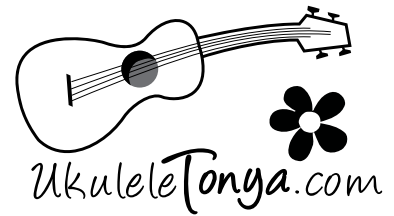


# So you want to buy an ukulele...



## 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. And then there are those banjo ukes—fun and loud!

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 cost goes up with the size of the ukulele.

## What to look for:

- Ask if the instrument has had a “set up” after unboxing. This means the string height has been adjusted properly for that instrument, it’s been tested for intonation and it plays properly. See this for a full explanation: <http://www.theukulelesite.com/ukulele-setup.html>
- 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 \$100 or under and those between \$100 and \$250.*

- Under \$100: Kala, Makala, Mahalo, Empire Music’s soprano or “Classic” tenor, Lanikai. Avoid the “tourist” instruments. Definitely spend extra to get it “set up” for best action and intonation.
- \$100 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, Luna). Mainland Ukuleles ([mainlandukes.com](http://mainlandukes.com)) are great solid top instruments made in Indiana.
- Above that price, check out custom and factory-made instruments by G String, Ko’olau/Pono, Kamaka, Kanile’a, KoAloha, DaSilva, Mya Moe and Nalu Ukulele.

## Where to buy:

- Avoid eBay/Craigslist unless you know exactly what you’re looking for and can evaluate an uke well.
- For used, try the Marketplace at Ukulele Underground’s forum (<http://www.ukuleleunderground.com/forum>)
- Avoid tourist shop instruments; most of these won’t stay in tune easily.
- The folks at Herreid Music in Chico offer a good selection of instruments and free adjustments for one year.
- Online sites to start with: [theUkuleleSite.com](http://theUkuleleSite.com) (808/622-8000), [FleaMarketMusic.com](http://FleaMarketMusic.com) (800/459-5558) and [Elderly.com](http://Elderly.com) (it’s a music store—really! 888/473-5810), [MimsUkes.com](http://MimsUkes.com) and [UkeRepublic.com](http://UkeRepublic.com).

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