

## A UKULELE BUYING AND CARE GUIDE

By Duncan Perry

I'm always excited to introduce folks to the ukulele. Here is some information to help you should you need to buy a uke or want information about caring for ukuleles. I've also included information about electronic tuners, cases and gig bags and humidifiers.

There are lots of ukulele brands for the beginner these days, some really lousy, some very decent. You can buy a good beginner's ukulele for a price in the \$85-\$300 range. Ukuleles traditionally come in three sizes: soprano, concert, and tenor. There is a still larger ukulele size called baritone. Until recently they were typically strung, tuned and played like a tenor guitar. It is now possible to string and play baritones like the other sizes.

Soprano (also called standard), concert, and tenor ukuleles are all tuned the same way and played the same way. Entry-level sopranos are the smallest and least expensive; they are good for small fingers, but ukuleles are not exceedingly large, so most people can play any size. Many sopranos have less volume than larger ukes and can sound a bit tinny. Sopranos generally have fewer frets (those spaces between the wires that cross the neck of the instrument) than their larger cousins, a fact that makes no difference if you are a beginner. Please note that the spacing of frets (the distance between those wires that I just mentioned) on the necks of ukuleles is widest on tenors and narrowest on sopranos. So, tenors are much more comfortable to play for folks with larger hands. Typically, adult uke players prefer concert and tenor size ukuleles, but hey, there was old Tiny Tim, a very large guy who played a soprano.

Here are the average total lengths of each size instrument:

Soprano: 21 inches with 12-15 frets

Concert: 23 inches with 15-20 frets

Tenor: 26 inches with 15 or more frets

Baritone: 30 inches with 18 to 21 frets



Most wooden ukes come in the figure eight body shape and look like little guitars. You can also find pineapple shapes, that is, ukuleles with roughly oval body shapes (there are other shapes and materials too, including one that uses cigar boxes!). The figure eight is the more traditional looking model and is favored by most players. A variation of the figure eight has a cutaway section on the body near the neck meant to facilitate playing high notes up the neck near the body of the uke. The cut away style is not essential for beginning players and often increases the uke's price. There are also banjo ukuleles available. They have four strings and are played like a wooden ukulele, although they sound much like banjos. Finally, there are resonator ukes

for the blues aficionado. These have either wooden or metal bodies with a metal resonator cone implanted in the front of the instrument to project sound.

Some wooden ukulele models have a gloss finish, others have a satin finish or an oil finish. All are equally fine. Gloss finished ukuleles tend to cost a little more than those with a satin or oil finish.

Less expensive ukuleles are made with laminated woods -- very thin layers of plywood. More expensive ukes are made using solid woods. High quality solid wood ukuleles begin in the \$300-\$500 range and top out in the thousands of dollars. Most of the entry-level solid wood ukes are made in Asia. The high-end ones available in the US are made in the US and Canada. Solid woods impart a better sound quality in many, but not all, ukulele brands. There is nothing wrong with owning a laminate ukulele (described by some manufacturers these days by the deceptive name, "layered" ukes)! I regularly play laminates (though not at the same time, of course). In fact, having a quality laminate ukulele is usually the best way to get started. Once you're sure you want to get on the ukulele highway, then a uke with at least a solid top is best if it is within your budget. Good ones can be found in the \$250-\$350 range. If you simply want to try out ukulele playing without a major investment, decent entry level instruments are available in the \$80-130 range depending upon size and maker.

When possible, visit a reputable musical instrument shop and try out different sizes, shapes and levels of ukuleles. Questions to consider are: What ukulele sounds best? What ukulele feels best? And, for some, what ukulele is most physically attractive? Compare the sound, feel, weight and finish of expensive ukes to the lower priced ones. You may be surprised to find no big difference in sound among instruments in varying price ranges although the fit and finish will be more refined on the more expensive instruments.

Please don't buy a ukulele online unless you know the dealer and can be assured of proper *set up* (making sure that the uke is in top playing condition when it reaches you) and service – or unless you are competent to do the work yourself. Buying from a local music shop is the best idea. Here are eight shops where folks previously have reported excellent service:

\*Friendly River Music Shop  
40 River Road  
Cornish, ME 04020  
(207) 625-8639

Midtown Music  
571 Elm St.  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207) 282-0254

Buckdancer's Choice  
248 St. John St.  
Portland, ME 04102  
(207) 774-2219

\*\*Musicians 1<sup>st</sup> Choice  
246 Western Ave  
Augusta, ME 04330  
(207) 632-0400

\*Everyday Music  
205 Broadway  
Farmington, ME 04938  
(207) 778-3483

\*North Conway Music Center  
1976 White Mountain Hwy  
North Conway, NH 03860  
(603) 356-3562

\*\*Northern Kingdom Music  
349 Harlow St  
Bangor, ME 04401  
(207) 947-6450

Tune Town  
932 Sanford Rd.  
Wells, ME 04090  
(207) 641-8863

Shops named above with an asterisk (\*) beside their name offer discounts to my students; (\*\*) may give discount or special offer. Be sure to mention that you are taking my class.

