

A Consumer's Guide *to* BUYING GEAR



by Anne Maxwell

If you are in the market for skydiving equipment, the most important thing to know is the size and type of equipment that you need. But once you have determined what you are going to buy, how do you actually go about purchasing the system? By carefully considering your purchasing options, you can navigate through the pitfalls and acquire the best equipment that your budget will allow.

SET A BUDGET

When buying gear, it is important to be very clear about how much you have to spend. Stick to your original figure even when offered discounts and killer deals; increasing it is a sure-fire way to end up staying on the ground with the latest cool gear because you have no money left over to jump. Shop around to get a good idea of the range in cost for each piece of equipment, so that when you are quoted a price you will have some idea if it is on the high- or low-end of the spectrum.

I recommend beginning with a sheet of paper and putting the amount you have to spend in large numbers at the top. Divide the page in half and head one column "new" and the other "used." Start with the "new" column and put in every piece of equipment that you would like to buy new and its price. Don't forget to include the price of a jumpsuit, altimeter, helmet and goggles. Total the column. If you are inside your budget, fantastic! If not, you need to decide which items you are willing to buy used. To give you some idea, a complete set of brand-new custom equipment that includes main, reserve, container and AAD will cost anywhere from \$6,000 to \$7,000, depending on the options.



WHERE TO BUY

When you start looking for gear, it may seem that everyone at the DZ has a piece of equipment with your name on it. Shop around. You can look at the following:

Local Gear Shops

PROS:

Local dealers tend to be experienced skydivers and can provide a wealth of free technical advice. They will be likely to measure you accurately and make sure that you end up with a good piece of equipment that is safe for your current level of experience. They are local, so they will be easy to reach for any problems that may arise. It is unlikely that you will be sold a piece of unsafe or shoddy equipment or that you will be ripped off, as any local dealer who becomes known for deceptive practices would not stay in business for long.

CONS:

Since they usually maintain a retail facility with on-site staff, they are rarely the cheapest source. There can also be a tendency towards

partisanship as they are often affiliated with particular manufacturers and may push their products.

Web/Catalog Dealers

PROS:

Price. With a large sales volume, they can usually sell cheaply. They usually have a wide range of goods on the shelf, ready to go, so if you have a credit card you can buy instantly.

CONS:

If you have a credit card you can buy instantly, possibly purchasing something that you cannot afford. You are less likely to be questioned about the suitability of the gear for your experience level. Factor in shipping costs and time. Remember to check whether purchases are final, since after-sales service could be nonexistent.

Skydiving Forum Classifieds

PROS:

They can be the best places to find a bargain if you know what you are looking for. Users often provide personal information on who they are and where they skydive. Their identity is available for scrutiny and can be verified by additional follow-up.

CONS:

It can be the best place to get ripped off if you don't know what you are doing. There are many buyer and seller scams. Even honest skydivers may make mistakes and overestimate the value and condition of their equipment. Most sales are done long distance, leaving you with few options if the deal is not as sweet as you first thought it was.

Online Auctions or Sales Sites

PROS:

These can be places to pick up a bargain if you know what you are looking for and are prepared to gamble. Some insurance for transactions is provided through eBay™, although the procedure is time-consuming and can be tricky. Local classifieds such as craigslist™ at least offer the possibility of checking out the equipment before payment is made. Ask every question you need answered before the end of the transaction to ensure that you are covered in case the goods were misrepresented.

CONS:

These are also great places to get ripped off. Personal identities are kept private, and you cannot always rely on the honesty of the seller. Some of the equipment is sold by non-skydivers and some is stolen or "found" (e.g. cutaways). It is easy to get caught up in online auctions and bid more than you intended. There are



virtually no refunds for gear that doesn't fit or that is in worse condition than advertised.

Noticeboard at Your Local Drop Zone

PROS:

The equipment is local. The identity of the owner and claims made about things such as the number of jumps on the equipment can be verified. You may be able to test jump or at least try the equipment on before buying. Independent inspection of gear will be straightforward.

CONS:

The equipment can be on the higher end of the price range if demand far outweighs supply, as is often the case with equipment suitable for novices.

