



The Big Outside

GEAR REVIEW: OSPREY XENITH 88/XENA 85 BACKPACKS

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Gear Review

Featuring: Xenith 88 and Xena 85

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When loading the men's Xenith 88 (the Xena 85 is the women's model) with nearly 60 pounds of family gear and food for a six-day, 45-mile family hike in Kings Canyon National Park, I cringed, expecting my hipbones and hip flexors to protest loudly when I put it on. But the moment I shouldered the pack, I was surprised by how comfortable it felt. And it remained comfortable throughout several hours of hiking every day.

What's the explanation? There have been impressive design innovations to make backpacks more comfortable, stable, and lightweight in recent years. But when you're carrying a big load—50 pounds or more—comfort boils down to the pack's foundation: the frame and hipbelt. The Xenith and Xena's plastic framesheet and peripheral aluminum rods bend toward the base of the pack, transferring most of its weight to the hips (despite the lack of stabilizer straps, the straps normally found where the hipbelt connects to the backpack). Meanwhile, the hipbelt sports bodacious padding and molded-plastic reinforcement to maintain its shape under a monster load. The frame holds the pack close to the hips and shoulders while allowing air to pass through a gap between my spine and the back pad, keeping me much cooler. Plus, the packs come in three sizes, all adjustable for five inches of torso range, with four sizes of harness and custom-moldable hipbelt for both men and women. So you can really fine-tune the fit—also a big deal with a big load.



Osprey Xenith 88

A big pack should have plenty of pockets and good access, and that's another strong suit of the Xenith 88 (and Xena 85)—which I also carried on a 44-mile, five-day, family backpacking trip in Washington's Glacier Peak Wilderness, starting out with 50-plus pounds. My favorite feature: the deep, crescent-shaped zippers on each side accessing the main compartment, which I used several times a day to dig out food or a jacket, instead of opening the lid. The lid has two pockets and converts to a lumbar pack, which I carried on a 3.6-mile, 1,200-foot round-trip morning hike from Little Five Lakes to Black Rock Pass in Kings Canyon.

The Xenith 88's two spacious, zippered, vertical front pockets held my water filter, trekking umbrella, and small clothing items, while the big, mesh front pocket overlapping them swallows a jacket or rainfly. The wide mouth of this top loader makes loading and retrieving items easy and the interior highly visible. The Xenith has two compression straps on each side, plus a top compression strap, to help keep a partial load from shifting. Lastly, your water bladder slips inside an external sleeve in the back panel, making it refillable without unloading pack contents—another smart feature, especially in a big pack.

I'll never look forward to carrying a monster load on my back. But when it becomes necessary, you can hardly do it more comfortably than with the Xenith 88/Xena 85.

