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FALL/WINTER 2016

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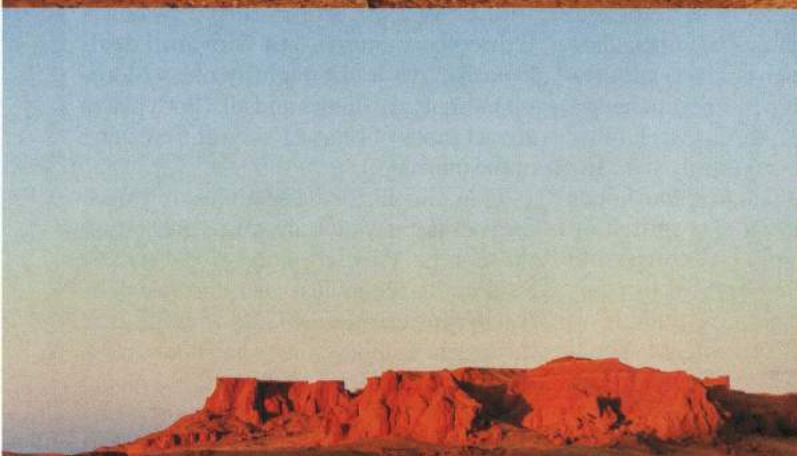
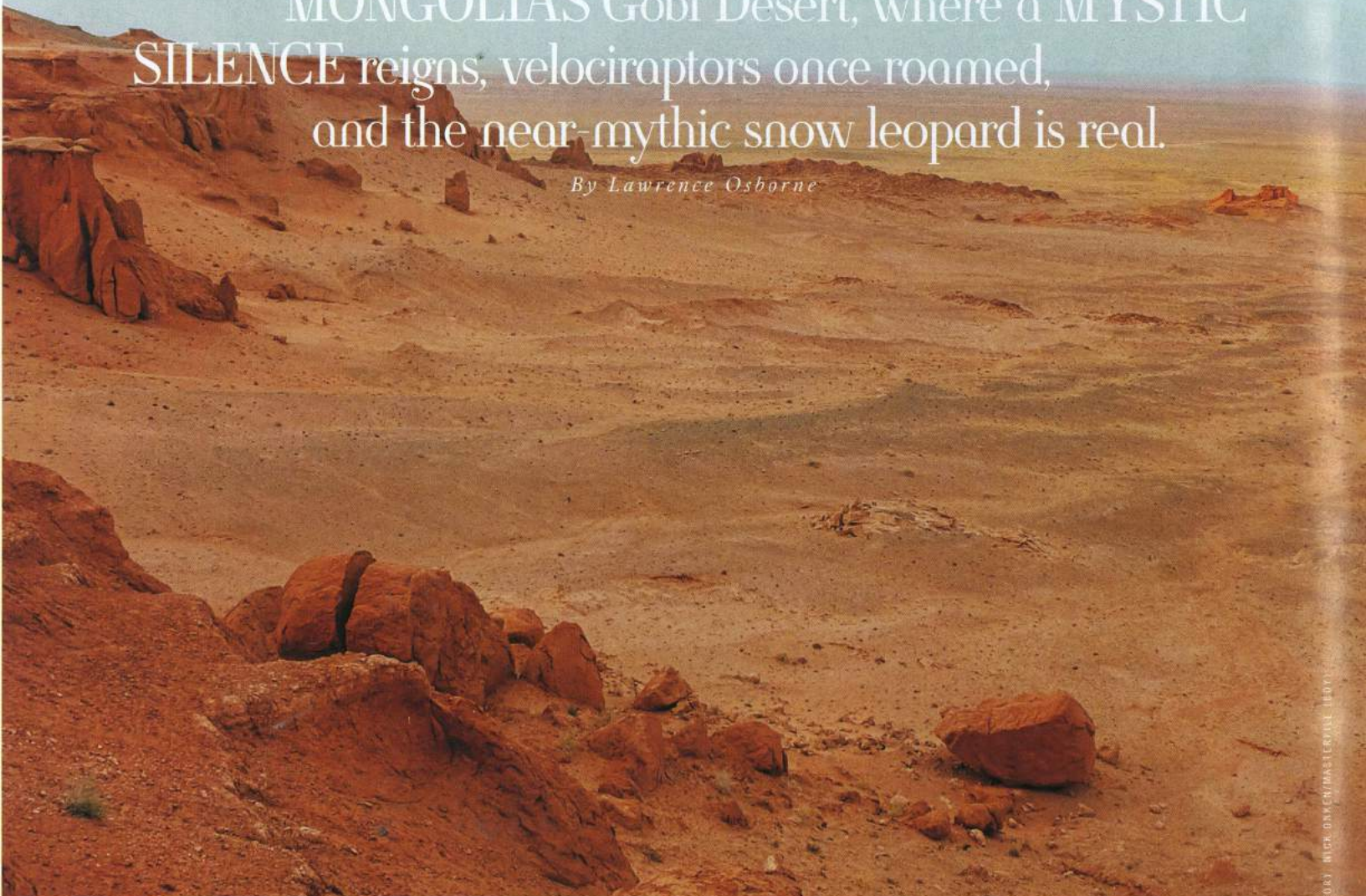
THE GRANDEST TOUR

