

# High Fiber

Always ready to sniff out a good yarn, roving reporter Karin Strom discovers mountainous Kyrgyzstan, with its dramatic scenery and abundance of cashmere goats.

**IT WASN'T ON MY BUCKET LIST**, but I couldn't resist the opportunity to visit the remote Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan. A place with a rich textile heritage, beautiful views, warm people and interesting food? I'm in!

Just getting to JFK Airport from my home in New Jersey is challenging enough; add to that a nine-hour flight to Istanbul, a four-hour layover, five hours to the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek and, finally, an hour hop to Osh, where I would find my host. Needless to say, I was a tad travel-weary and happy to settle into my guest-house digs for a rest before heading off to the mountains in search of some of the world's finest cashmere.

As they have for centuries, semi-nomadic shepherds still tend their flocks of goats and sheep in the mountainous terrain that makes up 94 percent of the country. (In fact, Kyrgyzstan is sometimes called "the Switzerland of Central Asia"—though not because it's a good place to hide money.) How did I find myself in this landlocked spot, which is farther from an ocean than any other country on earth? I had been doing consulting work for a small company in Osh called June Cashmere, which produces hand-knitting yarn from fiber collected from goats in southern Kyrgyzstan. I'd already learned quite a bit about Kyrgyz cashmere from the owner, a young American named Sy Belohlavek, and was anxious to go to the source. So last May I set off on my adventure to the heart of Central Asia, where I was taken on a whirlwind tour through remote mountain villages and lush summer pastures to discover everything I could about the distinctive Kyrgyz cashmere fiber.

All of the "stan" countries are known for their luscious textiles, of course: the colorful *suzanis* of Uzbekistan, the graphic silk and cotton *ikats* of Tajikistan, the dense chain and satin-stitch embroideries of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan all come to mind. While Kyrgyzstan has a deep embroidery tradition, the country is best known for its decorative wool felt work, called *shyrdak*. (See "Sheep to Shyrdak," page 40.)

Prior to the establishment of borders between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the 1920s and 1930s by the Soviet Union, this historically tribal region was a fluid network of connections and trade

routes. The most famous one, the fabled Silk Road, had a strand that wound its way through what is now southern Kyrgyzstan, where sections of it still remain in use. As in ancient times, textiles and handcrafts are an important part of life, especially in the villages, where long snow-bound winters provide plenty of time for crafting. Spinning, weaving, embroidery, felt making and, yes, knitting and crochet are a vital part of the local culture, and markets are filled with colorful examples, new and vintage, utilitarian and decorative.

Commercially, when it was a part of the Soviet Union, the textile industry in Kyrgyzstan was state run and included silk, cotton and wool production and manufacturing. When the Soviet Union broke up, in 1991, Kyrgyzstan became an independent republic; the interconnected value chain the Soviet state had provided disappeared almost overnight, leaving factories abandoned and thousands of Kyrgyz without jobs.

As often happens, though, upheaval provided opportunity, and in 2007, while a group of Kyrgyz artisans were visiting the U.S., they recognized an opportunity to help preserve handcrafted textiles in the rural villages in a way that would be financially sustainable. This idea arose from an encounter they had with a fiber-processing mini-mill in Ohio, Morning Star Fiber Mill, owned by J.C. Christensen, which catalyzed a vision to set up mini-mills in remote areas to revitalize the local fiber industry back in Kyrgyzstan. Christensen agreed to travel to Kyrgyzstan to assess the feasibility of establishing such mills for processing wool and cashmere fiber, and in 2010 he and his friend Sy Belohlavek headed for Central Asia.

