

Alternative Beds

Dream On

Sleeper Sofas. Futons. Inflatable Mattresses

These products have come a long way from the basic, often uncomfortable versions you might remember. Today, many use dream technology to ensure comfortable slumber.



Left and above: Ligne Roset Nomade Express. Below: Sealy Posturepedic sleeper sofa.

By Jennifer Litwin

Do you remember visiting your friends or relatives who put you in that sleeper sofa with the big bar that protruded through the mattress? Trying to get a good night's sleep was a nightmare, right? And waking up in the morning, if in fact you were able to sleep, was a challenge because getting out of bed was difficult with your new backache.

Well, finally, furniture manufacturers have stopped napping and heard those groans. Today's sleeper sofas, futons and air mattresses, used either as the occasional guest bed or as the everyday sleeper, are substantially improved compared with previous incarnations, so that it's far more likely your guest--or you--will be in deep slumber sawing logs than in agony counting sheep.

Research: You Snooze, You lose. Until a few years ago, you could probably tell you were sitting on a sofa that opened into a bed because the seat

cushions were a pain in the butt. Sleeper sofas were also notorious for being difficult to open and close and for having ridiculously thin mattresses that rested atop that dam bar. Thankfully in a case of "What took you so long?"-manufacturers have developed many products that eliminate those problems. If you haven't been a dedicated shopper of sleeper sofas lately, the variety just might amaze you. So finding the right one for you could be a difficult task given the extensive options in frames, fillings, fabrics and mattresses.



Most retailers now offer a standard, 5-in., innerspring mattress wrapped in cotton, poly/fiber, wool, foam or down or various blends, meaning "goodbye" to the antiquated, heavy, thin cotton mattress. Lighter weight and less bulky, synthetic materials offer resiliency in the springs and help make the sitting and sleeping surfaces comfortable.

But even these types can't surpass the comfort of a sleeper sofa with an air mattress that sits on top of coils and seemingly hugs your body. Just like a regular inflatable mattress placed on the floor, these sleeper-sofa versions allow you to adjust air pressure. The mattress stays relatively flat until it is inflated in less than a minute with a well-concealed pump that connects to an electrical outlet.

Companies such as Ethan Allen and La-Z-Boy have fared well in the sales of these kinds of sleeper sofas. When we ask salesperson John Berger of Ethan Allen what percentage of his customers are willing to pay the \$275 upcharge for an air mattress, he tells



Futon design has evolved to the point where manufacturers are creating coordinating pieces, including, chairs, ottomans, end tables and cocktail tables.

us. "After showing my customers the regular innerspring mattress we offer and then showing them the air mattress, all the customers choose the air mattress."

Several European manufacturers that sell in the United States, such as Ligne Roset and Innovation, have combined a foam mattress with the sofa cushions. Some American manufacturers, such as Lifestyle Solutions, are also following this trend. Tracy Knott of Roset USA Corp. (Ligne Roset) touts the simplicity of her company's sofa bed. Knott says you eliminate the need to remove and replace the pillows, something particularly important for "an older person who can't easily bend down to lift up the heavy cushions."

So what gives the sleeper support? It's memory foam, also known as Bultex. A mattress made of this lightweight material has a higher density in the inside and a lighter density on the outside. It feels as if the sleeping surface is cuddling you.

Ligne Roset's mattress is 6-1/4 in. thick, providing an especially plush feel.

These European sofa beds (they don't call them sleeper sofas) are usually slipcovered in durable, bright fabrics that fasten to the underside of the frame.

Many sleeper sofas come with a TV headrest position, so that you can recline while raising your head to a comfortable position while watching television. By simply lifting up on the corner of the sleeper frame, you can create the TV headrest position.

Sofa beds generally range from \$600 for entry-level models to \$1,000-\$2,000 in the midrange to \$3,000 and more for the most luxurious designs.

The Futon Awakens. You may be thinking that the aforementioned Euro-styled sofa beds sound a lot like futons. Because, yes, those sofa beds work like futons in that their cushions are also their mattress. But they have much simpler opening/closing mechanisms than futons.

That said, futons have still come a long way. They developed a bad rep in the early '80s because they were thought of as eyesores in the center of college apartment living rooms. Today, their mattresses are much improved and no longer slip and slide when you sit on them. And they are covered in far better fabrics. Futon frames offer better sleeping support while maintaining the look of a finished sofa. In fact, frame selection is heaven for a wannabe-interior designer; there are dozens of styles and

finishes in wood and steel.

