

Gossamer Gear Gorilla Backpack Review

Lower volume ultralight backpack with removable stays and other components - so you can set up the pack for individual trips and personal preferences to your heart's content.



Overall Rating: **Highly Recommended**

It's rare to review a product with only minor flaws, and for those exceptional products, we reserve our Highly Recommended rating. The Gorilla is a perfect size for ultralight backpacking, for a wide range of trip lengths. Many of its components are removable, so it can readily be set up for individual trips and user preferences. This versatile pack can be stripped down to a 15.6-ounce frameless backpack for light loads, or built up to comfortably carry 25-plus-pound loads when needed. For the ultralight backpacker, this is one pack that will do it all.

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by Will Rietveld | 2009-10-13 00:10:00-06

Introduction

I still have my original Gossamer Gear G4 frameless backpack. It has a few holes in the bottom from scraping over rocks, but it's still a perfectly good pack. Fast forward to the new Gossamer Gorilla pack, and you will notice some familiar features - front and side mesh pockets, rolltop closure, wide shoulder straps, sleeping pad sleeve, and you can still stuff socks for padding in the shoulder straps and hipbelt if you want. Conceptually, Gossamer Gear packs have not changed, but there are huge improvements in the details that make them a whole lot better. The new Gorilla backpack, with its durable fabrics and removable curved aluminum frame, is state-of-the-art Gossamer Gear. (And you can still purchase a new G4 if you need a replacement.)

Gossamer Gear introduced an ultralight removable frame in their Mariposa backpack back in 2004, consisting of two straight carbon fiber stays (0.9 ounce/pair) inserted into sleeves on the backpanel. The Mariposa could be used either as a frameless backpack or with the stays inserted to increase its load carrying capacity. The concept was a big advancement at the time (an ultralight frameless or internal frame backpack ALL IN ONE!), but the straight stays were less than ideal for pack fit and load-carrying comfort. After experimenting with several prototypes, they developed a curved aluminum stay (3.4 ounces) that fits into the same sleeves on the backpanel. I have tested both versions and can unequivocally say that the curved stay, along with other improvements incorporated into the Gorilla pack, are a big improvement. This pack is near perfection!

Description

The new Gossamer Gear Gorilla is designed to be as versatile as possible. The pack comes in three sizes (S, M, L) and three hipbelt sizes are available. The pack body is the same for all pack sizes; the shoulder straps are simply sewn on at different heights to create different pack torso lengths. Many components (frame, hipbelt, sternum strap, shoulder strap and hipbelt padding, bungee system) of the pack are removable, so the user can choose the components he/she wants to use. Accessory hipbelt pockets are available for hikers who want to add them.

The Gorilla (2800 cubic inches, 23.2 ounces size Medium) is the second lightest internal frame backpack available. The lightest is the Gossamer Gear Mariposa Plus (3600 cubic inches, 22.3 ounces size Medium), which is constructed of lighter fabrics and has the same stay (yes, the stay is interchangeable, and older Mariposas can be easily retrofitted).

The key factors that differentiate the Gorilla (besides its lower volume) are more durable fabrics (210 denier PU coated ripstop body and durable stretch nylon pockets) and removable curved stay. The revised Miniposa (14.5 ounces size Medium) has the same dimensions and feature set, but it is constructed of silnylon and does not have a stay. The difference in weight between the two packs is 7.8 ounces, which is the weight added to the Gorilla by the removable frame and durable fabrics.



The new Gorilla backpack is Gossamer Gear's latest and greatest - 2800 cubic inches and 24.5 ounces (size Large). It's constructed of durable fabrics and mesh and has a new contoured removable aluminum frame.



