

KPS Research & Design T5 Ballhead by E.J. Peiker

Over twelve years ago, I wrote that I had found the perfect ballhead - the Really Right Stuff BH-55. The BH-55 has been my primary full-sized ballhead for all of those years and it remains one of the very best heads ever made. In the intervening years, many new tripod heads with new features have been introduced. I have tested many of them and wrote about some of them including some highly touted ones but none of them provided me a superior experience to the BH-55... until now! About a year ago I got the opportunity to use both an Arca Swiss C1 Cube geared head and an Arca Swiss D4. I loved the absolute precision of the geared nature of the C1 Cube but I did not like it's mass nor it's very slow approach to photography since all adjustments had to be made using the gears - there was no quick way to reposition the camera on the head. The D4 tried to solve this problem by providing both a geared function and a



quick action function using a dual pivot design but the gearing in this head was somewhat difficult to use and despite trying several D4 heads, most had very inconsistent tension in the gearing between the pitch and roll axis. The cost of nearly \$1200 before putting a panorama clamp on top was also a turn-off for a product that still had some significant flaws. A few months ago I was introduced to the KPS Research & Design T5 geared ballhead. This head is a traditional ballhead that incorporates a geared system that allows you to fine tune pitch and roll similar to the Arca Swiss D4 but without the inconsistent tension between the axis. Unfortunately the first units only came with its own clamping system and I wanted to be able to use a panorama clamp on top. It seems that I was not the only photographer that requested this and KPS made available a model without a clamp that accepts different camera mounting platforms including those made by RRS. I did not hesitate to order the base head and then put a Really Right Stuff Panorama clamp on top.

The KPS head is manufactured and designed in Korea. This is not a cheap knock-off product. It is an innovative and uniquely designed extremely high end, precision manufactured tripod head and it is definitely not cheap in price or in quality. The head works just like any normal high end ballhead with a panning base for controlling the yaw axis and a universal ballhead positioning control for controlling pitch and roll (the two black knobs). Similar to some of the Arca Swiss models, a tension knob is integrated into the main control knob but unlike the Arca Swiss, it does not have the tendency to bind. In addition to these basic controls, it has a geared pitch and roll fine tuning control (the two red knobs) that can be used even when the head is fully locked to allow up to 15 degrees of left/right tilt (roll) and forward/backward tilt (pitch) allowing one to very precisely frame a subject as one would with a fully geared head like the Arca Swiss C1 Cube. You do not have to use these additional controls and ignore them completely when speed is of the essence making it function exactly the same as a traditional high end ballhead. But when a fraction of a degree can make or break a photo, one can first position the camera with the main controls and then with great precision, fine tune the framing. It is a fairly large head using a 44mm ball. The head is quite tall at 6 inches with the panorama clamp attached and it has a load capacity of 88lb. The T5 comes in an attractive box but the documentation must be downloaded. The non-clamp version costs \$730 with various different clamped versions available for more.



KPS T5 compared to RRS BH-55

When one adds an RRS panorama clamp as I have done, the whole bullhead ensemble ends up at nearly \$1000. As stated, this is a premium proposition for the discerning photographer. The KPS T5 is available exclusively from Legio Aerium in the USA

(<http://www.legioaerium.com/store/c2/KPS.html>).

In order for the gearing to work well and in a highly intuitive manner, it is important to properly position the head relative to your subject. I have found it to work best if the KPS logo is positioned toward the

photographer (similar to the first picture of the T5 in its box). This puts the main ball control in perfect position for your left hand, the geared left/right tilt control in your right hand and the geared forward/backward tilt control in the front.

I have now used this head exclusively for my landscape photography for a few months including several longer trips where the head received very high utilization. I can honestly say that I would not want to go back to the BH-55 even though it is still one of the world's finest heads. I have actually sold my BH-55. The only minor shortcoming is that there is no way to know when the two geared tilt controls are centered other than counting turns of the knob from either stop. Since my a7R II's level is off by 0.8 degrees, I am constantly turning the left/right tilt or roll control in the same direction so I eventually end up at the stops and know that 15 half turns returns the control to center. In fact each half turn represents one degree of tilt in the controls. I can't immediately see a way for KPS to incorporate a centering indicator or mechanism though. This is a very minor thing though. Having the flexibility of quickly being able to frame a subject as a normal ballhead provides or being able to work slowly, deliberately and with extreme precision all in the same head is fantastic.