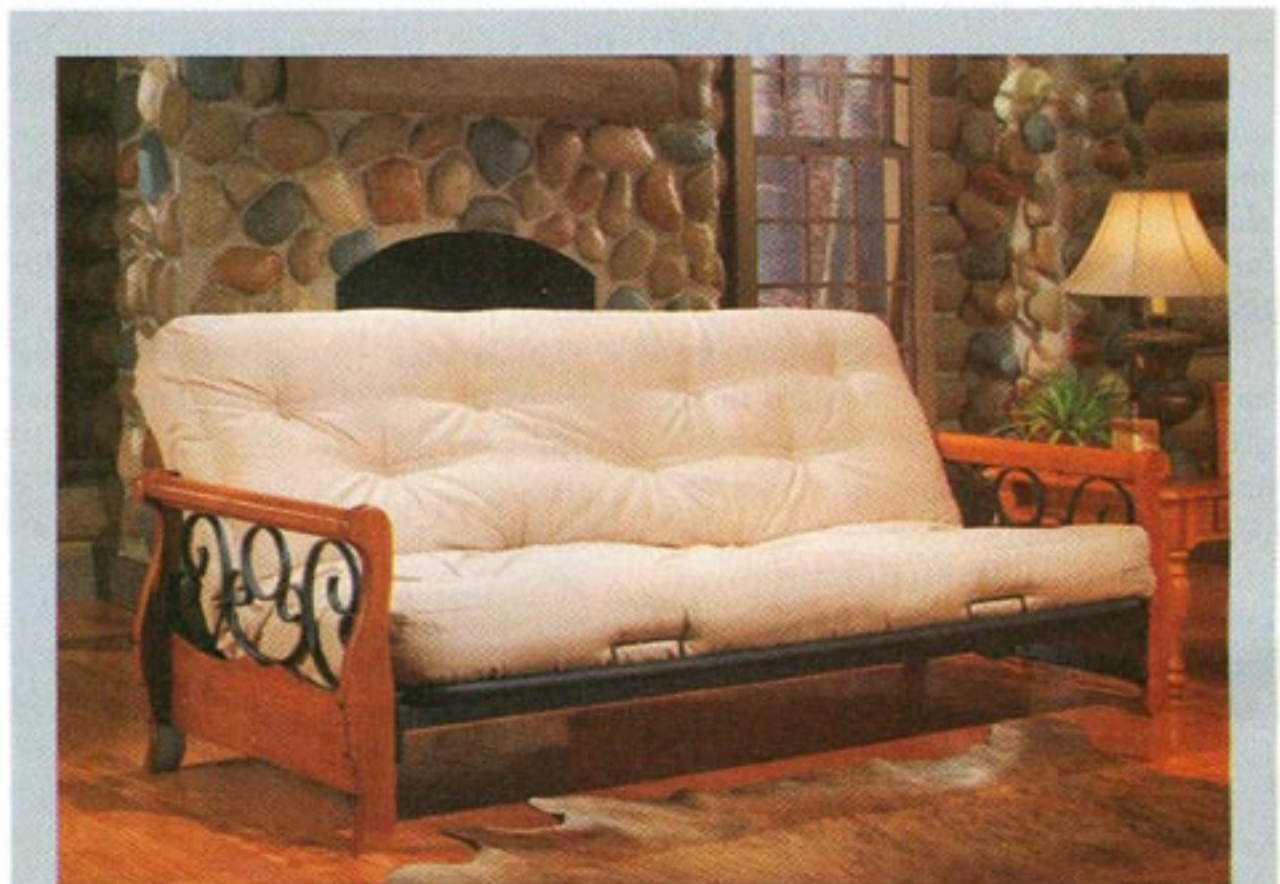
Plus, updating the look of a piece of furniture has never been easier. "A major drawback of futons used to be the fact that the zipper was only on one side of the futon cover," says Nancy Taylor of retailer Dream on Futon. Removing the mattress was a bear. "Now futon covers have zippers that zip around the perimeters of the mattresses."

