



Stabilizing Cameras On Board

Three Horizon True camera mounts excel in tests, but they come with hefty price tags.

Anyone who has ever tried to stabilize a camera aboard a moving boat knows how difficult it can be to keep the equipment dry, compose the shot, level the horizon, and keep your hands off the shutter button during long exposures.

Using a slow shutter speed (longer than 1/60th of a second) with a handheld camera, usually produces a blurry image, especially aboard a boat. Self-timers and wireless shutter triggers can make the job easier but are of little value if the camera isn't securely mounted.

Given hull vibration, wave action, and the unevenness of the deck, setting up a stable work platform for the camera presents myriad challenges that marine photographers try to solve using a variety of camera mounts, three types of which *Practical Sailor* recently put to the task.

WHAT WE TESTED

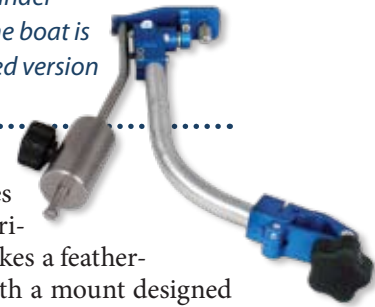
Among the most popular gadgets for stabilizing a small video camera or digital SLR camera with a zoom lens is the

venerable beanbag, similar to those photographers often use on African game safaris. The bags are typically fitted with a mounting screw that locks the base of the camera to the bag. Representing this category in our test was the Camo-Pro 7 beanbag from OmniPod.

Flexible devices that can be twisted around poles or tree limbs have been gaining popularity among the growing array of camera-stabilization tools. The San Francisco-based company Joby offers a line of flexible tripods that accommodate electronics in varying weights. The wimpiest models in this GorillaPod line are designed to hold steady a pocket-sized point-and-shoot, and the beefiest are meant to brace a professional DSLR camera with up to a 200-millimeter zoom lens attached. We tested the heavy-duty GorillaPod Focus and SLR Zoom.

A third method of camera-stabilization requires more specialized equipment, such as the precision line of camera mounts from Horizon True, and is geared toward the more serious shutterbugs and videographers. We tested three self-leveling Horizon True setups invented and sold by Jeffrey Mootz of Minnesota: the Counter Balance model, Pendulum model, and Multipurpose

The Horizon True Counter Balance we tested (left) uses a recently updated hydraulic dampening system to keep the camera's viewfinder level, even when the boat is heeled. The updated version is pictured at right.



kit, which includes a mast mount. Horizon True also makes a feather-weight version with a mount designed for Lasers and other small boats.

HOW WE TESTED

PS compared each product for function, durability, stability, ease of handling, and the ability to self-level the viewfinder.

Each camera mount was tested aboard a Bristol 27 attached to its mooring and also while it was underway using auxiliary power across a smooth sea—ideal but rare conditions for a marine photographer. The products were set up on multiple spots on the boat: coachroof, stern pulpit, cockpit seat, mast, etc.

All were tested using a 20-ounce Canon 20D DSLR camera with a 20- to 35-millimeter lens (17 ounces) attached. At a combined 2 pounds, 5 ounces, the test load was relatively light by professional photography standards. By contrast, a more typical professional setup aboard a boat might pair a relatively heavy Canon 1Ds MKII series camera (3 pounds, 9 ounces) with a 200-millimeter Canon lens (3 pounds, 4 ounces), far heavier than the Canon combination we used to test the mounts.

OMNIPOD

The Omnipod Camo-Pro 7 is a durable beanbag with a flexible, nonskid bottom, a Velcro strap for securing it, and a threaded stainless screw centered for mating with the camera. Packed with polystyrene beads, the bag measures 11 inches long by 7 inches wide and 2.5 inches tall.

Bloggers offer up myriad suggestions for substitute camera platforms while on the go—from rice sacks to tube socks stuffed with grain to zipper-top plastic bags filled with native soil. The



The simple OmniPod Camo-Pro 7 beanbag can be secured to many places on a boat via its Velcro strap.

