The Three Camel Lodge in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia

Mongolia, Mongolia

Jalsa Urubshurow
Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

The design and development of the Three Camel Lodge in Mongolia’s Gobi Desert was guided by an emphasis on local community values and long-term ecological sustainability. The lodge was built to complement its natural desert surroundings and to utilize renewable energy sources, taking advantage of both solar and wind power. Artisans indigenous to the Gobi crafted the roofs of the buildings in accordance with the canons of traditional Mongolian Buddhist architecture, without using a single nail. Guests stay in authentic traditional Mongolian felt ger tents. Simple, organic materials were sourced locally to support the rural economy, maintain a natural appearance that blends in, instead of ...
Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists, Quality of benefit to residents for the destination, Quality of tourism management by destination leadership, Quality of stewardship of the destination.

Organization size
Small (1 to 100 employees)

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Tourism-related business

Year innovation began
1999

Indicate sector in which you principally work
General tourism, General destination stewardship/management.

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Innovation

What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.

We seek to be a leader in sustainable practices in Mongolia and to support projects protecting the ecological and cultural treasures of the Gobi.

Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the map located on the competition homepage.

The design and development of the Three Camel Lodge in Mongolia’s Gobi Desert was guided by an emphasis on local community values and long-term ecological sustainability. The lodge was built to complement its natural desert surroundings and to utilize renewable energy sources, taking advantage of both solar and wind power. Artisans indigenous to the Gobi crafted the roofs of the buildings in accordance with the canons of traditional Mongolian Buddhist architecture, without using a single nail. Guests stay in authentic traditional Mongolian felt ger tents. Simple, organic materials were sourced locally to support the rural economy, maintain a natural appearance that blends in, instead of contrasts to, the Gobi landscape, and reduce the need to haul goods over long distances.

As part of the lodge’s commitment to supporting the local economy of the South Gobi, which is one of Mongolia’s poorest regions, we recruit locally, purchase organic meats and vegetables from nearby farms, share profits of sales of handmade goods with Gobi artists, and sponsor environmental conservation groups for schools. All staff members are extensively trained to promote cultural interaction based on mutual respect and an understanding of cultural differences.

Explain in detail why your approach is innovative

The Three Camel Lodge was established as a pioneering eco-lodge and base for conservation with a long-term commitment to future generations. When the lodge was being planned and built in 1999 dialogue about sustainable tourism was almost non-existent. At that time Mongolia, in its nascent stage as a capitalist democracy, was focused more on the economic power of tourism and the number of visiting tourists than on how tourism can be used as a vehicle for protecting fragile landscapes and ancient cultural traditions. Since then the Three Camel Lodge has continued to serve as a model for sustainable tourism practices. We initiated a first-of-its-kind cooperative agreement with local government and National Park authorities, prohibited hunting within a 12-mile radius of the lodge, and advocate against animal poaching and unauthorized removal of dinosaur fossils from paleontological sites. Drainage fields have been made three times larger than local requirements to conserve and reuse water and we have led successful reforestation projects to grow native Gobi shrubs around Bulagtau Mountain. Every light bulb is fueled by solar and wind energy, water is heated by fire, and we are working towards the goal of the lodge being completely self-sustainable in terms of energy.

Impact

Describe the degree of success you have had to date. How do you measure, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact on sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How has it transformed or contributed to the power of place or demonstrated the sustainability of tourism? How does your approach minimize negative impacts?

Since the lodge began operation in 2002, it has achieved national and international acclaim for its positive contributions to Mongolia. Every year has seen an increase in guest stays and higher net profits, which allows us to fund projects and initiatives at the lodge and at the community level. This includes organizing local environmental conservation clubs for children and serving as a main sponsor for the 1000 Camel Festival, a unique local event allowing travelers to learn about the threatened Bactrian camel and the camel-herder’s lifestyle. One of the lodge’s most successful projects resulted in the planting of endemic Gobi trees and shrubs. Plant cover in the Gobi has been reduced due to overgrazing by goats and the cutting down of trees for fuel, a loss which causes increased desertification and lack of forage for wild animals. The tree project at the Three Camel Lodge is inspirational, as it shows the potential for growing plants in the arid Gobi, and will be replicated in other areas. In addition, the consumption of goods and energy at the lodge is closely monitored in order to minimize carbon output and trash, thereby lessening our footprint on the Gobi region.

