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A TRAVELER'S LIFE LIST

by PATRICIA SCHULTZ

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Remote, Vast, and Hauntingly Beautiful

THE GOBI DESERT

Mongolia

Lying between Siberia to the north and the Tibetan Plateau to the south—and covering a landmass of 500,000 square miles—the Gobi is one of the most remote and least trodden deserts in the world. The third largest in

the world after the Sahara and Arabian Deserts, it covers nearly one-third of Mongolia. It's also one of the world's most beautiful, with mountain peaks, gravel plains, grasslands, desert steppes, sand dunes, and oases.

But there's a reason this is also one of the world's least inhabited deserts: The Gobi ("desert" in Mongolian) can be inhospitable, with extreme temperatures (ranging from -20°F in winter to 100°F in summer), near-continuous winds, and little rain. The best way to explore is by four-wheel drive or organized camel trips, during which you might spot herds of wild horses or encounter nomadic herders living in the round, tentlike huts known as *gers*, into which you'll likely be invited for food and drink.

Only about 3 percent of the Gobi is covered by sand—including the Singing Sands dunes, so named for the peculiar sound made by the winds blowing over the smooth, round grains—the rest is mostly gravel plains and exposed rock. One of the most famous rock formations is the Flaming Cliffs, named by American explorer and paleontologist Roy Chapman Andrews for its vivid red sandstone cliffs. In 1923, Andrews and his team made the world's first discovery of dinosaur eggs here. Since then thousands of bones and footprints have been found in the area, including the remains of a velociraptor; organized tours



Dinosaur fossils, including the first eggs ever unearthed, were discovered near the Flaming Cliffs.

are sometimes invited to help excavate. Trekking along the Jargalant mountain range or within the Gobi Guryansaikhan National Park is also unparalleled.

Not far from the Flaming Cliffs, the Three Camel Lodge—a sophisticated, eco-efficient ger camp—appears like a mirage. It's a stylish refuge lodge of Mongolian traditional design, with wood stoves, solar-powered electricity, and hand-painted furniture. Its biggest perk may be the remarkable stargazing in this remote and incomparably beautiful place.

WHERE: Dalandzagrad is the gateway to the Gobi, 344 miles/553 km northeast of Ulaanbaatar, the capital. **HOW:** U.S.- and Mongolia-based Nomadic Expeditions offers organized group tours and customized guided individual tours. In Ulaanbaatar, tel 976/11-313396; in the U.S., 800-998-6634; www.nomadicexpeditions.com. **COST:** 12-day trips from \$2,885, all-inclusive. **ORIGINATE** in Ulaanbaatar. **THREE CAMEL LODGE:** Tels same as Nomadic Expeditions;