



Tumendelger Kn

What Nomad Is This?

From the time of Genghis Khan to the new millennium, the camel continues to provide meat, dairy, shelter, and transport along with a new chapter in fashion and fiber.

Nomads are difficult to define. Do we call them hybrid pastoralists or roamers with herbivores? Are nomads a state of being or a state of mind?

Bruce Chatwin, an anthropologist who was contracted to write (but never published) *The Nomadic Alternative*, eventually concluded that nomads are on the move because they like a life in motion. The sedentary

ways of the pastoralist (who by definition lives within specific boundaries, just like a farmer) held little appeal and evoked boredom for the perpetual wanderer. Nomads are never bored.

Conversely, Jeremy Swift, also an anthropologist and a friend of Chatwin's, developed a different view of nomads: "It's hell on wheels having to take all your possessions and your children everywhere you go."

So pick your poison or perhaps your pleasure — hell on wheels or

bucolic boredom.

Nomadic peoples range from reindeer herders in the Arctic to Australian Aborigines, with countless bands of migrating tribes in between. In fact, in order to determine just how many nomads there really are, one has to go back to the original question: What is a nomad?

Fortunately, we need not get bogged down in this anthropological quandary when investigating matters of fiber. Our focus is on camel herders, specifically those who are trying to establish a cottage industry of handspun camel hair in the Gobi. We'll begin with a bit of background.

Thanks to their great adaptability, camels can be found from the sands of North Africa to the steppes of Mongolia. In fact, few crossroads in between haven't been traveled at some point by these even-toed ungulates. Through the ages camels, which can travel up to 40 mph when appropriately inspired (whipped), have primarily been used for transport. They have also starred in the legendary camel races of the Arab world, where prize money is on a par with American horseracing and camel jockeys are all too frequently the victims of child slavery. Camels in these races reportedly travel at speeds up to 60 mph. But these supercharged sand sprinters are of the Dromedary variety. The lusciously soft camel hair used in hand spinning and textiles comes from the Bactrian camel.

The Bactrian camel comes originally from the city of Bactria (present-day Balkh) in North Afghanistan. The city is a mere hop, skip, and hump from the Hindu Kush mountains in a region that was part of the Persian Empire until Alexander the Great rearranged the boundaries. Camels are ideal for food, transport, and personal thermostat control (camel wool when worn and dung

when burned are both effective in combating the cold), and hence there was great incentive for domestication. Today the Bactrian is a popular and practical possession for many families in the region, and as of 2002 there were approximately 1.4 million domesticated Bactrian camels living in northwest China and Mongolia.

The wild Bactrian, however, is on the verge of extinction. There are only 950 of these animals left in the world, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources classifies them as critically endangered. The increasingly ruinous effects of "civilization" aren't helping the situation.

China's Gashun Gobi is one of the wild Bactrian's primary habitats; the area was also a Chinese nuclear testing site for 45 years. Remarkably, and indeed miraculously, the camels managed not only to survive the effects of radiation but also to continue breeding naturally. Today, though the testing has stopped, illegal mining for gold and copper continues to contaminate the animals' habitat. Sport hunting is also a threat, and the wild Bactrian is now even more endangered than the giant panda.



Nancy Shand

Above: A Mongolian nomad with several skeins of handspun camel hair along with some felted boots.

Below: Bactrian camel herd in the southern Gobi during the summer.

Opposite page: Baby Bactrian camel.



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Left: Mongolian nomads using drop spindles. Notice the difference in the color of the camel hair. Recently, Nancy Shand was able to get Louet (spinning wheel manufacturer) to donate two treadle spinning wheels. Apparently, only the younger spinners enjoy the faster production. The older ones still prefer the drop spindles.

Below: Several skeins of handspun camel yarn that have been individually marked with the spinner and their region.



neighborhoods and sound bytes from the western world have created a longing, or perhaps an altered

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There was a period, sometime after the siege of Genghis Khan and before the threat of nuclear warfare, when camels (and their herders) enjoyed a pristine, albeit remote, existence, and when Mongolian nomads were known as People of the Wilderness. In his 1921 article for *National Geographic*, Adam Warwick wrote, "Financial crises cannot affect them, for money as a medium of exchange is little used on the plains, where brick tea has more value than minted dollars. Municipal affairs do not concern them, for they build no cities, leading a migratory, carefree existence. They need no roads; the illimitable steppe is a natural highway where nations can pass without crowding... They want no electricity: at sundown after a long day in the saddle, they are ready to lie down and sleep."

