

The Big Shopper in Tropical Barkcloth

Editor: Liz Johnson
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When you first saw the beautiful fabric we used for these totes, how many of you shouted, “*My grandma had curtains from fabric just like that!*”? You’re right; this is the classic tropical print barkcloth that was all the rage in home furnishings from the late 1940s through the 1960s. It’s still hugely popular for both unique garment construction as well as home décor, but you don’t have to scour the thrift stores to source it. You can find many options at your local in-store and online fabric outlets in the same classic exotic florals, like palm fronds and hibiscus blooms. The texture, weight, and colors are just as rich and gorgeous as the vintage originals.



Barkcloth comes by its name honestly; it was originally made from the inner bark of trees in a similar method to how handmade paper is created. Today, what is commonly called barkcloth is a soft, thick, and slightly textured fabric. Its surface is usually a bit rough, like the bark of a tree.



Many fashion historians credit the early popularity of the “tropical barkcloth” to the American experience with different cultures and places throughout World War II. Post-war, people became more interested in a wider variety of colors and designs, especially the bright, bold tropical prints of the Pacific islands.



Today's barkcloth comes in a variety of widths, from a standard 44" to a full 54". The wider width options make it excellent for the home décor items for which it was most famous: curtains, slip covers, and patio furniture upholstery.

We wanted to show you how wonderful the fabric looks on a slightly more unusual application: a large tote. The generous size makes it perfect as a farmer's market shopper, a beautiful carryall for knitting supplies or even as a diaper bag alternative.



The fabric is traditionally 100% cotton or a cotton/line blend. We selected cotton webbing for the handles and quilting cotton for the lining, so our bags are completely machine washable. Prewash your fabric and trims prior to starting then re-press so your starting cuts are straight and true. We added a removable inset to help stabilize the bottom of bag, but it is a simple open sleeve so the “stiffener” inside can be removed prior to washing and easily re-inserted when done and dried. To help the colors keep their vivid hues, wash in cold water with a color-safe laundry soap, And although you could tumble dry on cool, we would recommend keeping machine drying to a minimum and hanging to dry instead.

Because we couldn't bear to not find an *immediate* use for the fabric leftover from our main cuts, we created a matching zippered pouch for each tote. The pouch is held in place with a ribbon lanyard secured under the bag's facing. When you have a big, big bag like this, it's nice to have a separate pouch to keep smaller items contained. And, by putting it on a little “leash,” it's easy to pull out from amongst whatever else you're carrying. If you'd like to make one, you can use our [Drop-in Zippered Pouch with Lanyard tutorial](#). The supplies needed and steps are shown there in full detail. The only change we made was to use a grosgrain ribbon for the lanyard and to eliminate the button loop since we permanently stitched our pouch in place.



Our totes finish at approximately 19¼" wide x 15" high x 6¾" deep. The handles are sized to allow you to carry by hand or over the shoulder. The over-the-shoulder option is designed to be a snug fit to best distribute the weight of a larger tote. We offer two, slightly different options below to secure the top position of the handle. Either option works great; you choose based on your personal preference.

Sewing Tools You Need



- Sewing Machine and standard presser foot
- Edge Guide foot: *optional but helpful for the precise stitching of the corner tucks*
- Quarter Inch Seam foot: *optional but helpful for the handle stitching*

Fabric and Other Supplies

NOTE: Quantities shown are for ONE tote.



- 1¼ -1½ yards of bark cloth; *get 1¼ yards if using a 54" fabric and cut horizontally, get 1½ yards and cut vertically if using a 44" fabric*
NOTE: *We found a nice selection of tropical barkcloth at Fabric.com and found the original 54" wide Big Kahuna barkcloth used for our samples at [an online home décor retailer](#).*
- 1½ yards of 44"+ quilting weight cotton in a coordinating solid for the lining; *we used [Kona Cotton](#) by Robert Kaufman Fabrics*
- 1½ yards of 45" wide mid-weight interfacing; *we used [Pellon Décor Bond](#)*
- ¼ yard of 45" wide fusible fleece; *we used [Pellon Thermolam Plus](#)*
- 3 yards of 1½" wide cotton webbing; *we used natural webbing for the Hamakua tote and black webbing for the Kamuela tote, both purchased locally – [Mood Fabrics Online](#) has black, white, and natural in the 1½" width*
- ONE 5½" x 18" piece of stabilizing material for the base sleeve; *we used [Tintex](#); you could also use plastic canvas, balsa wood or even cardboard*
- All purpose thread to match fabric
- See-through ruler
- Fabric pen or pencil
- Seam gauge
- Seam ripper
- Scissors or rotary cutter and mat
- Iron and ironing board
- Straight pins
- Clips, such as [Wonder Clips](#); *with the thicker fabric and webbing, the Wonder Clips were easier to use than pins*
NOTE: *If you are making the optional pouch, you can use leftover scraps of the barkcloth and the lining. In addition, you will need ONE 8" x 15" piece of lightweight fusible interfacing, ONE 7" zipper, one ¾" D-ring and Swivel Clip, and ½ yard of ⅝" wide grosgrain ribbon.*