25 TRIPS OF A LIFETIME

VANISHING

Few places are, and feel, as sublimely remote as
MONGOLIA'S Gobi Desert, where a MYSTIC
SILENCE reigns, velociraptors once roamed,
and the near-mythic snow leopard is real.

By Lawrence Osborne



ACT



We came out of Ulaanbaatar a short while after daybreak, two Land Cruisers a half-mile apart headed south, and soon we had left behind the half-finished tenements and coal smoke of Mongolia's capital. The road wound around hills streaked with Buddhist prayer flags, past antennae and long-abandoned cement buildings and Soviet factories where the chimneys seemed to have gotten cancer. Across the hillsides flocks of longhair goats scattered in slow motion, and there was an hour of bitter rain that fell with the slowness of snow. When the sun finally broke through the low clouds again, we were in grasslands—the vast steppe preceding the Gobi Desert—and the surface shone here and there with pools of lifeless, half-frozen water. Our Mongol drivers said it was surprisingly mild for late October, and there was no irony in their voices.

A couple of hours into the drive we stopped for a picnic of caviar, local cream, and Chinggis Black Label vodka. (Chinggis is the Mongolian version of Genghis; eight centuries after his death, Genghis Khan is still the national hero.) We had another eight hours ahead of us. More than half a million square miles (a thousand miles long and five hundred miles wide), the Gobi Desert is about twice the size of France and with an elevation of 3,000 to 5,000 feet—remote and austere and prized by paleontologists as one of the world's richest sources of dinosaur fossils. Most of it lies in Mongolia, but China rules its southern portion, which is known in that country as Inner Mongolia. The tiny airport at Dalanzadgad, 350 miles southwest of Ulaanbaatar, was closed for the season, and the open road was the only way of reaching our destination: the southern Gobi and my guide Jalsa Urubshurow's lodge, the Three Camel. ➤➤➤

ANCIENT EVENINGS
The Flaming Cliffs (top and far left) are among the world's richest repositories of dinosaur fossils. Left and center: The gers at Three Camel Lodge.



➔ Stocky, virile, and packed with explosive energy, Jalsa has elegant iron-gray hair and construction worker shoulders. A Mongolian-American from New Jersey, of the Kalmyk ethnic group, he did in fact make his fortune the hard way, in the American construction business, and now, at age 60, he's Mongolia's most famous cultural ambassador and tour guide. He designed the Three Camel Lodge himself, working with Mongolian architects and carpenters and using traditional techniques, and both the lodge and his tour company, Nomadic Expeditions, are the incarnation of an intense and personal—and maybe even nationalistic—pride.

"I've brought many people here: film stars [including Richard Gere], captains of industry, writers, you name it," he told me. "I've always said it's a difficult country to get to know. You need someone to show it to you. You need a Mongolian who can show you how to feel it."

At five in the afternoon in mid-October the thermometer was already plunging alarmingly. Soon, Jalsa said, the high steppe would be among the coldest places on earth, with temperatures sometimes dropping to minus 50 Fahrenheit. And there might come the *zud*, a terrifying confluence of severe drought, wind, and cold that sometimes kills half the country's livestock. The lodge is closed between November and May; we were the last guests of the year.