Covers are more attractive, colorful, softer and plusher than even a couple years ago. Popular fabrics today are chenille and micro suede because of their durability and washability.

Thomas Neilson of Innovation USA says demand is strong for tufted buttons on futon cushions/mattresses, which provide a resemblance to upholstered couches. Be aware that these buttons make it impossible to remove and wash the cover.

Today's best futons have a mechanism for opening and closing the "bed" on their facing side, a vast improvement over mechanisms located on the side of the piece, which are inherently cumbersome to operate.

Karl Kunkel, who regularly reports on the futon industry for retail-industry magazine HFN, says he's witnessed dedicated work by manufacturers to satisfy discriminating futon shoppers judging products on "how much they look like a couch in the living room." Add



Sealy Windsor Futon



Examples of how the quality of construction has improved for some futon frames include use of dovetail joints (left) to strengthen the assembly of the piece. Other manufacturers have designed in the ability to easily replace the slats (top, left) of frames. Among them, August Lotz (Boyd, Wis.) also incorporated a system (top, right) that allows soiled/damaged arm tops to be easily detached and swapped with replacements the company sells.

this to their being lightweight and how quickly they setup and you've got the makings for a category that's ready to come out of its slumber.

Mattress technology is also improved. Thinner yet denser synthetic materials such as foam, latex or visco, a foam product with elastic that is synonymous with memory foam, also enable futons to look more like a sofa and "sleep" more comfortably than older models.

Some manufacturers continue to produce the traditional, 100 percent cotton futon mattress for consumers who prefer the fabric's "breathability." But Kevin Reichard of Affordable Futons warns that cotton mattresses won't hold their shape and are generally not for everyday sleep. Companies such as Otis Beds counter that mentality with 10-yr. warranties.

Brian Donohoo, president, Futon Association International (FAI), says that even though more people are buying futons online, you should shop for futons in stores and sit on a variety of different mattresses. He says that for about \$250 you can get a good quality mattress in a foam/cotton blend.

It might be worth the time it takes to do a "test sit" of Wolf Mattresses'

Aerolife futon mattress. The company says its unique cotton wrap helps create a springier feel in the mattress.

Don't forget, you don't have to buy a futon and mattress set. In fact, it is probably a wise choice to shop for the two pieces separately.

So Where Should You Buy a Futon? Unlike many furniture products, futons are usually not sold by large furniture retailers. Most futons are sold at mom-and-pop shops. And there is a benefit to shopping at these local stores, because they cater to the large variety of frames and mattress choices. We found the owners and salespeople in these small stores for the most part extremely knowledgeable about futons and very helpful. Many of these stores also offer local shipping and assembly for a charge of \$15 to \$25.

Many of the discount department stores such as Target and Wal-Mart are also selling futons these days. But remember, their employees are not trained in the operation and facts about the various futon frames and mattresses.

Most futon frames cost less than \$1,000. Discount department stores carry some for less than \$300. Most cost between \$300 to \$500. Add-ons for

futons include magazine racks, food tiays, drink holders and drawers. Each individual add-on can tack on \$95 to \$150 to the cost of the frame.

There is a noticeable difference in quality and feel between a low-cost frame and a midpriced one. Many low-cost designs are made of a lightweight metal or unfinished or softer woods. Many of these are difficult to open and close and come with clumsy cotton mattresses. Most low-cost frames also tend to have a simple arm design with exposed hardware.

The main difference between the mid- and premium-priced frames is the variety of wood finishes and covers. Premium woods include ash, rubberwood, and some of the imported Asian hardwoods. Also, many of the premium frames offer several reclining positions.

Pumped Up. Most inflatable mattresses are considerably less expensive than futons and sleeper sofas and yet are quite comfortable for that last-minute guest. Most quickly inflate in less than a minute, having come a long way from the days of "charging" them overnight or using a foot pump. Plug a cord into an outlet, press a button and-bingo the mattress is ready to use. Some



Simmons Beautyrest Extraordinaire air mattress

allow use of manual pumps for when you are not near all electrical outlet.

"The plastic feeling [of the mattress surface] is not as present as it was in the past," promises Susan Sperling of mattress-maker Aero. Many surfaces have a slip-proof velour top to enhance comfort. Most use standard sheets and covers. Another great feature of the inflatable mattress is the fact that most are made with puncture-resistant materials that can resist tears and absorb 600 lbs. of weight.

