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Confessions of a 'knitaholic'

A woolly obsession is sweeping the land. **Harriot Lane Fox** is hooked

My name is Harriot and I'm a knitaholic. There's an embryonic scarf in my kitchen. Today I wasted hours making surplus mugs of Bovril in order to sneak in a few rows while the kettle boiled. Oh, that soft hand-dyed Welsh wool, the swishy glide of needle over needle.

Knitting lessons should carry a health warning. This granny-ish pastime is all the rage again, in case you didn't know. Film stars clickety-clack away between takes, while young trendies are knitting in pubs and on the London Underground. But what nobody mentions is how addictive it is. Once you've got needles and wool, and know how to use them, you'll have an itch that's got to be scratched.

I blame Aneeta Patel. Until we met, I was a knitting ingénue with good genes – my mother makes Madame Defarge look like a slouch. I knitted one unwearable scarf under her tutelage, aged 14, and lost interest. Last winter, I tried again.

After several dull evenings going over the basics, I had a mutant practice square in acrylic, useless even as a potholder – hardly the prelude to a wardrobe full of glamorous knitwear.

In just two hours, Aneeta works miracles. Knitting nous pours from her. Dropping the right needle while winding the wool round the other one is not wrong, after all, but frightfully modern, she says. However I should be holding the loose needle with the finger tips of my left hand rather than resting it on my embonpoint.

"Everyone can knit," says Anita. "If you've never done it before but I see you two or three times every month, and you knit in between, I see no reason why I couldn't start you with socks in four months – the sort you'll want everyone to see."

Aneeta is the Mozart of knitting. She learned when she was five and now writes patterns and holds classes at her flat in Stepney, east London. Pupils include City lawyers, school teachers from Australia and young mothers in burkas. "You can never tell who's going



GUIDE TO THE GENTLE ART OF MAKING SCARVES

Harriot's scarf

Description: The best thing is that it looks hand-made. The oh-so desirable hand-dyed new wool varies in thickness from fluffy dreadlock to tight twisted string. It makes random fatter stitches that look like cool loops and hide my hiccupping tension. The scarf is 18cm wide (15 stitches, just because

that looked right) and 158cm long (enough for once round the neck with a Dr Who dangle), in a blur of buttery yellows and pinks.

Knit kit

Three skeins of Colinette Point 5 100 per cent wool (£6.10 each)
 Brittany 12mm birch knitting needles (£6.10)
 Crochet hook (£1)
 Total cost: £25.40
 I won't have to pay for the tools again, of course.
 Time to make: 5hrs 45mins – spread over four evenings and



about 14 daytime Bovril visits to the kitchen. With thick wool and needles like tent pegs, the scarf grew gratifyingly quickly – a real confidence booster.

Beginners' knitting survival guide

Aneeta Patel, pictured, holds regular two-hour classes (£22, 07940 850458; www.knittingsos.co.uk), and her book, *Knitty Gritty* (£14.99, A&C Black), is full of absolute beginner-proof instructions and patterns. Run by enthusiasts, the UK Hand Knitting Association (www.ukhandknitting.com) is a mine of information on classes, knitting groups, shows and shops. A couple of quirkier websites are also worth a visit: the Victoria & Albert Museum's (www.vam.ac.uk) – type "knitting" into the search box for history, free patterns and blogs; to "whip your knitting into shape", try www.domiknitrux.com. For a gossip and a knit try UK-wide Stitch n Bitch (www.stitchnbitch.co.uk)



DO'S AND DON'TS

What tools do I need?

Apart from wool and knitting needles, the starter tool kit comprises darning needles, crochet hook, scissors, pencil, cable needle and tape measure.

When will I be able to knit a jumper?

Anyone who practises regularly – i.e. who knits a minimum of two rows a day – can make a scarf in two weeks, start a baby cardigan after a month and tackle socks in four months

How can I avoid making beginner's mistakes?

You can't. But it will help if you count your stitches at the end of every row and don't stop halfway through a row. And always put your knitting down for *Strictly Come Dancing*.

And if I do make a mistake?

It depends what it is, but you can sew up unintended holes and put a sequin or button on top for that quirky "boho" look.

When is the best time to knit?

Any time except when you get back from the pub. That's how you get "the wine row" – the one you regret with your hangover in the morning.

What's the best music to knit to?

Lauryn Hill's album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* "because it's really long so you don't have to get up to change it," says Aneeta.

to turn up," she says.

Rather than booking a course, you join a class when you need one. Each lesson focuses on new skills – casting on, knitting and starting a new ball of wool in the first session – with a proper project, like my scarf, to practise them on at home. After three lessons, you tell Aneeta what you want to achieve (Brora-esque cashmere cardies, of course). Tonight in her sitting room, with Norah Jones playing in the background, the atmosphere is part *How to Make an American Quilt* (remember Winona Ryder at her grandmother's quilting bee?), part secret meeting of knitting fundamentalist converts.

"I'm obsessed; I can't stop looking at needles," says Sam, a property entrepreneur, brandishing a new pair with toadstools on the ends. She's only had one lesson but delves into a carrier bag to produce two beautiful scarves and a pair of baby booties she taught herself how to make with Aneeta's new book for absolute beginners, *Knitty Gritty*, the must-have accessory this winter. Sam is almost as big an inspiration as Aneeta. I'm going to teach myself to cast off and make a hippie fringe for my scarf, and then booties for a new nephew, a wispy shawl for Christmas parties, and those wrist warmers. How many mugs of Bovril is that?

OLIVER PRITCHETT

IT JUST OCCURRED TO ME...



SLEEPLESSNESS IS A VIRTUE

We are told that Gordon Brown gets by on four hours' sleep a night while he supposedly saves the world from financial ruin. We are obviously supposed to award him brownie points (excuse the pun) for this minimal amount of shut-eye, but the real question is: how many hours does Mrs Brown manage to put in?

Comparing notes on how the night went is a ritual of married life and the partner (usually the man) who has slept like a log is at a serious moral disadvantage. It must go back to the days of babies and night-time feeds when anybody appearing the least bit rested and bright-eyed could be accused of being an unfit parent. In later years this leads to what I call competitive insomnia – and in our household we play the game to Olympic standards.

"How did you sleep?" she asks. "Fitfully," I reply, putting on a troubled look. "Scarcely a wink."

"That's odd. You seemed completely out to the world."

"I was just lying very still so as not to



Comparing notes on how the night went is a ritual of married life

disturb you." One of the rules of the game is that you don't use the word "snoring".

You may, however, say: "Well, you sounded very deeply asleep." Tactics play a crucial part; if your partner plays the "I couldn't get off" card, it's probably best to respond with the wide-awake-at-five-and-couldn't-get-back play.

Bedside digital clocks have made the sport more sophisticated. "I'm surprised you didn't hear that fox barking at 3.23," she will say. "That must be when I finally snatched a few minutes between 3.17 and 3.41," you reply. "After the visitors to Number 17 slammed their car doors at 2.58."

The Prime Minister obviously believes he has a trump in his competitive insomnia game. He can give a bleary sigh and say: "Would you believe it? I had to get up four times in the night to go and telephone the IMF."

Even so, I bet Sarah Brown can beat that.

