

**Consumer Decision Making Contest
2001-2002 Study Guide
Luggage**

Buying luggage is much like buying any other consumer good. It pays to compare!

In today's marketplace, much of the luggage sold in the United States is made overseas and those manufacturers do not provide replacement parts for their products. That means, if something breaks, you have little – if any – chance of having it repaired. Even if you purchase luggage that can be repaired, replacing those parts or repairing the damage may be as expensive as buying a new set of luggage. As a result, the initial purchase you make is very important.

Wheels

While wheels allow you to move your luggage with greater ease, they can also be a source of frustration.

Beware of purchasing luggage with wheels or wheel housings mounted on the exterior of a suitcase. Any protruding objects are more susceptible to getting caught on other items and being damaged. Wheels that are inset into the case, allowing only a portion of the wheel itself to be exposed, are less likely to be damaged or broken.

Avoid purchasing luggage where the wheel system and the feet of the suitcase are one unit. If one breaks, it can be expensive to repair or replace those parts.

Purchase only ball-bearing wheels. If pulled for a long period of time, non ball-bearing wheels tend to heat up and may actually melt the plastic wheel housings that hold them on the bag. Most better wheels include ball-bearings which allow them to roll smoothly over a variety of surfaces and for longer periods of time without damaging the case. In addition, ball-bearings extend the life of the wheel itself.

Look for wheels that are fairly large in diameter and are mounted into substantial wheel housings because they are the most durable, sturdy and reliable.

Siding

The durability of the outside fabric or shell of a suitcase is extremely important because the outside area is exposed to the greatest amount of abuse, wear and tear.

Soft-sided Fabrics vs Hard-sided Shells. Luggage manufacturers use a variety of fabrics, including nylon, polyester, jute, canvas, ramie, tapestry, denim, vinyl and leather. They are available in a variety of prices and, as a general rule, you get what you pay for!

When comparing fabrics, be sure to check the denier of the fabric when possible. The denier refers to the size of the yarn in the fabric; the higher the denier (the larger the yarn), the more durable the fabric.

Hard-sided shells tend to offer more protection for fragile items, but may also be heavier to carry around. While the hard shells are quite durable, resistant to heat and stains, and less likely to tear or rip, they do have a tendency to crack or dent in the corners if they receive a severe blow. Many of the soft-sided cases are lined with urethane to make them water resistant. In addition, they are often treated with a stain-repellent to help maintain their appearance.

Leather is also very strong and durable. However, it is very susceptible to scratching and scarring with repeated use. Because of this tendency to mar easily, most luggage manufacturers only offer leather items in smaller carry-on pieces such as garment bags, totes and brief cases.

As a general rule, a high quality nylon fabric (such as Cordura by Dupont or a ballistic nylon) have an extremely high wear and tear durability. That durability is greatly increased if the fabric is also treated, making it water repellent and stain resistant.

When purchasing hard-sided luggage, be sure that the shell of the case is fairly thick. The thinner the plastic shell, the less resistant it is to cracks and dents. Most shells made of Polypropylene or Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene will rarely break, but they will show surface scratches and wear and tear over a period of time.

Handles

Many of the luggage sets available in today's marketplace come with telescoping handles, a term that refers to the retractable hands that allow suitcases to be easily maneuvered. Some tips to follow when comparing handles include:

Avoid buying luggage with handle systems that are not secured in place when not in use. Over time these handle systems, held in place by friction, will loosen and pull out while you are moving your suitcase.

Look for handles that are substantial. Many of the tubes used to make them are easily dented or bent, which can totally disable the handle system.

Beware of buying luggage with handles mounted on the exterior of the case unless the handle system is exceptionally well-protected on the outside. It is generally best to purchase luggage with a handle system mounted on the case interior because it is more durable. It is important to note that few manufacturers who mount the handles on the outside provide adequate protection for them.

Shop for a handle system with a locking mechanism to prevent them from accidentally releasing while in transit. This feature is especially important if you plan to check the luggage with an airline. Also, if the handle will lock into place when fully extended, it is much easier to pull your luggage.