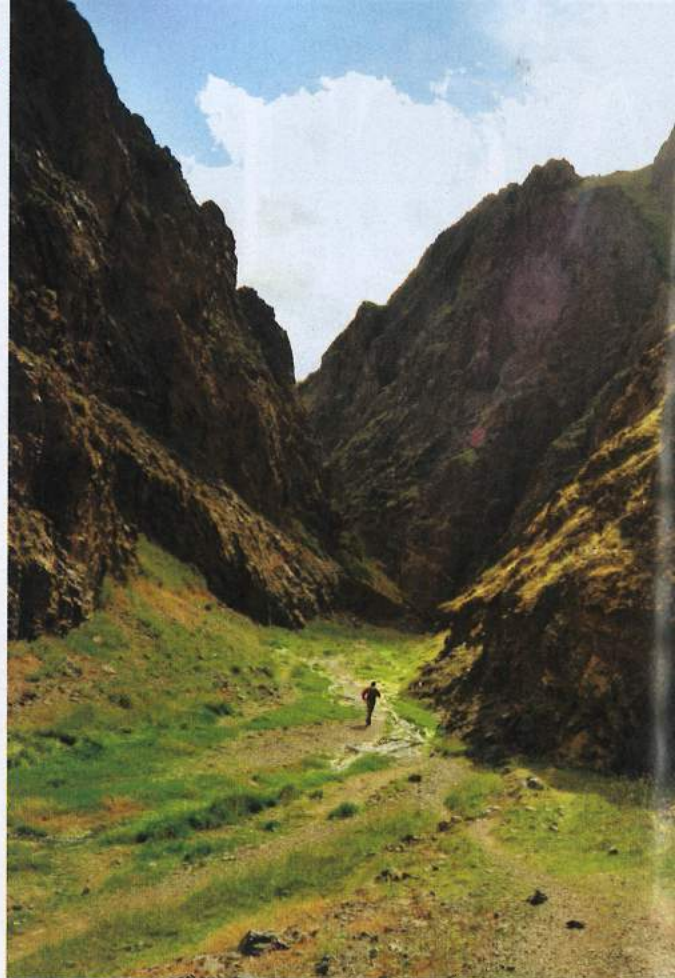
Jalsa told me that there were wolves everywhere in the Gobi and that they probably outnumbered people. "I count that as a triumph of conservation for this country," he said. I asked him if wolves were sacred to Mongols. "Absolutely. There are two words for them. But the sacred word is *chinuao*. Mongolians believe that we are descended from wolves, and I think we probably are. You'll see them soon. You'll hear them every night."

But it was another animal, considerably more elusive, that had drawn me to the Gobi at the edge of winter: the snow leopard, the shy *Panthera uncia*, which has been seen in the wild by only a handful of people and of which only an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 remain outside zoos. A few days before my arrival a member of Jalsa's staff and two guests had spotted one in a remote valley. As it happened, Peter Matthiessen, the author of the classic travelogue *The Snow Leopard* and a friend of Jalsa's, had stayed at the Three Camel Lodge in 2013, the year before he died—although his 1978 book, which describes a grueling search to find the snow leopard in the company of the naturalist George Schaller, was set in the Dolpo region of Nepal. Wasn't a pursuit of this rarest of all animals in fact a quest for a spirit of place, since one's chances of ever seeing one were almost nil? I put this to Jalsa.

"Myself, I've always dreamed of the snow leopard, but I've never seen one," he said. "For 25 years I've been dreaming of it." At the beginning of his own journey, more than 40 years ago,

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not yield a SIGHTING.
But what mattered was
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a SNOW LEOPARD
could exist.

HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN
Some believe the Gobi is the ur-region where all the world's mystical religions originated. In places like the Yol Valley, it's easy to believe. *Opposite: Local transport.*

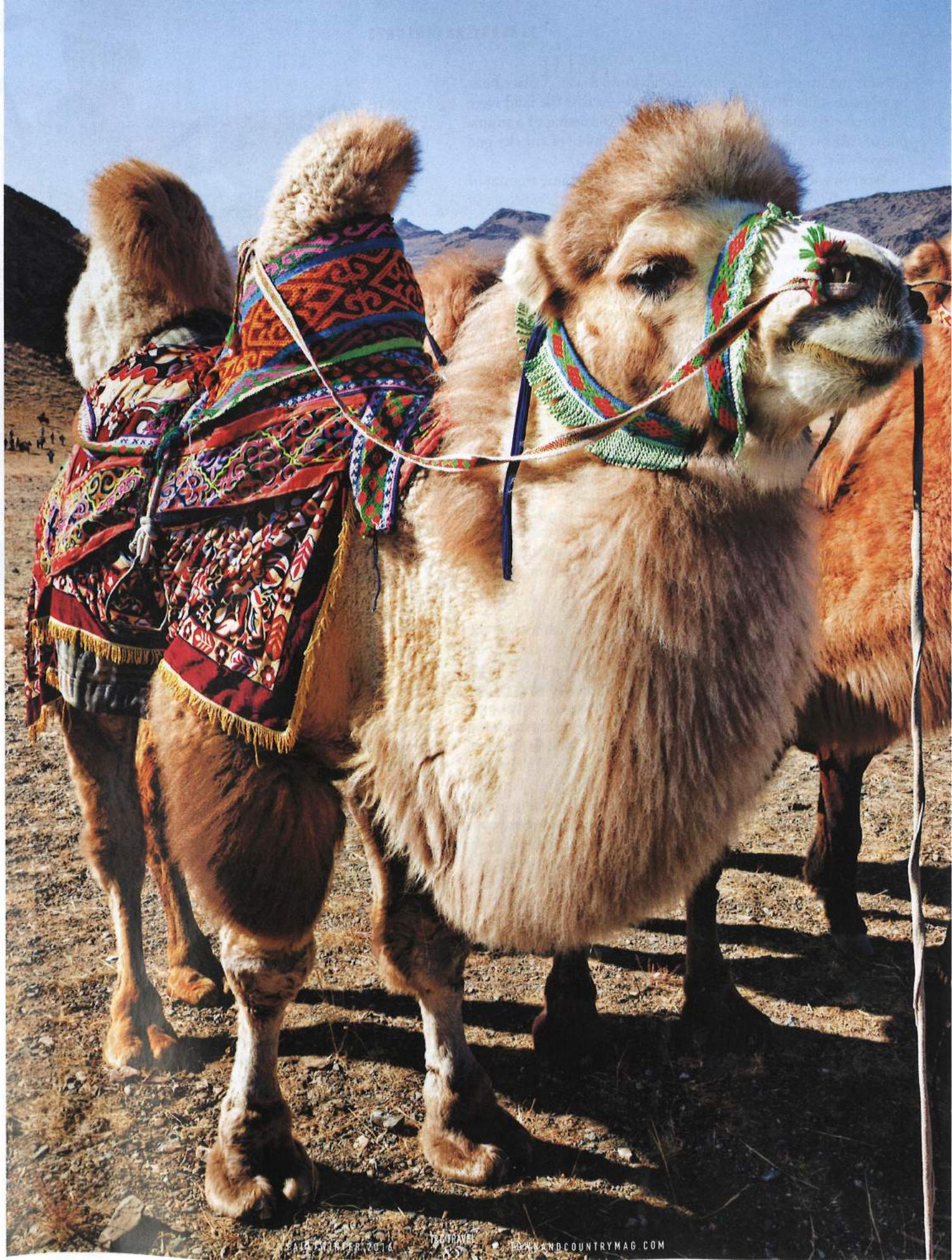


Matthiessen had written that Schaller knew "of only two Westerners...who had laid eyes on the Himalayan snow leopard in the past 25 years; the hope of glimpsing this near-mythic beast in the snow mountains was reason enough for the entire journey." But what about the Gobi? It was a pretext for my journey that would probably not yield a sighting, but that didn't matter. What mattered was seeing a landscape in which a snow leopard could exist.

We stopped for a toilet break in the desert grasslands, and as I walked slowly off, smoking and enjoying the cold, I noticed four objects in the grass. I approached them and saw that they were four horse legs cut off at the knee and left standing erect in the grass. It looked like a grim and sardonic art installation. I asked the Mongolians what they were, or why they were there, and they turned away. "*Zud*," one of them muttered, shrugging.

