

Affordable Luxury's

Holiday Gift Guide



Holiday Gift Guide

Once again, it's the time of year when try to think of what would make the perfect holiday gift for each of the people on our list. You can browse catalogs or Web sites like Amazon, but the staff here at AL has put together a list of some of our greatest hits over the past few years to give you some ideas.

It's broken up by Gifts for Anyone, Gifts for Children (most important!), Gifts for Women and Gifts for Men. Of course, these could also be gifts you might like to receive yourself (hint, hint), or maybe if all else fails, you can just buy them for yourself.

Please fell free to pass this along to anyone you like, and stop by the blog for more ideas.

Suspension Trainers Can Help Get Less of You Through the Holidays **(\$100 - \$200)**

Suspension trainers are deceptively simple products: a set of two adjustable nylon straps with anchors, handles and loops for your feet. Hang them over a sturdy door, close the door, and then what? By changing the length of the straps, and the distance and angle of your body position, you can do an amazing number of exercises that work out every part of your body with a little or a lot of resistance.



No need to drag yourself to the gym in the evening post-DST darkness. You can store a suspension trainer in the smallest of apartments; in fact, they are very

popular with travelers who put them in their carry-on bags to use in hotel rooms.

Resistance training gives you a triple advantage in staying (or getting) in shape: it burns calories, lowers your body fat percentage and increases the rate you burn calories at rest. Plus it moves the needle on the toned/flabby scale.



Several brands of suspension trainers are available. They all work on the same principle, using your body weight and position to increase or decrease resistance. Because the effectiveness of each exercise depends on the precision of your body position, each exercise also works your core muscles, which must be engaged to stabilize your body and maintain proper form through each series of

repetitions. As we've all sadly learned with age, core strength was what you used to build and maintain naturally as you hoisted yourself up trees, across playground jungle gyms, and over the various obstacles you climbed rather than avoiding as a younger person. They also seem to be the first to go, and with their demise go your formerly flat abs and willingness to be seen in a swimsuit, while along come back pain and other joint strain that make ordinary activities more stressful. Since suspension trainers work your core with each exercise from multiple angles, they provide a more effective core workout than simple crunches -- which everyone hates, and which aren't really that effective, anyway.

The popular brands of suspension trainers come with DVD instructions to watch and a printed guide to post nearby as a workout reference. The [Jungle Gym XT](#) comes in a tasteful shade of Ferrari red and costs about \$99 (maybe the price of 3 or 4 months of gym membership). The [TRX](#) is yellow and costs about twice as much -- \$200 (or maybe the price of 6 or 8 months of gym membership). Take a look and decide for yourself.

If You Get A Quality Umbrella, You Won't Leave It Behind (\$50 - \$350)

After (and unfortunately during) a major rainstorm, public trashcans tend to have pitiful, broken umbrellas sticking helplessly out of the top. Presumably, the former owner continues on after the catastrophic umbrella failure and gets very wet without it. You won't mourn the loss or breakage of a \$6 umbrella too much, but you'll still have to get another one. How about a durable, high-quality umbrella that you like a lot and won't forget?



Perhaps the first question should be: what would the Queen of England do? After all, it rains there all the time. She has people to carry her umbrellas for her, so she's not going to lose one, so she buys hers from [Swaine Adeney Brigg](#) in London. They are beautiful objects, with wooden shafts, handles in bamboo or the wood of your choice and canopies in either nylon or silk. They are most definitely *not* affordable to most of us, starting at about £250, or a little over \$400 US. So let's keep looking.



If the Wright Brothers were still around in the 21st century, I could see them coming up with something like the Dutch [Senz](#), an asymmetrical wing-shaped design that is darn near windproof. It turns itself around to head into the wind; you can still see under it and the long trailing edge keeps the rest of you dry. It is a great high tech design, but they do look a little odd.



[Davek of NY](#) is an American company that makes a line of strong, well-designed umbrellas. It looks as if the gearshift from an Audi TT was grafted directly onto a round, ultra lightweight version of the convertible top, made to open quickly and easily. If it turns inside out in the wind, you can just press a button and it uninverts itself. Best of all, it has a lifetime warranty and they will pay half the cost even if *you* screw up and lose it.

I think the Senz is the way to go. Maybe someday all umbrellas will look like that.

Fenix E21, the Best 21st Century LED Flashlight

(\$35)

What do you need flashlights for? Camping, looking in small spaces, seeing in the car at night, going out in the dark, living through power blackouts - when you need them, you really need them. Or do you? Is the handy flashlight app on your phone good enough?



I say no. Power blackouts are a good example. The electricity goes off and you don't know when it will be back on. The charge on your phone is precious; you need it to communicate and you can't charge it anymore. The last thing you want to do is run it down using it as an emergency flashlight. Even the old-fashioned

plastic flashlight with two D cells is better for that purpose. I decided I wanted something better, and flashlight technology has improved dramatically over the last few years.