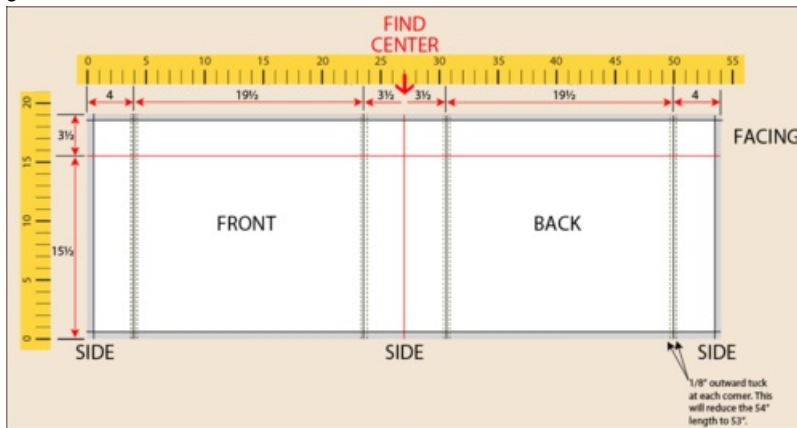
Getting Started

1. From the barkcloth, cut the following:
ONE 19" high x WOF (width of fabric or 54") wide rectangle for the main exterior panel
ONE 7¾" high x 20½" wide rectangle for the exterior base panel
ONE 7" high x 39" wide rectangle for the base inset sleeve
TWO 2¾" x 50" strips for the handle accents
NOTE: *As mentioned above, this is the cutting pattern for 54" width fabric; if using a narrower width, cut vertically to get the needed measurements.*
2. From the lining fabric, cut the following:
ONE 53" x 15½" rectangle for the main lining panel
ONE 20¼" x 7¾" rectangle for the lining base panel
3. From the mid-weight fusible interfacing, cut ONE 53" x 15½" rectangle.
4. From the fusible fleece, cut ONE 19¼" x 6¾" rectangle.
5. From the base stabilization material, cut ONE 5½" x 18" rectangle to insert into the inset sleeve.
6. From the webbing, cut TWO 50" lengths.

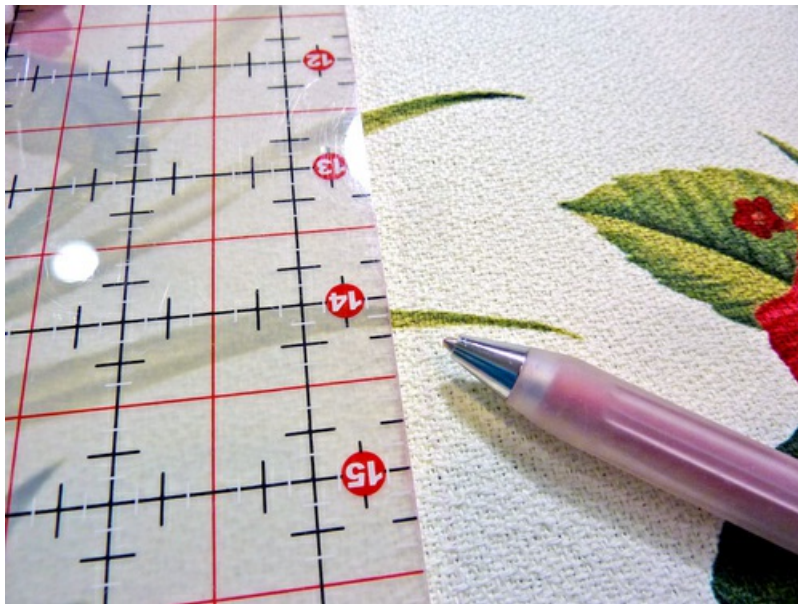
At Your Sewing Machine & Ironing Board

Mark and stitch the four corner tucks

1. Bark cloth is an awesome fabric, but it can be a little soft and even a little stretchy, so we felt the corners of our tote needed a little extra help to have good definition. To do this, we added outward tucks at each corner.



