

Group test

SMALL PANNIERS




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For touring or commuting, two compact bags might be the answer. **Dan Joyce** reviews four pairs

S MALL PANNIERS ARE often called front panniers as they'll fit to a low-rider front rack, providing extra luggage space for cycle-campers, tandemists and long-haul tourers. They'll also fit to a rear rack, as the alternative term 'universal' acknowledges, for use as your main luggage.

Two small panniers on a rear rack work well for tours of a week or three where you're staying in B&Bs, hostels, or hotels, as it dissuades you from overpacking; a bar bag (see cyclinguk.org/barbagsreview) is nevertheless a useful addition. For commuting, two small panniers offer better bike handling than one big one and enable you to easily separate work and bike gear.

Unlike large rear panniers, which require longer chainstays, small ones will fit almost any bike that will take a rear rack – many road bikes, cyclocross bikes and children's bikes, for example. All small panniers are left/right interchangeable. 

Your thoughts?

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DURABILITY

Tough fabrics such as Cordura and cotton duck resist wear and tear better and justify higher prices. Most bags are stiffened internally to retain their shape on the rack, and many are reinforced externally to prevent the rack or the ground wearing out the fabric.



HOOKS

Two top hooks and a lower anti-sway catch are standard. The more adjustable these are, the more racks the bag will fit well. A retractable security catch for the top rail is critical to stop bags jumping off. Some hooks fit rails up to 12mm, others up to 16mm. Reducer inserts give a rattle-free fit on narrow rails.

WEATHER RESISTANCE

It will rain. When it does, it's more convenient if the bag itself is waterproof. Waterproof fabric doesn't guarantee a waterproof bag. Heavy rain can soak through zips or stitched seams, or get in through openings. Welded seams and either rolltop closures or deep lids are the best defence.

CAPACITY

10-15 litres per bag is standard. For large items, bag shape and closure is a factor: lids, buckles and straps allow 'outside' items; zips and rolltops don't. For small items, internal and external pockets provide easier access.

FEATURES

Every pannier has a carry handle for transportation off the bike; some have a shoulder strap too, which is particularly useful if you have more than two bags on your bike. Reflective patches and logos add night-time conspicuity.

1 CARRADICE SUPER C UNIVERSAL/FRONT

£90 PAIR carradice.co.uk

Super C bags are made in the UK from cotton duck, a tightly-woven canvas impregnated with paraffin wax. It's very durable; chainsaw trousers are made from cotton duck. It resists rain well too, as long as it's reproofed with wax periodically. In downpours some dampness can get through the stitching, such as that securing the large outer pocket, but it's minimal. The main compartment is tapered, which improves heel clearance. Attachment is via Carradice's new Quick-clip system, which replaces the C System ratchet hooks. The central hook has sprung cam to keep it on the rails, while the other two are open hooks – with reducer inserts, if needed. It takes a while to set up the hooks initially, but the bag is rock solid on the rack and goes on and off easily.

Colour: black. **Capacity:** @ 14 litres. **Max rail size:** 13mm. **Weight:** @ 810g.

2 BROOKS NORFOLK FRONT PANNIER

£80 EACH brooksengland.com

The Norfolk pannier looks like cotton. It's actually polyester (900 and 1200 denier), with a waterproof polyurethane coating on the inside. As the seams are stitched, a little dampness can seep in here in heavy rain. There's a large outer pocket fastened with velcro and two stretchy side pockets for lightweight items. The main compartment has a rolltop closure secured by hooking a metal buckle through a fiddly fabric eyelet, then tightening the strap. The overall aesthetic is 'retro cool' but the back is businesslike. It uses Ortlieb's QL2.1 system. Lifting the handle retracts the retaining catches in the hooks, so the pannier comes off one-handed. The hooks can be repositioned without tools, which is handy if it'll go on different racks, and have reducer inserts. No reflectives.

Colour: black or dove. **Capacity:** @ 13 litres. **Max rail size:** 16mm. **Weight:** @ 750g.

1



VERDICT: Heavy-duty touring luggage you could use for decades

2



VERDICT: Stylish and functional, but very expensive and not actually better

3



VERDICT: Pricy but top quality waterproof touring panniers. Cheaper Ortliebs are good too

4



VERDICT: Simple, waterproof and lightweight. Fixed hooks won't suit all racks

3 ORTLIEB SPORT-PACKER PLUS

£130 PAIR ortlieb.com

Like all Ortliebs, these top-of-the-range welded-seam panniers are 100% waterproof. Compared to cheaper Ortliebs, the Cordura material is lighter-weight and doesn't feel like truck tarp. You can pack a bit more in as well, as the main compartment has a lid rather than a rolltop. It comes with a shoulder strap. There's a narrow double pocket inside; a small external pocket is one of several optional extras. Attachment is by the same Ortlieb QL2.1 hooks as the Brooks, with the same easy-off convenience and tool-free adjustability. I prefer Ortlieb's Allen-bolted QL1 hooks, now found only on the budget Sport-Roller City, as a keep-it-simpler principle is an asset on tour.

Colour: green, red, black, blue. **Capacity:** @ 15 litres. **Max rail size:** 16mm. **Weight:** @ 750g.

4 ALTURA ARC 15 ROLL TOP PANNIER

£39.99 EACH altura.eu

Like Ortlieb's Sport-Roller City and Carradice's Carradry Front, the Altura Arc 15 is a budget bag that's fully waterproof. The design is simple: one rolltop compartment without pockets. The attachment system is simple too: the Rixen Kaul Vario top hooks are fixed in position. Their openings are adjustable to fit rails 6-15mm in diameter. A single latch folds out to secure the bag to the top rail. It's not sophisticated but is secure – assuming the spacing between the hooks suits your rack. The Arc 15 sits high up, which limits racktop loads but does increase heel clearance. Weight is low, thanks to the minimalist design and lighter-weight fabric.

Colour: grey or red. **Capacity:** @ 15 litres. **Max rail size:** 15mm. **Weight:** @ 540g.



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