

GROUPTEST

CTC'S SEAMUS KELLY REVIEWS OFFICE BAGS

Briefcase panniers

Briefcase panniers protect your laptop, prevent A4 documents getting dog-eared, and look more businesslike in the office. **Seamus Kelly** reviews four

STANDARD PANNIERS are okay for the commute to work, so long as you're happy with the cycling equivalent of a holdall. Contents can get jumbled. Documents can end up dishevelled and your laptop can squash your packed lunch. A briefcase pannier is a more organised, more businesslike-looking alternative.

The four bags in this test are all able to accommodate a 15-inch laptop computer, as well as A4 documents and stationery, while still having room for accessories and a waterproof jacket. They're all weatherproof. And they all fit securely, so you don't have to worry about them jumping off the rack and smashing expensive contents if you hit a pothole on the way to a meeting.

2 Fixings

Hooks that can be moved, preferably independently, enable you to fit the bag where you want on the rack, ensuring adequate heel clearance. All good hooks have some kind of catch to stop them coming off the rack accidentally. Ortlieb's and Vaude's retract when you lift the bag's handle, which saves time when you park but makes opportunistic theft when you're waiting at the traffic lights a possibility.

3 Weather resistance

All four of these bags are impressively waterproof. I hosed them down, spending five minutes on each, aiming at flaps and seals. The Carradice and Altura bags showed no signs of moisture ingress. The Vaude let in a little dampness without its raincover but none with it fitted. Surprisingly, a few water droplets managed to get inside the Ortlieb.



1 Heel clearance

Briefcase panniers don't taper towards the bottom, so usually fit to the rear rack at an angle to provide heel clearance. Some are manufactured left- or right-specific, others are can be adjusted to fit either side. Smaller notebook-computer sized panniers may fit squarely on the rack, in either 'landscape' or 'portrait' orientation.



4 Off the bike

All briefcase bags have carry handles, and most have a shoulder strap – detachable so that it doesn't end up in the spokes. Carry the bag with the 'bike side' away from you body to keep road grime off your clothes. Some bags have a zip-up panel to cover up the rack-mounting hardware (and any road dirt).

5 Compartments

Internal dividers and pockets let you organise the briefcase's contents better, to stop you fishing around. A padded laptop pouch is obviously useful; check that the size suits. External pockets are handy for bike gear that you don't want mixing with your office stuff.

BALANCING
YOUR
NEEDS

Backpacks and courier bags are convenient for short trips by bike, as the bag goes with you when your dismount. They do isolate laptops more from road vibration, although I've carried computers and cameras in panniers for the last ten years and, with fairly careful packing, have had no issues. The big advantage of a pannier is that it takes the weight off your back, which is more comfortable and helps stop you getting sweaty. Using a single pannier is less balanced than two, but I've found that it only makes a significant difference to handling if the single bag is heavily laden.

**ALTURA URBAN DRYLINE 17 £74.99**

Designed to carry a 17-inch laptop computer, this bag has lots of height and width internally. It's the only pannier I've come across that can carry a hardback A3 sketch book, making it a good choice for artists and designers. The bag itself looks smart in black, and the reflective patches and logos are discrete enough not to look out of place at work. The interior is divided into compartments, including a removable laptop pouch with handles and a zip. The Urban Dryline 17 attaches to the rack at a steep angle to enable this large bag to remain clear of heels and thighs, and although it looks unusual this works very well. The clips and stabiliser were easily adjusted without tools. Removal from the rack involves pushing down on the red button and lifting the bag. It was so easy it could be done in a single movement with one hand. Dimensions: 42×34×13cm. zyro.co.uk

Weatherproof, good value, lots of features, and plenty of capacity

**CARRADICE BIKE BUREAU £95**

The Bike Bureau is made from cotton duck with leather straps. It's big enough to carry a day's office essentials, plus a change of clothing. A removable laptop sleeve is suspended by two studs near the top of the bag, providing an extra level of protection. Under the large external flap there is a waterproof nylon cover with a drawstring closure to keep the contents dry. An extra flap over the top of the bag can be deployed to cover the rack hooks off the bike, although the Velcro patches to hold this flap in place are not as effective as the Altura's zip-down cover. The plastic panel on the bottom of the test bag arrived scuffed and split. Had I bought the bag, I'd have had to exchange it. I wasn't keen on the fixings, which needed a screwdriver for grub screws and a hammer to fix the rail end caps. Dimensions: 44×37×15cm. carradice.co.uk

Traditional style, tough fabric, and weatherproof. Fixings and base could be better

**ORTLIEB OFFICE BAG (QL2) £105**

This box-like bag uses Ortlieb's familiar roll-top closure system, without an additional flap over the top. Of the four bags in the test, this one looks least like a typical office bag. Inside there is a large open space with a few pockets for pens, phones etc. It does not have a laptop sleeve of its own, although there is plenty of space to fit one; Ortlieb even make them. The bag is light for its size but seems quite robust. I found the closure buckles harder to open than most and they would be a challenge for anyone with long finger nails. Setting the fixtures up is easy, with just a hex key needed to tighten the stabiliser. Simply pulling up on the handle releases the catches and removes the bag from the rack. This QL2 version uses 'normal' hooks; there is also a QL3 version with recessed hooks. Dimensions: 40×30×17cm. ortlieb.co.uk

Plenty of room but lacks a briefcase's compartmentalised interior and appearance

**VAUDE NEWPORT II MEDIUM £74.99**

The Vaude bag looks smart and modern and is also available in grey, which might suit those wanting a more traditional style. The heavy material has a weatherproof coating and is easy to wipe clean. The bag is slightly smaller than the others, and its interior is divided into two compartments, one of which has light padding for a laptop. (I still used a neoprene sleeve for extra protection.) No tools are needed to adjust the clips and I was surprised to find no stabiliser on the bag. In use, even when riding out of the saddle and over cobbles the bag didn't swing away from the rack. The bar carrying the clips can be positioned for either left or right side of the bike. I particularly like the way it can be very easily removed, making it more comfortable to carry as a shoulder bag. Dimensions: 38×26×14cm. vaude.co.uk

A compact office pannier that's also comfortable as a shoulder bag