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CAMELS IN CALIFORNIA

Where every day is hump day

The drive to Ramona along Highway 67 is dotted with pastoral scenes typical of rural San Diego County: vineyards, horse ranches and homes with tidy white-picket fences. But when you make a sharp turn off Old Julian Highway onto a long driveway, you might feel like you've left California and arrived in a foreign land.

It's because of the camels.

Twenty of the humped creatures gambol around the Oasis Camel Dairy, sharing 34 picturesque acres with horses, sheep, turkeys, chickens, exotic birds and yapping farm dogs. When you get close, the curious, friendly animals crowd your personal space and give you a full-court press for a welcome.

It's a public tour day at Oasis and the outdoor bleachers are filled with families watching Nancy and Gil Riegler's presentation. They entertain the crowd with anecdotes about their birds, their dogs and of course, the main attraction: their camels.

"I see myself as the hostess of the party," Nancy said. "I love being with the animals and birds, and I love entertaining people."

Husband Gil starts the show talking about their lifestyle and animals, then deftly hands

off to Nancy, who picks up where he stops, showing off her talking parrot and telling funny stories. Gil returns to the arena with Sampson, a 5 1/2-year-old camel who sits when told to "kush" and amiably nibbles the bill of Gil's cap.

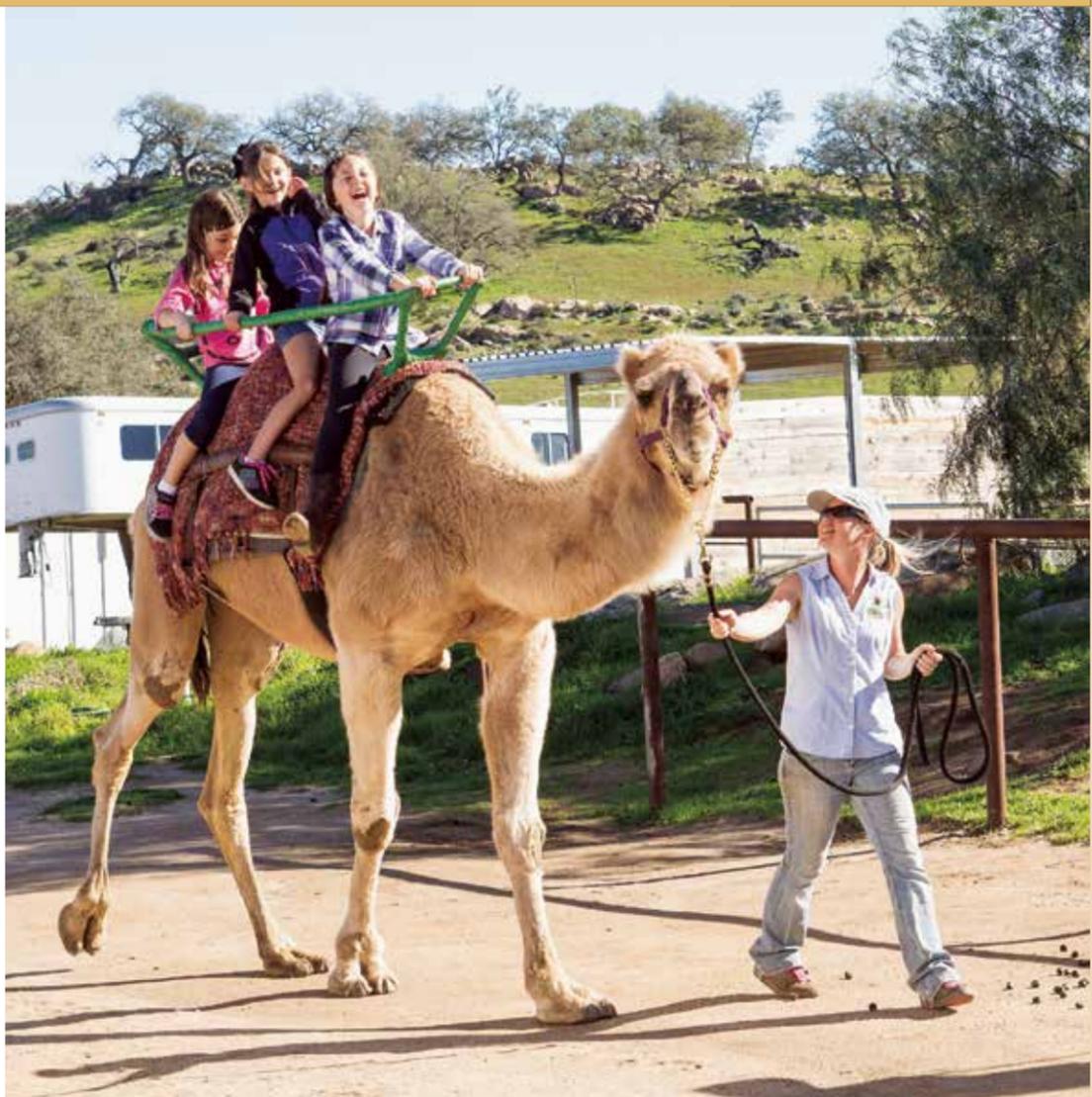
The show is fun, but it also offers an education about these uniquely shaped animals.

