

# It's all in the handling

It's been a tough few years for the world's tourism and travel industry, but all the gauges are pointing to the positive side for a major rebound. After nearly three years of malaise induced by terrorism, SARS, war and a distressed economy, tourism appears to be in vogue once again. While the threat of terrorism continues, as does turmoil in the world's hot spots, improving economic conditions have many ready to go.

Higher gasoline prices notwithstanding, several associations that monitor travel trends say we will be travelling more this year. Globally, the International Air Transport Association predicts air traffic to return to pre-2001 levels in the near future. Executive Travel SkyGuide, a unit of American Express, reports that during the first four months of the year, worldwide passenger traffic was up more than 15 per cent over the same period in 2003.

Another significant barometer: luggage heavyweight Samsonite reported dramatically increased sales during the first months of this year.

Alas, the options for stylish air travel have diminished with the demise of the Concorde, but that's far from the case when it comes to goods for packing one's belongings. New styles, colours and nifty gadgets abound for travellers who seem to be champing at the bit to hit the skies or roads once again.

Industry experts say consumers demand a lot from their travel bags: form, function, security, sturdiness and perhaps, most of all, value at a good price. Travellers also want fashion combined with functionality and as a result, many luggage designers are moving away from the traditional to the hot and cool. Some of the latest collections, reading like a grocery list, include such hues as pumpkin, eggplant, silver, blue camouflage, lime, lemon and mango. Designers seem to be more focused on women's products. At the Travel Goods Show, new fabrics and materials were introduced, including microsuede, stonewashed cotton canvas and microfleece grid fabric. Jacquard, crinkle nylon/polyester blends, rip-stop polyester, suede skin, herringbone and nappa cashmere cowhide were among new collections. And this year, mama's got a new bag as companies are aiming more products at women and teens. Products are becoming more specialised, offering pockets for PDAs, cell phones and games.

## Returning confidence

Everyone seems to want to be shed of their old bags as US luggage sales, lagging since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York, are slowly improving, says Michele Marini Pittenger,



president of the Washington, DC-based Travel Goods Association (TGA). She reports considerable optimism from exhibitors at her organisation's 2004 Travel Goods Show.

"Our exhibitors were extremely enthusiastic, no doubt encouraged by a stronger economy and a renewed consumer interest in travel," Pittenger says. "Retailers are more upbeat and positive. Statistics show that more people are travelling and those travellers appear to be making their way into travel goods stores for the hottest new products available".

Look for luggage carousels at the world's airports to be more rainbow-like as bright colours increasingly vie for space amongst the drab olives, blacks and navies. Pittenger says colour is becoming a greater consideration for consumers, citing pink as a hot incomer. Soft-sided bags continue to rule the market although Samsonite and Delsey report increased hard case sales in the US, she says.

In addition to the question of what to buy is where to buy it. Of course, there are the large department stores, the big box discounters, the boutiques specialising in travel and the major catalogue merchants. More recently, internet sales have exploded with such outlets as *ebags.com*, which has lugged more than 2.1 million bags through cyberspace over the past five years.

While there hasn't been a recent industry-altering innovation rivalling the impact of the wheeled carry-on bag (the brainchild of a Northwest Airlines pilot in 1988), there are plenty

*Samsonite's wide-ranging choice of luggage covers carry-ons to world cruising. Noted for product strength and versatility in its use of composite materials, Samsonite also offers expert packing advice to the occasional traveller.*

 Samsonite



A selection from Tumi's Cargo range.



of construction tweaks aimed at easing the aching backs and arms that are often related to long journeys. Several firms have developed new handle and wheel systems. There's good news for southpaws as Tumi's new collections have handles that can be adjusted for left or right-handed travellers. EZ Swany's Walking Bag incorporates a handle that allows the traveller to push the case instead of pulling it, relieving stress from their back. Several companies offer new collections with lightweight frames.

The common sight of air travellers desperately cramming and contorting their bags into the overhead luggage bins during the boarding routine may soon be a bad memory. While the standard carry on size is 22 inches (56cms), more manufacturers are making bags slightly smaller, in the 17 to 21 inch (43 to 53cms) range. These bags offer the same features, but are designed more efficiently.

### New collections

With so many choices, how does one narrow the list? Doug Dymont, a San Francisco-based frequent business traveller for many years, shares advice gained from his travels on a web site, [www.onebag.com](http://www.onebag.com). Obviously, he touts travelling light as he opts to take a single carry-on bag no matter the length of his journey. Dymont advises considering bags for quality, size (airline carry-on limits) and transportability. Oddly, he eschews popular wheeled bags in favour of roomy, yet lightweight models easily moved the old fashioned way. The bag best meeting Dymont's requirements is the Easy Going Carry-On, made of ballistic nylon and available in only one colour: black. Another rarity: the bag is manufactured in the US.

Many of the world's leading luggage manufacturers are devoting considerable R&D time developing for the needs of women, a growing market. Lightweight structures and ergonomics are the goals here. Among the better known industry names, Tumi's latest offerings in bags for women feature rich colour, texture and distinctive shapes. The Cargo collection is

made of nylon fabric and is available in walnut, leaf, brick and wheat colours with leather trim. Cargo is available in a utility pouch, "slouchy" satchel, messenger bag, baby tote and small backpack. Tumi's lightweight T3 line is for men and women and is served up in the form of soft backpacks, totes and messenger bags.

