

AZBIG's Tip on: Care, Maintenance and Repair of Your Riding Leathers!!!

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Leather Processing

Leather has been used by man for thousands of years and stood the test of time because of its practical benefits. Unlike manmade woven fabrics, the fibers of an animal's hide have grown together to form a strong protective surface. Leather originates from seven main groups: cattle, including calf and ox; sheep and lamb; goat and kid; equine animals, including horse, mule, zebra; buffalo; pig; aquatic animals such as seal, walrus, whale and alligator. Subcategories include: ostrich, lizard, eel and kangaroo. The raw hide is relatively inexpensive. The majority of the cost of leather is derived from the work done by the tanneries and finishers. The hide is composed of three layers, epidermis, a thin outer layer; dermis, the thick central layer and subcutaneous or fatty layer. Fresh hides contain between 60-70 percent water by weight and 30-35 percent protein. About 85 percent of the protein is collagen, the fibrous protein held together by chemical bonds. A hide will begin to decompose within hours of an animal's death. Leather making is the science of using acids, bases, salts, enzymes and tannins to dissolve fats and nonfibrous proteins and strengthen the bonds between the collagen fibers. The modern commercial leather process involves three basic phases: preparation for tanning, tanning and finishing. Preparation for tanning includes stripping the skin of hair and curing or dehydrating to prevent decomposition. The tanning process gets its name from tannin, the agent that displaces water from the interstices of the hide's protein fibers and cements these fibers together. There are many different tanning methods, each producing leather with different properties for a variety of uses. Natural tanning from extracts of vegetables is an ancient process that is still utilized today but may take weeks and sometimes months to complete. It results in firm, water-resistant leather. Mineral tanning utilizes mineral salts and produces a soft, pliable leather. This process may take only days and sometimes hours. Oil tanning is an old method in which natural oils and fatty substances are pounded into the dried hide until they have replaced the natural moisture of the skin. This process is utilized primarily to make chamois leather which is soft and porous that can be repeatedly wetted and dried without damage. Finishing then takes place. The processed hide may be dyed, embossed, tumbled, split, dried and coated to give additional resistance to abrasion, cracking, peeling, water, heat and cold. Hides are dried to about 20 percent moisture. Each hide has unique markings that the animal acquired during its lifetime. Some may consider them flaws, but I like to think of them as a sign of authenticity and uniqueness that vinyl substitutes would not have. If you want it to stay looking new, leave it in the closet! Clean, condition and enjoy your leathers and you'll be rewarded with a lifetime of enjoyment. Over the years leather will change its appearance in some way but that is what makes the item uniquely yours. See you on the road...

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