks, advertisements, TV commercials, and tourism magazines market Wadi Rum as a place where the tranquility of the boundless empty spaces with its timelessness and unspoiled nature brings visitors into contact with the remote areas of their inner selves, relieving them of the discontents and comforts of civilization. Such marketing strategies tickle the Westerner's suppressed yearnings of self-indulgence in the distant lands of the East. To ensure success, tour operators make sure that their clients experience what they expect. They are aware that for many travelers, holidays are "experiences in fancy" (Dann 1976:19); a way of de-stressing after months of demanding work and hectic routines. In such cases "a certain picture is built up of a world that makes up an escape from present reality" (ibid.:22). Since tourist perceptions are known to be closely related to fantasy and the world of dreams (Dann 2002:173) tourists tend not to see the countries they visit objectively, but project their wishes, illusions, and fantasies. Thus the tourism industry allow pictures and images to speak and reinforce the tourists' fancies.

Most pictures marketing Wadi Rum show the vast, empty areas of the untouched semi-arid desert of the area, Bedouin tents, Bedouin camel riders or desert guards in their traditional clothes (see picture 53), or mesmerizing sunsets experienced after long rides on camels and a quiet meal with peppermint tea in a Bedouin tent. The camels are always an indispensable element in the marketing strategies of Western tourist operators while objects of modern civilization such as cars and recent technology are avoided. The images promote the idea of a modern Western tourist traveling into the past and leaving behind hi-tech civilization so as not to disturb the long preserved images of the Oriental life-style of Bedouin Arabs in the tourist's mind (see picture 54).

CAMEL TRACKING IN THE NORTHERN BADIA?

In contrast to the southern Badia, where tourism is well developed by theming and marketing Wadi Rum as a kind of authentic Arab desert experience explored by camel, the northern Badia still has potential in this regard. With a total area of 26,000 sq. km, the northern Badia constitutes 36 percent of Jordan's desert. Rainfall is minimal throughout the year, averaging less than 50mm annually. A number of archeological sites, historical cities and desert palaces, constitute important tourist attractions, but they are still under-advertised and under-explored. Yet a cam-

⁵ The Ministry for Tourism allows permits for 30 camels to enter Petra. All are owned by the Bdoul Bedouins.

el-based tourist experience can easily be linked to the rich history of camel caravans in this particular part of the Badia.

Ancient caravan routes connected three important cities in the Arabian Peninsula from the second century BCE until the 17th century: the two Nabatean cities Petra (the rose-red city) and Busra al-Sham or Nova Trajana Bostra (declared the capital of the Province of Arabia in 106 BCE and still an important halt for pilgrims going to Mecca until the 17th century CE) and a third city, Tadmur or Palmyra (described as the bride of the desert and famous for its heroic history under the rule of queen Zenobia). There were a number of villages on these caravan routes, such as Khirbet As-Samra, Umm al-Jimal, Umm Quttein, Jawa, Deir al-Kahf, Deir al-Kinn. Khirbet As-Samra, midway between Amman and Bostra, made it a suitable caravan stop. Umm al-Jimal, the best preserved of the ancient Houran towns,⁶ was linked to the Grand Imperial Highway (*Via Nova Triana*) during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan in 106 CE. Due to the Roman military presence the city flourished. Between the 5th and 8th centuries CE, it was a prosperous trading center and agricultural settlement. As for Umm Quttein, Jawa, Deir al-Kahf, Deir al-Kinn, their strategic presence between the imperial highway and another road known as the Strata Diocletiana, which ran from the city Sura in Babylonia to Palmyra and between Bostra and Azraq, made them important resting places for desert travelers on the ancient trade routes (Rollin/Streetly 1998:114, 120).

Since northern Badia has been part of a long and exciting history of cross-cultural interaction since Greco-Roman times, it can be marketed successfully by exposing its importance in the study of the Silk Road. In ancient times, caravans traveling from Iraq to Jordan to Syria and Saudi Arabia played an important role in transferring culture and transporting goods. The impressive remains brought to light by 18th and 19th century travelers to the area and by archeologists in more recent times of archeological sites such as Umm al-Jimal's monuments makes the area even more attractive for tourists. Such rich history and vital presence on ancient trade routes, well known to historians, orientalists and explorers, make the northern Badia an interesting place for those who like to explore the past. If promoted successfully as a tourist attraction for people interested in desert adventures, tourists may experience a climatically more moderate desert adventure than in Wadi Rum. The northern Jordanian desert is an extension of the Syrian plateau (or Badiat el-Sham in Arabic) with an annual precipitation of 135 mm, in contrast to the southern Badia, which is part of the Arabian subcontinent with minimal precipitation. Camel trekking would not only be an exciting means of discovering the desert wonders and ancient cities in the arid lands of north-east Jordan, but would also encourage sustainable management of Badia resources through eco-tourism and nature preservation (Dutton et al. 1998).

Developing a sustainable tourism strategy through camel trekking as niche tourism could promote the rich archeological and historical assets in the northern Badia (see Shunnaq et al. 2008) and could market a variety of camel products such as milk, meat, and products made from camel hair. This approach would not only help in developing local communities and provide an additional source of income (as is the case with the Bedouin in Wadi Rum), but would also attract tourists who desire to spend a few days exploring the natural beauties and remnants of ancient civilizations on camelback. A sustainable tourism strategy would also encourage migration to the Badia and establish self-supporting communities (Al-Homoud et al. 1995).

