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DUNES STRUCK

Camel trekking, ger camping, fossil hunting and discovering the rugged beauty of Southern Mongolia's entrancing Gobi Desert

BY STAN SESSER

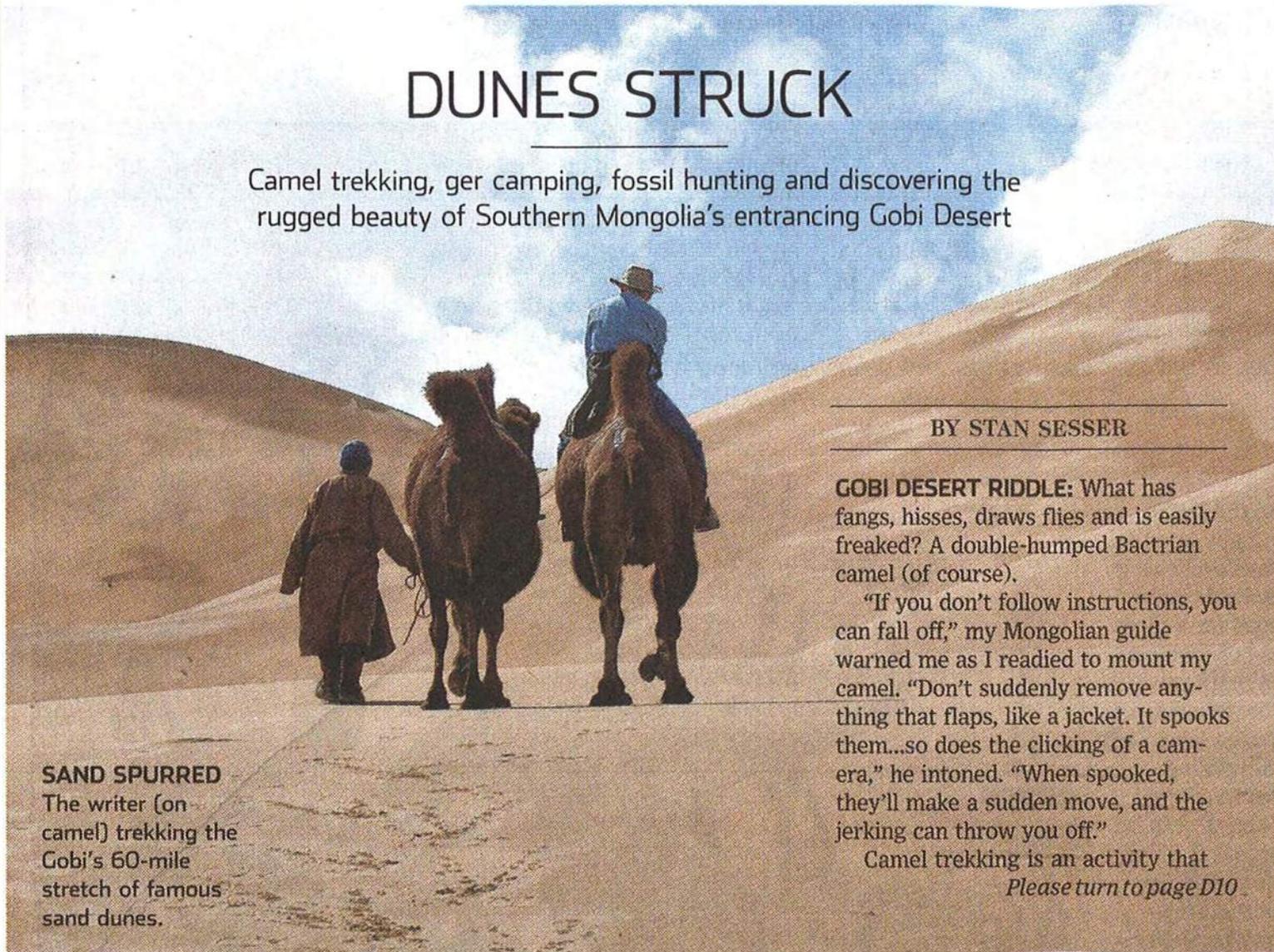
GOBI DESERT RIDDLE: What has fangs, hisses, draws flies and is easily freaked? A double-humped Bactrian camel (of course).

"If you don't follow instructions, you can fall off," my Mongolian guide warned me as I readied to mount my camel. "Don't suddenly remove anything that flaps, like a jacket. It spooks them...so does the clicking of a camera," he intoned. "When spooked, they'll make a sudden move, and the jerking can throw you off."

Camel trekking is an activity that
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SAND SPURRED

The writer (on camel) trekking the Gobi's 60-mile stretch of famous sand dunes.



