



## Leather and the varying qualities used by saddle manufacturers

Viva Iberica supply saddles handmade by craftsmen and from reputable companies using quality European leather. Typically **full-grain and 'vegetable tanned'** leather.

There is no international grading scale for leather or for terms such as 'Grade A' or 'First Grade'. These terms do not mean anything in particular and the poorest quality tack can be claimed to be 'Grade A' or 'First Grade'.

Saddles supplied by Viva Iberica from Zaldi, Ludomar and Marjoman are predominantly made from full-grain and vegetable-tanned leather.

### **What is full-grain leather?**

The outer side of the skin is the 'grain' side, the inner the 'flesh' side. Naturally tanners want a good looking finished product on the outside, so searching for flaws they may use a buffer to remove any they find, but this will remove some of the top layer of skin. Full-grain leather means that none of the top layer has been buffed off, i.e. that it is a top quality flawless skin.

Some saddlers, such as Zaldi, Ludomar and Marjoman will not generally use buffed skins, believing that removing some of the top layer weakens the hide.

### **What is vegetable-tanned leather?**

Vegetable tanning takes a lot longer than chrome tanning, but the end result is usually a heavier, stronger and more water-resistant leather which wears well and tends to hold its shape better.

Processes involve soaking the skins in tannins extracted from plant materials and this process can take months.

Soaked hides are then washed and dried to produce a stiff, un nourished product. Tanners then employ a process called stuffing, in which oils and fats are worked into the skin to improve suppleness, provide water resistance and give the leather a long life.

Oils and fats can take months to completely penetrate and the hides will be given time for this to occur, before being dressed and finished (currying), when finishing oils, fats and dyes are applied. Cheaper leather may have this colouring

sprayed on, while quality leather may be finished by hand.

Zaldi, Ludomar and Marjoman usually prefer leather made through vegetable tanning as opposed to chrome tanning.

### ***Chrome-tanning***

Chrome-tanning is a much faster process than vegetable-tanning, taking days rather than months. The hide is soaked in chromium salts, producing a strong leather but one that is more prone to stretching than vegetable-tanned leather and will not absorb oils and fats as well as a vegetable-tanned product. It also tends to be less rigid and its water resistance is poorer.

### ***Colour finish***

The colour finish should be uniform. Bear in mind the item will have been given a final finishing colour by the tack manufacturer to tie together all the components, which in a good saddle might include a combination of pig and cow leather, and even calfskin.

Cheap leather can sometimes look as if the finish is painted on. Bend the leather one way and then the other - the colour should not be affected.

### ***Judging quality***

Quality leather should not feel spongy. If you pull it and bend it the fibres should show no signs of breaking or tearing and good quality leather should normally feel quite heavy, because of its high density. Lightweight leather is likely to be porous and of lesser quality.

Suppleness is important and is a clear sign that the leather has been well treated at the tannery. Well maintained tack will become more supple with use, but a new item that is stiff and dry demonstrates a substandard treatment.

Suppleness also needs to be assessed in relation to thickness, for example thick leather should still be supple – it's just that it offers more resistance. Bend the leather one way and then the other and inspect the grain side carefully. In good leather, a few fine wrinkles may show from the bending, but there should be no evidence of tearing or damage.

You can test tack by for example pulling on load-bearing straps to assess the stretch. They should feel firm yet flexible, but if you get anything more than a few millimetres of stretch by hand then it will most likely stretch a lot more once in use.

You can easily be fooled by poor quality leather. There are many good of tanneries making quality leather but also many others making cheap leather look like quality leather. For example, porous low-grade leather can be squeezed through heavyweight rollers to make it appear denser than it really is. Also look along any exposed edges of leather and if there is a blue or green tinge it is probably chrome-tanned, likely strong but more prone to stretching.

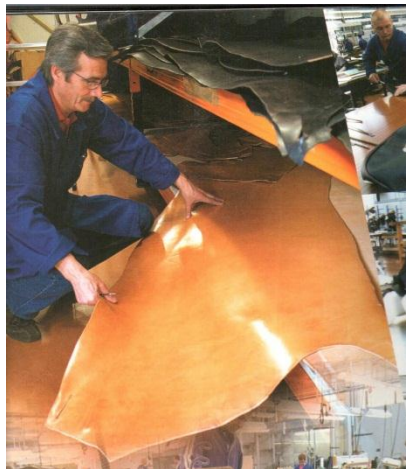
## **Your safeguards**

Shop from a dealer who backs the products it sells on behalf of a manufacturer with a long term reputation and a pride in its products, service and guarantee.

*Note: We have, at Viva Iberica, been selling Zaldi saddles for 21 years and never had a single problem with any sold – in fact at our stud Yeguada Iberica, we have been using their saddles on a daily basis for the same number of years and they are all still in excellent condition.*

Reputable manufacturers will have stringent quality-control measures and are incredibly selective of the leather they source. This includes manufacturers such as Zaldi, Ludomar and Marjoman. They aim to build tack of a consistently high quality, so every saddle or bridle should be as good as the next. These manufacturers know that an excellent reputation is hard to earn and easy to lose, so they strive to ensure their quality is consistently good.

Poor quality items will either quickly showing their true colours or fail at the worse moment. There are many products sold today at very low prices, but check carefully and find out where it came from (more and more a well disguised, if not impossible task) and you will most likely find that the low price is due to poor quality, cheaply made inferior leather, only a matter of time before this is revealed under use. There are no shortcuts to quality.



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Viva Iberica and Yeguada Iberica  
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