

# Women's Lightweight Packs

Three new overnight packs designed specifically for women



*Women's packs include specially-designed waist belts and straps contoured to fit a woman's torso. The Osprey Aura 50 also features an innovative suspension system and the coolest zipper pulls ever designed.*

BY ALLISON WOODS



It used to be that we women didn't have a lot of options when it came to outdoor gear. Packs, sleeping bags, and technical apparel

were all "unisex," which means "made for a man, but a woman might be able to use it too, kind of."

Now we have so many options that there are subcategories of women's pack types. This review is targeted on smaller, dayhike or weekend overnight packs with suspension systems that are somewhat scaled back from those of their larger

siblings. The most notable differences in women-specific packs are the waist belt, typically conical, and the straps, contoured to fit a woman's torso.

All three of the packs featured here have removable pack lids, are hydration compatible (bladder sold separately) and have big expandable outer "stuff-it" pockets for easily stowing a raincoat, rope, or puffy jacket. People who want one pack to do everything might consider these smallish, fast-and light packs. None are designed to carry more than 35 pounds, and most carry best in the 24- to 30-pound range. They all sport excellent compression systems and carry well for use as a day pack. In selecting your next pack, consider the type of pack you will be needing (and as I always say, buy your gear based on the type of hiking you will do *the most*. You can always rent or borrow specialty gear). Then try on the packs that all meet your criteria. Work with a skilled pack fitter in finding the one that fits you the best. This cannot be stressed enough.

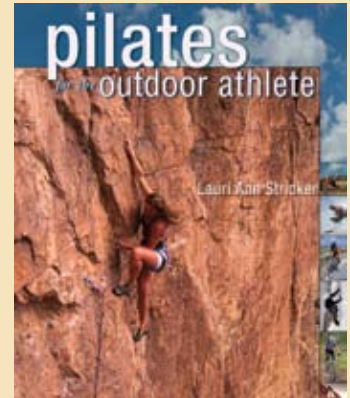
## Osprey Aura 50

47-50 liters, 2 sizes

\$189

Osprey has taken their wildly popular Atmos series of ventilated packs to new heights with the Aura line, designed specifically for women. The Aura has a "trampoline-style" suspension, with thin frame stays held in tension in a "C" shape that keeps much of the pack away from your body enough to allow for air circulation. This is a time-tested suspension style that has mostly been seen in day packs until the last couple of years. The straps and waist belt are perforated for further ventilation, and the sternum strap sits comfortably and is easy to adjust. There are many simple ways to hang things off of the straps, such as lip balm or a whistle.

## NEAT STUFF!

**Pilates for the Outdoor Athlete**

By Lauri Ann Stricker  
(Fulcrum Publishing,  
\$27.95, 2007)

Here's a neat book written just for us. Lauri Anne Stricker's *Pilates for the Outdoor Athlete* breaks into sport-specific sections and designs simple Pilates workouts. The workouts stretch and strengthen muscles subject to the most abuse, whether you are conditioning for skiing, climbing or hiking. Easy-to-understand instructions such as, "roll yourself like a wheel rolling on a rail" allow even the clutziest among us an opportunity to tone and strengthen the Pilates way. Excellent pictures and line drawings add detail that makes sense in twisting your body up into unexpectedly challenging positions. —Allison Woods



Mountainsmith's CDT 45 has a minimalist suspension system that excelled in our tests. Plus, this "back-to-basics" pack has a top pocket that detaches and converts to a fanny pack.

The waist belt sports twin mesh zippered pockets for storing cameras and snacks. They are secure and easy to reach, but mesh? Hmm... Most of us are now carrying expensive digital pocket cameras, and we want them close at hand in case we run across that perfect shot. Mesh pockets+camera+Northwest weather=bad combination. Osprey, do you hear this?

