

Hands-on Review: 4 iPhone4 Cases

Robert Franner

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The Roots Tuff Case (www.gentec-intl.com) provides a stark contrast, standing at the far end of the function versus form tradeoff.



The backside of the Roots Tuff Case emphasizes its rugged appeal at the expense of Apple's high-tech statement.

Of the four cases reviewed here, it alone comes with a screen protector, and it's of the highest quality. The protector (there are no adhesives: it can be removed, washed, and reapplied) is easy to affix with a minimum of bubbles, and the gossamer smoothness makes it near impossible to tell from the unprotected screen. There's absolutely no orange peel or telltale ripple. You do lose the benefit of Apple's impregnated coating that helps resist smudges, but that's subject to wear and at least the protector keeps it fresh for future use. Thick sipes and visible mould seams conspire to erase the iPhone4's minimalist appeal, but the sipes doubtless add to the peerless shock protection offered by the Roots case.

Although I wouldn't rate the screen protector equal to the flip cases in the event of a frontal blow, the rest of the case deserves the highest rating. The thickness of the rubber and its durometer ensure the very best protection, placing this case in a class by itself in providing a shock absorbing effect.

Having shelled out 800 after-tax dollars for Apple's new bauble, I wasn't about to test Roots' claim that the phone would survive a four-foot drop over a hard surface, but if I were forced to drop it, it's the one of the four that would get the call.

The Tuff Case was the only one to come with a belt clip, and it's a clever design that has a swing-out stopper so the clip becomes the leg for a viewing platform that swivels for landscape or vertical orientation. There are three notches on the inside of the clip to afford as many angles of view!

The slippery rubber case combined with the smooth, translucent holder makes for very easy retrieval of the iPhone. The generous U-shaped based allows the iPhone to go in either way: its backside facing outwards during general use, and screen side out for desktop viewing. All told, this is an excellent, functional design.

Finally, Roots alone provides a carabiner clip that threads through a hole in the belt clip. With a selling price of \$34.99, I rank the Tuff Case as the value leader of the lot, by a wide margin.



The clever clip holder of the Roots Tuff Skin has a U-shaped bracket that swings out and locks into one of three channels designed to offer varying tilt in landscape or portrait mode.

The fly in the ointment is its style. Beauty may well be in the eye of the beholder, and the following is necessarily subjective, but its hard to overlook how fiercely the tough look flies in the face of the minimalist Apple aesthetic. Apple says 'Audi TT,' and the Roots replies 'ATV.' The leather flip cases say 'Gucci,' and the Tuff Case says 'Kodiak Work Boots.'

The siping running across the rubber may well be necessary to provide extra shock absorption, but it's unattractive, collects lint; and in any case, the seam running along the perimeter should have been de-burred. As for the diamond pattern with the huge Roots maple leaf that dominates the back surface, it needs to be said that it drew condescending remarks from every one of my friends and acquaintances (who admittedly know me for being anal about style and averse to the tough look).

So how does one rate these cases? It depends on what you want: they're all over the map when it comes to tradeoffs.

For functionality, I point to the Tuff Case and the Shinnorie as the co-leaders, with the Tuff Case arguably providing considerable more bang for the buck. But if you have a pressing need for that inner sleeve the Shinnorie alone provides, that can be a deal maker.

The Incase comes closest to preserving Apple's elegant design aesthetic, by a mile; but it offers the least protection, by the same measure. The others deserve a three-way tie, with the flips winning in case of a frontal blow and the Tuff Case winning in all other scenarios.

The two flip cases equal the Incase in elegance, but point to a different expression of luxury; and offer a degree of personalization not offered by the Roots and Incase designs.

The Tuff Case is designed to maximize functionality and value, while providing elevated protection with complete disregard for aesthetics, and completely meets its objectives.

For what it's worth, here's my personal evaluation. I tend to rotate the cases according to mood and need. My overall favourite for style and function, the Shinnorie gets the most use. That it betters the Melcko functionally while delivering the same kind of design statement means the Melcko gets the least use, in spite of the latter's excellence.

The Incase gets the nod when I yearn for the Apple minimalist look and simplicity, but always leaves me feeling queasy because of its limited protection.

The Roots Tuff Case gets the second most use, in spite of my antipathy for its appearance, because of its unmatched combination of protection and features. Anytime where desktop viewing might take place (such as air travel), it's the best choice. Also for tradeshow work and the like, the superbly engineered belt clip provides the cleanest access to the iPhone.

If I were to base a rating purely on the hours logged, the ranking would be: 1. Shinnorie 2. Roots Tuff Case 3. Incase 4. Melcko. Needless to say, your mileage may vary.