I looked around and chose the Fenix ("phoenix") E21 as the flashlight at the sweet spot of price and performance. It takes two AA batteries, and is just slightly bigger than the mini-Maglight it resembles. It is easy to use with just three settings for the Cree XP-E LED bulb: off, on, blindingly bright (150 lumens) and on, one-third as blindingly bright (48 lumens). Just a small turn of the front near the lens adjusts the brightness. Very simple.



The light throws a strong miniature sun in the middle, ranging from an inch or so close up to several feet at the limit, and a very wide spill that lights up the surrounding area well enough to see everything else just fine. So you can light up what you want to see and still notice anything in the periphery. It's made of aircraft grade machined aluminum, so you can officially feel free to drop it from a meter and a half onto a concrete sidewalk or submerge it two meters underwater.

It's a lot of flashlight for \$35.

Luxury: 8

Affordability: 8

Available from [Amazon](#)

Want more luxury? You can pay about twice as much for a two AA battery flashlight with a much brighter Cree LED and many more settings. Take a look at the [Fenix LD-22](#) or the [ThurNite Neutron 2A](#) to get an idea of just how much power you can hold in your hand ...

Hunter Wellington Boots Actually Keep Your Feet Dry (\$125)

For years I searched for the perfect inclement-weather boots. As a shoe fanatic, I have more than a dozen pairs of fashion boots -- knee-high, thigh-high, ankle-high, booties, in black, brown, suede, kid, patent, plus more pairs of Uggs than one woman could ever wear . . . -- so many boots, but nothing to wear when it's cold and wet -- or just wet. I mean, seriously, I lovelovelove my Uggs. They're like fluffy bedroom slippers I can wear to the mall -- but in the rain or snow? Well, let's just say that no one would ever lug wet sheep as ankle weights So here I was, ultra-fashionable yet completely unprepared for the one occasion when boots are unequivocally required. Finally, after many uncomfortable moments with several pairs of allegedly waterproof fashion boots, Hunter Wellington boots stepped into my life.



Ah, Wellies. Such a functional, fashionable boot. Though mine are in basic black with a matte finish, you've probably noticed them on the feet of strangers, or in relatively upscale department stores, in an assortment of colors and styles. The tall ones look just like riding boots -- in fact, if I still rode, I would wear them to the barn (still in black, of

course), because they're waterproof and rubber AND they have a little heel to keep your feet in the stirrups, so you could ride in them and then, even if they get mucked up, they're easy to clean.



But you probably don't need a barn-proof boot that keeps your feet from sliding out of the stirrups of a saddle. You only need a boot that enables you to commute more confidently in the damp, drizzly, humid weather that climate change will apparently force us to endure for the rest of our lives, no matter where we live.

These are the boots for you. They are toasty in cool, wet weather, but not so hot that your feet swelter in warmer temps. Inside the top of the boot, you'll notice the Royal Warrant, "By Appointment of Her Majesty the Queen," and you must assume the Windsors know something about all-weather boots.



No wonder the Queen loves them: their timeless classic style, their seamless water resistance, their pillow-like rubber sole (you know, like those awful Crocs, but SO much more stylish) . . . what's not to love? Hunter Wellingtons come in multiple colors and have an endless assortment of fleece liners to keep you both dry and warm and to coordinate with any outfit or mood.

In black, brown, or navy, matte or glossy, Wellies are conservative enough to ease a sloppy work slog through wet or slushy city streets. In the rainbow of alternative colors, they can illuminate the most dreary weekend. Either way, once you have them, the liberating walk straight through a puddle instead of the ginger step over it might restore your youthful exuberance to the point that you actually look forward to the rain.

Vacuum Coffee Makers Make Great Coffee, and They're Fun to Watch (\$80)



Vacuum coffee makers are definitely among the tools that coffee achievers say make the best coffee. Regular Mr. Coffee type drip coffeemakers with paper filters that you have to go out and buy in a store and then throw out after using just cannot be that good (and they're not; the filters eliminate most of the essential oils that are preserved by most of the other methods). Plus they are just plain boring. French presses are a bit boring, too, but the metal mesh allows the oils to stay in the cup and add to the taste. It's good but the remaining sediment makes them a bit sludgy. Vacuum coffee makers filter out the grounds and let the oils through for a great cup, and the spectacle of the dark, boiling liquid brewing has the drama of a science experiment seen for the first time by a grade school kid. Setup is easy: water in the bottom and coffee in the top. Heat the bottom and the expanding steam pushes the water miraculously up into the top chamber, where it mixes with the coffee and brews for only about a minute. Take it off the heat, set it down on a cold burner and as if performed by a magician, the process quickly reverses; the fresh coffee quickly drips down in the bottom leaving 100% of the sediment behind. An exciting dramatic event to watch first thing in the morning. The upper globe comes off, is easily rinsed out and you're left with a pot of fresh brewed coffee. The Bodum Santos

commonly sold today has a stand to hold the top part and a small lid to keep the coffee in the main pot warm. Easy to use, easy to clean, makes great coffee and great for spectators, too.

