

Aarn Photo Pockets Review

By Rick Kopitzke

Endless Search for the Perfect Camera Bag

Most photographers have a ridiculous collection of camera bags with all different capacities and configurations that make them ideal for certain situations and simply awful for others. What I was missing in my bag collection was the ability to comfortably and functionally carry my camera gear on day hikes and overnight backpacking trips. Even when day hiking I want to be able to carry water, clothing layers and wet weather gear, food and some emergency supplies in addition to my camera gear. I have a wife and two small children and when hiking with them I need the capacity to carry enough for them as well. Living in the Pacific Northwest, I also need to protect my gear from the wet weather. This is what the Aarn Bodypacks and Photo Pockets allow me to do better than any other camera gear hiking solution I've seen.



Aarn Peak Aspiration Bodypack with Pro Photo Pockets

By 'functionally carry', I mean being able to access and use my gear without having to stop, take off the pack, pull the camera stuff out, re-pack the backpack and then get the pack back on. I want to be able to access my camera, lenses, tripod and whatever else without a great deal of hassle. The Photo Pockets let me carry my camera, 2-3 lenses, an extender, a small flash, remote trigger, filters, batteries, storage media and cleaning equipment all in front of me and accessible. To carry a super-telephoto would require I carry it over my shoulder or in the backpack but my 70-200 and smaller gear fits in the Photo Pockets just fine.

The Photo Pockets come with a set of dry bags to store the sensitive gear in. Rather than the typical solution of a rain cover that prevents access to everything and usually just fits over the outer surfaces of the bag, you store the camera and each lens and gear separately in individual dry bags.

Capacity of the Regular Pockets

This is the gear I am able to carry in the Regular Photo Pockets.

Description	Size	Weight
Canon 5D + L-plate	4.75 h, 6.5 w, 3.25 d	32 oz / 895 g (camera) 4.1 oz / 116 g (L-plate)
Canon 70-200 f2.8 IS II 77mm filter size	8.75 L with filter, 4 dia hood, 5.25 w tripod bracket	58.9 oz / 1670 g
Canon 24-105 f4.0 IS 77mm filter size	5.0 L with filter, 3.75 dia hood	24 oz / 670 g
Canon 17-40 f4.0 77mm filter size	4.75 L with filter, 3.375 dia without hood, 4.74 dia hood	16.7 oz / 475 g
Canon 2x Extender III	3.0 L, 2.75 dia	12 oz /

L – length, h – height, w – width, d – depth, dia – diameter , oz – ounces, g – grams (L, h, w, d in inches)

Additionally I carried two 77mm filter cases, 3 spare batteries, lens cleaning kit, 4 media CF cards and a remote release.



There are two pockets in a set each designed with some functional differences. The main compartment of the camera pocket has a vertical padded divider towards each side to hold and protect the lens mounted on the camera body. The camera body rests on the dividers if the lens isn't long enough to reach the bottom of the compartment. The dividers are sewn to the front of the pocket but velcro vertically to the back of the pocket so you can adjust the width of the divider as needed.

This ability to make adjustments is a useful feature. With all of my lenses taking 77mm filters I need the dividers pretty wide to fit the lens with hoods reversed into the space. In order to fit the 70-200, the tripod mount needs to be rotated the top of the lens or it hangs up on the dividers. If you have narrower lenses or no tripod mounts on the lens it would be possible to keep them narrower and store filters, lens cleaning kit or media to the sides of the dividers. With my setup I can store some thin stuff on either side like filter holders and the remote.

The main compartment of the lens pocket has a single, non-padded divider down the middle. With my lens taking 77mm filters and hoods reversed I can't effectively use the divider and get two wide lenses in the space available so I detach the velcro and fold the divider out of the way. I can then get two lenses with hoods (the 17-40 and the 24-105) in side by side by placing one lens hood down and one lens next to it hood up. For padding I use the soft lens pouches that came with the lens to protect each lens from scraping the other. I am able to use the divider with the larger Pro model pockets and the divider in the Pro pockets is padded as well but I still need to have one lens hood up and one lens hood down.

