

Benro TMA28C Tripod and B1 Ballhead Review



Tough Terrain For Tripod testing

Tripods are really underrated pieces of gear that don't get the interest they deserve. Photographers spend a fortune on top of the range cameras/lens, agonizing for ages about technical specifications and pixel peeping at 100% at photos taken in ideal conditions. Often very little thought seems to go into tripod selection yet photographers happily place thousands of pounds of gear on flimsy tripods. I recently saw a photographer high in the Cuillin with a top of the range Canon DSLR and very expensive lens with costly Lee filters attached and all this was precariously balanced on a lightweight, budget tripod. To make matters worse, the photographer was very tall and the tripod very short so he was uncomfortably hunched up and the wind constantly threatened to topple his tottering tripod. To me this is a false economy; not only are you risking damage to your expensive camera and lens but also you are not getting the best results from your expensive camera/lens combination.

I have always believed in using quality tripods, any savings being a false economy. Buy cheap, buy twice, so the saying goes and that's what happened to me in my tripod odyssey. Landscapes are certainly one genre of photography that can benefit a lot from a good tripod especially if you are going to print large and want to get the most detail you can in your image. Good technique and good support can allow a lesser camera to produce great photos. For instance, I have just reviewed Saal Digital's A3 photo book and the large size enabled me to print photos up to 84 cm wide using a full frame camera but an old one. I use a Sony A7 mostly because it is the smallest and lightest in the series yet it's only 24 megapixels compared to the 42 of the A7 mark 3 version. Most of the photos were taken on a tripod with a timer and everything was done to produce an image of the highest quality.

Quality tripods and heads can seem expensive for something that doesn't have the kudos of electro-optical components but when you factor in the cost per day they are probably worth almost their weight in gold. My first decent tripod was a Gitzo and I remember paying about £300 for it which at the time was a huge amount. But that tripod has been used constantly since 2005 often on a daily basis in very harsh terrain. The good thing about tripods is that they don't become obsolete, don't require upgrading, so the actual cost per day is very small.

Having been a long term user of Gitzo, I haven't really kept abreast of developments in the tripod field and until recently didn't know a lot about Benro. All Things Cuillin member Mike Quinn asked about advice for a lightweight tripod and Tim Wilcock suggested a Benro FIF19CIBO Carbon Fibre Tripod which prompted me to do a bit of research myself. A few days later Mike was on holiday on Skye and kindly brought his new toy round for me to see and I was instantly hooked. The product looked top notch and oozed quality. Just a few seconds of play convinced me this was a premium quality tripod. I contacted Benro UK about the possibility of reviewing a tripod and was impressed by their prompt response and felt like a child in a sweet shop when asked simply what would I like to review. It was tempting to simply go for the top of range, most expensive model but common sense kicked in and I knew I should opt for something that I'd actually want to use.

Benro UK's Digital Marketing Director, Scott Baggaly, was brilliant in answering my questions and between us we decided on TMA28C carbon fibre tripod and a B1 ball head. The reasons behind the choice;

- Reasonably lightweight, although to the non photographer the set up seems fairly hefty. 1.54 kg for the legs and 0.36kg for the head. Quite a bit lighter than my Gitzo.
- Carbon fibre for weight saving but also handles better especially in the cold when touching metal is a big no. Also one leg is foam clad making it easier to handle and carry especially in winter.
- 4 section legs so that it is more compact when closed. I wanted something that would easily strap on the side of my rucksack. NB 4 sections versus 3 can be heavier and potentially less stable. 53cm folded length of legs which was noticeably shorter than the Gitzo.
- Didn't need to be too tall since I'm only 5' 8" so could be a lighter, shorter model.

- Reasonably sturdy but not overkill since I am only using a Sony A7 but wanted something to show and potentially loan to clients using Canon DSLRs.
- Twistlock legs rather than folding levers. Twistlocks were what I was used to from the Gitzo and make it easy to slide the tripod down the side compression straps on my rucksack. Clips would make loading and unloading a chore as they would snag on the straps.
- Bewildered by the choice of heads, I left the choice of the B1 to Scott. It seemed a reasonable compromise of weight and ability still to support a huge 14kg.
- Universal Arca Swiss style quick release plate compatible. I have a L bracket on my camera which enables you to quickly swop from portrait to landscape orientation and it needed to accept this rather than having some own brand mount which requires you to by manufacturer specific plates.

