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Sunday, June 11, 2006

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# Cool iPod cases from Haverhill's Italian connection

By Help Desk

*Al Gordon*

Our worldwide search for cool cases for high-tech gadgets has yielded hand-sewn, luxury Italian leather goods — by way of Haverhill.

Orbino (<http://www.orbino.com/>), which has its workshop in Naples, makes somewhat pricey cases for laptops and Palm organizers, but surprisingly affordable cases for the iPod Video and Nano models. The company's owner Michael Ventre, grew up in Haverhill — and therein lies a tale.

Although his grandfather was an Italian tailor in North Andover, Ventre really reconnected with Italy while attending Phillips Academy in Andover. A beloved teacher (Dr. Vincent Pascucci, who died earlier this year) arranged for Ventre to go to Bologna, Italy, in a 1986 exchange program. He went on to study economics in Harvard while spending his summers in Italy as a writer of travel guidebooks. After graduation, he went to work in Rome for Procter & Gamble. But finding that the mega-corporate life was not to his liking, he joined a consulting firm in Milan that advised Italian luxury goods makers.

Ventre returned to the United States to work with his father in a Newburyport-based firm, but by 1997 he was back in Italy, setting up the Naples workshop that became Orbino. In an email interview, he assured me that the reality of launching a small business abroad is not quite as romantic as it sounds.

"It's an interesting time to be working in the leather goods trade in Naples — a city with a rich heritage (of artisanship)," he said. "Many of the workshops have closed. The younger generations are less interested in carrying the torch, and competition from Asia exerts new pressures. Nevertheless, I've found a happy home here, working side by side with the master craftsmen, who have been extremely generous in sharing their time-honored trade."

His cases reflect that sense of craftsmanship. The \$65 "Cambio" for the 5th Generation iPod with Video and the \$39 "Roadster" and

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"Sportivo" for the Nano are made of high-quality leathers that are hand-sewn with heavy-duty waxed threads. The seams and stitching form a decorative pattern that gives the cases their stylish look. The Cambio also has a polished metal ring around the click wheel. The Nano models come with removable lanyards that provide an option of wearing the player around your neck.

A clever polished metal folding belt clip doubles as a stand for propping up the iPod on a desk (of particular importance to the video model). For protection of the iPods, the cases all have clear plastic shields that cover both the screen and click wheel of the iPod. A nice touch here is that the shields can be replaced if they are scratched.

When you first start to put your iPod into an Orbino case, more than likely you will have a moment of "Oh my gosh, it doesn't fit!" panic, thinking that it is too tight. Not to worry. Like a good pair of shoes or gloves, the cases need a little bit of breaking in. Just insert and remove your iPod a few times, or just let it sit in place a couple of days.

A competitive benchmark for high-end leather cases is Vaja in Argentina. Its "Classic" series of cases is roughly equivalent to Orbino's designs. Bear in mind, though, that Vaja's lineup of cases is much, much larger, with products for dozens more devices than Orbino makes. Vaja has cases for most major PDAs, cell phones, "smartphones," Sony's PSP and digital cameras as well as other music players. In addition to their iPod cases, for example, I recently tested their cases for the Palm 700p Treo smartphone and was pleased by their functionality and quality.

Vaja also makes an i-Volution series, which includes the iVod for iPods, that is unmatched for combining style with maximum protection. An iVod has a hard-shell plastic case as a backbone, which is then covered by protective padding, and finally the whole shebang is wrapped with stylish leather that can be custom ordered in a multitude of color combinations. The only design downside is that the padding does greatly expand the dimensions of the device it encases.

A bigger issue is that the i-Volution series' pricetag has been escalating over the years to the point where you can easily top the \$100 mark — especially if you opt for all the protective options and for the most sophisticated belt clip system. That gets you into territory where, especially for cell phones and the iPod Nano, the price of the case approaches or exceeds that of the device itself.

If you have deep pockets — or a tendency toward klutziness — an i-Volution would be the way to go. But otherwise Orbino and Vaja's Classic are both high quality options. In terms of pricing, Vaja's Classic is a little less expensive for the iPod Video, while Orbino has the price edge on Nano cases. Really, it comes down to subjective taste: do you like Orbino's Italian flair or Vaja's Latin sophistication?

*Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at [www.algordon.com/techblog.html](http://www.algordon.com/techblog.html) and e-mail him at*

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