Meanwhile, in 2008, Dr. Carol Kerven of the U.K.'s Odessa Centre led a study that focused specifically on the quality of cashmere fiber produced by the original indigenous goat breed in rural Kyrgyzstan. The Jaidari goats—now found mainly in southern Kyrgyzstan—had managed to escape crossbreeding with new breeds of fiber goats introduced by Soviet state farms; as a result, the goats' fiber retained its long staple and low micron count. Kerven points out that "to survive the harsh winters, these goats have evolved a soft, downy under-

coat, concealed beneath an outer layer of coarse hair." Her study confirmed that a substantive proportion of these goats were producing fiber comparable with the high-quality cashmere found in Mongolia and China, which dominates the commercial market. "At the time, the only buyers of this cashmere were local middlemen who were paying shepherds a low flat rate based on weight and not quality. This fiber would be sent on to China, where all of its latent value was realized outside of Kyrgyzstan."

While the mini-mill vision hasn't yet come to fruition, Belohlavek was able to establish a network of contacts in the villages outside Osh. Kyrgyz livestock expert Sabyr Toigonbaev helped establish programs to train local herders on combing and sorting cashmere, rather than shearing the goats and selling unsorted fiber, in order to harvest the highest quality fiber. And Wini Lebreque of SWF Fiber Innovations in Pennsylvania trained Belohlavek and his Kyrgyz team on how to grade the fiber, enabling June Cashmere to pay shepherds more for the portions of the fiber that meet its quality standards. Carol Kerven and Sabyr Toigonbaev have set up an elite breeding flock of the best cashmere goats and promote them through international projects aimed at improving villagers' incomes from cashmere, while preserving the genetics of the valuable local cashmere breed. And to maximize the potential of this local breed, herders

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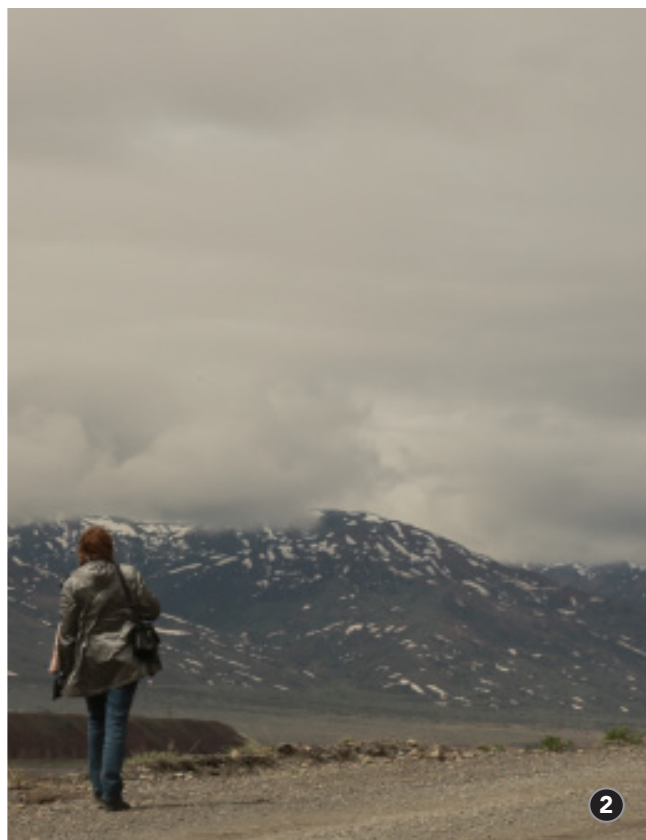
are encouraged each year to assess their individual goats and identify the ones that produce higher-quality fiber. These goats are used for breeding, while those that produce poorer quality fiber are culled from the flock and sold, encouraging over time the production of superior fiber. The cashmere used in June Cashmere yarns averages 16.3 micron, on par with industry standards.

