

Fall 2008
Vol. 5, Issue 4

WILD FIBERS



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through its people and its pastures

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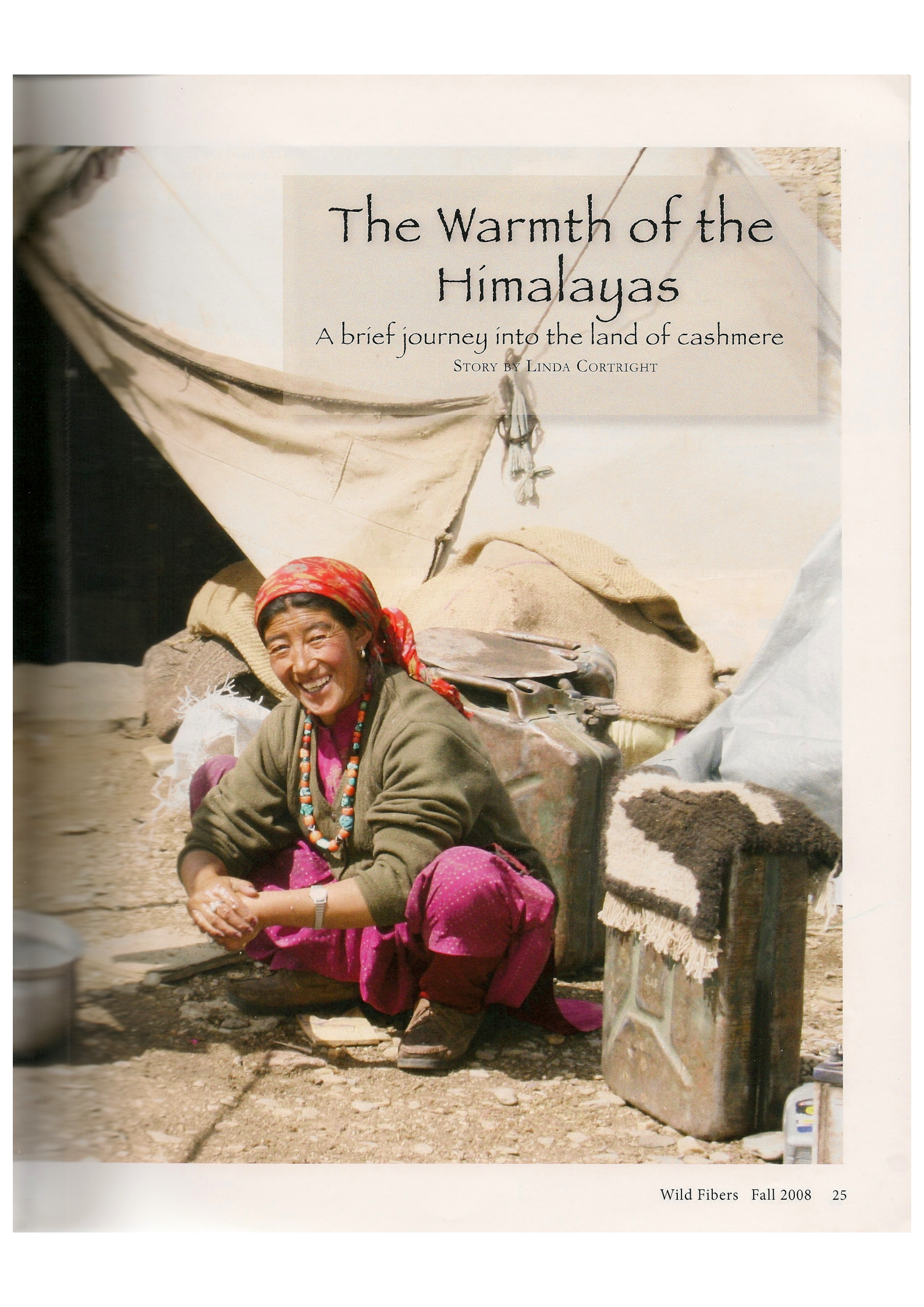
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A woman with a joyful expression is the central focus, sitting on the ground in front of a large, light-colored tent. She is wearing a vibrant red headscarf with a floral pattern, a dark green cardigan over a pink top, and bright pink patterned pants. Her hands are clasped in her lap, and she wears a silver watch on her left wrist and a long necklace of colorful beads. The background shows the interior of the tent with various items like a metal pot and a woven basket. The overall scene is set in a dry, outdoor environment.

