

OPINION

Cashmere? Not when you can wear muskox

A scarf made of the animal's inner down costs between \$200 and \$600

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The following is not to suggest, when an Olympic Games comes to town and stages dozens of rather fun celebrations, that you shouldn't avail yourself of your chosen pursuits — like hitting the museum or the beer garden.

It's merely a little reminder that the Olympics aren't just about sports. Sometimes, they are about the opportunity to learn, about others, and about ourselves.

For instance, you might think the hottest trend to come tumbling out of Canada's great white north in recent years was the discovery in 1991 of a motherlode of diamonds, so abundant and of such high quality that their introduction to the world literally put the Northwest Territories on the mining map.

You would be partly right, if only because today the territory's three diamond mines and their annual haul of 10 million carats account for nearly 60 per cent of the territory's GDP, bringing a much-needed new prosperity to the Arctic.

But as much as the future of a new modern north is being forged in its

diamond mines, its raw past is being preserved on the tundra.

Just wander into Canada's Northern House, on the corner of Hastings and Seymour in downtown Vancouver and one of the many free complements to the 2010 Olympic Games, and you'll bump into evidence of that in the person of Fernando Alvarez.

Alvarez, who was born in Peru where the alpaca and vicuna and guanaco roam, and who knows a thing or two about making textiles out of animal hair, moved to Banff 23 years ago, and will tell you the story of the day he found himself wondering what he could make of a big bag of muskox fleece offered to him by University of Saskatchewan researchers who were studying alpaca and muskox.

Muskox, of course, is one of those ethereal creatures of Canada's far north, a prehistoric mammal that looks like a shaggy-haired cross between a bison and a water buffalo and shares not a little mystique with other tundra denizens like the narwhal, the polar bear and the Arctic wolf.

So when the scientists asked Alvarez if he wanted to try and make something with the fluffy inner down, or underbelly hair, that their experimental muskox shed during the spring moult, he took the bag to his textile plant in Peru and started playing around with it.

"I was intrigued by how it looked,"

says Alvarez. "It was soft and fine and it had a lot of loft and volume. But spinning it was a challenge."

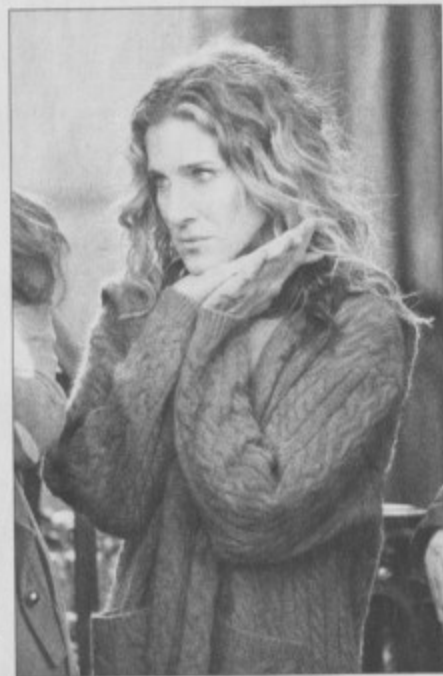
Muskox inner down — officially called qiviuk in the Inuit language — is the layer under the guard hair, the long outer coat the muskox is known for, and Alvarez knew he was on to something, so he kept modifying the spinning techniques until he found a way to make it work.

Today, Alvarez sells muskox scarves, sweaters, dresses, hats, fabric and accessories — you might find him wearing a custom qiviuk-blend suit — around the world. There's an Qiviuk Boutique in the Plaza in New York, outlets in Banff and Lake Louise, and a growing customer base in Italy, France, the U.S. and England (he gifted Queen Elizabeth with a red shawl and sweater, for which she wrote him thank you notes).

"This fibre is fabulous," says Alvarez, who on Wednesday is wearing a cable-knit muskox sweater with a shorn beaver collar, and notes that celebrities like Sarah Jessica Parker and Nicolas Cage have taken to muskox wear.

"It has amazing properties. It's light, soft, warm. It's better than cashmere."

That boast prompted disbelief, and a challenge, by an Hermes executive in Paris, who eventually conceded that qiviuk was, in fact, better than his best cashmere. The Hermes store now sells



Sarah Jessica Parker wears a muskox sweater as she shoots an episode of *Sex and the City*.

Alvarez's line.

The tundra's new fancy fleece is pricey and rare — a scarf takes about 150 grams of qiviuk and can cost from \$200 to \$600 — partly because the supply of about 2,000 kilos comes from the 500 to 1,500 muskox that are harvested annually under strict regulations from the 75,000-strong Banks

Island herd north of Inuvik.

"I see it growing, but gradually," says Alvarez. "It's very unique and it's very Canadian. It's the only thing that we have only in Canada."

Canada's Northern House, which also showcases the culture and industry of Nunavut and the Yukon, one of dozens of free attractions, from art shows to pavilions, being held to celebrate the 2010 Winter Olympics.

If you're Canadian, and even if you're not, go to Northern House and you might just discover the Canada that has always been a bit off the national radar, given its geographic disconnection and its small population — our three territories cover about a third of Canada's land mass but are home to only about 110,000 residents, more than 50 per cent of them aboriginal.

Open now through the end of March, Northern House is 13,000 square feet of art and culture, native fashion, interactive activities, live entertainment and a diamond exhibit with an on-site prospector and professional polishers. Here are soapstone sculptures, snow shoes, beaded crafts, a dogsled full of pelts, whale bones and a stuffed wolf, polar bear, caribou and muskox.

It's as close to the north as you might ever get. Throw in -44 C, with a strong wind, and you might think you're in Inuvik.

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