Look for luggage with handles that will store flush with the suitcase. The top portion of many handles actually protrude above the case, increasing the likelihood of damage.

Take the suitcase for a test-drive. Make sure the handle system operates smoothly and extends to a height that allows you to pull it comfortably.

Frames

In recent years, many manufacturers have greatly increased the quality of their luggage frames. However, some are still inferior. You can look on the inside of a suitcase to determine what type of frame is being used.

Some of the best constructed cases use a full honeycomb frame. Often made of PVC, this type of frame has air pockets running within the frame, allowing it to be somewhat flexible when it receives a severe blow. Honeycomb frames are lightweight, but durable and they offer substantial protection to the case contents. The quality of the frame is greatly enhanced if its edges are covered with a foam bumper or fabric to reduce possible zipper wear.

In addition to using the plastic PCV, manufacturers also use steel, wood, aluminum, spring steel, spring wire or other types of plastic. As a general rule, metal and plastic frames are the most widely used.

Be cautious when purchasing soft-sided cases with a steel frame. Many of these frames will have plastic corners or plastic inserts surrounding the entire frame. The thin edges of this plastic may be fairly rough and sharp, causing them to wear through the fabric of the case. Most cases using this style mount the zippers directly on the edge of the frame. As a result, repeated use of the zipper and the suitcase causes wear and damage on the outside corners of the zippers.

Zippers

There are two basic types of zippers used in luggage today: coil zippers and molded zippers. The coil zipper is made of one continuous strand of nylon or polyester which is wrapped and stitched into the zipper tape. It is the most commonly used zipper. The molded zipper is metal or plastic and has individual teeth individually applied to the zipper tape. (If you have looked at luggage recently, you know that metal zippers are rarely used.)

Avoid smaller-sized zippers. Many manufacturers are using zippers that are commonly found in clothing items, which are not strong enough to withstand the stress of a suitcase. The larger, oversized zippers are much more durable, making them able to tolerate the repeated wear and tear and the stress of closing a full load.

Zippers that are inset away from the edge or the seam of the suitcase are also a better choice. Each inch of material between the edge and the zipper can make a major difference in the amount of abuse it can endure. The edge of the suitcase is a very vulnerable stress area, especially on the corners. The corner portions of the zipper may be worn over time or the stitching that holds the zipper in place may become worn. Having a case with plastic zippers and a plastic or metal band running around the side of the suitcase will greatly increase the potential for damage to the corner portions of the zippers.

Damaged zippers are a big problem with this type of design, and they are very expensive to replace.

Latching Devices

In order to protect your valuables while traveling, you may want to consider luggage that has some type of locking device. The most common protective devices are locks and straps. Both come with latches that use either a key or a combination to unlock. The strap tends to provide greater security than just the singular lock. Choosing a lock with a combination may be “safer” than one with a separate key, especially for people who have trouble keeping up with keys!

Stitching/Hardware

Be sure that you examine the stitching and the hardware on any piece of luggage you plan to purchase. After all, it's the stitching and the hardware that hold it together....and keep your clothes inside!

A well-constructed bag should have even stitching, and the closer the stitching is together, the better. Any stress points on the case, especially handles or shoulder straps, should be reinforced with extra stitching or rivets to ensure greater durability.

You also want to check the seams of the case where the material is actually stitched together. Poorly constructed suitcases may have only a small amount of material that overlaps the stitch line, making it more likely to pull or tear loose from the bag. In addition, you want to check the hardware on the bag, which includes locks, handle posts, zipper pulls and so forth. While it is not always easy to tell how durable the hardware is, you can look to see that it is made of a heavy, solid metal construction. Any hardware made out of plastic or lightweight metal is more susceptible to damage than the heavy, solid metals.

References

Harrison Luggage Consumer Guide <http://www.harrisonluggage.com>

Samsonite Luggage Company <http://www.samsonite.com>

Prepared by Sue Lynn Sasser, Family Economics Specialist, January 2001