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Living Full Circle

Montanans like Sean and Mollie Busby are joining the growing wave of Americans seeking simplicity in yurts

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Sometimes you have to travel across the world to find your home, or at least to find the inspiration to build it when you return to Montana.

In December 2012, professional backcountry snowboarder Sean Busby and his wife Mollie flew to Central Asia's Kyrgyzstan on an expedition to deliver ski gear and medical kits, while teaching avalanche safety, to isolated villagers scattered throughout the country's highlands. Already toying with the idea of downsizing and living more simply, the Busbys were instantly enamored with the locals' circular dwellings.

For perhaps as long as 3,000 years, nomadic cultures of the Central Asian steppe have valued yurts for their portability and protection from the elements, and yurt makers to this day remain respected craftsmen there. Mollie says she and her husband fell in love with the yurts' "symmetry and balance," contrasting it with the jagged 90-degree angles of other houses.

"I stepped inside and it was amazing," Sean recalls.



Daisy, one of Mollie and Sean Busby's dogs, lounges comfortably in the living area, with the bedroom to the left.

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The writing was on the rounded walls: the Busbys knew they had become yurt converts. Back in Montana, they got in touch with Beth McDonald, a Flathead Valley woman who had been living in a yurt but was moving, and purchased hers earlier this year.

The Busbys join a rapidly growing wave of Americans who are making yurts either their permanent or seasonal home, often seeking simplicity and affordability. Yurts also have commercial uses, such as at campgrounds – including high-end glamping – and temporary housing for work crews, among others.

Shelter Designs, a yurt manufacturer previously based out of Troy and now in Missoula, defines a yurt as consisting “of a round wall and a roof system that is free standing using a tension ring at the wall and a compression ring where the roof rafters tie together.” The company says three types are predominant today: a frame-panel permanent structure, the traditional ger from Central Asia and a fabric-covered yurt based on the ger.



Mollie Busby sits at her dining room table in the yurt she and her husband, Sean Busby, constructed.

Shelter Designs, which made the Busbys' yurt and is respected for its hand-crafted quality, has seen business boom in the last seven years. Orders for the company, owned by Hays Daniel and Vince Godby, have skyrocketed from the single digits to about 40 annually, coming from Montana, nationwide and across the world. Base prices range from around \$7,000 to \$22,000, depending on the size and model, including one with a 40-foot diameter, which provides 1,250 square feet of living space. Big yurt manufacturers elsewhere in the country fulfill hundreds of orders each year.

Godby says about half of his company's orders are for permanent residences and the rest are for other purposes, including a wide variety of commercial uses. He attributes some of the surge in popularity to the housing crash. People are more wary of taking on a mortgage, plus it's harder to get financing. With a yurt, you can own a home outright for the price of a new car.

"It's amazing the variety of climates and situations that these are effective in," Godby says.



Sean Busby descends the stairs leading up to the front door of his yurt.

McDonald says she wanted to downsize from her 3,800-square-foot home in Massachusetts after her kids left. She moved to Montana, purchased a yurt and lived in it in her friend's yard outside of Kalispell while she shopped around for her own property. She was there for a year, including one comfortable winter, before she found land in the Mission Valley. The property already had housing, so she reluctantly sold her yurt, though she was happy to see it go to an enthusiastic young couple like the Busbys.

McDonald is planning to buy another yurt at some point for her new property. She says there's a certain magic in the yurt's shape and atmosphere, and it offers the security of home ownership at a manageable price, echoing Godby.

"It's a kind of freedom," she says. "You don't spend all your time cleaning and worrying about a mortgage. You can actually go out and enjoy your life. There's more to life than a mortgage."

In April, after disassembling and transporting the yurt from McDonald's property, the Busbys built the yurt deck – its foundation – on their land outside of Whitefish. They own two 5-acre plots, separated by a short car ride on a dirt road, which they bought cheap as a foreclosure property. Upon purchasing the land, they moved into a house located on the lower plot, but they harbored a desire to build and move into a smaller home on the upper 5 acres while renting out the bigger house. The yurt was the perfect fit.