The rear water bottle pockets work well for stowing fishing rods and tent poles, but are *just* out of reach while wearing the pack. This is a common problem in pack design, and one less important than in this day and age of hydration systems. Straddling the rear stretch pocket are two large zippered compartments that make leaving the removable pack lid at home to save

weight a real option. Adjustable hook-and-loop/bungee pole or ice ax holders offer additional outside storage options. This might sound a little nitpicky, but the Aura has the nicest zipper pulls *ever*. They have big round burly loops that open easily, even if you're wearing gloves.

**Mountainsmith**

**CDT 45**  
42-47 liters, 2 sizes  
\$179

The CDT 45 is a minimalist's dream, offering little more than a packbag and a few pockets. The suspension system consists of a pair of aluminum stays in the shape of an "X", another time-tested and comfortable style. Of note is the

adjustability of the CDT's suspension system. It's comparable to that of full-featured packs, and assures a precise fit. The contoured straps fit well, and the sternum strap is serviceable. There are pockets on the pack's waist belt, but only the right-hand pocket has a zipper and is large enough to carry a camera. The waist belt moves independently of the back sheet, allowing for increased freedom of movement.

On the back of the pack, the large rear pocket and twin water bottle holsters are

made out of a burly stretch fabric. Once again, the water bottles are *just* out of reach of the wearer. Twin ice axe/pole loops are simple yet functional. The removable pack lid cleverly converts to a simple lumbar pack. Strangely, the pack lid does not have a clip for attaching keys to the inside of the pack—definitely an omission. WTA volunteer Kim Brown had this to say about the CDT 45, “I hardly noticed it was there.” This may sound like damning with faint praise, but gear you don’t notice is the best sort—it leaves you free to enjoy your hike! This pack will hold high appeal for those looking for a no-nonsense work horse.

## Gregory Jade 50

45-55 liters, 3 sizes  
\$189

Gregory’s new pack, the Jade, was designed as a women’s version of the

wildly popular “Z” pack. I didn’t think they could improve on perfection, but looking at the Jade and the Z side by side in the super-secret WT Test Labs, it appears they were in fact able to improve on an already great product. The backbone of the suspension remains a single aluminum stay, but the framesheet is concave to create the “trampoline” effect described above. This allows for generous air flow between pack and wearer without compromising the “close to back” maneuverability of an internal frame pack. The straps, waist belt, and back panel are all mesh, and there’s so much airflow between the back panel that that a marmot could walk right through it. Woo hoo! Ventilation! The sternum strap is comfortable and easily adjusted. Two zippered pockets on the

*If you’re looking for a pack with lots of back ventilation, the Gregory Jade 50 is your pack. Waterproof and welded zippers help keep your stuff drier on wet days.*



## Women’s Hiking

waist band offer close-at-hand small storage that won’t let your camera get wet. Of the three packs, the Jade seems like it has a slightly larger capacity, though these packs were not volume-tested at a lab.

Moving around to the back of the pack, the water bottle holsters are angled, and have a clever zippered bellows system to hold different sizes of water bottles. I can *remove* a water bottle from the holster, but can’t *replace* it. Now I’m starting to wonder if this is a personal problem. Atop the requisite “stuff-it” panel, the Jade sports a storage pocket that’s more useful than it might appear. Right next to that, a vertical zipper allows access to the main packbag without opening the lid. The extended collar on the main pack body allows for either overfilling the pack, or removing the lid, and using the collar as an excellent roll top. I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention that the Jade’s zippers are all waterproof and welded, assuring drier contents on wet days, saving weight, and adding a little curb appeal.

### The winners

The Mountainsmith CDT 45 has, by far, the best suspension system. Add to that an excellent pack lid-to-fanny pack conversion and you’ve got some great features in a stripped-down package. The Gregory Jade 50 has the best bells and whistles and the freshest ventilation system in the bunch. The Osprey Aura has the best straps and waist belt, and uses innovative materials to the best advantage.

There are some terrific options out there for women’s backpacks. I can’t stress how important it is to find a trusted pack fitter to assist you in finding the one for you. One of the ways the manufacturers can keep the weight (and the price) down is by removing much of the adjustability of the suspension system and that makes finding that perfect fit that much more critical. ♦

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