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PERSONAL SHOPPER

Quest for the Perfect Bag

What to look for when buying luggage. By MARGARET LOFTUS

Thanks to new materials such as polycarbonate, and the influence of fashion handbags, the luggage market has exploded in recent years with stylish, sturdy, and extravagant offerings, from the swirly canvas Roxy rolling duffel (\$132) to Valextra's white leather Costa suitcase (\$6,900). Online retailer eBags (www.ebags.com) now carries some 500 brands and 30,000 products. Here's what to keep in mind when shopping.

• **BIGGER ISN'T NECESSARILY BETTER**

The most important factor in determining size is whether you check your luggage or carry it onboard the plane. Frequent flyers have long favored the 22-inch rolling upright, which is the maximum size for hand luggage within the U.S. (20 inches is the maximum internationally). Remember that if your flight is full or you're flying on a smaller regional jet, you still may not get your carry-on on. You might be better off with a soft-sided oversize shoulder bag such as Timbuk2's Cargo Tote (www.timbuk2.com); \$80), which can be squeezed under-



When shopping for luggage, consider how you intend to use the piece, and look for a sturdy, lightweight model.

neath the seat or in the overhead compartment. As for checked luggage, most U.S. airlines require that the total dimensions of each checked bag not exceed 62 inches, or you'll pay extra. And don't make the mistake of buying the largest bag, because once you fill it, you may discover it is either too heavy to tote or it exceeds airline limits.

• **LIGHT IS RIGHT** Airline weight limits (generally two bags weighing no more than 50 pounds each; international restrictions can be half that) have sparked competition

among manufacturers to come up with lighter pieces. Unfortunately, many luggage manufacturers don't advertise the weight of their products or do not include attachments when

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weighing them (eBags now publishes the weight of many of the pieces it carries). As a general rule, soft bags are

lighter than hard luggage. But some newer hard-sided suitcases now weigh in at less than 10 pounds. For example, the new polycarbonate Titan line (www.titanluggageusa.com), a new entry from Germany, has a 22-inch carry-on weighing 7.5 pounds.

directional "spinner" suitcases are all the rage; they're easy to maneuver, but possibly more exposed to wear and tear than the traditional in-line two-wheel versions. Many manufacturers now include locks on their baggage; fine, but make sure they're TSA accessible. Tumi's bar-coded bags (www.tumi.com) can be eventually traced back to their owners. In the last five years, the spectrum of luggage colors has expanded far beyond basic black. That's good news for travelers, but don't be lulled into thinking yours is the only lime green suitcase on the carousel; add a unique ribbon or sticker and double-check the tag.