

GOTTA HAVE GEAR

CAMERON SIDE BAG FROM EMERGER | Review by Brian Clark

Sometimes you just *know* about a product, even at first glance. Sometimes it's the materials, other times it's the design — occasionally it's both. Likewise, sometimes you just *know* about the people behind the brand. Once in a long while, it's all of the above.

Chris Freeman and I met at this year's well-attended Denver Fly Fishing Show back in February where I was enticed by the "heritage" vibe of the canvas bags hanging in his booth and the classy leather-accented leader and wallet organizers on his table. I've always been partial to belting leather and brass fittings, but we don't see them often these days. I asked why he'd chosen traditional materials, and my interest piqued when he mentioned something about liking "old guitars" in his answer. I immediately suspected that we might be in for an enjoyable conversation, and quite possibly some fishing trips and jam sessions.

Yet again, despite already firmly believing fly fishing people to be among the finest folks on the planet, I'd wildly underestimated the depth of talent in our pool.

Chris grew up in an extremely musical family, and he's more than dabbled in band, percussion, vocal performance, and a variety of stringed instruments, including some of the "old guitars" mentioned above. In our subsequent email exchanges, it emerged that we both have musical kids and houses littered with instruments. We agreed that a prime benefit of working from home is having access to those instruments, and also being around the house for those rare moments when the kids aren't elsewhere. We eventually admitted that getting to play music with our kids is about the only thing we dig even more than fishing.

When his family moved to Colorado in 2010, Chris was fishing over 100 days per year, and his old gear was falling apart. During a visit from his parents, he happened to ask his mother — a seamstress for most of her life — if she'd teach him to sew. One thing led to another, and the bag Chris wanted to carry began to emerge from a series of iterative experiments. Once the design solidified, he went looking for durable materials which would age gracefully and resonate with his aesthetic leanings — something between the classic flight jackets from *Top Gun* and a pair of old school Chuck Taylors. Waxed canvas, bridle leather, white top-stitching, and solid brass were the answers. Friends began asking him to make bags for them, which in turn led to a sale on Etsy — then another. By 2015, Chris and his wife had accidentally started one of the premier brands for American-made heritage fly fishing goods. Over a decade later, it's still just the two of them, but they've been featured multiple times by *The Fiberglass Manifesto*, collaborated with author and fashion editor David Coggins, and they're shipping bags and wallets all over the world.

Much of our modern gear leans on space-age textiles. Some of these do specific jobs extremely well, but there's a dark side: many of them are manufactured with ecologically problematic processes, and most of them will dramatically outlive their useful life. Once they become damaged to the point where they no longer serve their purpose, they'll continue to damage the environment for decades, if not centuries. In sharp contrast, bags from Emerger are made from time-tested natural materials which not only retain their utility despite hard use but look more seasoned and



"I just think that fly fishing feels more artistic and creative. There's nuance and delicacy. As artistic people, we live in that space. Creativity feels sacred, and fly fishing feels the same way."

— Chris Freeman, founder of Emerger Fly Fishing

beautiful with age, yet will still eventually degrade naturally.

Waxed cotton canvas was developed late in the Golden Age of Sail as a replacement for linen sailcloth; canvas (made from cotton) is lighter, less expensive, and less wind-permeable than linen (made from flax). It starts out as a heavy-duty, high-density, duck-weave (in Dutch, "doek" means "cloth") cotton fabric into which a mix of waxes is melted — paraffin for hydrophobic properties and beeswax for durability.

The resulting material is extremely durable and water-resistant, and it also repels dirt and mud — simply wipe or rinse it down, work it over with a stiff brush, and let it dry naturally. Scraps from sails were often made into highly sought-after apparel and bags.

Like fine leather, waxed canvas develops a patina over time, giving Emerger's bags a unique character. Each new crease creates a line in the wax — but leave the bag out in the sun for a few minutes and those lines fade, providing a fresh canvas for recording more adventures. Better yet, the material can easily be rewaxed whenever necessary, enabling an indefinite number of renewals — a virtue that modern synthetic technical fabrics simply can't match.

Emerger currently makes two messenger-style bags for fly fishing: the Cameron Side Bag shown here and the smaller, single-compartment Traveler model. Both feature an integrated net slot on the outside of the bag, enabling access to the compartments without removing the net.

On the inside of the main compartment of the Cameron Side Bag are four yellow pass-thru sleeves with generous space for thick (or multiple) fly boxes, plus additional storage in the middle. The front compartment also has an internal pocket to provide organization; it's perfect for small tools and accessories, or for one of the leader or fly wallets also made by Emerger. Bias tape has been added to protect raw edges of the fabric both inside and out, and the yellow accents add a stately, refined air to the bag.



Emerger uses English Bridle Leather in the harnesses and straps, a leather type differentiated by having been impregnated with oils, natural greases, and tallow. It's meant for hard use in adverse conditions; over time, and with regular use and exposure to moisture, sunlight, and natural oils, it'll darken somewhat and develop a rich, rustic sheen.

Solid brass resists corrosion, and it's far stronger and more durable than the various plastic and polymer clips used on many modern bags.

Sure, it weighs a little more, but it looks damned classy. This is gear for the long haul, not the ultralight run.

For anyone who enjoys maintaining their fishing gear on days when they can't go fishing (surely I'm not the only one), conditioning the leather and polishing the brass on this Emerger bag are delightful distractions.

I don't think that "#SlowGear" is trending as a hashtag yet, and the idea of going viral almost feels antithetical to the idiosyncratic vibe of the traditional gear movement. Even so, these bags and wallets from Emerger sit at the vanguard of heritage craftsmanship expressed in the form of fly fishing gear. I look forward to both abusing and caring for my Cameron bag for decades to come, and I hope to wet a line and pick some strings with Chris himself someday.

- 18Oz Waxed Canvas and 10-12Oz English Bridle Leather
- Solid Brass hardware and YKK #10 brass zippers
- Dimensions: 11" L x 7" D x 8" H
- Designed and assembled in Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

MSRP US\$330.00

Website: www.emergerflyfishing.com

Emerger's bags are highly water-resistant but are not designed to be fully waterproof or submersible.

Note that while Emerger's side bags are symmetrical and ambidextrous, their creel-style slings are made for use on the left or right, messenger style. Specify which side you prefer when ordering.