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F-Stop Loka Pack :: Love it, but would like a version made for women even more

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Unfortunately, the only photo of me and the Loka is this one of me mocking a sign in Oregon (yes, I act like a child sometimes...). Still shows how the pack generally fits.

Nearly every backpack I have owned has been seriously uncomfortable. There has been no love with these packs, just a lot of cursing bad design, sore shoulders, and feeling like I am carrying a bag of rocks on my back. Because I over-analyze any purchase, I have continued to wear uncomfortable packs, despite their ability to influence my mood and enjoyment of a trip. After two years of pondering the purchase of a new backpacking pack and analyzing the decision to death, I finally bought a new Osprey pack last summer. I was shocked that it was so comfortable because, I was convinced, there is nothing such as a comfortable pack. If a comfortable backpacking pack exists, maybe a comfortable camera backpack exists, too...

After reading many positive reviews of F-Stop camera packs, I decided to give one a try. I purchased the F-Stop Loka with a medium Internal Camera Unit and – wait for it – love it!

Summary

Overall, the F-Stop Loka pack is a perfect size for my needs, carries my mix of photo gear very well, and is very comfortable. Since I got the pack in early May of this year, I have worn it on hikes totaling about 35 miles in all kinds of different conditions – raining in the Colorado mountains, freezing on the Colorado prairie, along the Oregon coast, in the Columbia River Gorge (raining again), and in warm weather in Moab. So far, the construction seems very solid and I expect it to last as well as any other well-made pack. I do wish that F-Stop made a women's version by modifying the hip belt and the shoulder straps (more on that later). That would make it a nearly perfect pack for me.

A Brief Tour

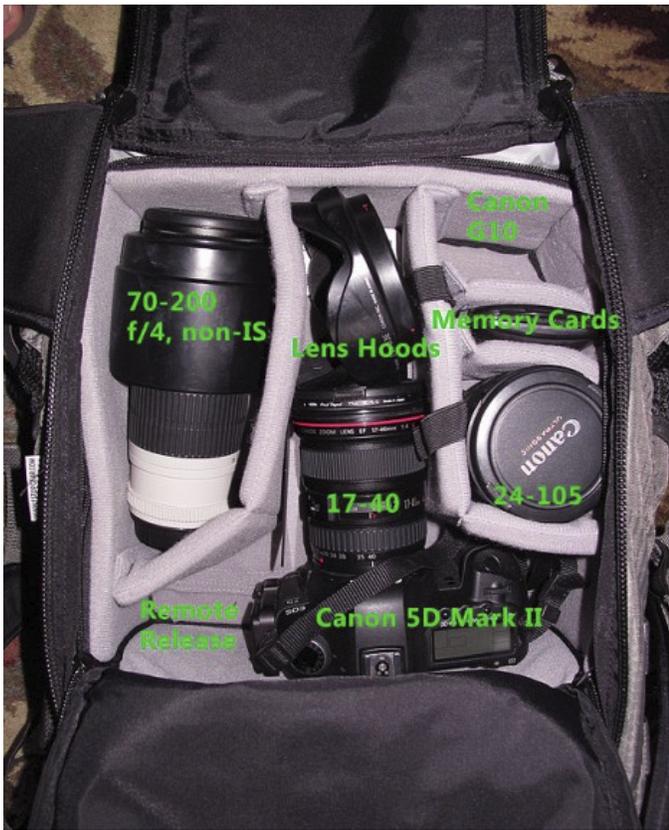
There are a lot of photos of the F-Stop Loka available on the internet. Since I have no skills when it comes to product photography, I am sticking to sharing snapshots to show features that I wondered about when I bought the pack.



Here, the back of the pack is open and the medium ICU is closed. Excuse the helper in the photo.



Here, the back and the ICU are both open, with the front of the pack lying on the ground



My medium ICU filled with gear. I could easy add another smaller lens.



Here, you can see the amount of room available from the top, with the ICU in the bottom of the pack. The visible mesh pocket is the pocket I mention below as being prone to emptying itself.



In the wild: The Loka chills out on the beach in Oregon, tripod, down coat, and water shoes attached.

Pros and Cons

Since there are a number of comprehensive reviews already available, I will focus mostly on a few points that I have not seen covered by other reviews or are particularly important to me.

Favorite things:

- Overall, this pack is VERY comfortable. However, I wish they made this pack with some customizations for women (see below).
- The layout that I have selected for my ICU allows me to easily leave any of my lenses on my camera body when I put it away. Every other bag I've owned has had a configuration that worked either for short or long lenses, but not both. This flexibility is a huge improvement.
- This pack seems quite well made and I think it will last, even though I am hard on my gear. This is a good thing, given the price of \$279 for the pack and an ICU.
- I really like the way the pack opens from the back and lays flat for easy access. I leave my ICU covered but unzipped when it is in the pack. With the ICU unzipped, I have found that it is really fast to unzip the back of the pack and access my gear. I can only think of one scenario in the last year where this would have been a cumbersome set-up – standing in thin layer of salty water at Badwater in Death Valley where I had no place to lay out the pack. Otherwise, this system works really well for quick access in almost all scenarios.
- The pack is the perfect size for me for dayhiking and I expect that it will be large enough for me to use in the winter for snowshoeing and winter dayhiking.
- The overall best thing about this pack is that it was clearly designed for outdoor photographers. The design is logical and deliberate.
- While the Loka is not well-suited to carrying a laptop and ICU as an everyday solution, it did work well for carrying my camera gear and 17" laptop on a plane. It was not comfortable, but it worked. The Loka also fit perfectly in the overhead bin. Since I sometimes bring a laptop but then do not carry it around with me, this arrangement works well for me.
- There are multiple ways to strap on a tripod, snowshoes, a jacket, or other gear. This lends to the pack's flexibility, which I like a lot.
- The Loka fits a water bladder (an interior sleeve is extra – I bought it but have not used it yet) or bottles.

Things I don't love as much:

- This pack is really comfortable with two exceptions. It is not made for a woman's body (see next point) and the back panel gets a little hot. Other reviews have commented about how the Loka fits quite close to your back. Overall, I really like that fit but it does mean that my back gets pretty warm when I am hiking. This is not a deal-breaker for me but this could bother others.

- Even though I know nothing about engineering a pack, it seems like alternative straps could be added to fit a woman's body much better. First, I would prefer contoured shoulder straps that are anchored more closely together on the pack. F-Stop could also make one small tweak that would make the pack much better for a woman's use. The sternum strap, at least on my body, goes right over my bust area and cannot be moved up to be closer to my sternum because of some material on the shoulder straps keeps the sternum strap from being slid up. With the straps as they are, I never buckle the sternum strap because the straps pull in too much and it is quite uncomfortable to have it buckled, given the strap's location. The hip belt probably fits a man with a narrow waist and hips quite well. The hip belt fits me – hip curves and all – adequately. The hip belt is generally comfortable but I would like the option to purchase a hip belt made for a woman's hips (a little longer in the padded area, with slightly different contours).
- The top flap flops over the front of the pack when the pack is opened from the top. Example of why this is an issue: some stuff flopped out of the mesh pocket on the flap while I was doing some night photography because I had not fully zipped the pocket. I could have easily lost a battery and some other stuff that night. One of these days, my car keys, an extra battery, or my headlamp will likely end up lost. This is more about me than it is about the pack, but it is still a small annoyance.
- All of the color options are drab. I would have preferred a more vibrant color. Why make a red Tilopa but not a red Loka?!

Overall: HIGHLY RECOMMENDED. F-Stop: Please consider making a woman's version of the Loka pack!

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