Today Belohlavek lives in Osh with his wife and five young children, as part of a tight-knit ex-pat community there. He purchased his first batch of cashmere in 2013; in 2016, after several seasons of product development, he established the yarn company June Cashmere as a way to bring Kyrgyz cashmere yarn directly to the knitting and weaving communities. *June* is the Kyrgyz word for animal fiber; it is also the time of year the annual fiber harvest is completed. Once gathered, graded and sorted, the fiber is

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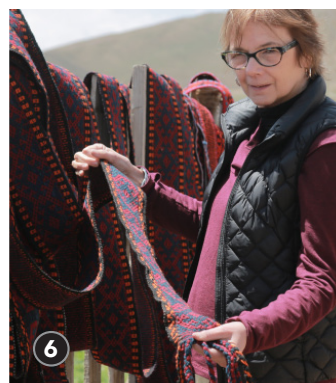
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## ON THE CASHMERE TRAIL

1, 2) Most of Kyrgyzstan is mountainous, with snow remaining on the higher elevations even in the summer. 3, 4) A village woman uses a metal comb, specially designed by June Cashmere, to harvest the downy fiber of a Jaidari goat. 5) Natural resources. 6) The author has her eye on some colorful hand-woven bands that are traditionally used to bind the felt coverings to the framework of the yurts that Kyrgyz shepherds reside in during the summer months. 7) In a Kyrgyz home, a woman shows her grandson how to spin. She stitched the embroideries in the background for her dowry. Photographs by Ilya Tarasov.



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sent to Europe for dehairing, which separates the guard hairs from the downy undercoat. Then it ships to England to be spun and then on to Maine, where it is organically dyed and skeined.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Largely mountainous and rural, this small country, barely the size of South Dakota, has only five cities of notable size; the total population numbers 5.5 million. In spite of urbanization during the Soviet era, the very geography of Kyrgyzstan and its ancient tribal culture means the majority of people live in villages that are spread out and isolated. The advent of the cell phone and the Internet has changed that somewhat, but physical access to many of the villages is still challenging, especially in the very snowy winter months.

In southern Kyrgyzstan, the cashmere buying season starts in April, when goats at the warmer lower altitudes start molting. According to Carol Kerven, before June Cashmere arrived, there were fifteen to twenty cashmere traders in Alay district, which boasts fifty-eight villages, and about six traders in Chong Alay district, which is composed of eighteen villages. All were connected through larger businesses to China, where the raw cashmere was sent. When Sy Belohlavek began collecting cashmere, he worked with a local manager to appoint a coordinator in every village from whom they would purchase. During the actual molting season, the June Cashmere local manager drives to each village and purchases cashmere directly from households. They park at the end of a road, and villagers bring out bags of cashmere, individually combed from each goat. Quality and cleanliness are assessed, fiber is weighed and cash payment is made immediately.

Just getting to these villages requires a long journey by car from Osh on roads that are challenging by any standards. As we drove through mountain passes, the roads got more and more sketchy and the landscape more and more dramatic. When I was there in May, the mountains were still covered with snow and the air was

crisp and clearer than anywhere I'd been before.

Entering a Kyrgyz village is like stepping back in time. Village life revolves around herding and, in the short growing season, agriculture. The buildings are rudimentary, but right away you feel the warmth of the people as you are greeted by men, women, children, goats, cows and dogs. The women dress in a blend of traditional and modern clothing, and married women always wear head coverings in this largely Muslim country. Men wear sneakers or the traditional boots, the *kepich*, and often the distinctive embroidered felt hat, the *kalpak*.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, a number of the herders here still live a partly nomadic life. Kyrgyz shepherds spend the harsh winter months in isolated mountain villages; in summer, they take their flocks and families to the *jailoo*, or high summer pastures, where they set up the felt tent structures called yurts, in which they reside during the warmer months. Most families have flocks comprised of sheep, goats, cows and sometimes yaks. Horses are essential, as they allow the shepherds to easily cover the distances their flocks roam in the vast open pastures.

Known for their hospitality, the Kyrgyz people consider it an honor to invite strangers into their homes. You'll always be offered tea and homemade bread and jam, and sometimes a complete meal. Bread is the staple element of any meal; it is considered holy and must never be treated with disrespect. Meat (usually mutton) is also a must for guests. Fried dough, called *borsok*, is also very popular and is often served with very tasty fresh fruit preserves and honey. No gluten-free diets here.