The gear quickly arrived by courier and it was like Christmas come early for me. The packaging looks very professional in black with the blue Benro colour matching the highlights on the actual tripod. Must make for eye catching displays in shops but for me personally it was nice to see everything well packed. The legs were in a padded carry bag inside the box. The padded case seems to reflect Benro's ethos and is well thought out. It's nice and large and will easily accommodate legs and head so it's easy to use with separate pockets for accessories.



The padded carry case is a nice touch and good for transporting and storing but something I personally wouldn't use in the field. Usually the tripod is just strapped to the outside of my rucksack with a neoprene case protecting the head. This allows for quick deployment when combined with a chest mounted camera bag carrying my A7 and 25 and 85mm lenses. Ironically I will probably use the blue Benro dust bag which should be enough to protect the tripod on the outside of my rucksack. It may seem strange but the addition of this lightweight bag that just slides over the tripod really pleased me.

It was good to see a bunch of accessories included as standard;

- Spiked feet as an option to the installed rubber feet. Useful on grass, snow etc.
- 2 allen keys and a spanner so you have all necessary tools to tighten and loosen things.
- Padded carrying strap which has proved surprisingly useful especially .
- Instructions.
- Best of all a short central column to replace the long one that is fitted as standard. I don't often extend the central column much, if at all, because it makes the camera a lot less stable. A short column would save weight and allow for shots from very close to the ground.

The Benro Mach 3 collection is billed as their most advanced combining classic design with cutting edge materials. In this case, carbon fibre legs using Benro's signature 9 layers to maximise the strength to weight ratio. All metal components, which are mainly magnesium alloy to reduce weight, are doubly protected by anodising and a powdercoating which not only look pretty cool but increases corrosion resistance.



I'm not a product photographer so I'm not going to include lots of shots of the tripod. For those interested here's a link to Benro with all the specifications and product shots;

<http://www.benroeu.com/products/benro-tma28c.aspx>

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The tripod looks the business with its dark 9X carbon fibre legs and Benro trademark blue highlights and feels really well made but now to the important question of how it performed in the field. My first outing with it coincidentally produced one of my favourite images of 2017 and two other great shots. Now I'm not saying I wouldn't have got them with the Gitzo but the fact was I used the Benro and everything worked perfectly on its debut.

One shot I have been dreaming of for literally years was the sunrise lighting up the Bhashtier Tooth high on the Cuillin Ridge and I have been there many times but never has the light been right. I went up one day in the snow in December but it was too cloudy for any sunrise to be visible despite the forecast. Next day I went again. First outing for the Benro, another 3 hour struggle in deep snow in the dark and nearly 900m of ascent over rough terrain. This time the stars were all aligned and a glorious glow lit the edge of the tooth but literally only for a minute or so. I was head down in a knackered state plodding up steep snow when I saw the glow out of the corner of my eye and knew I had to be quick. Flung down my rucksack, grabbed the tripod from it and A7 from its chest pouch and carefully picked my way across the steep slope conscious of how silly it would be to end up sliding down to the coire below with a camera and tripod when there were ice axe and crampons in my rucksack.

The legs extended smoothly and I kicked down the snow for a solid platform and shot 5 shots. So ephemeral was the light that the glow was only visible in the first 3 shots. As certain as I could be that I had got a stonking good shot, I continued up to Bealach nan Lice and enjoyed a flask of hot coffee whilst hoping the clouds that had rolled in would clear.



The B1 Ballhead operates very smoothly and being able to adjust the friction on the main control knob is great so you can set it exactly how you want. I particularly like the Pull and Twist safety system which reduces the chance of accidentally dropping the camera from the Swiss Arca mounting system. The more I used the Benro, the more impressed I was and I kept discovering hidden features. For example, below the blue anodised ring on top of the centre column is a rubber ring which acts as a shock absorber for the camera/lens as you slide the centre column down.



Photo looking across Coire Lagan to the alpenglow on Sgurr Alasdair as the sun sets.

Photo taken from location in first photo showing tripod.

Having used the tripod quite a lot for about a month, I thought I knew enough to write a review although of course the ultimate test is how durable and long lasting it is. I feel pretty confident it should last as long as my Gitzo. The

design and construction seem superb and from research on the internet I haven't found anyone reporting any problems so all seems good. Also good was the feedback I received from several Benro users who said they treated their tripods pretty harshly and how well they have survived with only an occasional clean and servicing.

