

Introduction

Few things are more relaxing than a soak in a hot tub or spa. The warm water and jets have a soothing effect on the mind and body and can be used for muscle relaxation or hydrotherapy. Hot tubs can also be a source of entertainment, allowing family members and guests to socialize in a comfortable atmosphere.

Unlike pools, the water temperature in hot tubs and spas allows for year-round outdoor use—even in the coldest of climates. They can also be installed within a home for protection from the elements or additional privacy. Whether inside or out, a hot tub or spa can provide decades of enjoyment when properly maintained and increase the resale value of your home.

This **BuyerZone Hot Tubs and Spas Buyer's Guide** includes the latest trends and data as well as common purchase considerations, including:

- What size to look for
- Popular features
- The importance of choosing a good dealer
- How much you can expect to pay
- What it takes to keep your hot tub or spa clean and safe

Once you know what to look for, we can also help you find qualified dealers in your area. Just fill out our free hot tubs price quote request form and we'll match you to reputable dealers.

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Pricing guidelines

Actual costs for a hot tub will vary tremendously depending on the style you choose, customization options, and shipping and installation. Here are some very rough estimates – we'll go into more detail in **Hot tubs pricing** on page 6.

- **Average price range:** \$4,000 to \$7,000
 - **Low-end portable model:** \$1,000 to \$2,000
 - **High-end installed model with add-ons and room for 10 guests:** \$12,000 to \$15,000
- **On-going power costs:** \$50 to \$60 per month
- **Cleaning and maintenance supplies:** \$50 to \$300 per year

Basic types of hot tubs

Most of the market for “hot tubs” today is more accurately for spas: technically, the term “hot tub” refers to the older, wooden tubs with bench seating, but the terms are fairly interchangeable these days. Because wooden hot tubs have increased maintenance requirements and higher purchasing and operating costs, they are less common today; however, some buyers strongly prefer the aesthetics of wooden hot tubs.

The most common type of spa purchased today is a molded acrylic shell with built-in seating and water jets. Beneath the shell is often fiberglass or wooden framing, and a composite or synthetic cabinet. One or more motors pipe water to the jets for massage and relaxation, and to filters and other cleaning systems to maintain the water quality.

Buyers who don't want to permanently mount their hot tub in one spot can choose portable spas: smaller, preassembled spas that sit aboveground. These usually accommodate only one or two people, but still include motors and jets similar to the full-size permanent models.



Sizes

Small portable spas and hot tubs seat one or two people and hold approximately 100 gallons of water. The largest models seat nine or more and hold approximately 500 to 1,000 gallons. Depths are usually in the 3-foot range and most are 3 feet to 9 feet in diameter. Square tubs are the most common, but hot tubs and spas are also available in round, oval, rectangular, or triangular shapes.

A 7-by-7-foot tub is a common size and typically seats 4 to 6 people. It's worth noting that the number of people who can share a hot tub isn't a fixed number as it depends on how friendly your hot tubbers are with each other, among other factors. In general though, you'll often find that filling a hot tub to its rated capacity results in a lack of foot space.

Heaters

There are two primary options for heating the water in your hot tub: electricity or gas. Electric heating is used in between 80% to 95% of all portable hot tubs currently sold throughout the United States. In comparison, their gas-powered counterparts are found in only 5% to 20% of installations. However, gas heating is used almost exclusively in the construction of larger, in-ground tubs as they have the potential to reduce operating costs over the long run.

Some buyers look for wood-fired, solar, or propane heaters for their spas and hot tubs. If you have a strong preference for one of these alternative heating methods, be prepared to spend extra... potentially, a lot extra. You may even have to buy a kit or aftermarket add-on to convert the tub yourself.

In general, you'll need 220v service to power the pumps in a hot tub – regardless of what you use to heat the water – so you'll probably need a professional electrician to do the wiring.

Insulation and cabinet

The spa shell is the innermost layer that holds the water. The outside – the cabinet – is most often made of synthetic material made to look like wood. The primary reason for this is the significant maintenance required to keep a real wood cabinet in shape. Of course, real wooden hot tubs usually feature wooden cabinets as well, which requires additional maintenance.

Between the shell and the cabinet is a layer of insulation designed to contain the heat of the water. The best choice

for energy efficiency is full-foam insulation: a sprayable foam that fills the interior spaces, including those around the pipes and motors.

Full-foam insulation can make it somewhat more difficult to repair internal leaks. However, since it stabilizes internal pipes and prevents vibration from working them loose, it reduces the likelihood that those leaks will occur. It also helps reduce motor noise.

Hot tub features

Hot tub models range from very basic to luxurious. The model that's right for your home depends on how you plan to use the tub – and how often.

To get started, are you looking for quiet relaxation or an entertainment spot for socializing? If your goal is an occasional getaway in the backyard, you may not need to spend extra on a fancy model. Instead, focus on the essential features for comfort and efficiency available in a basic tub.

If you have a large family or plan to spend a lot of time in your spa, a high-end model may be worth the investment. High-end hot tubs may have digital lighting and sound systems or even include flat-screen TVs and DVD players, in addition to all the standard features you'd find in traditional spas.

