

Djembes

This brief review outlines the different types of djembe supplied by **Waywood Music**. It also provides a comparison between the different makes and styles to help you make the best choice for your needs.

Waywood Music supplies djembes made by Kambala and Bucara. These are both excellent makes and cover a broad range of prices. Each has its own pros and cons which are detailed below.

If you need any further help please call Stuart on 01509 553362 or 07814 628123 or send an e-mail to stuart@waywood.com.

KAMBALA



Kambala Djembes: *Bassam* (left) & *Professional* (right)

Two ranges of Kambala djembes are manufactured in the Ivory Coast:

- *Bassam*
- *Professional*

All Kambala djembes have wooden shells or bodies made from African Iroca wood, a fast growing plantation hardwood. They also benefit from a very high standard of quality control, uncommon amongst indigenously manufactured drums, ensuring consistently high standards across all steps of material selections and drum construction. Kambala have also taken the step of producing more standardised drum sizes.

The bearing edge (top rim) is much more rounded than on other makes, ensuring greater energy transfer from the head to the shell, resulting in maximum shell resonance. This rounded edge also means greater comfort whilst playing.

Bassam Range



Unlike many other brands Kambala do not manufacture a true 'budget' range. Yes, the *Bassam* djembes are cheaper than those in the *Professional* range, but the quality of their shells and heads is pretty much equivalent.

Shells are carved to a very high level of craftsmanship, both on the inside and outside, with no rough edges or splinters. *Bassam* drums have less intricately carved shells.

The heads are excellent quality, shaved goat skin and are tensioned very high using red-coloured rope, producing cracking high tones from slaps and warm open tones. Strong bass tones are enhanced by the resonant shells.

The tensioning rope is slightly thinner than on *Professional* models and made from a different material, but from personal experience, it does not undergo any greater degree of stretching during drum life.



High Quality Carving on Base



Bottom and Internal Detail

Bassam djembes are excellent drums for all situations.

Please remember, any drum with a natural skin head will detune in humid or damp conditions, but re-tension as they dry out. When drying any drum with a damp skin at high tension, ensure that they are not left in direct sunlight as they can dry-out too quickly, leading to splitting of the skin.

The quality of *Bassam* shells and heads has been continually improving over recent years, to the extent that they are hardly distinguishable from the higher-priced *Professional* range.

Professional Range

Kambala *Professional* djembes are top quality instruments. With thicker, more intricately carved shells they produce cracking high tones and thunderous low tones. There are more models in the *Professional* range each with its own sound characteristics. They are also more expensive than drums from the *Bassam* range.

Traditional

The traditional design is typical of drums played by the West African tribes of the Malinke and Bambara, found in the African countries of Guinea Conakry, Mali, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast.

The body of the drum is broader and bell-shaped with a longer base. This produces a warm, well balanced sound with plenty of high, mid and bass tones. As with all Kambala drums the heads are excellent quality shaved goatskin tuned at very high tension using marine quality, non-stretch black rope.



Solo



The *Solo* djembe has a longer, narrower body and stem. Drums are about an inch longer than *Traditional* models of an equivalent diameter. The result is a deeper and stronger fundamental tone than the normal '*Traditional*' djembe but also produces more attack from the slap strokes.

An unshaved 'hairy' rim gives extra comfort when playing slap strokes (right) and adds to the visual appeal.



Base/Stem Carving Detail

BUCARA



Bucara Djembes: *Traditional* (left) & *Festival* (right & back)

Drums in the Bucara range are also excellent quality and come in two ranges:

- *Traditional*
- *Festival*

Details of these ranges are given below.

Traditional Range

These djembes are handmade in Ghana (in conjunction with a Fair Trade organisation) using Tweeneboa (African Cedar). This is a softer, less dense wood than Iroca, meaning that these djembes produce a warmer sound than their Kambala counterparts. They have good quality shaved goatskin heads and are available with either 'Single String' or 'Double String' rope tuning.

Single String Djembes are the standard Djembe as used all over Western Africa. With their highly tensioned heads they produce a big bass tone and sharp slap tones. *Double String professional Djembes* are top of the Bucara range, using twice as much rope to tension the head. These drums can be tuned higher, hold their tuning well, have a wider dynamic range than the single string djembes. The weave around the top of the drum acts as a comfort curve, reducing hand pain during playing. Each drum has its own intricate relief carving.

Festival Range



These drums depart from traditional manufacturing methods by employing fibreglass shells and are made in Indonesia.

They have strong shells which are much thinner than those found on wooden djembes, mainly because of the inherent strength of fibreglass. Because the shells are relatively thin, they are very resonant, so the drums produce excellent bass tones and very sharp slap tones. The high quality drum heads are made of shaved

goatskin and are highly tensioned using rope tuning.



