

Big Rain, Little Umbrellas

CHANCES ARE YOU'LL need an umbrella this winter. Many parts of the country, from California to the Northeast, have been hit with above-average rainfall in December and January, according to the government's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The good news is that travel umbrellas are getting smaller, making it easy to stash one in a suitcase, purse or computer bag.

Last year, manufacturer Totes introduced its most slender model yet, at five ounces and less than an inch and a half in diameter when closed. (Previously, the smallest model was an ounce heavier and a half-inch thicker.) It's now one of the company's top three sellers.

But does small and light equal drenched? We bought five travel umbrellas online and rated them on sturdiness, ease of use and portability with the help of five frequent travelers. When our testing day arrived without a storm cloud in sight, we tried them under the closest conditions we could get to rain and light winds: a garden hose followed by a ceiling fan set to high. Finally, we stuffed each into a nearly full laptop bag.

Cute, but Clumsy

It was hard not to fall in love with cute, and the \$22 Totes Micron Umbrella, bought from the manufacturer, was certainly cute with its tiny plastic case and a length of just over 6 inches when closed. However, opening and closing the manual umbrella was a clunky, two-handed ordeal. A button releases the canopy when you're closing it but doesn't retract the umbrella completely, and one tester pinched her fingers in the shaft as she tried to fold

the whole thing up. (Ann Headley, director of product development at Totes, says pinching can happen with manual umbrellas.) We expected more for the price.

Our next two umbrellas—from REI and Brookstone, each for \$20—also won praise for their size. They were slightly shorter than the Totes model, at 6 inches each, but they were just as hard to open and close. (The Brookstone model did have black metal parts, which looked somewhat sleeker.) At least the umbrellas weren't ruffled in the least by our admittedly unscientific hose-and-fan test. In fact, all of our choices held up fine, although the umbrellas with a larger canopy kept the rain farther from our toes. And the canopies on the first three were our smallest, each spanning 40 inches.

Hammacher Schlemmer's smallest umbrella, for \$25, turned out to be not so compact. At 16.5 inches folded, it was our largest umbrella by far, and didn't even fit into our stocked laptop bag. It did have some nifty features,

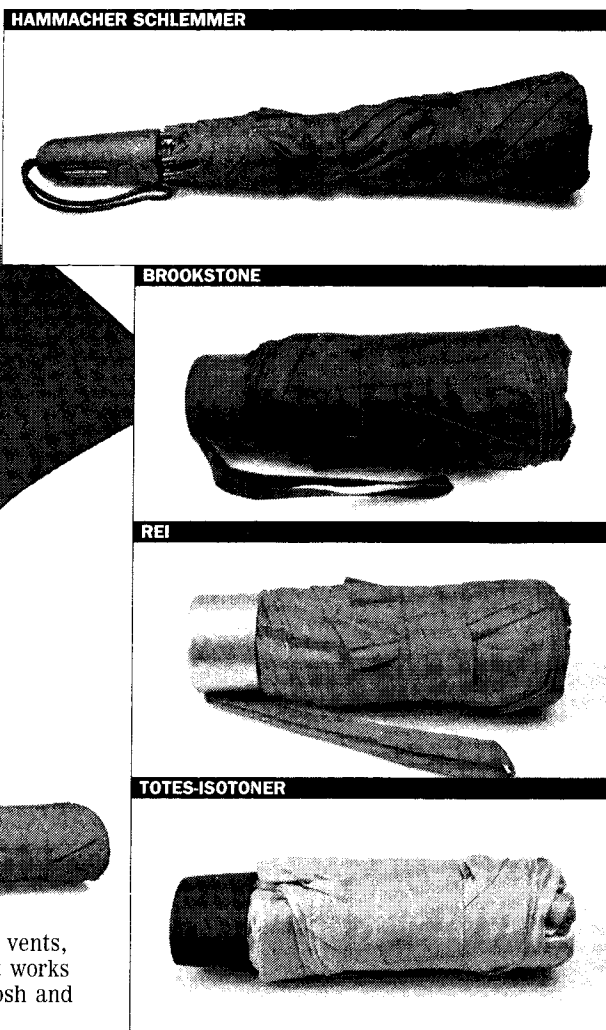
however, including wind vents, an auto-open button that works with an impressive whoosh and a shoulder strap.