Views of the Gossamer Gear Gorilla: The front view (top left) shows the pack's large front pocket made of durable stretch nylon. There are six loops in the side seams to attach a bungee system (not shown). The backpanel view (top right) shows the pack's wide shoulder straps and backpanel sleeve to hold a sleeping pad. The hipbelt pocket on the left is my camera case, and the right pocket is a Gossamer Gear add-on hipbelt pocket (\$15). A side view (bottom left) shows a lower mesh pocket designed to make water bottles reachable. And the top view (bottom right) shows the pack's drawcord closure and top compression strap.

Suspension System and Features



Gossamer Gear's new curved stay (left) is made of aluminum tubing

and weighs 3.4 ounces. It easily slips into sleeves sewn on the inside of the pack's backpanel (right). A silnylon hydration sleeve is visible inside the pack.



Like other Gossamer Gear packs, the Gorilla has a mesh sleeve on the backpanel (left) that allows the user to insert a sleeping pad for padding. The mesh used in the sleeve is much improved over previous versions. Shoulder straps (center) measure nearly four inches wide from edge to edge, have removable closed cell foam padding, and are faced with 3D wicking mesh on the inside. The removable hipbelt (right, 4.1 ounces size Medium) is a similar width and construction.



The new stretch nylon pockets on the Gorilla are really stretchy and very durable. The bottoms of the three exterior pockets (one front, two side) are 210 denier ripstop nylon for increased durability.

Note that the Gorilla pack does not have a torso length adjustment, so it's important to measure your torso length and choose the correct pack size. Hipbelt sizes are based on hiker girth. The only pack fit adjustment on the Gorilla is the shoulder strap length; the pack does not have load lifter straps or hipbelt stabilizer straps.

Field Testing

I tested the Gorilla on a number of on-trail and off-trail summer backpacking trips in the southern Rockies, carrying weights ranging from 10 to 25 pounds. For one quick overnight trip, I stripped the Gorilla down to a 15.6 ounce minimalist frameless backpack (I did leave the 0.4 ounce shoulder strap pads in) and carried 12.5 pounds. I also tested the pack fully equipped on walks near home with weights ranging from 25 to 35 pounds to determine its comfortable weight carrying capacity.



Fully loaded Gorilla pack with 21 pounds (left), and the same pack used on a day trip from a base camp (right).

My immediate (and continuing) impressions of the Gorilla are as follows:

- For me, the pack volume is perfect for ultralight backpacking (same for the Miniposa). It has the right amount of room for my ultralight gear kit, plus room for food, water, and fuel for up to eight days.
- The construction is excellent. Stitching is close and tight, and there are adequate reinforcements in stress areas.
- The new curved aluminum stay is golden! I really like the pack's fit.
- I love the pack's wide shoulder straps for distributing weight, and the 3D mesh backing resists sliding on my shoulders.
- The new stretch nylon exterior pockets really stretch out and will hold a lot of gear, and they're very durable. Outside pockets on some packs are tight and hard to get items in and out, but not so on the Gorilla.
- The backpanel sleeping pad sleeve is much improved; it has stretch nylon panels on the side and 3D wicking fabric face, and it doesn't stretch out of shape and bleed dye like the mesh used on the old Miniposa.
- The side pockets are shorter and angled to make a water bottle reachable with the pack on, but I use a hydration system, so I would prefer taller side pockets that would hold more (can't satisfy everyone!).
- It's easy to access the hydration sleeve, and it's very easy to pass a drink tube through a port and down a shoulder strap.
- The Gorilla functions well as a daypack for going on a day hike from a base camp
- I really like the durable fabrics; this pack is built to last. The added weight is about 4.3 ounces.
- The hipbelt requires some effort to remove because it has a Velcro patch on both sides. It's much easier to put back on.
- Likewise, the sternum requires some effort to remove and replace. A screw driver helps.
- The stay is very easy to remove and replace. The curvature can be changed by bending it over something round, but I found the pre-bent curvature just fine.