Many premium products have a somewhat deceptively named pillowtop. It adds cushion on top of the coils and makes the "inflatable" sit as high as a regular bed. Your guests, especially



Best Buys in Sleeper Sofas, Futons and Inflatable

Best Buy Categories:

[P] = Premium selection;
[M] = Midrange selection;
[E] = Economy selection.
See page 72.

Researching alternative sleeping options is quite a task. We spent a great deal of time talking to manufacturers, visiting retailers and sitting on a variety of surfaces. There are many that are solid and stylish. Each manufacturer has some unique product designs that are good. Plus, some manufacturers are a notch above when taking into account operating ease, quality and warranties. In each category—sleeper sofas, futons and inflatable mattresses—we found good values among economy-priced pieces, but midrange- and premium-priced selections easily surpassed those in sophistication and comfort.

All sleeper sofa Best Buys are queen-size. We only reviewed full-size futon frames, not mattresses. (Editor's Note: There are many quality mattress choices, and matching one to a futon frame should be based on personal comfort of the combination.)

We looked at how quickly and easily a product opened/closed/inflated, the materials in and on the mattress, frame construction

and uniqueness of design.

Prices noted for futons cover the frame only. Expect to pay between \$250 or more for a quality futon mattress.

While there are three uses for inflatable mattresses—for the occasional houseguest, for camping and for a hospital patient who needs to improve his/her circulation—our Best Buy recommendations are geared only to the first use. All inflatable mattress Best Buys are queen-size.

Best Price is a reflection of the lowest retail price available at presstime for each model and is subject to change at any time.

Sleeper Sofas

[P] Ligne Roset Nomade Express Sofa Bed

List: \$2,395-\$3,195 (depends on fabric); Best Price: \$2,395

We especially liked how easy it was to open the sofa into a bed. The cushion doubles as the mattress, so there are no loose cushions to put on the floor and take up space. The memory-foam (Bultex) mattress covered with polyester batting is wonderful. The foam is crushed, so the mattress doesn't feel stiff or look bulky. We expect this to provide one pleasurable night's sleep. Tufted buttons are a nice look and can be

reversed for a smooth sleeping surface. Zippers have been removed from the cushions/mattress to add a clean look.

Features:

- * Dimensions: 80 in. (w) x 43-1/4 in. (d) x 37-1/2 in. (h)
- * Steel frame and molded aluminum feet
- * Memory-foam mattress
- * 40 fabric styles, 500 color options
- * Warranty: 5-yr. on frame and mattress

[M] Ethan Allen Tribeca

List: \$1,524-\$3,574 (depends on fabric); Best Price: \$1,524

We were immediately drawn to this sleeper sofa for its simple and narrow frame and versatile style. It is easy to open and operate and includes a TV headrest position. The least expensive fabric, cotton twill, is very comfortable and attractive. The cushions are also comfortable, wrapped in polyester and cotton. The frame construction is excellent, with no visible staples or plywood. An air mattress can be purchased optionally for \$275. It's easy to inflate by using an electric pump.

Features:

- * Dimensions: 79 in. (w) x 39 in. (d) x 38 in. (h)
- * Coil-construction mattress

- * 1,500 fabric choices
- * Optional air mattress
- * Warranty: 7-yr. on frame and springs

[E] Sealy Posturepedic Supreme

List: \$1,049-\$1,399 (depends on fabric); Best Price: \$1,049

This economical sleeper sofa has an excellent innerspring, 5-1/2-in.-thick Sealy Posturepedic mattress. There are many cotton fabrics from which to choose for its exterior. The sofa frame is wrapped in foam and is sturdily constructed of birch plywood. The sofa's lines are clean and tapered. A TV headrest is included. The Posture Royal, Sealy's lower-priced version, costs \$250 less, but is not recommended for everyday use.

Features:

- * Dimensions: 82 in. (w) x 36 in. (d) x 36 in. (h)
- * Innerspring mattress
- * Dozens of fabric choices
- * Warranty: Lifetime on frame; 1-yr. on mattress, manufacturer's defects

Futons (Frame Only)

[P] August Lotz

List: \$399-\$599; Best Price: \$399

August Lotz manufactures superbly constructed premium futon frames. Made from ash, a

older ones, will love this. They will no longer have to bend down and sleep just off the floor. These so-called "airbeds" are 24 in. high. Because of their thickness, airbeds generally inflate in about 3 minutes.