Festival djembes are loud, very light in weight, colourful and durable, being less prone to cracking on rough treatment than wooden drums.



Fibreglass Djembe: Base Construction (left), Head & Rim (centre), body & Tensioning (right)

Bucara have recently added bolt tuning to some djembes in the *Festival* range. These use tension rods (similar to those found on a drum kit) with goatskin heads. They have also introduced synthetic (plastic) heads on some bolt-tuned drums, which are much more stable over a wide range of climatic conditions.

Bucara *Festival* djembes are extremely good value, considerably cheaper than their wooden equivalents and have potential for giving good service and long life. NB. *They are also relatively new to the market so longevity has yet to be confirmed.*

PROS & CONS COMPARISON INFORMATION

Sometimes the amount of information can seem overbearing, making a decision difficult. Below are some common questions that are frequently asked when buying djembes and some answers that I hope will enable you to arrive at the best choice for your needs.

Rope Tuned or Tension Bolt Tuned?

An advantage of rope tuning is comfort when holding the djembe between the knees for playing: bolt-tuned djembes can dig into the thighs. However, bolt tuning allows rapid, easy adjustment of head tension for different playing situations, using only a spanner, rather than the complex, time and energy consuming Mali weave technique for rope tuned drums. Bolt tuning also allows for rapid head replacement which is not possible with traditional, rope-tuned drums.

Goatskin or Synthetic Heads?

Goatskin heads are 'the genuine article', with a lineage stretching across centuries of use. They produce a slightly drier (less 'ringy') sound and are very durable when not abused. However, they do absorb moisture readily and resulting in detuning in humid environments. They can also split if left in direct sunlight when damp/wet due to rapid drying-out, re-tensioning at a rate greater than the head can tolerate.

Synthetic heads don't always have that authentic sound but are extremely durable, can handle more abuse and also extremely stable over wide ranges of temperature and humidity. They are ideal for outdoor use. On bolt-tuned models, the heads are also easily replaced.

Fibreglass or Wooden Drums?

Wooden drums are once again the 'original article' and are very durable when treated correctly. They can, on occasions, split if dropped from a height or if they are banged hard on the ground. However, the force required to achieve this is high. The wood can dry out over time which may increase the risk of cracking, but this can be counteracted by occasionally applying a wood rejuvenator such as linseed oil. Wood shell djembes produce a big, warm, resonant sound with plenty of bass tone.

Fibreglass shells, as with synthetic drum heads, are very durable. They are thinner than their wooden counterparts and considerably lighter. They are resonant, producing a good range of high and low tones. From personal experience, fibreglass shells produce a more focussed sound with more controlled bass tones. This means that the bass notes do not sustain as long, which is not so much a problem as a matter of personal choice.

Size Options: Larger or Smaller Diameter?

Smaller diameter (9"-12") drums are higher in pitch and lighter in weight. They are easier to hold by younger or smaller people and less prone to fall away from the player when held between the knees. Their sound is drier (has less overtones and sustain). They are not as loud and the bass tone is not as deep (except perhaps on the Kambala *Professional Solo* djembes).

Conversely, larger diameter (13"-15") drums are louder, deeper in tone and have more sustain, overtones and ring. They don't always suit smaller players, through a combination of diameter and weight.

If buying a number of djembes it is always worth considering a variety of diameters. Not only does this suit a wider range of playing situations, but rather like notes on a melodic instrument, it also allows for increased tonal variety and colour during group playing.

Cases or No Cases: Bags or No Bags: Hats or No Hats?

Cases and bags are always a good investment providing they give adequate protection against unexpected or unwanted impacts during transport, storage and accidents. They certainly extend the life of the drum considerably.



Padded bags for djembes are made from durable fabrics or high impact materials (e.g., Kevlar™). Padding provides extra protection from impacts.

They provide great storage protection and are very comfortable when carrying the drum on the shoulder. Their light weight adds little to that of the djembe.

Many professional djembe players use these types of bags, only using flight cases for shipping between venues.

Hard cases are also a very good option if there is likely to be a higher risk of damage. They tend to be cylindrical in shape and take up more storage space. They are made from high density polythene and polypropylene, so are relatively light weight, but are still quite a lot heavier than their bag counterparts.



An option for added head protection is the use of djembe hats.

These are elasticated, padded protective covers which simply slip over the top of the drum to give much needed protection against accidental head damage or splitting.



They obviously do not provide protection for the main body of the djembe. I use a hat and a bag: the bag for storage and transport, the hat for protection when the djembe is not being played.

If I can help any further please call me on 01509 553362 or 07814 628123 or send an e-mail to stuart@waywood.com.

Best wishes

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