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matches man with a foul-tempered, humpbacked beast that sinisterly hisses and cavalierly drops to its haunches when it no longer feels compelled to carry you.

It's also a great deal of fun, particularly when taking place in the vast and otherworldly Gobi Desert.

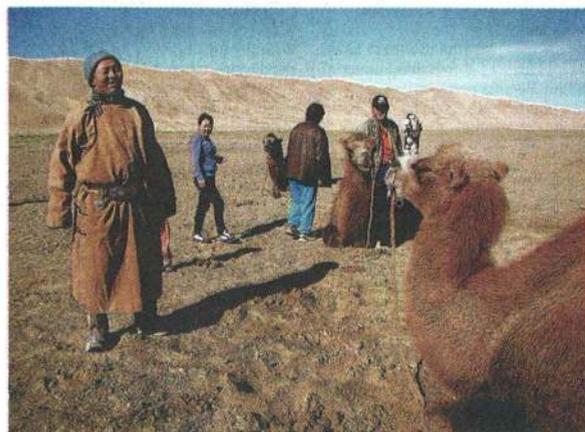
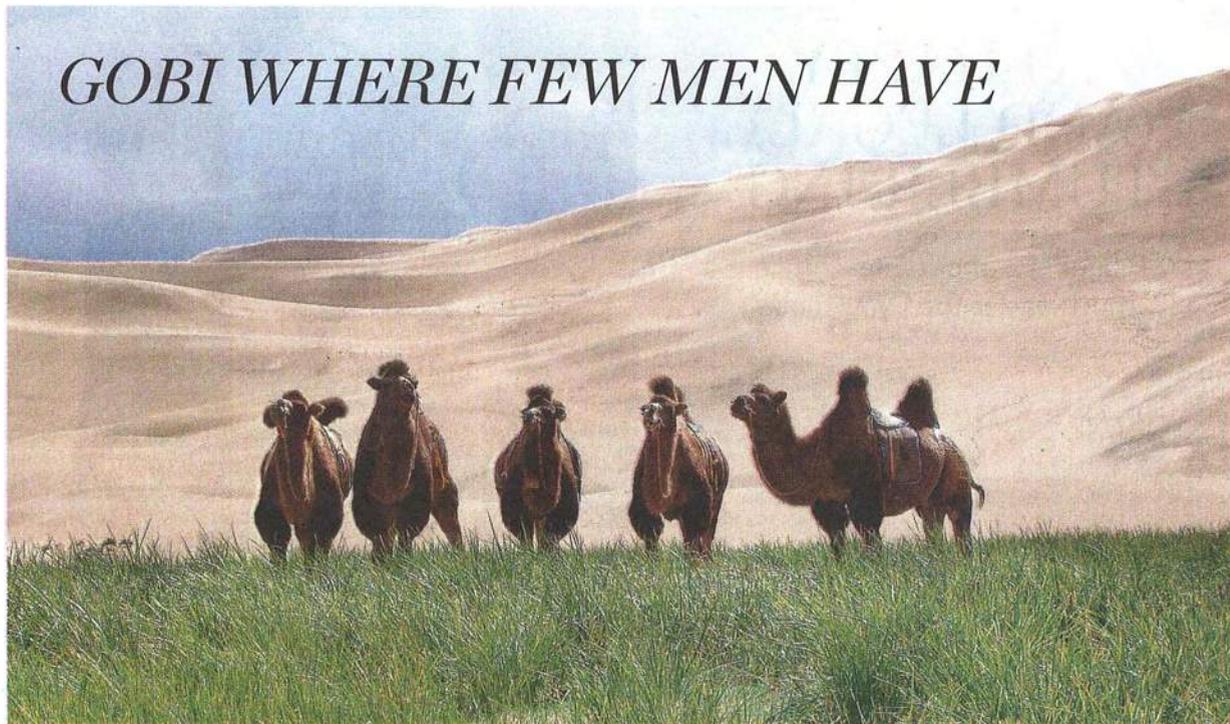
The Gobi stretches across 500,000 square miles of both Mongolia and China's province of Inner Mongolia. Temperatures in this vast terrain can soar above 110 degrees in summer, then drop to 40-below in winter, leaving May and September as the only truly temperate months.

When I arrived on the hour-long flight from Ulan Bator, Mongolia's capital, I found myself in the throes of the area's heaviest rainstorm in a decade. The firm desert ground had been turned into swamp, the roads into churning streams.

Yet surprisingly, the Gobi can be a comfortable, accessible place to travel. With a population density of around three people per square mile, you can drive in a car for hours without passing another vehicle. World-weary loners, take note: The desert is also dotted with mirage-like "ger" camps, where tourists stay in Mongolian yurts—spacious tents made of felt, stretched along wooden latticework.

