

The Suitcase Secret

How to Choose Attractive yet Functional Luggage



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Buying luggage can be extremely subjective. A good choice can be very dependent on things like frequency of travel, aesthetic importance, physical strength of owner, and price.

As a travel writer, I'm on the road a lot and have gone through more luggage in the last few years than the average person goes through in a life time. Along the way I've learned some lessons and am happy to share my finds (and mistakes!) with you.

Appearance. Okay, I'm going to expose my weakness straightaway. I refuse to have ugly or non-descript stuff. Over the years, I've purchased some good-looking bags which unfortunately were not functional or of good quality construction. Finding attractive luggage that will also withstand the abuse of baggage handlers takes some effort, but will be more cost-effective in the long run.

Quality. When buying soft-sided gear, you need to be mindful of the quality and thickness of the fabric. In the span of one year, I purchased two 4-piece sets of fabric luggage - one set was bright magenta and the other was a trendy black and gray Hawaiian floral print. Every time I retrieved those pieces from the baggage carousel I'd find another slash through the ultra thin fabric. Of course, the airlines always offer to replace your bag with a brand new one that they have stored in a back room warehouse. Always black. Always ugly. "But this bag is part of a 4-piece set!" I'd say. "Can't you reimburse me so I can purchase a new set?" Well, that never happened.

Size matters. The bigger the bag, the better, right? Wrong. Learn to embrace "less is more." It took me many, many years, but ultimately I'd had it with having a sore back and arms from lugging a suitcase jammed with things I'd never used. Buy trial/travel sized toiletries or plan to purchase them at your destination. Most hotels also have laundry service or washing machines, so a classic black pencil skirt and/or a pair of khaki capris serve nicely with several coordinating stylish tops. Multitasking your packing is an art form into itself, so master it and use it.

Several years ago, I fell in love with a gigantic 31" high pink polka dot suitcase and bought it on impulse. I only used it once. Fully packed, it was so heavy I could barely wheel it around. It almost

didn't make the airline weight limit, and my teenage son refused to be seen helping me tow it. The light-colored fabric came off the carousel soiled with airplane grease stains. And I'm pretty sure I heard one of the baggage handlers call it a "collapsible bed."

Functionality. The cheaper the luggage, the cheaper the wheels. Ease in wheeling is crucial, as I found out the hard way. I got off on the wrong subway stop in New York City and had to walk several blocks to the next one. My pretty 21" magenta weekend bag should have been no problem. But the rough city sidewalks wreaked havoc on the cheap plastic wheels which soon became flat and stationary and I ended up dragging that bag across the city. Not fun.

I will also never buy another piece of luggage that is not a "spinner," i.e. has four wheels instead of the customary two, so it can be pushed and glided instead of just pulled. If you are a person of limited upper body strength, you will love the ease of traveling with spinner luggage.

Your suitcase should also be functional in the way it can be packed and how it rolls. I purchased a piece of very attractive Kathy Van Zeeland hot pink [faux] snakeskin bag with quality of material in mind. I knew it would not get slashed by sharp edges in the cargo area and dirt/grease could be washed off. It wasn't cheap, but I loved the look. It was a little awkward packing it with the soft sides, but the real problem was the side handle which protruded from the bottom. Once tipped up to wheel, everything inside slide down because the sides didn't hold it in place; and because the top was soft I could not rest or attach a carry-on bag on top as a walked.

Top Pick. After all the mishaps and bad choices, I decided I'd had enough and splurged on better quality luggage. I found a type that checks off every single one of my requirements: looks, quality, function, light.

Polycarbonate luggage is durable but surprisingly light weight, holds your clothes in place without wrinkling, is expandable, has spinner wheels which make it super-easy to pull or push, and is available in a variety of bright colors as well as plaids and fun florals. I chose a piece with huge yellow, pink and orange flowers.

Bam!

And the best part? I have no problem finding my bag on the carousel!

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