The Right Balance

At last, the WindPro umbrella, for \$25 at Magellan's, came in with the right balance of features and size. It wasn't our smallest, at 11 inches when closed, but its unusual flat-frame construction—it folds into a thin rectangle—made it easy to slide into our bag. It also felt the sturdiest of all, without being too heavy. The black center rod was made of hefty steel, unlike most of our others, which used a more lightweight aluminum. Its fabric extended to a 43-inch-wide arc, far enough to keep our knees dry, plus it came with



MAGELLAN'S BEST OVERALL



HAMMACHER SCHLEMMER

BROOKSTONE

REI

TOTES-ISOTONER

wind vents (a small piece of fabric stretched across the top, which the company claims will help disperse any gusts and prevent the umbrella from blowing inside out). Most of all, our panel liked the fact that by pressing the button on the easy-to-grip rubberized handle, the whole thing flicked open and shut. It's our Best Overall.

Because the other four weren't much cheaper, there's no Best Value this week. Instead, we'll buy a \$5 umbrella off the street the next time we're caught in the rain. Or we'll just hope for snow.

—Renée Bacher

STORE/PRICE/PHONE	QUALITY	SHIPPING COST/TIME	RETURN POLICY	PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE	COMMENT
Magellan's WindPro Flatwear Vented Auto Umbrella \$24.85 800-962-4943 magellans.com	Best Overall. This sturdy, compact umbrella (11 inches long, 12 ounces) has a 43-inch canopy, folds flat and opens and closes easily at the push of a button. The rubberized handle was also comfortable. Fabric case included.	We paid \$25.95 for overnight shipping; it arrived the next business day in a tidy bubble-wrap envelope.	Refund at any time if you aren't happy. You pay shipping unless product is defective.	Travel-supplies retailer has an interesting feature that allows you to browse by country; information includes shopping suggestions, local history and visa requirements.	Umbrella is available in four colors. Magellan's sells two other umbrellas, both of which are smaller but have fewer features, each for \$19.85.
Hammacher Schlemmer Wind Defying 44" Compact Auto-Open Umbrella \$24.95 800-543-3366 hammacher.com	We liked some of the features (auto-open button, pinchless runners for easy closing), and it had the largest canopy of all, at 44 inches. But it was too large, at 16.5 inches closed and 16 ounces, to really be compact.	Overnight shipping cost \$26.90. It arrived on time, oddly packed in an oversized box.	For refund at any time. You pay shipping, unless product is defective.	Site, with many high-tech and gift items, is well organized and easy to use. This is the smallest umbrella out of four sold on the site.	This umbrella and the one from Magellan's were the only two with a steel (instead of mostly aluminum) rod. Other rain products include a water-proof travel jacket with 40 pockets to manage electronic devices.
Brookstone Micro Mini Umbrella \$20 866-576-7337 brookstone.com	Umbrella (6 inches long, 8.5 ounces, 40 inch arc) was one of our smallest, but didn't feel very sturdy and required two hands to close it. Comes with a zippered case with mesh sides.	We paid \$27.87 for on-time overnight shipping.	Refund or exchange within 60 days. After that, for exchange or store credit only. You pay shipping unless the product is defective.	Good-looking, easy-to-use Web site sells a total of five umbrellas.	Site carries a larger travel umbrella with a built-in LED flashlight, wind vents and an automatic open-and-close button for \$40.
REI ShedRain Mini Umbrella \$20 800-426-4840 rei.com	Opening and closing was not smooth on this umbrella (6 inches long, 6.7 ounces, 40-inch canopy), which had an aluminum shaft and ribs. Cute zippered case included.	Overnight shipping, for \$23.99, came the next day.	For refund or exchange at any time. You pay shipping if return is by mail, or return to store.	Store, which specializes in outdoor gear, allows you to compare all four of the umbrellas sold online based on price, material, dimensions and weight.	This is the smallest umbrella on the site. The next-smallest (8.5 inches long) folds flat and has titanium-enforced ribs, for \$30.
Totes-Isotoner	Aluminum-frame umbrella (6.25	We paid \$5.95 for stan-	Refund within 30 days if you are	This easy-to-navigate site (from the	The five-ounce umbrella that was intro