DESERT CASTLES IN THE MIDDLE BADIA

With 10,400 sq. km, the middle Badia is the smallest but central part of the Jordanian desert (14 percent). It has one aquatic natural reserve (Al-Azraq meaning "blue"), a wildlife reserve (Al-Shomari), and is rich in archeological sites with characteristic desert castles (for an example see

⁶ Houran is a geographic area extending from southwestern Syria to northwestern Jordan. Its boundaries extend from near Damascus in the north to the Ajloun mountains of Jordan in the south.

Amrah in picture 55).⁷ These can only be reached by private car, since no camel tours or another kind of transportation is available. For centuries the Al-Azraq wetland was a point of attraction for camel caravans carrying spices and other goods from Arabia, Mesopotamia and Syria. Additionally, for thousands of years, migrating birds have stopped here on their journey between Africa and Europe. National efforts have been focusing on rehabilitating these wetlands after the over-pumping of the groundwater led to the drying up of numerous natural springs which were essential to the biodiversity of the area. Al-Azraq's water is still being pumped to Amman to provide drinking water for the capital's increasing population. Developing a sustainable and nature-friendly tourism strategy in the area may allow some community involvement and may further development in the middle Badia region. For nature lovers, the wetland area, the wildlife reserve and the desert are attractions worthy of exploring. Camel trekking would here also be a unique way for tourists to enjoy the beauty of the desert castles, following the ancient routes of past inhabitants and travelers. Tourists could learn about the remnants of ancient and Islamic civilizations and the vitality of this area centuries ago while enjoying the beautiful scenery from the backs of camels.

CONCLUSIONS: THE LURE OF THE JORDANIAN DESERT

The majority of Western visitors to the Middle East are in search of the exotic: the strange and unique Other in its various forms. Tourism operators therefore, promote cultural differences as "fascinating, but not disorienting; strange and unique, but not too unfamiliar" (Salazar 2010:84). The tourism market is largely aware of the tourists' demands and fancies, so tourist operators and tourist guides are trained to fulfill – and thereby further promote – what the advertisements promise. Surfing through dozens of websites Wadi Rum is repeatedly promoted as a Jordanian Badia tourist attraction with the image that a journey to this area is a journey to another world where silence dominates its infinite tranquility; Bedouin with their camels can be enjoyed alongside wonders of the Arabian desert; camel trekking is offered to explore ancient routes of Arabian caravans and to enjoy the mystery and remoteness of the Arabian desert. At night, after watching a unique sunset, the tourist can enjoy the hospitality of the Arabian Bedouin in a traditional tent with the Eastern scents and spices. Camels are always nearby, never absent from the Eastern scenes. Tourists will be offered an enjoyable Oriental buffet with peppermint tea, nargile (schischa), belly dancers,⁸ henna painting, carpets and cushions and then, if they wish, they can sleep outside under the dark velvet sky with thousands of stars.

Jordan's Badias are isolated places from the world and tourism operators have more freedom to create unique experiences for tourists in such areas. The camel is thereby an essential element for projections of fantasies and stereotypes about the Arab East and for creating authenticity in the tourist experience. Thus, tourism in the Jordanian Badia is mainly-adventure based or fantasy driven. Camels, sheiks, dunes, hot desert sand and Bedouin are very prominent elements in tourists' visualization of the Middle East. These perceptions are woven together by tourists and tour operators alike from ideas presented in the media, in legends, and in literature. The majority of travel agents advertise the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent as locations with beautiful desert dunes and archeological or historical sites, where camels are either a backdrop or a

⁷ Jordanian desert castles such as Safawi, Al-Hallabat, Ein Elseel, Asikhm, Mshash, Al-Azraq, Amrah, Owaineed, Kharraneh, Al-Hammam, and Tuba were originally Roman fortresses. The Ghassanids, tribes of Arab origin, converted the fortresses into palaces (Luck 2011). During the 6th century CE, an earthquake destroyed most of them. During the Umayyad period (661–750 CE), the castles were rebuilt and used as caravan stations for travelers to Al-Hijaz, baths, hunting lodges, fortresses, meeting places, or as retreats for nobles when Muslim Arabs had succeeded in irrigating large areas of the desert. With elaborate mosaics, frescoes and stucco, the desert castles are also rich examples of early Islamic art.

⁸ Belly dancers were introduced by the tourism industry in Jordan in the 1990s and have never been from the local population. Most are Syrian, Lebanese, Algerian or Moroccan dancers who are hired by tourism operators to create images about "typical Arabia."

focal point. Images of camels have become a vital element in the tourism business advertising Arabia and are used as interest catchers and fantasy triggers.

A number of Arabian countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have had many years of experience in camel trekking adventures, camel festivals, camel-milking contests, auctions and beauty pageants. Studying these possibilities, the Jordanian Badia could be an ideal place to promote the presence of camels by introducing camel trekking in the northern and middle Badia and promoting camel contests and auctions as part of tourist attractions and desert adventure tours. Camel trekking in Jordan is not only a regular part of tourism packages sold to Westerners, but has much deeper implications in the Western mind. Camels have become a dominant motivational factor for the Western tourist to visit the land where Laurence of Arabia roamed the desert, Harrison Ford starred in *Indiana Jones* and Agatha Christie chose her setting in her famous novel *Appointment with Death*. Tourists expect to be thrilled and transported by living their mental images about the East. They also expect that their tour operators fulfill their promises by addressing their desires and fantasies. The tourists' oriental perception of Jordan therefore plays a vital role in their experience of the Jordanian desert as they await the fulfillment of their expectations while experiencing the Badia in a very subjective pre-fabricated way on camel back.

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