The Warmth of the Himalayas

A brief journey into the land of cashmere

STORY BY LINDA CORTRIGHT



I am wearing two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a vest, a goose down jacket and a qiviut hat, and I am encased like a body bag at the morgue inside two military sleeping bags. It is September 1st and I am in India. More than 12,000 cashmere goats are sleeping peacefully within a few hundred yards of my tent, along with 2,000 yaks, several hundred horses, and what seems to be the loudest guard dog on the planet barking incessantly at the midnight air.

"Tell me, Linda," asks my friend Stobgais, "are you cold?"

"Ah *chhoo-chhoo*," I answer in Ladakhi, meaning I am *very* cold.

"Okay, I will make hot water bottle for your feet, then you will be fine."

I met Konchok Stobgais almost two years ago while attending a cashmere conference in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. "Yes, I am real nomad," he told

me when we were introduced, and then sensing my amazement instantly began to laugh. "It is true. Some day you come to Ladakh and I will show you."

Since that first meeting, Stobgais has indeed shown me many things. He has shown me that being a nomad is not just a way of life—it is a mindset. It is equal parts self-sufficiency and interdependence. It is where the conservation of natural resources is the norm not the exception. And in the desolate region of the Himalayas, the wisdom is surpassed only by the size of the heart.

Located in an area that encompasses 140,000 square miles and includes both the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges, Ladakh is at the center of India's cashmere production yet perilously sandwiched between Pakistan and Tibet. It has been at the center of political struggle since India was colonized, and it continues to be the site of continued unrest.

While the area is inhabited by herds of wild asses, chubby marmots,

and black necked cranes, as well as the elusive snow leopard, it is the cashmere goat that defines the nomad's livelihood. And because of Stobgais' great generosity of spirit (and our shared passion for cashmere), I am able to experience a tiny chapter of nomadic life. So our journey through the High Himalayas begins in a little Suzuki—a vehicle that seems undeniably small to scale such dramatic peeks, even if its carrying capacity exceeds the mightiest of yaks.

With the city of Leh as our starting point it takes several hours (at least) to reach the Rupsho nomadic camp in Norchen Valley. We go through Tanglang Pass, the second highest motorable pass in the world at 17,582 feet, where the scenery is like no place else in this world, but it is not a leisurely drive.

Above: A herd of 1,600 yaks trots across the valley floor on the way back to the main camp where they will be used to move to a new location in two days. Right: Tashi Dolma, whose husband is the head of the village. Opening page: Sonam Lhadon, whose husband is the secretary at the cashmere mill in Leh.

In many places the road has either been washed away, or there are swarms of both men and women working to rebuild it by hand. They carry large rocks on their backs with scarves covering their mouths and noses, while trucks painted as colorfully as the saris in downtown Delhi make little effort to avoid hitting them.

Stobgais and his brother-in-law Norbu, who has joined us to help with the cooking and setting up our camp, are forever jumping out of the car to see how deep the mud is. Can this little car possibly slog through muddy trenches that nearly reach my knees? But the two of them start filling the tire tracks with large stones that I fear will surely puncture a tire, impale the gas tank or snap the axle. That is, of course, if we even make it to the other side.

After completing the first of many such harrowing crossings, where only a few inches separate the edge of the road from our car teetering over a 300-foot drop, Stobgais lets out a joyous laugh as he pounds on the dashboard and announces, "Suzuki is Samurai—we can go anywhere!"

Right ... I think to myself, perhaps the Suzuki can just take me home.

In my most enlightened moments I think of how blessed I am to have this extraordinary experience amid the exotic backdrop of the Himalayas with my cherished friend who has opened my eyes to a world I never could have imagined. At other moments, when I am not feeling so enlightened, I think I must be utterly mad.

At this altitude there are no trees to interrupt the landscape, only miles of rocky desert with precious amounts of browse to sustain both man and beast throughout the year. In another few months, snowfall will limit grazing opportunities, if not eliminate them all together. But for now there is food for everyone although the temperatures

have started to drop.

As we go bumping along the mottled road, I see a large dust cloud in the valley gradually moving toward us.

