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Home in the yurts

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TENTS today have become synonymous with the outdoors. But they used to be portable homes or primitive dwellings for nomadic tribes around the world.

The tents of Arab and Asian nomads, often known as yurts, were made of goat hair or dark sheep wool. In the Sahara Desert, these makeshift homes are still made of goatskin and camel hide while the circular Tibetan yurts, with walls of latticework, are made of horse, camel and goat hair.

Conical tents are common among the mountain tribes of southern Turkey while the Maikhan Tibetan tent is a sprawling network of poles and ropes supporting a felt of yak hair. The material used for these yurts also indicates one's status. The yurts of rich Tibetans were normally made of thick felt, white-washed with a coat of lime, with the colour white symbolising wealth.

Designs were also dictated by the climate. The yurts of the Shammar tribes of northern Arabia are closed on all sides during cold weather, with openings at the corners. In the warmer parts of southern Arabia, the fronts of the yurts are open but can be closed with fabric during rainy weather or a sandstorm.

Catch a glimpse of the world of the Islamic nomads and the exotic lives that they lead in the Beyond Boundaries: Tents of the Islamic World exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur.

The exhibition, which was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, features tents from major regions along the Silk Road.

The exhibits include the dome-shaped Mongol yurt, comprising 84 roof poles resting on a circular lattice wall to withstand rough storms and strong winds.

A canvas sheet now replaces the felt, which is pulled over to form the roof. The yurt is also partitioned into a male and female section. The centre, where the fire pit is, has a crown which also serves as the ventilation hole. Wooden doors replace the thick felt flaps at the entrance.

The Turkmen and Kirghiz yurts, are made of willow reeds and shaped like a circle. The criss-crossed latticework walls are covered with reed mats in summer and woollen felt in winter. The roof is opened at the peak, where the smoke flap allows for ventilation.

Gender roles and responsibilities are also clearly divided within the encampment. Women drive the carts, milk the cows and make butter and yoghurt while the men make saddles, bows and arrows and look after the horses and camels.

The nomadic black tent, used in Anatolia and west Iran, are made from domesticated goat hair which is twisted, braided, then woven into long, rectangular strips. The stitches are loosely woven, to enable them to swell and then tighten during stormy weather, and to allow for better ventilation during the summer.

Finally, the exterior of the Egyptian single-poled tent is fully decorated in colourful applique designs, which are cut and meticulously hand-stitched onto the base. Geometric stars are commonly used. The Egyptian tent was first produced as part of the Khedieval ceremonial celebrations towards the end of the 19th century.