

Hot Tub Shopping Guide

In this Shopping Guide, we will suggest that you ask many questions of your hot tub salesperson. No one knows everything, so saying they have to check once or twice may well be an indication of honesty. But if the salesperson is not fluent in their knowledge of their spas, we would suggest you shop elsewhere.

			Brand 3	Brand 4	
	Bullfrog Spas	Clearwater Spas			Items to Evaluate / Questions to Ask
USING YOUR SPA	YOU ARE LIKELY INTERESTED IN A SPA FOR ONE OR SEVERAL REASONS; PERHAPS RELAXATION, THERAPY, FAMILY TIME, STRESS RELIEF, ROMANCE, AID IN SLEEPING, PAIN RELIEF, MASSAGE, ETC.				➤ Will this spa achieve your desires?
Is the spa comfortable?					➤ Whether you sit in it dry or wet, be sure to sit in it.
CONSTRUCTION	IS THE SPA BUILT TO LAST?				HOW YOUR HOT TUB IS BUILT IS CRITICAL TO HOW LONG YOU WILL ENJOY IT.
Shell Material	Lucite & Aristech Acrylic	Lucite & Aristech Acrylic			<p>Three materials are used for spa shells</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Acrylic (made by either Lucite or Aristech) is far & away the dominate material used for spa shells. It is non-porous, available in a complete rainbow of colors, and available in a both glossy and rougher "stone" appearance. ➤ OAS (Olefin Acrylonitrile-Styrene) was once used by many companies for spa shells. Today only 1 major company markets them. Though OAS is available in other colors, this company only makes them in white with a rough surface. OAS can stain and may turn a pale yellow when not exposed to sufficient ultraviolet light. ➤ Polypropylene. This is used by a ½ doz. companies that specialize in the lower-end hot tubs. The entire spa (cabinet & shell) is molded from molten polypropylene granules. These are commonly called "Rotationally Molded Spas".
Laminate Spa Shell?	Acrylic/ABS Laminate	Acrylic/ABS Laminate			<p>Many spa companies will say they use Lucite® but not tell you it's only a single layer. Both Lucite & Aristech make single layer acrylic and 2-layer laminate acrylic. You want the laminate for strength.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask the salesperson if the shell is made of laminated Acrylic/ABS.
Rigidized Spa Shell?	Isotec®	Isotec® with embedded steel mesh			<p>Your spa is holding 1 to 2 tons of water. Some companies do not rigidize their spa shells. You want a rigidized laminated spa shell for strength and durability. Isotec® is preferable to fiberglass for rigidizing because it is stronger, bonds to Acrylic without needing a bonding agent (fiberglass needs a bonding agent called vinyl ester) and is truly "Green" because there are no toxic resins.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask if the shell is rigidized and if the manufacturer is using Isotec®. ➤ Ask the salesperson to show you a sample of the spa shell construction. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ You should see 3 layers. The laminated Acrylic/ABS and rigidizer. ○ Isotec® will be smooth. Fiberglass will have a course texture. ➤ Be sure the shell is rigidized to the edge of the shell. Have the salesperson show you the edge of the spa shell for the spa you are interested in. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shells that bend are not rigidized. ○ Several spa companies use designs that do not allow you to see the shell edge. There is probably a reason other than appearance for this. ➤ Also, everyone wants to appear "Green" so spa companies using fiberglass usually don't say so. If you read that they use vinyl ester or are recapturing volatile compounds, they are using fiberglass.
What Supports The Shell?	Cast Resin "Z" beams and solid foam blocks	6" PVC pillars			<p>Most spa manufacturers are still using wood 2 x 4 frames and hard, sprayed-in polyurethane foam to support their spa shells. Both cause problems.</p>

