A Look Ahead, a Glance Behind

The BIG Trends
From This Year’s International Travel Goods Show

The International Travel Goods Show is the place to see big brands, popular perennials and all-new items all at once, for a top-down perspective. Product trends are The Show’s greatest variable, and The Show is where these trends are minted and validated. What’s prominent at this Show shapes the industry’s trajectory for the coming year.

Wheels: Bigger is Better

Now that 4-wheelers have become the luggage norm, they’re no longer enough to differentiate one brand from another. But a good set of wheels still makes for a compelling showroom demonstration, so manufacturers put extra effort into this year’s rollers.

Small-diameter, low-height casters are lighter weight and permit more luggage volume for a given set of overall dimensions. But on rough surfaces like cobbled sidewalks, or the deep-pile carpet of a high-end hotel, those little wheels bog down in a big way. Big wheels are popular with mountain bikes and off-road vehicles because they have more “float” over the rough stuff, and that same principle applies here.

Large-diameter 2-wheelers were on show from Projekt, with its Puddle Jumper on 5” wheels. XTEND, which placed in last year’s Product Innovation Awards, sports a pair of 5.3” wheels. And G-RO, which raised $4.7 million with its crowdfunded launch, rolls on even larger wheels that are almost the height of its 8.5”-tall carry-on.

This year’s first-place Product Innovation Award winner, Travelmate Robotics’ self-driving suitcase, rolls on “omni wheels,” big wheels with perpendicular rollers around their circumference, providing 4-way, caster-like mobility without the bulk of casters.

Athalon showed off luggage featuring the sine-wave Shark Wheel, which already enjoys a following as a low-rolling-resistance skateboard wheel, and promises to provide more float over soft surfaces with its S-shape tread.

Some 4-wheelers get into the act too, like Chariot Travelware with its 2.25” caster wheels. Thule’s Revolve Global Carry-on and Handy Sandy’s Magic Suitcase also use oversize wheels.

Get a Move On

Nobody likes trudging through the airport with luggage in tow – we’ve all shot covetous glances at passengers being whisked through the terminal on golf carts. Some of those airport concourses can feel like an 8,000-foot runway, and while they can’t make the distances any shorter, a few items at this year’s Show tried to ease the journey.

Travelmate Robotics wowed the Product Innovation Awards committee with its self-driving, autonomous suitcase. The carry-on responds to voice commands (you can even name it, so it knows when it’s being addressed), or it can be controlled via smartphone, so you can walk unencumbered as your carry-on follows faithfully behind. Newcom (Best Travel Co.) also quietly showed off a smartphone-controlled self-driving case.

Scoocase went one further, with its carry-on that converts to an electric stand-up scooter. The companion Bluetooth app turns your smart device into a dashboard showing speed, distance traveled, remaining range and battery charging.

Americas Travel Merchandise showed its Scootie 2 kids’ carry-on that transforms into a 3-wheeled kick scooter, now part of a growing product category. No word on whether there’s a version for grown-ups, but it wouldn’t take much to scale this up to adult size.

Modobag cruised the aisles with its ride-on case that resembles a motorcycle, complete with fold-up footpegs, pop-up handlebar and memory foam saddle. The self-powered case had no trouble coping with deeply padded carpet, with an 8-mpg top speed and 6-mile range that should be more than enough for Heathrow’s endless hallways. It charges in an hour; and its

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Micro Texturing Goes (Almost) Mainstream

It was only a few years ago that textured hardsides were the growing trend, offering a respite from the monolithic rectangular form that’s come to symbolize 21st century luggage. As molding technology has become more widespread, so has the proliferation of textured hard shells. Geometric designs like stripes and polka dots were first, followed by whimsical swirling designs and intricate geometries.

This year, texturing goes micro. The new surfaces feel like piped frosting from a 0.5 mm tip. Texturing is more tactile than visual, and probably provides additional scratch protection by elevating the surface above luggage conveyors and other scuff-prone surfaces. Aerolite (USB International) showed off micro-ribbed hardshells, and Mia Toro (HONTUS Milano Group) went even further, using sinusoid fine-toothcomb lines that felt like wood—an illusion that was enhanced by the woodlook graphic and burnt-wood artwork.

