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Industry: Luxury luggage woos the jet set

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The holiday season has officially started, with Christmas or New Year's vacation just around the corner. For most people these events will include some sort of travel, which means pulling down the luggage and digging out the carry-on bags. But with the new restrictions in luggage weight, plus the long wait at the baggage carousel trying to distinguish one black bag from another, luxury luggage companies are looking for ways to make their brands stand out from the crowd.

For business and frequent travelers who often find themselves paying a fee for checked suitcases, the goal is to get everything into a carry-on bag. Not just to avoid the luggage fee, but also the wait upon arrival for suitcases to get to the baggage claim. In addition to basic functionality, many travelers are also looking at their choice of bag as a new outlet for personal expression.

"Travelers are asking themselves, 'what does this luggage say about me?'" says Milton Pedraza, CEO of Luxury Institute, a research group that came out with a survey last year on luggage luxury brands. "There is no question that luggage has become a fashion statement."

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the successful Black Label line launched in 2005 by Samsonite. Partnering with big names in fashion and design like Alexander McQueen, Marc Newson and, next spring, Viktor and Rolf, Samsonite has hooked into the growing desire of travelers to treat their luggage more like a luxury handbag than a suitcase. Marcello Bottoli, the president and CEO of Samsonite, says that the company created a global creative director position in August "to change the way we and consumers thought about the category - bringing in trend colors, beautiful styling and great design on top of our historical functional attributes."

Well-known luggage brands are not the only companies trying to tap into this desire for distinctive luggage. Names that are known more for fashionable clothing - like Prada, Gucci, Fendi, Lanvin and Bottega Veneta - have expanded their brands to include at least a capsule collection of high-end luggage. By taking pains to incorporate the DNA of the fashion house into the line - say the intrecciato weave of Bottega Veneta or a colorful sketch from the designer Alber Elbaz at Lanvin - these companies are hoping to entice fans of their clothing into buying matching suitcases.

For some people, however, a piece of luggage from a luxury fashion or luggage brand still isn't exclusive enough. "There is a one-upmanship attitude among luxury clients," says Pedraza. "If everyone has a Louis Vuitton suitcase then they want to have the limited edition or custom-made version. Something to differentiate themselves." Fashion brands like Louis Vuitton and Hermès have made this feature available to their clientele for years. But it is a sign of how important this option has become that luggage brands like Tumi and Samsonite now have divisions that do one-of-a-kind pieces.

Lisa Armstrong, the fashion editor of The Times in London, teamed up with Louis Vuitton to create a unique carry-on bag that she auctioned off for charity. She says the experience taught her how much thought goes into making luxury luggage. "I learned a lot about the pragmatics of making a bag - I wanted so many features - from indents for storing computer cables to cashmere blankets," she says. "But in the end I realized that if we included all of them there wouldn't be any room for clothes. Actually what makes a case work is its versatility and flexibility - and like packing, the art of luggage lies in editing. I managed to get the blanket included though."

As cabin bags morph into oversize versions of luxury handbags, checked luggage has gone sleek and space-aged; the objective being to make the lightest suitcases possible to cope with the ever-shrinking weight allotment given to each passenger. Brands like Rimowa, Tumi and Titan have created light and durable suitcases from high-tech polycarbonate plastics that can weigh less than 4 kilograms, or 9 pounds, for a 69-centimeter, or 27-inch, piece.

hot pink, canary yellow and cobalt blue are fast becoming favorites among younger luxury travelers. "Color is one trend that is very popular right now," Pedraza says. "That, along with a strong design element, is creating more of an emotional appeal to consumers."

The best example of how widespread the need has become to have a matching set of well-made suitcases is the recent partnership between the high-brow luggage manufacturer Globe-Trotter, a British company that has specialized in luxury luggage since 1897, and the American apparel brand favored by recent college graduates and young professionals, J. Crew. Launched this year, the line - which starts at \$1,000 for a vanity case to \$2,400 for an 84-centimeter suitcase - gives its customers the choice of three colors: the perennial favorite, black; the extreme luxury of ivory; and a searing sour lemon that is sure to make eyes water when it hits the luggage carousel.

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