

## **New Camera and Lens Support Products** **Text copyright E.J. Peiker, all rights reserved**

As you may have surmised from my earlier article, "Lighter and Better Equipment for the Hiking Photographer" (November 2005), I am always on the lookout for new things that make photography easier, more convenient, and less physically demanding. In this article, I review three new products that will make life easier for many by lowering weight while preserving stability.

### **Flat Plate Solution**

I do a significant amount of photography that requires strenuous activity to get to the shooting locations. This requires that I take all of the equipment I will need for a successful shoot but at the same time minimize the weight. For this reason, I love the Gitzo 1200 series of tripods for traveling, landscape photography, and hiking due to their relatively small size, low weight and excellent strength and capacity.

I use both the Gitzo 1228 Carbon Fiber and 1297 Basalt Tripod. The Achilles heel of these tripods is that they have a center column which both adds weight and prevents lowering of the tripod to ground level. Kirk Enterprises has introduced a convenient and simple solution to this dilemma; they now offer an assembly which replaces the center column and its lifting mechanism with a metal flat plate. This reduces weight, allows the tripod to be set up at any height from ground level all the way to its maximum leg extension (minus center column extension), and increases overall stability.

Since a center column severely degrades tripod stability, removing it is not a significant loss in my opinion; however, if you will be shooting in situations that require your equipment to extend higher than what the 1200 series will allow, either reinstalling the center column or switching to a taller tripod such as the 1300 series may be necessary.

The flat plate adds a bubble level which the 1200 series of Gitzo tripods is lacking and it eliminates the problematic plastic center column nut that some of the older model 1200 series tripods have. At \$80 for the FP-200 with shipping, this is one upgrade that is absolutely worth it. There are similar flat plate assemblies available for the 1000, 1300, 1400, and 1500 series of Gitzo tripods.

### **Ballhead**

Choosing a ballhead for your lightweight but sturdy set-up is also very important. I finally have the light and sturdy hiking ballhead that I have been looking for. The Really Right Stuff BH-40 fits the bill perfectly and replaces my Kirk BH-3 on the trails. Like its big brother, the BH-55, which is my primary ballhead and in my mind the best ballhead on the planet by a wide margin, the BH-40 has no competition in its market segment.

The BH-40 incorporates a 40mm hollow ball (to reduce weight) with a precision panning base, a tension knob that is calibrated with numbers, a new easy to tighten ball-head lock that has a progressive braking action based on position, and the optional Arca-Swiss style mounting plate with lever release.

Each control has a different look and feel so that one can easily change settings without having to take your eye off the camera viewfinder. Various Arca-Swiss style clamps are available. The BH-40 is very conservatively rated at 18 lb load capacity – it could probably carry twice as much although I don't recommend this. Operation is smooth and fit and finish is classic RRS – the absolute highest you will find in the industry. As is usual with RRS products, they are expensive, but they are precision tools built to the most exacting standards, are very well supported, and are of the highest grade. This makes them well worth the price premium.

### **Tripod Head**

After a year of waiting and speculation, the new Wimberley Head II is available for users of super-telephoto lenses such as the 400 f/2.8, 500 f/4 and 600 f/4 lenses. For those unfamiliar with the Wimberley Head, it is a specialized gimbal tripod head that allows you to operate the large and heavy lenses with ease. There is no possibility of the lens flopping to one side or the other

under its own weight as one would have with a traditional tripod head. Using just your finger tips, the Wimberley Head II allows fluid motion in all three dimensions with very large and heavy lenses.

The new unit is a major improvement over the original design in many ways. It is a beautifully machined and smooth operating gimbal-style head that weighs approximately one pound less than the old head and is slightly more compact while actually improving overall operation. This reduced weight is highly welcome as the original unit added a lot of carrying weight. The new unit integrates the Arca-Swiss style mounting clamp into the clamp base rather than being a separate unit. Not only does this reduce weight and size, it allows for a smooth surface on the underside of the mounting clamp which makes carrying this unit over your shoulder much more comfortable.

The panning control is now located on the left rather than above the center point of the tripod which does take some getting used to after years of having the panning control on the tripod center line, but this allows all play to be eliminated which increases stability.

The new head also requires one to modify their over the shoulder carrying technique if one carries the tripod over the right shoulder but since I carry tripods over my left shoulder, the new style works well for me. While it is extremely expensive at nearly \$600, it is also well worth it if you shoot with super telephoto lenses. For those trading up from the original Wimberley head, note that you will need a new flash bracket attachment unit or an FA-09 adapter as the old style bracket does not fit on the new head. Overall this is a highly recommended update to the world's premier long lens support platform.

As always, I will continue to look for products that allow you to achieve maximum stability while minimizing weight and report on them here on NatureScapes.Net.



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