Luxury: 9

Affordability: 6

Available from [Amazon](#)

Want more luxury? Hario, the Japanese company whose name means "King of Glass," makes products that are in a class by themselves. They are expensive and hard to find, but they are gorgeous and extremely high quality. Get a Hario Nouveau and an old Cory glass filter rod from eBay to replace the paper filters and you will have the ultimate brewing machine.



MarieBelle Aztec Hot Chocolate (\$50)

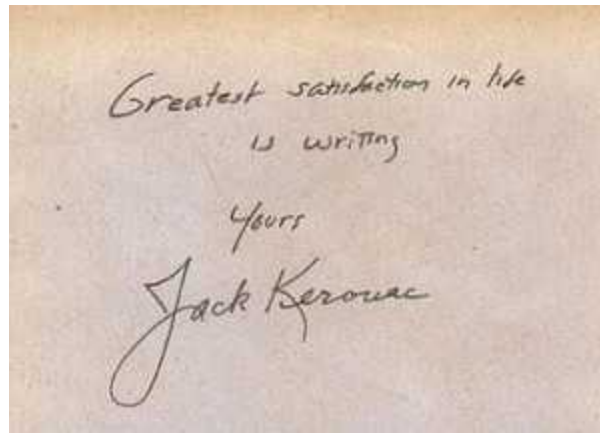


The weather is changing here in most parts of North America, and we are turning our thoughts to ways to keep warm. Curling up under a blanket, starting a fire in the fireplace, taking warm baths - all the things that you don't miss in the summer become the luxuries you don't want to miss in the fall. And of course there's hot chocolate - warm, sweet and giving the comfort of chocolate to the true chocolate lover. You can just pick up a box of Swiss Miss at the grocery store. You really can, it's not against the law. But then again, if you are going to take the time to make it yourself, heating up the milk and pouring it into a cup, then why not drink real hot chocolate, not hot cocoa? MarieBelle is Colombian chocolate; it doesn't even have any cocoa powder in it. Just tiny pieces of 63% cacao that you dissolve (melt, really) in water or milk. You can go to the boutique in New York's SoHo or your neighborhood Williams-Sonoma.

Affordability: 7

Luxury: 9

Books Autographed by Authors (\$25 - \$35)



Unlike some famous baseball players, authors do not charge extra for their autographed books. In fact, they are happy to sign a book they wrote just out of gratitude to you for having bought it. I don't know how long we will still have brick and mortar bookstores, but as long as we do they will still host writers on booksigning tours. Check the events at your local big bookstore (or big city library) and see what's coming up. Typically there is an entertaining reading in the beginning, then everyone lines up and patiently waits for the guest of honor to inscribe their book with a signature and/or a personalized inscription. You actually get to meet authors of varying degrees of renown (I have met and shaken hands with Stephen King, William Gibson, Brett Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney and many others). Since the books are always first editions, you end up with a signed first edition that could appreciate quite a bit over the years above the mere list price that you paid for it.

Affordability: 10 (no premium over the list price) Luxury: 10 (you get the full experience of hearing the author speak and answer questions before you even read the book)

Sharpie Stainless Steel Permanent Marker

(\$8)



I have always liked Sharpies. They make laundry markers and felt-tipped pens that are smooth and make a bold statement. Signatures look best with thick lines, and if you need to scan them, they need some definition. The problem, of course, is that the traditional single-use Sharpie would get used up and inevitably end up in the trash on its way to take up landfill space. Nothing luxurious about that, and then you just had to buy a new one. Now three of my favorite things are combined: the Sharpie itself, the stainless steel (think the DeLorean of pens) and less waste. Pick one up for \$8 and see how it feels.

Affordability: 9

Luxury: 8

Available from [Amazon](#)

Want more luxury? Well, there are plenty of high end pens around, but only a Sharpie is a Sharpie. If you're a George W. Bush fan (?), he had White House and Camp David Sharpies made, but I'm not sure where you can still get one ...

Ten Wooden Toys That Children Will Love to Get

Wooden toys are usually a timeless design, are fairly high-quality and tend to hold up well to the wear and tear of the actual play that kids will inflict upon a popular toy. Wooden toys will stand out in a group of plastic toys, so they will attract the children's attention on special occasions when there will be a lot of toys around. Let's also remember that wooden toys are sustainable and are not made from fossil fuels, like plastic ones. With all that in mind, here's AL's list of the all-time greats, in approximate order of the age of the child recipient:



1. **Alphabet blocks** - Playing with toys is a child's job, and the result of that job is reaching an understanding of the physical world. The next stage in the job is learning to speak and then reading and writing, and alphabet blocks are the perfect early learning toy for all those things. They're non-toxic, and too big to swallow. Available from [Amazon](#).



