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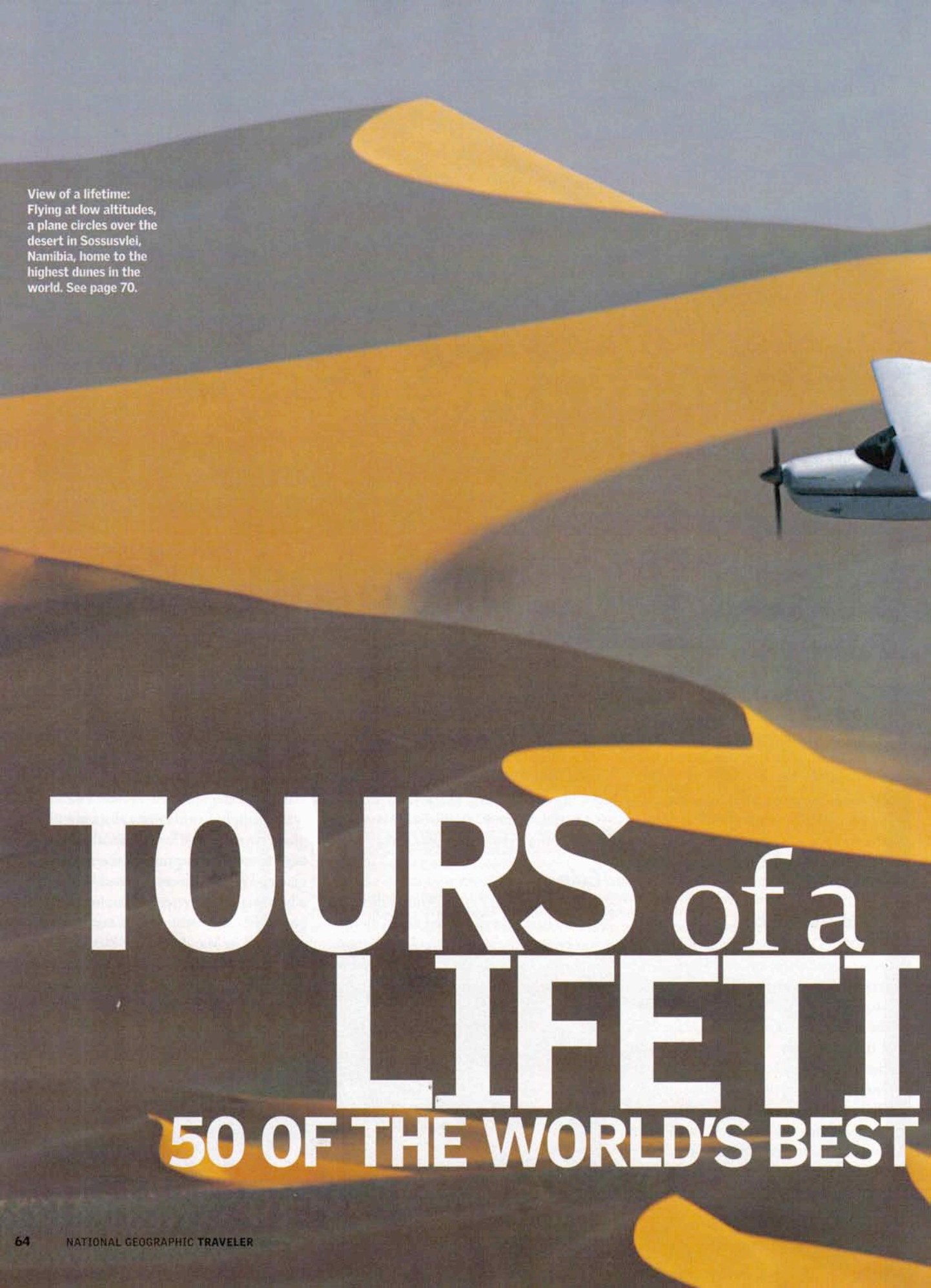
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View of a lifetime:
Flying at low altitudes,
a plane circles over the
desert in Sossusvlei,
Namibia, home to the
highest dunes in the
world. See page 70.

