

How to Buy a Backpack

Pack Fit

By Robert Earle Howells

The best contemporary backpacks are virtually bespoke garments compared to the off-the-rack, one-size-fits-most models of yesteryear. Of utmost importance here is torso length, so the pack rests just right on your hips without doing a potato-sack number on your shoulders. It shouldn't sag, nor rest so high it squeezes your kidneys. Look for a pack that comes in two or three sizes, AND offers fine-tuning adjustability. Cheaper packs often come in one size. Though they may offer a ladder-adjustment to raise or lower the shoulder straps, the fit will be approximate at best. As a smallish (5'8") guy, I have to drop the shoulder straps way down to get them to curve just right over my shoulders – which usually means that the junction of the straps, where they join the back of the pack bag pokes me in the small of the back.

Besides overall pack sizes, the best packs offer different sizes of hip belts and shoulder straps – hip belts that match the greater flare of feminine hips or the lesser flare of male hips; shoulder straps narrow enough not to gouge slender folks in the armpits, wide enough to disperse a load better than, say, the hemp twine of our potato pack. When you've boiled down your choices to one or two packs, seek out the factory-trained pack-fitting expert at your mountaineering shop to nail down the fit. Because today's packs have so many adjustability features, this is almost impossible to do unaided.

Walk around the shop carrying each pack, loaded with the full amount of weight you intend to carry on the trail. You'll feel the best pack grab onto your back like a pet monkey, with no discernible hot spots, and the load will feel so perfectly distributed that you'll wonder if you forgot something. You should be able to sashay your hips freely, swing your shoulders fully, and raise your legs in majorette's parade step without ever feeling drawn off balance.

