

Crafting Tradition and Innovation: Gulf Sandals

Tradicija izrade i inovacija: Zaljevske sandale

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Abstract

The common name of the traditional Gulf sandal is "Zbeiri Na al", where "Zbeiri" is the name of the design and "Na al" is the name of the traditional sandal from this region. These sandals embody the fusion of cultural identity and craftsmanship excellence in the United Arab Emirates. The "Zbeiri Na al" sandals are the first traditional sandals known in the Gulf region and are worn all year round by all age groups, from children to elderly men. This article provides an insight into the historical significance of Gulf sandals (also known as Arabian sandals or Emirati sandals), focusing on the craftsmanship and how the traditional sandals are gaining interest from globally renowned fashion brands whose designs are inspired by Gulf culture and tradition. It also examines the cultural essence, market dynamics and the intersection of tradition and innovation in leather craftsmanship in the Gulf, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (hereafter: UAE).

Keywords: tradition; Gulf sandal; leather craft; shoe craft; Persian Gulf; United Arab Emirates.

Sažetak

Uobičajeni naziv tradicionalne zaljevske sandale je "Zbeiri Na al", gdje je "Zbeiri" naziv dizajna, a "Na al" je naziv tradicionalne sandale iz ove regije. Ove sandale utjelovljuju spoj kulturnog identiteta i izvrsnosti izrade u Ujedinjenim Arapskim Emiratima. Sandale "Zbeiri Na al" prve su tradicionalne sandale poznate u regiji Zaljeva i nose ih tijekom cijele godine sve dobne skupine, od djece do starijih muškaraca. Ovaj rad pruža uvid u povijesni značaj zaljevskih sandala (također poznatih kao arapske sandale ili emiratske sandale), fokusirajući se na izradu i kako tradicionalne sandale zadobivaju interes svjetski poznatih modnih marki čiji su dizajni inspirirani zaljevskom kulturom i tradicijom. Također ispituje kulturnu bit, tržišnu dinamiku i raskrižje tradicije i inovacija u izradi kože u Zaljevu, posebno u Ujedinjenim Arapskim Emiratima (u daljnjem tekstu: UAE).

Ključne riječi: tradicija; zaljevska sandala; kožarski zanat; obućarski zanat; Perzijski zaljev; Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati.

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates is one of the Gulf States founded on December 2, 1971. It is located in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering the Arabian Gulf to the south and southeast and the Gulf of Oman to the west. It consists of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm al Qaiwain and Fujairah [1]. The United Arab Emirates has a dry desert climate characterized by two main seasons: winter and summer, which are interrupted by two transitional phases. During the winter months, which last from December to March, average temperatures generally fluctuate between 16.4°C and 24°C. Due to the weather conditions and the sand, special footwear is required. Leather is highly valued in Emirati culture and stands for tradition and craftsmanship, combined with the need for appropriate and practical footwear. The idea of the Arabic sandal came from different countries and cultures, such as India, and led to the "Na al" – a shoe that is still popular among the citizens of the Gulf today. Salem Al Remeithi, founder of the luxury sandal brand Albatar from the United Arab Emirates, explained the reasons behind the distinctive look of their signature sandals. He emphasized that the design was influenced by the need for comfort during the five times daily prayer times and therefore sandals that are effortless to wear

were required. In addition, weather conditions significantly influenced the design philosophy; the open toe structure of the golf sandals was a conscious decision as wearing socks and closed shoes in hot and humid climates is uncomfortable. Al Remeithi emphasized the importance of allowing the feet to breathe, especially when regular and extensive walking in such conditions is part of everyday life [2].

To fathom the origins of the Arab sandal, a look at history is essential. Salem Al Mheiri, co-founder of the Duca & Das store in Abu Dhabi, sheds light on the past and points out that the local population largely refrained from wearing shoes. He explains that many locals did not wear shoes at all due to the sandy soil in the region. In the colder seasons, the Bedouins began to wear "zarbool", thick socks made of goat or camel hair, to protect their feet from the cold. They not only used these socks themselves, but also engaged in their manufacture and trade, so that they were also used by the inhabitants of the coastal towns [2]. It is interesting to note that the traditional Gulf sandal is still popular today and is worn by all age groups throughout the year and that popular shoe brands also produce the traditional Emirati sandal.

