



Benelux Benefit

For some years now John Peeters has been ploughing a lonely furrow building an alpaca business from a young man's obsession. Now after much hard work and one major setback his efforts have been rewarded as alpaca farming in Belgium and Holland start to take off.

In 1999, as a 19-year-old agricultural student it was compulsory for us to do a work experience abroad. I decided to go to Australia, not knowing what I wanted to do at that time. Surfing on the internet I found lots of farms in Australia, and one specific sector just stood out for me: alpacas. I knew these animals as my father kept a lot of animals and we had bought our first alpacas in 1996. We kept them as a hobby, and I didn't know at that time that one could make a living breeding alpacas, so I was very surprised to find lots of alpaca farms on the internet.

I came in contact with Kate & Robbie Cuthill, owners of Blackgate Lodge Alpaca Stud, one of the smaller studs in Australia. This man was an alpaca shearer, something I wanted to learn, so that made me decide to go there. In the first few weeks in Australia it became clear to me that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life. Talking on the phone to my parents I convinced them to come over to Australia and have a look at the alpaca business there. I showed them around and they too were very impressed. Looking at the quality of the animals in Australia made me wonder whether we had alpacas or llamas – the animals were so much different. Learning more about quality I was convinced we had alpacas, but just very bad quality.

Back home I started an alpaca shearing business, travelling throughout The Netherlands and Belgium to shear alpacas at hobby breeders and zoos. I was surprised how many alpacas there were in the Benelux countries but I was very disappointed with the general quality – maybe I was spoiled too much in Australia. The same year I went to England to work at MileEnd Alpacas, where I learned more and more. The shearing business went abroad the second year when I travelled to France and Germany too to shear there.

In 2001 I bought my first alpacas myself – about 25 females. We also moved my business to Belgium, where we bought a very old and neglected farm. Building the new stable and farmhouse started in 2002. I still lived at my parents' place in The Netherlands and travelled daily to Belgium (only 30 km) to feed the animals and build the stable and house. Then on a morning in September 2002 when I arrived at the farm with my dad we looked at the fields and saw nothing. All the animals were gone. Stolen. The fence had been cut and 33 breeding females were taken from their fields. I was left devastated with just a couple of males which they had left behind. The animals have never been found, although they all were microchipped.

Four years of study and hard work and a lot of money had been invested in alpacas and the new farm and I knew for sure that I was going to buy new animals and start over. So in November 2002, only two months after the animals were stolen a new group of females were happily grazing on the farm. This time I bought a group of high quality females in England.

The first few years were difficult for me. Not only because of the stolen herd, but because it was difficult to try to sell an alpaca in a country where the animals are known to be of lesser – cheaper – quality. But more and more people got convinced over the years that they should not buy bad quality animals and that there is only future for good quality stock.

In 2004 we also started with guided tours on our farm. The first year we had 500 paying visitors, the second year was amazing with 8.000 visitors. For 2006 we had 8.000 again, plus 3.000 visitors on our open day in August. These farm tours and open days are mainly to educate people about alpacas and I have got some sales of animals to people who came to my farm as a tourist.

I try to promote the higher quality alpacas in every possible way. The last two years we had a Belgian Alpaca show and in 2007 we will organise a show in The Netherlands. We also got access to some high quality males from Classical MileEnd Alpacas, who were very happy to agist a male on my farm for matings. We have also won some prices at the German AZVD shows for the last three years. This convinced people that they should buy better quality animals and that's why the demand for these animals has risen and prices are catching up with the UK. I actually sold so many females this year that I needed new animals that again I bought in England, this time a group of thirty nine Peruvian females.

So I am very happy to see the alpaca business in the Benelux growing with more and more breeders who breed better quality alpacas. I was the first and only professional alpaca breeder in the Benelux for years, but in 2005 and 2006 some new farms started breeding alpacas professionally, so I am not alone any more.

Anybody who wants to come over and visit my farm is very welcome. Please make an appointment in advance. We also have two holiday guesthouses, so you are welcome to stay overnight. More information can be found on www.alpaca-international.com.