



A Well-Traveled Yarn

by Michelle Wiener

When semiretired anthropologist Nancy Shand accepted a job that took her to the outer reaches of Mongolia, it's safe to say that she did not foresee a yarn career in her future. Yet such a life change is exactly what Shand experienced as she and a BBC filmmaker were monitoring an experiment in community development among livestock herders in the Gobi Desert.

Mongolian nomads, who make up approximately 40 percent of the country's population, herd sheep, horses, cashmere goats and two-humped Bactrian camels from pasture to pasture in this semiarid environment, where temperatures frequently drop to -60 degrees. To help them survive the brutally harsh winters, the camels developed an extremely thick underwool, or down. Like that of the Alaskan muskox (which gives us qiviut), the camel down is not shorn, instead dropping in clumps as the camels move from place to place. The nomad women gather the down and wash it in either well water or horse's milk, and then use drop spindles weighted with wood or stone to spin the down into fine fiber.

Until recently, the fleece from these Mongolian goats, sheep and camels had no market other than the limited one across the Chinese border, the only one available to the landlocked country—a trade relationship Shand calls “pitiful.” She created Nomad Yarns as an alternative for the herders, and the company is currently the only market venue for the handspun camel yarn. Through this venture, Shand hopes to stabilize the market and create spinning and knitting cooperatives that will guarantee improved income and welfare for itinerant women in Mongolia.
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