2. **Architectural blocks** - Your basic building block teaches children how the man-made world is put together, and of course one of the most fun parts of that is seeing (and hearing) how that world can come crashing down.

They are also good for children who may put them in their mouths, and older children will enjoy making more elaborate structures, and then may be knocking them down, too.

Available from [Amazon](#).



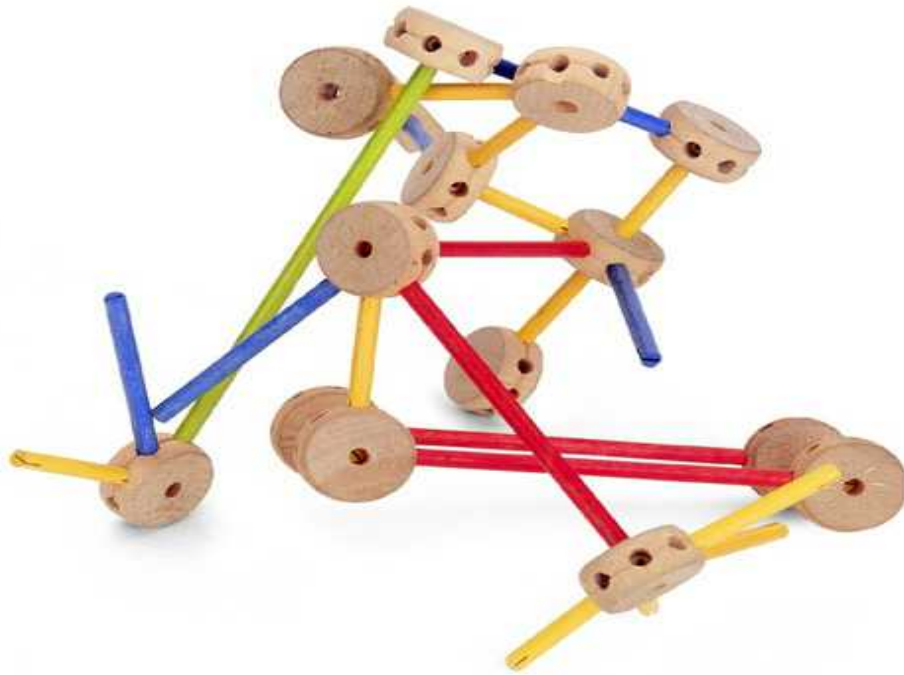
3. **Baby Walker** - There are many varieties of these; the one my son had always reminded me of a lawnmower.

Nothing's more natural than the gradual process of a baby turning into a toddler. The walking part's easy; the hard part is learning to let go and not fall. The baby walker gives a child the security of something to hold onto and the freedom to go wherever on their own. Available from [Amazon](#) (and lots of other places).



4. **Croaking Frog** - Obviously not the classic piece of Americana that some of the other toys are, the croaking frog is handmade and sold in many developing countries in Asia and Central America.

The handle comes out and is used to make a realistic, rhythmic croak by sliding it along the back and tapping the large hollow volume. In Costa Rica, for example, they are for sale literally everywhere in any size and color you could imagine (or get one carved to order if you're there and have the time). They are a truly unique gift, made by people who really need the money.



5. **Tinker Toys** - Get ready for the 100th anniversary of Tinker toys, invented in 1914. Everyone knows the construction toy with the round wooden hubs and colored sticks. These are for children who are older and more coordinated than the more basic blocks and they could be a choking hazard. Even adults can be intrigued at the complex structures that one can make with these. Not surprisingly, these are now made in plastic as well. Some say the plastic sets are better. The choice is yours. Available from [Amazon](#).



6. **Lincoln Logs** - Another iconic American building toy, designed in 1916 by John L. Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright. The notched logs enable children to make very sturdy wooden structures, while reminding them that houses used to be made directly from trees. It also reminds them of the humble background of our 16th President. Available from [Amazon](#).



7. **Walking Bike** - These wooden push bikes have become increasingly popular with young children, who love to push them along and coast for longer and longer distances.

They seem to work well as bicycle balance trainers, shortening or eliminating the time needed for training wheels. The German [LIKEaBIKE](#) is beautiful and durable, but you can get them much cheaper from other manufacturers. Or accomplish the exact same principle by just removing the pedals from an existing child's bicycle and letting them practice rolling and balancing on the bike they can pedal later.



8. **Xylophone** - Do you see a pattern here? Children love to build things and make noise, so many of these toys are about those two activities. But isn't music a form of noise?

They can just bang away on the xylophone and try the different sounds and eventually they will learn that sound can be organized just like anything else in the world, and after that, who knows? If the child is going to be like Mozart, it's best to start early. They also learn that words can begin with X. Available from [Amazon](#).

9. **Automoblox Toy Cars** - These are relatively new on the scene, and not 100% wood, but I liked them so much I gave them their own [post](#).