Photos by David Liscio

PS VALUE GUIDE		PORTABLE CAMERA MOUNTS FOR ONBOARD USE						
MAKER	MODEL	PRICE / WARRANTY	WEIGHT**	RATINGS				
				FUNCTION	DURABILITY	STABILITY	SELF-LEVELING	CONSTRUCTION QUALITY
OMNIPOD	OMNIPOD \$	\$40 / 1 month	2 pounds	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Poor	Excellent
JOBY GORILLAPOD	FOCUS	\$99 / 12 months	1.1 pounds	Excellent	Fair	Good	Poor	Poor
	SLR-ZOOM	\$50 / 12 months	8.5 ounces	Excellent	Fair	Good	Poor	Fair
HORIZON TRUE	PENDULUM	\$239 / 3 months*	3 pounds	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
	COUNTER BALANCE ✓	\$500 / 3 months*	4.5 pounds	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
	MULTI-PURPOSE	\$500 / 3 months*	3.5 pounds	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent

✓ Recommended \$ Budget Buy *90-day money-back guarantee **Maker specs

problem with most homemade beanbags is that they lack the quarter-inch screw that secures the bag to the camera, which means the camera could easily fall overboard. That isn't a concern with the OmniPod.

During our trials, we lashed the bag to a stanchion and a grab rail on the coach-roof. With the Velcro strap and the camera screwed to the bag, testers had no fear that the camera might fall overboard.

Simplicity, affordability, and stability are the Omnipod's best features. However, the device offers no self-leveling capability, so as the boat heels, your camera viewfinder will follow suit. It also was the least versatile of the three types of mounts tested, but no tools are needed to attach the camera or to affix the mount.

The OmniPod Camo-Pro 7 beanbag can be purchased online for \$74 and comes with a 30-day warranty.

Bottom line: The Omnipod's limitations—especially the inability to self-level—should be recognized from the start. But it's the second least expensive of the group and has few parts that can break or corrode. It gets the PS Budget Buy.

JOBY GORILLAPODS

Testers found the innovative Joby GorillaPod Focus and SLR-Zoom easy to use. Attaching the test camera via the quarter-inch stainless screw was simple, and the aluminum and plastic legs with rubber grips offer unlimited onboard mounting options. We wrapped their legs around the mast, a stanchion, the pulpits, and the grab rail. We also used them as mini tripods in the cockpit.

We had high hopes for both, given Joby's unique approach to mounting. The plastic-and-rubber SLR-Zoom, rated for 6.5 pounds, performed without a hitch during tests. However, the Focus failed with the Canon 20D DSLR and lens attached. One of the legs separated at the aluminum socket-plastic ball connection and could not be reattached.

The Focus is rated to support up to 11 pounds, considerably more than our 2-pound, 5-ounce test equipment. According to Joby, this type of defect is extremely rare and would be covered by their no-questions-asked return policy for factory defects.

Flexibility and versatility are the

GorillaPods' best features. They can be twisted like a Gumby doll into all sorts of configurations, enabling them to wrap around just about anything.

The GorillaPods do not adjust to the boat's heel, and the hinged design presents multiple failure points, a characteristic that was highlighted by our test unit's demise.

The Focus can be found online for \$99 and the SLR-Zoom for \$50.

Bottom line: The GorillaPod concept is exceptional, in our opinion, but they still can't help level your viewfinder.

HORIZON TRUE

The three Horizon True models we tested—the Pendulum, Counter Balance, and Multipurpose Mount kit—were



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 The Joby GorillaPod Focus mini-tripod (top, far right) mutates into a gripping mount for numerous mounting options (bottom, far right). Our test model succumbed under light load when one of its legs popped out of its socket.





The Horizon True Pendulum model uses friction dampening and gimbaling action, allowing the camera to swing and keeping the picture stable.

designed originally for videography, but they also can be used with still cameras (with timers or remotes). All are made of stainless steel and anodized aluminum.