The Gobi is in many ways like the old American West, filled with abandoned hamlets and buildings, traces of disappeared peoples. Across its oceanic blond grass, horses and the black silhouettes of camels move languidly, as if they are the only inhabitants. Ancient Turkic nomads left enigmatic petroglyphs carved into boulders 2,000 years ago. "Look at this place," Jalsa cried at one point. "Where is as empty as this? There's nowhere like it except the Sahara. But I think it's emptier than the Sahara."

At the end of the day we came to a still-living settlement nestled under rock cliffs. It was windblown but tenacious, hanging on by its nails. On the way in we passed a children's playground that looked grim and decidedly unchildlike, and then impoverished-looking white *gers* (the circular felt tents of the nomads) erected on dusty slopes with their chimneys smoking, the yards surrounded by low walls. Goats in the street watched us pass with lemonade eyes. There was a Buddhist cemetery on a ➔



➤ hillside, the stones sinking into dust as if into a tide. A place built by nomads, unsettled at its gimcrack core. Across the land were scattered *ovoo*, shamanistic prayer mounds consisting of a simple pile of rocks with a silk scarf, or *khadag*—symbol of the sky god Tengri—flying from a stick.

Women with ruddy, haunted faces showed the same amount of curiosity about us as the goats did. We drove into a gas station surrounded by shattered cinderblock houses that had looping power cables hanging loose from them. The houses' windows were shuttered but were surprisingly decent. Next to the gas station was a little shack with the word *KARAOKE* pinned with stoic intent to the eaves. You could walk to the edge of this village, where the idle cement mixers and the row houses petered out, and look out into the brown haze of the desert. The declining sun made it look like a bracken sea, a girdle of mist at its farthest edge. The silence was overwhelming.

It was night before we came to the strung-out lights of Dalanzadgad, the only town in the deep desert. It's a place of low, cheaply built houses, *gers* within walled enclosures, the lonely neon lights of gas stations, and the occasional wild bar. The streets were iced over, silent, and deserted. An hour farther on from here, over open and roadless desert, lay the Three Camel Lodge. We could see it from miles away in the moonlight as we approached, a ghostly "village" of 40 white *gers* scattered around a low stone outcrop covered with neolithic tombs—circles of rocks that mark the graves of people whom no one knows anything about. Jalsa Urubshurow's strange and beautiful kingdom.

We drove past a roofed well and into the shadow of the outcrop. The staff was waiting, hot towels on trays, and I felt very much like the last guest of the season as I struggled through a glacial wind to my *ger*. The Three Camel's tents are raised on cement foundations and warmed with traditional pipe stoves burning coal, with tin chimneys running up through the pitched ceilings. They feel like saunas inside. Their doors are painted orange, a nod to nostalgia—it was the color used for furnishings during the era of Soviet collective farms, now long gone. Between the tents run stone paths lit by low, solar-powered iron lamps. They cast an almost imperceptible light, but the star-studded sky was brilliant enough to see by as Jalsa led me up to the lodge's lovely main building—massive timbers and Chinese-style upturned eave tiles—where he has created, in keeping with his restless, Zorbaesque temperament, the only luxury bar in the Gobi, stocked with surprisingly uncommon single malts. I noticed at once a bottle of Hakushu and an 18-year-old Yamazaki. These malts are more

In the valley was
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ROCK SPIRES.

STAR OF THE STEPPE

The mournful *morin khuur*, or horsehead fiddle, provides a fitting soundtrack for this strange and stunning place.



rarefied than the standard ones you find in Tokyo or New York, and they are even less usual hundreds of miles into the Gobi.

We drank a shot of each—the barman even had spherical ice, in the Japanese manner—while the wind howled around the windows and gusts of snow mixed with sand hissed against them. “My ancestors came from a place once known as Dzungaria,” Jalsa said, “which is now part of Xinjiang in northwestern China. It was the homeland of a Mongol people called the Oirats. They went into Russia eventually—I think in the 17th century—and became known as Kalmyks.”

