

dreaming . . . *on a cloud of* CASHMERE

Julia M. Chiarella takes us through a trail of luxurious cashmere in Italy

IT'S THE EPITOME OF LUXURY, the essence of elegance embedded in a historic country rich with style and quality. Italian cashmere – what could be better? Home of the world's finest cashmere designs, Italy has a secret path that only well-informed tourists take advantage of while they visit.

Taken from the down of the Kashmir goats in Chinese Inner Mongolia, cashmere is made of the animal's second coat, closest to the body, which is short, fine and extremely warm. Only five million kilograms of cashmere are produced annually worldwide, making the fibre very rare and therefore very expensive. But not all cashmere is created equal. Making the top of the list for quality, experience and luxury are three remarkable brands: Brunello Cucinelli, Agnona of the Ermenegildo Zegna Group and Loro Piana.

I had the opportunity to visit all three brands in Milan during fashion week when they were presenting their spring-summer 2006 collections. Getting up close and personal with this high quality cashmere was the softest dream ever.

BRUNELLO CUCINELLI CASHMERE

Designer Brunello Cucinelli is not someone who takes his work lightly. On the other hand, the business side of his work remains only one part – he is devoted to making his work and the work of his employees a family experience, built on human values, where creativity is key. Case in point, Cucinelli decided to devote 20 years to renovating the medieval village of Solomeo, near Perugia in the Umbria region, to create his humanistic business enterprise. Solomeo is home to the Cucinelli cashmere manufacturing business, allowing it to be in one place, unified and in harmony. With 400 inhabitants, the village holds a small cluster of medieval houses that were built at the end of the 14th century. The castle has become the Cucinelli company headquarters and the



Images this page: Loro Piana - www.loropiana.com

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church, square and old farm have been transformed into a villa for cultural events and where the company cafeteria is located.

The son of farmers, Cucinelli didn't enter into the fashion business until his mid-twenties. It was then that he decided to pursue a vision to produce refined, coloured cashmere. In 1978, Brunello Cucinelli Cashmere was founded, paying close attention to colour, quality, hand-crafting and style that are now considered one of the best in the world. The village of Solomeo is structured with genuine craft workshops, resembling those of the medieval times. It is in these workshops that creative expressions are developed and then exported all over the world.


AGNONA

Dating back to 1953, Agnona began with Francesco Ilorini Mo, a textile worker and fabric designer. Raw material quality was always the major concern for the founder and the company, who obtain their cashmere from Tibet and China. Through craftsmanship and highly technological processing techniques, the fibres are transformed into easy-to-wear knitwear that is chic and classic. In 2000, the Ermenegildo Zegna Group – acquired complete control, renewing the brand's drive. The Agnona flagship store is on the distinctive Via della Spiga in Milan, with stores and multi-brand outlets all over the world. The spring-summer 2006 theme is based on a woman who does not pursue fashion but loves to dress in a way that enhances her personality – further indication that Agnona creates classically unique pieces.

LORO PIANA

Wool fabric merchants at the beginning of the 19th century, the Loro Pianas are originally from Trivero. With a relocation to Valsesia and six generations later, the company is still dedicated to supplying the finest cashmere to the most sophisticated customers. The brand has become the biggest single purchaser of the world's finest wools. Manufactured in

the company's own facilities, the products are distributed worldwide to directly-operated stores and speciality retailers. Quality is key for the brand, which led to Loro Piana having a direct presence on all the major markets where raw material is found, such as China and Mongolia. The company formed direct relationships with government agencies in China through Loro Piana Mongolia Limited. Now with over 1700 employees divided into two business sectors, textile and luxury goods, Loro Piana operates several manufacturing facilities in Italy as well as in the US.

So when you take a visit to the Piedmont region, be sure to book a unique shopping tour with a tourist group such as Sophisticated Italy or Vantaggio Travel. They will take you on the famous cashmere trail to visit the generations-old textile mills that produce for the leading design houses. Agnona has a factory-type outlet in Borgosesia while Loro Piana has one in Valsesia. In Perugia, Umbria, Brunello Cucinelli's Solomeo is an experience in itself. 



Images this page, top, centre; Loro Piana, Calvi Storte. Above, left to right; Brunello Cucinelli – www.brunellocucinelli.it. These images; Agnona – www.agnona.it with scarf behind by Loro Piana.