TVTechnology

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Miller Compass 25 Head and Sprinter Tripod

by Carl Mrozek

Regardless of what high-definition cameras can ultimately achieve, they will fall short of the mark without solid and smooth camera support. This begins with a tripod.

The recent ascendancy of small cameras with large sensors and 3D capability complicates the process of tripod selection even more. Many camera support companies have launched new lines of lightweight tripods geared especially for DSLR users, but such devices can be problematic, especially when the camera is tricked out with a full complement of microphone, lens, monitor, rails, matte box and the like. When shooting in 3D with a dual-camera rig, the size, weight and bulk of the camera package is doubled, and there's often substantial weight of the 3D rig itself to contend with.

Miller Compass 25 and two-stge tripod

In applications such as this, it behooves one to choose a tripod head that is more than capable of supporting your heaviest likely payload. One such option is the Compass 25 fluid head by Miller Camera Support LLC, along with their two-stage carbon fiber tripod.

FEATURES

Miller's Compass 25 fluid head is designed to handle a payload ranging from eight to 31 pounds. This covers a broad spectrum of cameras, yet this versatile head itself weighs less than seven pounds. One of the keys to its fairly high load capacity and versatility is that the camera platform sits barely six inches above the bowl, with three inches of fore and aft movement, further enhancing its ability to support a spectrum of payloads. Also, the illuminated bubble level makes it feasible to accurately level the head both in moonlight and sunlight conditions.

The unit uses the standard quick-release Euro plate with several fastening options, including standard quarter-inch and three-eights-inch fastening screws, and also a quarter-inch screw with a threadless pin. The pan range is a full 360 degrees, and the tilt range provides 90 degrees of forward movement and 75 degrees of backward movement. The tilt lock uses a caliper disk brake system, and the "telescopic" handle can be extended by eight inches from a fully compressed position.

Tilt and pan is available in five discrete stages, plus a neutral position. The head is designed to function at temperature extremes from minus 40 degrees to a searing 149 degrees F, making it suitable for use in just about any weather or climate extreme.

Miller's Sprinter two-stage carbon fiber tripod features the company's "sprint loks"—dual side-locking levers designed for extremely fast single-handed leg locking and unlocking. The two-stage mid-level spreader is also designed for speed and flexibility. Its spokes fold inwards and upwards in sync with the legs for easy setup and relocation. The length of each spoke can be precisely adjusted with an individual locking lever, which is essential for tripod stability, and makes it possible to secure the tripod in a variety of postures on flat and uneven ground.

The tripod's feet are the dual-claw toe variety, which dig in to turf, and even rugs, for solid support on many types of surfaces. However for really flat, hard surfaces, there are flat-soled rubber boots that can be clamped on each foot. For added stability during transport, a pair of plastic clips is provided for clamping one leg to another, thus keeping them tightly together.

IN USE

I initially moved the Compass 25 Sprinter package by the handle attached to one of its legs. This handle is designed to traverse the length of the strut, yet slides naturally to a balancing point, enabling me to easily lift and carry the 12-pound tripod package comfortably with one hand.

I was able to easily extend the lower legs by popping up the hard plastic lever securing each with a flick of my thumb. All three were fully extended, and ready to spread out into a tripod configuration within seconds. The same was true for the second stage, which I only half-extended. After tightening the mid-level spreader with a quarter turn of the center adjusting knob, I was ready to mount a camera and start shooting.

I'd already attached the Euro-plate adapter to the base of a Canon XL H1 using the quarter-inch screw and pin, and was ready to snap it into place on the Compass 25. I should note that the locked and unlocked positions at the back end of the sliding plate were the opposite of what I was accustomed to, and for that reason I exercised plenty of caution so as not to accidentally assume that the camera was secured to the sliding plate when it wasn't.

The plate lock is spring-loaded and the weight of the camera triggers it to engage with a sharp click indicating that the camera is secured firmly.

Being accustomed to using my camera with a smaller head and also a 75 mm bowl, I felt an immediate difference when I first tried panning on the Compass 25. The panning movement it provided was slow and smooth, even at the mid-level "3" setting. Also, there was no additional "bump" at the end of a pan, as I often experience when using smaller heads. It was a pleasant surprise to experience this repeatedly, even after trying some sudden "whip pans."

Key adjustments in setting up and using the Compass 25 system include centering the camera plate by using the sliding base plate, and counterbalancing the payload via the four-stage counterbalance system. The Compass 25 design makes these operations both instant and silent.

Adjusting pan and tilt drag levels are also straightforward operations. I really like the neutral gear option where there is absolutely no drag. Also, the pan and tilt dials are notched for easy gripping and are designed to turn one stage at a time. This makes it easy to add or reduce drag in discrete levels while keeping your eyes on the viewfinder.

Another feature that I appreciated was in leveling things up by eyeball.

The Compass 25 system enabled me to stalk wildlife such as geese, ducks, foxes, and deer with my camera turned on and ready to shoot as soon as I re-planted the tripod's claw feet on the ground. In spite of the solid support it provides when the feet are firmly planted on the ground, the spreader and legs folded together easily whenever I needed to quickly relocate the complete 25-pound rig I was using.

The Compass 25 also made it surprisingly easy to walk and stalk wildlife, even when crouching on rough terrain with the full camera/tripod package.

Regardless of how I transported the compass system, getting it "on its feet" and ready to shoot was a breeze. The best part was the secure and solid support and the smooth camera moves that resulted—at least for my 14-pound camera payload. I briefly attached a 20-pound-plus camera load and was able to also get similar camera moves without any problems, in spite of the reduced weight "headroom" that accompanied the extra six or seven pounds of camera.

FAST FACTS

APPLICATION
ENG, EFP, sports, wildlife video capture

KEY FEATURES
Wide payload range, five-stage pan and tilt drag controls, four-position counterbalance

PRICE
$6,052 MSRP for complete package

CONTACT
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SUMMARY

Miller's Compass 25 fluid head and Sprinter carbon fiber leg tripod combine many features that are found in comparable and pricier support systems. The system functions as a well-integrated entity and can be fully deployed and broken down for transport very quickly, should this be a requirement. Apart from few vulnerable knobs and lever weak links, the head is ruggedly constructed and is well suited for ENG, EFP and otheer applications.

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