

Yahoo! Financial News:

Extravagant Offbeat Gifts

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(reprinted from Bankrate.com) Extravagant, offbeat gift ideas Wednesday
December 7, 6:00 am ET Leslie Hunt

What does a rare vintage Jimi Hendrix poster have in common with chichi dog beds and flashlights so bright they temporarily blind? They're all part of extravagant gift ideas that make uncommonly good gifts. Whether your friends and family members enjoy gourmet food or adrenaline rushes, follow fashion trends, decorate, play music or pamper their pets, there's something on this tip list for just about anyone with expensive tastes. If fortune has smiled on you, consider not just sharing the wealth, but lavishing it on loved ones with our fancy gift finds. Fashion face-lift For the busy woman who has everything, consider treating her to a style update or makeover.

At wallbounce.com, for example, \$925 will purchase the services of a fashion stylist who "will literally meet you, go over your wardrobe with you and take Polaroids of different outfits to create a look book, or she'll take measurements of you and go shopping with you, putting together outfits for you to try on," says Wallbounce CEO Robin Wilson.

If your friend doesn't need a whole new look, trendy accessories might make an appropriate gift. Alison Deyette, TV correspondent, style expert and co-founder of stylebakery.com, suggests purchasing a handbag-rental service from a site such as bagborroworsteal.com.

"Your friend gets to rent a new designer purse every month. You pay the monthly fee for them." At Bag Borrow or Steal, fees start at \$20 a month and go up to \$175.

Wining and dining without a clue Even if you don't know your reds from your whites, you can still impress wine connoisseur friends and foodies with these savvy gift ideas:

One idea comes from Constance White, a commentator for E!'s Fashion Police and editor for eBay's Personal Style magazine: Buy a trip to a vineyard in France or to the Napa Valley in California, where plenty of bed and breakfast places beckon. "That beats a bottle of wine," she says. Top off the gift by including a copy of the movie "Sideways."

For wannabe winemakers, let friends not just visit the Napa Valley but make their own wine from Napa Valley or the wine region of their choice. It may not sound

like a gift, but the wine-making service from Crushpadwine.com allows consumers to customize their own barrels of wine, or about 300 bottles, and keep abreast of the grape picking, processing and harvesting without ever setting foot in the selected vineyard, if they choose. Connoisseurs make decisions online on some 30 technical preferences -- whether to chill the must, whether they want oxygen exposure, how long to age the wine and what kind of vessel they want the wine stored in. The facility welcomes customers to watch and taste, or they can follow the expensive transformation through a webcam. Cost of becoming a winemaker: \$3,900 to \$9,900 per barrel.

If spending that much isn't appealing, a portable wine steward can be a welcome wine-saver for the wine connoisseur, says Deyette. The portable wine steward helps with an age-old problem: If you don't finish a bottle right away, it quickly turns so undrinkable that the drinker gets to finish it. A portable steward with cooling capabilities keeps the remaining wine chilled at 45 or 65 degrees and reduces further oxidation of the wine with a layer of inert argon gas. The wine toy goes for \$200 at hammacher.com.

Deyette says another good idea for the wine connoisseur is a refrigerated wine cabinet. You can buy one that holds from six bottles to 150 bottles. These can cost from \$500 to \$11,000 at wineenthusiast.com. Note: Units vary in size, so consider your friend's square footage.

White says that buying restaurant and dining experiences is a trend now for the wealthy. To treat your loved ones to luxury, book a private table at the nicest restaurant you can think of, and if you're feeling even more generous, pay for their stay at a nearby luxury hotel.

On wallbounce.com, you can book a private chef table for six, at Alain Ducasse Restaurant at the Essex House in New York. You begin with champagne -- Laurent Perrier Grand Siecles, of course. An eight-course seasonal tasting menu with wine pairings follows. Cost of a dream meal: \$5,000.

Spending dough for dough Ready for dessert? A thoughtful gift for someone learning to cook is a private lesson with a professional chef. Wallbounce.com, for instance, offers a private lesson with a professional dessert chef. For a full three hours, your friend will learn how to make at least three dozen sugar and chocolate cookies from scratch, decorate them and package them for mailing. A certified baker will instruct on shortcuts, techniques, tips on measuring and temperature control, and how to decorate cookies. Cost of cookie baking skills: \$700.

Decking the halls If no other gift seems safe, home decor offers a gift path well beaten. If you want to strut down the path, however, the experts advise:

If you're thinking "art prints," don't also think, "I know your taste so well that I can easily pick something you like." It isn't that simple, even if you know the art someone already owns.

"Art is so subjective," Deyette says. Instead, she suggests buying photographic artwork. "What's great about photo artwork is that it can fit into any theme."

Photo art Web sites such as Wall Kandy feature snapshots of destinations from Bangkok to Brazil. Typical prices range from \$50 to \$105, depending on whether you purchase frames.

If your friends have too much artwork already, buy them a consultation with a decorator, Deyette says. If you want to skip the part where you pay for the new furniture, you can get a decorator who will come to your friend's home and move furniture around and write down suggestions.

Thrilling ideas in a heartbeat Yeehaw.

Forget dance lessons. How about flying lessons, a hot air balloon ride or bull riding instruction? Organize a trip for someone to ride in a race car or go skydiving via a Web site such as Thrill Planet, which specializes in adventurous outings. For those who like excitement, "Anything with an adrenaline rush is good," Deyette says. Lessons and rides range from \$139 to \$500. For some experiences, you'll have to call for pricing.