Kalmykia, their land, lies along the Volga River and the Caspian Sea, but Jalsa's parents migrated westward to Germany and then the United States to get away from the Soviets. They wound up in a displaced persons camp after World War II but were aided by the Tolstoy Foundation, a philanthropy started in 1939 by the youngest daughter of the novelist to help refugees from the Soviet Union. The foundation persuaded the Americans that the Urubshurows were Caucasian “Russians” so that they could move to the U.S. despite immigration controls on Asians. “That,” Jalsa concluded, “was how we ended up in Monmouth County, New Jersey.”

Jalsa's father was illiterate, but he kept alive the stories and traditions of Mongolia for his two sons. “He used to recite from memory ancient fairy tales and legends,” Jalsa said. “I spoke Mongolian at home, and I always wanted to go back.” When Mongolia declared independence from the Soviet Union, in 1990, he did. The country's new prime minister, Dashiin Byambasuren, asked Jalsa to help set up a national tourism organization and develop the U.S.-Mongolian Business Council to open Mongolia up to Western tourists.

“Twenty-five years ago,” Jalsa said, “it was a completely different place. There were very few cars, and [CONTINUED ON PAGE 96]

TIPS & TACTICS

GOING, GOING, GONE



The best times to visit the Gobi and **Three Camel Lodge** are June, and September through October. By the beginning of November it is ferociously cold, while October can swing surreally between warm days and clear, chilly nights and frosty mornings dusted with snow—perfect.

The easiest ways to Ulaanbaatar are through Beijing, Seoul, and Hong Kong, and from there Nomadic Expeditions will organize everything, including all ground transport. The new **Shangri-La Hotel** in Ulaanbaatar is conveniently located in the city center and around the corner from one of the excellent outlets for Gobi cashmere—a must-buy (SHANGRI-LA.COM/ULAANBAATAR/SHANGRILA/).

To reach Three Camel Lodge, you will either fly (weather and the airport gods permitting, it takes 90 minutes) or drive the six to eight hours to Dalanzadgad and from there on to the lodge, a further one and a

half hours. But the overland route is scenic and a worthwhile trip in itself, especially if you stop at the Tsagaan Suvarga (White Stupa) geologic area, a series of spectacular rock formations.

The all-inclusive lodge (there is nothing else within realistic driving distance) has some of the best food in the country, both Mongolian and Western, and a stunningly well-stocked whiskey bar. It arranges all daytrips, including visits to festivals and explorations of the famous Flaming Cliffs, one of the world's most important fossil grounds for dinosaurs, especially velociraptors. There are also magnificent hikes to take around the lodge itself. AN 11-DAY STAY, THE LODGE'S "ULTIMATE GOBI" PROGRAM, INCLUDES SEVERAL NIGHTS IN ULAANBAATAR AND TOURS OF THE CITY AND ITS ENVIRONS AS WELL AS FIVE NIGHTS AT THREE CAMEL LODGE; IT COSTS \$6,395 PER PERSON, DOUBLE OCCUPANCY. INTERNAL AIRFARE IS \$340 PER PERSON, IF THE AIRPORT IS OPEN. INFO@NOMADICEXPEDITIONS.COM, 800-998-6634 L.O.

NATIVE SON
Mongolia, Jalsa Urubshurov says, "is difficult to get to know. You need a Mongolian who can show you how to feel it."

HIDE AND SEEK

Four more wildly romantic places where you won't be found—unless you want to be.



