

Oprah Winfrey in a Camilla Franks kaftan.



# The O factor

The media maelstrom surrounding Oprah Winfrey's Ultimate Adventure Down Under saw politicians, celebrities and tourism groups pull out all the stops as they sought to transfer some of her celebrity currency into Brand Australia, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

Feature

**W**he 300 audience members at the September taping of the first episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* final season knew they were lucky. When Winfrey announced she was packing up her famous couch after 25 years, and launching her own cable network, tickets to the last season had become hotter-than-hot commodities. This audience, however, was about to get a whole lot luckier.

They had been chosen as "Oprah's ultimate audience", a core group of loyal American fans who had followed and supported the media star's rise. One man, a barber, had not missed an *Oprah* show in 25 years, closing his shop to customers during the hour it aired. When he retired, he put a barber's chair and a flat-screen television in his garage, where he continued the tradition. Winfrey's team invited him to bring to the taping his family, including his 27-year-old son, who has "known" Winfrey all his cognitive life.

To thank these fans, Winfrey invited actor John Travolta (who had been voted all-time favourite guest) to appear on the show. Travolta happens to be a qualified pilot and an ambassador for Australian airline Qantas. He regularly flies his personal Boeing 707, which is painted in the Qantas livery, around the world (but not to Hong Kong – local aviation laws diverted his plane to Macau in 2002) – and now he was offering to fly Winfrey and her 300 guests to Australia for an eight-day, expenses-paid trip of a lifetime. Needless to say, the surprised audience was reduced to hysterics.

Audience members were not the only ones counting their blessings – Tourism Australia, a government agency, also licked its lips, at the prospect of having Winfrey and her production crew in the country to film two live shows at the Sydney Opera House, dubbed the Oprah House for the occasion.

Australia wasn't the first country to try to lure

Winfrey and Andrew McEvoy, managing director of Tourism Australia, says it was down to timing.

"Oprah has always wanted to come to Australia," McEvoy says. "There are always three or four Aussies in her audience and she has celebrity friends from here. It was her 25th and final season and Australia has always been an 'ultimate destination' for Americans. The idea of getting the ultimate audience to Australia with Oprah just made sense. It was now or never.

"Of course, we had looked at who she indexed against – 25- to 54-year-old women who earn more than US\$75,000, and that was a key decision in our approach, as they are the ones that make the travel decisions," says McEvoy, who, until appearing on the show in September, had never watched an episode. "My wife made me sit down and watch four episodes and I was blown away. I thought, 'Wow, I get why you're so influential now,' with the way she connects with the audience through emotion."

Emotion has equalled big bucks for Winfrey – the first black female billionaire has an estimated fortune of US\$2.7 billion. On her show, she has revealed that she experienced physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse as a child, she has spoken about growing up poor and about an unwanted teenage pregnancy, and she has battled the bulge in full view of the camera, losing and gaining significant amounts of weight. This working-class, overweight, black woman's confessional is a long way from the air-brushed and unattainable glamour of Hollywood.

Audiences perceive Winfrey to be one of them; they empathise with her when she struggles with her weight because they've struggled with theirs, too. They love her when she backs the underdog and gives a voice to minority groups. They love her more when her celebrity friends cry on her shoulder as they promote their latest film or stint in rehab.

Whitney Houston spoke of the physical abuse from her husband, Bobby Brown, while on Winfrey's couch

– the same couch Tom Cruise jumped up and down on while expressing his love for Katie Holmes, and Marie Osmond grieved on for her son, eight months after he had committed suicide. Winfrey was connecting people long before Mark Zuckerberg accepted his first friend on Facebook. What tourism board wouldn't want access to Winfrey's network of friends?

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* has more than 49 million viewers in the United States every week and is broadcast in 146 countries; her website, Oprah.com, welcomes more than six million users each month; more than two million people read *O, The Oprah Magazine*; and she has more than 4.8 million followers on Twitter.

A Winfrey endorsement is akin to winning the lottery. Analysts estimate her endorsement of Barack Obama for the United States presidency gave him more than a million votes during the democratic primary while Oprah's Book Club has shot 60-plus books high up the best-seller lists. *Life* magazine named Winfrey, a dedicated philanthropist, one of a 100 people who have changed the world. The others? Let's just say Jesus was on the list.

