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Tested: Osprey Zealot 16

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Thirty-eight years in the trade have clearly taught the designers at Osprey a thing or two about making packs, because the Zealot 16—their 976-cubic-inch dump truck of a hydration pack—is the king of comfort. Go ahead, load the Zealot with 100 ounces of water, body armor, a full-face helmet, tools and any other creature comforts—the one thing you won't feel is a pain in the back.

Though Osprey packs are no longer hand-made in the U.S.A., its quality control is remarkably stringent: The company's founder and owner spends months out of every year at the factory in Vietnam to ensure that design and production standards are kept high.

The results are evident. Consider the clever weight-distributing straps, low-profile reservoir, well-ventilated shoulder harness and ridge-molded back panel. No hot spots or aching shoulders from wearing this pack. The Zealot is also loaded with useful features, including the LidLock helmet clip—which fastens XC helmets to the outside of the pack—a removable, rollout tool pouch, a smart-phone/music-player pocket on the left shoulder strap and a magnet built into the sternum strap that secures the reservoir hose and keeps the bite valve within easy reach. The rigid-framed reservoir was also a breeze to fill and insert into a fully loaded pack.

Downsides? The bite valve on the hydration bladder shit the bed after nine months in the middle of one long, hot ride in the mountains of Idaho—leaking water like a sieve and quickly draining the bag of life-sustaining water. Big, big bummer. I was reduced to begging for hydration by the side of the trail. You know you're in a bad place when you stoop to suckling another man's bladder. I've since tossed the Osprey bladder and have substituted it with a CamelBak's own bladder, which is truly hard to beat.

The internal organization of the main pouch could also be better. A few zippered pouches would go a long ways to taming the absolute orgy of spare tubes, multi tools and spent energy gel packs that reside in my Zealot pack. In short, the Zealot 16 isn't perfect, but it is my pick for the most comfortable "big pack" on the market. On long, hard rides, this is often my choice.