2. Following the diagram shown above, mark four vertical lines representing the four corners of the finished bag. These lines are placed 4" in from each raw side edge and 3 1/2" to either side of the exact center of the panel. Use a fabric pen or pencil to draw in each vertical line. Remember, you are working on the right side of the fabric, so make sure you are working with a pen or pencil that will easily wipe away or will vanish with exposure to the air or the heat of an iron.



3. Fold along each drawn line and press to set.



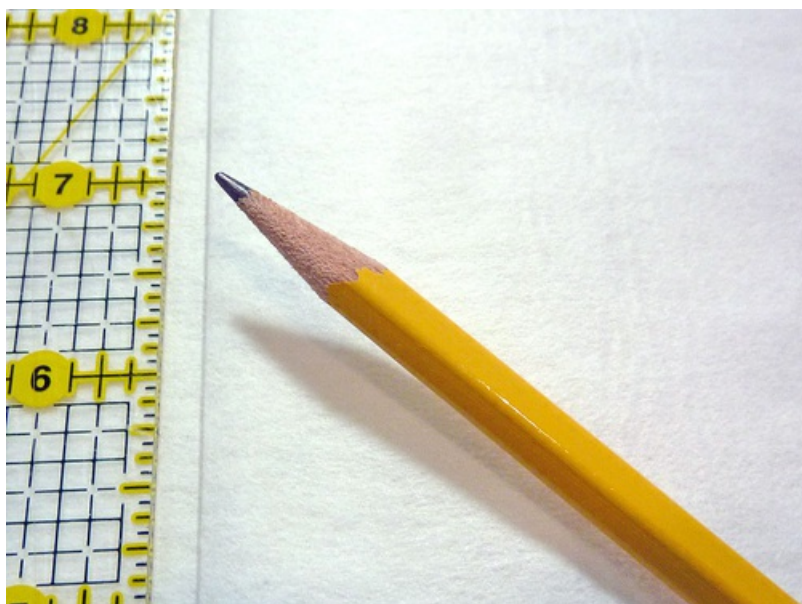
4. Thread the machine with thread to best match the exterior in the top and bobbin. Lengthen the stitch.
5. Edgestitch $\frac{1}{8}$ " from the folded edge. This means the four tiny tucks will each take up just $\frac{1}{4}$ ", resulting in an overall reduction in the width of the exterior panel from 54" to 53". We used our Janome Edge Guide foot for a super precise seam.



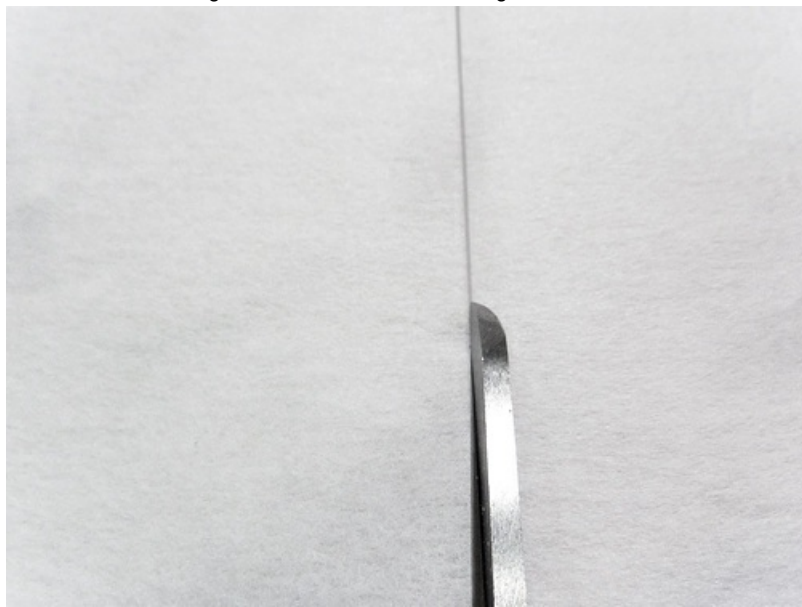
Prepare and fuse the interfacing

1. Flip the tucked exterior panel so it is facing wrong side up and flat on your work surface. Place the interfacing panel on top of it. The interfacing panel should be flush with the bottom raw edge and both raw side edges of the exterior panel. It will sit $3\frac{1}{2}$ " down from the top raw edge of the panel. Lightly pin in place and then draw in a vertical guide line to match each tucked seam.