It looked as though it was going to take someone bigger than Jesus to help boost tourism in Australia, a country that, like many other destinations, including Hong Kong, had experienced a decline in visitors from North America after the 2007 global financial crisis.

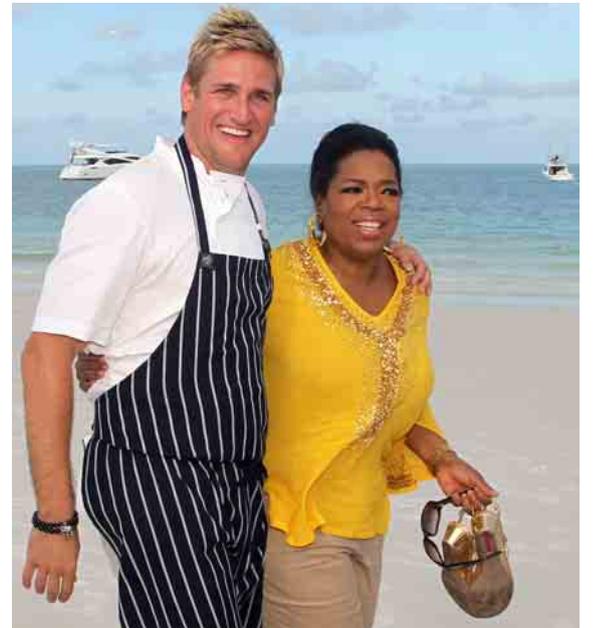
The market has since picked up. Last year, Australia saw an almost 6 per cent rise in foreign tourists – but Winfrey's visit is expected to boost visitor numbers even further, after the Australian specials air in the US this month.

Americans were first "alerted" to Australia by *Crocodile Dundee* star Paul Hogan's "Come and say g'day" campaign, which exported the "shrimp on the barbie" cliché and ran for six years from 1984. Three months after the campaign had been launched, Australia rose into the top 10 most desired holiday destinations for Americans. It was soon in the top three. >>



Tourism Australia's more recent attempts to capture the imagination of international visitors have been less successful. The ill-fated "Where the bloody hell are you?" campaign of 2006 cost about A\$180 million (HK\$1.4 billion) and was immediately banned on British television due to the use of the word "bloody". It was later cleared for screening after 8.30pm.

Oprah's Ultimate Australian Adventure – which took place last month – coincided with the "There's nothing like Australia" campaign, which uses real Australians to sell the tourism message. Australians were asked to upload photographs showcasing the best experiences they believe the country has to offer. Almost 29,000 images were used to create an interactive online map. The entire online, television and print project cost A\$3 million to make and a further



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A\$150 million will be spent on advertising over the next three years.

Tourism promotion is a cutthroat world, though, and the campaign launch was hijacked on April 1, when the Twitter account @nothinglikeaus was re-directed to New Zealand's official tourism site as an April Fool's prank. The New Zealand agency also bought URLs similar to that of the official campaign.

"What New Zealand did was get more people talking about the campaign," laughs McEvoy, who says it's all good fun. "It effectively pushed us up all the search engine lists."

Using the public to spread the word is a technique Winfrey understands well. She regularly surprises Americans with her generosity. In 2003, she gave actor David Caruso a Porsche. Why? Because he'd lost 135kg and had always wanted to be small enough to sit in one.

Of course, Winfrey and her production company, Harpo Productions, are commercially savvy. Porsche would have given Winfrey the car for the coverage alone but the audience was led to believe it was all down to the generosity of the talk-show host. After all, it's the thought that counts, right?

Many companies have wanted to benefit from the Oprah effect. In 2004, the host, or rather General Motors, gave each member of her audience a car. That's 276 Pontiac G6s in one swoop. The surprise

generated hundreds of millions of dollars worth of publicity for GM worldwide.

Getting Winfrey to Australia was always going to be a commercial venture. Tourism Australia spent A\$1.8 million, individual states and territories contributed about A\$3 million combined and Harpo and its commercial partners invested A\$7 million.

