

AND THE AWARD FOR BEST HAIR GOES TO...

The alpaca! Its population is growing so rapidly in SA that it even has its own National Alpaca Day on 30 April. Gen up on this Andes animal (and its lovely locks) here



THEY'RE NATURALLY LUXURIOUS. 'It's considered one of the finest animal fibres on the planet,' says Alison Notley, president of the SA Alpaca Breeders Society. 'Most alpaca fibre is between 15 and 28 microns, comparable with cashmere, while even the finest kid mohair is coarser, at about 30 microns.' Alpaca is also seven times warmer than wool.

THEY'RE PHOTOGENIC. 'They're extremely cute,' says Manfred Hinsch, who owns an alpaca stud near Graaff-Reinet. 'They have lovely big, round eyes, and even have colour-coded eyelashes.' It is the most colour-diversified natural fibre in the world, with some 22 shades registered, from white to caramel to maroon to black.

THEY'RE CHARACTERS. 'Not only do they have highly individual looks but they have individual personalities

and a sense of humour,' says Notley, 'and they prunk for the joy of it – rather like impalas. They're also very stoic – they don't seem to like losing face.'

THEY HUM. 'They'll hover around, and when they're comfortable with you they'll hum,' says Hinsch. 'They communicate with their cria (alpaca offspring) like that. It's a very soothing sound; they've been used therapeutically to help troubled children.'

THEY MAKE EXCELLENT HERD GUARDS... Being highly territorial, they'll squeal and make sharp, noisy inhalations that sound like high-pitched donkey brays to warn the herd of intruders, and also kick and spit as modes of defence. 'They've been successful at guarding sheep,' says Notley.

...AND PETS. 'They make good companions and can be led around on a halter like a dog, often becoming fairly attached to humans,' says Hinsch. 'You just have to show a certain amount of assertiveness.'

THEY'RE POOR BREEDERS. 'They have a low sperm count, with breeding sessions lasting up to half an hour,' says Hinsch.

They only have one cria per year (after an 11-month gestation period). But they're very affectionate mothers, although they don't lick their babies because they can't – their tongues can't project from their mouth.

THEY'RE A GIFT FROM THE GODS. According to South American folklore, the Quechua people, who domesticated alpacas over 5,000 years ago, believe they were put on Earth to raise alpacas and that alpacas were put on Earth to raise the Quechua – neither can exist without the other.

GET THE WARM FUZZIES HERE!

Many of SA's 52 alpaca breeders open their farms to the public on 30 April; otherwise, visitors are welcome if they call ahead

STILLWATER ESTATE PHILADELPHIA

'Come and you'll fall in love with alpacas instantly,' says Eva Dölitzsch-Tatzreither of Akelei Alpacas, a working farm near Cape Town with alpaca tours by foot or 4X4. Arrive by 10AM, and you can walk with alpaca mothers and their cria from the stables to the paddocks. The Alpaca Boutique sells handwoven scarves, shawls and the Afro-Alpaca Bijou jewellery range. akelei-alpacas.co.za

HELDERSTROOM ALPACAS VILLIERSDORP

Alison Notley's alpacas were part of SA's second import consignment; her herd produced the country's first alpaca twins – an extremely rare phenomenon: 1 in 50,000. helderstroomalpacas.co.za

CRICKLEYWOOD NEAR GRAAFF-REINET

Home to ex-Namibians Manfred and Verena Hinsch's Mukuti Stud, this was the first alpaca farm in the Eastern Cape. They make blankets, clothing, yarn and soap (with a pinch of alpaca

fibre added to the lye, which dissolves to create a wonderfully soft and lustrous product), plus there's a guesthouse. alpacasa.co.za

QUENTIAL ALPACAS WELLINGTON

With a herd of 150, plus 22 recently born cria, visitors get a one-hour tour (R50pp) to see the animals, specialised mill and weaving studio. quentialpacas.co.za

SERENA ALPACAS HIDCOTE

One of SA's largest herds (over 240 alpacas) lives near Mooi River in KwaZulu-Natal, where fleeces are used to fill duvets. On National Alpaca Day there'll be an introductory workshop, plus tours of the farm and duvet mill. +27 (0)82 896 0276

MISTIQUE ALPACAS WAKKERSTROOM

In Mpumalanga, Fenella van Ryneveld welcomes visitors to see, touch and feed the animals that produce the luxury

fibre that she spins into yarn for her non-allergenic winterwear. There's a spinning demonstration, too. wakerstroom.co.za/alpacas

ESTANCIA ALPACA FOURIESBURG

Fairview Estate, in the eastern Free State, is an appaloosa stud farm and home to alpacas bred from among the first contingent brought to SA. It has beautiful accommodation, including a 100-year-old sandstone house and a handsomely converted caravan on the lake. fairviewestates.co.za

THE ALPACA LOOM NEAR PAARL

Manor House Alpaca Stud breeds companion and herd guard alpacas, and offers alpaca barn tours (R50) at weekends, with an introduction to the animals and their luxurious fibre. There's a coffee shop and weaving studio (open daily), plus a petting zoo for children. alpacas.co.za

More farms on alpacasociety.co.za