The combination of great looks, high quality and interchangeability gives them tremendous play value. You can have fun with one, or get more and combine them in custom ways. They keep coming out with new designs, but they still maintain the basic form factor. The standard ones are reasonably priced, and they also make Minis, which are half the size and one-third the price. Available from [Amazon](#), or check out the [Automoblox Web site](#).

10. **Marble Runs** - OK, more blocks, but these are tons of fun and are one of the best toys to get grownups down on the floor to play.



Kids get the general idea, that marbles run downhill and drop through the holes, but adults can always think of more things to add or a better way to do them, then as soon as you're done, the marbles go. Lots of companies make these, but I liked [Haba](#), for their high quality and enormous variety of add-ons. Plus, they're wood, and some runs are made of plastic, and we don't want that. Available from [Amazon](#).

LEGO Is the Toy for All Occasions (\$10 - \$400)

As I write a post about Lego (not Legos), I start to hear the long-ago voice of my seventh grade English teacher, Miss White, warning me not to pick such a broad topic. I would always think it would be easier to do a ten page paper about, say, the Civil War, but she would tell us that it would be easier to pick something like the Battle of Gettysburg, or even better, the South's retreat from the Battle of Gettysburg. With that in mind, let me be clear that the subject of this post is not Lego, but the sheer variety of Lego. Brightly-colored interlocking blocks from Denmark, available since 1949, and with quality control to make them snap together but still come apart with the strength of a child's grip, have spread to playrooms in every country.



There are 62 times as many Lego pieces as there are people in the world, and Lego is the largest producer of (very small) vehicle tires. Now, however, there are many, many Lego toy assembly kits: Star Wars, Harry Potter, SpongeBob, Ferrari, Pirates of the Caribbean, Bionicles, trains, Mindstorms robots, Indiana Jones, Bionicle, Hero Factory, Toy Story - and more coming out every year. So how do you know which ones to get? That's the easy part: every Lego set is designed for children of a certain age range, has a set number of pieces, giving you an idea of how complex they are to build. Check out the

[Lego Web site](#) to get an idea of how you can slice and dice their vast universe of products so that you end up with something that is perfect for the child's skill level, interests and costs exactly what you want to spend.

Darda Toy Pullback Cars (\$10 -\$15)



When there are small children around, or recently around, toy cars seem to multiply like magic: Matchbox, Hot Wheels and Johnny Lightning are all the same size and kids love them. They are all a lot of fun, but not as much fun as Darda cars. Just try running one back and forth to wind up the pullback motor, then let it go and watch it take off like a shot. You'll be amazed how fast and far they go with the Mega Motor power. Some of them, the Stop'n'Go models, can be cocked by pushing them down after the motor has reached maximum power and then releasing them to take off from a standing start. They are very high quality, the earlier ones were imported from Germany, and the motors are replaceable. There are lots of racetracks and other accessories available for them so the fun never needs to stop. Fun for adults, too.

Affordability: 8

Luxury: 6

Available from [Amazon](#) (lots of different models available)

Kikkerland Wind-Up Toys (\$10 - \$15)



Who doesn't love toys? Brazilian Chico Bicalho's work on many levels: they're inexpensive and rugged enough to be real children's toys, yet their whimsical design and lively open clockwork mechanism makes them fascinating to adults. They're politically correct; Bicalho is committed to funding reforestation projects. Having one on your desk gives you a light-hearted object to admire at rest and an ice-breaker and conversation piece when you take a moment to wind it up and show someone the lifelike way it skitters unpredictably around. They are all equally affordable and each one has its own personality. You can get one or more, or go ahead and get the whole set. This is a toy for all ages that someone had to invent.

Affordability: 8

Luxury: 7

Available from [Amazon](#)

Clarisonic Face Scrubber Is the Electric Toothbrush for Your Skin (\$140)

After a lifetime of youthful looks and clear skin, you look in the mirror and realize something isn't quite right. You're not as young as you were. Those days spent in the sun at the ocean's edge have taken their toll, despite your religious use of sunblock. Is that . . . a . . . line? And what are those round things? How did they get there?

Gasp!

You couldn't be old enough to look . . . old, could you? Darn that sun! Your mother always told you sunscreen didn't really work. Perhaps if you swear to wear #50 every day for the rest of your life . . . never mind. The years are gone, and you can't get them back. As any dermatologist or make-up artist will tell you, preventive action is the most effective, and now that you've noticed the signs that it could actually matter, a good first step is to make sure your cleansing ritual removes as much dirt, debris, and excess oil as possible from the surface of your skin, while exfoliating gently to remove dead skin cells. For a long time I simply used a washcloth (how novel!). Then, I combined oatmeal and cornmeal for a homemade scrub. Now, though, more serious measures are in order.