My preferred ukulele brand choices for beginners are: **KALA**, **OHANA**, and **ISLANDER** by Kanile'a. I recommend going online to check out the company web sites to get a sense of the ranges of ukuleles they make. Bear in mind that not all music shops a variety of brands. Decide what you like, call a music store to see if they carry it, and if they do, check it out and while you are there, try comparing your choice to other ukes for sound, feel, and construction. Below are the URLs for these manufacturers:

<https://kalabrand.com>

<https://ohana-music.com>

<https://www.islanderukulele.com/shop/>

Other moderately priced, reputable brands of ukuleles that I like include:

- Amahi
- KoAlana by KoAloha
- Oscar Schmidt
- Cordoba
- Lanakai
- Luna

If you really want to buy on-line, here are four reputable dealers. But, understand that you will pay shipping (unless they are having a special or unless you buy a pricey ukulele) and that having service and repairs done long distance is a VERY BIG nuisance.

The Ukulele Site: <http://www.theukulelesite.com>

Elderly Instruments: <https://www.elderly.com>

Bernunzio Uptown Music: <https://bernunzio.com>

Sweetwater: <https://www.sweetwater.com>

And, if you want to build your own (no prior experience needed) Stewart-MacDonald (aka Stewmac), the best instrument builder's friend in the US, offers: is your chance:

[https://www.stewmac.com/kits-and-projects/instrument-kits/ukulele-kits/stewmac-ukulele-kits/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=shopping&utm\\_campaign=2021-12-gp&gclid=EAlalQobChMIha3oh\\_yN9QIV2vvjBx3BZA0AEAQYDiABEgKEdPD\\_BwE](https://www.stewmac.com/kits-and-projects/instrument-kits/ukulele-kits/stewmac-ukulele-kits/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=shopping&utm_campaign=2021-12-gp&gclid=EAlalQobChMIha3oh_yN9QIV2vvjBx3BZA0AEAQYDiABEgKEdPD_BwE)

### **CASE/GIG BAG, TUNER and HUMIDIFIER**

Please note that it is important to also buy a case or gig bag to protect your ukulele. Music stores carry cases and gig bags of varying quality. For a beginner's ukulele a gig bag that is reasonably well padded (at least 10 mm padding) is a good option. Make sure the zipper works well and if you play to travel with it or "play out" try to find one that's waterproof. **Kala, Lanikai, Levy, and Uke Crazy** are reliable brands, but because ukulele bodies vary in size and shape by manufacturer, even within the size categories – soprano, concert, and tenor – it is best to try out the case or gig bag to make sure your ukulele fits well. You should be able to buy a decent gig bag for about \$35. Foam core cases offer more protection and are in the \$50 range. Hard shell cases begin around \$79.

It's important to have an electronic tuner or at least a tuner app. You can find free and for pay apps for your iPhone and you can buy an electronic tuner such as the **Kala Ukulele Tuner**, and multi purpose tuners by **Fender, D'Addario, Intellitouch, and Snark**. These clip onto the peg head of your ukulele – where the tuning knobs are – and enable you to efficiently and accurately tune your instrument. I recommend that if the ukulele bug bites you, have both an app and an electronic tuner.

It is also important to ensure proper humidity for your ukulele. The ideal humidity level for happy ukuleles is in the 45-55% range. Below 35% and you risk drying out the uke, shrinking the wood, cracking it or worse, above 65% the wood can swell a bit and distort sound. During winter months especially, when our homes tend to have low humidity, wooden instruments can dry out, though excessive air conditioning can seriously lower humidity too, during summer.

A small in-case humidifier can protect your investment, although you need to keep a weather eye on it to be sure the humidifier remains moist. **Herco's** clay humidifier priced at around \$4.00 is the cheapest and is a good choice for use with inexpensive ukes. **D'Addario** makes reasonably priced rectangular humidifiers for around \$10 that I use with my several of my ukuleles. **Music Nomad** and **D'Addario** make a humidifier that inserts in the sound hole and is held in place by the strings for \$10-\$14 – these are a good choice, especially for all wood ukes. **Oasis** offers one that inserts in the sound hole and extends into the interior of the body; it is held in place by the strings. This is the premium humidifier and as such costs \$18-20. All are available on-line and in most musical instrument shops.



The most reliable way to check humidity is with a humidistat. Here are some examples:



I keep a humidistat in each ukulele case and gig bag. I typically use the small one, available from Amazon, for in-case measuring and the larger ones for assessing room humidity. Note that humidistats only give an approximation of the humidity in whatever space you keep them. I have found that the little ones are generally + or - 3 %. Larger ones vary more, depending on manufacturer.

Check the humidity level in your uke case or gig bag at least every week. Always use distilled water to minimize mold problems. A gallon from Walmart or a grocery store will last a long time. I use these devices roughly from October through April or May, depending on the weather.

#### **MY RECOMMENDED CHECKLIST WHEN BUYING A UKULELE**

1. Buy from an established local dealer who services and stands behind what the store sells if you can.
2. Try all sizes to determine which one feels best to you.
3. Select a ukulele that you think sounds, feels and looks good.
4. Make sure the dealer performs an inspection to insure that the uke is in top playing condition, with the strings set up properly, and that the physical condition of the instrument is perfect (good finish -no cracks, dents, dings - straight neck, and especially, no jagged fret wires).
5. Don't forget to get a case or gig bag to protect the instrument.
6. Buy an electronic tuner or add an app to your cell phone.
7. Buy a humidifier and use it with *distilled* water during late fall, winter and early spring.
8. It is good, but not essential, to buy a music stand – inexpensive ones can be purchased online.
9. Consider adding strap buttons and buying a strap.

Please feel free to be in touch with me if you have questions! My email is:

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or call me at: (207) 219-8055.