



How to buy a Ukulele - Part One

Finding your first, or next, ukulele is a process. My ideal plan goes like this:

First, some questions. What do I want this uke to do for me? In which situations will I play it - by myself, in large groups, indoors, outdoors, on stage, traveling?... The more questions you can come up with and answer, the easier it'll be to find YOUR ukes.

Next, go to a place where you can get your eyes and hands on a lot of ukuleles. Try various sizes and shapes to discover which fits you and feels comfortable. If you don't yet know any chords, ask the salesperson to show you a couple so you can actually try some instruments.

Choose some that really grab your eye. You want instruments that you can't resist when you see them at home.

Now, COMPARE, COMPARE, COMPARE! You may be a quiet player, but you need to hear the full volume, resonance, and tone of each uke. Using a "C" chord, slowly drag your thumb down across the strings, one by one, at the 12th fret, keeping your thumb pressed to the fingerboard. Do the exact same thing several times, a little more quickly each time. Now you know what that one is capable of. Just about any instrument sounds pretty good by itself. Only by comparing, side by side, can you judge which is the sound you love right now. (Or the sound you need.) Every uke sounds different, even if they look identical to you. Resonator ukes are a little louder. Banjo ukes a lot louder. For outdoors or onstage, you may want electric capability. Having a built-in preamp is more cost effective than external or aftermarket solutions.

Now, let's talk money. Although I care way more about the instrument than the price, I understand you may choose a price range or limit. There are a lot of good ukes available between \$45 and \$150 - a lot of great ones between \$150 and \$400. Above that, you're starting to pay for fancier trim, prestige, or the choice to not buy something from China or Indonesia. I've compared, as described above, ukuleles in the \$1000 to \$1500 range and not found them to be even greater instruments. I've currently kept 5 fabulous and flashy ukes for myself, each very different, serving different purposes. Since their total retail value is \$1596, I now say I would only spend more than \$500 on a ukulele if I had a personal relationship with the maker and was feeling flush.

NOTE: So you know who's talking here: I've worked with sound and materials all my life, including 20 years building and restoring wooden boats. I keep over 150 ukuleles on display at The Ukulele Place. They come and go and are constantly compared. Very few people have the opportunity to gain that kind of experience and I enjoy sharing what I've learned. I prefer to sell, teach, and make music live, hands on, face to face. Come see me, we'll have fun, ask me anything.

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How to buy a Ukulele - Part Two

Most ukuleles under \$150 have a laminate (3 ply plywood) body. No worries about cracking wood. A good choice for travel. If the core ply (middle layer) is a white wood it may be Basswood, a very resonant wood that can make for a surprisingly good sounding instrument. The other layers (exterior veneers) also affect the tone.

Over \$150, some Sopranos will be all solid wood and some Concerts and Tenors will have solid spruce or cedar tops, which generate more volume. Solid sides and back add more to the price. Solid wood can crack from shrinkage due to extreme dryness, or physical abuse. I have not had any cracks, but I put a humidifier in ukes with any solid wood if traveling to dryer climates. Solid wood instruments “open up” (become more resonant) the more they’re played.

Of the 160+ ukes here now, I counted 30 species of wood, 5 metals, and 2 plastics (not counting trim). Some of them have produced consistent effects on the instrument’s tone. For example, the various woods called Mahogany, Okuome, and the orange Lacewood, are strong on the low and midrange frequencies and weak on the high end, yielding tones I call rich and mellow, of varying volume. Dark, dense Rosewood is strong across the whole spectrum and when combined with a spruce or cedar top, makes the fullest, loudest sounds - yet still gorgeous when played softly. Acacia (called Koa in Hawaii), is extremely variable in performance and appearance, ranging from quiet and dull to complex and pleasing tones, but rarely really resonant. It’s colors and grain vary from light and bland to rich, contrasting and highly figured.

Longer strings mean more space between the frets and, require more tension to get up to the same tuning. This is particularly noticeable with Tenors, making them harder to play. Not a good choice for beginners, unless you’re coming from guitar, or have long, strong fingers. Most ukes arrive with Aquila Nylgut strings because they are the most popular now. They are the loudest and richest. Many other brands are flourocarbon nylon, which sound brighter. Strings are inexpensive and easy to change, so if you’re inclined to experiment, just understand: Different strings make the same instrument sound different; the same strings can sound different on different ukes; new strings stretch a lot, so don’t blame the instrument, keep tuning again and again, until they settle in. Remember - to make valuable judgements - Compare, Compare Compare.

Most makers set the action at the nut too high, over .050 inch, making it hard to pull the strings down to the fingerboard at the first fret. I am a rowdy strummer and set mine at .038 without any fret buzz. (Action at the saddle affects what is possible.) I lower all of them before selling. Look for a flat or slightly concave neck with no raised frets. I put a zero fret on one of my ukes and can’t identify any difference. A virtuoso acquaintance with a background in Flamenco says he can’t play a radiused fretboard. Just try things yourself.