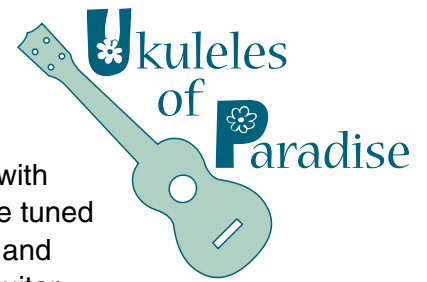


So you want to buy an ukulele...

Sizes:

Ukuleles come in four sizes; typically (but remember, there are no rules with ukuleles), the first three sizes (**soprano/standard, concert and tenor**) are tuned similarly and are the tuning listed in most available ukulele songs, chord sheets and tablature list. The **baritone** (the big boy) is tuned like the top four strings of a guitar.

Each size has its own delights. While you might think a “big” person would play one of the bigger instruments, oodles of bonus-sized folks play the tiniest ukulele (the soprano); the reverse also holds true. Cradle a few and see which you like—or get one of each! Typically the cost goes up as the size of the ukulele goes up.



What to look for:

- Does it stay in tune? Take an **electronic tuner** with you to check at the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 12th frets. From fret to fret the note should go up a half step; on the first string (A), the first fret should be A#/Bb, second fret is B, third fret is C and 12th fret is A again (but one octave higher).
- Geared tuners are easier for beginners to use; “fine” ukuleles can have geared, friction style and even peghead tuners. Friction tuners are a traditional style/look but it’s not necessarily a sign of quality.
- Look at the nut carefully; check that all the strings are seated snugly. If the nut is too high or too low this can cause intonation problem or buzzing; if the strings are loose in the nut it’ll buzz, too.
- Run your fingers along the fingerboard—do the wire frets poke out and stab you?
- If it’s older, don’t buy one with a crack or body separation unless you want to pay a luthier to fix it well.
- Play it! Do you like the sound? Does the neck feel comfortable in your hand? Play it some more!
- **Put good strings on it—Nylgut Aquilas** (they come in sizes to match the ukulele sizes) are generally a great way to improve every ukulele (and cost less than \$10). Aquila strings make even the most inexpensive ukulele sound much better and are typically much easier for a beginner to play.
- If you have the budget for it, always opt for a “solid-top” instrument over a laminate; the tone of a solid-top will be better and will even improve over time.

Prices: *Cost shouldn’t be the only factor in your consideration, but if you’re not sure you’re going to like playing, you’ll probably be uncomfortable spending a couple of weeks’ wages on one. For that reason, we’ll focus here on ukuleles priced around \$75 or under and those between \$75 and \$200.*

- Under \$75: Makala, Mahalo, Empire Music’s soprano or “Classic” tenor, Johnson, Lanikai. Avoid the “tourist” instruments. Definitely spend extra to get it “set up” for best action and intonation.
- \$75 to \$250: The Fluke, Flea and Applause Ovations are all consistently-made plastic-backed instruments with great sound. Some wonderful mid-range ukuleles are made these days in the Far East (Kala, Nalu,
- Above that price, check out custom and factory-made instruments by G String, Ko’olau/Pono, Kamaka, Keli’i, DaSilva, Mya Moe,

Where to buy:

- Avoid eBay unless you know what specific model/make you’re looking for (or you’re dealing with MusicGuyMike, see below).
- Avoid tourist shop instruments; most of these won’t stay in tune easily.
- Online sites to start with: FleaMarketMusic.com (800/459-5558), UkeLadyMusic.com (214/924-0408); UkuleleWorld.com, Elderly.com (it’s a music store—really! 888/473-5810).
- MusicGuyMike sells online only and has a great reputation for service and well set-up instruments (even in the lower price categories). Much of his inventory is on his eBay store (<http://stores.ebay.com/Musicguymics-Room>), or you can write him directly at musicguymic@aol.com and ask him about other instruments he might have to fit your budget and needs. He takes credit cards and his shipping is quick and reasonably-priced. Phone: 757-777-7873. Tell him “hi” from Tonya!

Don’t forget a chromatic electronic tuner (about \$20) and a case or gig bag!