Off to the store I rushed, convinced that I was aging years with each passing moment. I had to have it NOW: that Clarisonic Face Scrubber I'd been ignoring as frivolous. From my chat with the saleswoman I learned that the Clarisonic comes in several models: the original Classic model and several new, smaller versions. The Classic is the original, larger model, with two speeds and a base. The newer Mia and Mia 2 are smaller, with one and two speeds, respectively. Models from the Mia 2 and higher have a 1-minute timer that buzzes after the appropriate cleaning segment for each quadrant of your face (forehead, chin, each cheek). You can purchase them with cleansers, but if you have sensitive skin like I do, you can use the Clarisonic with your own soap for the same result. The Clarisonic Plus comes with brushes for other body parts, and you can buy additional brushes separately.

I have used face brushes before, but I was intrigued by the concept of the Clarisonic. I've had a sonic toothbrush forever, and I've been very pleased with its results. The principle is simple: a sonic brush uses a sonic frequency to create hundreds of brush movements per second, and those brush movements provide extra cleaning power to the surface they clean.

So the question is, does it work? It actually does. In just under two weeks of twice-daily usage, I've noticed that my skin feels cleaner and less oily. My pores look smaller, and what few blemishes I may have had have disappeared. All that exfoliation does seem to have reduced the faint lines I had begun to see, and I'm optimistic that persistent use will enhance that result. Spending that \$140 has inspired me to upgrade my skincare routine to include regenerating serum and daily sunscreen, even beyond summer.

Soehnle Scale Brings Precision to the Kitchen (\$23)

What's more frustrating than not being able to find the right measuring spoon right away? You give up, and either eyeball half of the one twice as big, or use one too small and have to dump it in and refill in multiple times. You won't have that problem with a digital scale. We've purchased the attractive and useful Soehnle Digital Scale; it has the sleek, minimalist European design that will make you want to leave it out on the counter ...



... and unlike measuring cups and spoons, it never needs to be washed clean of whatever you put in it.

More importantly, digital is just easier and more accurate than mid-twentieth century analog. Put the bowl on the scale, press the tare button to zero it out, and spoon 220.00 grams of brown sugar out of the box. Just like that, you now have a cup of "tightly packed" brown sugar - no worries about how "tight" or "packed" you got it to be. Now

here's the best part. Next is three cups of sugar. Zero button again, and pour 384.00 grams into the bowl from the bag. You have exactly four cups of your batter, and you haven't used the measuring cup once. No removing of any grains of brown sugar required in between. The measuring cup, and spoons aren't needed at all anymore.

Once you have one, you can get all OCD about everything in the kitchen. Making cookies or pancakes with that exact amount of batter you mixed? Make each cookie and each pancake exactly the same size (by removing the same amount of batter from the bowl, by weight, each time). Get your family to guess which one's the biggest (good luck with that when they are all identical). In fact, using the scale is, in itself, a fairly OCD way to cook, since measurement by weight is much more precise than by volume -- and, indeed, the way the rest of the world measures ingredients is by weight. This precision is especially important to baking, where every milligram of each ingredient can alter the chemical interaction among ingredients and, thereby, change the cooking time and texture of your baked goods.

Key to success with any cooking scale is the conversion of your favorite recipes for easy reference. The first time you try a recipe using the scale, note the volume-to-weight equivalents on the recipe; then, the next time you make the same recipe, you can add the ingredients by weight automatically without using a single measuring implement.

Another hint (and Max deserves the credit for this one): if your digital scale, like the Soehnle, has both metric and U.S. customary units, converting your volume measure to the metric equivalent is much easier, and requires much less math, than will U.S. customary units that require another equation when the ounces you've added to your recipe convert to pounds (so you can finally thank your elementary school math teacher for forcing you to learn the metric system).

Oh, and the Soehnle scale goes up to 9.5 pounds, so you can also weigh packages for shipping (and very young babies) ...

Available from [Amazon](#) for under \$23.

Is Expensive Lingerie Worth It? (\$75 - \$300)

While in London, I just had to go shopping at Harrod's in Knightsbridge. Needing more, I walked across Hans Road to Rigby and Peller to check out the lingerie that bears the Queen's [Royal Warrant](#). While they had some beautiful things, the sad truth became clear that the Queen and I are proportioned differently -- well, not entirely sad for me, but clearly another brand would be better.



Here you are again, gentlemen, lights twinkling and carols caroling, wondering what Santa could possibly bring your honey that she hasn't already bought for herself on those weekly excursions to the mall, or that you weren't clever enough (you little devil, you) to think of suggesting to Santa the last time the jolly old elf dropped by. What, indeed, does one give to the woman who has everything? Jewelry and furs, you say? Well, she already has those, and last year's jewelry will be pretty hard to top. But how about ... European lingerie? And when I say, "European lingerie," I mean genuinely from the continent of Europe; please don't go to that loud, pink, overly fragrant store at the mall with its store logos emblazoned on every item it sells (you know the one I mean), imagining that at those prices -- and with those models, and those commercial voiceover accents -- their garments **MUST** be as luxurious -- or luxurious enough, anyway. They are not. European lingerie is what your honey must have -- even if she already has other

"fancy" undergarments, even if she thinks she isn't a lingerie person, even if YOU don't care what her lingerie looks like (but I know that's not possible).

