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Tibet - Norlha Textiles

#IWEARCULTURE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCELLA ECHAVARRIA

PURPOSEFUL TRAVEL WITH A FOCUS ON FINDING TRUE TREASURES IS NOT ONLY A TREND, BUT A MOVEMENT TOWARDS CULTURALLY RESPONSIBLE TOURISM AND PHILANTHROPY



Beijing - Wuyong

Bolivia - Sucre



Tibet

Tibet



Travelling to remote places has many advantages, like running away from tourist traps, escaping the step-by-step guidebook style of travel, enjoying pristine nature sites and, especially, discovering best-kept secrets. Remote travel in search of the unique is a trend that is gaining momentum at the same speed as globalisation aims to invade every corner of the earth. And it is precisely that open invitation to surprise and the unexpected that is the very secret of a fabulous trip.

MY COUNTRY IS UNDERGOING A HEARTBREAKING LOSS OF TRADITION FOR THE SAKE OF AN IRRESPONSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE FUTURE

- Ma Ke -

Tiffany Smith, a philanthropist from California, says, "I love discovering the work of new artisans, finding ways to support their work and helping them realise their value". One of her recent discoveries while travelling in Beijing was Wuyong, the living museum started by Chinese designer Ma Ke in an industrial area of Beijing. Ma Ke explains, "Cultural variety and regional diversity are being assimilated through economic globalisation.

Traditional craftsmanship is disappearing from our daily life, and can now only be found in museum exhibits. Through these tremendous social changes, my country is undergoing a heartbreaking loss of tradition for the sake of an irresponsible pursuit of the future".

Ma Ke created Wuyong as an answer to her concerns and a lifetime of work as a designer of Exception, the first Chinese designer brand. Wuyong is one of these secret places that only operate by word of mouth and by appointment. The main area is an open lobby where different exhibitions of "useless" concepts take place, such as Chinese baskets, puppets and umbrellas. The real mystery awaits after a very small door asks guests to kneel and enter a humble rural house that is exactly the opposite of the buzzing outside world. One of Wuyong's hosts, wearing a traditional Chinese apron, leads the way through wooden furniture, accessories, and fashion and lifestyle items such as tea tree powder and handmade soaps.

In Ma Ke's words, "I became more and more attracted by Chinese traditional craftsmanship; the peasants live their lives the way our ancestors did, they get up when the sun rises and they rest when the sun sets. The intimacy and harmony they have with nature; the clarity and frugality they treat everything with; and the reverence they have for nature has moved me profoundly".

In another Beijing street, hidden in an alleyway, is Kathrin von Rechenberg's studio. She is a German designer who came to China 15 years ago looking for tea silk, a traditional southern Chinese fabric made from hand-woven silk treated

with yam juice and mud. Kathrin explains, "I was instantly taken with the lustrous black shades and subtle texture of the dark, paper-like fabric, with its interesting ecological characteristics. Tea silk has existed since the Ming Dynasty. To this day it is produced manually in southern China, using traditional techniques that have not changed in more than 500 years."

TO THIS DAY TEA SILK IS PRODUCED MANUALLY USING TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES THAT HAVE NOT CHANGED IN MORE THAN 500 YEARS

- Kathrin von Rechenberg -

She continues, "The plant used to dye tea silk has long been associated with traditional Chinese medicine for its wound-healing properties. Centuries ago fishermen noted that their nets, treated with yam juice from a fibrous native tuber to prevent them from rotting, turned black from being in contact with river mud." A similar labour-intensive process today transforms the neutral silk fabric to give it its rich, coppery and caramel tones. The best quality fabric is stored for up to 5 years and properly aged tea silk is as rare as fine wine. Rechenberg applies her knowledge of haute couture to the love of this fabric, making true works of art.

In Ritoma, a remote Tibetan Autonomous Region in Gansu province in China, glamorous textile junkies and chic Beijingers travel hours in search of fine yak textiles at Norlha Atelier, a social

enterprise run by 120 nomads. With retail stores only in Tibet, Norlha is a true destination for textile connoisseurs who know that this short fiber requires great skill to be handspun. Norlha has been working for a few years with high-end European fashions that appreciate the quality and craftsmanship of its textiles.

At literally the end of the world in Puerto Natales, Patagonia, Paulina Escobar is the creator behind Le Mouton Vert (the green sheep), a small enterprise that uses the whitest merino wool in the world to make handmade pieces that are now in the hands of collectors and textile aficionados. The process is entirely handmade, transparent and responsible, using merino wool, which is the world's whitest - "The immense pastures and the high wind factor helps the sheep be very clean".

Two years ago, Paulina moved from Switzerland back to Puerto Natales in search of a place where she could weave in peace and good light. "I found a place with a view to the glaciers and the ocean at the end of the world...my next step was to reconnect with the women I remember from my childhood who were innate weavers; strong Chilean women who simply loved weaving". Paulina is a firm advocate of responsible wool and high quality heirloom pieces that carry with them the history of their land, which in this case happens to be uniquely white. She campaigns against overconsumption and in favour of a frugal and responsible lifestyle.