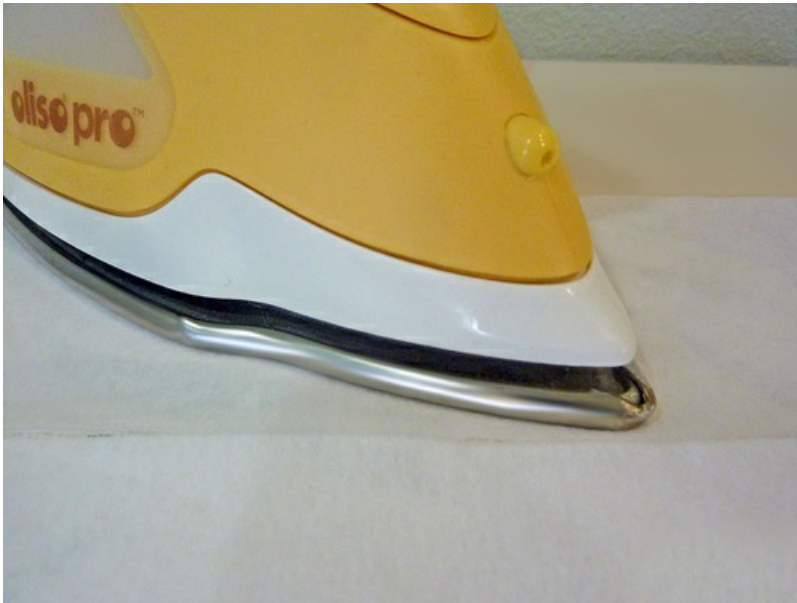
NOTE: Normally we would keep the interfacing out of the seam allowances, but the rough texture of the bark cloth makes it a bit more resistant to fusing. Allowing the interfacing to be secured within the seam adds some extra security against shifting.



2. Remove the interfacing from the exterior and cut along each of the four drawn lines. You'll end up with five pieces.



3. Re-position the five pieces across the wrong side of the main exterior panel, maintaining the top/bottom/side positions listed above. Butt together the five pieces so the "cracks" between the pieces are centered over each tucked seam. Fuse in place. This construction method allows a crisper fold at each corner of the tote.



Prepare and place the handles

1. Find the two handle accent fabric strips and the two lengths of webbing.
2. Fold back both 50" raw edges of each strips $\frac{1}{2}$ " and press well.
3. With the wrong side of the strap accent facing up (so you can see the folded back edges), lay the webbing down the center to conceal the raw edges. Pin or clip in place.



4. There should be $\frac{1}{8}$ " of fabric extending beyond the webbing on each side.



5. Thread the machine with thread to best match the fabric in the top and the webbing in the bobbin. We used natural for both on our Hamakua tote.
The stitch should still be lengthened from the corner tucks
6. Attach a Quarter Inch Seam foot if possible.
7. Stitch with the bark cloth facing up and the webbing against the feed dogs. Using a ¼" seam allowance, Topstitch down each long side, removing the clips as you go.



8. Repeat to create the remaining handle.
9. Place the fused exterior panel right side up and flat on your work surface. Each handle should be centered between the tucks with 7" between the straps, measuring from the *center* of the two straps not the inside edges.
10. First find the exact center point between each set of tucks. Place one side of one strap. The center of this strap should sit 3½" from the center point. The bottom raw edge of the strap should be flush with the bottom raw edge of the exterior panel.



11. Measure 8" down from the top raw edge and mark with a pin or marking pen. This is the stopping point for the stitching that secures the strap to panel.



12. From this 8" mark, measure down another 1½" and place another mark. This denotes the size of a 1½" X Box that will help secure the top of the strap.



