

All boxed up



Lisa Travell meets the brains behind **The Box** – a new company that delivers fresh fruit and veg to your door in Doha

You have to be driven to start your own business, but it takes extra determination to set up shop in another country. Sandra Harthoorn has done just that, and her passion for her business shines through. The Box was launched in Doha in November 2009. Originally branded as The Green Box, it's based on the simple idea of importing fresh fruit, vegetables and poultry into Doha and delivering them to your door. Sandra states that the idea originally generated due to a lack of good quality products. 'I found a concept that didn't exist in Doha and thought I'd give it a try,' she says.

A former national swimming champion she also spent six years working for the International Life Saving Federation, and came to Doha working on the Asian Games. Her original plans to stay for a year were shelved when her husband started his own business, Qmotion. Motivated by the sense of freedom being your own boss afforded, The Green Box

was born. 'Everyone I spoke to about the idea of The Green Box said it was a great business idea, and there really are a lot of opportunities here in Qatar,' enthuses Sandra. 'I like the flexibility of having my own business – I work more hours, but I work for myself and I enjoy it. Whatever you put in is for your own benefit.'

It helps that The Box has a great sponsor who Sandra describes as 'involved, committed and interested', as setting up hasn't necessarily been a smooth ride. 'It has not been simple, and there are logistical challenges, with compounds and streets without names,' she explains, 'and we are also dependant on flight delays and customs issues.'

Products available for delivery are fresh fruit and vegetables in boxes of 5kg and 10kg, whole chickens, chicken fillets and chicken dippers. The chicken is incredibly fresh and due to a special packaging technique has a shelf life of 12 days. The contents of the fruit and vegetable

boxes vary depending on the season and availability, and are sourced primarily from growers in Europe. The produce is selected, then sent by airfreight overnight and delivered to your door the next day. The Box point out that this way the food has not been touched 'over and over again in a supermarket before it ends up in your kitchen.'

It's a concept that may take a while to adapt to, but Sandra likes to think

'I found a concept that didn't exist in Doha and thought I'd give it a try'

that in a way it's 'strangely exciting', not quite knowing what will be in your box until it arrives, and she points out that it could well change your attitude towards food. 'The fruit and vegetables selected are seasonal,' she explains, 'it is sometimes hard to get the balance between variety and seasonal, so we try to always have the basics, but also a mix.' However, help

is at hand if you open your box and have no clue what that strange looking vegetable staring back at you is, or if you should boil it, fry it or peel it. Gill Johnson writes weekly recipes for the website, and this is guaranteed to inspire you to cook up a storm with the contents of your green box. 'I started looking for my own recipes in the beginning,' explains Sandra, 'but I'm not an expert, and I met Gill through school and asked her if she would be willing to write weekly recipes for the site, and she's really enjoying it.'

Indeed, the website is very well designed, and not only offers weekly recipes, but also a 'juicing with Kelley' section (featuring mouth-watering juicing ideas), Doctor Mike's health and nutritional tips, and a kids' corner section with expert tips and facts to get children eating and drinking healthily. Sandra believes she's 'adding value' with these extra features on the site, where you can schedule your orders up to 12 weeks in advance and also pay on-line.

It's obvious that customer service plays a major part in the business, and Sandra explains that they offer, 'not only quality products, but also a quality service.' This is evidenced by the fact that customers are contacted every two weeks to give feedback on the products, they receive a weekly newsletter and also reminders to order before the cutoff date. 'It's a matter of going all the way for the customer,' she states, and indeed her level of commitment to customer service is substantiated by the fact that she investigates any complaint personally and on the same day.

The future looks bright for The Box, with a cooling room nearly completed Sandra explains that she will be able to store goods overnight and therefore arrange different delivery dates other than the current Saturday slot. She is also working with a local supplier to assemble the boxes in Doha, rather than Belgium, and deliver every day of the week. 'That's my aim,' Sandra states, 'but we'll have to see if it's feasible.' Indeed, the opening of the cooling room presents other business opportunities, and Sandra has numerous ideas such as fresh fruit arrangements as gifts, food baskets in offices to promote healthy eating, and even company subscriptions for employees. Sandra smiles as she says, 'there are lots of opportunities, but we're just taking it step by step.'

For more information, go to www.the-box.me