



Teaching an Old Bag New Tricks

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I have a confession to make. I have a hard time throwing out useful things. My latest dilemma was caused when I was given a set of panniers. I couldn't make them work due to their mounting system.

First, a little background on panniers, those handy bags used by bike tourists and EMS cyclists. There are many great panniers and a few great mounting systems, but rarely do they come together. The typical mounting system is nothing more than J-hooks that are used to hang the panniers on the rack, accompanied by some sort of strap or bungee cord to both secure the bottom and keep the pannier on the rack. There are variations of this system and some unique systems. Some work and some don't. One company that has modified this system is Arkel Overdesigns. Arkel provides a locking cam on the rail of their hooks in addition to the bungee. This allows the top of the pannier to be secured to the frame. Another method, pioneered by Ortlieb, takes a different approach. The Ortlieb system uses locking top hooks to both hang and secure the pannier, along with a horizontal bottom hook that does nothing but control the bottom of the pannier. The ingenious part of the Ortlieb system is that the hooks release by pulling up on the carrying handle. Both the Ortlieb system and the Arkel system are excellent, and both manufacturers sell the mounting systems as parts as well as stand-alone products.

So back to my problem. I inherited a set of panniers that were useless to me. They were huge, and the mounting system that came with them was impractical unless you had a very small foot or used them on a touring bike with long chain stays (to be fair to the manufacturer, they have since discontinued this mounting system and now use a conventional system). I couldn't throw them away, but I really wanted to make them work. After an internet search, I ordered a set of mounting hardware from the Arkel website. When I examined the mounting system, three things became apparent. First, the mounting system was well engineered. Second, the J-hooks were mounted in a channel that allowed them to be positioned so the pannier would attach at the optimum position for your rack and then be locked in place with a set screw. Third, a cam locked the pannier to the rack, making it impossible for the pannier to come off while riding down stairs! These are two features that all mounting systems should have.

As mentioned earlier, these panniers are huge and not very practical. Their size alone was a problem that the adjustability of the new hardware wouldn't overcome. The only obvious solution was to turn the pannier diagonal to keep it behind the seat stays. After removing the old hardware, I measured out where to punch holes in the pannier for the new hardware. I heated a nail with a torch and used it to punch each hole. This ensures that the holes won't fray, and is much easier than using a drill. I then mounted the hook rails using the supplied hardware and used straps from the old hardware along with pop rivets to secure the bungee cord at the bottom. I also used a piece of black cord through the zipper pulls along with a barrel clamp to help adjust the size of the pannier. The end result is we now have a large set of panniers to carry extra clothing, water bottles and supplies for our team to our special events. We also now know that we can improve the great sets of panniers we bought and make them perfect.

If you're tired of losing your panniers going over obstacles or just have panniers with broken hardware, check out Ortlieb or Arkel Overdesigns. They both can be found on the web at <http://www.ortliebusa.com/> and <http://www.arkel-od.com/>.

Note: Arkel has changed their design. The new method uses locking cams in each hook that release when the carrying handle is pulled upward, similar to the Ortlieb design. They still offer their mounting hardware as a stand alone product.

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