

## **The Perfect Moleskine (And you can't have it)**

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According to legend, when famed travel writer Bruce Chatwin learned that his favorite notebook, a moleskine manufactured by a small company in Paris, was being discontinued, he immediately went to the shop and bought every last one they had in stock. At least he had the forewarning.

I've found the perfect little black notebook; in my opinion, the absolute end-all, be-all of little black notebooks. The one I could use forever and never give a second thought to the competition. One that is perfect in size, design, and portability.

So why is my search for the perfect little black notebook going to continue after this entry is posted?

They don't make them anymore.

I first came across the Mazzuoli-brand "Stifflexibles" when I was living in Bologna, Italy, in 2003. At the time, I had been using the standard Moleskine to keep a record of my travels, and was quickly filling it up. One day, I wandered into a small stationary store and noticed three notebooks on display that greatly resembled my Moleskine – but something was different.

The cover was the same style of rigid, black, oil-cloth cardboard found on the Moleskine. However, there were two vertical creases, which allowed the cover to be bent back. In fact, you could rifle through the pages of the notebook without even opening it. And though the cover itself was certainly rigid and would protect the pages, the creases allowed it to be flexible enough to keep in your pocket.

Impressed, I bought two of the notebooks, but continued using my Moleskine to finish it. Upon returning to America, I gave the two Stifflexibles away to friends of mine as souvenirs and completely forgot about them.

Recently, one of my friends contacted me with the news that he had lost his notebook. He was devastated, not only because the notebook contained a wealth of his ideas and scribbles, but also because he considered it to be the perfect little black notebook. Durable, flexible, portable, and sleek. He wanted to know if I knew where to buy more. At the time, I was growing disappointed with my experiences with the Moleskine, and decided to search for a few more Stifflexibles.

I contacted the manufacturer, Giuliano Mazzuoli, but was disappointed to learn the notebooks were long out of print. So I turned to Ebay and after a lot of searching, found someone who had previously sold a few online. The seller happened to have five remaining copies. Feeling like Chatwin, I bought all five in a heartbeat.

As far as I know, they're the last five anywhere. But I'm reviewing them with the hope that maybe, just maybe, what Mazzuoli did right with this notebook will stand as a lesson to other manufacturers who can't figure out how to make a decent moleskine notebook. So pay attention!

First off, the cover – the heart of the Stifflexible. Both the front and back cover have two creases which allow it to bend back and forth, yet with the rest of the cover remaining stiff and sturdy. I simply cannot describe how amazing this system is. It allows portability and flexibility (you can keep it in any pocket, front or back, and not notice it), yet you get all the benefits of the typical hardcover Moleskine. While I liked the soft cover Miquelrius I reviewed last week, it's just comes off as soft and flimsy when you could have the option of something like this.

Also, it is extremely more organic to use. Unlike the Moleskine, which is very difficult to flip through, the Stifflexible is all about quick access. You can bend it back to rifle through the pages like you would a softcover book and not have to struggle at all.

Simply put, if you have ever wanted to be able to keep your Moleskine in your pocket, or wished there was a soft cover option that was still as durable, you are searching for the Stifflexible. The combination of a hard cover with flexibility: who knew?

The pages are near identical to the Moleskine variety. The lines go to the top of the page (no headers here), the spacing is nice and tight (but not too tight), the page color is creamy, and the binding is of the section-sewn variety, which allow it to be opened flat on a table surface. To add a bit of style, the page edges are colored red, blue, green, or yellow. Use this for a week and you'll wish the Moleskine had colored edges.

The notebook itself is slightly smaller the Moleskine, and as I have said before, this makes all the difference in the world. This notebook feels like it wants to be carried around everywhere you go. Forget a backpack, purse, jacket, or laptop bag – a pair of jeans and the Stifflexible are all you need.

Like the Moleskine, the Stifflexible has a black elastic to keep it shut and a small folder pocket attached to the inner back cover. However, instead of a ribbon bookmark, the Stifflexible uses a flap of black cardboard to hold your page. In terms of efficiency, this works extremely well – you don't have to go digging for the ribbon to find your place, and it's even easier because you can rifle through the pages by bending the cover back.

Sadly, the Mazzuoli design company has set their focus on fine pens and watches, and seems to have moved past notebook design. It's too bad they didn't get the distribution that Modo e Modo has had, as I'm sure they would've been huge in the United States (an interesting point: according to the pretentious pamphlet that comes with each Moleskine, no new moleskines were made between 1986 and 1998, when Modo e Modo went into operation; yet, strangely, the copyright date on the Stifflexibles is 1997...).

Mazzuoli sent me a 2008 product catalog, in which a new set of Stifflexible notebooks are advertised, but sadly, they've substituted the black cover for covers with pictures. It's too bad that a company that could make the perfect little black notebook has lost sight of what that is. I'm not sure if these new versions are even of the same quality, but I will do my best to track them down when they come out next year and review them. In the meantime, if you'd like to see a return of the original black Moleskine-style Stifflexible, send them a letter to the company urging them to go back into production. Miracles have happened before!

However, I've been thinking that all might not be lost. Studying the standard Moleskine, it looks like a Stifflexible version could possibly be made with an exacto knife, tape, and some creativity. If all goes well, I will post a how-to on making your own Stifflexible shortly. Until then, I will continue the search for the perfect little black notebook, knowing sadly that I have already found it, and that it's not being made anymore.