Instructor, Rigger, Friend

PROS:

They know you and will have a very good idea of the best equipment to suit your current experience level. They are unlikely to knowingly sell you unsafe gear.

CONS:

Most people lose their objectivity when they have a financial interest in the product they are selling. If you are thinking about buying a rig from a friend, get an outside perspective and valuation.

PAYMENT METHODS

Escrow

A simple and safe way of dealing with individuals whom you don't know is to use your local rigger, instructor or DZO as an escrow agent (a neutral third party who holds goods or money during a business transaction). The escrow agent is responsible for ensuring that the equipment is as it was represented, then distributes the goods and money to the correct parties. In the event of a dispute, the return of the items and payment is relatively straightforward. There is usually a fee.

Credit Card

One of the safest methods, credit cards provide you with a full record of the transaction and the item is oftentimes insured. Any disputes can then be referred to the credit card company. Only merchants can receive credit card payments. Ask if the merchant offers a cash discount to make sure that you are not paying more simply because you are using a credit card.

Cash

Cash is simple, easy and the most likely way to get a discount. Get an itemized receipt that fully reflects the entire transaction. Do not use in the case of long-distance sales, as disputes may be difficult to resolve.

Bank Transfer

Bank transfers are also simple and they provide a full transaction reference. Bank transfers should only be used with individuals and companies who are known to you, since the money will be immediately out of your control. It is a good way to send money internationally, but again, only if you know the identity of the person you are dealing with. *You do not* want to provide unknown people with your bank details.




PayPal™ and Similar Services

These are simple, easy ways of paying for items long-distance or through auction sites. PayPal™ provides insurance on transactions. The commission is expensive.

Western Union™

This is a much reviled and abused system that remains useful when the proper caution is taken. It can be the best way to send money internationally. This is the preferred method of scammers and the overseas rip-off brigade. Get references, do background checks and don't deal with people who cannot satisfy all of your questions.

FINAL TIPS

- » Research. Check out websites, and ask instructors, riggers and friends to inform you about the type of equipment that you need and a rough idea of how much you should expect to pay. Ultimately you are responsible for your purchases.
- » Ask for discounts. Most dealers factor in a discount. If buying a complete set of brand-new gear, it is worth asking for something free (a gear bag, packing mat, etc.) The markup on gear is fairly large. Most prices are pretty flexible, especially if you have done your research and can honestly say that the same product can be found cheaper somewhere else.
- » When buying used gear, bargain hard. The price will usually be as flexible as the stated number of jumps on the equipment.
- » If the seller is genuine, the gear's condition can be verified and the deal is good, snap it up. If you don't, someone else will.
- » Consider buying costly items from your local dealer, directly from the manufacturer or through a website/catalog dealer with a full-refund policy. (Bear in mind that unless you return the goods for a legitimate reason, you will incur the postage and possibly restocking fees.) You can gamble more when buying smaller items.
- » Have every piece of used gear checked thoroughly by a rigger with no financial interest in the transaction. He or she will be able to confirm the condition and value of the equipment very accurately.
- » Watch for sales of demo rigs by manufacturers. You can often pick up top-of-the-range equipment that is around a year old, at great prices. Call the manufacturer directly or check out their website on a regular basis. Bear in mind that some manufacturers will only sell through dealers.
- » Avoid classified ads until you have a thorough knowledge of the sport, and even then be very cautious. If the bargain seems too good to be true, it probably is.
- » Don't be afraid to walk away from any deal that does not ring true, particularly if the individual won't provide references as to who they are. It is better to lose out on a "bargain" than be scammed. Our sport has a great networking system, and identities can be readily verified; don't be afraid to use it. Everyone should be able to supply the name of their drop zone and be able to provide names of people who are well established in the sport to vouch for them.
- » Be prepared to accept that your new rig will become your baby for a period of time, and that you may spend countless hours with your new purchase to the exclusion of your friends and family! 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Maxwell, USPA #110200, is a rigger and a skydiving instructor who runs a new and used gear-sales service. She has more than 4,000 jumps and has been skydiving for nearly 20 years. She divides her time between DeLand, Florida and Empuriabrava, Spain.