

Tough tripod test

Any tripod can look good on a level floor in a studio, but outdoors, in tough conditions, it's another matter. **Rod Lawton** tests six of the best to find out how they'll cope in the wild...

» A tripod is just three legs and a centre column... right? Well, not quite. Tripods vary enormously in size, stability and features. Outdoors on rough ground and in tough conditions, the differences really become apparent.

This is when you discover that the mini lightweight tripod that looked so neat in the shop is blown away by the first gust of wind; which leads us to an inconvenient truth about outdoor photography: any decent tripod will be too big for a gadget bag and a bit of a pain to carry. So get used to it!

The next truth is that landscape shots are easy for any tripod, but close-ups aren't, especially when you're knee-deep in water and want a low-level shot.

This is where the conventional three-legs-and-a-centre-column design hits the buffers. Adjustable leg angles help you get down to ground level, but you need either

a removable centre column or a horizontal boom to get the camera down low too.

We've rounded up six good-quality tripods with different approaches, including classical design and engineering quality (Gitzo), innovative centre column adjustments (Giottos, Manfrotto), lifestyle branding (National Geographic) and a complete rethink of tripod design (Uniloc) to see which comes out on top.

This should be very interesting... »

ON TEST

Giottos 9351B (prototype) with MH7001 head	£130
Gitzo GT2330 with 2272 3-way head	£430
Manfrotto 190XPROB with 802 head	£165
Manfrotto 055XB with 804 head	£175
National Geographic Expedition NGET1 with NGEH1 head	£554
Uniloc System 1700 with 30 ball head	£203



How we tested them

Our tripods were subjected to a battery of tests on their usability outdoor situations, including:

- How long it took to attach a camera and extend them to their full height.
- For those that have horizontal boom options, we tested how long it took to set them up and how difficult it was.
- How long it took to set the tripod to its lowest position and how easy it was to remove the centre column.
- How rigid each model was when at its maximum height.
- How stable they were when kicked or

kocked (some tripods are quite 'springy', especially lighter ones).

- Ease of leg clamp operation.
- Column action smoothness.
- Smoothness of head movements
- Speed and firmness of the head lock.
- Ease of operation.
- Quality of build, materials and general 'feel' of construction.

The reviews don't list each property individually, but they were all evaluated and used to form an overall opinion of the tripod's suitability for the task.



What to look for...

Heads

Three-way heads are great for the studio, but slow to set up on uneven ground. Ball heads are simpler and quicker.

Centre column

Sliding columns are simpler than geared columns and don't get fouled up with mud and grit.

Legs

Twist locks don't snag on straps and branches like clip-locks, and the 'reversed' legs of the NG and the Uniloc are clever – you can stand them in water.

Quick release

QR mechanisms are useful when you want to quickly shoot some frames hand-held or explore new angles without having to move the tripod.



Digital
**Camera
Best
buy** ✓

Giottos

9351B/MH7001 ball head

PRICE £130 STREET PRICE TBC

CONTACT www.giottos-tripods.co.uk

How much does it weigh?



The 9351B here is a prototype model from Giottos' new range. We tested it with Giottos MH7001 ball head.

It's quite compact when folded, but opens out to a good height. The centre column is released via a locking knob, and the vertical movement is nice and smooth. If you pull it all the way up, the column actually comes out altogether, revealing this tripod's special trick. A second locking knob lets you adjust the angle of the column clamp, so you can rotate it slightly, re-insert the column and use it as a boom.

You can do this with the Manfrotto 190XPROB and National Geographic tripods, but where they only allow a horizontal boom, the adjustable clamp angle on the Giottos gives you more than 90 degrees of movement. It has much of the versatility of the Uniloc in this mode and, thanks to a Head Rotate Control, it's easy to rotate the column/boom to point in any direction.

The Verdict

Although it doesn't have the finish or the smooth movements of a pricey tripod, for the money you get a stable tripod with a classic design and high adjustability for those awkward angles. Great value.

93%



Gitzo

GT2330/G2272M 3-way head

PRICE £430 **STREET PRICE** £410

CONTACT www.gitzo.com

How much does it weigh?



Gitzos are the Rolls-Royce of tripods, and the GT2330 is expensive for an aluminium one, but surprisingly light. Gitzo claims to use standard-thickness aluminium to maintain strength, but to have saved weight elsewhere in the castings and by using a basalt centre column. The legs are fixed using twist locks, which are a bit quicker than flip-catches, less likely to trap your fingers or break your nails.

At full height, it's the most rigid of all the tripods on test. However, it's also one of the least flexible for close-ups because the column can't be turned into a horizontal boom. You can entirely remove the column and mount the head directly on the baseplate. This makes it easy to take low-angle shots and, unless you need the extra height offered by the column, it's probably an ideal configuration for general use.

Simple and comparatively limiting, but the engineering is superb.

The Verdict

No flashy gimmicks or clever tricks, and you pay extra for a horizontal boom, but when you use it you can understand what you're paying for. Simplicity is a boon and the G2272 head is quite superb.

89%



Manfrotto

190XPROB with 804 head

PRICE £165 **STREET PRICE** £140

CONTACT www.manfrotto.co.uk

How much does it weigh?



The 190XPROB is a straightforward mid-range tripod from Manfrotto, but with a neat twist. It has a unique column clamp design which means that if you release the column and pull it up to its full height, then press in a sprung catch in the base, you can rotate it through 90 degrees and use it as a horizontal boom.

