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Natures
Photos

My solution to the great camera bag dilemma!

If you're like me you will own many different camera bags, one for each situation and a few more just in case. I'm not sure how many I have but if you asked my family they would say too many! I need special camera bags of course when I go to Africa and because the airline regulations have changed over time I have three different sizes but my collection includes many more that I seldom use.

Like most people I started out with the traditional backpack to carry my increasing collection of kit. I even used to recommend folks took all their kit to a shop where they could try out different bags to see which could house all they wanted and were still bearable to carry. Whilst they are flexible and convenient I soon realised their main downfall was their weight when fully laden and the strain it puts on your shoulders and back. In addition there is the difficulty you face getting things in and out. There are many designs and many solutions all intended to carry all the kit you might ever want and with designs and adverts that persuade us that it's all possible. It's often tempting to get one big enough to carry everything but that only exacerbates the problem. I know I have such a camera bag! You could of course be disciplined and elect to have a smaller, lighter version but you would still have problems taking it on and off when you need to get equipment in and out. You might also not be able to carry that essential piece of equipment you need for a particular expedition – hence the need for that special bag for that special occasion! There are many specialist



bags that solve the access problem by sliding around to your front when you want to get into them but these are never big enough or, key for me, have the flexibility I need to store different equipment. There are also many alternative solutions to the traditional backpack available including shoulder harnesses such as BlackRapid™ and belts with quick removable clips such as the Spider™ system. These have their uses but all suffer for the same problem namely that you can't carry additional equipment easily. The harnesses and the Spider™ system only practically allow you to carry up to two cameras with lenses mounted and they don't offer much protection for the camera. Any visit to a photo show these days or casual glance at a photo magazine will offer a new and novel approach and it's always a popular topic of conversation when folks gather for a workshop of mine.

A few of years ago when visiting the photo show in Birmingham I became particularly interested in the modular component system or belt system sold by ThinkTank™. I use their backpacks for Africa as I think they're very well designed and thus decided to give their belt, or modular system, a try. I very quickly became a convert and now seldom take my heavy backpack unless I really need to. I do still use a large backpack when I want to take a lot of different equipment for example if going on a dedicated macro shoot as there is little alternative. I do though of course suffer the shoulder and backache associated with carrying it around all day long. I also use a backpack when visiting a hide as of course it can be placed on the floor and protection equipment. I also take one when travelling abroad for the same reason of protecting kit although I have developed a particular approach for safaris I will explain in another newsletter. At all other times I use the ThinkTank™ modular system and find that it is possible to

carry a lot of equipment easily and simply. I recently spent three days photographing at zoos in Holland carrying the following:

- Canon 1DX body
- Canon 70-200 f2.8 MkII
- Canon 100-400 F4.5-f5.6 MkII
- Canon 300 f2.8 Mk1
- Canon 24-105mm MkII
- Canon extenders 2X and 1X both Mk3
- Spare batteries
- Spare Memory cards
- Mobile phone
- Phone charger



I also of course had to carry tickets and brochures plus some cereal bars and a bottle of water to sustain me. The total weight of 11.5Kg was considerable but I was able to walk many miles each day without any issue.

The Think Tank modular component system consists of a belt or which you hang various different pouches. There's nothing new in this approach as other manufacturers and indeed the British Army have used it before and in the case of the British Army with great success. Many years ago as a young photographer I used to use an army surplus system designed for soldiers to carry munitions and supplies to carry my camera kit. I have tried other modern systems designed for photographers but never felt they quite worked for me. What seemed different about the ThinkTank™ approach was how carefully it had been thought out. This was particularly evident in small details such as the way the pouches attached and various options like extensions that could be unzipped to take lenses with hoods. There were also three different sorts of belts which initially I felt gave flexibility but however having tried all three I think there is only one option that works for me.

Starting with the belts. You clearly have to buy the one that suits your dimensions although they are adjustable to a degree. From experience I would advise one where the minimum dimensions are only marginally smaller than your waist size. My logic here will become evident later in the article but principally means you can slide the pouches right around to the front without the adjustment buckles getting in the way. There are three models:



- Steroid speed belt
- Pro speed belt
- Thin skin belt

Details of all three can be found at

<https://www.thinktankphoto.com/collections/belts-and-harnesses>

I initially felt the steroid speed belt would give the most support and being more rigid would enable me to carry heavier equipment but I personally have found that being wider and more rigid it digs in to my hips and its style means you can't slide pouches about as easily. The thin skin belt is the cheapest by a few pounds but is so basic that it doesn't provide enough support. My choice and the one I always use is thus the pro speed belt.

