

# Why Camels? One Man's Answer

By Nancy Riegler

**G**il Riegler and Goldie, one of Oasis Camel Dairy's milking camels, stand before an attentive group of seventy-five adults and kids on a cool, sunny day in Ramona, Ca. While Goldie grunts soft approvals to his gentle neck scratches, Gil energetically expounds on everything camel. Camel facts about adaptations, natural history, behavior and the benefits of camels' milk intermingle with anecdotal tales of his close friends; his camels.



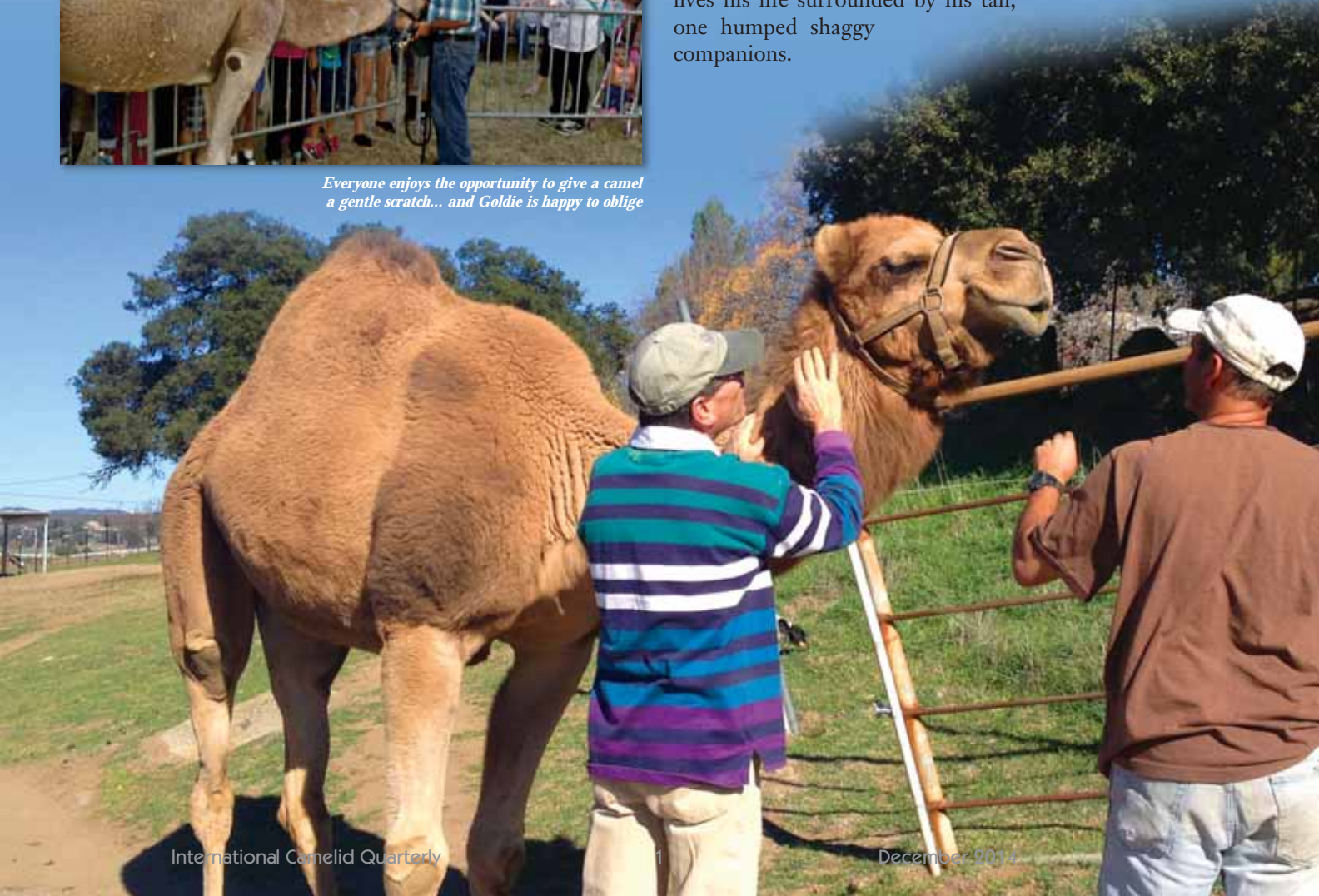
*Everyone enjoys the opportunity to give a camel a gentle scratch... and Goldie is happy to oblige*



After everyone has an opportunity to pet and take pictures with Goldie, Gil opens up the tour for questions. Three hands go up at once. All three have the same question as a chorus of voices asks in almost unison...“Why camels?” Or, more specifically, “Why did you get camels?”