These days, there are fewer and fewer Mongolians who are technically nomadic. Satellite dishes powered by the wind or the sun can be found precariously perched on rooftops in the Gobi. A black-and-white television set is still a prized possession in certain

sense of adventure, for the young. Also, the vast landmasses that have been parceled out by the government have to some extent limited the parameters in which nomads now travel. They are still on the move several times a year, however, packing up children and belongings in quest of the next available forage. And though the nomads' journeys may have been shortened, the camel's primary role has remained the same.

A camel can carry a load between 350lbs-500lbs with some being able to carry much more. But just a single ounce (perhaps straw?) more than the animal is willing to bear and it will drop to its knees in abject refusal. Some people claim that camels mutter and groan while they are being loaded and only adopt the mantle of silent scorn at the point of complete rejection of a load. Others claim that the animals are quiet and

acquiescent most of the time and only give voice in times of protest. Whatever the disagreement regarding rules of temperament, there is complete agreement on the quality of a camel's breath, which is said to be so poisonous as to shorten the life of a camel driver.

Arguably, there may be a need for a camel whisperer (if one is not already available), but when annoyed, camels are prone to kicking and biting quite vehemently. Their dental grip is frequently marked by a twist of the lower jaw after contact with a victim, and blood poisoning in someone who has been bitten is not uncommon. The disposition of some males can be so unsettling or threatening that "known offenders" were once marked with scarlet cloths tied to their forelocks to forewarn innocent strangers.

But for all of their obstreperous habits, camels can still elicit tender devotion. *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, a charming movie/documentary, is no Hollywood version of a story about a gallop through the Gobi. In fact, with no spoken English and only a few subtitles, the movie accurately records the efforts of a nomadic family to reunite a camel with its rejected baby. (The movie might even have been called *The Story of the Weeping Audience*.)

Herders also exhibit tenderness toward their animals during the long, long rides through the desert sand

that can wear down a camel's foot to the quick. A herder will often throw a limping camel on its side and place a low stool under its foot to bandage the inflamed area with a leather thong, which is then woven through bits of accumulated callus.

During the springtime of every year, camels naturally shed their undercoats in great clouds of downy softness in much the same way that cashmere goats shed their fiber. Herders gather the camel fiber either by hand or with shears. The hump is never clipped, however, as this is a vital spot for regulating body temperature, and leaving it exposed could ultimately place the animal at risk for disease.

According to a report released by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, camel down measures 19 to 24 microns, which is only slightly coarser than Iranian cashmere. Camel down can vary from less than one inch to four inches in length. The outer hair is much coarser and grows to more than a foot. During the winter, a camel grows a mane around its entire neck, and long tufts of hair frequently extend

Below: Nomads pack up everything and move several times throughout the year in search of the best food and water for their animals. A ger (round felted tent) is approximately 18 feet in diameter and is supported by a series of wooden slats. Although primitive in appearance on the outside, it offers plenty of comforts of home despite the persistent need for mobility.



from its muzzle and its joints around the elbows and knees. Camel hair comes in, well, the color camel, but can also be a deep reddish brown, grey, or the most valued and rare hue of all, white.

Mongolian nomads are experts at dehairing camels by hand. The long hairs need to be thoroughly separated, leaving only the cashmere-like down for spinning into lightweight material used for clothing. The coarser hairs are used to make felt for gers (the nomads' round felt tents), carpet backing, and the herders' winter coats. The strong, springy hair from the mane is also used for bedding and is said to have properties that ease symptoms of rheumatism and arthritis.

Understandably, camel hair is not the exclusive purview of the nomads. It has been used in western fashion for centuries and its price (because of its availability) makes it far more afford-

able than fine quality cashmere for the average consumer.

Yet it is only recently that camel hair spun by Mongolian nomads has begun to penetrate the handknitter's market. Most camel yarn (when available) has been processed by commercial mills accustomed to the similar process used for cashmere.