2. Traditional Men's shoe wear in the United Arab Emirates: "Na al" and "Zebeiri"

The term "Na'al" in Arabic refers to a revered type of sandal that is historically associated with meaning. These "na'al" symbolize the footwear worn by a revered figure throughout their life and represent a symbol of respect and historical significance within a cultural context (Figure 1) [3, 4].



Figure 1. Na al sandal, Musem Topkapı Palace, Turkey [4]

Leather sandals for men have taken a prominent place throughout the Gulf region and also in Emirati dress, reflecting a blend of tradition and craftsmanship. The use of various leather components such as 'Al Zurbul', wool socks and imported socks made of silk, wool, cotton or mercerized cotton is evidence of a pragmatic approach to protect men's feet from the heat of the earth and sand. The most commonly used sandals in the UAE are usually made of cowhide, with the lower part made of cowhide and the upper part made of sheepskin and connected with iron parts and threads [5].

A very popular sandal design among people of all ages, which is known for its widespread use among different population groups in the Gulf countries and is part of the traditional dress of men in the Gulf region as well as in the UAE, are the traditional sandals still known as "Na al" (Figure 2a, b and 3). The use of leather in "Na al" shows the country's great interest in integrating leather into its lifestyle.



a



b

Figure 2 a and b. "Na al", traditional Gulf sandal today, popular by different age group. Source: Personal album, Mayar Al Sabah, 2023.

Over the years, manufacturing methods have evolved, but the essence of traditional clothing and footwear has remained and is a testament to timeless quality.

"Zbeiri", like the design of the "Na al" sandal (Figure 3), "stands for a cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in tradition. As has already been emphasised, leather is highly valued in Emirati culture [6]. Its integration into the "Zbeiri" sandal embodies the fusion of cultural identity and craftsmanship excellence in the UAE.



Figure 3. "Zbeiri" design of "Na al" sandal [6]

3. "Na al" and "Zeiberi" in the local shoe industry

Compared to the first "Na al" sandals, the only notable change is the use of innovative materials, stitching and quality, subtly bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. The UAE has successfully demonstrated the market potential of golf sandals to international brands. This has led them to cleverly adapt to local preferences, resulting in collections that fit perfectly with our traditional look and style. Based on general awareness and reputation in the local footwear market in the UAE, the following sandal brands were frequently mentioned in terms of popularity: Al Tawash, Al Mandoos, EBL and newcomer Tamima. Table 1 briefly compares the selected brands.

In the following part the popular brands of Gulf sandals in the UAE will be presented.

First brand presented is Al Tawash that produces Men Arabic Sandal (Figure 4) recognized for its Gulf apparel. It offers a diverse range of high-quality footwear and apparel that bridges the gap between tradition and modernity.



Figure 4. Al Tawash, Men Arabic Sandal. Price: 160 EUR (630 AED, according to GoogleFinances) [7]

Al Mandoos, Trendy Baby Ostrich Leather Arabic Sandals with brushed leather buckle is shown on the Figure 5. With its exquisite leather goods, the company makes an important contribution to the Emirati leather industry. The products are an expression of Emirati culture and are made by hand.



Figure 5. Al Mandoos, Trendy Baby Ostrich Leather Arabic Sandals with brushed leather buckle. Price: 227 EUR (900 AED, according Google Finances) [8]

EBL (Al Khaznah Tannery) produces EBL Arabic Sandals (Figure 6). EBL specializes in camel leather and expresses the Emirati heritage in its products. Al Khaznah Tannery supports the development of local manufacturers in the United Arab Emirates and produces customized leather goods for companies, with a focus on ethical leathers.



