

WIND-SWEPT WOOLENS

Tea and Tweed in The Falkland Islands



From her childhood home in Cumbria, Nicola Kilmartin has baked, grilled and stirred her way around the world working as a cook, in salmon fishing camps in Northern Russia and on horseback treks in Outer Mongolia. Until one day, while cooking in Scotland, she saw an ad for a cook in the Falkland Islands.

Known as Hattie, which seems more fitting than Nicola, for a woman whose curly blond hair is styled daily by the wind, she read the ad and thought, ‘the Falkland Islands?’ Judging by pictures she had seen from the war in 1982, when winter was approaching, the Falklands hardly looked like an enticing archipelago set adrift in the South Seas.

But after some research she took the job and worked at a wilderness lodge on West Falkland, catering to fishermen, ornithologists and the odd passers-by. She figured at the end of six months, she would be gone. But in the light of spring, Hattie realised this bleak place wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, she had fallen in love not only with the Falklands, but also with the local sheep farmer, who she married.

Tragically, just five months after they exchanged their vows, Hattie’s husband passed away. She had every opportunity to move back to England, but she didn’t. By that time, her love of the Falklands had taken hold of her, and her cooking skills sustained her, as she eventually agreed to take a job at the Sea Cabbage Café at Bluff Cove Lagoon on East Falkland.

Bluff Cove Farm is 35,000 acres of tree-less, achingly depleted soil, along with 4,000 sheep and a robust penguin colony. Historically, it has subsisted on its sheep, left to fend for themselves, gathered once a year to be shorn in the woolshed until cruise ships began trickling into Stanley Harbour at the beginning of the century. Almost overnight, Bluff Cove was in the tourism business, driving passengers out to the lagoon for a trip to ‘meet-the-farmer and see his penguins’, accompanied by a sumptuous cream tea made by Hattie.

It was a business model that worked and worked well, and eventually Hattie got a ‘promotion’ and married Kevin Kilmartin, owner of Bluff Cove, where she not only continues as the cook, but now has a hand – or both hands to be precise – in the wool business.

‘Our sheep have to be tougher than many of the Merino-crosses in the Falklands,’ Hattie explains. ‘We have mostly Perendale and some Corriedale. Our wool is much coarser than you would find elsewhere here, ranging from 24 - 30 microns. But it is perfect for tweed.’

Approximately 400,000 sheep call the Falklands home. They arrived in the mid-1800s when cattle, which had serviced a leather industry, was replaced with the wool industry. Both in spite of and because of the harsh conditions, the Falklands continue to produce some of the whitest wool in the world; a low lanolin content combined with a steady saltwater breeze

and the overall lack of vegetable matter (branches and bushes that contaminate the fleece) makes for a very clean fleece. The wool is shipped all over the world, often blended with other fine wools, never to be seen again. Hattie, however, thought differently.

With a gift shop and a small museum, (which has never seemed just quite as enticing as Hattie’s cooking) Bluff Cove is host to 8,000 tourists a year. But something was lacking. ‘We didn’t have anything that was unique to the farm,’ Hattie explains. And that’s when she set about designing their own tweed.

Creative by nature – with food or with fibre – Hattie took up felting and spinning. Using Cushing dyes and the microwave, she developed a colour-way that reflected a blend of greys from the stone runs – a geologic phenomenon from the last Ice Age; plus the myriad of flora on the farm, from the native white grass to the edible Diddle-Dee berry bushes, and finally, a purple skyline stolen from the pages of heaven. With samples in hand and no shortage of determination, Hattie sought advice from Stephen Rendle and Alan Cumming at Lovat Mill in Hawick, weavers of Scottish Estate tweeds and more recently, boasting clients such as Chanel, Ralph Lauren and Purdy. Enticed, no doubt by the challenge, they took on the job of transforming her microwaved vision into a spectacular tweed.

‘It’s absolutely brilliant,’ says Hattie. ‘They used a broken herringbone ombre design to better



reflect the landscape than the more checkered look of a tweed.'

The first throws came off the loom in 2016 and by the following year, Hattie had also designed a Falkland seascape tweed, using palest pink for the sand and turquoise and deeper blues for the sea, still in the same broken herringbone pattern. Each tweed is finished with a thin tuft of orange, yellow and black edging to signify the penguin influence, thus making a distinct Falklands brand.

The tweed is shipped to the Falklands, arriving as large heavy bolts. All of the throws are then individually cut from the roll on their dining room table, and a label is hand sewn on to every single one, before being packaged to sell.

In addition to the throws and other items in the shop with tweed accents, they now have caps and hats made by a traditional cap-maker in Yorkshire. 'We don't sell our tweed anywhere else in the Falklands,' Hattie says with pride. 'People who visit us get something that is truly unique.'

Admittedly, living on 35,000 acres in the middle of the South Atlantic is not always romantic, even if Charles Darwin went traipsing through your 'backyard' nearly 200 years ago. It remains a self-sufficient existence totally off-grid. The farm electricity is generated by wind turbine and solar panels, and water is piped from the farm spring.

'You really have to have a pioneering spirit to live here. Sometimes it takes three to four

months for supplies to come in. It forces you to become good at improvising,' says Hattie.

Which explains why her shortbread is made with a light sprinkling of custard powder. 'You see, to get to the Sea Cabbage Café you have to go off-road. We're improving the track, but there's still gullies that you can only manage with a four-wheel drive vehicle. My shortbread kept breaking going through the dips!'

Hattie discovered a little custard powder was all it took to firm-up the shortbread and make it off-road worthy. Fortunately, her beautiful tweeds are perfect as is. ♦♦♦ **Linda Cortright, editor & publisher of www.wildfibersmagazine.com**
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