



LEATHER LITERACY

Florence, Italy is filled with artisans creating the ultimate in handmade leather goods, if shoppers know where to look and what to look for:

by SUSAN HUSTON



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HERE XXXXX Custom-made italian
leather shoes



“Your coat is as soft as butter. Where did you find it?”

It’s a question connoisseurs of Italian leather often hear.

Traveling to Italy for a once-in-a-lifetime leather purchase can be overwhelming and, unfortunately, disappointing. A shopper may return from the quest with fake Italian leather.

But there are tools and tips to use while leather shopping in the staggering maze of Italian shops and markets to discern whether leather is real, inferior or fake.

Florence is the center of the Italian leather trade and there are ample opportunities to buy leather throughout the city from tiny boutiques, leather-makers’ storefronts, luxury stores and street markets. Along with abundance of choice comes anxiety. Markets become hectic and vendors will use liberal amounts of charm to “hook in” customers before offering the best price in town. It’s often a stressful, unpleasant experience.

Among the ways to purchase leather, the most common is buying from the larger San Lorenzo Market and Mercado Nuovo. These outdoor markets feature unbelievable amounts of leather goods

PERSONAL STYLE

with sales people who are glad to entice customers with compliments and ridiculously cheap prices that are hard to resist. While this is generally a sign of poor quality Italian leather, (including some fake items,) it's a great way to purchase smaller gifts and souvenirs at better prices. Shoppers should feel free to haggle or walk away if a street vendor does not accept an offer. It's part of the nature of the market and there are many other choices at neighboring stalls.

Another option is purchasing leather directly from a known artisan. Many are part of families who have fashioned leather goods by hand for generations. Located in the Oltrarno District, these sellers tend to be low pressure sales people and provide higher quality work and leather. Custom-made leather shoes, made by one of these artisans, will not wear out for years, according to one satisfied customer.

Luxury leather items are sold in top Italian designer stores and, while offering the same leather as the smaller shops and boutiques, these craftsmen ensure their wares are hand-finished, in-house, by artisans. As expected, the look, feel and price differ from smaller boutique or factory outlet leather shops and markets. Factory shops and boutiques are the most cost effective way to shop for leather. Customers can find unique designs and quality construction without the luxury store price.

Additional leather buying tips:

- Look for unique designs. If the same product is found in many places, it's probably manufactured en masse, often with lesser quality leather.
- Look for details like tight, small stitching and metal zippers. Plastic zippers generally signal lesser quality. If possible, check the leather edges to see if it's real leather or not. Authentic leather has a "rough around the edges look" while fake leather has a perfect edge.



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- If a jacket or purse is lined, pinch the lining away from the leather and rub the lining and the leather together. If the leather is stiff or will not separate from the lining, it is not real or quality leather.

- Look for soft, supple leather with texture. Animal skins are not perfect; they have texture or markings.

- If you find suede leather on the smoother side of leather, it's genuine.

- If the price is too good to be true, the leather is probably inferior or even fake.

- Don't buy the first thing you see. When looking for something unique, keep shopping and comparing.

Finding the style, price and quality of affordable leather ensures a fond memory of shopping for leather in Italy.

As a leather enthusiast, I found the perfect leather coat, without breaking the bank, more than a decade ago, and in the process made a lifelong Italian friend, Smilie. He is the third-generation owner of AJ Leather factory and Toscana leather, near the famous Basilica di Santa Croce.





Looking for a butter-soft leather jacket? Smilie will bring in a designer to measure the customer and create something to his or her specifications at a reasonable price.

At a less traditional shop called Benheart, shopkeeper Samone Razzino explains how Benheart leather features hand-dyed, edgy, unisex designs. Together with designer and co-owner, Hicham Ben Mbarek, the store offers fresh, unique designs that make their leather goods stand out in the midst of old-world Florentine retailers. The demand for Benheart products helped the store expand to branches in Milan, Verona, Lucca, Rome and Tokyo.

Florence is a great city packed with wonderful leather choices. Happy shopping!

Susan Huston is a fashion expert and personal stylist who visits Italy (and Italian leather markets) regularly.

Italian Leather goods for Personal Style in Indulge in Fort Worth, TX September 16, 2017.