

Using the Kata 3N1-30 to Carry Multiple Cameras

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In planning for an upcoming trip to Japan, changes in what I needed to photograph made me consider a different bag system for the trip. In the past I've used Kata's R-103 computer/camera pack and T-214 sling bag combination and found it to be excellent. However, since I started using a netbook in the field and have been paring down the amount of gear I drag along, this combo is kind of overkill. Unfortunately, I was going to haul more gear than would fit in just the T-214, and using the R-103 alone would result in having to do the dreaded "pack dance" (that dance you do while you are trying to get the bag off your back, get the appropriate camera/body out of the bag, and then trying to do something with the bag so you can get the picture that doesn't involve putting it in the muck you are usually standing in while trying to do this).

In looking around for something different, it was obvious that most pack systems suffer from the camera availability problem. Traditional sling bags work fairly well for light loads, but are kind of painful to lug around after a while if you're trying to schlep a large amount of equipment. Even the newer designs along the lines of the Lowepro slingshot series still suffer from this problem. The lowepro fastpack series looked interesting, but I didn't like hanging that much weight simply from the waist belt when accessing it (And from a certain point of view, its even worse than a typical backpack because you can't get into it if you wear the bag backwards so it is on your chest, a common solution to the bag dance problem).

In addition, I normally shoot with two bodies, which made it desirable to find a system that would allow me to carry/access both cameras. I also wanted a unit that would conform to most airline size restrictions for bags

In the course of my research, I came across the Kata 3N1 series of bags. These bags can either be carried as a sling bag or a backpack, and features

an access flap on either side for 'right or left handed' shooting. the bag also features a pretty reasonable tripod hanging system, as well as being sized to conform to what appears to be a worst case carry on luggage size (NOTE: it is advisable to check with all the carriers you plan on flying on to verify their baggage rules before you fly).

While the bag is apparently designed to carry a single body with its bottom against the back side of the main compartment, the depth of the unit and specifications on the size of the bag showed it was possible to stick a camera in edgewise with the arca mount L plates I normally use, and it appeared possible to be able to carry two cameras with lenses mounted. A quick search of the internet showed a posting where this was done, so I ordered a unit.

While the unit is well made, it doesn't seem quite as indestructible as my R-103. In addition, Kata appears to have cut a few corners (like not lining the entire interior with their fuzzy velcro material – more on that later). It also didn't have some of their other little touches, like "keying" the various buckles so you couldn't plug the wrong straps into each other - like, say between the shoulder strap and the waist strap for example. The shoulder straps also gave me pause – they seem light for a bag you could cram 30+ pounds of gear into (and there's no sternum strap). This can get uncomfortable fairly quickly, though I found it acceptable if the waist belt is used. The one thing about the straps I didn't like was that you have to be careful slinging the bag around – the padding doesn't go down far enough to prevent you getting neck burn when you swing the bag around – they have a little secondary pad to try and overcome this, but it doesn't seem to work all that well.

The one other big complaint is one I have with most Kata bags – for somebody designing gear to be used in the field they seem to think people don't need to drink water, preferably w/o having to take the bag off to get to it, or risk the bottle leaking on your expensive gear. If they didn't want to take the space to put in a "real" hydration system, you think it wouldn't have killed them to at least run a chunk of webbing across the top of the bag so you could clip on some other vendor's water bottle holder or other accessories. (A modification I will probably end up doing in the near future). I ended up digging out a lowepro water bottle holder which I will

attach to the big strap on the top flap for this. In addition, I also clipped a sunglasses case onto this strap as necessary. I did not like this solution as you need the strap for getting the bag when fully loaded into overhead storages spaces on planes, trains, busses,etc.

On the other hand, their tripod solution seems pretty good. Although I seriously overloaded it (Gitzo 2220 with Acratech head and occasionally a manfrotto pano head), and the mount system performed very well, though I ended up putting the ball head end into the little pouch at the base of the pack for the sake of stability. Figure - 1 shows the bag loaded



Figure - 1: Kata 3N1-30 with Gitzo 2220 attached

with the Gitzo 2220 attached.

After I received the unit I started physically placing the components, and

quickly found out that while both cameras would fit fine on their sides above each other , the flap is just a little too small to allow access – It doesn't quite unzip all the way to the bottom, forming a lip which prevents you from pulling the bottom camera directly out, and the other end of the flap doesn't quite go far enough up on the main compartment, given its rounded shape at that end. DOH!

After thinking about it for a while, I realized I could actually position a camera on each side and it might actually work. By putting the camera from the “left handed” sling side upside down and putting the smaller of the two cameras (40D) on the “right handed” sling side, I found you could adjust everything so both cameras could actually be removed from/put into the pack when worn in the sling positions.

