



Pan American Leathers, Inc.

# Exotic Leather Handbag Guide

# Introduction to Exotic Handbags

The handbag industry is an incredibly lucrative market. Each year, the top fashion houses compete to have the best handbags and create the most unique and interesting designs. With this focus on making the best possible product, the top fashion houses have attracted droves of ultra-wealthy clients, many of whom spend years on waiting lists to get their own custom-made handbag.

How do many of the top fashion designers create a product that makes the wealthy willing to wait years and spend tens of thousands of dollars for a single handbag? How do the most successful designers create something that stands out as being truly unique and worth the wait?

By using exotic leather for their handbag projects.

## Why Use Exotic Leather?

Exotic leathers often have unique appearances and characteristics that put them above more common materials as an option for making handbags. These exotic materials are much more exclusive than typical materials, giving an innate enhancement to the value of the finished handbag as a status symbol.

After all, anybody can have a handbag made from inexpensive cloth, but a handbag made from crocodile leather is something that only a few people can boast that they own. It is this kind of bragging right that has ultra-wealthy clients staying on waiting lists for years so that they can get the latest handbag from their favorite designer.

To help you with your next exotic leather handbag project, we here at Pan American Leathers have put together this handbook about using exotic leather for handbags.





# Picking a Type of Exotic Leather to Use

There are a great many different kinds of exotic skins available on the market. Each type of skin has its own unique properties that might make it just right for a particular project. In this guide, we wanted to talk to you about three of the most useful types of exotic leathers for handbags:

- » American Alligator Skin
- » Python Skin
- » Caiman Crocodile Skin

Each of these three types of exotic skin have their own unique benefits that put them at the top of the pile when it comes to desirability as a handbag material.

## American Alligator Skin

Alligator leather is the highest end of luxury leather for handbags; it's flexible, distinctive, and opulent. Of the different crocodilian species used for leather, the American alligator is perhaps the easiest to work with. In fashion circles, alligator leather is a consistently high-demand material for all kinds of leather projects, which drives the price for this skin.

Hailing from the southeastern portion of the USA, American alligator hides are mostly collected from farmed sources, which protect the animals from harm and help to ensure a steady supply of better grade skins. Alligator skins come in sizes ranging from 20 cm wide by 3 ft. long to 90+ cm wide and 14 or more ft. long.

The hide of the American alligator has very little calcium. This makes American alligator skin much less bony in comparison to other crocodilian species. Because there is so little calcium in the alligator hide, the scales are smoother and cleaner.

With the flexibility of alligator hide, it makes for an ideal material for handbags. Why? Because, over time, handbags will be repeatedly exposed to both light and severe bending from everyday use. With repeated flexing, a more rigid skin will begin to show crease marks. However, alligator skin, being more pliable than other crocodilian hides, will not show crease marks as easily. This allows alligator hide to continue looking like new for longer with less maintenance.

American alligator skins are also visually distinctive, possessing a unique texture because of the naturally-occurring scale patterns in the skin. This makes the alligator skin pop visually compared to plainer materials, and serves as a mark of authenticity.

In short, American alligator skin is a top-shelf material for your most exclusive clientele, with a price point to match. While the cost of alligator hide may make the material prohibitively expensive for some, this exclusivity is all just a part of the allure.

## Python Skin

A native of Southeast Asia, the python is a reptile that needs no introduction. Gathered from both the wild and from farms, the python is a popular choice for many different high fashion and design projects. Part of the reason for this is the size that python skins can grow to: small skins are 25 cm wide and 1.5 meters long, while the largest skins can be 60 cm or more in width and as much as 6.5 meters long. In short, python skin is easily large enough to meet the panel size demands of a large handbag.

Because these skins come from farms as well as the wild, it is often easier to find the kind of large, grade I skins needed for items with big, open panels such as handbags. This makes the python a superior choice compared to the anaconda, which is taken only from wild sources, making large, pristine skins incredibly rare.

The primary drawback with the python is that in California, you cannot trade in items made from python skins due to a legal statute.