I suppose to a normal, rational person, the idea of someone keeping, let alone, centering your entire life around camels, seems odd. And to those who follow the notion that camels are mean and dangerous, having camels could seem downright ridiculous.

This becomes Gil's favorite part of the tour experience; sharing his personal feelings about camels and why he lives his life surrounded by his tall, one humped shaggy companions.



With a wry smile Gil says, "From my first opportunity to work with a camel I heard a voice deep down inside me that said; if you have camels in your life... everything else will work out and be wonderful" He gives the audience a moment, allowing his testimonial to sink in before he continues.

"Camels are not what most people assume they are" explains Gil. The common, American misconception is that camels are unreasonable, cantankerous beasts, preferring to be left alone when in fact, camels are highly intelligent and social. They are arguably more like primates or canines and less like horses or antelope. Developing over thousands of years with limited predation, they have evolved their group dynamic beyond the 'let's stay together so the lion won't eat all of us' model to the strong familial bonds found in non-prey animal collectives. Or as Gil puts it, "They spend their time developing their relationships rather than trying to keep from being eaten."

### ***Making Good Camels***

As much as Gil advocates for camels, he also cautions those seeking camels of their own to learn as much as they can about all things uniquely camel before taking that step. When most people decide to start working with camels they bring with them their preconceptions from their own life experiences. If people have worked with horses, or llamas, they will naturally try to transfer their experiences and expectations to camels. Due to the camel's size, they will probably rely largely on their horse sense.

Some aspects do transfer but those aspects that do not can impede, and damage, your camel's ability to be a safe, happy and loyal companion.

Camels are sensible creatures that don't spook like horses. For example, if a horse gets his halter caught on a fence post, he will most likely panic and cause himself great harm in an attempt to free himself. But a camel could do the same thing and rather than panic, would try several different approaches to free himself. Horses are built to escape impending doom. Camels are built to stay calm and endure.

With that being said, you could argue that a camel is a safer, easier animal to work with than a horse. "Well, not exactly" says Gil. He goes on to explain, "They are so intelligent that it is very easy to mess them up and make them fearful or aggressive." The more intelligent the animal, the more engaged and educated the handler needs to be.

So what is the number one mistake new camel enthusiasts make? According to Gil it is buying a bottle baby because you think that is safer than an adult. A common misconception is that big camels are scary but if I get a baby camel, then we can grow and learn together. It will be my friend and never hurt me. But this is an unfair expectation. The baby camel is cute and safe because it is small. The baby needs a confident leader. It needs to grow up in an environment with confident role-models and parents who naturally discipline a rambunctious youngster and shape him into a good citizen of the herd.



*Gil and Camelot enjoying the afternoon sun... two very contented beings*

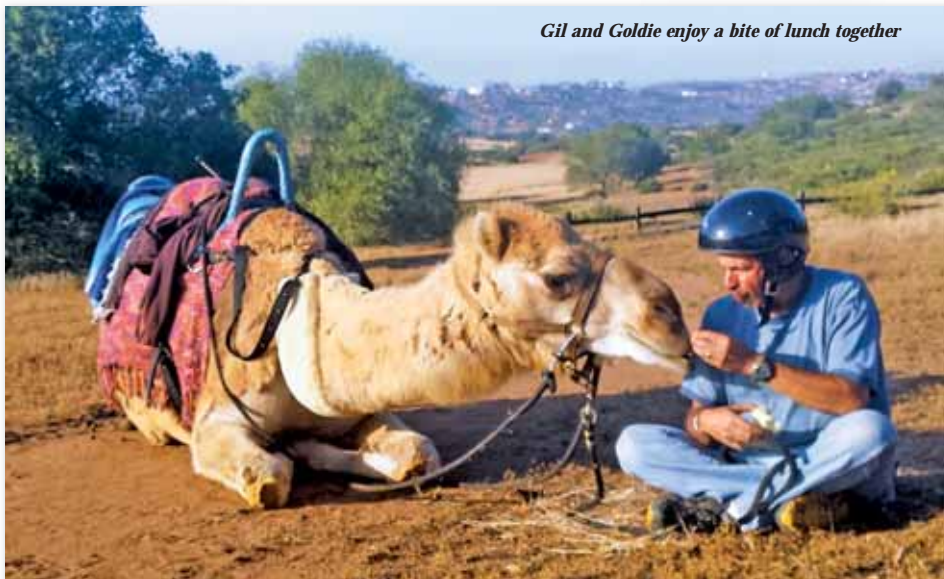
Out in a herd, a baby camel will have friends... other baby camels. And they will wrestle and play rough until eventually, one of the babies is stronger and more dominant. Meanwhile, the baby enjoys a more respectful relationship with its mother and adult herd-mates.