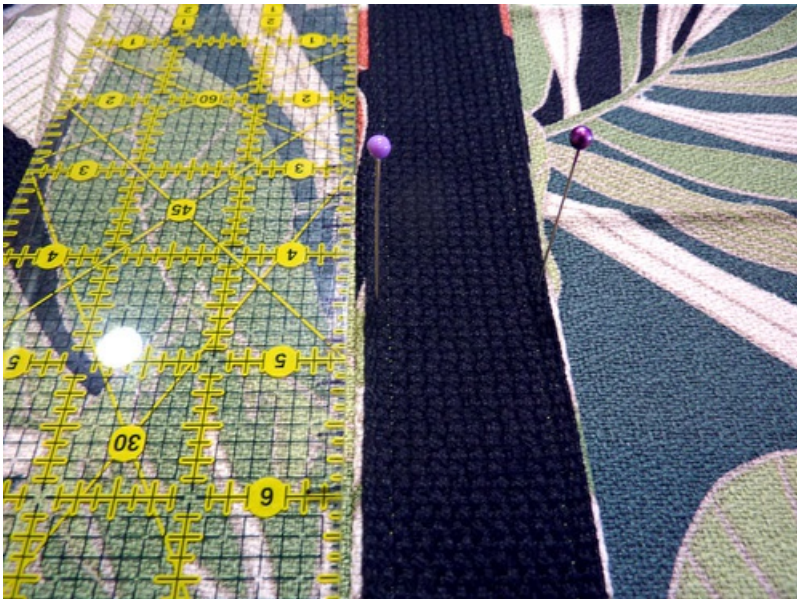
13. Make sure the machine is threaded with thread to match the webbing in the top and bobbin. The stitch should still be lengthened. Create the X Box first. If you are new to this technique, we have a full tutorial



14. Continuing edgestitching along each side of the strap from the base of the X Box to the bottom of the exterior panel.
15. Repeat to secure the opposite end of the handle, remembering to keep the distance from strap-center-to-strap-center at 7". Then repeat to attach the remaining handle.

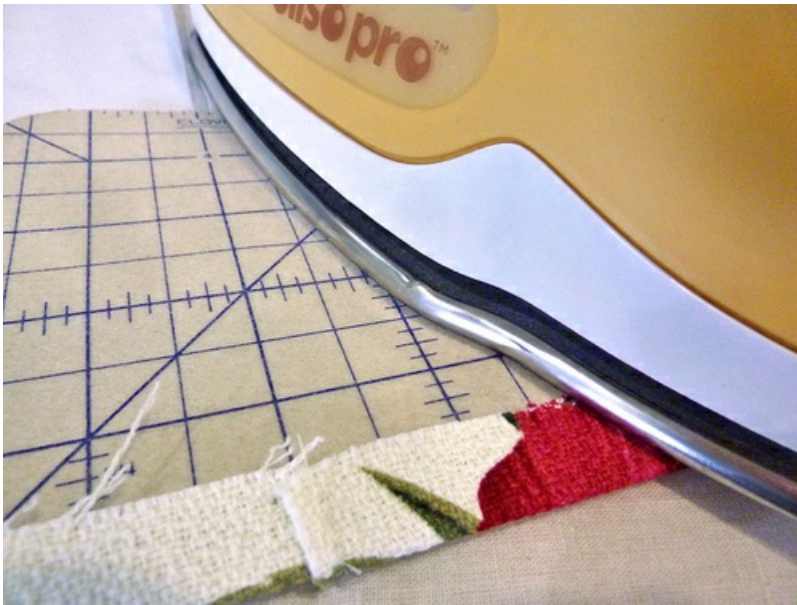
Optional positioning of handles for a tighter handle loop

1. If you'd prefer *less* of a handle drop as shown on our Kamuela tote, all the basic steps are identical, but you would create your X-Box at just 4½" down from the top raw edge rather than 8" down.



Prepare the base and inset into the exterior

1. With the handles stitched in place. Press the facing hem into position. To so this, fold back the raw edge ½" and press well.



