

Yakking about yurts

State parks officials are still deciding whether pets should be allowed, but there's no debate about one thing: The nomadic structures are a big hit with Oregon campers

By **LARRY BINGHAM**
THE OREGONIAN

Yes or no? Should the pet stay home or go? The question whether dogs and cats should be allowed in the 78 cabins and 190 yurts at state parks drew more than 10,300 responses in a survey that ended recently.

That either means we love our pets — or we love our yurts.

While Oregon Parks and Recreation Department officials analyze the responses and decide what to do, we take a moment to celebrate the yurt, that humble round structure — sturdier than a tent but not as rigid as a cabin — adapted from the ancient portable dwelling known as the “ger.”

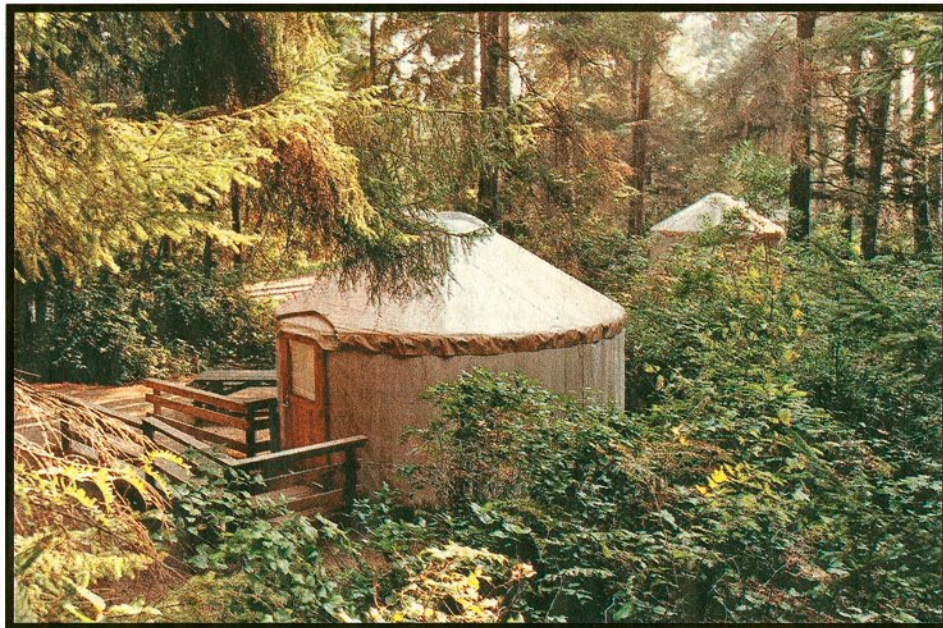
The domed hut wasn't invented in Oregon; we have to credit sheepherders in Mongolia 2,000 years ago for that.

But some of the first modern canvas yurts were made by an Oregon tree planter, and the industry was essentially born here.

Then it took an Oregon state parks manager, faced with a budget crisis, to come up with an idea that has since stormed through 22 other states.

Craig Tutor, the former parks manager who fanned the early flames of a fire that is still raging, thinks the reason yurts have exploded is simple. “When I say I'm going yurt camping, it sounds like an adventure,” he says.

“And it is.”



DOUG BEGHEL/THE OREGONIAN

Yurts at Beverly Beach State Campground offer a bunkbed that sleeps three and a futon that unfolds to a full-sized bed, plus electricity and a space heater.

Great moments on the road to yurttopia

1978

Oregon tree planter Alan Bair and two partners found Pacific Yurts Inc. in an aging dairy barn in Creswell.

1991

Pacific Yurts introduces French doors as an option.

Nov. 18, 1993

Craig Tutor attends a conference in Minnesota where he notices an abundance of state-run cabins. Facing a budget crunch at home, he goes to the Oregon State Fair and sees a Pacific Yurts display. A light bulb goes on: Yurts could draw campers to state parks during the off-season — and bring \$\$.

His department orders two 14-foot yurts costing roughly \$5,000 each for Cape Lookout State Park.

Aug. 2, 1994

Popularity of the Cape Lookout yurts leads parks officials to order 14 more.

Dec. 1, 1995

Campers love yurts! Oregon orders 50.

March 19, 1996

Georgia state parks copy the Oregon model and order one (and subsequently more).

May 20, 1996

Washington state parks join the bandwagon.

May 22, 1997

Idaho state parks follow suit.

Aug. 11, 1998

Massachusetts doesn't want to be left out of a surefire money maker that draws new campers to parks and extends the camping season. The state orders one — and subsequently more.

1998

Oregon starts using lottery revenue to buy more and more yurts.

May 2000

A village of “deluxe” 24-foot yurts, with kitchenettes, bathrooms, decks with propane grills, a covered porch and views of Lake Marie, is ordered for Umpqua Lighthouse State Park.

April 22, 2002

Time magazine prominently features yurt makers at Pacific Yurts and Oregon Yurtworks in Eugene.

July, 2002

Eco-Logic Books publishes Paul King's “The Complete Yurt Handbook,” which explores, among other things, “the etiquette of ger living.”

2003

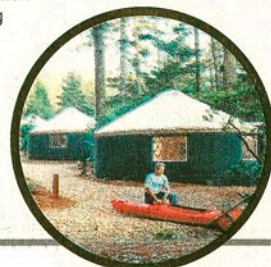
Oregon Parks and Recreation Department surveys yurt users and finds that “staying in yurts is like camping — only better.” Users cite heat, electricity, dry shelter, comfort and convenience as reasons they love yurts.

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Becky Kemery, who has lived in yurts in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, publishes “Yurts: Living in the Round.” Doing research, she sees a need for a comprehensive Web site and creates the nonprofit organization: www.yurtinfo.org.

Today

Eco-tourism and environmental concerns flame demand not only in state parks but in national parks, private resorts, military bases and the home market. Oregon-made yurts, some produced from second-growth Doug fir, are shipped to Japan, Australia and Chile. Other yurt makers, from Washington state to the state of Virginia, want a piece of the action and hang up a shingle.



Photos courtesy of PACIFIC YURTS