

Purely Cashmere

pure luxury from Scotland

“Cashmere”: the very word evokes pampered luxury. One simple cashmere garment transforms an outfit into the realms of high fashion. But this air of glamour and romance contrasts sharply with the world in which its journey begins, where nomadic goat-herders and their animals together withstand the rigours of intense conditions in some of the world’s least forgiving habitats.

ABOUT SCOTTISH CASHMERE

from the world’s harshest environments come its most luxurious fibre

BY DR NICK FIDDES

Edinburgh, Scotland

It is vital to understand that there are two broad grades of cashmere, making cut-price examples a false economy. Asian-made products (usually from China or Mongolia) are often cheaper. But the short, thick fibres used there to keep prices low fall far short of the distinctive softness, warmth, and durability for which Scottish-made products in this fabulous fibre are rightly famed. Non-Scottish garments will almost always bobble, wear through, and lose their shape far faster. Scottish cashmere is renowned as the most exclusive product of all, using only the finest raw materials combined with expert and secret skills refined over centuries. Read on to discover why.

The World’s Rarest Natural Fibre

Cashmere is the world’s rarest production fibre and is one of the most expensive in nature. The entire planet produces just a few thousand tonnes per year. Only vicuna and musk ox — neither being produced in commercial quantities — achieve higher prices.

Around 60% of raw fibre comes from China, mostly from Inner Mongolia, which produces the finest product. Its rarity is due to the exceptionally harsh and geographically remote conditions of its production, and the labour-intensive but refined skills required for every stage of processing. Cashmere’s natural mystique is also enhanced by its being produced by exotic peoples following a timeless pastoral way of life.

The origins of cashmere production are lost in the mists of time. Even the Romans cherished it. And by the 1400s thousands worked in Shrinigar, Kashmir, weaving beautiful shawls from the underfleece of domestic goats. Cashmere reached Western Europe in the 1700s, led by the fashion-setting Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III of France.

From the Harshest of Environments...

Herds of up to 50-200 hardy, wiry, nimble-footed goats roam the high plateaux of China and Mongolia, herded by semi-nomadic tribesmen, almost untouched by the modern world. Foraging for grass & scrub, they return at night to the safety of traditional felt tents (yurts). Bitter winter winds bring temperatures down to -40C, so the goats grow a downy under-fleece for protection. The poorer the grazing, and harsher the winter, the better quality of undercoat.

Each spring the goats moult, soft down clinging to coarse outer hairs. Goats survive only seven years or so, and are first combed at 2-3 years old. Unlike ordinary wool which is sheared, cashmere is painstakingly hand-combed, goat herds and their wives gathering the few ounces from each animal, scouring their territory for extra tufts brushed off whilst roaming the rough scrubland. This 3-4 week season is a community celebration, in full traditional costume, a ‘harvest festival’ when the year’s main income is earned.

The Journey

Cashmere wool can be brown, or grey, or the most precious of all: pure white. First it is roughly hand-sorted by colour and grade in China, by teams of local women with eagle eyes from years of experience. The combings are then gathered together to be sent on the first part of journey, carried first down steep mountain trails by yak and by horse, then down river on rafts and sampans, eventually to be bailed up and freighted far across the globe.

The Quality

Only the finest, softest, under-hair closest to skin is used: just 200-250 grams (c. 8oz) per animal. Fibre quality is measured in thickness and length, which varies from 20mm (0.8") for cheap cashmere up to 65mm (2.5") for the most luxurious. Certified Scottish cashmere uses only European yarns, of Chinese or Mongolian origin, at a minimum length of 34 mm (1.4") at least 16.5 microns thick. Top suppliers, like Purely Cashmere, specify only the highest standards.

Traditionally, Scotland has been the home of the cashmere knitwear industry, producing collections sought out by discriminating buyers in prestigious markets the world over. Unlike cheap cashmere which can quickly lose its shape and 'bobble', top quality Scottish cashmere magically becomes softer and kinder with wearing and careful washing.

The Process

Raw cashmere arrives in Scotland matted & oily. It is first treated to remove dust and sand, then gently washed in large baths of pure warm water, never too hot to damage the precious fibre. This is scoured to remove all coarse hairs, and checked for the tiniest fragments of moss or thorn, any part of which could spoil a piece. Every hair of wrong colour is removed by hand. This painstaking process loses half the original bulk.

The quality of soft Scottish water is a vital ingredient, just as it makes Scotch whisky so inimitable.

It is air-dried to a precise moisture content, then air-mixed by colour to achieve the right shade. Oil is replaced to add resilience and protect during knitting. This is removed again in later final washes. In the latter stages of production the fibre may be blown from one process to the next through chutes and tubes, not carried, to maintain its elusive softness.

If to be dyed this is done in half-batches to perfect the shades, and then 'carding and spinning' combs and stretches it, in rollers with thousands of tiny ultra-fine teeth, teased to a fine gossamer gauze for perfect uniform evenness with all fibres parallel. Eventually this produces one long thread, which is wound onto cones for spinning.

Two special washes remove the last oil, then 'milling' opens the fibres to realise its characteristic softness. Scottish cashmere's unrivalled quality is a result both of using only the finest raw materials, and the most skilled and careful production process that includes many more stages than low-cost cashmere manufacture elsewhere.

The Feel

So rare is the product that each goat's wool might make a single scarf; one overcoat needs the down of two dozen animals — half a herd! A sweater, two to three goats' annual production, can use 5.5km (3.5 miles) of cashmere yarn.

No man-made fibre equals cashmere's exquisitely soft luxury feel, which also makes it so warm and light to wear. Cashmere has the highest warmth-weight ratio of any fibre. It is impossible not to touch it, with the softest caress.

It is all a far cry from the Mongolian mountains to the boutiques of the world's leading cities. And knowing the many skills along the way all adds to the appreciation. Truly there is nothing quite as luxurious as pure Scottish cashmere.