2. Fold down an additional 3" and press again. We're using our Clover Hot Hemmer.

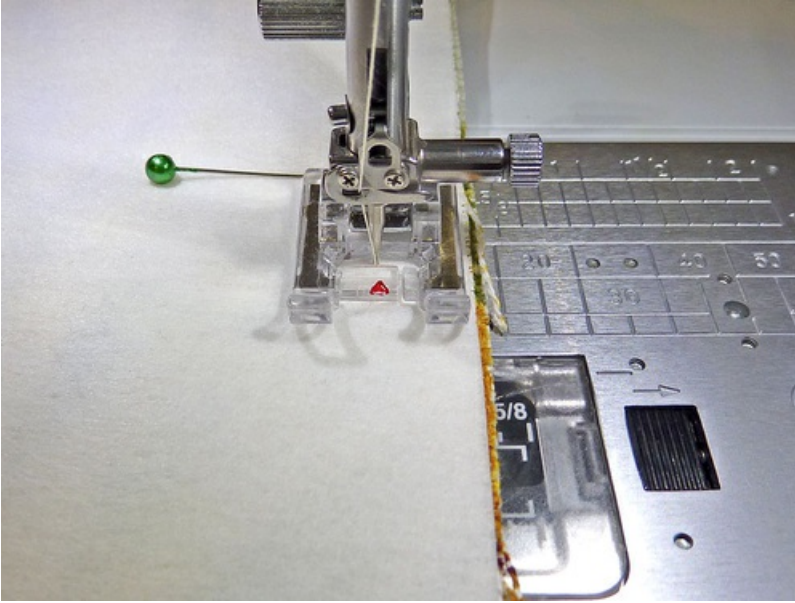


3. Unfold so the crease lines are visible and you can stitch up the full 19" side of the panel.
4. Place the 19" sides of the panel right sides together and pin in place.



5. If necessary, re-thread the machine with thread to best match the exterior in the top and bobbin. Re-set the stitch length to normal.

6. Using a $\frac{1}{2}$ " seam allowance, stitch together to create a tube. Press the seam allowance open and flat.



7. Find the exterior base panel and the fusible fleece panel.
8. Center the fleece on the wrong side of the base panel so there is $\frac{1}{2}$ " of fabric showing beyond the fleece on all sides. Following manufacturer's instructions, fuse the in place.
9. Find and mark the center point of each of the four sides of the base panel.



10. Also mark $\frac{1}{2}$ " in from each side at each corner for your seam's starting and stopping points.



11. Find and mark the center points along the bottom of the exterior tube. The seam is one side seam; flatten with this seam centered to find the opposite side's center point. Then, fold in the opposite direction to form the center points of what will be the front and back of the tote.
12. Turn the exterior tube wrong side out. The base panel should be facing right side up.
13. Starting on one side, pin the base panel right sides together with the body of the bag. Align the center pin point on the base panel with the side seam of the body of the tote. Continue pinning the base in place, matching all the quadrant pin points.



14. Starting $\frac{1}{2}$ " in from the corner, and using a $\frac{1}{2}$ " seam allowance, stitch along the first side. Stop the seam at the opposite corner, $\frac{1}{2}$ " from the corner. In other words, your seam is starting and stopping $\frac{1}{2}$ " in from the edge of the base panel.
15. Remove the project from the machine. Turn the corner. To help make the turn, you can clip the base panel at the corners. You are clipping into the corner at a diagonal at a depth of about $\frac{3}{8}$ ". This frees up the seam allowance so you can stitch each side of the bag independently.
16. Use a $\frac{1}{2}$ " seam allowance to stitch the next side of the base to the body of the bag. Again, start and stop at $\frac{1}{2}$ " in each corner.



NOTE: The steps for this part of the construction are summarized; if you are brand new to inserting a base panel, we have a [handy step-by-step tutorial](#).

17. Set aside the exterior bag.

Create the lining

1. Find the main lining panel. Fold it in half, right sides together. Pin along the 15½" sides.
2. Re-thread the machine with thread to best match the lining in the top and bobbin.
3. Using a ½" seam allowance, stitch the one side seam.



4. As you did above, mark the center points of each side of the lining base panel as well as the bottom opening of the lining "sube."



5. Insert the base into the lining tube in the same manner as you did above for the exterior.

Assemble the lining and exterior

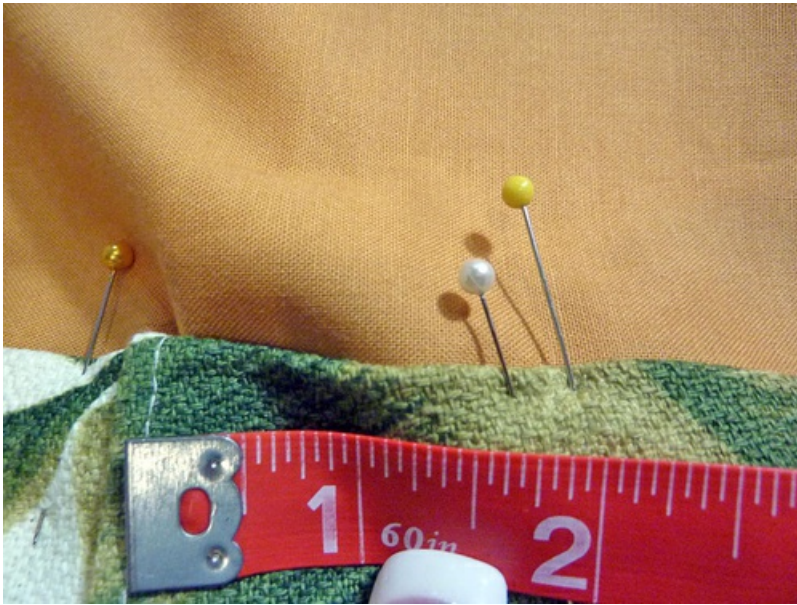
1. Find the exterior bag, it should be right side out. Unfold the top facing hem. Fold the handles down out of the way.
2. Find the lining bag, it should be wrong side out.
3. Slip the lining inside the exterior so the two are now wrong sides together. The top of the lining should sit along the top of the exterior panel's interfacing.



