



South Africa's superior-quality Merino wool is one of the best natural fibres around. We take a look.

eco-cool Merino



The Merino is an economically influential breed of sheep prized for its wool, which is considered to be some of the finest and softest wool of any sheep. The best Merino wool is common in high-end, performance athletic wear, but is also widely used in fashion and other clothing contexts. Typically meant for use in running, hiking, skiing, mountain climbing, cycling, and in other types of outdoor aerobic exercise, these clothes command a premium over synthetic fabrics.

Increasingly, however, Merino wool is also becoming a fabric of choice among leading couture houses and designers. Several properties contribute to Merino's popularity for exercise and other forms of high-end clothing, compared to wool in general and to other types of fabric:

- Merino is excellent at regulating body temperature, especially when worn against the skin. The wool provides some warmth, without overheating the wearer. It draws moisture (sweat) away from the skin, a phenomenon known as wicking. The fabric is slightly moisture repellent (keratin fibres are hydrophobic at one end and hydrophilic at the other), allowing the user to avoid the feeling of wetness.
- Like cotton, wool absorbs water (up to a third of its weight), but, unlike cotton, wool retains warmth when wet, and so helps wearers avoid hypothermia after strenuous workouts (climbs) or severe weather events. This has obvious advantages in cold weather climates, even when used for high-fashion items.
- Like most wools, Merino contains lanolin, which has antibacterial properties.
- Merino is one of the softest types

of wool available, due to finer fibres and smaller scales.

- Merino has an excellent warmth-to-weight ratio compared to other wools, in part because the smaller fibres have microscopic cortices of dead air, trapping body heat similar to the way a sleeping bag warms its occupant.

Merino in SA

South Africa was the first country outside Europe which owned Merinos. This history stretches back as far as 1789, when the Dutch government donated two Spanish Merino rams and four Spanish Merino ewes to Colonel Jacob Gordon, the military commander at the Cape at that time, on an experimental basis.

These sheep were initially the property of the King of Spain, who had the sole right to export Merinos. However, the King sent a number of sheep from his famous Escoriale Merino Stud as a gift to the House of Orange. The sheep could not adjust to the high rainfall in the Netherlands and were therefore sent to Gordon. He immediately realised the possibilities of this breed and decided to keep it pure, grazing them on the Company farm Groenkloof, 55km from Cape Town.

By 1830 wool sheep farming in the Western and South Western Cape was already fairly well-established. The next expansion was eastwards. The 1820 Settlers played an important role in this extension and development of Merino flocks. In 1834 the Great Trek started and the Voortrekkers took their sheep flocks northwards with them. Within a few years the Merino had spread to all parts of the country.

From 1891 considerable numbers of Merinos of the American Vermont type were brought to South Africa. However, it was found that the Australian Merino, the Wanganella and Peppin type, were best suited to improve local flocks, and large numbers of this breed were imported.

With all the different types contributing genetic material, SA breeders have succeeded in developing typical Merino at least on a par with – or better than – that from anywhere else in the world. SA Merinos, having developed and adapted in the course of more than 200 years, now form a key component of the SA's agro-industry. There are some 14.5 million Merino sheep in SA at last count, out of a total of 25m sheep.

Wool production

The Merino's production potential for fine wool is unique. According to renowned expert Dr CA van der Merwe: 'The Merino is the only sheep in the world that can produce 10-15% of its own live mass in clean wool.' The SA variant also produces sheep and lamb meat considered among the best quality in the world.

Types of Merino

Different types of Merino sheep were developed for different regions in SA.

These types vary from strong wool (25 micron) to the finest wool (16 micron). Merino sheep are now found in almost every district of SA. Merinos, in great numbers, are found in the drier Northern Cape province, on the fertile lands of the winter rainfall areas of the Western Cape and millions of Merino sheep run on the Karooveld and Grassveld of the Eastern Cape and Free State. Well-known Merino breeders with large top-quality flocks are also found in KwaZulu-Natal and most parts of Mpumalanga.

Merino fabrics

Merino wool is a naturally technical fibre with excellent handle and drape, appealing to both active and fashion markets. Obviously, it is a 100% natural fibre, while also being sustainable, renewable, durable and biodegradable. Better yet, Merino is a multi-climate fabric that keeps you warm in the winter and cool in the summer. The Merino fibre's inherent qualities – hydrophobic exterior and hydrophilic interior – means that it is 'breathable' and transports moisture away from the body where it evaporates into the atmosphere. Merino is also naturally luxurious, has natural stretch and recovery, is soft to the touch and has an elegant drape. Merino garments also offer superior UV protection – important in our sun-drenched part of the world – reducing the effects of the sun's rays and providing protection of up to SPF50 when dry and SPF40 when wet. Merino is also naturally anti-microbial and resistant to contaminants due to its physical and chemical structure.

Clothing joint venture

A joint initiative between *Boeremakelaars Koöperatief Beperk* (BKB) and The Merino Company (TMC) has seen Merino wool emerge as an increasingly important local fibre, with enormous local and international appeal across a range of applications. As important as this contribution to the SA agricultural sector is, it is also based on eco-friendly principles with BKB's motto being: 'If we take care of nature, nature will take care of us.'

'The unique attributes of South African Merino make it nature's best fibre. South African Merino is sourced from dedicated South African Merino wool growers who are devoted to the care of the environment, their farms and their sheep,' says BKB.

A result of the BKB-TMC joint venture is the 'CORE Merino' range of products, made exclusively from natural Merino fibres. This range includes stylish and functional summer and winter wear, minimal and layered versatile

wear and easy wear, together reflecting the full range of consumer needs.

This offering represents a first for South African fashion and outdoor active-wear enthusiasts. Developed together with Merino garment experts, the range is offered in order to fill a gap in the market so often mentioned by those seeking functional, stylish and comfortable Merino wear.

As CORE Merino fibres are sourced directly from BKBPlus woolgrowers, these members know where their wool goes, and wearers can be confident that the fibre in their garment is only the best quality, natural SA Merino.

The product range conforms to standards set by Cape Wools to carry the 'South African Merino' label. CORE Merino is endorsed by both the National Wool Growers Association and Merino SA.

Fashioned into technically performing circular knit fabrics, using state-of-the-art machinery few have access to, these multi-purpose and functional Merino garments provide style in summer or winter, the finest in next-to-skin comfort, and are described as 'perfect for both the lifestyle and active-wear markets'.

There are two garment types in the CORE Merino range: base-layer and mid-layer. The base-layer garments are 100% superfine Merino, single jersey (175gsm) coming in a range of styles, from classic short-sleeve tees to snug, long-sleeved zip-neck styles and full-length leggings for both men and women. These multi-purpose garments work brilliantly as part of a layering system, and can be utilised in many ways – from underneath work wear to fashionable outerwear.

The mid-layer garments are 100% 20.5 micron Merino, single jersey (250gsm) and are available in four styles designed to layer over your favourite base-layer garments for cooler days. This range consists of long-sleeve crew-neck, V-neck and zip-neck styles for men, and a zip-neck style for the ladies – perfect for replacing old traditional heavy knitted sweaters.

Across both the base and mid-layer ranges, all shoulder seams and shoulder panels have been flat-seamed for comfort under pack or bag straps. Every feature of the CORE Merino range is the result of input and considered by experts with the aim of achieving optimal look, feel, comfort and practicality in SA conditions. **SG**

For more info: www.coremerino.co.za

Resources: Wikipedia • www.merinoso.co.za

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Available at www.coremerino.co.za