"Stop the car!" I shout. "I see yaks."

Half running and half sliding, I rush down the side of a hill to see the dust cloud soon morph into a herd of 1,600 yaks returning "home," just in time to help the nomads move on to the next campsite. The yaks are separated into two groups and go rumbling past me at a pleasant trot with only a pair of shepherds on horseback encouraging them from behind. They snort, mutter and belch, and swish their giant tails with the same command that a lion shakes its bountiful mane. They seem totally oblivious to me—a stark contrast to how overwhelmed I feel by the enormity of their presence.

Stobgais recognizes one of the shepherds and calls him over. Within minutes they are shaking hands, hugging and chattering by the side of the road like a couple of happy magpies. Nomads are intensely social creatures and seem to possess a convivial attitude not only with members of their own community, but also with the world as a whole. The nomads in Changtang Province are Buddhists, and perhaps it is the Dalai Lama's laughter I often hear echoing through the hills.

As we get back into the car I ask Stobgais why the yaks are so far away from the camp. Why did the shepherds have to go fetch them? Aren't they routinely herded back to the camps every night?

In a word—no.

The yak provides two primary functions—milk and might. Only the females and

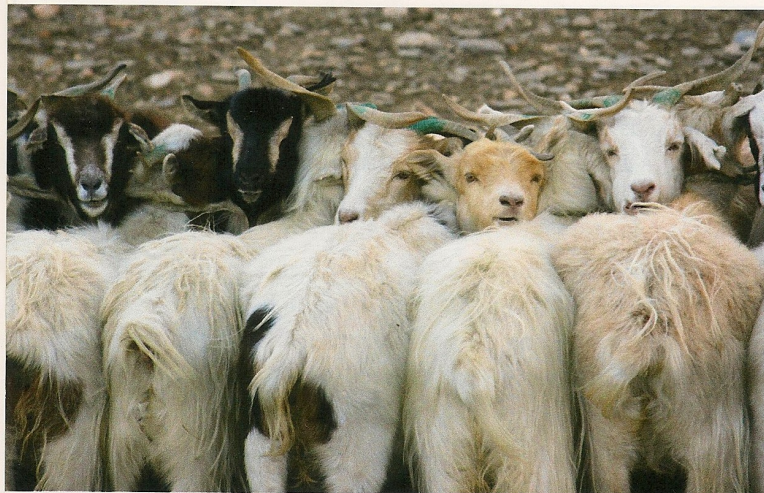
their calves stay close to the camp, returning home every evening to be milked, and then they are milked again in the morning before leaving with a shepherd in search of pasture for the day.

Alternatively, the males are much more independent and don't have much useful purpose in between moving days. They can easily travel unsupervised for weeks at a time, going up to twenty miles away from the main camp. If the shepherds can't easily locate them on horseback when it's time for a round-up, no doubt one of the other nomadic tribes will have spotted the herd and pointed it in the right direction.

"Don't they ever get lost?" I ask.

"No, not really," Stobgais answers. "But sometimes if I want to go to Tibet





I will tell the guards at the border that I have lost my yaks. But I always know where to find them.”

Considering the intense security at the airport in Leh, and that I (along with everyone else on the plane) am bodily searched at least four or five times before boarding, I wonder about the relative ease of bypassing “Homeland Security” in search of a “lost” herd of grunting beasts.

We continue driving for almost another hour before turning off the main road and begin off-roading across the desert floor. The stones are now ping-ponging against the bottom of the mighty “Samurai” and every time a particularly large one hits I see Stobgais wince. He has been saving for this car for quite some time, using much of the money he makes as a trekking guide to buy it. But he quickly tells me that his wife, who is a teacher, helped pay for part of it even though she herself does not drive. “Oh ... the woman driver makes me very nervous,” he says. “I get off the road when I see one.”

In fact, I have only seen one woman driver while in Leh and I believe Stobgais’ fears are well founded.