Samsonite is another company catering to the special needs of female travellers. The new Signature line incorporates multiple organisational compartments ranging from removable toiletry kits to mesh pockets. The line is constructed of 840 denier nylon and is available in mocha and wineberry earth tones. Samsonite's new Sahara Spinners combines an adaptable wheeling system and a lightweight, durable hybrid construction.

Briggs & Riley's latest development is a 22 inch (56cms) transformable upright. Owners may use it either as a one-piece rolling carry-on or transform it into two separate bags: a deluxe duffel with optional backpack straps and a wheeled carry-on upright. Once the duffel is zipped off, a face panel zips onto the wheeled upright, creating a new carry-on. Each bag can hold two to three days worth of clothes.

Seeking to satisfy the ergonomic needs of travellers, the TravelTow Company has developed a rotating luggage handle adapter. The TravelTow device attaches to luggage and its patented handle aligns the user's hand, arm and shoulder, allowing luggage to be pulled naturally at the traveller's side. Made of 100 per cent nylon, TravelTow uses a hook n' loop strap to attach to your existing luggage handle.

### Lost luggage and security innovations

TGA's Pittenger says security concerns have manufacturers putting a lot more thought into luggage construction.

"For instance, east-west type bags unzip and open up like a walk-in closet, revealing two transparent side compartments that provide security personnel with an easy view of the interior so they don't have to rummage through the contents," Pittenger says. She cites as

an example the Eagle Creek Pack-It System, which are mesh and transparent packing envelopes and cubes that organise clothing and facilitate easy baggage inspections.

In the age of world terrorism and the subsequent stringent security measures at airports, a healthy market has emerged for luggage security devices.

CCL Security Products offers two devices with the goal of making trips through airport security checkpoints less of a hassle. SearchAlert is a re-settable combination lock, giving travellers the ability to lock their checked luggage at US airports without the fear of having the locks cut off. The product also features a security window that alerts travellers if their luggage locks were opened during an inspection by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agents or anyone else.

In conjunction with Travel Sentry, a system accepted by TSA, SearchAlert gives TSA agents, using a secured access device, the ability to open the SearchAlert lock without destroying the lock.

The other device is Prestoseals, a disposable one-time use tamper-detection device. They replace luggage locks at airports at check-in time to avoid loss of the luggage lock if TSA agents need to hand search luggage following its trip through the electronic screening process. Prestoseals cannot be removed without destroying its security feature. If the Prestoseal is not present when the traveller retrieves luggage, and a federal TSA seal has not been used to reseal the luggage, it means an unauthorised person has gone through the luggage. The locks can also be used to ensure luggage is secure while in hotel rooms.

And, in Pennsylvania, the York Daily Record newspaper reports that a local inventor has developed a line of clear plastic luggage designed to help speed travellers through checkpoints. At last report, this entrepreneur was seeking a manufacturer for mass production of his innovation.

Sometimes it seems as if checking luggage with an airline is the equivalent of playing Russian roulette with your belongings. An estimated 20 million bags are lost by the world's airlines every year. British company Ilutra Systems has developed i-TRAK, a lost luggage locating service using sophisticated SMS technology. Users attach specially designed tags to their luggage and register unique codes with i-TRAK that enable the luggage to be traced in the event it is lost. Whenever a lost bag is found anywhere in the world, the i-TRAK system is designed to help its finder contact the owner by phone, SMS or e-mail to allow arrangements to be made for retrieval. Now, UK outdoor specialist Berghaus is teaming with i-TRAK on its adventure travel sacs.



*Berghaus describes its Spectre travel sac as being for 'the experienced traveller'. i-TRAK world-wide luggage tracking service is a standard feature on four models in the company's Adventure Travel series.*

Berghaus

Africa will be the next hotspots for luggage fabrics.

Supporting Zumstein's assertion is a recent deal between Taiwanese firm Eminent Luggages Worldwide and Ricossa Marketing in India for a 50-50 joint venture to establish a manufacturing plant in India for the production of travel bags and accessories.

What does the future hold for luggage design and development? Michele Pittenger opines that the move to more user-friendly products will continue.

"There will probably be more streamlined, lighter-weight, and more ergonomically inspired travel goods collections in the market," she says. "There will be more colours and more travel goods designed specifically for women. The market needs more of the same kinds of innovations we've been seeing since 1988, when the upright wheeled carry-on was introduced. Now, if someone would just invent luggage that packs itself."

Most manufacturing of luggage fabrics and luggage has moved to the Far East in recent years, with obvious effects on western companies. An example is North Carolina-based Glen Raven, a company that stands out as one of the most successful textile firms remaining in America. It did considerable business in nylon luggage fabric, but has lost 90 percent of that in very quick order.

backpacks," says Glen Raven's Gary Zumstein. "Now, we're running about two million yards, if that. All in a five-year period."

Of course, much of the manufacturing found its way to China, but Zumstein says Vietnam has been making strong moves of late, especially in the technical backpack business. Japan and Taiwan are also losing business and even Korea, still a large weaver, has to be concerned, says Zumstein, who wonders if India and





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