I must admit, I am pretty heavy on gear. Gear is bought to be used not molly coddled. Cameras and tripods are tools and the Cuillin is a particularly harsh environment. In fact, it's hard to imagine a harsher testing ground for gear with the abrasive gabbro rock, bogs and lochs then the salt water as the mountains rise straight out of the sea. I try to be careful with gear and with the new tripod have washed it down after use in the sea and leave it open to dry overnight. Also I have read that carbonfibre is vulnerable to splitting in cold weather if dropped so I have been careful with the Benro since my old Gitzo has two cracks from when strong winds in Coire Lagan blew it over several years ago.

Positives

- Design and build excellent. Benro must be confident in their products since they are covered by a 3 year warranty which extends to 5 years if you register online. I like that their website details this and also has an address to send items to for repair or service.
- The leg locks are chunky and easily adjusted even in the cold with gloves on.
- The B1 Ballhead is very smooth with large control knobs; the Pan Lock controls horizontal rotation, there is a friction control to adjust the tightness of the main control which releases/locks the ballhead. Everything works slickly and as it should. Lots of landscape photographers use geared heads and I don't think Benro make one.

- The ability to get really low shots using the short centre column and the very wide splaying legs. This will be useful for macro shots and low angle landscapes.

Negatives

- Short centre column doesn't have a hook like the longer one it replaces to hang a bag etc on to weigh down the tripod especially in windy conditions. Only a small thing but for the time being I will probably use the longer one because of it's hook. My brother is an engineer and I may ask him if he can add a hook to the shorter one to make it ideal.
- This is only a negative to me since I will probably never use it but the tripod design allows one leg to be removed and used as a monopod. Presumably it could be a tad lighter without but it is a clever design and many people will obviously make use of it.
- Not just Benro but most tripod manufacturers seem to have only an option to screw on metal spikes or rubber feet. With the profusion of rock on Skye, I inevitably opt for the rubber feet even in winter with snow and mud but ideal would be a design which incorporated perhaps metal spikes which screwed out from rubber feet thus allowing the best of both worlds.

Tripods are such a fundamental piece of gear especially for landscape photography that they either work or don't. The fact that I had to search around for any negatives really says more about the tripod than all the positives. The Benro simply does it's job, does all that is asked of it and has no really bad points. Having had it for about a month, I have used it quite intensely. It was probably used for 10 pre dawn to after sunset days before Christmas and since the festivities has had almost two weeks of constant use mostly in a mountain environment but with a couple of

beach and loch trips. This has probably been enough for me to discover any faults or niggles and I am confident that it is a piece of kit I could whole heartedly recommend.

The TMA28C has a RRP of £310 but is widely available for about £269. The B1 Head costs £99.



**Weird clouds above Sgurr nan Gillean and looking towards Bla Bheinn.
In such cold, windy conditions a sturdy tripod was essential.**

Benro TMA28C Tripod and B1 Ballhead Review Update After Three Months Intensive Use



Above and Beyond.....Benro TMA28C Tripod and B1 Ballhead high in the Cuillin last week.



The panorama I took looking the other way. A stitch of 5 shots so a steady tripod was essential

Benro introduced my review on their Facebook page by saying “We believe in our tripods and heads...that’s why we don’t mind sending impartial photographers our products to review in harsh conditions...A big thank you to Adrian Trendall who really put our kit to the test in his TMA28C Tripod and B1 ball head review.”

Having used the tripod for just over three months, I thought I’d do a follow up to my earlier review. Apart from a two week period over Christmas when I was away visiting friends and relatives, I reckon I have used the tripod at least 5 days a week so it’s probably had well over 60 days of use. Now 60 days may not sound like a lot but some of those days have been pretty long with a 3 hour walk/climb in the dark to be on a summit for sunrise. Then I might be out all day walking and climbing, take in the sunset and descend in the dark

The Cuillin is a very testing environment with savagely sharp gabbro rock, lots of scree and loose rock. Then there is the battering from mega high winds, rain and snow. Add in salt water in coastal locations and you have an absolute torture test for gear. If it survives in the Cuillin then it should be good anywhere.



The TMA28C Tripod and B1 Ballhead have been thoroughly put through their paces and come through with flying colours. The best thing I can say about them is that they have become indispensable tools and like good tools their use has become intuitive. Everything works slickly and does exactly what's asked of it. With use, muscle memory learns and I can rapidly remove the tripod from it's location on the side of my rucksack and intuitively set it up

possibly whilst balancing on a steep slope or cliff edge. I love the twistlocks on the legs and the tripod is a joy to set up. The light can change rapidly in the mountains and it's essential that all my gear is easy to use and quick to set up and the Benro certainly meets these criteria.