Although Stobgais is a nomad by birth (once a nomad, always a nomad), very little about his present life seems

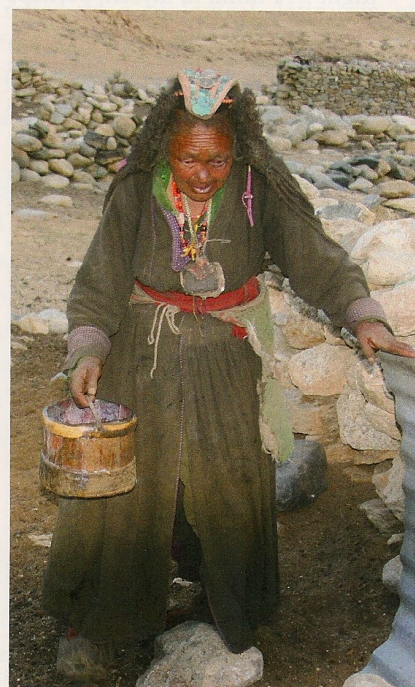
traditionally nomadic. During much of the summer he is a trekking guide capable of leading groups of twenty or more tourists (with nearly twice as many horses) and a handful of cooks and helpers on high-adventure trips throughout the Himalayas. But there is no question that his heart is with the nomadic people and this is the driving force behind his role as the general secretary of the cashmere mill in Leh, owned and operated by a newly formed nomadic cooperative.

During the springtime after the cashmere has been hand combed from the goats, Stobgais is responsible for traveling to every nomadic camp in the region and bringing back truckloads of cashmere to the mill for processing. He knows which tribes have the very best cashmere, and he knows how to negotiate a fair price—although the mill pays slightly less for the cashmere than the Kashmiri traders who have been buying it from the start, the difference is more than compensated in the overall goal.

“Last year we paid 1700 rupees per kilogram of top quality cashmere [about \$16 per pound],” he says. “They might be able to sell it for a slightly higher price to the traders, but the nomads know that they can now share

in the profits of the mill. It is a much better system in the long run—but it takes time.”

It is late afternoon by the time we arrive at the Rupsho camp. There are more than fifty tents—a mixture of the traditional all black yak hair tents along with modern white nylon ones spread out over an area that is roughly a quarter of a mile long and only several hundred yards wide. The white tents are touted for their portability and ready-made ease, but there is a



Don Moore



universal consensus that they are not as warm, nor as long lasting, and definitely not waterproof when compared to their all-natural counterparts. Some of the tents are actually a combination of hand-woven yak hair at the top with nylon flaps for the siding. Our tent is a military parachute that Stobgais bought at the Tibetan border. “I tried to pack the regular tent, which is very big,” he says. “But there was no room in the car to put it.”

“Perhaps we should have strapped it to a yak,” I mutter under my breath.

It is important to remember that not all nomads are created equal. In fact, the Rupsho nomads are at the upper end of the spectrum owing in large part to the grazing rights they have along Tsokar Lake, which has been a critical source of salt for centuries—something that is of both great nutritional value to the animals and trade value to the humans. The salt naturally accumulates at Tsokar because the lake has no outlet, causing the water to become quite brackish. But in the last

twenty years there has been a decline in the output.

“The Rupsho nomads have always shared the rights to Tsokar Lake with the Karzok nomads,” Stobgais tells me. “But the two tribes had a fight about twenty years ago. The nomads believe the fight was very inauspicious and that is why the supply has gradually been depleting. But it is also true that because of global warming, the lake’s shoreline has decreased as the water level has risen.”

Stobgais lets me decide for myself what is at the root of the problem.

Because of the easy access to salt, the animals are healthier and in turn their chances of surviving the winter are increased proportionately. With a high survival rate also comes a proportionately higher yield of cashmere. Consequently, this is one of the few nomadic camps where nearly every family has a car—something that was virtually unheard of twenty years ago. Obviously, the cars have facilitated the nomads’ mobility, not so much in terms of traveling from

one camp to the next (give me a yak any day), but for conducting business in Leh and bringing home supplies.

I catch myself thinking that the prevalence of vehicles somehow pollutes my perception of the nomads’ authenticity, but within minutes of our arrival we are invited for tea with the wife of the village chief, and as she plies the stove with handfuls of dried yak dung to heat the water for our yak butter tea, I realize there is still plenty of “authenticity” safely intact.

