

30-01-2014

A Brave New Wool: Merino Base Layers

With their temperature-regulating and odor-busting prowess, itch-free merino undergarments from Icebreaker, Patagonia, Smartwool and others are shepherding in woolen bliss for all



Shown: Patagonia's Merino 2 Lightweight Crew and Smartwool's PhD Outdoor Light Crew Socks *Illustration by Peter Arkle for The Wall Street Journal*

"**WEAR WOOL NEXT** to the skin," wrote Colin Fletcher in the "The Complete Walker," a 1960s bible of backpacking. And they did: For decades, outdoorsmen and women championed wool for its ability to retain heat by trapping tiny pockets of air, while preventing you from overheating by wicking moisture away from the skin. But while they reaped wool's benefits, many of Fletcher's acolytes also itched all the way down the trail.



AWGA - News Update

Times have changed. High-end brands have pushed the age-old textile forward—especially wool from the merino, a softer-coated sheep breed. Animals are being bred to produce thinner, longer fibers. Sourcing from ranchers who are more apt to keep their flocks in highlands, where the sheep's coats are less likely to get dirty, allows for milder washes in the processing phase. The result: a durable but ultrasoft fabric that's finally itch-free.

“ *Merino wool is a durable but ultrasoft fabric that's finally itch-free.* ”

As it turns out, the qualities that make merino wool ideal for a mountain climb from one microclimate to another also make it great for going from a cold parking lot to an overheated office. Garments from companies like Icebreaker, Ibex, Patagonia and SmartWool that are designed with adventurers in mind also work discreetly under a suit.

During a three-month journey around the world, I tested some of the brands' hard-wearing claims. My backpack was stuffed mostly with merino garments that I wore and re-wore on the mountains of Morocco and at Paris bistros alike. Here is the best of the stuff I sampled.



Icebreaker's Anatomica Boxer Briefs Danny Kim for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas

Underwear

Acarophobics (those who fear itchiness) take note: Quality wool underwear will not cause you to squirm in your seat. Premium outfitters use fibers that are much finer (17 to 19 microns) than standard wool (grandpa's sweater: 24 microns), so strands that come in contact with your skin flex instead of poking at your nerve endings. **Icebreaker's Anatomica Boxer Briefs** (\$45, us.icebreaker.com) blend those merino fibers with Lycra stretch material for support and barely-there weight. Because merino wool dries quicker than cotton, it's great to travel with. You can wash a pair of drawers in the hotel sink and sleep assured they'll be ready to wear in the morning. And unlike the slick and baggy synthetic "travel underwear" you find in the SkyMall catalog (which I also tested), merino wool underwear doesn't make you feel like you're wearing a deflated hot-air balloon.

Base Layers

Merino undershirts and long johns are a gateway drug to the woolen underworld. Since most wool base layers are less bulky than traditional waffle thermals, you can wear them under work clothes, too. The best I tried was made from a blend: **Patagonia's Merino 2 Lightweight Crew** (\$80 for men's, \$90 for women's, patagonia.com) uses a jersey fabric that's 80% wool and 20% polyester. It withstood washings (and even machine dryings) better than other 100% merino offerings, some of which shrunk, puckered or lost their shape. Other basics in the Merino 2 Lightweight line are long underwear, henleys, crews and polos.

Short-Sleeve T-Shirts



The dirty truth about most stretchy, synthetic performance apparel flooding sportswear stores: It stinks. Literally. Studies have found that polyester knits retain more odor than wool. While all four merino T-shirts I tested were wearable without washing for a few days (not for weeks, as some companies claim), the one I put on most frequently was the ultralight **Patagonia Merino 1 Silkweight** (\$65, patagonia.com): The men's short-sleeve shirt in medium weighs a mere 4.7 ounces and is incredibly soft. Although it's 35% synthetic Capilene, the Merino 1 Silkweight conquered stinkitude as well as its all-merino competitors. The addition of Capilene also ups the fabric's "burst strength," making the shirt less likely to rip.

Socks

Out of eight pairs I tested, **Smartwool's PhD Outdoor Light Crew Socks** (\$21, smartwool.com), held their shape and resisted ruptures the best. (I managed to bust holes in the toes of several pairs from other brands.)

Unlike the raggy wool socks from 20 years ago, these are made with modern weaving machines that vary the thickness of the merino across the sock, creating a denser weave in parts that require more warmth and padding, such as under the foot. The advanced weaving technique also allows for precision placement of the nylon used to create the sock's foot-conforming structure, resulting in less bulk. Smartwool's PhD line comes in heavier weights for skiers and compression models for runners, but the Light Crew version, available in men's and women's sizes, is perfect for slipping inside street shoes, and comes in a range of colors and patterns.

Patagonia Merino 1 Silkweight

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303448204579338793940842788>