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Many years ago, my first camera backpack was a Lowepro Photo Trekker. It travelled many miles and accompanied me on countless photo adventures before I finally had to retire it. Since that first Photo Trekker, I've used several other different Lowepro camera backpacks of various styles and sizes, and for the most part I've been very happy with them. Lowepro's newest series of camera backpacks, the Pro Trekker AW, is being touted the "ultimate expedition camera backpack." To see if it can live up to this claim, I tested the Pro Trekker 300 AW — the smallest of the series, which includes two other larger models (400 and 600). I didn't have the opportunity to take the Pro Trekker 300 AW on a multiple-day extended trip, but my co-tester and wife, Leslie, and I put it through its paces and gave it a real workout. The reason I asked Leslie to help me out with this test is that as a short (five-foot-two) woman she has trouble finding camera backpacks that comfortably fit her frame and still provide the comfort, functionality, ruggedness and protection that a professional outdoor photographer requires.

For us, the most important thing a camera backpack must do, since we do a lot of hiking on back-country trails, is fit properly

— comfortably distributing the weight of the camera gear while not restricting movement. A person can get away with using a poor fitting camera backpack for a short 20-minute walk, but when hiking and photographing for 12 hours or more a day, several days in a row, your camera backpack must fit properly. The harness system of the new Pro Trekker AW series is one of the best that we've seen. It has a fully adjustable 10-point harness system with adjustment points at the top of the pack, shoulders, torso, sternum, waist and lumbar regions that not only adjust to different body heights but also allow you to hold the pack close to your body for a comfortable fit. We like Lowepro's new Pack Jack harness adjustment tool, which makes it really easy to adjust the pack to create a custom fit and is stored in the back for future use.

For Leslie, this is the best-fitting camera backpack she has used to date. She especially likes the wide hip belt, which helps distribute the weight onto her hips and off her shoulders. I also find it to be one of the best-fitting camera packs I've worn, but since I'm six feet tall and it's the smallest pack in the series, I wasn't able to adjust it so the hip belt rested on my hips. But that's the problem I have with every camera pack I've used. Both the 400 and 600 models would

probably fit my body better because they're longer, but I'm not sure I'd want all that extra room; I'm sure I'd fill it and that means extra weight to carry around. I found that with the harness properly and comfortably adjusted, when I ran there was only a very slight amount of bouncing of the pack. A pack has to fit extremely well to perform like this.

Ruggedness and protection are the next most important features that a camera backpack must provide. According to Lowepro, the Pro Trekker 300 AW is "built with lightweight, yet durable technical performance fabrics to provide resilience during heavy outdoor use and travel. Ballistic nylon and Hypalon® are strategically placed at stress points to offer extra strength. Heavy-duty YKK splashguard zippers around the main compartment provide superior water resistance and help protect valuable contents." While we weren't able to test the pack long enough to comment on its durability, the Pro Trekker 300 AW is very well constructed and should stand up to many years of professional use. We especially like the use of the heavy-duty splashguard zippers, which give the contents of the pack extra protection from moisture. Speaking of protection from rain and snow, the Pro Trekker 300 AW has a built-in All Weather (AW) cover that's stored in a pocket at the bottom of the pack. When you need it, just pull it out and over your pack. We really like that the AW cover has cling straps, which means you can tighten the cover over the pack so it isn't flapping around in the wind and better protects the pack. We also like that the AW cover comes out from the bottom of the pack in such a way that you can still use the compression straps that are located at the bottom of the pack, which can be used to carry a large tripod or other items. Like all the Lowepro camera backpacks we've used, the Pro Trekker 300 AW has really good external padding and the padded internal dividers provide good protection. They're easily adjusted and, once in place, hold securely. With all these features, your camera gear is well protected with the Pro Trekker 300 AW camera backpack.



