

Get Over the Hump

Move as slow and steady as a camel to master the challenge of Ustrasana

by Kristin McGee



Slanting your thighs back will overwork your legs. Instead, lengthen your torso and keep your hips directly above your knees as you bend backward.




I've always tried to figure out why we call it Camel Pose (Ustrasana). To me, it doesn't look anything like a camel. I've heard it gets its name because the arched back represents the camel's hump (*ustra* is Sanskrit for camel). Most yoga postures do resemble their Sanskrit names. Crow Pose (Bakasana) actually looks like an ominous, strong bird; and Tree Pose (Vrksasana), of course, physically represents a stately oak.

So, how does Ustrasana resemble a camel? The camel is a patient, very slow-moving animal and maintains an easy-going temperament even as it endures long, hot days in the desert heat. Maybe the posture is named more for the attitude of the camel. In order to arch your back and feel the warmth of the sun on your chest without getting agitated, you need to exercise patience and move slowly.

When I first learned Ustrasana, I thought it most important to reach my ankles. I'd fling myself back into the pose, grab my ankles...and immediately feel a huge burning sensation in my quadriceps. Once I had hold of my feet, I'd then try to push my heart upward, which would feel even more intense.

If a camel relied on only his legs to keep him going on his long treks across the Sahara, I'm sure he'd be feeling the burn as well. Instead, the camel can relax and move slowly as he relies on his hump (which stores fatty tissue as a source of energy) to keep him cool and collected. We humans can rely on our breath, which cannot flow easily in Camel Pose when your leg muscles tense up and take on the brunt of the back bend.

Relying on your legs only also makes it extremely difficult to open your thoracic spine (upper back) to support your chest. I had to learn to relax, be patient, stay solid above my knees, and use my core strength and upper back muscles to open my chest. When you first lift up *then* arch back, your quadriceps can relax. And when you scoop your tailbone and keep your hips forward, you will eventually reach back to your feet naturally. Your heart will soften and open, and your back bend will feel incredible as you maintain your camel-like cool. 

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Ustrasana (Camel Pose)

Warm-up: To create a nice rounded "hump" in Ustrasana, start with several Sun Salutations in traditional Sivananda-style (includes Crescent lunges on both sides). The Crescent lunges and Cobra poses will open your hip flexors, heart region, and lower back. To work on extending your lower back and scooping your tailbone, do Warrior I on each side. Make sure to engage your abdominal muscles and keep your front lower ribs from splaying open.

To open your chest even further, lie back over a block placed at its lowest level at your shoulder-blade region with a blanket or a block under your head. Hold for at least 5 breaths.

Now, you're ready for Ustrasana:

- Start in a kneeling position, with your knees directly under your hips.
- Press the tops of your feet down firmly into your mat. If your lower back feels stiff, flex your feet and tuck your toes under.
- Spin your inner thighs in and back to broaden your lower back, and scoop your tailbone down and under into that space.
- Inhale and lift your chest as you reach your hands behind you. Externally rotate your arms at the heads of your shoulders and turn your palms out. Stay calm and breathe as you lift your heart even more, and support the back bend by engaging your abdominal muscles and drawing your shoulder blades together.
- Grab hold of your feet. If your hips move back, press them forward along with your tailbone, and keep arching in the upper thoracic region.
- As you gently drop your head backward, gaze down the tip of your nose. You can also keep your chin tucked into your chest if you have neck issues or injuries.

TIP: If you practice Ustrasana facing a wall, knees right up against the baseboard, you'll know exactly when your hips move too far back. You can work on pressing your hips forward into the wall and finding the lift in your chest as you open into a beautiful rounded posture.

What It Does

- opens your chest and shoulders
- strengthens your abdominals, upper back, and thighs
- helps you soften and maintain calm in the heat of any moment