It is pleasantly warm inside the



Don Moore

Above (l. to r.): 1. Cashmere goats are happily tied in with a single long rope every morning and evening to be milked. 2. Kids. 3. Yaks on the run. 4. A goat in camouflage. Opposite: A woman returning to her tent with a bucket of fresh milk. Right: Early in the morning, thousands of goats leave the camp and head out to graze.

tent, but the dark yak hair across the roof certainly alters the level of daylight. Perhaps this is “mood” lighting nomad style. “Julley, Julley,” everyone says as we greet each other, the all-purpose Ladakhi saying for “Hello,” “How are you?” “It is nice to see you,” etc. The only thing missing when you smilingly



sing out “Julley” is the two-fingered peace sign.

I have virtually no command of the Ladakhi language and must rely on Stobgais to explain why I am there. The tenor of the room instantly changes when I show them a short video from my camera of my own cashmere goats. (Admittedly part of the video includes a scene of my goats attempting to walk through the sliding doors of my dining room.)

“Yes, I really do live with my goats,” I explain, and in the next breath I explain that I spin and knit as well. I learn that both men and women spin in Ladakh. In fact it would be fair to say that probably every Ladakhi nomad knows how to spin, although very few spin cashmere. It is far too valuable a commodity to use for their own purposes. And so they use either sheep’s

wool, or yak hair, depending upon the finished product.

The spinning is all done with either a drop spindle or support spindle—no deluxe double-treadle wheels to be found in this corner of the world. They prepare the wool using hand cards—literally. Instead of opening and straightening the fibers with a pair of wooden carders, they use just their hands. The fibers are opened and straightened just by tugging them back and forth between their fingers—enough to avoid any major clumps once they begin spinning. The emphasis is on durability as opposed to fineness. The heavy mattresses they sleep on, which are really deep pile rugs, are designed to give maximum padding between you and the ground. Thicker is definitely better.

The atmosphere inside the tent is friendly, but palpably reserved. One of

the young ladies has a three-month-old baby that instantly gravitates to Stobgais, but that is clearly suspicious of my presence. “It is your white face that makes him scared,” says Stobgais, and I realize that I am possibly the first white face this little baby has ever seen.

In part because of the ready access of transportation, more young women are now having their babies at the hospital in Leh. But as I talk with some of the older women, they all had their babies either in the tent, or out in the mountains while tending to their herd. “They would cut the umbilical cord using a rock,” Stobgais tells me. “And then carry home their baby at night.” (Stobgais is one of seven children and I

Above: Mawang Tharchin, a yogi who spent more than four years in meditation with his wife, Tashi zangmo. Right: A traditional yak hair tent with nylon sides.

neglect to ask if he was welcomed into the world amid a herd of grazing goats—it would seem fitting.)

More than an hour later when we emerge from the tent I can feel how much the temperature has dropped now that the sun has dipped behind the mountains. And with the setting sun also comes the return of the goats. The camp is located in a long, narrow valley and within the next hour, herds of several hundred goats or more start magically appearing on the slopes, and before nightfall everyone has returned and settled down in an area adjacent to their owner's tent. There are no fences, nor gates to contain them, only a small stone enclosure where the babies are kept during the night to keep them from nursing so their mothers will have plenty of milk for human consumption in the morning. And with nothing to keep them in, there is nothing to keep predators out.