SwissGear (Group III International), Aerolite (USB International) and others displayed hardshells with raised hexagons that resembled 1/8” honeycomb. GABBIANO Luggage was one of a few brands that featured micro brickwork surfaces. Heys, Swiss Bags, Carlton, and others sported faux carbon texturing, a pattern that sporting goods aficionados recognize as “4k carbon weave.”

Once you knew to look for it micro texturing was almost ubiquitous, from the likes of Global Traveler (Group III International), Nautica (Randa Luggage), RONCATO, Rugged Equipment, and Triforce Luggage.

A Year to Shine

Colors and finishes are the most attention-getting trend of any given year, and this year there was plenty of eye candy.

Metallics were huge, with glistening, metallicized shininess on display in almost every booth. Silver and gold were just emerging last year, but 2018 saw shiny metal finishes in almost every color. While principally a hardside feature, even soft luggage got the metal treatment, with notably flashy entries from Americas Travel Merchandise and Travelers Club Luggage.

Related to metallics—and likely to be popular next year—is glitter. The sparkle of glitter graced bags from LongLat’s Kathy Ireland Collection and Travelers Club Luggage’s Kensie octagonal hardshides. Others on the sparkly bandwagon included Chariot Travelware, Dot-Drops, EPIC Travelgear and Solite International.

Florals are hot in fashion, and while the travel goods industry often plays catch-up that wasn’t the case this year. Flower-themed prints adorned wares from 24-7 International, Aerolite (USB International), Aimee Kestenberg, Americas Travel Merchandise, EPIC Travelgear, Heys, Macbeth Collection by Margaret Josephs, Randa Luggage, Travelers Club Luggage and Triforce Luggage.

Luggage, with dozens more contributing to the virtual bouquet.

With so much brightness and light, it’s somewhat surprising that gray was a hot color this year. This is a departure from the metallic hues that have been a luggage mainstay since the advent of aluminum luggage. Think urban-flavored colors and nature-inspired shades like smoke, ash, granite, even earthier shades bordering on brown and taupe. Strong examples included Hedgren, Solite International, Travelway Group International, and ZERO Halliburton.

Shelve It, Pack It

It’s too soon to say shelving has replaced the industry-standard packing cube, but shelves are a growing trend. What was once the sole domain of ShelfPack by McKaba Luggage—which landed the TGA Buzz Award at The 2015 International Travel Goods Show—has spawned competitors with their own take on shelf packing systems.

ShelfPack introduced the idea, with its rolling suitcase featuring tiered shelving that telescopes into the case. You’d pack the shelves, lower them into the case, and all your items were held securely in place. On arrival, you’d pop up the shelf supports at either side and everything was ready to go. ShelfPack has continued to refine the concept, removing some of the complexity and heft from its 26” case.

First-time Show exhibitor Solgaard Design launched on Kickstarter with its Lifepack backpack in 2016, hustling up $1.2 million and delivering more than 20,000 bags to date. Its Carry-on Closet is a 22” roller that uses the 4-wheeler’s trolley handle to suspend its 6-tier organizer shelf. It’s a simpler, albeit much smaller, take on the shelves-in-a-suitcase concept.

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Grand Fusion Housewares, another Show first-timer, came with its patented Stow-N-Go Portable Luggage System, an even simpler reimagining of the shelf-in-a-suitcase concept. Suspend the 3-shelf organizer in your home closet, load it up, then unhook it and lower it into any suitcase. The shelves accordion down, with contents fixed in place by twin compression straps. On arrival you undo the straps, lift it out and hang it in the hotel closet.

While not technically shelves, Dream Duffel’s rolling luggage with integral garment rack provides the same closet-you-bring-with-you convenience. The carry-on-size bag converts to a 49” tall garment rack, becoming its own full-service wardrobe station. Add the company’s Attitude Hanging Accessory Case, which is like a hanging vanity, and all your wardrobe and makeup needs are covered.