What's so special about European lingerie, you ask? Well, as with most garments, European designers know quality. They know how clothing should fit, and they know how undergarments must be made to ensure that the clothes covering them appear to fit well. Thus, brassieres by brands like [Chantelle](#) or [La Perla](#) will provide support without wires that dig into her skin, will create a smooth line beneath even the clingiest sweater, and will perform both of these functions without excess wiring or padding and with a delicate, feminine fabric that is flattering without looking either matronly (see R&P, above) or trashy (see V.S., above). The styles most frequently displayed tend to be brightly-colored or extremely lacy or intricately patterned, all of which can be quite pretty for the woman who prefers extremely frilly undergarments, but the great discovery about European lingerie is that it also comes in styles that are basic and perfectly serviceable, but still pretty enough to make one stand a bit taller and feel more elegant without excessive detail that every woman won't appreciate (and that won't necessarily work under one's every-day professional wardrobe).

Are these "unmentionables" unspeakably expensive? Well, they certainly cost more than average department store lingerie, but the purchase of European lingerie isn't simply about spending the money. The value of European lingerie is in its high quality, invisible elegance and the confidence she projects knowing she's wearing it. With those intangible benefits, it's a bargain at any price.

Merkur HD 38 Safety Razor (\$50)



Wet shaving is the perfect example of affordable luxury. Even if you haven't tried it, you owe it to yourself to see what it's like to shave with very hot water, a brush, great-smelling shaving cream and a single blade that you can actually hear as it does its job. Modern expensive plastic multi-bladed cartridges are an example of marketing over everything else. They cost you \$3 each and they end up going straight to help fill up landfills. Try shaving the way Churchill and JFK shaved, and in the process you will spend a fraction of the money on blades. The German-made Merkur HD is precision made and designed to be balanced and not to slip in wet hands. It lacks the slick twist-to-open (TTO) mechanism of some modern double-edge razors (or even most vintage Gillettes), but that only matters once a week or so when you change the blade. Overall, a quality instrument for your first experiment in wet shaving.

Affordability: 4

Luxury: 7

Available from [Amazon](#)

Want more luxury? The [Merkur Vision](#) is adjustable, TTO, looks like something out of a postmodern German sci-fi movie and will set you back about \$160. There are some beautiful and highly collectible vintage Gillettes on eBay from the Mad Men era, but that will be a post for another day.

Affordability: 2

Luxury: 9

Swiss Army Knife CyberTool (\$100)



The Victorinox Swiss Army Knife CyberTool is handy for two reasons: it has tools that you won't have anywhere else around the house (the Torx drivers) as well as high quality, conveniently sized tools that will be right at your fingertips (the bottle opener, scissors, etc.). Available in your choice of black, blue or traditional Swiss Army knife

red, you also have to decide whether you want the 29, the 34 or the 41. I like the 34; it has the scissors and pliers that the 29 lacks. The 41 has a saw that you could use to cut down trees and a file that I can live without. The Torx bits are handy for opening electronic devices (like TiVos) that you don't mind voiding the warranty on (a post for another day, I think). All in all, handy for repairing all sorts of things, like glasses. Plus it's a knife, two knives actually, so remember to leave it out of your carry-on bag.

Affordability: 5

Luxury: 8

Available from [Amazon](#)

Want more luxury? Well, there's always [this](#), but I wonder if they're serious ...

Johnny Beard Fireplace Bellows (\$35 - \$200)



It's starting to get cold in North America, and that means if you have a fireplace, you'll want to have fires. After a few nights of hyperventilating by blowing into the fire, I knew a fireplace bellows was a necessity,

not a luxury. But now which bellows? The quick, cheap and easy thing to do was get the usual Chinese-made product from my local chain store. But no, I didn't want to do that. Cheap, yes, but eventually it would wear out and get thrown out, or tossed in the dumpster if I ever move somewhere without a fireplace. Johnny Beard, a real person from Tulsa, Oklahoma, has been in the bellows business for over 30 years, and he has gotten pretty good at it. He makes a wide assortment of fireplace bellows for every taste and price range, and his customer service aims to please. I accidentally ordered the wrong one, and when I called, he answered the phone himself and personally changed it for me. Order up 'til two weeks before Christmas if you want to give one as a gift. I went for the one in the picture, the Pennsylvania Pine, one of the lower-priced models. It evokes nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch design and has a romantic heart-shaped intake hole. You may prefer something different; there are plenty to choose from. Check them out online [here](#).

Affordability: 6

Luxury: 9

Want more luxury? Don't have to go far. The Johnny Beard [Special Editions](#) are as luxurious as you could want.