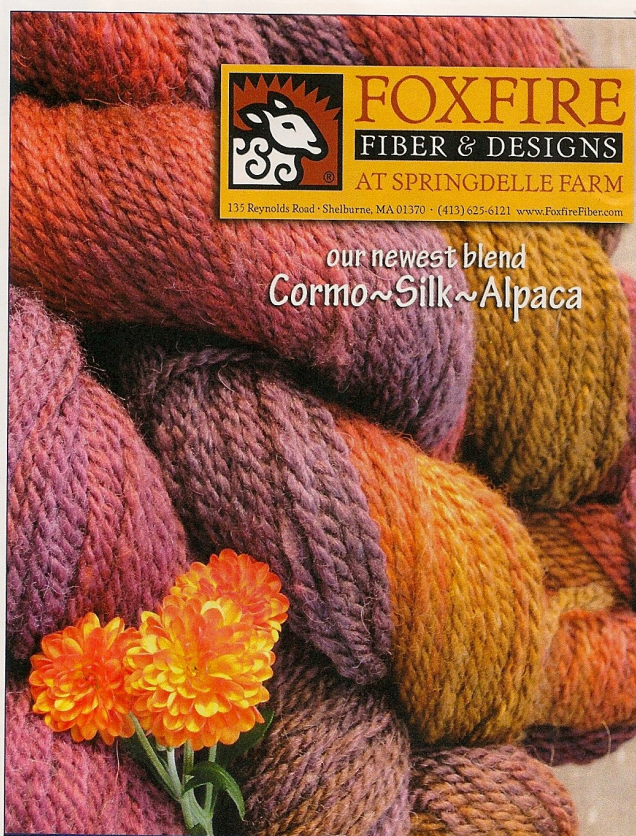
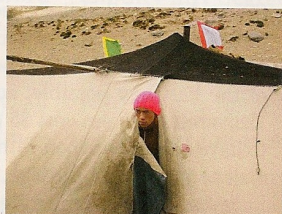
Although there are exceptions to the rule, I am amazed at how well each member of the herd tends to stay within their own group. Of course the occasional wanderer is inevitable, causing the shepherd to go looking throughout the camp and then ultimately drag, or carry the recalcitrant critter back home. They rarely seem to return willingly. They scream in great protest like a child who has just been hauled away from a birthday party. But once back in the fold they usually stay for the remainder of the night.

When darkness finally sets in, all outdoor activity comes to an end and it is time for dinner and bed. Stobgais is superb at ensuring I am warm enough—the addition of the hot water bottle at my feet makes sleeping at 15,000 feet almost seem cozy. But as I snuggle inside my “bed of many layers,” and try to position my head on the softest part of my duffle bag, I realize that I have had too many cups of tea. I wrestle with the idea of disentombing myself or of hoping that I will just fall asleep and wait until the light of day.

“Stobgais,” I call out rather quietly. “Where did you put the flashlight?”

Surprising as it may seem, nighttime in the nomadic camps is not particularly peaceful. With miles of mountains separating me from the buzz of city life, it is the barking dogs on full alert engaged in keeping away the wolves, wild dogs and anything else that might portend danger that disrupt my mistakenly anticipated quietude. But in the stillness that does lurk in between the canine shouting, I can hear the yaks softly humming in the night, and soon I am warm enough to drift off to sleep.

It isn't long—maybe an hour or so—before I wake up in complete panic. I can hear a woman screaming. She doesn't



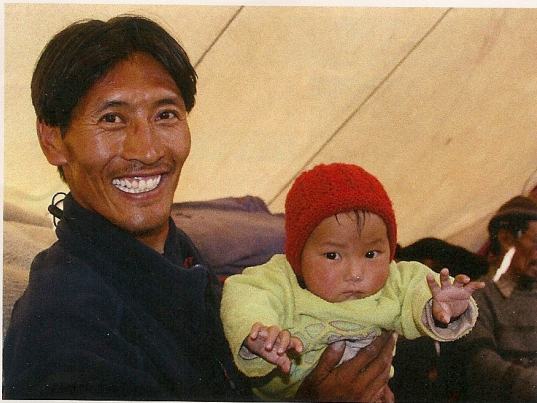
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sound as if she is in pain—she sounds angry. I wonder if perhaps some animal has gotten a hold of one of her goats and she is trying to beat it free. The screaming increases and I feel the need to get up and check things out when I hear another voice, a male voice, and he begins screaming back. I no longer think it is such a good idea that I investigate by myself. An English speaking westerner is probably not going to help the situation and there is the very real possibility that my presence may only make things worse. I listen more closely although I can hardly determine what is being said, and it occurs to me that alcohol may be at the root of the problem. Stobgais has told me that the men occasionally return from Leh having had too much

hard liquor. They are only accustomed to drinking *chang*, their homebrewed beer made from the local barley. Not surprisingly, domestic unrest frequently follows.

The yelling eventually stops, the barking continues, and I give both sleeping bags an extra tug over my head so that only my nostrils flare out above the zipper. I keep turning from one side to the other but I have difficulty breathing. It must be the altitude.

When I next open my eyes I can see through the hole in the top of our tent that the sun is just beginning to rise. I also see that

Top: My friend and guide Stobgais holds a new baby that is suspicious of my white face. Below: Tashi Dolms pours out the milk from the goathide sack.