The commercial partners included Qantas, which flew the American audience to and across Australia, and McDonald's. The latter had managed to offend many of Australia's urban residents by suggesting to Winfrey's audience that McCafes were where most Aussies chose to do their socialising.

Motorola gave each audience member a mobile phone and telecommunications company Telstra gave them access to a network.

"Social advocacy is powerful," McEvoy says. "There are already 300 audience members with a Motorola who [while in Australia] tweeted and blogged and Facebooked about their experience. They'll go home and tell their friends, who will tell their friends. The audience [members] were celebrities in Australia."

He's not wrong. One American audience member says she had to buy extra luggage to carry home the gifts that had been showered on her during her stay.

With my Oprah's Ultimate Australian Adventure

press pass around my neck, I was mistaken for an American audience member in two food outlets. The attendants greeted me like a star, smiling and shaking my hand and asking me where I had stayed on my travels. It's no wonder Winfrey asked whether Australians had "all been to friendly school".

The truth is Australia caught Oprah fever. From the moment the coup was announced in September, Australians scrambled to get a piece of the star.

Sydney fashion designer Camilla Franks is known for colourful kaftans in flowing fabrics. Her Camilla label adorns the likes of Beyonce Knowles and, now, Winfrey, who was photographed wearing a Camilla kaftan.

"Camilla stores have experienced an immediate sales increase, which has led to production demands for the kaftan [worn by Winfrey] and other designs in that particular print, with a 120 per cent increase in sales last week," said Franks, two weeks after the picture was taken.

More than 350,000 people registered for show tickets, which were to be allocated through an online lottery system. The Sydney shows had 6,000 seats per taping, offering untold marketing opportunity to savvy companies.

Western Australia's pearl and diamond industry got the nod, giving 6,000 limited-edition Oprah charm pearl necklaces to audience members at the



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## Her own thing

Oprah Winfrey says she’s “grateful we weren’t embarrassed” during the much-anticipated first weekend her new OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network was on the air in the United States. At one point on the night of January 1, the day the network debuted, OWN was the third-ranked cable network, behind ESPN and USA in the ratings. The challenge will be turning the curious into regular viewers.

“I am grateful that the first phase of what we wanted to happen actually happened,” says Winfrey, who calls her network’s programming “mind food” and says the intention is to bring positive energy into the homes of people who watch it. “I see myself as a messenger for a message that is greater than myself and my message is you can, you can, you can.”

Among OWN’s programmes is a competition in which 10 contestants vie for the chance to host their own show. *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett is producing the competition and will produce six episodes of the winner’s show. The contestants include an obese chef who wants to do a cooking show that illustrates his attempt to get back into shape, a disabled man who wants a show on overcoming obstacles he faces travelling around the world and a prospective variety show host who wants to be “America’s gay best friend”.

Lisa Ling’s new series, *Our America*, shows the journalist profiling people involved in controversial issues, including sex offenders, faith healers, drug addicts and online brides.

Winfrey says not all of the programmes will be hits, although “there are a few shows that, even if [audiences] don’t respond, I’m keeping on because I can, because I like ‘em”.

Winfrey says she didn’t truly understand the work that would be involved in starting the network.

“It was not actually until we were on the air that I fully started to grasp what it means to have a network where you are the OW of OWN.” *Associated Press*

first taping and 6,000 Kimberley diamond necklaces at the second.

Each state tourism board was allowed to pitch its case directly to Harpo Productions and Winfrey’s location scouts scoured the suggested locations, making the final decision as to where the host would go and how the American audience would be split across Australia.

“This is an activation campaign,” says Laura Dawson, executive director of marketing at Tourism Western Australia. “People make their travel decisions based on other people’s recommendations and we’re driving for dinner-party conversations.”

Lyndel Grey, executive director at Tourism New South Wales, agrees.

“It presented such a good opportunity to showcase our destinations, deeper than any other advertising campaign can do,” she says. “Getting real people here is a bonus as there’s nothing more powerful than that testimonial.”