If you visit a Kyrgyz household, you might even be offered *kymyz*, a beverage made from fermented mare's milk. Warning: Its sour taste tends to be quite strong for Western palettes, but local doctors recommend it for the treatment of everything from tuberculosis, gastritis, pancreatic disease and anemia to cardiovascular diseases. Just remember, it is impolite to refuse any food or drink that is offered to you in Kyrgyzstan. ■

### IF YOU GO

You can visit Kyrgyzstan for up to sixty days from forty-four developed nations without a visa, making it a popular destination for people looking for something off the beaten path. Especially attractive to hikers, cyclists and horseback riders, the country is as breathtakingly beautiful as the terrain is challenging. Experiencing rural life in Kyrgyzstan does sometimes involve roughing it—don't expect to always find indoor plumbing, and be prepared to share a room in a guest house—but is well worth the sacrifice of creature comforts, especially for fiber and textile lovers. The cities and the more touristy areas, like the stunning azure Lake Issyk-Kul, are more used to international travelers, but everywhere I went in Kyrgyzstan was so welcoming and open, I forget any discomfort. Here are some of the urban highlights:

#### • OSH

Check out the open-air market, a great source for spices, fabrics, felt slippers and local pottery. At Saimaluu Tash Art Gallery, artist Arstanbek Myrzaev works with local sewers to create dramatic wall hangings and tapestries pieced together from vintage and contemporary Kyrgyz embroideries and textiles. Tea is more widely available than coffee in K'stan, but the Brio Coffee shop offers coffee drinks and a variety of tasty snacks.

#### • BISHKEK

In the more urbane capital city of Bishkek, visit the Tumar shop for a modern take on the traditional felt crafts. Visit Supara Ethno Complex for a fabulous traditional Kyrgyz meal served in a yurt or in one of seven traditional stone and wood nomadic buildings.

### SHEEP TO SHYRDAK: THE KYRGYZ ART OF FELT MAKING

While utilitarian undyed felt pieces are used to cover yurts because they can be made dense enough to be nearly impervious to wind and water, the more decorative felt characteristic of Kyrgyzstan is called *shyrdak*.

Traditionally felt making is largely the domain of the tribal women, and many villages have collective felt workshops that employ local women of all ages who use skills handed down through generations. The

felted wool is made by hand with fiber from local sheep. Graphic geometric designs are created by piecing together undyed wool felt and brightly colored dyed felt. The felt is personalized and decorated using elaborate embroidery techniques.

Each design is symbolic, and no artist is supposed to work if she is in a bad mood so that only positive energy is put into her work. The rhombus pattern echoes the diagonal wooden

latticework of a yurt interior; the four corners of each rhombus represent the four seasons and the four cardinal directions. The trefoil curls are ram's horns, symbolizing abundance, good fortune and family.

During my stay, I was treated to a fashion show of contemporary felt pieces, put on by the fashion department of Polytechnic University in Bishkek, which featured student work and professional designer collections.



Hand stitching echoes the flowing lines of the geometric design.

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is wearing a grey cable-knit poncho. The poncho features a complex cable pattern and a buttoned placket on the right side. She is also wearing a wide, light-colored horn bracelet on her left wrist. The background is a red and gold patterned fabric.

### NORAH GAUGHAN

Gaughan's cables bring to mind soft breezes flitting across a sand dune. Knit in one piece from side to side, the rectangular poncho makes imaginative use of slipped stitches and lacy cables, precluding the need to make buttonholes. The incorporation of eye-catching backing buttons makes the garment not only arrangeable in numerous ways but fully reversible. Six skeins of June Cashmere's heavenly Lace make this an heirloom-worthy piece.

- For closeup and alternate views throughout, please visit our website.