Figure 6. EBL (Al Khaznah Tannery), EBL Arabic Sandals. Price: 88 EUR (350 AED, according Google Finances) [9]

And the last presented brand is Tamima that produces TAMIMA leather sandal, crocodile design (Figure 7). An up-and-coming but promising brand that focuses on orthopedic and anatomically correct Arabic sandals made from natural leather and combines Italian design with Emirati craftsmanship.



Figure 7. Tamima, TAMIMA leather sandal, crocodile design. Price: 131 EUR (520 AED, according Google Finances) [10]

It is important to mention that leather and footwear production occupies a significant position in the UAE. According to the Middle East Footwear Market Analysis by IndexBox (2023), exports of leather footwear in the Middle East increased significantly in 2021. The UAE recorded a remarkable growth with a remarkable CAGR of +8.4% during the period 2012-2021, positioning itself as the fastest growing exporter in the region. This data underlines the increasing importance of the UAE in the Middle East leather footwear market [11].

4. “Na al” and “Zeiberi” in the global shoe industry

To understand the interest of world-renowned luxury shoe designers in the production of traditional Gulf sandals, it is important to outline the market situation in the leather and footwear sector in the United Arab Emirates, especially since this article focuses on the UAE. According to Statista (2003), the UAE footwear market was worth US\$1.21 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow by 4.11% annually until 2028. The standout sector, leather footwear, contributed significantly with US\$0.54 billion in 2023. The UAE is expected to achieve per capita sales of US\$ 119.30 in 2023. The expected market volume by 2028 is 36.93 million pairs, with an expected increase of 2.5% in 2024. Individuals are expected to own an average of 3.23 pairs in 2023. Notably, 88% of sales in 2023 will come from the non-luxury segment, although the UAE is seeing an increase in demand for high-end designer footwear, highlighting consumers' pursuit of quality and luxury products. This sector is the key growth driver of the market, reflecting the country's strong inclination towards high-end leather products [12].

This statistic is one of the main reasons why renowned brands such as Berluti (Figure 8), Santorini (Figure 9), Prada (Figure 10) and Cesare Paciotti (Figure 11) are incorporating Emirati heritage into their creations to meet local demand. There are also many other luxury fashion brands such as Tod's and Loro Piana that produce traditional Gulf sandals.



Figure 8. Traditional Emirati Sandal produced by French luxury brand Berluti, price: 1340 EUR (5300 AED according Google Finances) [13]



Figure 9. Traditional Emirati Sandal produced by Italian luxury brand Santorini from exotic leathers such as crocodile and lizard, price: n/a [14]



Figure 10. Prada Arabic sandal, price: 1845 EUR (7300 AED according Google Finances) [15]



Figure 11. Cesare Paciotti, Timless Madras, 581 EUR (2300 AED according Google Finances) [16]

5. Conclusion

The development of Gulf sandals in the United Arab Emirates is an example of tradition, craftsmanship and individualization. The sandals

known as “Na al” and “Zbeiri” are much more than just footwear, they are an example of a cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in Emirati culture. The evolution of Gulf sandals, influenced by the sand and climate, to contemporary craftsmanship and various modern designs, represents a fusion of tradition and innovation. Artisans, craftsmen, local and global brands have combined age-old techniques with modern, innovative materials.

Local UAE brands such as Al Tawash, Al Mandoos, EBL and Tamina, mentioned in the text, show the demand for a traditional Gulf sandal, and global luxury brands such as Berluti, Santorini, Prada, Cesare Paciotti, Tod's and Loro Piana, which produce the same type of traditional sandal, show the influence of the Gulf sandal on the international fashion stage. The intersection of Emirati heritage and global fashion contributes to the timeless elegance and cultural depth inherent in the traditional golf sandal.

In summary, the journey of the Gulf sandal from its historical origins to the present day is not only a footwear, but also a testament to rich Emirati heritage, craftsmanship and cultural identity. Cultural expression can be served through crafts that work on attracting tourists that affect the country economy positively. They serve as reminders with places that people visited and can be used as attraction by displaying how it is being made [17].

As the global market recognizes and embraces the design of traditional sandals, the heritage of the Gulf sandal remains as a timeless symbol of Emirati tradition and craftsmanship for generations to come.

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