Patagonia

Tibet - Norlha Textiles



Bolivia - Jalq'a and Tarabuco Textiles

Patagonia



I FOUND A PLACE WITH A VIEW TO THE GLACIERS AND THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE WORLD... MY NEXT STEP WAS TO RECONNECT WITH THE WOMEN I REMEMBER FROM MY CHILDHOOD

- Paulina Escobar -

Bolivia is one of South America's best-kept secrets. Its history is told mainly through a very rich textile culture that is alive today thanks to its mostly indigenous population (80%). Near the beautiful city of Sucre are two villages known for their textiles: Jalq'a and Tarabuco. The red and black textiles of Jalq'a represent the underworld and the chaos of the dark realms where strange creatures abound. These Quechua artists represent a primal world of darkness and confusion, one that depicts the very core of the earth. Their world is one of fantasy and their textiles are true museum pieces, very much appreciated by collectors of modern art.

The village of Tarabuco produces very different textiles. Their world is one of order, colour, clarity and symmetry. They tell stories of their daily life marked by the cycles of nature and cultural events. They love water and represent it through zigzags in most of their textiles. The horse is one of their main figures as well as the condor, llamas and rabbits.

#Iwearculture can be more than a hashtag; it can redefine the very essence of culturally responsible tourism. And as Ralph Waldo Emerson says: "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not".

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Marcella Echavarría is a Colombian-born, New York-based entrepreneur contributing regularly about cultural and adventure travel, design and food to magazines in South America and the US. Her work has been featured in *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Departures*, *Centurion*, *W*, *Indagare*, *Daily Candy* and *Elle Decoration*. Alongside her work as a travel and lifestyle photojournalist and travel designer, Echavarría covers artisans around the world and works with them to preserve their craft by developing links between these vanishing communities and developed markets.



Tibet - Norlha Textiles



Beijing - Rechenberg



Beijing - Rechenberg



Tibet



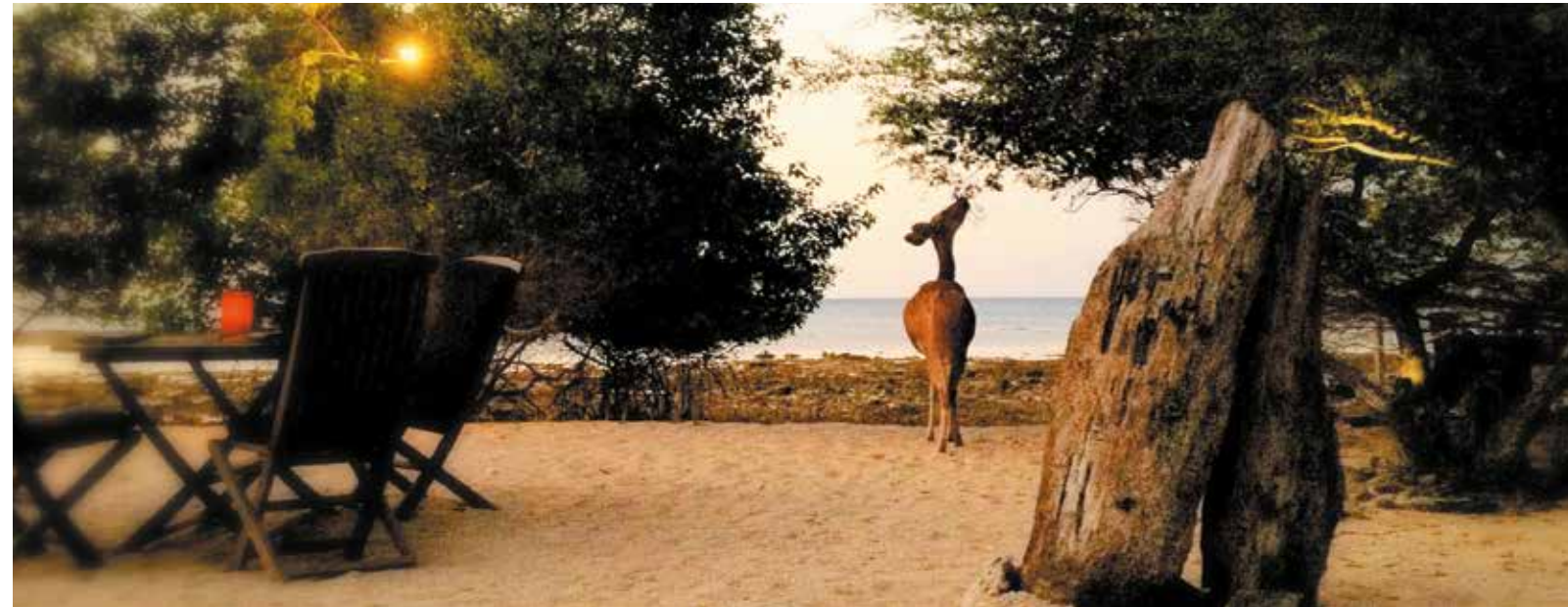
Beijing - Rechenberg



Bolivia - Jalq'a and Tarabuco Textiles

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