Smart Luggage Gets Real

Smart luggage has matured. What started as pie-in-the-sky offerings that included LCD projectors, built-in Wi-Fi and other features seemingly aimed at the Consumer Electronics Show rather than travelers has finally come down to earth. There are still gee-whiz items, but most companies bringing electronic-enhanced luggage to The Show have adopted a more pragmatic approach.

Initially luggage manufacturers were developing their own power banks, or partnering with companies like Joey Energy to incorporate on-board charging into their wares. That’s still happening, with companies like G-RO and Scoocase equipping their bags with power banks. But for most luggage makers at this year’s Show, power bank integration has become an accommodation similar to laptop and tablet sleeves. Travelers provide their own power bank solutions like GoPlug, which suffered no shortage of interest at The Show.

Examples of power bank-accommodating luggage include Antler USA’s Titus and DELSEY Paris’ Pilot 4.0, featuring built-in USB charging ports with cables leading to dedicated power bank compartments. Adding a smart power bank like GoPlug’s would not only provide charging capability, but also add GPS tracking and Bluetooth connectivity (which savvy retailers are eyeballing as add-on sales).

USB charging has become the equivalent of the 110-volt wall outlet or cigarette lighter plug, and many bags sported two or even three outlets. To stand out in the charging game, some manufacturers were touting peak charging rates of 2+ amps (the better to support tablet charging), even USB 3.0 charging ports and their attendant support for higher-amp devices.

While not new, luggage with built-in weighing capability enjoyed a greater emphasis this year, perhaps as a result of air carriers’ increasingly stringent enforcement of weight limits. Global Suit Case Co. and Newcom (Best Travel Co.) were among those touting new self-weighing luggage.

The connectivity reality check has not damped all enthusiasm for more-connected luggage. Planet Traveler (HONTUS Milano Group), one of the first companies to show a smart suitcase, had its Space Case lineup with features like robotic locks, self-weighing, biometric security, Bluetooth audio, speakerphone and more, including an option for alkaline battery power. Despite a growing movement toward banning lithium-ion batteries in checked luggage – on which many of these feature-laden cases depend – this wasn’t the only bag to offer more advanced features.

Anti-theft is the New Value Added

Anti-theft, once the almost exclusive purview of Pacsafe, is becoming an everyday design staple, as manufacturers struggle to provide more perceived value for consumers. Puncture-proof zippers and RFID-blocking pockets are more widespread than ever. Even brand-new companies like Solgaard Design are including items like retractable locks on their standard products.

Pacsafe didn’t invent anti-theft features, but security has always been the company’s prime selling point. Their most prominent feature is eXomesh® fabric with embedded steel cable mesh to thwart razor blade-enabled pillage. Locking and puncture-proof zippers, cables for securing luggage to fixed objects, RFID pouches and other security enhancements are a hallmark of Pacsafe’s products, and it’s probably done more than any other company to highlight anti-theft components in its marketing. And these same features are becoming more widespread in the industry.

Travelon® has bet big on security, incorporating it into its company slogan, “Travel easier and safer.” Its Show media kit featured more than seven pages devoted to anti-theft products, encompassing dozens of items – and not even two pages for the comfort and

Floral prints and graphics were de rigueur on hardsides and soft luggage alike. And they really pop on an on-trend metallic backdrop.
convenience items that were its previous mainstays.

L.C. Industries has quietly built its anti-theft luggage business, with items such as its Secura Destinations Convertible Anti-Theft Backpack. Anti-theft is one of the most prominently featured categories in its booth, and on its website.

The accessories powerhouse Design Go has continued investing in anti-theft items, with RFID passport sleeves and wallets consuming a larger proportion of its ever-expanding catalog.