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The musk ox had a square mile divided into three pastures, and enjoyed their natural foods during the snow free months. In the winter the pastures did not provide sufficient food and hay had to be shipped to Unalakleet for them.



Unalakleet

Shipping by air was very expensive, somewhere around \$100 per bale. Trying to find other options Sigrun Robertson began investigating alternate methods

of getting hay to the musk ox before winter set in. She found that it could be barged from the Fairbanks region, down the Nenana River to the Yukon River, and then on to Unalakleet. This method was discarded because the hay would have to be ready to ship in mid-June, a little too early for the hay crop.



Talking to a hay farmer in Fairbanks about the dilemma, Sigrun learned that it was possible to ship hay through the post office as by-pass mail for a subsidized rate to the remote villages. Negotiations began with local hay farmers to buy 2,000 bales of the best hay possible, and have it delivered to the airport. Delivered the bales cost \$5 per bale. Once there, each bale had to have a label attached with the delivery address and sender, as well as the correct postage, which was about \$4.90. As you can imagine, this was quite a sight watching 2,000 bales of hay being unloaded, each one labeled, then re-stacked on pallets.

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it is snowing. I start rummaging for my still camera, my video camera and my hat (made of qiviut!) and as I prepare to lace up my boots Stobgais calls out from his sleeping bag: "Please Linda, do not start working so soon—you must first have your tea."

I am convinced that if I don't hustle outside immediately, I will risk losing the perfect shot. On the other hand, I have also learned not to argue with Stobgais. "You know, Stobgais," I say with complete resignation, "you are the only man in nearly fifty years that I have ever listened to."

"Really?" he says with his signature laughter filling the morning air. "That is because you are smart woman." And then we both start laughing together.

After a cup of Assam tea flavored with cardamom seeds and three cubes of sugar I head out. There are easily more than 1,000 goats within twenty feet of our tent, many of them wethers (castrated males) that are in no rush to start the day. They are nestled together like children at a sleep-away camp, and as I quietly walk among them I think that *this* is where I want to spend the night, nestled in between their soft sides of cashmere.

The majority of goats are white, but there is no shortage of little brown and white bodies speckled like a Hereford cow. Some have solid brown heads, or little black spots dotting their backs like inverse dominos. Traditionally, all white animals command more money because of the versatility in dyeing, but the genetics of these cashmeres have been mixed for so long every baby born is something of a mutt. The nomads are careful to use only the best bucks for breeding, and the government prides itself on having a cashmere herd with some of the best genetics available. The bucks wear only an "apron" strapped around their midsection to prevent unwanted pregnancies, however, it is by

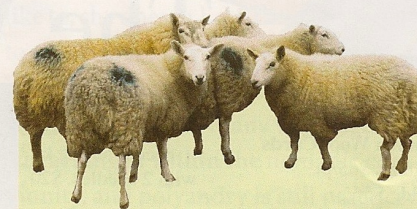
no means foolproof. Accidents happen, just like everywhere else.

The cashmere I have seen from Ladakh is exceptional. Using only my eyes (as opposed to a microscope) for calibration, I see that many of the fibers are clearly less than fourteen microns—well within the range of high quality cashmere. But the cashmere on the goats at the moment is still quite short since it is still early in the growing season.

It is snowing quite hard by now, perfectly horrible weather for taking pictures, so I put away the camera and decide to just sit down and watch. Both men and women are calmly moving about tying the female goats together one by one in a line—their heads alternately facing opposite directions. It is time to be milked. They seem surprisingly willing to be snagged into a line but I later learn that with their udders bursting they know the line-up means relief is imminent.

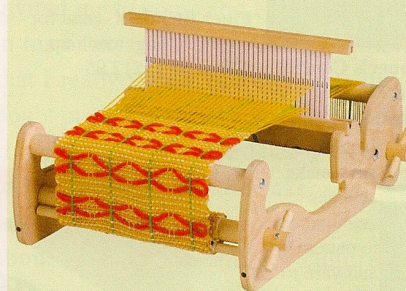
Perched on the nubby earth with no yak hair mattress for protection, I close my eyes for a moment and try to imagine what it is like to go through this routine every single day of the year—without fail. And then I try to imagine what it is like when the temperature, which is right around freezing, drops another fifty degrees. And then I think, for just a moment more, about having a baby in the middle of the Himalayas with no one there to help me—it is not easy being a nomad.