The Cuillin at dawn. The vivid colours are known as The Belt of Venus or an antitwilight arch, an atmospheric phenomena visible shortly before sunrise or after sunset

The above photo summarises why I need dependable gear that is easy to use. To be in place pre sunrise, I had to walk and climb for two and a half hours in the dark using crampons and ice axes, the way lit only by the stars and my head torch. Then in winds approaching 65 miles per hour I had to set up camera and tripod wearing gloves to try and keep my fingers warm since with the windchill factored in the temperature must have been about minus 20. The wind was so strong at times that I literally couldn't stand up and had to shelter behind rocks.



**Another shot where I had to climb for 3 hours to be in place for sunrise.
Coire a Ghrunnda as the sun hits Sgurr Alasdair.**

I can't really comment too much on the long term durability having only used it for 3 months but they have been pretty intense and I can't see any obvious problems or even any real sign of wear and tear. It is a new toy and as such I have probably mollycoddled it a bit more than usual; but the only extra protection has been the thin blue dust bag which I have used to keep it in on the outside of my rucksack to give a little protection from scratches etc. If I've used the tripod in the sea then I've washed it off with fresh water. Apart from this, I just use the tripod and replace it

in it's padded case when I get home. There's a few minor scratches as you'd expect but the tripod still works like new.

What I really like;

- The tripod and head do what they are designed to do, hold the camera and lens steady even in very windy, adverse conditions
- Intuitive to set up in dark etc
- Foam on leg not only warmer to hold in the cold but bigger diameter and easier to pick up when wearing gloves.
- Ball head is very smooth and all movements very fluid. Very sturdy especially for size and weight.
- Other manufacturers possibly use them, but new to me was the safety lock on the tripod head which means a quick release has to be pulled to release the camera/tripod plate/L bracket etc. Very easy to use and a great addition to prevent expensive camera gear accidentally falling off. I like it a lot and have become so used to using it that when I have used clients' tripods which don't have this feature then I still instinctively go through the motions of releasing it.
- Dust/dirt resistant collars on legs to prevent ingress of dirt etc. I like these a lot. Also the rubber twist locks are nice and chunky and easily operated when wearing gloves.

- Cost/performance ratio. Benro tripods are very similar to the Gitzo range with which I am very familiar. Gitzo seem to be recognised as perhaps the premier tripod producer but this does come at a cost and typically a similar Benro product probably costs half or less than it's Gitzo equivalent. I know that to a certain extent you do get what you pay for but in this case I can't help but think a large part of what you are paying for is the name rather than any quantum leap in quality.



**The Fairy Pools are even more magical when the mountains have a dusting of the white stuff.
Long exposures like this obviously need a steady tripod.**



Another long exposure, this time of the ever popular Elgol looking towards a snow capped Cuillin

The tripod has become like a well loved tool that does all that is demanded of it, in a business like and efficient manner and you cannot really ask for better than that. As to negative points, well I'm really having to wrack my brain to think of any. Obviously it would be great if the tripod could weigh next to nothing, pack down to the size of a match box yet be as stable as a steel girder but even Benro designers are constrained by the laws of physics and the tripod produces an excellent compromise between weight, bulk and stability.

The only minor fault is that when wearing gloves it can be awkward to use the hook at the base of the centre column which needs to be pulled down so as to hang a rucksack etc on to act as ballast. In the dark, with a strong wind howling around and wearing gloves I have struggled to grasp the sprung loaded hook. To make things easier, I have simply tied a thin piece of cord to it which can easily be grasped by cold fingers encased in gloves. Job done and the tripod is perfect for my needs.

In my initial review I mentioned the short column but haven't actually used it due to the lack of hook to hang a bag from. In fact, a number of times I have been glad of the longer central column and the ability to gain a little bit of height. The other thing I mentioned was the option to use either spikes or rubber feet. Well, in the snowy, winter conditions I have opted to just use the rubber feet and things worked fine although a couple of times I have had to trample down the snow to create a firm base. I still hope Benro listen to feedback and come up with a design that incorporates spikes which can retract through the rubber feet.

Benro certainly listens to feedback and I am pleased they have just announced a geared head. The Benro GD3WH Geared Head could well be the holy grail for landscapers with it's precise adjustment in 3 separate axes and best of all it is Arca (the industry standard) compatible rather than using generic fittings favoured by some tripod companies.

Perhaps even more interesting is that Benro UK have introduced a range of filters which look to be premium products and include not only graduated neutral density filters but also reverse grads. Exciting stuff.



