

# The backpack experience

**Backpacks generally get a bad press in the bikepacking world - conventional wisdom being that weights over two kilos should be on your bike, not on your back. I venture to disagree, strongly suspecting that many people's dislike of heavier packs is due to factors much lower down.**



The pic shows my long-haul-compatible touring outfit as it currently stands for late spring to early autumn - with a base luggage weight of just over six kilos, including a choice few luxuries I have come to consider essential for a good time. Unlike many bikepackers, notably in the Anglo-Saxon world, I don't use a huge seat bag, because I want the bulk of my baggage to shift with my body on technical trails. And anyway, a seat bag would also hamper my drop seat post, so I am strongly backpack-reliant for that reason alone. Luckily, this rarely bothers me, because I feel I'm getting a technically superior trail-riding experience with little loss of comfort.

In fact, until recently I never saw much problem potential in backpacks - including *relatively* heavy ones. To me personally, the acceptable load still hovers around a maximum of 4.5 or occasionally even 5 kilos, counting some provisions and inevitably fluctuating a little; but I carried quite a bit more without ruining the fun in the early days of my touring adventures. So when I briefly switched to a framed rucksack this summer and the additional 500g of empty pack weight felt like the proverbial straw, my first reaction was to attribute the experience to middle age. My second was to question pack design. Both approaches suggested that weight must be slashed.

So okay, I have never imagined that weight doesn't matter - only that the agreed parameters for backpacks might be more generous. And the supposedly superior design of my new pack improved

nothing at all anyway - in fact, the frame even seemed to exacerbate the consequences of pack motion. But come to think of it, why *should* a frame serve much of a purpose on a bike? Pack frames were invented for walkers, not pedallers. Different postures, different intensity levels, different movements. People somehow expect the concept to be transposable with a few tweaks, but the reality of the effort is a let down. Sophisticated carrying systems don't even deal with perspiration very convincingly. All they deliver on two wheels are redundant ounces... and the wicked potential of all superfluous cures to backfire in unforeseen ways. Truth be told, I knew that already; so I'm a ninny for staging another expensive experiment.

I have hence returned to a simpler and lighter pack that weighs just 340g in itself, and I'm certainly right as rain again now. But is the explanation as straightforward as it possibly seems? Are simplicity and a reduction in total back load the whole story? Remembering that my pack problems coincided with sudden saddle woes during a long tour in July, I started wondering whether a more *holistic* approach to riding comfort might hold the true key to an acceptable backpack experience. In other words and for instance: Is seat pain a symptom of excessive weight? Or does an ill-fitting saddle limit the weight you can handle? What happens when you get geometry spot on and find the best available saddle for your very own bum? Because when your seat bones are well cradled and your torso optimally relaxed, shouldn't your body should be much happier to cope with some work? Hey, perhaps even with weights that would strike any hiking granny as yawningly unremarkable! Yes, that's comparing apples and oranges, which is something I rejected just a paragraph ago. But the contrast seems significantly bizarre nevertheless.

My tentative conclusion after very meticulously choosing and testing a new saddle is this: tolerable backpack weight is indeed a fine line, but only once the rest of your configuration is set in stone. Until then, it is a pretty wild variable quite astonishingly determined by proper alignment of the other two parameters I have mentioned: saddle comfort and bike geometry. The better adjusted these two factors are, the more your pack can weigh - sometimes to a radical extent and often due to modifications a day-tripper would not experience as urgent. But conversely, questionable riding posture and even slight saddle disharmony can throw the equation right out of whack for a plethora of interacting reasons. And then you endure a painful disaster you might understandably attribute to an overloaded backpack - though it probably says almost nothing about pack weight and showcases something more elusive. Yes conceivably, even the shape and angle of your grips could be the true culprits. So before you eschew backpacks and their on-trail advantages, you might wonder whether your bike is actually fine-tuned for touring.