There is also an option of an additional harness bizarrely called the 'pixel racing harness' which resembles a set of braces. When carrying particularly heavy equipment I use this as it provides a little extra support which is really valuable. It might be worth considering however that these might not be as comfortable on ladies as men. I also have to say at this point that the system with or without braces could not be called a fashion accessory but then neither do I think can backpacks. The only one downside I found is that raincoats need to be worn either under the belt or over the pouches making you look a rather strange shape!



With respect pouches there are numerous different styles but the main one that I'm sure you'll by first is designed to carry a camera with a mounted lens and is called a digital holster because it does just that, it carries your camera lens mounted in a way that you can remove it quickly to shoot with. I carry mine over my right hip because that gives me easiest access. They come in various sizes to accommodate a normal camera such as the Canon 5D MarkIII or similar and a deeper one for a pro series camera such as the Canon 1DX or 5D MarkIII or similar with battery grip attached. Each size comes in various lengths depending on the lens you want to mount.

- The smallest, digital holster 5 and indeed 10, are designed for small to medium mirror less cameras and doesn't suit my equipment.
- The digital holster 20 is designed for a standard sized DSLR with a medium lens such as a 24 - 105 mm with or without the hood reverse (all of the bags come with a clever unzip of extension to allow for lenses with the hood mounted).
- The digital holster 30 is designed for a standard sized DSLR with a longer lens such as the 70 – 200mm f2.8 or even the 100 – 400mm f4.5 again with or without hood reversed.
- The digital holster 40 and 50 are the same as the 20 and 30 but are designed for pro series bodies or standard D SLR's with a battery grip attached.



All except the five and 10 have additional pockets on the side for batteries, lens caps and memory cards as well as a pocket with an attached rain cover that can be easily fitted should you find yourself in a heavy storm.



After some considerable thought I purchased

- A model 20 when I want a standard sized body and a walk around lens for example when visiting London or just out walking.
- A model 50 with my pro series or standard DSLR with battery grip and my longer lens.

In addition to the holsters there are various pouches for carrying lenses, flashguns, batteries and other assorted bits and pieces as well as some small packs which will carry for example even a laptop. I have no need for the small pack as I feel no need to carry a laptop but others might. All the lens pouches have the same unzipable portion (see left) at the bottom to allow for a lens with a lens hood attached and all have incorporated waterproof covers. What the system lacks, certainly at present, is a lens pouch to carry a 300mm f2 .8 lens. I need to carry this lens but fortunately the Lowepro™ case has a clip designed to fit their belt system which will work perfectly with the ThinkTank™ system.



Lowepro™ also make a very useful lens exchanger case (see photo right and video at <https://player.vimeo.com/video/28019373>) which unzips to permit you to hold one long (e.g. 70-200) type lens whilst changing the other. When holding or carrying just one lens it zips up to a normal pouch size. This again can be attached to the ThinkTank™ belt.



N.B. Having tried the Lowepro™ belts I've found them to be nowhere near as flexible as the think tank ones or the ThinkTank™ system.



All the ThinkTank™ holsters and pouches come with a clever attachment system which allows to either slide around the belt or fixed in a particular position. I personally find I prefer the holster in a particular place but everything else sliding around. After deciding which belt and pouch combinations that you want to use, you simply attach the pouches unto the belt. Depending on what's more comfortable with the way you work, you can either have the pouches locked in place or free to slide around the belt. Being able to slide them around the belt certainly helps if you want to slide a lens or other pouch around to the back out of the way.

It's also worth noting that you can just as easily access lenses and cameras etc. both standing kneeling or sitting something very important for a photographer who is on the move. In summary therefore I find this system suits me perfectly in that I can decide exactly the equipment I think I want for a particular occasion and go out equipped with a belt and pouches or holsters suited for that particular excursion. If I want to carry additional bits and pieces such as a raincoat and perhaps sandwiches I either use one of the so called 'skin pouches' from ThinkTank™ or a small lightweight hikers day backpack. For carrying a tripod should I need one I use a shoulder sling. It is also possible to carry a camera on a traditional sling if you want to have very quick access with the spare lenses and extras in the think tank pouches. You can be as flexible as you want and never need to carry kit you might not need or have kit that isn't easy to access.

Lastly I do like the Spider™ system because it allows you to access your camera very quickly and I have just discovered and started to use their, Spiders™, ThinkTank™ pro speed kit which allows you to attach a SpiderPro™ holster to your ThinkTank™ belt. Every eventuality is thus covered!



N.B. When using the ThinkTank™ modular system with pouches et cetera attached you do need to be careful when removing the belt so the pouches and holsters don't slide off. The approach I've adopted is to unclip the buckle and holding the ends with the pouches etc. hanging down, put your hands behind your back and clip the belt together again thus forming a loop and stopping anything sliding off.

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