

## Messenger Bags

Volume 6, Number 9

### What is a messenger bag, and why should I care?

Messenger bags have traditionally been used by bike messengers to transport items for delivery across town. They have a single shoulder strap and use a flap to cover the main compartment. The first bags used by messengers were actually designed for telephone linemen—a design that lives on in De Martini bags ([www.demartinibags.com](http://www.demartinibags.com)).

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a number of companies emerged to serve this market, notably Manhattan Portage ([manhattanportage.com](http://manhattanportage.com)), Zo Bags ([zobags.com](http://zobags.com)) and Courierware ([courierbags.com](http://courierbags.com)). These bag makers, and more recently, Crumpler ([crumplerbags.com](http://crumplerbags.com)), Chrome ([chromebagstore.com](http://chromebagstore.com)) and Timbuk2 ([timbuk2.com](http://timbuk2.com)) have developed a following well beyond the messenger community as people began to snap them up as a fashionable and practical alternative to backpacks and briefcases.

They often have a variety of slots, pockets and compartments to securely stow your digital camera, cellular phone, pens, notepads, iPods and all of your other gear.



Messenger bags come in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. Timbuk2 is the manufacturer of the two bags on the left, while Crumpler is the manufacturer of the bag on the right.

## Are they for men or women?

Messenger bags are worn by both men and women, though some models have more gender-specific traits (e.g., fabric color and pattern) than others.

## How much do they cost?

Within a manufacturer's product line, size of the bag seems to dictate the price more than any other attribute.

*Typical retail prices for messenger bags by size:*

- Small: \$60–\$75
- Medium: \$80–\$125
- Large: \$150–175

You can sometimes find messenger bags at a steep discount—particularly in colors and patterns from previous model years.

## Where can I buy one?

Most of the manufacturers listed have online stores where you can order bags directly. They are also available from outdoor retailers such as REI ([rei.com](http://rei.com)), Backcountry ([backcountry.com](http://backcountry.com)), Eastern Mountain Sports ([ems.com](http://ems.com)) and Moosejaw ([moosejaw.com](http://moosejaw.com)). Large luggage retailers like eBags ([ebags.com](http://ebags.com)) also have a good selection of messenger bags for sale.

## What features differentiate messenger bags?

- **Material Type:** Bags differ widely in the type of material used in their construction. Some old-school bags are made of cotton, though most use nylon for greater durability. If you plan to use the bag outside at night, look for reflective materials on the bag to increase safety. Finally, a bright interior lining can make it easy to find small items in the bottom of the bag.
- **Water Resistance:** Some bags are sprayed at the factory with a special finish known as DWR (durable water resistance) which helps your books and papers survive surprise April showers. Manufacturers like Timbuk2 take it a step further by including an waterproof vinyl liner in many of their bags to provide an extra measure of protection against water.
- **Shoulder Strap:** Most messenger bags have a 2" wide, adjustable length nylon strap. Look for removable straps, as they give you flexibility in case you ever want to change straps. Some straps

come with cushioned pads, which are great for a heavy load. If your ideal bag lacks a cushioned pad, you can easily add one (\$10-\$20). Chrome bags integrate a seat-buckle into the strap. You simply press the release button, which parts the strap and allows the bag to drop to the floor. This lets you avoid lifting the strap of a heavy bag over your head.



Chrome messenger bags feature a unique strap-release system.

- **Fasteners :** Messenger bags use different fastening systems to keep your items secure. Velcro fasteners are popular, as are lightweight plastic quick-release buckles.

- **Wide vs. Tall Orientation:** Many authentic messenger bags are wider than they are tall. This allows the messenger to strap the bag tightly to his or her back while riding. For those transporting books and gadgets on foot, a vertically-oriented bag can be useful, reducing the chances of havoc in the China shop.



A top handle can make it easier to grab your bag in a hurry.

- **Top Handle:** Some bags provide a handle on top of the bag to make it easier to grab it and go. You're more likely to find top handles on tall than wide bags.

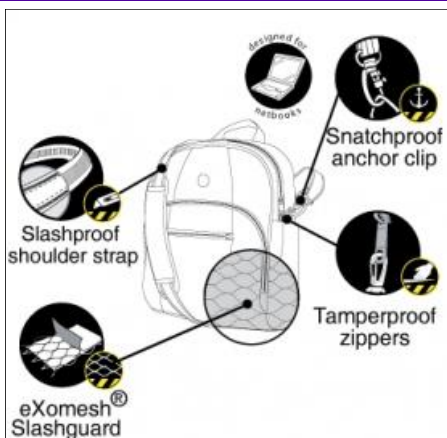
- **Laptop Computer Protection:** A number of messenger bag manufacturers sell models which feature padded inner linings to protect laptop computers. Even if the bag you like doesn't feature a laptop compartment, it's often a



A padded laptop sleeve can convert an ordinary bag into a computer bag.

simple matter to add a padded laptop sleeve (\$15-\$30) to keep the computer safe in your messenger bag.

- **Security Features:** Pacsafe ([Pacsafe.com](http://Pacsafe.com)) has a line of bags which have numerous security features, such as slash-resistant straps and lining and the ability to lock the bag to a stationary object.
- **Secondary Strap:** Some of the bags designed for professional bike have a second strap (typically removable) which attaches to the sides of the bag and goes around the rider's abdomen, keeping the bag securely attached. If you plan to use the bag while biking, this feature can be helpful.



Pacsafe bags incorporate numerous security features.

## Conclusion

Messenger bags' popularity has grown well beyond its urban bike messenger roots. If you're looking for something a little different become a casual, funky alternative to backpacks and briefcases.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email ([moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info](mailto:moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info)), or call me at 630-986-1976 ext. 225.

An archive of Tech Talk issues can be found at: [tinyurl.com/HPL-techtalk](http://tinyurl.com/HPL-techtalk).

Mike Oetting, Reference Librarian  
11/01/2010



20 East Maple St.  
Hinsdale IL 60521  
630-986-1976  
[www.hinsdalelibrary.info](http://www.hinsdalelibrary.info)  
[reference@hinsdalelibrary.info](mailto:reference@hinsdalelibrary.info)