The Joos Orange Charger Brings Solar Energy Into the 21st Century (\$150)

The [Joos Orange Solar Charger](#) is about as green as technology can get. Everybody has a good feeling about green technology. Do you think there is anyone who has, let's say, a Prius that doesn't love it, admire its cool features and feel moral and virtuous for owning one? Many of them famous movie stars and other celebs who can afford to drive whatever they want? I don't have a Prius, but I get the same feeling from recycling, remembering to take reusable shopping bags to the supermarket and from using rechargeable AA and AAA batteries. I have looked at other solar chargers and until the Joos came along, they just weren't ready: either too slow, too unreliable or just generally low quality. The Joos Orange Solar Charger has that quality feel that involves good fit and finish and a little bit of heft without being actually heavy.



It's a little smaller than I expected, which makes it more portable for outdoor and travel use.

It is not only water resistant, it's waterproof. You can actually charge it underwater, if you plug the female microUSB jack with the built-in cover. You don't even really have to, if you dry the jack out once in a while.

I'm not sure why you would need to submerge it, but if a good sunny charging day turns without warning into a not so good rainy charging day, there is no need to worry about the Joos Orange getting wet.

It comes with all the plugs and wires you are likely to need, and you can order unusual ones and reflector mirrors for even more efficiency [here](#). The Joos tells you its status through red and green LEDs, but if you are a true geek, download the free software to your computer and communicate with your Joos to your heart's content. The computer will also charge it up through the USB port.

The battery is lithium-ion, and if you end up using the Joos Orange so much that you need a whole new battery, you can order one from the manufacturer and change it yourself, always a convenient feature and green, too.

So while you sit outside and recharge your spiritual batteries, you can charge the batteries for your devices as well.

You can order one or arrange to be notified when they are back in stock [here](#).

Sanyo Eneloop XX Batteries Will Feed Your Hunger For Power (\$25)

Sanyo Eneloop batteries don't have to live in the charger all the time, which is a bad idea anyway, unless you have a charger like [this one](#) with a trickle function.



AA and AAA batteries power much of the gadget-obsessed Western (and Eastern) world. I was an early adopter of rechargeable batteries, back in the nickel-cadmium days. NiCd batteries would go strong until they ran out of power, then abruptly drop dead. They were a huge improvement over throwaway batteries, though, just as alkalines were a huge improvement over carbon batteries. At least alkaline batteries didn't get thrown away quite so fast. Modern nickel metal hydride (NiMh) batteries are great, except they are dead when you buy them and they lose a charge fairly quickly on their own, so they're good for toys and cameras, that get used a lot; and bad for things like remote controls and flashlights. Flashlights in particular are supposed to work when you need them,

like when the power goes out during a storm. Who is going to remember to charge their flashlight batteries (until the power's out, and it's too late . . .)?

About five years ago, Sanyo (and others) introduced low self-discharge batteries that held their charge and therefore could be sold holding a charge and used right out of the package. The initial trade-off was that they were not as powerful as the ordinary kind, only about 2000 mAh compared to more like 2700 mAh for their competition. The Sanyo Eneloop XXs are now perfect. You can buy them, stick them right into something (although you should top off the charge first), and use them immediately ... or do the opposite: charge them up and wait until you need them. They will hold a charge basically as long as you want. The manufacturer suggests that you store them in a cool place, a really cool place like the refrigerator or freezer.

They feel solid in your hand and they look great, too, with an edgy, extreme sports design.

The one drawback is that they are expensive, but don't rechargeable batteries pay for themselves?

Affordability: 6

Luxury: 9

Available from [Amazon](#)

California Car Duster Keeps Your Car Clean and Saves Water (\$25)

The [California Duster](#) is the perfect way to get dust off the car's finish.



I love riding in a clean car. Maybe it's genetic, but if my car needs to be washed, I just worry about when I'll have the time to get it clean. The cars are garaged most of the time, but they still seem to pick up a thin layer of regular dust and brake dust. Through some quirk of the space/time/matter continuum, Daisy's car, which is new and shiny black, ends up coated with fine snow white particles; mine, which is vintage (meaning old) and white, gets coated with what looks like jet-black coal dust. Too bad it can't be the other way around. In any event, the dust looks OK for a while, but a few drops of rain will mix with the dirt and suddenly the cars look filthy and need to be thoroughly rinsed off with fresh water, if you have a layer of [good wax](#), or washed with car wash if you don't. The California Duster is the perfect way to be proactive, and keep the car looking

clean nearly all the time. When the car is recently clean, dry and shiny, just keep an eye on it for a few days until it starts to get a little dusty, then take a few minutes (really, that's all it takes) and dust it off with the California duster.

You will be gratified at how much better it looks and it will go that much longer between water washes. You can dust your car every day, or just when it needs it, and it will go longer between washes with water and look good the whole time.

It even comes with a case to keep the dust off the inside of your trunk.

Almost sounds too good to be true. What's the catch? Doesn't seem to be one: they are relatively cheap and no, they don't scratch the paint. True hard-core motorheads use them to dust off their Ferraris and Rolls-Royces (or pay other people to do it).

Available from [Amazon](#)