One hump or two?

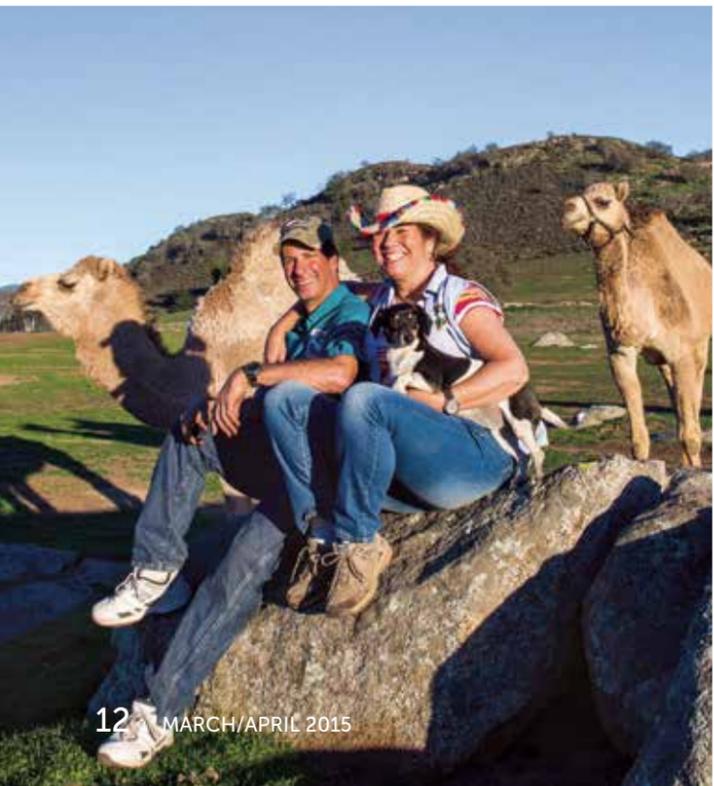
The Rieglers raise single-hump, dromedary camels, but they didn't start out with a camel dairy in mind.

Nancy grew up in Ramona and worked at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, and then branched out on her own, training birds and doing bird shows. Gil, originally a gem cutter and jewelry maker, volunteered at a facility for disabled people and helped train therapy animals. That's when he was introduced to camels, which were used in the program.

"I fell in love with their gentle eyes and friendly nature. They're like big dogs," he said, dispelling myths that camels are mean animals that spit. Yes, camels will spit (although it's actually contents of their stomach mixed with saliva) when provoked, but they are more inquisitive than aggressive.