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Spa Frame?	Cast Resin "Z" Beams	6" PVC Pillars			<p>Wood (even pressure treated wood) presents many problems when used for spa frames. Both termites and carpenter ants eat wood and most spa companies using wood only use pressure treated wood for the base. Wood also expands and contracts with moisture and temperature changes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Have your salesperson show you the frame of their spas & not just a photo. ➤ Some brands don't even use 2 x 4's. They're using 2 x 3's, even 2 x 2's. <p>Two manufacturers are now making spa frames from steel (one with galvanized, the other with powder coated). However we see problems with this also.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Steel rusts, even galvanized (zinc coated) steel can rust. ➤ More importantly, these manufacturers are still using wood. In fact, one of them is using particle board, though they give it the fancy name of "Recycled Wood Panel Substrate". Particle board & water is a terrible idea. Particle board is pretty much a sponge around water!
Spa Base?	Molded Plastic Base w/ electric chase ways	Molded Plastic Base			<p>Many spa companies are now using a plastic base, though some are rather thin. However some companies make it appear they are using a plastic base by screwing a plastic trim piece on their wood base.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ When you ask your salesperson to show you the frame of their spa, have them also show you the spa base.
Insulation?	Soft, Full-Foam	Cabinet walls & spa base are insulated. Covers have 3" to 5" taper, the thickest available.			<p>Particularly here in Texas, this is overhyped. It's not that cold here and all your major spa brands will cost roughly \$12 - \$20 per month to operate. There are several effective ways to insulate a hot tub and the cover is most important since heat rises. Full foam does insulate well. The problem is <u>leaks in spas with hard foam insulation are extremely expensive to repair once the warranty expires because all the plumbing in all hot tubs other than those from Bullfrog Spas is behind the spa shell (and buried in the hard foam if the spa is a Full-Foam spa).</u></p> <p>Some spa companies claim they have to full foam to prevent leaks caused by vibration of their plumbing. We think that is true if spas are poorly made, and many are.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Have your salesperson show you how their spas are insulated. If they tell you the foam is there to prevent leaks, you've got to wonder how well they are building their spas. ➤ Ask them to also demonstrate the covers used on their spas. If the spa is not full foamed, are they using covers that are 3" on the edge and 5" thick in the middle? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Almost all spa companies are using thinner covers. Use a tape measure to check.

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Top-Grade Equipment?	Balboa Control Packs Gecko/Aquaflow Pumps	Balboa Control Packs Waterway Pumps			Quite a few companies use "Proprietary" equipment. They will likely have their own "brands" and suggest that they are superior to other equipment. <i>Balboa, Gecko/Aquaflow, & Waterway are the dominant equipment suppliers to the spa industry.</i> Their equipment is readily available from many sources. This is particularly important once your spa warranty expires. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask what company makes their Control Packs (the electronic controls and the heater), Motors, and Pumps. ➤ When you have to replace a Proprietary part you will pay more than for top-quality parts from the major spa equipment manufacturers.
48 or 56 Frame Motors?	56 Frame	56 Frame			Most spa companies now use 56 Frame motors. However several major spa companies still use 48 Frame motors & are not likely to tell you. <i>A 56 Frame motor is 40% larger, runs cooler, last longer and costs approx. \$85 more per motor.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask who makes their motors and if they are 56 Frame motors. ➤ Have your salesperson measure and show you the diameter of the motor. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 56 Frame motors are 6 1/2" in diameter. 48 Frame motors are only 5 1/2". ○ We have even found one larger manufacturer labeling their 48 Frame motors as 56 Frame. Of course, they are also a proprietary brand!

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WARRANTY	PLEASE SEE OUR <i>HOT TUB WARRANTY SUMMARY</i> ALSO ON OUR WEBSITE.				WE MAINTAIN COPIES OF THE WARRANTEES FOR MOST ALL SPA COMPANIES IN OUR SHOWROOM. THEY ARE AVAILABLE FOR YOU TO READ AT ANY TIME.
Shell Structure?	Lifetime (return to factory after 6 years)	Signature / Gold 20 / 10 years			For all spa companies, this really means only 1 thing. The shell will not leak. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Several companies have a Lifetime Shell Structure warranty and all require that the spa be returned to the factory (at the owner's expense) after 7 years or less.
Shell Surface?	6 years	20 / 10 years			This says the shell will not crack, delaminate or fade. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some companies specifically exclude "surface cracks" and/or "discoloration and fading". <i>Please see our Hot Tub Warranty Summary for additional information.</i>
Spa Structure?	Lifetime Bullfrog calls this Uniframe®	20 / 10 years			<i>Only 6 companies offer a Spa Structure warranty.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Many companies talk about "Structure" but they mean only the shell (see above).
Plumbing?	Lifetime on JetPaks®. 3 years	5 / 3 years			It is very difficult & expensive to repair leaks in spas using hard foam to support their spa shells. Clearwater uses no foam. Bullfrog uses soft foam for insulation only and has very little plumbing in this foam as most of their plumbing is in their JetPaks®.
Equipment?	BlameFree® 3 Years	5 / 3 years			To avoid their warranties, some companies will claim that you damaged your spa. They will call it "Chemical Damage". <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This is the reason for Bullfrog's BlameFree® Warranty on ALL equipment. ➤ A few companies offer a No-Fault warranty on just the heater element.
Prorated?	No	No			<i>Prorated warranties are much less than they appear to be at first.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Most Internet & Discount retailers prorate their warranties. ➤ Even 2 major spa brands heavily prorate their warranties, but you would never guess by what they say on their websites.