Over the course of the week I spent crisscrossing the Gobi—traveling an average of 50 to 100 miles most days—I got a glimpse, both literally and figuratively, of the other side of the world. There was not only stark beauty, but tastes of a nomadic civilization different in every way from our own. That's not easy to find these days, as the spread of Western culture, through tourism and the Internet, brings homogeneity to the world even at its remotest edges.

A stuck-in-amber, landlocked bubble of the prehistoric past, the Gobi is also one of the greatest paleontological sites in the



HUMP DAYS Clockwise from top: A rare grassy patch in the Gobi Desert provides the camels a roadside bite; Mongolian camel driver-guide Enkhtuya (far left); the aptly named Flaming Cliffs, rock formations that illuminate as the sun sets on the Gobi.

going the way of the dinosaurs.

The younger generations,

repeatedly to keep the animals from sitting down or stopping

at (while briefly visiting another) had shared central build-

even a casual tourist can make discoveries. As it happens, our

nity-based agricultural cooperative, grows vegetables—a rare

From top: Stan Sasser/The Wall Street Journal (3); Nomadic Expeditions (2)

world. In 1923, preserved dinosaur eggs were discovered for the first time in history, at Bayan Zag (in English, "the flaming cliffs"). The rocks there illuminate and redden during sunset, a natural spectacle that's reason enough to take the odyssey. The Gobi is rugged paradise as well for hikers and bicyclists, who can commune with nature for hours on end, never encountering another soul.

For the camel trek, I was placed (along with two other visitors) in the hands of Enkh-tuya, a 55-year-old camel driver who after a lifetime in the Gobi's blistering heat and alternately freezing cold looked 20 years more than his years. He and his wife welcomed us into their ger, where we sat on benches upholstered with rugs. Over cups of tea boiled with camel milk, Enkh-tuya bemoaned that his way of life was

like his four children, often opt for education and big city living in the capital instead of carrying on family trades. Many, he said, never return. That isn't to say, though, that Enkh-tuya is doing poorly by Mongolian standards. He owns 30 camels, used for tourism and the fur that goes into camelhair coats. During the six-month tourist season (from May through September) his camel herd earns him \$5 an hour per rider.

Our camels obligingly lay on the ground, and were trained to have riders mount them (solely from the left side). If you approach them from the rear, our guide warned, you could be in for a kick. And, he said, avoid putting hands near their mouths. "Camels have fangs, and getting bitten by one isn't pretty."

We started off on our journey with Enkh-tuya shouting "Chul!"

to much desert grass. I quickly realized that our two-humped camels, Bactrians, were much more pleasant to ride than the one-hump Dromedary variety I once rode in Egypt. They're more diminutive, less and their thick fur provides welcome padding. But the constant bouncing, and the fact that your feet are essentially locked into stirrups, can get wearying as the hours pass (and the rear hump is 100 feet set in the recline position to serve as a back-rest).

Most of the Gobi looks exactly the same as the rest of the Gobi: packed dirt with the occasional clump of grass. There are no formal roads, and errant four-wheel-drive vehicles roar over the dirt spans like it were a freeway.

But we were in a special place, the Gobi's famed sand dunes. Occupying just 1% of the Gobi, the dunes are a 60-mile-long stretch of peaks and valleys sculpted by the winds, rising in some spots to as many as 600 feet above the desert floor. A car would be spinning its wheels in seconds, but it's perfect territory for camel trekking, and a landscape right out of "Lawrence of Arabia."

To provide the ultimate Gobi experience, the trek was equipped to include a night of upscale camping.

The two ger camps I stayed

ings for toilets and showers, and group dining halls. All were clean and had friendly staffs, serving hearty indigenous-fare meals that wouldn't put-off "Western" palates. (At one, I put in a special request for camel tenderloin; verdict: delicious.)

The standout in the pack, **Three Camel Lodge**, was designed for luxury-leaning travelers, equipped with the inno-

guide came one upon another purported dinosaur bone fragments, unearthed by the recent rains, when he took me to Tugrugyn Shiree, a group of forbidding barren hills that are prime territory for bone hunters. If you want to determine an ancient dinosaur bone from a still-living creature, he advised, just lick the bone: If it sticks to your tongue, it's ancient.

The Gobi dunes are a 60-mile-long stretch of peaks and valleys sculpted by the winds. It's a landscape right out of 'Lawrence of Arabia.'

vation of private attached bathrooms. My outfitter, the New Jersey-based **Nomadic Expeditions**—whose partner company owns the Three Camel Lodge—had equipped our Toyota SUV not only with a private sleeping tent, but also with a toilet tent, a solar-powered shower tent and a nurturing chef from Ulan Bator. Her preparations, in a country hardly known for its culinary wizardry, turned out to be first-rate, and it prepared us for our morning excursions with vigor and high expectations.