These camels give milk, take people on rides and star in pageants, but they're not desert dwellers in some far-off land. They're right here in California. Gil and Nancy Riegler, left, own Oasis Camel Dairy in rural San Diego County. Above, Moria Del Castillo leads Booboo and passengers on a tour of the dairy.





Oasis Camel Dairy is one of the few places in the U.S. where camels provide entertainment as well as milk—the key ingredient for skin-care products such as soap, left. Co-owner Gil Riegler, shown above with Sampson during a public tour day, was introduced to camels through an animal-therapy program for disabled people.



The Rieglers recognized the draw of offering hands-on experiences with these exotic creatures. But in addition to creating an agriculture-tourism destination, they'd heard about the benefits of camel milk and began the dairy business to produce and sell camel-milk soap, body lotion, lip treatment and skin serum at the farm, on road shows and online. When the camels shed their winter coats, they also sell the wool to weavers who make specialty camel-hair clothing.

Oasis was established 15 years ago as the first camel-milking dairy in the United States—and it is now one of just a few. There are about 5,000 camels in the nation today, and although their use as beasts of burden and as a source of milk dates back centuries in other coun-

tries, camel milk is a relative newcomer to the stateside dairy community.

Who's got milk?

Camel milk, which contains roughly the same nutrients as cow's milk, is gaining momentum as both a beverage and an ingredient. Santa Monica-based Desert Farms sells camel milk throughout California and online, offering nutrition information and noting that "it tastes just like milk." The Rieglers, however, focus on their skin-care products and camel-milk chocolate imported from Dubai.

"We wanted to do something more than just tours and rides," Gil said. "That's when we found out about the benefits of camel milk and how it keeps the skin soft and moisturized."

Camels live 40 to 50 years, but get-

ting their milk is no easy task.

"Camels have a 13-month gestation and then produce milk for about a year, as long as the calf nurses," Gil explained. "So we only get milk when a camel has given birth."

Cows, in comparison, have a nine-month pregnancy and then produce milk for about 10 months. Camels can be milked a couple months longer, but the calf must be present at each milking, as this induces the flow of milk. Also, camels are somewhat picky about who can milk them.

On a diet of hay and grains such as wheat and oats, a nursing camel produces about a gallon of milk each morning and afternoon, while a cow gives 6 to 7 gallons each day. After Gil milks his camels, he freezes the milk until he

needs it for the cosmetic products, which he makes right on the farm.

Star power

While Oasis is an animal farm and dairy, the road shows, Moroccan theme parties, weddings, Christmas pageants and private and public tours are the main sources of revenue.

"If we relied only on camel milk for our living, we'd starve, but because of the entertainment background, we can add this unexpected agritourism that people love," Nancy said.

As the Rieglers wrap up their presentation, the crowd disbands and families begin lining up for the much-awaited camel rides. Others wander around the farm, observing the raucous birds, dodging

wandering chickens, picking up feathers shed by gobbling turkeys and reaching out to touch sheep heavy with wool.

Jenny Knutsson waits patiently in line with her 3-year-old son, Anders, and their family friends. Unlike many other guests, she is a Ramona resident but this is her first visit.

"I've driven past the farm a thousand times, but we didn't know they did public tours," Knutsson said. "We go to the wild animal park a lot, but this is a chance for our children to get up close and personal with the camels."

Her toddler is very determined to experience a camel ride: "I want to go on the camel. Alone. By myself." A while later, he does go solo.

Others are not so brave, pairing up with

older siblings or a parent at the mounting block and going for a short ride, pausing while the camel is given a snack of grains and parents take photos and videos, before returning to dismount.

To the side of the main building, Nancy does brisk business selling the camel-milk cosmetics and chocolate. She keeps up a constant patter with the visitors, enjoying the interactions and directing them to area restaurants and vineyards.

"We are camel enthusiasts," she said. "We love what we do. And when people come for our tours, they get a glimpse of our lifestyle." 

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