"The person hand-raising that baby camel needs to be the parent, the nurturing boss, not the playmate." Gil goes on to caution that everything starts to go wrong when the calf starts to push like he would with an equal sibling in the herd and the owner, who has been permissive up until that point, suddenly gets scared and cracks down. This is so frustrating for the calf and can start him down the road to feeling unsafe and insecure about interacting with humans.

### ***Knowing Camels***

When a person has attained that knowledge about camels - of what they need and how to communicate with them - then you can achieve, in Gil's opinion, one of the most meaningful, non-human relationships you will ever have. And these relationships aren't limited to your personal camels; they are possible with all camels you meet and work with.

"I have stepped in to work with some pretty scary adult camels that are biting and charging and really going at it. But I look to understand the root of their actions. I try to determine if they are coming from a place of fear or frustration or aggression... the three starting points are very different. I then quickly move towards communicating a consistent, fair-minded exchange with them. Camels want to be with you and as long as being with you doesn't mean



*Gil and Goldie enjoy a bite of lunch together*

drama and surprises, they want to work with you. As long as you are not the source of fear or frustration, they are usually willing to work through establishing a line of communication with you so you can move forward together.”

“They use a gentle touch and a soft voice. It is practically hypnotic.” Gil uses stories to explain. “We had a tour at the Dairy a couple of months ago and instead of using my go-to-guy Sampson for the demonstration, I brought out Jasmine. When it came time for the camel rides I went in to get Jamal ready and Sampson immediately pushed his way through the camel crowd, got nose to nose with me and pressed his muzzle all over my face and neck while sounding low, quick grunts. That was his way of saying, “Hey, I’m the one that comes out for the tour. I am feeling a little anxious that you broke our routine. “So I took a few moments to pet his nose and neck and then gently pushed him away and retrieved Jamal for the camel ride. He (Sawmson) wanted some reassurance.”

Similarly we can stand for a couple of hours at a private, Moroccan theme party, meeting guests and posing for pictures while Sampson stands quietly content. But as soon as the crowd starts to thin out and the evening develops that ‘winding down’ feeling, Sampson is pressing his nose to my neck and grunting... asking what is next and



letting me know he is ready to get on the move.”

Teaching others to develop their knowledge of camels is Gil's passion. “I want camels, all camels, to have a good life. I see a camel whose owner needs direction and assistance to be a better partner and for both their sakes, I want to help them get there.” And Gil does help them get there by offering his Hands on Camels Workshops at the Oasis Camel Dairy. Enrolling a limited class size, Gil gathers zoo keepers, private owners and even those who elieve they would simply like to learn about camels and see them as Gil does. Over a one to three day clinic Gil and his herd of camels, each with their own personality, quirks and challenges, guide participants towards developing their camel communication skills. “It’s pretty magical to see the transformation. You can see people getting it and the more they get it... the more they want to work with camels”.

It’s not a traditional 9 to 5... that’s for sure. Supporting a thirty-four acre farm devoted to camels and products made from their milk seems like a pretty twisty trail to navigate in economically and environmentally unstable times. But as Gil softly iterates, “If I have camels in my life, everything else will work out and be wonderful.” And from the outside looking in, that seems to be just about right.

**CQ**

**About the Author**

*Located in San Diego County's wine country, between Ramona and historic Julian California, the Oasis Camel Dairy is home to over twenty dromedary camels as well as a host of exotic birds and farm animals. Nancy and her husband Gil, along with their camels, introduce Americans to their camel world through appearances on television shows including Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe, Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern and Larry King Live. Gil and Nancy also travel the western United States with their educational camel presentations, as well as open the Dairy for tours and events. The Oasis Camel Dairy is America's first camel milking farm dedicating its practice and resources to dairy. To find out more please visit <http://www.cameldairy.com> and on Facebook: Oasis Camel Dairy.*



Nancy & Gil Rigler  
26757 Old Julian Hwy • Ramona, CA 92065  
[contactus@CamelDairy.com](mailto:contactus@CamelDairy.com)

**1-760-787-0983**

**[www.CamelDairy.com](http://www.CamelDairy.com)**