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Available on their website?	Yes	Yes			Some spa companies do not list their warranties or provide only a summary. > <i>Be sure you see the warranty, not a summary.</i> You'll know why immediately. > The FTC requires all retailers to provide copies of warranties before you purchase.
SERVICE	ONCE YOUR WARRANTY EXPIRES, HOW EASY WILL IT BE TO SERVICE?				YOU WILL WANT YOUR SPA OPERATING PROPERLY WELL AFTER THE WARRANTY EXPIRES.
Ease of Service	Easy	Easy			
Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Most of the plumbing is in the JetPaks®, in your spa water, not behind the spa shell. > Insulation is soft foam, not hard foam. > All equipment is on 1 side of spa. > Equipment is not proprietary, hence readily available and from the largest, oldest suppliers in the spa industry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No foam at all under the spa shell, hence all plumbing is accessible in seconds. > Equipment is not proprietary, hence readily available and from the largest, oldest suppliers in the spa industry. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Plumbing in hard Full-Foam spas is very difficult and expensive to repair. Most of the major brands are made this way. <i>One of the most common reasons people replace their spas is leaks that are too expensive to repair.</i> > Control Packs, Motors, Pumps, etc. from "Proprietary Brands" are only available through them. Repairs can be more expensive or nearly impossible if the supplier is no longer in existence.
Local Dealer?	Yes	Yes			
WATER QUALITY OPTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Bromine – Yes > Ozone – Yes > Salt System – Yes > PHMB (Baqua) - No > Enzyme – Yes > Ion – Yes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Bromine - Yes > Ozone – Standard > Salt System – Yes > PHMB (Baqua) - No > Enzyme – Yes > Ion – Yes 			This can get a bit complicated but it comes down to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Bromine has been the industry standard for decades. It is preferable to Chlorine in a spa because Chlorine will dissipate from your water at temperatures above 97°. > Ozone will reduce your chemical requirements. A good thing, but not required. > Salt Systems are very common in pools, but not in spas, probably because these systems don't require other chemicals. <i>Spa Chemicals is a profitable business so most companies want to sell all they can!</i> The big advantages to a Salt System? – You change your water once a year instead of 4 times, no other chemicals, ½ the operating cost of other methods, & lower bromine levels are needed. > Baqua (& related products) use a chemical called PHMB and hydrogen peroxide as an oxidizer. It is not compatible with ozone, bromine or chlorine. It is also expensive & only available through dealers. > Enzyme based systems are particularly good for people with skin sensitivities but we have found them ineffective at maintaining proper sanitation, hence recommend a Salt System for folks with skin sensitivities. > Several ion based systems (using either silver or copper ions) are available. They must be used in combination with either bromine or chlorine.
YEARS IN BUSINESS?	15	35			The suppliers for Discount Retailers have a history of going bankrupt.
IN-GROUND OPTION?	Yes	No			Bullfrog Spas are the only spas that can be placed in-ground without modification and still provide easy access to all equipment.

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INTERNET USER REVIEWS	89% Positive #2 as rated by Users	100% Positive #1 as rated by Users			<p>All of the websites claiming to rate spas take advertising money. They are not independent reviewers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <u>The only independent reviews are by spa owners</u> (and even these may not be independent, but they're as close as possible right now.) ➤ Based on 319 Internet User Reviews from Nov. 2005 – Nov. 2008 found at various websites but ½ came from http://www.hottubsparatings.com/cgi-bin/reviews.pl.