Jets

Jets are one of the most popular features of hot tubs. They force powerful streams of water throughout the tub to create a massaging effect. Manufacturers can equip their tubs with a wide variety of different jets—swirl, whirlpool, moving, adjustable, and many more—all of which provide different types of water flow.

Jets are a personal preference. You may even want different jets at different times or on different body parts. Therefore selecting a model that incorporates a wide variety of jets is usually your best bet. Some hot tubs even feature interchangeable jets, making it easy to swap in alternate jets to change the experience.



Some hot tubs come with more than 50 jets while others only have only a dozen. But don't be wowed by tubs that feature an extremely high number of jets. Most users find a smaller number of powerful jets much more relaxing than dozens of tiny, less powerful ones – a fact that's reflected in the dominance of models with hydrotherapy features and similar functionalities associated with stronger jets.

Pumps

While the jets shape the water flow as it enters the tub, the real power behind them comes from the pumps inside your hot tub. Smaller tubs may have only one pump, but the popular 6- to 7-foot models usually have two pumps in the 2 to 5 horsepower range. Larger tubs often have three or more pumps.

Power isn't everything though. More high-power pumps means increased energy costs, potentially more noise, and a higher purchase price. Striking a balance is important. So watch out for dealers who stress power over other features.

Covers

Covers help keep the tub free of debris, prevent children or pets from falling in, and improve energy efficiency by

trapping heat when it's not in use.

If you need extra safety, look for covers that are listed with ASTM (the American Society of Testing and Materials) and UL (Underwriters Laboratories). If insulation is important, know that covers are rated by thickness and often include two measurements, one for the middle and one for the sides. For example, a 4- by 2-inch taper cover is generally a good insulator, sloping from 4 inches thick in the middle to 2 inches thick at the edges. If you're in need of even more padding, covers also come in a 5- by 3-inch taper and a 6- by 4-inch taper.

Those on the lookout for ways to trim costs may want to consider a thicker cover, especially if you plan on using the tub regularly. The warmer you can keep the water during downtime, the less energy will be required to heat it back up to your preferred temperature.

Covers can be heavy and awkward to move, so many larger covers include built-in lifters that help you move them.

Additional features

- **Lights:** Used to illuminate the interior and exterior of the tub for nighttime use. LED lights use less electricity and some types let you choose different colors.
- **Waterfalls and fountains:** These liquid effects add the calming sound of falling water to high-end tubs and range from simple waterfalls that flow into the spa to jets that spray steams of water up and over the heads of tub occupants.
- **Digital control panels:** Used to control heaters, jets, lighting, and sound and entertainment systems. Some manufacturers provide a second, remote control panel that lets you heat up the tub from inside your house.
- **Lounge seats:** Most mid-sized to large hot tubs include at least one lounge seat that lets the bather lie back and relax. These seats are designed for comfort and hydrotherapy, but some buyers prefer a hot tub where all the seats are upright, facing each other. On the other hand, you may want a tub that includes two lounge seats so multiple people can enjoy the relaxation they provide.
- **Cup holders/coolers:** Not surprisingly, many people like to enjoy cold beverages while using their hot tubs. Built-in cup holders provide a place to rest your drink; coolers let you keep more refreshments cold. Simple extras like these can really help you enjoy your purchase that much more.



Choosing a dealer

Choosing a spa dealer is a critical part of your purchase decision. The combination of water, electrical controls, motors, and exposure to the elements leads to the eventual necessity of service and repairs—a need that makes you dependent upon a reliable dealer. Here's a checklist for choosing the best one.

- **In-house service.** Look for spa dealers who provide service calls, as opposed to those who pass them off on a third party. You want the specialized expertise and reliability of dealer repairs, not a third party that has a large customer base to deal with and only a general level of knowledge.
- **Delivery.** It's also best to choose a dealer that handles their own deliveries. Those who outsource delivery may not consider the challenges specific to your location when they sell you the tub—narrow entryways or

unsuitable supports would be two prime examples. These and a host of other logistical hiccups can lead to a big “uh-oh” moment when the delivery arrives if not taken into account in advance.

- **Solid track record.** Choosing an established dealer is also important. A spa dealership can be an attractive business opportunity for people looking to make a quick buck—until they discover the burden of ongoing support. The industry has a small but steady number of dealerships opening and closing quickly. Look for a dealer who’s been in business for 10 years or more, demonstrating a commitment to hot tub and spa sales and quality service.
- **Product lines.** A related consideration is the strength of the manufacturers the dealer represents. New hot tubs come with warranties that can cover the equipment for 1 to 10 years and the shell for 5 to 20 years. But that warranty is only as good as the manufacturer that supports it.

Choosing a spa dealer who offers the best service and warranties may cost you more up front. But in the long run, even one substantial repair can make up the difference. Take the time to check references, including those supplied by the dealer, as well as any neighbors or friends who have used the same dealer.

Hot tub sanitation

Even tubs and spas with advanced filtration systems require regular chemical treatments for sanitation. The water that people soak in is a breeding ground for germs. And without proper maintenance, your hot tub can turn into an “oversized Petri dish,” posing some serious health risks. Your exact sanitation needs will vary considerably based on “bather load” (the number of bodies in the tub over a set period of time).