In what ways are local residents actively involved in your work, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

The lodge was built under the auspices of Mongolian architects and local residents. We forged a cooperative agreement with government and National Park officials to ensure community acceptance and involvement with all aspects of the lodge operation. Over 70% of our full-time staff, and many of our seasonal staff, are from the Gobi. We work with several nomadic families who supply the lodge with dairy products, meat, vegetables, and camels, and our souvenir shop sells crafts made by local artisans. By providing equitable employment, we help to provide economic stability for many locals, thereby reducing the number of people for whom relocation to cities is a necessity.
How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

The lodge serves as an exceptional base for exploration of the Gobi. It is within driving distance of the famous Flaming Cliffs, where the first nest of dinosaur eggs were discovered. With a visit to Bulgan, a nearby farming community, guests can meet the producers of the fruits and vegetables they eat at the lodge. There are many opportunities to visit the-gers of neighboring nomadic families to learn about their unique way of life and participate in daily activities and guests can meet with passing nomads at the nearby well (built by the lodge for community use) where families come to water their livestock.

Describe how your work helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area’s cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues.

Through example, experience, and education, we are able to help travelers and local residents alike to better understand the cultural and ecological value of the Gobi. Guests are encouraged to visit local nomadic families, attend lectures at the lodge on environmental and regional issues, and learn, with the help of traditional Mongolian proverbs posted throughout the lodge, how to reduce their impact on the Earth. Youth groups organized by the lodge are trained to be environmental stewards of their communities and are empowered to advocate against poaching endangered animals, removing and selling fossils from the Gobi, and mining activities using toxic chemicals.

Sustainability

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others. Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

The Three Camel Lodge is financially sustainable and all profits are reinvested into the company to enhance employee livelihoods, sponsor community-based projects, improve amenities, and purchase more advanced eco-technologies. The standard operating procedures and management structure of the lodge has set the benchmark in Mongolia and our staff is regularly recruited to train at other ger camp facilities. For this reason, the Mongolian Tourism Association named the Three Camel Lodge the “Best Tourism Industry Innovator” and “Best Management Company” in Mongolia. We see our model being replicated throughout the country.

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?

The Three Camel Lodge is self–financed and operates in conjunction with Nomadic Expeditions, the pioneering cultural and adventure travel company in Mongolia. The two operations have collective ownership with revenue to cover annual expenses.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

The success of our lodge can be attributed to the dedication, hard work, and commitment of our staff. However, individual conviction is not enough for sustaining projects that are guided by a long-term vision. We see the need for greater unity among individuals, communities, businesses, and organizations to commit to sustainable development principles that strive for the betterment of the many, not just the few, and protection of Mongolia’s precious natural resources against harmful and exploitative environmental practices. Unfortunately, corruption, self-interest, and monetary greed pose challenges to implementing sustainable tourism initiatives and can also undermine projects already underway. We hope that by developing solid partnerships with successful, supportive local organizations who share our desire to collaborate, such as the Ongiin River Movement, we will be able to expand our innovation so that it can have a greater impact and positively contribute to the lives of more Mongolians.

What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

Internally, we strive to perfect our eco-lodge so that it runs true to its mission and serves as a model for responsible, sustainable tourism. We are enhancing our training programs by hosting eco-tourism consultants and providing experiences abroad that allow staff to see first-hand successful eco-lodges and sustainability projects in other regions of the world. Improving our monitoring systems is critical so that we can precisely measure our carbon footprint and water use. Collaboration and exchange of expertise with local non-profits and domestic professional organizations is key to better developing the geotourism sector and for carrying out mutually beneficial community-based initiatives.

The Story

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.