You can purchase an inflatable mattress from under \$100 to as much as \$300.

Thankfully, lying on an air mattress no longer feels like you are going down a huge inflatable slide at an amusement park. Many manufacturers incorporate a square coil system for better body support without bowing or swaying, says Sperling.

Of course, firmness can be adjusted by letting out air.

The Right Sleeping Option. Numerous salespeople with whom we spoke told of customers claiming upon return visits that they opt to sleep in the guest room and let their visitors sleep in their bedrooms because they love the feel of these new mattresses. What better testimony to the fact that alternative sleep options no longer are just a quick fix for an occasional guest. If you spend some time checking out the latest sleeper sofas, futons and air mattresses, you're sure to find that you can

address your need for space-saving furniture/bed products today without sacrificing the benefits of sleeping on a regular bed mattress. 0

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Mattresses

hard wood that is extremely durable, the futon is front-opening and -closing, easing strain on your back. The frame can recline to any position, and pressure is spread evenly throughout for a strong construction. The nicely curved top of the frame has no sharp edges. Dovetailed joinery is solid. The manufacturer sells replacement slats and arm tops in case of damage to original parts. Noteworthy is the wonderful craftsmanship of the arms.

Features:

- * Dimensions: 81 in. (w) x 37 in. (d) x 39 in. (h)
- * Opens and closes from front
- * Warranty: 5-yr. full replacement, limited lifetime

[M] Night and Day Premium Collection

List: \$459; Best Price: \$459
After testing numerous futon frames in the \$300-to-\$500 price range, Night and Day was a clear winner for us. We tested the Twilight model, and not only do we like the smooth finish on the frame, but we found it extremely easy to open and close with a few easy movements. The hardwood comes in several finishes. A nice twist is that the back of the frame matches the design of the front.



Features:

- * Dimensions: 85 in. (w) x 38 in. (d) x 35 in. (h)
- * Opens and closes from front
- * Warranty: 10-yr. on frame

[E] Sealy

List: \$279; Best Price: \$279
For the money, this is a great deal. Sealy's units open and close from the front. Like most offerings in the price range, it has a metal body, but it feels sturdier than that of the competition. The futon's arms are made from hard Asian rubberwood. The finish is a golden oak. We liked the design of the Bridgeport model in particular.

Features:

- * Dimensions: 84 in. (w) x 33 in. (d) x 30 in. (h)
- * Opens and closes from front
- * Warranty: 5-yr. on frame

Inflatable Mattresses

[P] Raised AeroBed

List: \$299.99; Best Price: \$227.95
A leader in the industry, Aero created an easy-to-use inflatable

mattress that is raised to the height of a regular bed. Although it is a big bed, it takes less than 3 minutes to inflate; less than 1 minute to deflate. Another nice feature is that the pressure is easily adjusted. So-called "quadricoil" construction makes the mattress feel more comfortable and secure. Included in the purchase is a cover, dust ruffle and carry bag.

Features:

- * Quick inflate/deflate feature
- * Warranty: 1-yr.

[M] Simmons Beautyrest Extraordinaire

List: \$99.96; Best Price: \$79.99
This model is very user-friendly and feels plush and secure. The top has a velveteen surface that prevents sliding and sweatiness. But the beauty of this bed is the soft "pillow" that sits atop the entire heavy-duty vinyl mattress. It adds 12 in. to the mattress height, bringing it closer to the stance of a regular bed. The

bed inflates in less than 3 minutes. Adjusting air pressure is easily accomplished with a push-button.

Features:

- * Quick inflate/deflate
- * Warranty: 1-yr. limited

[E] Intex Ozark Trail Elevated Queen Air Mattress With Pump

List: \$48.73; Best Price: \$48.73
The Ozark Trail is a great value with its velour top and sides, high-volume electric pump and comfortable air cushions. It takes about 3 minutes to inflate. The mattress feels durable, and its elevated height (20 in.) helps make it feel more like a bed. It comes with a duffel bag.

Features:

- * Easy-to-adjust firmness with a release valve
- * Warranty: 90-day limited

For more information on the above Best Buys, contact the manufacturers directly. See page 70.