The heavier loads I carried with the Gorilla were 21 pounds on a base camping trip with my wife, and 25 pounds on another trip where I carried a friend's ridiculous 7-pound tent to help reduce his 40-pound-plus load (we talked a lot about how to reduce his pack weight!). I found the Gorilla, with all of its components, surprisingly comfortable carrying these weights. The wide shoulder straps really function well to distribute weight, so I did not have any shoulder strap pain at all, and tightening the hipbelt worked as expected to transfer weight to my hips.

From my weighted pack tests I conclude that the maximum weight carrying capacity (for me) for the Gorilla is about 30 pounds, and the comfortable weight carrying capacity is around 25 pounds. The stay in the Gorilla pack simply resides in sleeves on the backpanel. It is not anchored to the hipbelt at all, so there is no structural connection to support the weight. My opinion is that 25 pounds is a comfortable maximum weight for this pack, but it can easily carry up to 30 pounds when needed.

The Gorilla can be stripped down to a frameless backpack weighing 15.6 ounces (with 0.4 ounce shoulder strap padding left in). It requires some effort to remove the hipbelt and sternum strap, but once it's accomplished, pack weight can be reduced by half a pound. The Gorilla is delightful to carry frameless with a light load; the wide shoulder straps distribute weight very well, and the 3D mesh backing minimizes sliding on the shoulders.

Comparisons

The following table compares packs currently available that have removable stays, allowing the pack to be used either frameless or with an internal frame. Note: information is manufacturer data for a size Medium pack.

Pack	Total Weight With Stays	Volume (cubic inches)	Fabric	Stay Description	Stay Weight (ounces)	Adjustable Torso	Cost (US\$)
Gossamer Gear Gorilla	23.2	2800	210d ripstop	Contoured aluminum tubing	3.4	No	165
Gossamer Gear Mariposa Plus	22.3	3600	70d ripstop	Contoured aluminum tubing	3.4	No	160
Six Moon Designs Starlite	30.0	4200	210d Dyneema	2 flat curved aluminum	5.0	Yes	175
Six Moon Designs Traveler	31.0	3800	210d Dyneema	2 flat curved aluminum	5.0	Yes	190

Note that all comparable backpacks have a much larger volume than the Gorilla, so the Gorilla is in a class by itself. If you are looking for a smaller volume backpack with removable stays, the Gorilla is the only one available. If you need more volume for lightweight backpacking or bulkier loads, you have a choice of three pack models that have removable stays. Of those, the Gossamer Gear Mariposa Plus is the lightest by 8 ounces, but it does not have an adjustable torso.

Assessment

Some readers may wonder why a 2800 cubic inch backpack needs a frame at all. The general rule of thumb is that a frameless backpack is comfortable to carry with loads less than 20 pounds. Of course that number will vary a bit up or down depending on hiker size and strength. For carrying more than 20 pounds, an internal frame backpack is recommended, and the sturdiness (and weight) of the pack will increase as the load increases. The Gossamer Gear Gorilla pack is extremely versatile because it can be used as a frameless backpack up to about 20 pounds, and the lightweight stay can be added to comfortably carry loads up to 25 pounds, or more. With food, water, and fuel, my pack weight is usually in the 17- to 21-pound range, occasionally higher for longer trips, so I find the frame to be a benefit on most of my trips.

Another potential issue may be the need for heavier, more durable fabrics in an ultralight backpack. There are definitely lighter packs available for ultralight backpacking, but they are strictly frameless backpacks. A removable frame backpack requires stronger fabrics to avoid damage from the stays wearing through or seams blowing out when the pack is under stress from heavier loads.

More durable fabrics also extend the life of the backpack considerably. The initial trend in ultralight frameless backpacks was to make them as light as possible, which meant really light fabrics like spinnaker and cuben fiber. And, yes, it is nice to have a super light pack for the times you want to backpack as light as possible. However, the current trend is to balance lightweight and durability, as evidenced by many of the current backpack models offered by Gossamer Gear, Six Moon Designs, Ultralight Adventure Equipment, and Mountain Laurel Designs. Pack designers and users have realized that incorporating durable fabrics into a pack does not increase weight that much, but it vastly increases durability and longevity. If you subscribe to that rationale, the Gossamer Gear Gorilla pack is an excellent choice.