This doesn't have the flexibility of the Giottos or Uniloc because the column can only be vertical or horizontal, but it's useful for overhead shots or low/awkward angles. It's quick to do, too, and the column can be rotated and clamped in 15 seconds.

The tripod is good without being great. The leg catches are quite stiff (stiff catches are painful when you've got cold hands) and it's not as rigid at full height as the Giottos. Manfrotto's 804 three-way head is quite compact, thanks to its short handles, but a little 'sticky' in its movements.

The Verdict

The 190XPROB is light, compact and versatile, but lacks the stability of the larger tripods. On uneven ground, on a windy day, with a heavy camera it can be rickety. It's inexpensive, but the Giottos does puts it a bit to shame.

72%



Manfrotto

055XB with 804 head

PRICE £175 **STREET PRICE** £160

CONTACT www.manfrotto.co.uk

How much does it weigh?



The 055XB doesn't have the rotating column described in the 190XPROB review. If you want this, you'll have to pay £15 more for the 055XPROB.

This version is cheaper and lighter than the 'rotating' version, which could be important because this is a more substantial tripod, with thicker, longer legs that give a higher and stiffer platform to shoot from. However, it's only 600g heavier.

The extra size and sturdiness make a big difference. Whereas the 190 doesn't always feel up to the job, the 055 does. It's not much larger when folded, either. Low-angle shots are easy because the 055 enables you to remove the centre column completely, and it goes high enough without the centre column to make this practical for outdoor photography. The 804 head is, as we said in the 190 review, a trifle 'sticky', but the weight and stability of the 055 make this less of an issue.

The Verdict

The 055X is comfortably big enough and sturdy enough for outdoor use. It doesn't have the class of the Gitzo, but it's a fraction of the price. There's a 'boom' version available if you need this feature.

83%

New Gear



National Geographic Expedition NGET1 NGEH1 head

PRICE £554 STREET PRICE £554 CONTACT www.supporttheexperience.com

How much does it weigh?

The NGET1 is actually 'engineered' by Manfrotto for National Geographic. It doesn't take too much detective work to spot the similarities between this tripod and Manfrotto's 458B tripod and 468MG hydrostatic ball head.

Some leg-warmers and articulated 'cup' feet have been added, along with protective rubber bellows around the shaft of the head. The leg-warmers are too loose to grip the tripod properly, and the cup feet are better suited to polished floors. The bellows feel thin and delicate.

Underneath, though, this is a very interesting tripod. There are no leg catches. Instead, an internal clutch mechanism enables you to pull the leg out but locks it rigidly in the new position so it won't push back in. The legs are released by a button right at the top. It's very clever and the fastest tripod to set up. The centre column splits and reassembles as a boom.

The Verdict

Super-fast setup and a good maximum height. The hydrostatic head has a beautiful movement and grips like iron with just a gentle tweak of the locking knob. A great combination but not quite as rock-solid as the Gitzo.

83%



Uniloc System 1700 30 ball head

PRICE £203 STREET PRICE £185 CONTACT www.warehouseexpress.com

How much does it weigh?

Uniloc tripods use a curved centre bolt to link both their legs and their centre column. The legs and the column can move independently, and much more rapidly than conventional tripods. Until you get used to it, though, it's like trying to wrestle with a robotic octopus, but once you master it there's a good chance you'll never use a conventional tripod again.

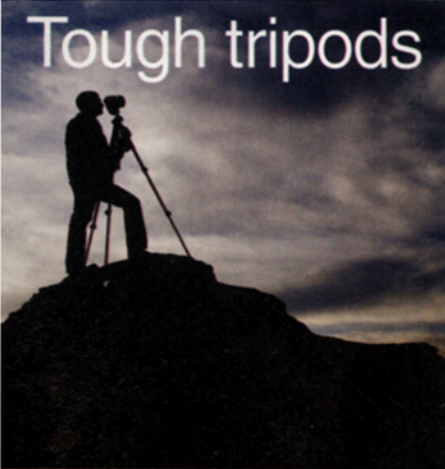
The design means you can use the centre column as a horizontal or diagonal boom at any angle, and it takes just moments to set up. The 'System' version has a multi-section column that can be assembled and reassembled using inset grub screws and an allen key. You can have a short column, a long column, an extra-long 'hinged' column.

Disadvantages? The two-section legs are long when folded and don't give the same height as the others when extended.

The Verdict

The Uniloc is tricky but brilliant. Nothing else offers this combination of speed, flexibility and engineering. You'll either love it or hate it. Uniloc is a small firm and tracking down one of these beasts isn't so easy.

90%



Tough tripods

Conclusion

The winner is the Giotto's 9351B. It's not the best in absolute terms, but its combination of versatility, rigidity and sheer value for money is just unbeatable. What really clinches it for the Giotto's is the cleverness of its column clamp design. A couple of the others let you convert their centre columns into horizontal booms, but the Giotto's lets you reposition it at any angle and turn it to point in any direction. Not even the Uniloc does this (here, you'd have to lift and rotate the tripod bodily).

Nevertheless, the Uniloc comes a close second. Its advantages are speed of operation and supreme flexibility, especially for awkward-to-reach macro subjects. It doesn't use any clever materials or fancy gimmicks, just old-fashioned engineering and inspired design. Availability does appear to be an issue, though.

For outdoor photography you need a tripod stable enough to stand up in a gale, versatile enough for the trickiest close-up and cheap enough that you're not scared to scratch it. Much as we admire the others (especially the Gitzo), the Giotto's and the Uniloc are the ones that fit the bill.

