

OUT OF MONGOLIA

Camel yarn comes to the United States

JESSICA GORDON

In 2004 when Nancy Shand traveled to Mongolia with a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary filmmaker, she didn't know what she was getting into. Certainly, as a seasoned anthropologist, she was more prepared than most to make a journey into a country composed almost entirely of the vast Gobi desert to the south and of a mountainous region to the north. She knew about the Mongolian people. "They are what anthropologists classify as pastoralists. They move with their herds from pasture to pasture with the changing seasons, following the new growth of grasses." She knew that she would be living quite intimately with a variety of animals, includ-

they could slip through a wedding band." Shand was taken in.

The yarn is spun from camel hair collected when it falls in clumps or is pulled or cut from the camels during warmer weather. The Mongolian women spin the hair mostly with drop spindles, so they can take their work with them in the fields. In its natural, undyed state, the yarn ranges from a light oatmeal to a dark brown tinged with red tones. The yarn absorbs dye beautifully, creating rich colors. The micron count of camel hair is comparable to that of musk-ox fiber, which makes it softer than cashmere. "The more you handle it," Shand says, "the more it blooms.

grams. Although Shand wishes the price could come down a little, the expense of getting it out of the country and into the market drives up the cost. At first she wasn't coming close to breaking even and was unsure about whether she could continue.

Until 1990, Mongolia was a Communist country backed by the Soviet Union, and it operated under a system of government-enforced collectivization. The herders were given animals and assigned jobs, and they were paid with food and supplies instead of money. When the country became a democracy, ownership of animals reverted to the herders, but the transition hasn't been smooth. "That part of the world is very tribal," Shand explains. "They have disengaged from the [Communist] social system, and now there's a new social system, but it has no infrastructure whatsoever. The government doesn't supply schooling for children, and there are few services for the people."

Practically speaking, the lack of infrastructure means that not much of anything is coming out of Mongolia, at least not with any speed or efficiency. "My company is the only opportunity the Mongolian people have for a good product to reach a good market. They have the camels, and people want the yarn. It's a matter of connecting the two." If she tried to work within the government's infrastructure, Shand could wait from six months to a year for a shared container to fill up. So she's finding other ways to move the product. The first 30-pound batch of yarn came out of the country in the backpack of a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer. Then Shand brought out two large airfreight shipments of the yarn, one of 400 and one of 500 pounds.

Shand admires not only the workmanship of the Mongolian herders but also their dispositions. "They are a very generous people," she says. "What I like most about them is their joyful directness." By bringing their goods into the Western marketplace, she

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Kn. Tumendelger

ing horses, sheep, goats, Bactrian (two-hump) camels, and the occasional cow.

What Shand never expected was that she'd leave Mongolia as the founder of a fledgling yarn company.

It began when she ran into nine skeins of yarn inside one of the herders' temporary homes, called *gers*. Shand was captivated by the yarn's beauty. "Soon," she says, "everybody was bringing me things they'd made with the yarn. I saw vests, hats, socks, and mittens. And there were shawls called wedding-ring shawls—shawls so fine

It doesn't pill and is very warm. Some of the Mongolians wear camel-yarn socks without shoes in the winter." As an added bonus for people allergic to wool, camel hair is hypoallergenic because camelids aren't related to sheep or goats.

Shand founded Nomad Yarns two years ago. From thousands of miles away, she manages the forty spinners she works with through the help of a volunteer from a nongovernmental organization based in New Zealand. But the going is tough.

The yarn currently retails at \$20 for fifty

hopes to help them bridge the gap between Communism and capitalism. “My long-run goal is to stabilize a market outside Mongolia for these incredibly beautiful fibers,” Nancy Shand explains. “Ultimately, I want to create a nonprofit cooperative that would ensure improved income for the women herders and sustain a gradually evolving cooperation among nomads to survive in a market-driven economy.”

To order camel yarn, e-mail Nancy Shand at nomadyarns@gmail.com or visit the Nomad Yarns website at www.nomadyarns.com. ■

Jessica Gordon learned to knit (backwards) from a girlfriend when she was in college. Since then, she always has some project or other on the needles. Jessica works as a craft books editor for F+W Publications Inc.



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