

Cashmere is so luxurious that the Ark of the Covenant of the Old Testament was reportedly lined with it. Pashmina shawls—named for a Persian word for wool—have been coveted worldwide since Napoleon, who did nothing by halves, gave 17 cashmere wraps to his second wife, Empress Eugenie.

What is cashmere?

Cashmere is the ultrafine, lightweight, extremely soft, silken wool from the undercoat of the Kashmir (or Cashmere) goat, which originally grazed in the high plateaus of central Asia, especially Mongolia.

Garments made from cashmere cost more than those from sheep's wool because it is a rare fiber available in a limited supply. It was traditionally collected by hand during the molting season, when the animals naturally shed each spring, but today cashmere is removed with a comb or by shearing.

Each goat provides four to six ounces of fiber a year, so it takes about four goats to make one sweater, six to eight goats for a sports coat.

Although you'll pay more for a cashmere garment than for one made from sheep's wool, it is worth it because cashmere travels well and doesn't wrinkle, has great insulating properties, and is long-lasting. Cashmere garments become softer with age and rarely pill after being worn and washed. A well-cared-for cashmere sweater should last a lifetime.

Signs of quality

Cashmere's reputation has been tarnished in recent years by an influx into the United States of mislabeled garments claiming to be cashmere. Yarns that combine standard sheep's wool with residual cashmere are imported into China, from which they make their way into this country, where they are sold as cashmere at discount prices.



Protect yourself by carefully reading the garment's hang tag or sewn-in labels, which are required by law to include fiber percentages. A sweater or coat fraudulently labeled and priced as "cashmere" or "cashmere blend" may have as little as 10 percent cashmere fiber, and pashmina is not a legally recognized or regulated term.

Beware deceptive or fraudulent advertising from unscrupulous manufacturers

that try to take advantage of unsuspecting consumers in search of a bargain. Inferior goods masquerading as discounted cashmere are no bargain. Always buy cashmere garments—such as men's and women's coats, jackets and blazers, skirts, hosiery, sweaters, gloves, scarves, mufflers, caps and robes—from a reputable source because mislabeled cashmere won't wear as well or last as long.

Cashmere care

The best way to make sure cashmere and camel hair garments last is to handle them carefully, as you would any other fine woolen.

Hand wash knits with cold water, using a mild soap. Dry clean woven garments.

Fold knitwear with tissue and store flat in a drawer; never hang on hangers. Hang woven garments on padded hangers, zippered and buttoned with pants and shirts on hangers designed for them.

Give garments a rest between wearings for at least 24 hours to eliminate wrinkles.

Treat stains as quickly as possible: Rinse immediately with cold water. Allow to dry away from direct heat, and then brush with the fabric nap.