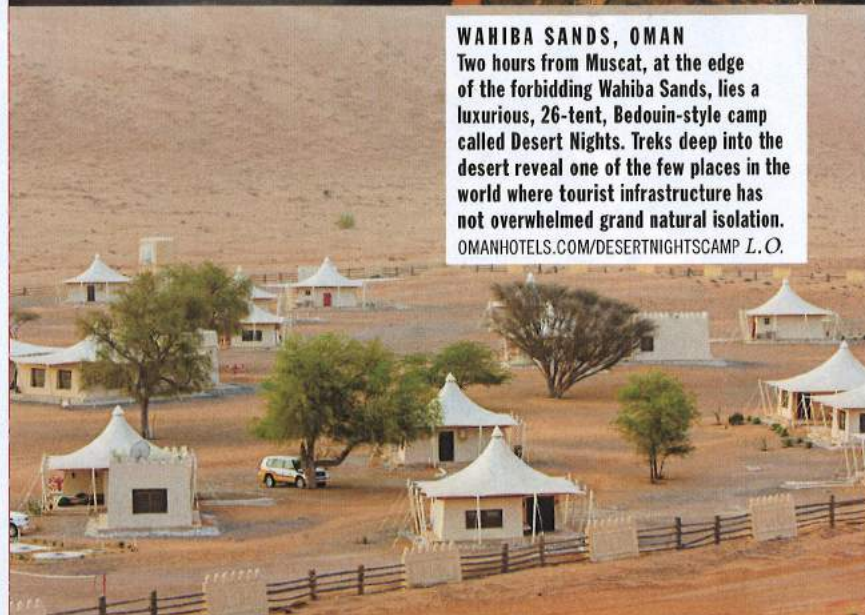
AERIAL BAY, NORTH ANDAMAN, INDIA
For sheer adventure, few voyages surpass a trip along the Andaman Trunk Road. The jungles on the way belong to the largely uncontacted Jarawa tribe. Eventually you reach the Bengali village of Diglipur and, near it, the wild shores of Aerial Bay, with simple guesthouses. Magnificent—but for the hardy. ANDAMANPRISTINERESORTS.COM



WAMENA, PAPUA, INDONESIA
Discovered by the outside world only in 1938, Wamena sits in a hidden valley (an hour's flight from Jayapura) that is home to the Dani people and the pygmy Yali warriors. Only a few outsiders are allowed. The rustic Baliem Valley Resort is the best. BALIEM-VALLEY-RESORT.COM

SONG SAA ISLAND, CAMBODIA
Forty minutes by boat from Sihanoukville, this private isle is set among a string of specks in the Koh Rong Archipelago. Its 27 sumptuous villas are surrounded by nothing but sea and distant jungle. SONGSAA.COM

WAHIBA SANDS, OMAN
Two hours from Muscat, at the edge of the forbidding Wahiba Sands, lies a luxurious, 26-tent, Bedouin-style camp called Desert Nights. Treks deep into the desert reveal one of the few places in the world where tourist infrastructure has not overwhelmed grand natural isolation. OMANHOTELS.COM/DESERTNIGHTSCAMP L.O.



HIDE AND SEEK, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: © SCHIT/ALAMY; REINHARD DIRSCHERL/GETTY IMAGES; DESERT NIGHTS CAMP; SONG SAA. MAP: HAISAM HUSSEIN





VANISHING ACT

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 86] most of the tourists came from communist countries—a lot of Poles. All the money from mining that we see now—from fluorspar, from copper and tin, from coal—that didn't exist yet." The southern part of the Gobi in particular has come to be known as "the Saudi Arabia of Asia" for its mineral wealth, its towns filled with prospectors, engineers, and miners. Seventy-five percent of the country's exports come from mines. But the effects of the vast mining projects on the desert are unclear, and the degradation of pastureland and groundwater is beginning to provoke anxiety. China's appetite for Mongolia's minerals, however, is voracious.

"Back then, the huge economic presence of China was unimaginable. But now everything has changed. I was here right at the beginning of the country's independence, so I have been at the heart of it all. I know what the dangers to Mongolia's natural heritage are."

"Vodka?" I suggested.

"You can't say anything against vodka. Let's drink some more Chinggis after this whiskey and you'll see what I mean."

Mongolians are epic drinkers and carousers, and in this respect they are extremely congenial to my own way of thinking. However, even a Mongolian vodka named after Genghis Khan seems to have no effect on Jalsa. After sleeping for two hours he gets up at dawn, fresh as a teenager, and begins another day in a storm of self-created energy. He might as well have been drinking Perrier all night.

As I lay in my *ger* that night, I heard the wolves howling somewhere in the darkness, the nomad dogs answering in kind. Perhaps the nearby herds of goats had attracted them. At sunrise I found that a soft heat had returned to the plains and the snow had disappeared. I walked up to the prehistoric tombs above my tent and looked down on a pale brown land rattled by refreshingly cool winds. From day to day the Gobi changes like this. It can snow in July and grow warm on a late October day after a night of snowfall.