Australia laid it on thick, with every state and territory covered. While Winfrey went to the Whitsundays, Melbourne and Sydney, her audience were entertained at vineyards across the country. They surfed in Byron Bay, dined with singer and actress Olivia Newton-John and witnessed native wildlife up close on Kangaroo Island. Winfrey hosted a women’s tour of Uluru and some of her audience members were the first white people to see particular traditional and sacred Aboriginal rock paintings in the Northern Territory.

Everyone met up again in Sydney on December 11 for a harbourside welcome party. A giant illuminated “O” was revealed on the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which the audience climbed the next day. The “O” remained lit each night until Winfrey’s departure, on December 15.

Did we mention that Winfrey also sailed in a regatta on Sydney Harbour with actor Russell Crowe, dined at a beachside barbecue with celebrity chef Curtis Stone in the Whitsundays and met Prime Minister Julia Gillard in front of 10,000 people in Melbourne?

Despite the media attention, Winfrey and her crew still managed to spring surprises. Winfrey sent a celebrity friend, rapper Jay-Z, to a music school for disadvantaged boys. She then surprised them again with laptops and music software at the Opera House taping.

Winfrey visited an Australian family barbeque

Clockwise from far left: Oprah Winfrey on stage at the Sydney Opera House; Winfrey with chef Curtis Stone; rapper Jay-Z surprises students at a music school for disadvantaged boys; actor Hugh Jackman rides in on a zip line over the Opera House; Winfrey with Prime Minister Julia Gillard; Winfrey sailing with Russell Crowe.

in Sydney and dropped in on a baby shower in Melbourne before detouring to a taco party in the exclusive suburb of Toorak, to which she took the tequila.

Melbourne-based journalist Suzanne Carbone writes the *Postcode 3000* social column for *The Age* newspaper. Her friend Megan Castran first met Winfrey four years ago in Hawaii and then again at the taping of a show in Chicago. Castran invited Winfrey to visit her home if she ever came to Australia and true to her word, Winfrey did.

“It was like she’d just walked off the set of her TV show,” says Carbone, who just happened to be at the taco party when Winfrey dropped by. “Here is a woman who’s close to Obama and there she was in my friend’s house, at the same dinner table as me. You had to pinch yourself – it was one of those moments.”

**GUESTS ENTERING THE** forecourt of the Oprah House on December 14 are offered a complimentary “survival pack” (water, sun block, inflatable cushion and rain poncho) from one of Winfrey’s elves manning the gate.

“How sweet of Oprah to think of us,” says Lisa, who is down from the Hunter Valley for the show.

The perception is that Winfrey chose each of the contents and may have even packed all 6,000 bags herself.

Rumours are rife of a performance by Beyonce or U2 but most of the female-dominated audience are just happy to breathe the same air as Queen O. The American audience bump, grind and jive their way through the warm-up music in true look-at-me-having-a-good-time-American-style while the more laid-back Aussies take photographs for their Facebook pages.

When Winfrey arrives, however, the entire crowd goes wild, and stays wild when Bon Jovi perform; when Winfrey donates A\$250,000 to the family of an Australian man with cancer; and when Jay-Z sits opposite Winfrey.

The crowd at the second taping keep the wildness going when actor Hugh Jackman sails in on a zip line over the Oprah House, injuring himself in the process.

Then they go ballistic when Bono graces the stage followed by Keith Urban, Nicole Kidman, Newton-John, Crowe and Jackman singing *I still call Australia home* as a giant Australian flag is unfolded across the audience to the backing of the Qantas children’s choir. Baz Luhrmann himself couldn’t have choreographed it better.

Analysts estimate the domestic publicity generated during Winfrey’s trip to be worth A\$100 million but Tourism Australia expects that to be far greater worldwide and to skyrocket once the shows are broadcast. Naturally, there’s an Australian marketing and advertising campaign locked and loaded and ready to go in the US the moment Winfrey’s shows go to air.

The next 12 months are crucial. Winfrey may have put her seal of approval on Australia but the real capitalising work begins now she has left the building. ■

The Oprah Winfrey Show *airs in Hong Kong on Diva Universal on Thursdays at 8pm.*