

Often commemorating marriages, births, housewarmings and other major life events, *shyrdaks* convey the artisan's wishes for prosperity, wealth, strength and courage for family, friends and tribe. The patterns often convey hidden meanings representing the history, culture and lifestyle of the Kyrgyz people.

The Naryn region bordering China on the south is most famous for the quality and variety of its *shyrdaks* although they are made throughout all regions of Kyrgyzstan.

The Kyrgyz Traditional Art of Making Felt Carpets – *Shyrdaks* – is among three cultural traditions of Kyrgyz nomadic life that have been recently honored by selection for the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, along with traditional yurt-making and the Kyrgyz epic tale of Manas.

# Ancient Traditions of Kyrgyz Nomads

## Shyrdak



Across the vast Asian land mass, artistry along the Great Silk Road has widely taken the form of carpets and textiles, and Kyrgyz nomadic traditions are no exception. But Kyrgyz carpets, called *shyrdaks*, are neither woven nor knotted, but are lovingly stitched from sheep's wool made into felt. These bright, colorful carpets, symbolically representing animals, birds, water, sun, clouds and other patterns inspired by nature, adorn the interior of yurts, the portable homes of nomadic herders high in the *jailoos* (mountain pastures) of Kyrgyzstan.

Sheep are as essential to nomadic traditions as horses and were the primary source of food, clothing and shelter for the Kyrgyz people. Yurts themselves are made of a thick, durable felt that keep dwellings cool in the high heat of a summer's day and warm with the dipping temperatures of a mountain night.



*Shyrdaks* line both the floor and the inside walls of the yurt, keeping both wind and moisture at bay and brightening the ambiance of this cozy habitat. *Shyrdaks* continue to decorate many modern Kyrgyz homes where they occupy a place of cultural pride – often, they are passed down from one generation to the next and can last 40 or more years with light usage.

Converting sheep's wool into felt is an arduous process of hand washing, dying, drying and rolling to prepare the dense fibers required for producing the felt, a process handed down for generations. Kyrgyz women have made *shyrdaks* for centuries, often working communally on carpets as large as 15-18 square meters that can take up to two months to complete.