4. Smooth the lining down into position, matching up the sides and base, then fold the exterior facing hem back down into position and pin in place. This hem should cover the raw edge of the lining.



5. If you are adding the pouch, make an additional mark 2" in along what will be the back panel of the tote. This will be where the grosgrain ribbon lanyard will be inserted and secured.



6. Re-thread the machine with thread to best match the exterior in the top and bottom. Lengthen the stitch.

Create the optional pouch

1. If you decide to make the optional pouch, we recommend doing it at this point. You could also do it right after you cut out your main pieces and then just set it aside until you get to this point.
2. Here is the link again to our original [Drop-in Zippered Pouch with Lanyard tutorial](#)
3. As we mentioned, the only change is that rather than making a self-fabric handle with a button hole we simply used grosgrain ribbon to attach the D-ring (one 2" length) and the swivel clip (one 9½" length).
4. Insert the raw end of the main lanyard piece under the facing at the marked corner point. The ribbon should be inserted under the facing about 1". You want the pouch to touch the bottom of the bag but not lay flat against the base or it risks getting stuck there with items piled on top of it.



Topstitch to finish

1. If you used our recommended lower X Box placement on the handles (8" down from the top raw edge), you can simply let the handles fall down and out of the way.
2. If necessary, after your optional pouch construction, re-thread the machine with thread to best match the exterior in the top and bottom and lengthen the stitch.
3. Topstitch all around the top of the bag just $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the top folded edge.



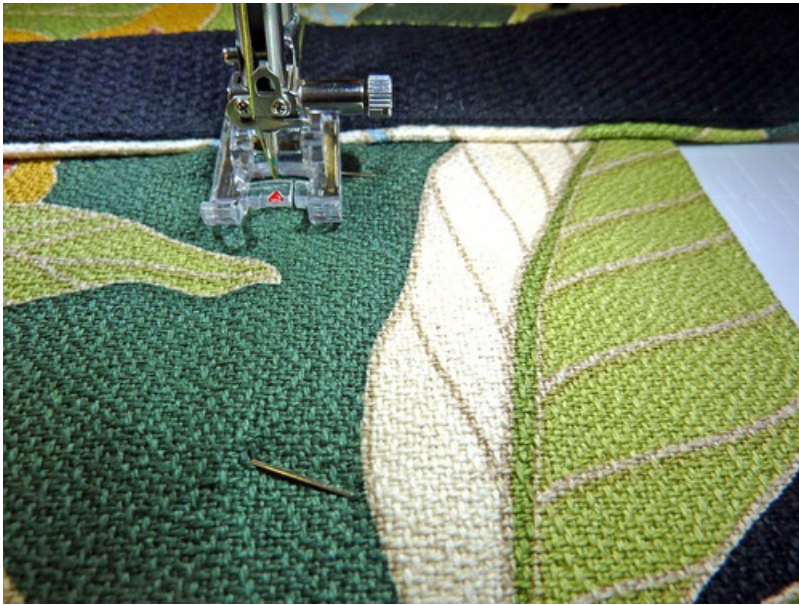
4. Run an additional line of topstitching $2\frac{3}{4}$ " from the top folded edge ($2\frac{1}{2}$ " from the first line of topstitching) to secure the bottom of the facing hem. This also secures the lanyard in place.



5. IF you chose the higher X Box placement, your first topstitching seam $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the top folded edge is exactly the same. But, for the lower topstitching seam, you will need to stop and lock your seam at either side of each strap.
6. Stitch up to the strap, stop, and lock.



