

Group test

Hydration packs

How else would you carry three litres of water, tools, snacks and a spare jacket on your mountain bike? **Mike Davis** reviews four backpacks

Fit and comfort

All manufacturers have their own ideas about shoulder straps, back padding and so on, and there's a lot of subjectivity to it. Straps need to be wide enough to spread the load but narrow enough to be unobtrusive. Waist and chest straps are useful to stabilise the pack.

Construction

Packs are expensive, so you want them to be built well enough to last. On the other hand, you don't want to be carrying excess weight around – a pack that weighs 1kg before you've put anything in it means more dead weight.

Camelbak introduced its first hydration pack in the early 1990s. The idea of carrying water on your back instead of in bottles seemed outlandish at first. But it made sense for off-road riding. It's a lot easier to grab a tube and suck than get hold of a bottle on uneven ground, and a bottle carried on the frame is considerably more likely to end up covered in unpleasant substances thrown up by the wheels.

Having the weight of water on you rather than the bike makes no difference to the total weight, but in a pack it's nearer to your centre of gravity, making it less distracting when you're manoeuvring the bike. And these days, many bikes – especially full-suspension models – have either just one or even no bottle bosses at all, a design decision made possible by the widespread adoption of hydration packs.

Early Camelbaks just held water. These days most have room for other riding paraphernalia as well.



Capacity

Every pack manufacturer has an extensive range, from minimalist bags with just enough space for a pump, tube and multitool, up to expedition-sized luggage that you could live out of for a few days.

For most people something in between is most appropriate. If in doubt, go slightly larger than you think – a partly laden pack can be compressed to take up less space, but you can't get 12L of stuff into a 10L bag. The 10-14L range is a good size for day rides.

Pockets

Some packs have lots, but the more there are the more rummaging you end up doing to find things. A big main compartment for bulky items like spare clothes, an organiser pocket for easily-lost bits like tools, and a safe place for your phone and keys is a versatile combination.

Reservoirs

Again, even if you mostly only carry 2L of water, there's no harm in having a 3L reservoir – you don't have to fill it.

Wide openings make it easy to add energy drinks and clean out the inside of the bladder, and quick-release hoses are handy for cleaning too. A valve on the mouthpiece is useful to prevent leaks; many car boots have been flooded by packs sat on their own mouthpieces.

CAMELBAK MULE £69.99

The Mule has 12.5L of storage capacity and a 3L reservoir. Reservoir access is via a zip around the moulded, padded back panel. The reservoir has a big screw cap and a neat handle that hooks into a rigid loop attached to the stiffening panel inside the pack to stop 'bladder slump' when it's getting empty. It can be tricky to get a full reservoir in when the rest of the pack's laden, but the hose routes easily through a single hole at the top. From there it can go over either shoulder through loops on the semi-rigid straps. The layout is simple and all the better for it: there's a large compartment, an organiser pocket, and a fleece-lined stash pocket for things like glasses and phones. There's also an expanding open pocket that's ideal for a jacket. This blue and white pack is eye catching – more subtle colours are available. There's also a women's version, the Luxe. www.zyro.co.uk



LEZYNE SVELTE £69.99

With 10L cargo volume and a 3L reservoir, the Svelte is on a par with the other packs here in terms of capacity. Unlike the others, the reservoir goes inside the main compartment with your other stuff rather than having a separate pocket of its own, although it does drop into an internal sleeve. Additional pockets include a small pouch on the outside and an organiser pocket that really deserves the name. With an array of pouches and sleeves all labelled with icons for pump, multitool, tyre levers and CO₂ cartridges, it's almost OCD in its fanatical organisation. There's also a pocket right down the bottom for a rain cover, although no cover is supplied. The harness is comfortable, although the pack is quite wide. An internal stiffening panel has an aluminium 'spine' that can be gently curved to suit the shape of your back, but it doesn't flex all that much. www.upgradebikes.co.uk



HYDRAPAK MORRO £79.99

Early generations of Hydrapak were feature-laden but weighty, but the Morro is on a par with the Camelbak and Osprey. It's the only pack here to do without any kind of stiffening panel in the back. Doing without saves weight and lets the pack conform to your back – moulded channels aid ventilation – although the general floppiness can make getting the reservoir in a bit of a wrestle. The hose routes out through either shoulder strap, although again it's a bit fiddly to feed it through. Hydrapak's reservoir is a winner, though, with a fully-opening top and the ability to turn it completely inside out for drying and cleaning. Gear storage totals 13L, with one big compartment and some peripheral smaller ones, although it's not clear what some of them are designed for and there's nowhere for a pump other than loose in the main compartment. www.madison.co.uk



OSPREY VIPER 10 £65

The Viper shares key features with Osprey's popular Raptor packs, but in a simplified and cheaper form. The rigid-backed 3L Hydraulics reservoir is still there, as well as the neat elasticated helmet holder, but you don't get as many pockets – and the Viper is the least pocket-laden pack here. Zippered pockets, totalling 10L capacity, comprise just the main compartment (with a useful internal mesh pouch and pump sleeves), and a stash pocket at the top. There's also a stretchy pocket on the outside of the pack that's useful for a jacket. The final pouch is on the left-hand shoulder strap, apparently intended for a phone or music player, if yours is weatherproof. The rigid back splits opinions, with some riders finding it a bit too unyielding. The Viper is designed for men, but Osprey offer the Verve range for women – same features but built to fit shorter torsos. www.ospreypacks.com

