



Tannery manager Pete Winterbourne says hand fleshing is one of the most satisfying processes.
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Room with a view: The showroom stocks an array of home accessories, footwear and clothing.

Skyeskyns' remote Scottish home provides a stunning backdrop for traditional tanning practices that attract visitors in their thousands.

Under the skin

Seven times as many sheep live on the Isle of Skye than people. The animal dominates island life – even the tanners at Skyeskyns leave early to tend to their crofts after work. The tannery is one of only a few sheepskin specialists in the UK, and last year welcomed a staggering 19,000 visitors through its doors – almost double the number of people that reside on the whole of the northern Scottish island.

A half-hour drive from Skye's capital Portree, tourists make the winding journey around the headland to the picturesque Lochbay to learn about the ancient processes that go into turning skins into beautiful finished products. The warm welcome, despite the sometimes grey conditions, has helped earn the business a five star rating from Visit Scotland, the country's tourist organisation, for its "exceptional customer service and world-class visitor experience".

"Before the tannery tour, a lot of people don't understand how it's done," explains Skyeskyns' Isabelle Florin. "They are amazed by how labour intensive the process is, and they are fascinated to see how the skin is transformed from something rough and not necessarily good-looking into something that's lovely and soft that they can run their hands through."

Rural way of life

Skyeskyns was founded in 1983 by Clive and Lydia Hartwell, who felt there could be a use for the abundance of local skins that were going to waste.

In the early days, they did most of the tanning themselves, with Clive and first tannery manager John McLeod graduates of Northampton University's leather course. Daughter Jess followed in their footsteps, attending Northampton alongside current tannery manager Pete

Winterbourne. She now runs the business with her mother and general manager Dave Till, as well as an expanding team of support staff. "It takes a special kind of person to be a tanner and our tanners love what they do," says Miss Florin. "Wool-on tanning is an art in itself."

Most skins are sourced from northern Scotland: from Dingwall, with some from Stornoway or the Scottish Borders. While the tannery is small, the techniques are traditional and visitors are encouraged to learn about the fleshing, tumbling and buffing, the carding, hand-combing and ironing.

After the tour, they can go upstairs to the showroom, where stock is complemented by skins and products from the other parts of the UK and further afield: farmed reindeer from Finland, and Norse, Icelandic and merino. "We don't find these sheep locally, although I hear merinos are becoming popular on the Outer Isles," says Ms Florin.



Rugs are not dyed to highlight the wool's original beauty.

A team of seamstresses make cushions and accessories, such as teddy bears or hot water bottle covers. The company also has close ties with sheepskin counterpart Devonia Tannery, which sends products to sell in its shop. "We don't dye anything onsite, everything is natural colours. When we do want something dyed, we ask our friends in Devon, as they have that ability."

Online sales are increasing, with the company focusing on print advertising, website expansion and social media channels to help grow the brand. There are also many Skyeskyns rugs in local guesthouses and hotels. "On Skye, people do try to buy locally. We are all very reliant on tourism but it's nice to support local business to make sure there are jobs."

However, the bulk of purchases are made by visitors to the tannery, with half of those sales by overseas tourists, who treasure their products as souvenirs of Scotland. A glance at TripAdvisor shows the attitude of American guests: "We couldn't resist the deep, plush and warm skins," says one. "My 17-year-old son cuddled that thing all the way back to the USA."

Veg tanning target

This year, the company is taking the big step of moving its processes away

from chrome, with a target of all its skins being veg tanned as soon as possible. "Although we recognise that our customers are increasingly conscious of provenance, as a business we are taking this step as part of our commitment to continuous environmental improvement. A more biodegradable effluent is part of our overall strategy. We want to be the best we can be and honour the beautiful place we live in."

The tanners are experimenting with mimosa and are still working on the final recipe. She reports that the leathers they are creating are "super soft and wonderful", and the switch will require little in the way of machinery or process change. "It's been talked about for years and we are finally taking the plunge. This would give us the option of expanding production should we wish to."

As there are fake furs on the market, Ms Florin says it is important to explain to visitors that sheepskin is not part of the fur trade, but a by-product of the meat industry. And the difference is clear: "As soon as people put their hands on a real sheepskin, they wouldn't want to go back to the fake version. The natural wool is so soft, so wonderful; it keeps you warm, it keeps

you cool, it's hypoallergenic, it does all these wonderful things, so why would you buy a fake one? There is a tangible difference between an artisan-produced sheepskin and a mass-produced one."

For the company's 30th anniversary celebrations in 2014, Princess Anne was invited to Skye to see how the tannery contributes to the local economy, and was presented with a sheepskin rug and teddy bears as souvenirs. HRH Princess Royal said it was a pleasure to see a family business that takes such pride in what it produces.

At the event, Jess Hartwell paid homage to her father, who had recently died. She said: "As we move from one generation to the next, we continue to uphold his core values: craftsmanship, outstanding customer service and pride in telling the story of leather, one of the most ancient skills, passed down through generations."

In April, the company made another advance: opening its first standalone shop, in Portree, to appeal to people arriving by boat or coach. "It's a good opportunity to catch that market, but also to signpost the main attraction," adds Ms Florin. "Because that's the real experience – coming here and seeing how it all began." 🌿