In 2005, Nancy Shand, a semiretired anthropologist, traveled from her home in Topeka, Kansas, to Mongolia with a film crew from the BBC. She spent the summer living in a single-room ger with a nomadic family of seven. After several months she had gathered a wealth of knowledge, not only about the family's nomadic cus-



Nancy Shand

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toms and traditions, but also about the challenges of everyday life.

Shand also acquired another kind of wealth, one she has shared with the fiber community through what she calls Nomad Yarns. Armed with handspun skeins of camel hair in varying weights, widths, and colors, Shand launched her grassroots effort to generate extra cash for a women's spinning cooperative she helped establish in the southern Gobi. Each skein is labeled with the individual spinner's name (no Tiffanys or Bethanys in this group) along with the name of the area that they are from. It is a laudable venture at any level, but even more ambitious for someone like Shand who isn't overly familiar with the language of knit one, purl two, or with the difference between lace weight and bulky weight yarn. And mind you, she is nearing 80.

Shand doesn't recall a single thought or event that launched Nomad Yarns; it was more an accumulation of her experiences and an enduring belief in helping others. Having traveled as an anthropologist to some decidedly less populated parts of the planet, she had an enhanced perception of nomadic life. "There is no privacy when everyone lives together in a single room — none," she says with a sense of both reverence and compassion. It is no coincidence that the traditional Mongolian dress for both men and women consists of a loose fitting ankle-length robe featuring impossibly long sleeves. The commodious nature of the robe allows (among other things) for the necessary changing of undergarments without compromising one's modesty. The only difference between the men's and the women's robes is the belt adorning the man's style. For years, women were commonly referred to as "beltless."