Testers found the heavy-duty Pendulum, rated to 15 pounds, to be superior to other camera mounts tested in terms of material construction and functionality. It is made for a professional DSLR camera with telephoto lens and waterproof housing or a waterproof prosumer video camera that weighs about the same.

The Pendulum is friction dampened, and is the suggested HT mount for still photography. The camera attachment point swings like a pendulum from a curved, vertical bar that attaches to the boat. No matter how the boat heeled during testing, the camera mount quickly leveled the horizon as it swung back and forth.

The Counter Balance model, rated for 4 pounds, uses hydraulic dampening; the manufacturer recommends it

for offshore use. Since our tests, Horizon True released an updated version of this mount. The new Counter Balance's hydraulic system allows for more positioning options and smooth transitions as the boat heels and pitches. For videographers, hydraulic dampening is the way to go—ESPN uses these mounts for filming regattas—though it may be overkill for the hobbyist still photographer.

The Multipurpose Mount, designed for lighter equipment, uses the same hydraulic system to level the camera, and comes with a Velcro mast-mount or a rail mount.

All of the Horizon True models are solidly constructed and relatively easy to attach with a series of built-in knobs and clamps. An Allen nut can be loosened with the supplied Allen wrench to adjust the tilt.

The downside of the Horizon True mounts is their price, which can range from \$239 for the basic Pendulum setup to over \$1,000 for the packages (with cameras). All Horizon True products come with a three-month, money-back guarantee.

Bottom line: If you're serious about marine photography or videography and have the budget to support the habit, the HT equipment is worth the investment.

CONCLUSION

Each of the three different mounting methods we tested has its pros and cons. The OmniPod was the most portable and least expensive of the bunch, plus its simplicity lends itself to a longer working life. It gets the Budget Buy nod.

Testers like the GorillaPods' unique approach and unlimited versatility, but their multiple failure points and inability to keep the camera level hold them back. If you also plan to use it off the boat (hiking, biking, etc.), the \$50 SLR-Zoom is worth considering.

The Horizon True equipment is undoubtedly superior to the other types of mounts, and its price reflects that. They were the least portable and had less versatility than the Focus, but they were the only test products that enable self-leveling, a key consideration in our testing.

Buyers who plan to use the HT mounts—or any attached to the pulpit—should also invest in a waterproof camera housing or waterproof equipment. ▲

CONTACTS

JOBY, 888/569-5629, www.joby.com

HORIZON TRUE

507/665-3366, www.horizontrue.com

OMNIPOD, www.omni-pod.com

TOOLS & TECHNIQUES

Tricks of the Trade for Amateur Shutterbugs at Sea



David Liscio

Here are a few tips for shooting at sea from professional marine photographer and *PS* contributor David Liscio.

- Salt hates your camera gear, so keep it dry and protected. A soft-sided dry bag with a folding mouth, plastic-snap closure buckle, and space enough for two camera bodies with lenses attached is a good starting point. These run less than \$30. A heavy-duty Zip-Loc bag is better than no protection at all.
- A boat is an unstable, vibrating platform, so use a fast shutter speed to keep the image sharp: 1/500th of a second is about the slowest, unless you want to show blur.
- Don't hang on to the mast or lifelines while shooting; they are moving and vibrating with the boat. Kneel or sit, and try to stabilize yourself while hand-holding the camera.

- Use the spot meter when panning a moving boat. Always bracket your F-stops one to two stops because the water's surface can fool your light meter. A circular polarizer screwed onto your lens will reduce glare and allow you to dial in the sky and clouds for a more dramatic image. Using fill-flash can bring out the facial details of your subject, particularly when they are shaded by a hat or bimini. Look for unusual or interesting angles. Go aloft in a bosun's chair. Eliminate visual clutter, such as drink cans, sunscreen, random bags, or towels.

- Lastly, be patient. In photography, light is everything. Wait for it to perform its magic, and on the water, like everywhere else, that usually happens an hour before sundown.

— David Liscio (www.davidliscio.com) is a photojournalist whose credits include *Practical Sailor*, *National Geographic*, *Sailing*, *Sail*, and *Cruising World* magazines.