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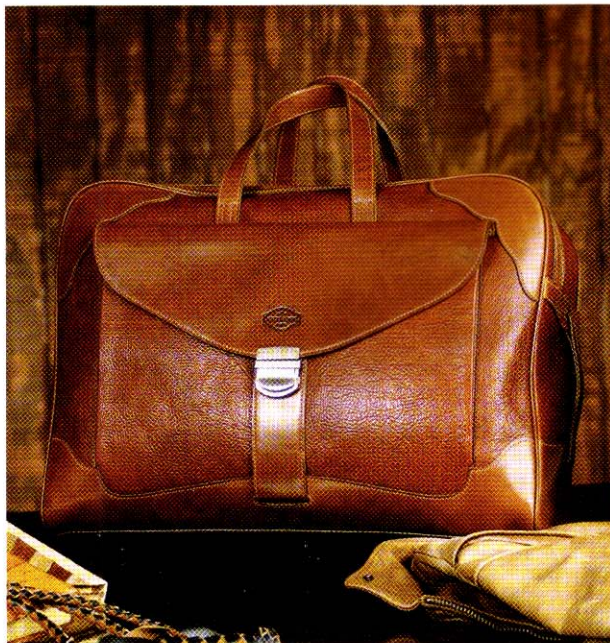


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High Gear

Patrick Noel Sance designs bags for life's adventures—both on and off the beaten path.



PATRICK NOEL SANCE tried not to make a sound as he hid in a crevice high in the Andes, near the border between Peru and Bolivia. He had been leading a mountaineering expedition on that day in 1989, when members of the Maoist revolutionary group Shining Path raided his camp. For Sance and his half-dozen comrades, it was every man for himself. There was shouting, followed by gunfire. "I thought they were killing us," recalls Sance. "I felt trapped like an animal. But at the same time I had this overconfidence in myself—that maybe they'd kill everyone but me." His confidence was shaken when one of the rebels hovered over him, pointing a submachine gun and ordering Sance out of his lair. "I think what gave me away," he says matter-of-factly, "were the clamps on my backpack, which were scratching the rock."

The now-55-year-old Sance, who, along with his companions, survived that incident relatively unscathed, moved from the realm of Indiana Jones to that of Louis Vuitton last fall, when he introduced a collection of more than 50 leather goods items for men and women. All of Sance's bags are crafted from Italian plein-fleur vachette, the durable top layer of the hide, and lined in calfskin or goatskin. Although he tailors his executive briefcases for encounters with adversaries who are somewhat more civilized than guerrilla insurgents, Sance does draw on his adventuring experience when designing travel and messenger bags—thus their unusual shapes.

"Bags on the market are ridiculous from an engineering standpoint," says Sance, a Frenchman now living in

Houston. "They don't make sense and are concerned with only the visual. When I design a bag, I think about being out there fending for myself and needing something that will help me, not be cumbersome."

Sance conceived the Aero collection while flying by light aircraft to the mountains of Alaska. He had difficulty fitting his gear into the plane's small cargo hold, so he designed bags that would fit precisely in the fuselage. "I made four sizes because the deeper you go in the fuselage, the more narrow it gets." The concept for his Sandbag model came to him as he prepared to jump out of a hot-air balloon and then ski down a French Alpine peak. The sacklike bags have great capacity, but you can compact them when they are empty. "I never get an idea for a bag by looking at another bag," says Sance. "It's always from a personal experience."

The son of a French colonial army officer, Sance spent much of his youth in Senegal. After fulfilling his compulsory military service (as a paratrooper), he spent years in Africa as a petroleum engineer before becoming a professional adventure travel expedition leader.

Sance's leather goods venture is one of his several current projects. Having previously organized numerous auto, motorcycle, and equestrian rallies, he now is working to introduce a roadster and motorcycle rally called the Grand China Tourist Trophy, which would run from Macao to Mongolia. Perhaps the experience will yield his next collection. —CHRISTIAN M. CHENSVOID

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The Patrick Noel Sance collection reflects the rugged yet refined lifestyle of its namesake and creator.