

CYBER SIDEBAR / LEADER OF THE PACK

With a rebounding global economy and business and leisure travel on the rise, demand is up for the latest on-the-go gear. Hemispheres' third annual "Leaders of the Pack" offers an in-depth peek at the most innovative travel products you'll be seeing and buying in the months ahead.

Like many frequent travelers today, John McManus, Kim Ballis, Hank Bernbaum, and Peter Cobb have scarcely unpacked from one trip when they find themselves repacking for the next. So they're constantly looking for an edge that will make the experience as safe, secure, convenient, and comfortable as possible.

The fact that they are top officers of leading travel goods companies - Magellan's, Travelpro, High Sierra Sport, and eBags, respectively - means that they actually do more than lug luggage; they design and select it for themselves and millions of others.

As you read this, they and several hundred other travel gear manufacturers and retailers are unleashing bold and innovative collections of new products - major advances in what has become a rapidly evolving consumer category. As shown by the more than 2,000 new product lines that debuted just a few weeks ago at the annual Travel Goods Association (TGA) convention, held this year in Washington, DC, the new wave of travel gear will feature more-vibrant colors, lighter and more-durable materials, more-integrated and versatile packing components, and a host of stylish bags and accessories for women. And after several less-than-stellar sales years, travelers now are showing a willingness to spend for gear that marries functionality with sophistication.

"Consumers are driving this continuing surge of innovation," says Michele Marini Pittenger, TGA president. "They want to travel more safely and securely, with greater comfort. And manufacturers and retailers have learned just how fast they can adapt to those changing needs. Rather than a year to get a new product to market, they're realizing they can do it in months."

Something for Everyone / Travel clothing and accessories are springing up in an almost limitless array of categories. From women's thongs to men's boxers, OneDerWear has introduced disposable, biodegradable cotton underwear in packs of five. They can be washed several times and dry quickly. "It's the perfect fit for the busy traveler," says Betty Hung, the company's CEO.

Bucky's wildly colorful Minnie Pillow with eyeshades is among a growing list of personal creature comforts aimed at travelers, including Pacific Dry Goods' travel towel, McNett's microfiber towels and sleep sacks, and Zip It Gear's Travel Sock, which wicks moisture, dries quickly, and conceals valuables.

The popular footwear company Aerosoles has a new line of women's shoes geared toward travel-AS Aerosoles Signature collection-that combines style, comfort, and value (under \$100) with a shoe that can be folded or compressed for packing.

Technology-enabled travel gear continues to proliferate. SCOTTeVEST offers a three-button, wool, navy blue sport jacket in its line of Technology Enabled Clothing, which lets wearers discreetly carry multiple electronic devices. Also on the technology front, Apple's iPod mini, the tiny brother of the company's iPod music player, was released in the United States in February and goes global this month. Valence solves a big problem with its N-Charge battery that lets users run computers and other electronic devices for 10 hours or more.

And finally, Built NY's Clink-Proof One-Bottle Tote is an insulated neoprene sleeve with handle that lets travelers safely pack wine or any other bottle.

The number and variety of travel gear solutions have never been this great. For the frequent traveler, the available options are packed with new possibilities.

Selby Bateman is Hemispheres' senior editor. In upcoming issues, look for continuing coverage of new travel products.