Closely monitor the pH level of your tub water and add chemicals regularly to keep it in balance. The chemicals most often used for sanitation are chlorine and bromine.

Occasionally, you’ll also have to perform a “shock” treatment by using a large amount of chemicals to restore the proper chemical balance. Hot tubs and spas are not safe for use up to several days after a shock treatment. For further sanitation, expect to drain the tub completely a couple times per year.

Besides chemicals, there are a few other water management components to consider:

- **Filtration systems:** Help maintain a clean tub by filtering out debris and forcing in clean water.
- **Ozonators/ozone purification systems:** Use ultraviolet light to create ozone, a natural antimicrobial.
- **Ionization systems:** Add zinc, copper, or silver ions to the water to remove impurities and inhibit growth of bacteria or algae.

Keep in mind that these types of water management features help *reduce* the amount of chemicals you have to use—by as much as 70% in some cases—but do not eliminate their use. True “chemical-free” hot tubs are not yet a feasible option.

The dealer who sells you your tub or spa should be able to walk you through the steps of proper sanitation, as well as supply you with a chemical kit that contain all the substances you’ll need to keep your hot tub clean.

The dealer should also offer a service plan—free basic testing on a regular basis or more thorough ongoing maintenance programs with a subscription fee. The key is to find a system that works for you and stick with it.

Pricing for new and used hot tubs

Hot tub and spa prices vary widely, depending on the size and features. You can spend approximately \$1,000 for a basic portable model that seats three or spend around \$15,000 for a huge, top-of-the-line model that seats 10 and has digital lighting and sound. Most models fall somewhere in the \$4,000–\$7,000 range.

Don't forget though, the purchase price isn't the end of your expenses. Be sure to budget for shipping and installation, sanitation, upkeep, and the energy it will take to power your hot tub or spa. You can expect to pay between \$10 and \$60 per month in power costs—most buyers find their costs average around \$20 to \$40 per month. Water maintenance supplies like chemicals and replacement filters can cost from \$50 to \$300 per year, depending on the tub and usage.



Used hot tubs

The market for used hot tubs is relatively small, for a couple of reasons. Tubs that are permanently set into decks or belowground are not good candidates for resale, and portable tubs are often moved from one home to the next. However, if you can find a used hot tub that fits your needs, you can save quite a bit of money—potentially thousands of dollars on higher-end models.

Be sure to test it out—make sure you see the tub filled with water and up to temperature before you buy it, as small leaks or heating-element failures can be hard to spot. Most importantly, you should still buy your tub from a reputable dealer—you'll want to be able to return the tub or get necessary repairs in case anything does go wrong.

Shipping and installation

There are a few things you'll need to do to prepare for delivery of your hot tub or spa. It helps to have a level surface selected for the tub—usually a concrete slab, porch, or deck that has been designed to bear the hot tub's weight. If the model you choose requires electrical wiring, it's not a bad idea to have that work done in advance so you can start enjoying your tub or spa as soon as possible.

Delivery and setup, if not included in your price, can run several hundreds of dollars. Not surprisingly, shipping and installation costs also vary depending on the model you select. A hot tub that is assembled on site will cost a lot more to install than a one-piece plastic spa. Inset tubs or spas will cost more than aboveground models. Make sure the dealer you choose walks through the installation requirements with you carefully to give you a complete estimate.

Regular hot tub sanitation is essential for preventing the spread of germs and growth of serious health risks.

Spa hot tub buying tips

One of the key steps in buying a hot tub is “wet testing.” All this really means is visiting the dealership prepared to take a test soak. By spending 10 to 20 minutes in the spa tub you're evaluating, you'll get a good sense of the action of the jets, the comfort of the seats, and the noise level of the whole spa.

Once you've narrowed your choices down to a couple of models, wet testing is the best way to really compare them. When you start to get overwhelmed with facts and figures about the number of jets, water flow ratings, and motor horsepower, keep this option in mind.

Additional tips

- **Know what you want and can afford before talking to a dealer.** If you haven't decided on a budget or thought about the features you can do without, you may end up with a spa tub that's more expensive than you actually need. Be wary of dealers who try to upsell you on a model outside your price range.
- **Talk to friends or family who own hot tubs or spas before making your purchase.** Ask what they like and don't like about the models they chose, and what they would do differently if purchasing new ones.
- **Avoid last-minute surprises.** When getting price quotes on spa tubs, make sure the estimates include all aspects of the purchase: the tub itself, delivery, and installation, including electrical and water hookups.
- **Consider how much personal time or energy you want to spend on maintenance and upkeep.** Ask dealers which models involve the most and the least amount of upkeep. Try to be realistic about how much you're willing to do—and how often.
- **Ask a dealer to help you estimate the total cost.** This is where you'll factor in maintaining a hot tub or spa on a monthly or yearly basis. The figure won't be exact, but you'll get a reasonable idea of what to expect.
- **Shop multiple dealers before choosing one.** Have a list of questions ready and trust your instincts if a dealer only seems interested in making a quick sale. Check the company's record with the Better Business Bureau and other consumer agencies.