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November 26, 2012

Can Two Backpacks Meet Every Need?

Featuring: Sirrus 36

URL: <http://tinyurl.com/ctpmdvp>

A reader contacted us with what is likely a common dilemma; she was downsizing, moving to a condo, and was going to have very little space to store all of her outdoor gear. Like many of us, she had a collection of packs that she'd accumulated over the years...bulky and difficult to store in any logical way. She wanted advice on how best to upgrade and downsize at the same time. Hmmm. Just the kind of challenge that we like! For starters, her timing is good. It's no secret that, historically, most backpacks have been designed for men. Men's packs can work well for some for taller women; the hipbelts might not be optimum and the shoulder strap attachment points might be a bit wider than ideal, but they're still better than the best packs from a decade or more ago. But, for the more "vertically challenged" females out there, men's packs can be a real punishment. Luckily, more and more manufacturers are paying attention to that issue, and designing packs for the way most woman are built. In addition, they've somehow gotten the idea that women like pretty things. Instead of the black, gray, olive drab, and dull blue of typical men's packs, women's packs offer color choices that are less...well, boring.

After a bit of research, the Mountainsmith Juniper 50 seemed like a natural jumping-off point. Like many packs that Mountainsmith makes, it has a small daypack that straps to the back (rather than the more common practice of using the lid as a lumbar pack). Great so far, but there's a big gap between the small daypack and the large overnight pack. What if you want to go off on a day hike in the Whites, or cross-country ski camp to camp in the wilds of Maine and carry the appropriate wind/rain/searing sun clothing to be ready for the miserable weather that can spit at you? Clearly, we needed another pack that splits the difference between the big Juniper and its little daypack.

After more searching, we settled on the Osprey Sirrus 36. We're unabashed fans of Osprey for packs that handle ridiculous amounts of abuse. Time after time, the Argon 110 proves to be our packhorse of choice when we need to carry loads that humans shouldn't be able to handle. Given that we're trying to make these packs fill gaps they really aren't designed for, that's a great characteristic. And, the sizing is just about right; small enough to be a heavy-duty daypack, but large enough that we should be able to get an overnight out of it. Finally, it comes in "Amethyst"; we said we wanted colorful, and we got it!





With both packs in house, time to get them out in the field. A day-after-Christmas hike to purge some of the excess calories was a great first test for the Osprey SIRRUS; it easily stowed extra clothes to stay warm when we stopped, a Jetboil and some (low calorie) cocoa, and random lunch food. And, thanks to well-designed pockets, everything was easily found when we wanted it.

The ultimate test for the SIRRUS came when an editor decided to use it for a solo overnight, just for the fun of it. With no companion to share the load, she had to carry everything; food, cooking gear, tent, you name it. With the help of the Big Agnes Fly Creek UL1 (the smallest and lightest solo tent we've tried), she was able to stuff everything into the SIRRUS, though the load, admittedly, looked somewhat ungainly. And, true to form, the Osprey simply hunkered down on her hips and carried the load without complaint. Once she was in camp, of course, it easily switched duties to carry her camera and a light jacket as she headed out to get a sunset view. One of the great features of the SIRRUS is an integrated raincover. Particularly for the day trips in the Whites, where Mt. Washington creates weather on a whim, that was a much appreciated detail. Having an emergency sleeping bag in your pack for...well, emergencies? Wonderful. Knowing that it's still dry after a random 34-degree downpour? Priceless!

After nearly a year of testing, the system has stood up to all uses and users, with no major complaints.



The SIRRUS 36 easily swallowed enough gear for a fast-and-light solo overnight; the suspension made the ungainly load comfortable to carry. (Susan Marean)



The Osprey SIRRUS 36 was a great companion for winter picnics, allowing room for necessities AND luxuries.