With python skins, you have a choice of whether or not to use the natural markings of the python in your project, or to bleach the skin





and dye it to make it a consistent, even color. While it may be slightly more difficult to use the natural scale patterns in a manner that creates a perfectly polished look, it can be well worth the effort for the uniqueness and the added authenticity a natural finish provides. On the other hand, using a bleached and dyed skin may make it easier to match the handbag to a specific collection of fashion wear.

## Caiman Crocodile Skin

Of the crocodylian species, caiman skin is one of the most cost-effective, making it great for a larger product launch by comparison. While more rigid than alligator leather, caiman skin is still a top-rate material for high-fashion accessories such as handbags.

Caiman skin comes from farm-raised sources, which helps to ensure that there are more grade I skins available on the market than skins that only come from wild sources. The largest commonly available caiman skins are roughly 40 cm in size, making caiman skins better suited for small to mid-size handbags.

With caiman crocodile skin's natural rigidity, these hides are particularly well-suited for use in hard-case type handbags. The pronounced, calcium-rich scales in caiman skin are sturdy, making them ideal for a more rigid case design.

Caiman skin is notoriously difficult to dye evenly, as the calcium deposits resist getting an even dye color with the rest of the hide. However, this helps to identify the final product as a genuine crocodile leather product. The lighter-colored portions of the hide represent a mark of the calcium in the hide which an imitation hide would lack. This adds authenticity to the final product, letting buyers know that they're getting a genuine crocodile skin product, not a stamped imitation.

## Choosing Between the Three

When preparing to order one of these top three exotic skins, consider the following:

- I. The size of your handbag design.
- II. Your price point.
- III. The handbag's style (hard case, soft sided, etc.).

Generally speaking, if you are making a large handbag design, then you'll want to use large skins, such as what can be found on python or American alligator skins. These hides come in sizes large enough for a single unit to fill out one or more panels from a large handbag.

As with any project, your budget plays a large part in determining what kind of skins you should order for your handbags. Of the three skins listed above, caiman skin is the most budget-friendly, with a caiman skin costing less than a third as much as a comparable alligator skin on average. If money's no object, then alligator skin is an excellent choice.

Finally, the style of handbag you plan to make should help you determine what kind of skin to use. As was mentioned in the previous section, caiman skins, with their rigid, calcium-rich scales, are optimal for use in hard-case style clutches and purses, while the bigger, more flexible python and alligator hides are ideal for large, soft handbags.

Once you've chosen a type of skin to use, it is important to know how to work with any given skin...



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# Tips for Working with the Different Skins

After picking out a type of skin to use for your next handbag project, the next steps are to order your skins and work them into a finished product. In this section, we'll discuss a few tips for ordering specific skins and working them into handbags.

## Alligator Skin Tips

As a material for handbags, American alligator skin remains one of the most luxurious materials on the market. On top of being soft and supple, the hide of an alligator is relatively easy to work with compared to caiman hide.

### Choosing a Skin

American alligator leather is in high demand for multiple industries, especially the handbag industry. As such, the cost for these skins runs high, so it is important to be as economical as possible when purchasing skins. This usually means choosing only hides that are as large as you need to make the specific size of handbag you're planning to make.

For example, if you're planning to make small handbags, then you'll probably only need skins that are 30 to 34 cm wide. To make medium-sized handbags, 35 to 39 cm wide skins are the most suitable. For large handbags, 40 to 50 cm wide skins should be enough.

On top of picking the right size skin, it is important to make sure that you only choose grade I skins that are free of defects. The reason for this is that handbags have large, open panels, so it is very difficult to hide a flaw in the skin.

Because of the high demand for alligator skins, finding skins that are available at commercial resellers/distributors in the colors you want might be difficult. If you have a specific color in mind, it may be easier to place a custom order with a tannery, although this will take time.





## Creating Carry Straps and Other Small Pieces

If the layout of your panels leaves you with excess hide, use that extra skin to make the carry strap, gussets, interior details and other odd parts for your handbags. This can save you a large amount of money on buying extra skins, and gives you accents that will perfectly match the handbag they are attached to.