Since I most frequently carry loads in the 17- to 21-pound range, I was inclined to use the Gorilla with all of its components because they simply work well together to provide a very comfortable pack that carries a moderate load very well. I personally found all of the features on the Gorilla worth their weight, except the bungee system, which I don't find very useful, but it's easily added when it's needed. The 1.6-ounce SitLight pad provided with the pack is also very useful as a backpanel pad, if you don't use a sleeping pad that is compatible with the pad sleeve (like the Big Agnes Clearview pad or Therm-a-Rest NeoAir pad). The bottom line is the Gorilla comes with a full complement of features, and most of them are removable, so you can set up the pack to match the trip and your personal preferences to your heart's content. Or, if you simply use the pack the way it comes out of the box, it's still very light and very comfortable to carry with moderate loads.

Specifications

Year/Model	2009 Gossamer Gear Gorilla (www.gossamergear.com/)
Style	Removable internal frame, top loading, roll down top with top compression strap
Volume	2800 cu in (46 L) total 2,400 cu in (39 L) in main pack body and extension collar 400 cu in (6.5 L) in front and side pockets
Weight	Size L tested, includes pack, frame, shoulder and hipbelt pads, bungee attachment system. Measured weight: 24.5 oz (695 g) Manufacturer specification: 24.2 oz (686 g)
Sizes Available	Unisex S, M, L; 3 hipbelt sizes
Torso Fit Range	Small: fits torsos 13-17 in (33-43 cm) Medium: fits torsos 16-20 in (41-51 cm) Large: fits torsos 20-24 in (51-61 cm)
Fabrics	210d PU coated ripstop nylon, 30d silnylon, 4.5 oz/yd ² stretch nylon
Frame Material	6061 aluminum tubing
Features	Durable fabrics, removable curved aluminum stay, removable hipbelt available in 3 sizes, removable/adjustable sternum strap with whistle buckle, removable padding in shoulder straps and hipbelt, removable front bungee system, sleeping pad sleeve on backpanel, one front and two side stretch nylon pockets with 210d ripstop nylon on bottom, two side compression straps, Y-top compression strap, extension collar, drawcord closure, 3D wicking fabric on inside of shoulder straps and hipbelt and on the backpanel, hydration sleeve with two hose ports, ice axe loop, haul loop
Volume To Weight Ratio	114.3 cu in/oz (based on 2800 cu in and measured weight of 24.5 oz)
Maximum Comfortable Load Carrying Capacity	25 lb estimated comfortable load for an average person carrying the pack all day

Carry Load to Pack Weight Ratio	16.3 (based on 25 lb and a measured weight of 1.53 lb)
MSRP	US\$165
Included	Pack with curved aluminum stay and hipbelt, closed cell foam pads for hipbelt and shoulder straps, bungee system, SitLight pad for backpanel

What's Good

- Lightest lower volume removable frame backpack available.
- Pack volume is just right for ultralight backpacking.
- Three pack sizes and three hipbelt sizes to fit most hikers.
- Removable stays allow use as a frameless or internal frame pack.
- Many components are removable, allowing the user to set up the pack for individual trips or personal preference.
- Durable fabrics and mesh.
- Contoured tubular frame is very lightweight and fits well.
- Stretch nylon pockets are very durable and stretch easily to hold a lot of gear.
- Fits well (if you choose the correct size).
- Comfortably carries moderate loads.

What's Not So Good

- No backpanel ventilation.
- Frame not anchored to hipbelt.
- Shoulder straps may be too wide for some hikers.
- Grosgrain loop on frontpanel interferes with tightening the top strap.

Recommendations For Improvement

- None, the Gorilla pack is as ideal as it gets.

Citation

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