TOURS of a LIFETIME

50 OF THE WORLD'S BEST

Like many of our readers, we've always shied away from organized tours, feeling that unscripted, independent travel is the richest sort. But for some places in the world—those where road signs are nonexistent, or where the alphabet is a series of graceful curlicues, or where ceasefires among warring parties are tenuous—tours may be a more practical way to travel than going it alone, especially if, like most workaholic Americans, you've only got two weeks a year to tackle that challenging but worthwhile destination. That's why we've decided to dedicate this year's Next Great Places special issue to "Tours of a Lifetime: 50 of the World's Best."

Tours are becoming an increasingly popular mode of travel to be sure, and not just for the senior set. While the term "packaged travel" may connote an image of an oversize motor coach off-loading elderly passengers outside Notre Dame Cathedral, it's actually an umbrella term that can encompass everything from tracing the steps of *The Da Vinci Code* protagonists in the company of fellow college alumni to an Amazon bird-watching expedition led by a renowned ornithologist to scaling Everest with an outfitter. "Twenty-five years ago, packaged travel was 'stop and stare,'" says Travel Industry Association spokesman Allen Kay, "but it's not about the bus anymore—it's about discovery and adventure."

Driving this trend are—you guessed it—baby boomers, many of whom have already traveled extensively and demand a more sophisticated experience as they age and as some inherit wealth from their parents. "While they may have done rustic trips in their youth, they want a bit more comfort now," says Geographic Expeditions CEO Jim Sano. When Sano joined the company 18 years ago, sales totaled about \$1.5 million annually. Today, the outfitter brings in \$20 million a year, nearly half of which is generated from the

STEPHAN BRUGNER

ME

helicopter a safe distance away from the rookery and walk a mile for a look at the magnificent birds with chicks at their feet.

■ **Quark Expeditions:** "Emperor Penguins: Snow Hill Island Safari," 14 days; \$11,995; 203-656-0499; www.quarkexpeditions.com.

SOUTH PACIFIC ISLANDS

Island Hopping

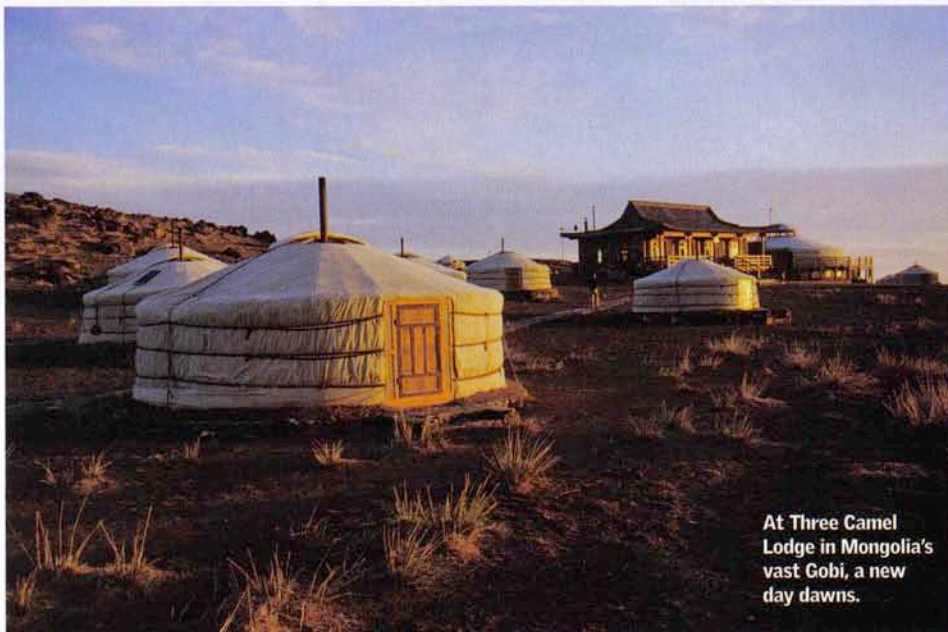
Zegrahm developed this small-ship expedition to the remote countries of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu six years ago. But it has been tweaking it ever since to incorporate more isolated villages and new snorkeling and dive sites where visibility often exceeds 100 feet. Not sure if that was a yellow-bibbed lory you saw on Tikopia? A slew of experts, which may include historians, marine biologists, anthropologists, and ornithologists, are aboard to help passengers get the most out of their odyssey. Zegrahm makes donations to villages it visits, including providing a steady stream of needed school supplies.