The Three Camel Lodge was built by Nomadic Expeditions, a pioneering cultural, educational, and adventure travel company in Mongolia. Nomadic Expeditions has been arranging travel to Mongolia since the country’s democratic transition in 1990 and the true opening of its borders to Western visitors. The company is guided by the belief that Mongolia can benefit greatly from the development of an ecologically conscious approach to tourism and that tourism can be used as a vehicle for wide-ranging sustainable development. The founder and CEO of Nomadic Expeditions and the Three Camel Lodge is Jalsa Urubshurow, a Kalmyk Mongolian who was born and raised in the United States. After Mongolia’s peaceful revolution in 1990, the first Prime Minister, His Excellency Dash Byambasuren, personally recruited Mr. Urubshurow to advise the government on expanding accessibility to Western travelers. Since 1990, he has made more than thirty trips throughout Mongolia and has been the leading force in promoting Mongolian tourism in North America and other Western countries. Mr. Urubshurow believes that Mongolia is one of the world’s last unspoiled natural treasures, and is dedicated to the preservation of its natural and cultural wonders. During his travels in Mongolia, he was particularly awestruck by the beauty and vastness of the Gobi desert and saw the need to protect its endangered wildlife species and rich paleontological sites. A carpenter by training, Mr. Urubshurow worked alongside his Nomadic Expeditions colleagues as well as local Gobi herders, government officials, park authorities, and craftsmen, to design and build the Three Camel Lodge as Mongolia’s premiere eco-lodge. The lodge has served as an example to local businesses that eco-friendly, community based practices are a better alternative to simply exploiting local resources with the goal of making as much money as possible in the short-term. We are pioneers in creating community-based events that attract locals and foreigners alike to the Gobi, such as the 1000 Camel Festival, which has gained popularity internationally, and mini-Naadam festivals that encourage youth participation. In recent years, our model has caught on in other areas of Mongolia and we are happy to see a growing collective interest in community-based tourism and enthusiasm in better developing this sector.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers’ marketing material.

Jalsa Urubshurow was born and raised in a Mongolian-American community in Howell Township, New Jersey. Growing up, his parents taught him the beautiful language of his ancestors and captivated his imagination by performing traditional songs and epics about the history and culture of Mongolia, an upbringing that instilled in him a deep love and respect for his ancestral homeland. In addition to his work with Nomadic Expeditions...
The Three Camel Lodge, Mr. Urubshurow is the co-founder and former Chairman of the North America - Mongolia Business Council. During his tenure as chairman he promoted corporate philanthropy including extensive relief during droughts afflicting Mongolia and funding for humanitarian projects.

Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.

The stay and tours based out of the Three Camel Lodge offer unique and engaging opportunities that take travelers well off the tourist path to experience authentic Mongolian culture in ways that are sustainable and contribute to the local Gobi community. Below are some examples of the unique experiences a traveler can enjoy while staying at the Three Camel Lodge:

- We offer opportunities to visit families that herd and live nearby. The lodge shares its well with local herders and the nomads often bring in their animals to water there. Guests often share experiences with the nomads in their homes (gers) and see first hand the local customs of the Gobi. We also promote educational exchange between trip participants and local people through the use of photographs from travelers' homes and informal conversations about subjects such as daily routines, life's pleasures and hardships, and family life in the hope of bilaterally increasing the knowledge of our hosts and guests.

- The lodge often hosts academic experts in fields such as paleontology, ornithology, botany, and conservation. As a result, during their stay at the lodge travelers have unique opportunities to attend lectures on the Gobi's natural history, wildlife, and flora and learn about conservation work in the region.

- Travelers often visit several nonprofit projects during their stay, such as tree planting programs. Our goal is to increase awareness about various provincial and private educational projects related to nature conservancy and wildlife protection in the Gobi.

The lodge seeks to preserve and protect local traditions and customs which are on the brink of extinction, and conceived and helped to organize the "1000 Camel Festival" as part of the effort to balance the preservation of Mongolia's past traditions with the conservation of nature. All proceeds from the festival's ticket sales, paid for by visiting travelers, go to local organizations that are involved in the protection of the camels.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

We have an extensive network of partnerships in the community, ranging from individual nomadic herding families, small businesses, and cooperatives, to schools and non-profit organizations. We seek to expand this network into other regions of Mongolia so that rural communities there can be inspired to commit to sustainable practices that intertwine improving peoples livelihoods with environmental stewardship, and also inform us of how to better serve our lodge community.

Internationally, we seek to continue to grow our reputation among foreign travelers, museums, nonprofit organizations, and universities so that we can not only build our financial base but also acquire knowledge and resources for how we can improve our work.

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