Our days were therefore all different from one another. That first morning, as the sun rose higher, we drove out into the plains to a festival the Three Camel organizes occasionally for guests that is centered on three traditional Mongolian sports: archery, wrestling, and horse racing. A dozen or so tents and Soviet-era Bukhanka vans were arranged in a circle, and within them wrestlers and musicians were whiling away the morning hours. The wrestlers were half naked, dressed in sky-blue briefs, collarless short-sleeved jackets, and traditional gutal boots with curled toes. On their heads sat little spiked hats, which they took off as they prepared for combat. Outside the circle, young girls in bright silk tunics fired arrows at straw targets, the arrows sailing off into the wheat-blond grass. But soon it clouded over and the cold returned. That night the snow fell again.

The following morning we got up before first light and drove on across the same open plain toward a distant rim of mountains, guided only by shallow tracks that converged, separated, and reconverged hour after hour, pathways across the desert unreadable to anyone but Gobi drivers. On the far side of the plain, hidden within the low mountains, lay the small and winding valley where Jalsa's lead guide, Anand Munkhuu, who was with us, had seen the snow leopard a few days earlier drinking from a half-frozen stream that ran along its bottom. We went there morning after morning, hoping we too would see it.

The valley was narrow, framed by iron-dark crags and spires. As we crept along the stream on foot, having left the cars at the valley's entrance, Jalsa whispered that the Gobi—it was doubtless!—possessed a mysterious force of its own, an energy. In *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen had speculated that the Gobi might be Shambala, a mythical kingdom mentioned in Tibetan sacred texts such as the Kalachakra Tantra that was the ur-region from which all of the world's mystical religions originated. "It's why," Jalsa said, "Matthiessen liked to come here at the end of his life." In the valley there was an icy silence, a stillness magnified by the certainty that the green-eyed cats were watching us from far up among the rock spires. "When you think," Jalsa murmured, as if afraid they might hear him, "that these animals might not exist at all 20 years from now..."

It was on our second visit that we suddenly saw them—a cluster of fresh paw prints in the sand to one side of the water. They were crisp and unmistakable, and as

rare as any prints that one could hope to see. Jalsa knelt beside them, and I thought he began to mutter a prayer. (He is a devout Buddhist; many times I saw him approach an *ovoo* in his Land Cruiser and drive around it three times to secure a blessing.) We stood for a long time in silence, contemplating this sign of a simple fact—a snow leopard drinking at dawn—then walked quietly back to the mouth of the canyon. Jalsa was elated, and it was clear that he would return to this secret place again and again until he saw the cat with his own eyes. More than any other animal in the Gobi, he said, the snow leopard symbolized everything that was disappearing from the natural world and that had to be defended to the "last day of my life."

That night the snow came yet again, but more wildly, and the tracks across the desert disappeared for a while. We could feel that it was time to leave. By the end of November, some of the drivers said laconically, you couldn't stick your tongue out without it freezing over. They said it matter-of-factly. And so it was time for a last drink of Yamazaki 18-year-old single malt whiskey at the bar and a departure ceremony. The entire staff of the Three Camel turned up to sing and dance with a troupe of virtuosic teenage musicians from a local school. Babies wrapped in fur sat on the bar, and boys in Manchu-style blue silk hats played the mournful *morin khuur*, the "horse violin" of the steppes. At the center of this merry commotion sat Jalsa, enthroned at the heart of the small world he had created almost single-handedly as a monument to his own people and to the land they inhabit. It was easy to see why the younger staff members idolized him and why, by the same token, he has become for many American travelers the incarnation of Mongolia.

"But I have a lot of New Jersey in me, as you can tell," he cried. "Have you tried my Philly steak fried spring roll? I just invented it half an hour ago."

The rolls were brought out, and they were, strangely, delicious. Jalsa is a famous cook, too, but I hadn't known that. We stayed up most of the night, oblivious to the huge moon that succeeded the snow showers, its silver brilliance coming through the windows. Two hours of sleep seemed more than adequate. As I packed at first light and the boys prepared to close the *ger*, I saw a line of camels moving across the dawn snow, and it seemed both unremarkable and sublime. Jalsa later told me that I, like many others, was fated to return. As for Jalsa himself, the Gobi is a personal thing. «