By angling a divider between the two cameras it just barely worked. Unfortunately, because Kata didn't cover the interior of the bag with their fuzzy velcro attachment material like they normally do (there's only a couple of strips where they assumed the camera would be placed), there was nothing to attach this divider to – which is a bad thing as you really don't want the bottom camera getting smushed by all the gear above it. To transfer the weight around the camera and to the bag, I ended up building a box structure out of their rigid modi-vers material. The divider runs across the width of the pack so I'd have the option of using the body with the long lens and still being able to carry it, and store a lens if a body with a shorter lens is placed in that position. Then, using more of the modi-vers material, I created a divider above the upper camera to store a flash and microphone gear for the 5D II.

Figure-2 shows the loaded pack with the “right handed” sling side open. On this side I put the Canon 40D with a 70-200L lens with 1.4X teleconverter.



Figure - 2: View of bag with right hand sling flap open

To prevent the equipment underneath from having to bear the full weight of this camera/lens assembly, the box section as was previously discussed can also be seen in Figure - 2. Because the bag does not have velcro on the side that goes next to the bag user, rigid Kata modi-vers material had to be used on 3 sides of this box, with the 4th side being the bottom of the bag which did have velcro to attach to. A fourth piece of modi-vers material was used at the end of this box for additional rigidity.

Figure-3 shows the loaded pack with the “left handed” sling side open. From this side, the Canon 5D MKII, flash, and microphone units can be accessed.



Figure - 3: View of bag with left hand sling flap open

In addition, I used one of the stock dividers in front of the Canon 5D MKII/24-70 lens combination to create a space to store a 17-40 lens.

Figure - 4 shows the bag with the right hand sling flap opened with the camera removed. Note the shelf visible in the upper right hand portion of the opening. This was made by using a piece of the rigid modi-vers material, which is tied between the box structure and the top of the bag. Between this shelf and the back side of the compartment, a piece of soft modi-vers material was used to create a stop between this side of the bag's contents and the microphone/flash.

Also visible is more details of the box structure at the bottom of the bag. Had Kata chosen to line the side of the compartment next to the wearer (left hand side of compartment in this photo) with Velcro material as they had done with some bags such as their R-103, the left side piece would not have been necessary.



Figure - 4: View of empty bag with right hand sling flap opened

Note also that the verticals in the box structure were rounded at the bottom for a tighter fit in the bag (cut is visible in lower right hand corner of the bag compartment in Figure - 4).

Figure - 5 shows the left hand sling flap opened with the camera removed.



Figure - 5:view of empty bag with left hand sling flap opened

Here the upper shelf can be seen in more detail. Visible at the upper left is an upright made from rigid modi-verse material to separate the flash and microphone gear as well as provide protection to the items from impact.

In addition, the divider used to separate the lower camera from an additional lens is shown pulled forward.

Figure - 6 shows the bag with the top flap open. Note that the box struc-



Figure - 6:View of bag with top flap open

ture does not extend all the way across the bag. This is necessary to accommodate the width of the camera that was used in the lower position. Also note that the top piece of the box structure really does go at a diagonal across the bag. This was done so the upper camera could be removed more easily from the left hand sling side.

Figures 7 and 8 shows the top flap of the bag open. Yes, you really can fit a netbook in there with a fair amount of other stuff. Unfortunately, the rain cover when folded up did not play well with the other items I had to carry, so it had to be carried unfolded, which took up a lot of room. It would have been helpful to have an external pouch of some sort for this instead.



Figure - 7: Top compartment showing netbook and rain cover

I also found that if you could fold your documents in half, you could place them in the mesh pouch on the flap side of this compartment and wrap them around the items in the compartment -an unfolded sheet of standard paper would not fit - Too bad Kata didn't put a document pouch between the outer covering and inner liner on the back side or something to store documents. Another option might be to create an external document pouch that attaches to the tripod carrier mounting points. The ability to carry larger flat items would have been helpful on my most recent trip. Notably, I really needed a larger flash modifier, as well as the ability to carry an 8x10 gray card.

was often difficult to get everything to fit due to the dimensions of the compartment for some reason.



Figure - 10: Storage pouch

Figure - 9 shows most of what I typically had in the bag on my most recent trip with it. The 3N1-30 also comes with a handy-dandy pouch that I found useful for storing memory cards. This is shown in Figure - 10.

In use, this two-camera setup takes a little bit of getting used to, but with the exceptions I have noted earlier the bag does seem to work well.