In June, they gathered friends and family to hold a yurt-raising party, guided only by a two-hour instructional video produced by Shelter Designs. The party put it up in a day and a half. Then the party ended.

"From then on, it was just the two of us," Mollie said, while adding that they did receive additional help on a few projects, including electrical work and the flooring.



The Busbys utilize two Goal Zero Yeti 1250 Solar Generators as power and energy storage for their yurt.

The yurt stood hollow, without anything inside the outer structure, which consisted of lattice wall frames threaded with a cable, side panels, insulation, windows, doors, wooden ceiling beams, and the extremely heavy canvas covering the framing. The emptiness loomed large: “We had never built anything before,” Sean said.

So, for the next several months, they learned on the fly, transforming the open space into a bedroom, living room, bathroom and kitchen. One of the most essential tasks for year-round living in Montana was installing an efficient wood-burning stove for central heating. They moved into the yurt in the fall.

“It’s been a long, long process, with one thing after another coming up, but it’s nice to be here now,” Mollie said.

If you think of a yurt as nothing more than a big tent, you’d be taken aback by the coziness of the Busbys’ new digs. The plywood floors are tasteful and practical. The walls, fitted with corrugated metal, are harmonious with the industrial feel of the stove. The living room is inviting, as is the kitchen, with a half-moon island that meshes with the yurt’s circular design and holds a propane stovetop. The bedroom is surprisingly spacious. The total square footage of the 30-foot-diameter dwelling is 700 feet, not counting the loft, which adds 300 more feet.

Despite the coziness, the Busbys have admittedly opted for a more primitive lifestyle than most by living off the grid. McDonald was connected to the grid. The Busbys get electricity from two solar panels outside that are connected by cords to two generators inside the kitchen. The generators indicate wattage usage, helping the Busbys monitor energy consumption. A refrigerator door left open can drain the whole house in a hurry.

The bathroom has a shower and an industrial composting toilet. The Busbys haul water up from the house and can either use it out of the containers or dump it into a large storage tank. This arrangement has made them hyper aware of their water usage, and during their first weeks they were using only three to five gallons a day, a number that will go up once they start showering there but will never get remotely close to the American average of 80-100 gallons per person everyday.

In winter, they aren’t able to use the steep dirt road leading up from the house, so they have to ski in or use a snowmobile to pull supplies and groceries on a sled. Having

access to their house is softening the transition. While friends are renting out the main level, the Busbys can use the home as a base camp when necessary and sleep upstairs.

After spending so much time in the backcountry and traveling to remote corners of the world, Sean is accustomed to living with little more than basic necessities and carefully evaluating what qualifies as a necessity. Mollie also travels frequently as executive director of Riding on Insulin, a nonprofit organization founded by Sean that empowers kids and adults with Type 1 diabetes to enjoy the outdoors. Sean was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 2004 while training for the Olympics.



The gas range top is the primary cooking surface in the Busbys' yurt.

Though Mollie runs Riding on Insulin today, Sean still makes appearances at the organization's ski and snowboard camps when he has gaps in a work schedule that takes him across the planet on snowboard expeditions and to numerous speaking engagements on behalf of his sponsors. In February, he became the first person with Type 1 diabetes to backcountry snowboard on every continent.

By removing clutter and stripping their lives down to the basics, Mollie and Sean say they have achieved a kind of peace that's rare in the modern world. Instead of watching television at night, they listen to owls and play board games. They talk. They spend time together, not just in the same room. They see the world a little differently.

"You realize that you don't really need that much in life," Mollie said. "You can live a happy life with less stuff and more experience."

To learn more about the Busbys, visit www.twosticksandaboard.com, or go to www.ridingoninsulin.org for more information on their nonprofit. Shelter Designs' site is www.shelterdesigns.net.

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