For some unknown reason, a single brown baby goat from the surrounding herd of thousands comes walking toward me. It takes a moment for her to overcome the unfamiliarity of my presence—perhaps it is my white face sparking concern yet again, but within minutes she is wrapped tightly against my legs as I gently stroke the underside of her chin. There is a felted flower stuck in her ear that looks as if it may



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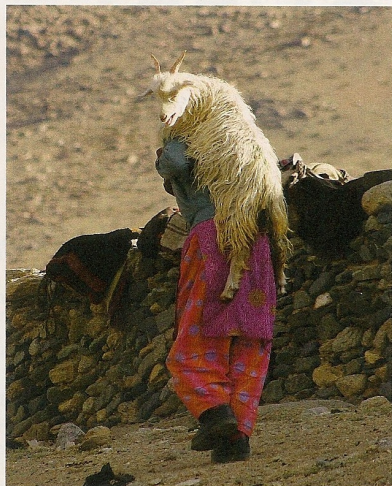
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have come from a child's barrette; obviously her sweet disposition has already endeared her to someone else as well.

Despite the seemingly primitive nature of the surroundings, there are increasing signs of Western culture.

I see one nomad wearing lime green Crocs, a woman with gold frosted nail polish, a pile-up of pink plastic tricycles, and several T-shirts with the Nike swoosh. My favorite outfit, however, is on a woman in full traditional dress except for her shoes. Her feet are so small she can wear



a children's size and so I get to chuckling watching her go padding about in sneakers decorated with Barbie dolls.

I return to our tent where Norbu has been preparing breakfast. Some of the other nomads have dropped off some fresh meat, yak cheese and butter for us to enjoy but I am happy to have a single banana heated by the fire.

During the next few hours I go visiting—each visit beginning with several cups of yak butter tea (I think there is a limit as to how much yak butter tea a non-nomad can drink)—and in one tent I ask Tashi Dolma, whose husband is the head of the village, if I might try my hand at rolling a milk-filled goat hide in order to separate the milk from the cream. While I am sitting cross-legged on the floor, she places a hairy sack on my lap and instructs me to rock it back and forth. It

Right: Tsewang Tashi, whose tent was next to ours, always had a stash of fiber tucked inside his robe that he would pull out and methodically start to hand card. Above: A stray goat being hauled back home screaming like a kid who is forced to go to bed before anyone else.

behaves something like a water balloon wrapped around a twenty-pound sack of potatoes, and after five minutes of vigorous manipulation my arms begin to tire. I know I must look clumsy (if not unquestionably out of place) as I try to

maneuver it, but the experience is not about the quality of my physical skill, it is about trying to lend a hand. With Stobgais close by for translation, I explain how much I enjoy doing it. Tashi Dolma starts nodding her head before he has finished

speaking (I suspect she knows more English than she lets on) and then announces that I am welcome to come back the following day and help her some more.

Fabulous, I think, I have my first job with the nomads.

On the opposite side of the camp, I go visit a woman weaving a mattress with a backstrap loom. The center of the design is light gray and made from handspun yak wool, but along the border, which has a Tibetan influenced motif, the yarn is brightly colored in a variety of reds, blues and hot-hot pinks. I ask her where the colored yarn comes from. Stobgais translates for her and explains that when she goes to Leh, she buys old sweaters from the second-hand shop. She unravels the sweaters and then uses the yarn for her weaving. She makes up the pattern as she goes along and admits it takes up to three weeks to complete a mattress. Although she would

like to, she doesn't have the opportunity to weave every day and the mattress she is working on is for her daughter who is getting married. Many marriages are still arranged within the nomadic community, and polyandry is still practiced among brothers who share the same wife, but within the small group that has assembled with me, each woman has only one husband.

When I first met Stobgais and he invited me to come and experience life in his backyard, I don't think he knew that I really would. But there was little doubt in my mind that someday I would come to this strange and beautiful land to go running with the yaks, sleeping with the goats, and discovering more about the rich and ancient culture of cashmere. What better place to learn about this most exquisite of fibers than in the land that bears its name, the state of Jammu and Kashmir in Northern India. Where even amid 12,000 cashmere goats it is still possible to be so cold at night ... Ah-*chhoo-chhoo!* WF