If you don't have enough excess material to do this, consider buying smaller, grade II or III skins to make into carry straps. With these straps, it's easier to work around flaws in the hide, as long as they aren't extra-wide. When buying hides specifically for straps, make sure that they're the same type of cut (belly or hornback, for example) and come from the same dye lot as the ones being used for the bags themselves.

## Tips for Working with Python Skin

Overall, python skin is an excellent material for handbags. Python skin is beautiful, flexible, and available in large sizes that can easily accommodate the needs of large handbag designs. To help you get the most out of a python skin order, here are a few tips to consider:

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## Selecting a Skin

Before you can start crafting that perfect python skin handbag, you first have to choose which python skins to use. When selecting python skin, consider the following:

- » **Grade.** Handbags normally have very large, open panels. Because of this you typically need large, grade I skins. In a large handbag panel, there is little to no room to hide or work around flaws in a hide.
- » **Size of the Handbag.** Are you creating a small clutch bag, or a big bag? The bigger your project is, the larger the skin you'll need. If you want to minimize your expenses, you'll want to make sure that the skins that you order are only as large as you need to fit your panels. However, some handbags are so large that they need to be seamed regardless. If you are flexible, try working from what you can find in stock at tanneries and resellers.
- » **Colors.** Do you have a specific color in mind for your handbags, perhaps to match other items in your collection? When shopping for hides, it's important to make sure that you get the colors you want so that your final product can match your creative vision. Here, buying your skins directly from a tannery can be helpful, as they can dye the hides any color you want during the tanning process.
- » **Skin Patterns.** One of the most distinctive features of a python's skin are the intricate patterns of colored scales on it. When ordering python hides, you often have the option of ordering either naturally-patterned skin, or ordering skins that were bleached to remove these patterns. Using natural patterns helps to quickly establish the finished piece as a genuine python skin product, while bleached skins often have a cleaner, more uniform appearance.

Keeping the above in mind while selecting python hides for your handbag project can help you ensure that the skin you get is suitable for your needs.



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## Using Scrap Material

When creating with a material as valuable as python skin, it is important to make sure that you have as little waste as possible. By minimizing wasted material, you can get more mileage from your exotic leather investment.

With the largest python skins, it is often possible to get multiple panels for a handbag from a single hide. However, material near the tip of the tail tends to be much more narrow than material from the midsection. This makes materials near the tip less useful for large sections of the handbag. Instead, use these portions of the skin for straps, trim, zipper pulls and other smaller details.

By using material that would otherwise be scrapped, you can get more from your exotic leather purchase, and add a more personal touch to your designs.

## Tips for Caiman Skins

### Picking the Right Caiman Skin for the Job

When picking out caiman skins for your handbag project, it is important to find clean, defect-free skins of a considerable size for each panel.

In general, caiman skins are good for small to mid-size handbags. Small handbags take skins that are somewhere between 30 and 34cm wide, while medium-sized handbags need skins that are 35 to 39cm wide.

The largest caiman skins available commercially are 40cm in width. This can make finding enough caiman skins big enough for a large handbag much more difficult than finding ones for small to mid-size ones.

As a general rule, you'll want to use grade I skins for any handbag project because handbags have large, open panels where it will be difficult to hide the blemishes and puncture marks of a grade II or lower skin.

When making a bulk order for caiman skin, try to make sure that each skin comes from the same dye lot. This helps to ensure a more consistent appearance for each skin that you use, and prevents the possibility of any single handbag having an uneven appearance where individual panels don't have a consistent coloration.





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To reduce the appearance and severity of crease marks in the hide, you can apply crocodile leather conditioners to the skin to protect it from becoming damaged. Treating the skin with a conditioner can also add luster while helping to prevent outward signs of damage from daily wear and tear.

## Treating the Skin

Compared to the other skins featured in this guide, caiman skin is relatively inflexible because it has numerous calcium deposits. Since caiman hide is stiffer than alligator or python skin, it is more likely to develop crease marks when flexed.