7. Reposition the bag at the opposite side of the strap and resume stitching. Repeat this "hop-over" at each strap.

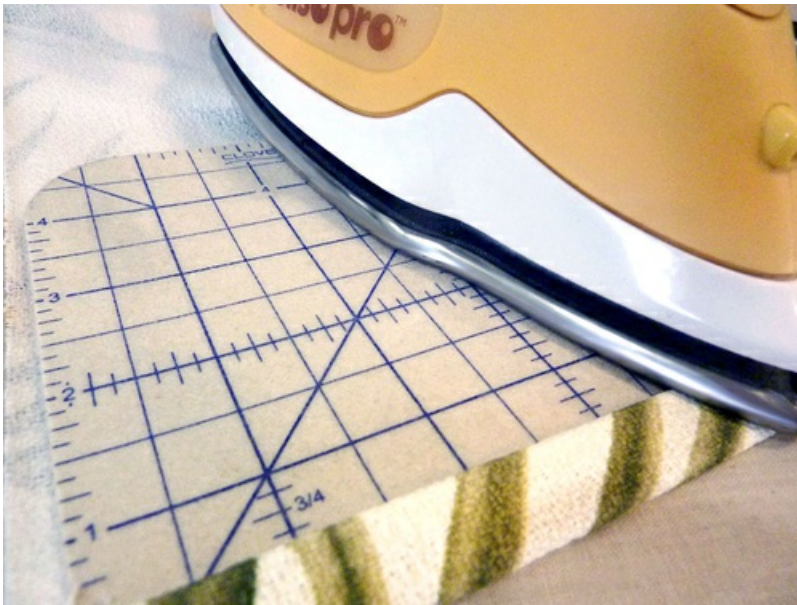


8. This higher placement allows the the handles to stay more upright, and when let go, they do not brush the ground. It also means there will be four small sections of the facing that are not attached at the back. Because the top of the bag is so large, it is well secured with the remaining stitching and it's not really necessary to worry about these little open areas. If it bugs you, you could hand stitch them closed.



Create the base inset sleeve

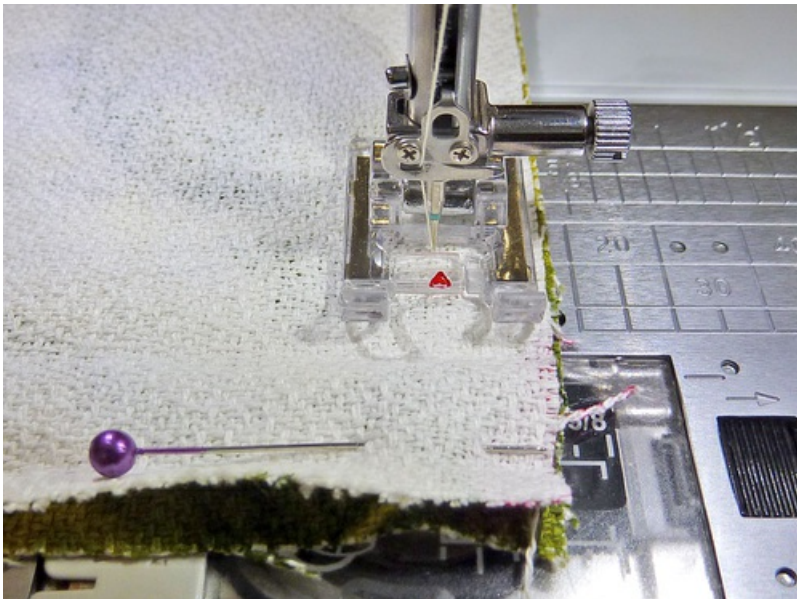
1. Find the remaining 39" x 7" exterior panel and the stabilizing insert (we used Timex).
2. Along each 7" side, make a $\frac{3}{4}$ " double-fold hem. To do this, fold back the raw edge $\frac{1}{4}$ " and press, then fold back an additional $\frac{1}{2}$ " and press again. Press firmly enough to set crease lines.



3. Unfold the hems so the crease lines are visible. Fold the panel in half (so it is now $19\frac{1}{2}$ " x 7"), matching-up the crease lines at each side. Pin along each side.



4. Using a $\frac{1}{2}$ " seam allowance, stitch each side seam.



5. Clip the corners and press open the seam allowances.
6. Re-fold the hem back down into position and topstitch to secure. If your machine has a free arm, now is a good time to use it.



7. Insert the stabilizing panel into the open hemmed end.



8. Insert the panel down into the base of the bag.

Contributors

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Storage Solutions

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