Each of the Regular Photo Pockets has a horizontal bottom pocket with access from a side zipper. I was able to put the 17-40 or the 24-105 lens in this bottom pocket but not with the hoods. When I stored a lens in the bottom pocket I had to store the hood in the main pocket. The Pro camera pocket doesn't have the horizontal bottom pocket with side access.

Each bottom pocket is separated from the main pocket by a padded divider that is zipped in place on three sides and sewn in on the fourth. This lets you unzip it and fold the divider down. This is really key to the flexibility of storage space in the pockets. By doing this I was able to put the camera with the 70-200 mounted in the camera pocket or store the 70-200 with the 2x Extender attached in the lens pocket. I ended up just leaving these dividers unzipped. As I switched from lens to lens I was able to move lenses between the various storage areas as needed depending on which lens I had mounted and whether the extender was on the 70-200 or not. If these dividers weren't zipped like this I wouldn't have been able to keep the 70-200 mounted on the camera when placed in the pocket or been able to store the 70-200 with the 2x on it.

The lens pocket exterior has a zipped net pocket on the top and on the front a net pocket with a strap and buckle. The camera pocket exterior has a pocket on top with an elastic band to secure it and the pocket also has the same net pocket on the front. I kept valuable items like my media storage and spare batteries in the zipped pocket. I keep gloves, Cliff bars, etc. in the elastic top pocket. The front pockets I use for water bottles or hung my monopod through the strap on occasion.

Regular Photo Pockets vs Pro Photo Pockets

The Pro pockets are bigger than the Regular pockets in every dimension except length. They also differ in some of the features. The Pro lens pocket doesn't have a zipper net pocket on the top. Instead there are two net pockets on the inside of the top with elastic closure. The Pro lens pocket also has a tripod carrying system on the front instead of the front net pocket.



Regular Photo Pockets

The camera pocket doesn't have the bottom horizontal pocket. Inside the camera pocket is a wide strap that uses velcro to adjust the depth of the lens and camera in the pocket. You could store accessories in the bottom of the pocket below the strap but there is no side access to this area so getting to them is problematic. Also you would need to relocate those items when putting a camera body with a long lens mounted in the Pro camera pocket. The Pro camera pocket has a side net pocket that has a pretty tight opening at the top and seems intended for thinner items like maps or a cell phone or GPS.

I prefer the Regular Photo Pockets over the Pro Photo Pockets.

- I don't hike with a battery grip attached to my 5D so I don't need the Pro model camera pocket to fit the body of my camera.
- I'm not sold on carrying my tripod with the tripod carrying system located on the front of the pocket. The weight and location of it are bothersome to me. I'd rather have the additional strapped net pocket on the front that comes with the Regular pockets.
- I really like having the zippered top pocket. I feel more comfortable placing expensive accessories in a pocket I can securely close.
- The Pro pockets are deeper and wider than the Regular pockets. This does start to infringe on the freedom of movement of your arms forward and across the front of your torso. How much this limits movement will depend on the relative size of you and the pockets.

With my current camera gear I can just fit into Regular pockets. If I were carrying a larger lens than the 24-105 and/or the 17-40 or had a pro-style body I'd have to switch to the Pro pockets. Luckily for me, I prefer the feature design of the Regular pockets over the Pro pockets. I'd like to see the Pro pockets with the same features as the Regular plus the side map pocket that the Pro has.



Pro Photo Pockets

Wet Weather Protection

The camera pocket comes with one long dry bag for the main pocket to hold the camera and mounted lens and another smaller dry bag for the bottom horizontal pocket. The lens pocket comes with 3 of the dry bags with two for the larger top pocket and one for the bottom pocket.

The size of the dry bags that come with the Regular pockets are a real disappointment to me. The dry bags are too small in diameter to fit my 77mm lens with their hoods reversed. The longer lens dry bags for the top of the lens pocket are too small in diameter to fit over the hood or the tripod mount on the 70-200 and they are too short in depth to be able to be closed and rolled over enough times to provide a decent moisture seal. The dry bag for the camera with lens mounted is big enough in diameter but again is a little too short in length to handle the 5D with the 70-200 mounted.