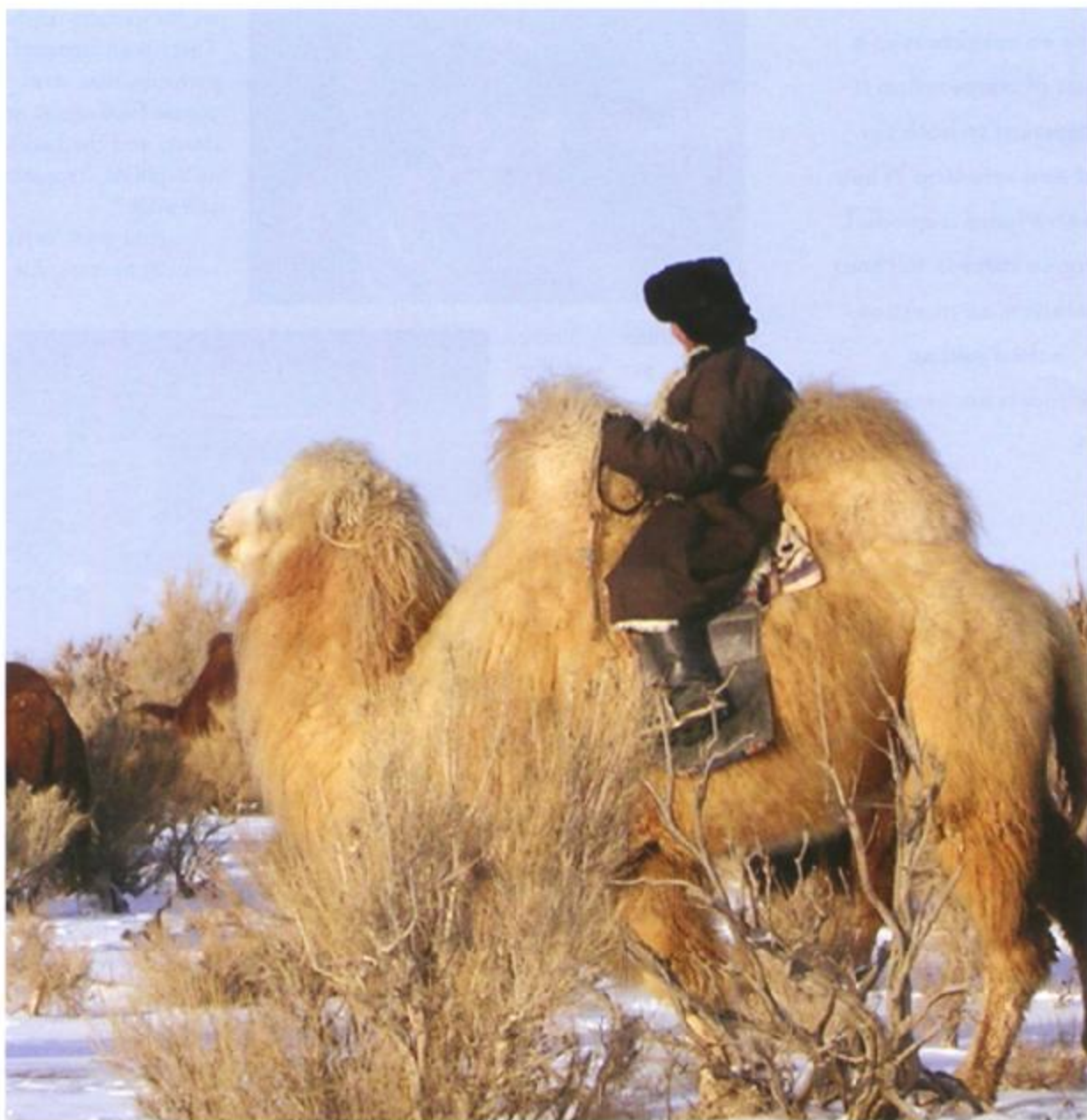
People living in the Gobi have

no neighbors so a spirit of cooperation is paramount to both survival and serenity. When an extra hand is needed, everyone steps in without hesitation, no questions asked and no requests necessary. In fact, the often-heard selfish demands of a small child are rarely tolerated, and personal space (which many westerners have come to expect in luxurious amounts) doesn't exist beyond the area a person presently occupies.

Public personas tend toward the demure and women carefully cover their mouths when laughing. Those who venture into braggadocio are quickly instructed on the value of self-deprecation; most Mongols are Buddhists and believe that we are all one — man and animal alike. Undoubtedly this philosophy also accounts in part for the great tenderness these people exhibit toward their livestock.

Despite the intimate living quarters — or perhaps because of them — there is a strict code of etiquette. Guests immediately move to the left upon entering the doorway of a ger, which always faces to the south. They are expected to sit cross-legged and if that is physically not possible, their legs should not be extended toward the host, nor should the soles of their feet be exposed. And if one should accidentally brush up against a stranger, a handshake and an apology are immediately expected to avoid insult or misunderstanding.

Yet regardless of how polite a person is, or how much their soul may long to wander, the life of the nomad — and of the camel — isn't easy. Nefarious interference seems to loom in all directions. "China is hell-bent on economic development, especially in the Northwest," says John Ware, who has been studying the wild Bactrian with the Geographic Society since 1992. "So there is always a competition between development and the



Camels are strong but look frumpy;
If you ride one your trip will be bumpy.

A most useful mammal:

The Bactrian camel

(The one who's excessively humpy).

By Sally Rosoff

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environment. There [was] a gas pipeline about to be put through but we've managed to get them to divert it, at a cost of U.S. \$18 million, away from a particularly sensitive camel area."

Other forces, specifically Mother Nature, are far less tractable. In the past five years, there have been two severe winters and a subsequent summer drought killing more than one-fourth of Mongolia's livestock and creating food shortages, risks of disease from rotting carcasses, and extreme economic hardship for rural populations.

Can a spinning cooperative such as Nomad Yarns stall the inevitable march of progress? Probably not. But

perhaps things are not as we Westerners might think. There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says, "With coarse food to eat, water to drink, and the bended arm as a pillow, happiness may still exist."

And with even a few camels to care for and a



Gunther Eichhorn

mound of their lush, soft hair to spin, perhaps a nomad's life isn't so much like hell after all.

For a list of Nomad Yarn distributors, please contact Nancy Shand, 545 Murray Hill Rd. Topeka, Kansas, 66615 (785) 272-2844, or online at nomadyarns@gmail.com or visit www.nomadyarns.com.

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Above: The nomad family Shand lived with for a summer.

Below: Inside a Mongolian ger. Notice the Dumbo wall hanging next to the traditional flag on the upper right..