The Gobi, while best suited for the more adventurous traveler, remains a wilderness where

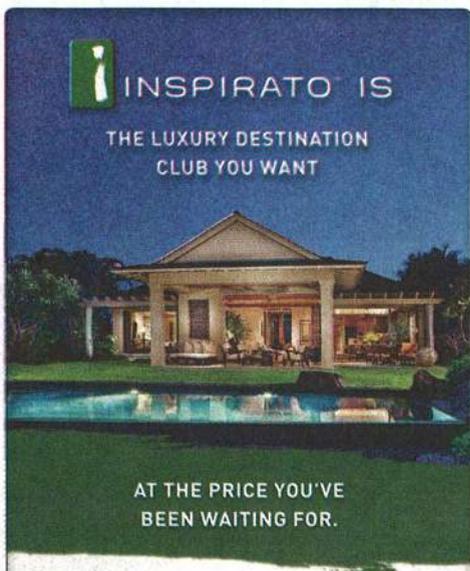
Mother Nature, however, was to intercede in our plans, with our campsite having turned to lake from the unexpected rains. We spent the night in a respectable-but-spartan ger camp, which allowed the chef to cook our dinner in their kitchen.

Arguably no ger camp in the Gobi can rival Three Camel Lodge for comfort and amenities. It's a lovely arrangement, featuring the finest of linens, the thickest towels and toiletries made from camel milk. Most of its electricity is produced from solar panels and windmills, and the clay roof tiles are made by hand. A big greenhouse, run by a commu-

ity in Mongolian cuisine—for guests' meals.

Staying at Three Camel Lodge, however, isn't comparable to staying at a contemporary luxury resort. Most of the staff is local, and while all were exceedingly friendly, it hasn't mastered all the finer points of modern-day hospitality. Moreover, its gers that were equipped with bathrooms had only toilets and cold-water sinks. Guests must walk to a central building for a hot shower, provided for in shower stalls with attached dressing rooms. Still, the creature comforts of the lodge provided a heaven-sent contrast to the hours spent on the back of a less-than-aromatic, fly-infested camel.

But pity those water-retaining creatures, as the riders and stable owners have it far better. When winter arrives, Enkh-tuya, like the others, un-pitches his ger and abandons ship, moving to a valley sheltered from the below-0 winds and chill. The camels are left behind, fending for themselves, digging through the snow for grass to survive. The following spring, when their keepers return, the frail but resilient camels, sadomasochists by nature, invariably show up at their ger doorsteps, ready for replenishment, and another tourist season.



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▶ See photos from a trek around the Gobi Desert at WSJ.com/Travel.

THE LOWDOWN

- **GETTING THERE** To fly to Ulan Bator, Mongolia's capital, you must go to Beijing and switch to Air China or MIAT Mongolian Airlines. It's no longer necessary to have a visa for China to change planes in Beijing. Your package tour to the Gobi Desert will include the flight to the Gobi from Ulan Bator.
- **WHERE TO STAY** Ulan Bator is not known for luxury hotels, but the Naran-tuul (\$108 per night and a considerable step down from luxury) is clean, comfortable and on the main street in the very heart of the city (naran-tuulhotel.com). In the Gobi, the **Three Camel Lodge**, run by a Mongolian-American who supports the local community and environmental projects, soars above anything else. Rooms there, and package tours to the Gobi Desert, can be booked through Three Camel Lodge's affiliated U.S. tour operator, **Nomadic Expeditions**, 800-998-6634, nomadicexpeditions.com.
- **WHERE TO EAT** Mongolian food, which centers on lamb and ignores vegetables, plays second fiddle in Ulan Bator to a slew of international restaurants. Café Amsterdam (amsterdam.mn) for breakfast



and Silk Road Bar and Grill for dinner are both excellent. The great national dish of Mongolia, fermented mare's milk, isn't pasteurized, so it can't be found in restaurants.

• **WHAT TO PACK** In the summer, you'll need light, loose cotton clothing, with a wind-breaker when it cools off at night. In the more temperate months of May and September, it can get quite cool, and in other months positively cold. Running shoes are fine for handling all the terrain you'll encounter. Take a wide-brimmed hat and plenty of sunblock.



HIGH-CAMPING From top: A peek inside one of the Three Camel Lodge's spacious bedroom suites; a collective of upscale yurts at the lodge's ger site in the Gobi Desert.