The dry bags that come with the Pro photo pockets are all big enough for the 77mm diameter lens with hoods reversed and the tripod mount on the 70-200. I'm hopeful that in the future Aarn will scrap the smaller size dry bags that came with the Regular Photo Pockets and just go with the larger size dry bags used in the Pro Photo Pockets. In the mean time I picked up some third-party dry bags that will fit my gear with hoods and tripod mounts.

Using the dry bags all the time was a bit of a hassle. I ended up letting the dry bags just sit in the bottom of the pockets and using them only when I was concerned about the weather conditions.

One thing I haven't tested yet is how effective the dry bags are at protecting my gear. Dry bag testing I want to do without my camera gear but I do want to know before I rely on these bags to keep my gear dry. I don't plan on fording any rivers with them until I do get a chance to test them. And not even then.

Using the Photo Pockets

The Photo Pockets function as well as I hoped they would and provide a benefit that I didn't expect. They do limit the vision of your feet somewhat and I found myself adjusting the position of my torso on occasion so I could see precisely where I should place my feet but I was easily able to do so. There is a clear view straight down the middle between the pockets and it is just a matter of shifting a little so I could see the footing. This adjustment isn't any worse than I have to make with a camera and/or bag hanging down my front so I don't consider it a big deal.

Accessing my gear from the top pockets is easy. The bottom pockets are a bit harder to open with the curved side zippers and the openings to the bottom pockets are not large. I found the easiest way to access my kit in the bottom pockets is to put it in the dry pocket and then just pull out the entire dry pocket. I can then take out and/or put in the dry pocket whatever I need, close it up and put the entire dry bag back in the bottom pocket.

One unexpected benefit of the front pockets is that I am able to rest my elbows/arms on the pockets when shooting and thus help steady my camera while taking the shot. This helps eliminate camera shake resulting in a higher number of keepers. I am also able to rest my arms on the pockets when just walking around with the camera in my hands. It gets tiring holding 5 pounds of camera and lens in my hand. Resting some or all of the weight on the pockets helps reduce the fatigue.

One concern I had before using the pockets was if they would interfere with my arm movement and range of motion. The Regular pockets didn't in any significant manner. I am definitely aware the pockets are there and made accommodation for them but I didn't feel like I was significantly hampered by them. I didn't take the Pro pockets out on the trail in real world use but I am a bit more concerned as

the extra width to them seems to wear to the sides and the possibility of infringing more on arm movement is definitely there.

Without the Bodypack

The two photo pockets can be taken off the backpack, buckled together and two shoulder straps that come with it attached. In this fashion it can be worn as either a back pack or a front pack with surprising comfort for such narrow little straps. When worn as a front pack it provides all the advantages of accessibility and provides stability when shooting. When you want to get it out of the way from in front of you or tire of the load in front you can easily switch it to the back.



Regular Pockets on Back



The pockets contain stays which can be bent to keep the pocket from resting flat allowing the air to circulate and keep you cooler.

Regular Pocket on Front Showing Stay

I'm not entirely a fan of the accessory straps that are provided for use without the backpack. They have quick release type buckles in the middle where you can adjust the size of the strap that can occasionally jab you. This is a rare occurrence but I think it wouldn't be too hard to make something a bit more purpose built for this use that wouldn't have the points sticking out.

Summary

I really like the Aarn Photo pockets. I'm going to be using them when I don't need the bodypack a lot more than I had anticipated. (Anyone want to buy some used camera bags?)

- They have the capacity to carry the camera gear I want to carry while hiking.
- I can accessibly carry my camera gear and my backpacking gear.
- They provide additional stability when shooting handheld.
- I can comfortably wear them front or back without the bodypack.
- They provide wet weather protection.

Some changes I would like to see include the following:

- Use the Pro-sized dry bags for both models of Photo Pockets.
- Replace the tripod mount on the front of the Pro lens pocket with a net pocket like the camera pocket.
- Add the bottom horizontal pocket to the Pro camera pocket with the zipped divider.
- Redesign the current straps for wearing the pockets without the bodypack with straps that just have a length adjustment buckle instead of the current design to avoid the occasional jab.
- Make the top opening on the Regular pockets just a half inch bigger in each dimension to fit a 5D and L-bracket a bit better.