www.daymen.com

Gary Fong Lightsphere Universal PowerSnoot

The Pro Trekker 300 AW is packed with other features, more than I have space to cover, but I will highlight a few of our favourites. Inside the main compartment are three zippered pockets, to hold various accessories, and four memory card pockets. There are two large, zippered external side pockets: one that has two memory card pockets and two padded pockets to hold accessories like a multimedia storage viewer such as the Epson P-7000 or the HyperDrive Colorspace UDMA. The other side pocket is designed for holding a hydration reservoir (up to two litres, not included) in a special removable, seam-sealed pouch. For us, this is a very important feature since it's so much easier to stay hydrated while hiking and photographing when using a hands-free hydration reservoir than when carrying water bottles. We really like the removable backpack lid, which provides a place to carry some essential, non-photographic items like lunch or a snack, a first-aid kit and a headlamp. The removable backpack lid can also be used as a separate waist pack, but we don't really see that as a feature we'd use. There are three exterior tripod sleeves, one on each side and a third on the front with a drop-down pocket to hold the feet of a tripod or monopod. These sleeves can securely hold tripods, monopods, and ski or trekking poles. Finally, there's a removable, padded "checkpoint-friendly" laptop sleeve located in the front pocket, which can accommodate up to a 15.4-inch widescreen laptop. Not a feature we feel is necessary for field use, but very handy when travelling by plane to photography destinations.

For most people, the Pro Trekker 300 AW would be large enough to carry all their gear. The depth will accommodate a pro-sized DSLR body with up to a 300mm lens attached, four or five additional lenses, flash, accessories and personal gear, and a wide-screen laptop. If you need to carry more gear, the 400 or 600 models might be better suited to your needs. Both Leslie and I were really impressed with all aspects of the Pro Trekker 300 AW camera backpack. It's well designed, loaded with useful features and, most importantly, very comfortable to carry. As far as camera backpacks go, in our books it's definitely a winner.

Price: \$400

www.outdoorphotographycanada.com

The secret to successful flash photography is the ability to control the quality of light you're using. Most people find the light from their flash is too harsh to produce pleasing photographs in most situations. To soften the harsh light from the flash, photographers bounce the light off a reflective surface or use some type of diffuser. However, there are situations where instead of soft, diffused light you need to have strong, directional light. The new Gary Fong Lightsphere Universal PowerSnoot gives you that control.

Following up on the success of the Gary Fong Lightsphere line of flash diffusers, the PowerSnoot takes light control in the other direction. The shape of the PowerSnoot and its parabolic reflective interior allows photographers to focus light to areas where they want a highlight and, just as importantly, away from areas where they don't want light. Think of it as turning your flash into a spotlight. Used without the snap-on grid, the beam of light coming from the flash is noticeably narrower than from the flash alone. Add the snap-on grid (6mm/quarter-inch grid squares) to the front of the PowerSnoot and the beam becomes even narrower, allowing more pinpoint control of the light. In addition to a more directional, focused light, the reflective inner surface of the PowerSnoot increases the output of the flash by up to two stops. Wildlife and sports photographers who use telephoto lenses may find the increased power and directional light just what they need to add light to their subject.

Having used an older model of the Gary Fong Lightsphere diffuser that was designed to work with specific brands and models of flashes, I really like the new

"universal"-style mounting system on the Lightsphere Universal PowerSnoot; the one unit can be used on just about any flash. The "universal" system consists of a black



rubber band that you slide onto your flash so the plastic PowerSnoot isn't in contact with the plastic of your flash. There's a Velcro strap that attaches to the PowerSnoot and securely holds the PowerSnoot to the flash. The system is amazingly secure when properly attached; I was able to pick up the PowerSnoot with the flash attached and shake it and the flash stayed attached (in the Gary Fong promotional information material they say it's strong enough to hold the flash and attached camera but I wasn't going to test that claim with my gear). My only complaint about the mounting of the PowerSnoot on my Nikon SB-800 flash was that the lower mounting tab was a little too long so it didn't allow the flash head to lock in the horizontal position.

If you're looking for maximum control of your flash photography, you should consider adding the Gary Fong Lightsphere Universal PowerSnoot to your camera bag. Although you probably won't use it as often as a flash diffuser, when you want directional spotlighting and specific highlights, it should get the job done for you.

Price: \$74.99



Direct Flash

Lightsphere Universal Diffuser

PowerSnoot, no grid

PowerSnoot with grid