To reduce the appearance and severity of crease marks in the hide, you can apply crocodile leather conditioners to the skin to protect it from becoming damaged. Treating the skin with a conditioner can also add luster while helping to prevent outward signs of damage from daily wear and tear.

## Sewing the Hide

The calcium deposits in a caiman's hide make for an interesting challenge when sewing said hide into a fashion product. More than once, a sewing machine's needle has been bent or broken by hitting a hard calcium deposit in the hide of a caiman.

Two things you can do to avoid this include:

- I. Marking calcium deposits and laying skins on panels in such a way as to minimize the number of them that you'll have to sew over.
- II. Preparing sewing lines with a dremel to thin out the calcium deposits so that a sewing needle may pass through.

Doing either (or both) of these can help you to reduce the number of times production has to be brought to a halt in order to repair the sewing machine so that work can continue, saving both time and money in the end.

## General Tips for Handbags

- » Use Grade I Skins for Handbag Panels  
With any exotic skin, you'll want to use Grade I skins for the panels of your handbags. Grade II or lower skins will have small flaws or defects in them that can be hard to work around when you're dealing with the large panels required for a handbag.
- » Ensure Consistent Dye Colors  
On top of making sure that you pick the right grade of skin, it is also important to make sure that all of the skins in your order come from the same dye lot. This helps ensure that your skins have a consistent dye color so that if you have to use more than one skin for your handbags, there won't be a jarring difference in the shade of the handbag from one side to the other.





# Where to Buy Your Skins

No matter which skin you choose for your next handbag project, there are three general sources of skin:

- I. **Tanneries.** The businesses that actually take raw hides and process them into finished leather.
- II. **Distributors.** These are the businesses that buy exotic leather from tanneries and store them for resale at a later date.
- III. **Manufacturers.** These businesses handle all aspects of the creation of your designs for you, from the ordering of the skin to the final assembly.

Each source of skin has its own unique benefits and drawbacks.

## Tanneries

Tanneries are the single best option for when you have a large custom skin order. Why big custom orders? Because, when tanneries process an order, there are always some minimum setup costs regardless of how many skins are actually processed in that order. This means that when orders are small, the price per skin is much higher than it would be for large orders.

Also, since the skins are processed to order, you can get almost any combination of finish and colors that you want. However, “to order” processing does take a considerable amount of time, which slows down your own ability to meet short-term demand.

## Distributors

Distributors, on the other hand, are best for small orders of readily-available items. While distributors do charge a markup over what they pay the tannery for their skins, distributors typically make massive bulk orders, minimizing their cost per skin. As a result, the distributor markup

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on a small order of skins is normally much less than the surcharge a tannery would tack on the bill to cover their setup costs.

Unlike tanneries, the skins sold by distributors are already finished and good to go. This means that there is only a minimal delay for shipping once the skins are ordered.

## Manufacturers

Manufacturers are the “hands-free” option for designers who either don’t have a manufacturing team of their own, or just don’t want to deal with the hassle of organizing and managing a crew of workers. While generally more expensive than either of the other two options, when you factor in the cost of labor, this choice might be more economical than it first appears.

The caveat with manufacturers is that you might have to carefully oversee their ordering process to make sure that they aren’t buying more material than they actually need to fill your order.

Your choice of whether to use a tannery, a distributor, or place an order with a manufacturer will be strongly influenced by several factors, including:

- » Schedule.
- » Size of order.
- » Need for special finishes or colors.

If you have a small order of commonly-available skin colors or finishes, then a distributor or a manufacturer may be your best option, especially if you need the skins right away.

On the other hand, if you have a very large custom order and a lot of time before you need your skins, then a tannery will be your best bet, as they make your skins to order, when you order them.

To learn more about choosing the perfect exotic leather for your next handbag project, or to place your order with a trusted, independent tannery/distributor, contact Pan American Leathers today!



# We Thank You For Reading...

We know that choosing and maintaining crocodilian footwear can be confusing. Sometimes it's not easy to get it all down into print like we tried to do here, so if there's something you're confused on (or you'd just like some personal help), feel free to call us or contact us at the addresses below.

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