RFID blocking is the feature of the moment, now baked into everyday bags, carry-ons, checked luggage and wallets. Almost any travel-specific outerwear incorporates at least one RFID-shielded pocket or compartment – a sign of our increasingly interconnected, wireless (and vulnerable) world.

### Apparel As Carry-on

With the possibility for stricter enforcement of airline carry-on rules looming in the future, multi-pocketed clothing is gaining traction among exhibitors. Possibly it’s a hedge against smaller carry-ons?

Kickstarter darling BauBax – which raised more than $9 million for its multi-pocketed travel jacket in 2015 – came to The Show with its BauBax 2.0 coat with 25 features. A multitude of pockets, headphone cable routing, built-in travel pillow and goggles, eye mask, insulated drink pocket and other cabin-friendly features made this a natural for The Show.

Longtime Show exhibitor Pacsafe has broken into the clothing market with its own multi-pocketed, security-enhanced outerwear designed for travel.

Craghoppers showcased its travel-friendly clothing including jackets, vests and pants with RFID-shielding technology.

Although more anti-theft than carry-on oriented, the appropriately named Pocket Socks made its Show debut with its zippered-pocket socks. This might be more akin to a money belt or neck wallet, but it’s still travel-specific clothing, which has seen more action – and interest – this year.

### Product Stories With a Cause

While community consciousness is not new to our industry, this year’s Show saw a definite uptick in exhibiting companies that are as much about a cause as they are about great product.

United By Blue and YaY Novelty, this year’s Community Service Award winners, have strong corporate citizen stories behind their brands (see our Community Service Awards story on page 67), but they’re far from alone.

CRUSOE’s leather passport wallets are all about travel and sustainability, with a unique tanning process that is eco-friendly, and lets the leather weather to absorb traces of its travels, like a passport stamp. Founder David Sylvia quit a successful corporate career to encourage international travel among students, so they might gain the eye-opening insight he experienced as a globe-trotting student. His goal is to boost the number of students who study abroad, and the number of Americans who hold passports – currently at a mere 9% and 44%, respectively.

First-time exhibitor Hamilton Perkins® wowed Show-goers with its line of bags made from recycled plastic and repurposed billboards. The Virginia-based B Corp is committed to fair wages, responsible sourcing and sustainability, with edgy designs and an authentically resonant backstory.

Uptothetime, a Launch Pod exhibitor, showcased its lifestyle bags and founder/designer Dahlia DeSouza’s commitment to furthering education (she is, herself, a professional educator). Ten percent of profits go to PACE Canada and Sashbear, supporting their missions of educating socio-economically disadvantaged children and teaching life-coping skills to those with mental health disorders.

AfterGen showed its youthfully fun (and often child-decorated) backpacks and lunch bags that help promote anti-bullying awareness and education.

Save the Girls brought its charming touch screen bags, along with its message encouraging women to forego stuffing cell phones into their bras and pockets, minimizing exposure to cell-ular radiation.

### More Momentum for Continuing Trends

And then there are the perennial trends, the ones that have not yet gone mainstream, but continue to persist and build momentum.

This year saw a continued emphasis on carry-on bags. Specialists like Walter + Ray and Airpocket are being joined by mainstream luggage makers and accessory brands, helping travelers stay organized in flight.

Packing cubes continue to be big, although new alternatives like AAACK! Packs and packable shelving are expanding the concept.

Eco materials, which first rose to prominence at The Show a decade ago, continue to gain traction. Recycled plastics are being used in more products. Young brands, in particular, emphasize sustainable materials, such as United By Blue’s bison fiber, organic cotton and vegetable tanned leathers.

Hard cases continue to evolve, adopting more soft luggage features such as expandability, multiple pockets and easier in-flight access for carry-ons.

Some trends are destined to peak and ebb. But other trends become snowballs, given their first nudge in the Show’s aisles, before becoming the new standard in travel goods. The only way to know is to witness and observe. And the best place to do that is The Show. If travel products are your business, you owe it to yourself to see it for yourself.

Make plans to attend next year – March 26-28, 2019 – and spot the trends as they happen. In real time.