

Hand-woven in the Hebrides

Breanish Tweed has launched what is said to be the world's first hand-woven vicuña fabric. Our Stornoway correspondent **Bill Lucas** reveals the story behind this extraordinary product, and the future plans at this inspirational family firm.

What is believed to be the first hand-woven fabric made from vicuña, one of the world's most expensive and luxurious fibres, is being produced by Breanish Tweed, in the north of the Hebridean Isle of Lewis, and is being used by the firm to manufacture a variety of garments. The bespoke firm, with a worldwide customer base, is renowned for its high-quality lightweight tweed fabrics made from Shetland wool, lambswool and cashmere. It also produces made-to-measure mens suits and jackets, as well as a range of knitwear and accessories.

Iain F Macleod, managing director of Breanish Tweed, says: "Obtaining vicuña was a bit of a challenge. However, through our contacts, we are now able to get the raw fleece direct from a vicuña farm in Peru and then have it spun. Importing it involves a lot of paperwork. The vicuña is softer than cashmere, but stronger and lighter, and provides both comfort and warmth. Vicuñas have a beautiful sun-coloured fleece, running from deep chestnut to fawn. It takes the fleeces of around 25-30 animals to make one overcoat,

and as they can only be shorn once every three years, it makes a luxurious, expensive fabric."

He adds: "We feel we are creating a niche market because our vicuña products are hand-woven. In fact I believe that we are the only producers of hand-woven vicuña. So far, we have used it to produce jackets, scarves and shawls. However, private customers wishing to order the fabric will have to do so through a bespoke tailor as it needs to be well-tailored. We do a 50/50 mix or a 25% vicuña/75% cashmere mix."

Macleod adds that because the cloth is hand-woven, it



Breanish Tweed mens jackets at Emanuel Berg in Munich.

needs such time and attention that it would not sit easily with being produced on a large scale: "For example, it takes three miles of walking to prepare the warp, and then half a day to get the tweed into the loom, tying almost 1,000 knots in the process. Then we weave around three to five metres an hour."

The launch of the hand-woven vicuña ranges marks a further milestone in the success of Breanish Tweed, which continues to expand, with plans to open new additional premises in Perthshire, on the mainland of Scotland, this summer.

Breanish Tweed is a family firm, with the three weavers all using single-width Hattersley looms - Macleod's father Donald John (known as Zebo), and two others. Iain's mother Chrissie and sister Christina are involved in the design work, with Christina also responsible for production.

Macleod says: "My sister and I are learning as much as we can from our parents, who are passing on their weaving and designing skills to us. We are the fourth generation of weavers in the family. In my father's village when he was young, there were 30 weavers and now there is only one, so it is important that these skills are not lost."

Six hand knitters also work for Breanish Tweed, producing



Iain F Macleod, who took over Breanish Tweed two years ago.

small ranges of luxurious knitwear and accessories sold at Byrne & Burge, a bespoke tailor in Mayfair, as well as through Breanish Tweed itself. Cashmere scarves and lambswool shawls are sold throughout the US, as well as at a handful of stores in the Scottish Highlands, London and in Europe. Macleod reveals: "We've just finished an exclusive pattern for the custom department in a famous department store in Manhattan. The claim to fame of the head tailor is that three Mafia guys were shot dead wearing his suits, so I gave him a discount."

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Breanish Tweed has also been making up exclusive patterns for a German store, Emanuel Berg in Munich, owned by Rolf-Werner Dorls and his wife Margot. The couple have installed a special Breanish Tweed display in the window of their shop following a visit to the Breanish Tweed premises.

Macleod, 36, took over Breanish Tweed two years ago, and is also a writer, director and producer, as well as a BAFTA award winner. He quips: "I still keep writing but now all my stories seem to include tailors, weavers or agents!" ●



Breanish Tweed cloth at Emanuel Berg in Munich.



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