Movie manics Of course, for loved ones who have a sparse DVD collection, Deyette suggests starting them with little DVD library.

For the traveler, she suggests portable video recorders. Products, such as the line of Archos mobile digital video recorders, download movies, music and TV shows so you can play them right on the video recorder screen in a plane or in a car. It can store between 80 hours and 400 hours of video, depending on the model. It costs \$400 to \$800 at Archos or J&R.

Your movie-loving friends will sing your praises if you spring for a double feature: tickets to a Broadway show that features their favorite actor, plus an overnight stay in the Big Apple, says White. Consult the upcoming cast lists at playbill.com to find out which Hollywood stars plan to tackle Broadway roles.

Bright idea For the traveler, grandparent, stay-at-home parent or anyone who could use some extra protection when alone, surefire.com sells personal flashlights that shine so brightly they momentarily blind any attacker. The FBI, U.S. Air Marshals and many police departments routinely issue SureFire's weapon flashlights. For \$75 or \$95, one small personal flashlight lasts for 10 years and at 3.1 ounces, fits in a suit pocket or purse. What's more, these tiny self-defense weapons double as regular flashlights, which you can't say about a can of Mace.

Pampered pooches For people with pets, a great gift might just go to the dogs. Consider purchasing a dog bed in a color that matches the color scheme of their home, Deyette says. You can get one that looks and feels extra lush for about \$100 to \$200. For an extra treat, pile up great chew toys on top, a huge bag of

Greenies and a few cans of Fido's favorite dog food, if you know what brand to buy.

For someone with a small dog, consider buying a dog outfit for little Fido. Fetch those hard-to-find items such as snow jackets at designer dogwear sites. Fifi and Romeo is one. Of course, a matching collar and leash make good gifts, too. These can be found at wagwear.com, another chichi dogwear line.

Gifts that rock ... and pop From lessons to sheet music to vintage posters, there's plenty to choose from when buying for a musician or music lover. It all depends on the person -- and how extreme you want your gift to be.

You can spend thousands on rare vintage posters and fine art prints of performers such as Jimi Hendrix, Metallica and The Who at Wolfgang's Vault, a rock-n-roll memorabilia warehouse that houses the remaining archive of Bill Graham Presents, a major rock concert promoter during the '60s. The Vault features more than 15,000 different items, ranging from vintage tickets and backstage passes and T-shirts to vintage posters, art prints and miscellaneous memorabilia.

Vintage tickets represent "a facsimile of the original posters for that venue," says Matt Lundberg, vice president. "These look great framed together with the matching poster."

Promotional posters or original posters that advertised upcoming venues for that artist or group range in price from \$15 to \$20,000. Cost of one rare Jimi Hendrix poster from 1970: \$12,850.

If a poster doesn't appeal as a gift, find some apparel once touched by the stars inside the aptly titled Bill's Closet. We found one eerie famous prop: a Marilyn Manson straightjacket from the 1997 Warfield Theatre venue. Complete with leather straps, the dark gray jacket is one of the most expensive items in Bill's Closet. Cost of a straightjacket: \$866.

Not the memorabilia type? If your friend wants to learn how to play an instrument, head to the local music store and buy them the desired instrument, plus lessons to start them off, says Deyette. If they have favorite band or musician, buy them the band's sheet music.

For everyday fans of music, Deyette suggests buying them the latest iPod. You can also buy an iPod Nano that comes preloaded with songs, says White. If they have the Nano, buy the latest iPod cover or an iTunes gift card so they can legally download new music for free. CDs are always good, too, if you know who your friend's favorite musicians are.

If they love a particular band, promise to take them to a concert when the band is playing in town, says Deyette. Say to them, 'next time they're near here, we're going.'"

Research upcoming concerts in your area at Ticketmaster.

Gift cards in a basket Of course, maybe you're busier than a plaid suit and have little time to arrange for fancy gifts. If you're opting for yet another gift card for someone special this year, at least present it better.

"Giving someone a gift card inside a card is a little impersonal," says Deyette. "I love the idea of putting together a basket around it." She suggests including a pair of cashmere slippers, some chocolates and a bottle of champagne to go with the gift card. "It's like saying, 'Here, I'm going to take care of you.'"

One author we spoke with made a similar suggestion. "Make it a gift in a gift," says Robyn Spizman, author of "Make it Memorable" and co-author of the "Author 101" book series. She suggests giving a handbag with the card, or putting the card inside a nice wallet. Besides customizing the card itself, you can further personalize the card by including a short poem with the card. "Write: 'Here's a shopping spree for you from me.'"

If you want to be even more generous, purchase a gift card to a hotel or airline, says Deyette. In the card, list of a couple of destinations they could go to and leave check boxes by them. You provide the means, they choose the inn.

Get gift-card smart Finding a gift card doesn't even have to be inconvenient. You can find a variety of gift cards in places you might not think to look, such as grocery stores and drug stores, according to the National Retail Federation.

Just be sure that when you buy the gift card, you fully understand its limitations and that you educate the recipient about them, Spizman says. Mention any expiration dates. If you want to research gift cards' terms and restrictions, check out Bankrate's gift card survey.

As for the gift card itself, be sure to make it personal.

"Don't give someone a generic gift card to Macy's or Neiman Marcus," says White. "Make it a gift card to a place they love, such as a favorite store. If they're basketball fanatics, then get a gift card to an NBA store. If they love candles and fragrances, give them a gift card to a perfumery."