■ **Zegrahm & Eco Expeditions:** "Faces of Melanesia," 18 days; \$8,780; 800-628-8747; www.zeco.com.

TANZANIA, MOZAMBIQUE

Trail of the Chimps

This safari starts in the heart of Africa for a glimpse of the continent's endangered chimpanzees. Lodging is at the Greystoke Mahale Camp in Tanzania's Mahale Mountains, where the proprietors have founded the Tongwe Tribal Trust to preserve the musical and oral history of



At Three Camel Lodge in Mongolia's vast Gobi, a new day dawns.

the forest dwellers there. After a stint in the remote Katavi National Park (where hippos wade by the hundreds and vast herds of wild Cape buffalo are shadowed by lions, hyenas, and leopards), it's sun and surf in the Quirimbas Archipelago, off the coast of northern Mozambique, and newly accessible by regional flights.

■ **Mango African Safaris:** "Western Tanzania and Northern Mozambique Surf and Safari," 15 days; \$6,725; 888-406-2646; www.mangosafari.com.

AUSTRALIA

Rafting in Tasmania

While this trip has been offered for nearly 30 years, the way it came about is a model for preserving wilderness through tourism. Back in the 1970s, the Tasmanian Greens eco-group, backed by World Expeditions, successfully halted the damming of the Franklin River. Today, the Aussie-run outfitter is the leading and most sustainable provider of this 75-mile

rafting expedition on the Franklin. This is the best way to see central Tasmania, where Aboriginal artwork adorns the inside of caves.

■ **World Expeditions:** "Franklin River Rafting," 9 days; \$1,890; 888-464-8735; www.worldexpeditions.com.

MONGOLIA

Desert Fossil Hunting in the Gobi

Dig for dinosaur fossils alongside one of Mongolia's foremost paleontologists, Demchig Badamgarav, in the relic-rich Gobi, the one-time stomping ground of oviraptors, protoceratopses, and velociraptors. The latest addition to Nomadic Expeditions' Mongolia-based roster, the trip includes a stop at the legendary Flaming Cliffs of Bayn Dzak, where the first nest of dinosaur eggs was discovered in 1922. Founded by Mongolian-American Jalsa Urubshurow after Mongolia's peaceful revolution in 1990, Nomadic Expeditions has been

instrumental in promoting sustainable tourism in the country, such as providing zero-interest financing to camps that engage in sound ecological practices.

■ **Nomadic Expeditions:** "Dinosaurs of the Gobi," 16 days; \$3,645; 800-998-6634; www.nomadicexpeditions.com.

ARCTIC

Finding True North

A pioneer in high Arctic travel, Pen Hadow will lead your group of hardy souls to the true North Pole. After flying by helicopter from Longyearben, Norway to 89° north, you'll strap on skis, navigating pressure ridges and ice rubble fields while avoiding thin ice and other hazards. On behalf of every client, Pen Hadow Travel contributes a percentage of profits to research into renewable energy resources.

■ **Pen Hadow Travel:** "Last Degree Expeditions," 5 days; \$26,000; 011-44-1364-631270; www.polartravel.co.uk.