

the climber

ISSUE 52 Winter 2005
Quarterly Magazine of the
New Zealand Alpine Club

Aarn FlowMo Bodypacks: Peak Aspiration Lightweight climbing pack from an award winning designer

Reviewed by Mark Watson

The Peak Aspiration is the most comfortable pack I have ever worn—period. Aarn Tate, owner and chief designer for Aarn Bodypacks, a small New Zealand pack manufacturer, lent me one of his innovative designs for a few months and I got the chance to try it on a couple of trips. Not long after I left the car the first time I used the pack I was heard to say 'I don't even feel as if I'm wearing a pack'.

Later, I lent the pack to a friend for a trip—his feedback to me was: 'you don't carry that pack—you wear it'.

So—what's the difference between this and other packs, and why is it so comfortable?

Aarn has approached his pack designs with a strong foundation of research, and a fresh look at the dynamics involved in loading a human body with a few days' worth of food and sending it into the hills.

The two key innovations applied here are U-Flow shoulder straps and Balance Pockets.

The difference with U-Flow straps is that they aren't fixed in place at the bottom of the back—they run underneath it, meaning that they can glide and well... flow, with the movement of your shoulders and torso. The consequence is that the pack moves with you when climbing, scrambling or moving over awkward terrain. Additionally it doesn't impinge the movement of your arms as much as a conventional pack when you're raising them. For climbing it is definitely an advantageous design. The straps are made from a very soft, malleable laminated open core foam, with a very stretchy edge binding. This allows them to hug every contour of your chest and shoulders—meaning that you don't get pressure points from the straps as with conventional shoulder straps. Additionally they are very breathable.

Enhancing the performance of the shoulder straps is a very high degree of adjustability, to both these and the waistbelt, which is very well shaped to cup your hips. The harness itself has an adjustable back length, and very open-core foam for comfort and airflow.

The Balance Pockets (optional at \$69.95/pair for the cheapest 7l, combined, model) are the more major innovation. They are basically detachable front pouches that you attach to the shoulder straps and waistbelt. They're best loaded with compact, heavy items (I put my fuel bottle and heavier food items in them). In use the Balance Pockets enable you to walk in a more upright position, and with considerably more balance than with a normal pack. Additionally, the load is distributed over the body, so your shoulders don't get as sore. It all adds up to a less fatigued body, and one that can traverse awkward terrain more confidently. I noticed a profound difference straight away wearing this pack.

Do the Balance Pockets have a place on a climbing pack? Yes and no—if I was climbing technical terrain i.e. belaying or soloing on steep ground I'd prefer not to wear them as they do make it a little harder to see your feet. The advantage of them is in load carrying to a climbing base. By itself the Peak Aspiration has a 45 litre capacity—an almost perfect size for a one-day or overnight climb—add the capacious Balance Pockets and you've got up to an extra 16 litres of space for all that food and fuel. Whip them off for the climb itself and you've got an extremely light mission pack with all the basic features a climbing pack should have.

Peak Aspiration is replete with all the other features you'd expect on a tramping/climbing pack—but many of these have been approached with fresh



Peak Aspiration

thinking and versatility. Features include:

- A stash pocket on the front of the pack for stowing a shovel, wet jackets etc
- Revised ice axe and crampon attachments
- Hydration system compatibility
- Rings for trekking pole attachment
- Optional snowstake/ski straps on the side of the pack. Called Lasso-Lock, these cleverly retain objects to stop them slipping around (extra cost at \$14.95). Snowboard straps are available also (\$24.95).

Two other options for the pack include Balance Gear Racks—this is a hardware racking system that cleverly transfers the weight to the hipbelt, and Tool Quivers—these attach to the pack and allow you to stash/retrieve ice tools without removing the pack (both of these recent additions were unused by tester).

The pack is made of lightweight Cordura (significantly lighter than that used by many of its competitors) but has heavy denier Cordura at the points of most wear. One of the coolest features is an integral dry-bag liner with roll top—no more plastic pack liners to bother with. This is a feature that is rare in packs, and particularly welcome with New Zealand's high precipitation.

In terms of durability, the pack stood up really well. The "pockets" for the snowstake containment are on the flimsy side, but otherwise it is a well constructed, solid piece of equipment. My only other gripe is that the pack is fiddly to take on and off; you get used to it fast, but wearing the Balance Pockets means a bit more care putting the pack on and doing up the hipbelt, and you have a couple of extra quick-release buckles to do up. Maybe I just need a little more patience...

Aarn Packs have been granted the Millenium Product Award for Innovation, UK 2000 and the DuPont BrandNew Award, ISPO Germany 2003.

Peak Aspiration, 40 litres, 1.6kg (S)

45 litres, 1.65kg (L)

RRP \$259.95. www.aarnpacks.com for more information