

## Ledge Review

FISH (Russ Walling) began making portaledges by hand in 1985 setting the bar in portaledge construction by using machined corners (rather than plumbing store fare) and 4130 cromoly

### **Metolius Bombshelter:**

Company Line: "Whether you're spending just 1 night or multiple weeks in the vertical world, you need to know that your home on the wall won't let you down. That's why the Metolius Bomb Shelter is designed to be the most bombproof Portaledge available. Our main priority was to make the most comfortable ledge possible and still keep the set-up time to a couple of minutes."

**Reviewer Experience:** 50 nights on the Metolius Bombshelter Double, 5-6 of those with a partner, the remainder solo.

### **Metolius Bombshelter: The Ups:**

- **Spreader Bar:** Metolius is the innovator of the "spreader bar" which keeps the long side tubes from flexing and allowing the bed to sag. A spreader bar is included with both the single and double models. This is especially useful in the double ledge model, where the frame must often support the weight of two climbers.
- **Bomb Proof:** The Metolius ledge is, in fact, as bombproof as they come.
  - The bed material is very tough
  - The fly is a full three pounds heavier than the other flies on the market, even though it uses the same amount of material. This is a testament to the weight of the material used in the fly.
  - The "wall side" of the bed material is protected with haul-bag like material and does a great job protecting the bed material.
- **Completely Waterproof Clip-In point for the fly:** There is no way that water can leak through the clip in point of this fly unless you damage it. Metal plates create a perfect seal and there is not "nylon" to wick water.

### **Metolius Bombshelter: The Downs:**

- **Tiny Shock Cord Pole Connector:** On a portaledge, all of the tubes are held together with elastic shock cord. The cord used in the Metolius ledges is basically ¼ inch shock cord. If this cord fails on

a wall, tubing and other ledge components can be lost. I have had Metolius shock cord fail on two occasions. It is the least “bombproof” component of the ledge and the least “bombproof” elastic cord in any ledge I’ve used.



Photo of Metolius Bombshelter elastic shock cord cut through, poles held together by sheath of cord



Photo of Metolius Bombshelter shock-cord wear. You can see the residue from where I tried to reinforce the cord with duct tape.



For comparison: See the burly bomber shock cord used by BD and FISH

- **Stability:** If this ledge is as much as “touching” irregularities on the wall it can go out of square. If going “out of square” causes the spreader bar to fall out of the ledge (has happened to me), the end poles can slide out of the cups, or come close enough to guilt you out of your sleeping bag. Additionally, for those who like to “flag” their portaledge during hauling, the metolius ledge will not

work. The spreader bar will be bumped out of place by either hitting the rock or will fall out due to forces placed on a ledge, resulting in a ledge that collapses and is then at greater risk of being damaged in a light wind. Don't flag the metolius ledge.



Metolius end tubes demonstrating corner instability despite tight bed tensioners. (Lunar Ecstasy Solo, Zion NP, Jan 2004)



“Uh oh” photo: If your spreader bar is in place but showing a gap like this, don't leave it this way and expect it to stay. The spreader bar must be absolutely right!



Photo demonstrating the “hourglassing” that occurs if the spreader bar falls out of the ledge or is not put in place properly. This is an extreme example.

Metolius corner joints and spreader bar

**Setup Tips:** Read your instructions carefully, or download them from the metolius web site. It is key that you assemble the side tubes THEN insert the spreader bar before trying to put the end tubes in place. Attempting to seat the end tubes without the spreader bar in place can be a comedy of errors, particularly if you are solo, thanks to the insecure nature of the cupped end corner joints. Once the spreader bar is in place the ledge is fairly stable.

Ironically, the color of the Metolius fly is basically Safety Orange. More ironically, they chose to consult with Land’s End and elected to name the color Apricot in their catalog. ;)

### **Black Diamond Cliff Cabana and Single Ledge**

BD purchased the ACE (Anker Climbing Equipment) formerly A5 ledge design. This ledge is known for being popular for expeditions, incredibly well made, durable, and for having every little thing just right. Interestingly, BD has made a few innovative changes to this outstanding ledge, some improvements, some it remains to be seen

Reviewer experience: 40+ nights on a very similar A5 Single version produced just before BD re-designed some aspects of it, 9 nights on the new BD single ledge.

### **Black Diamond Ledges: The Ups:**

- **Quicklink Suspension Connection:** Brilliant. Brilliant. Brilliant! Quicklink connections between the suspension on the bed mean that it is easy to repair any “clusters” that might occur during the setup process. Straps tangled? Just unfasten one, pull it through the cluster and re-attach it. Because the

tubes are held together with very bomber elastic, you won't drop any parts and you won't want to cut yourself free and fall to the deck every time your ledge gets tangled. This is a huge benefit and it is only offered by Black Diamond

- **Spreader Bar:** For the first time, the BD (previously A5/ACE) cliff cabana offers a spreader bar. We feel that the spreader bar, which was once the most unique feature of the Bombshelter, will now make the Cliff Cabana (the double ledge) more able to compete with the Metolius Bomb Shelter from a comfort standpoint. We don't feel that a spreader bar is necessary on a single ledge, and neither does Black Diamond, so it is not available.
- **Fly Options:** BD offers two fly options with both the single and double portaledge. The "Simple" fly is a lightweight fly of ripstop nylon of the standard design, which wraps around the edges of the ledge. However, a fly with two doors, two "vapor ports" to prevent condensation, and a full wrap-around bottom to prevent leakage will be offered in the spring. **VERY IMPORTANT** – A wall is not a campsight. Think carefully before going with a lightweight fly. Falling debris washed off of the top and sides of formations and very high winds can damage your fly! Go burly!

From the BD web site: "As lightweight/minimalist flies, Simple Flies are excellent for light walls, summer cragging, climbing fast and avoiding rescue tickets on El Cap." Note – May not be enough to avoid the rescue, just enough to avoid having to pay for it. Hmm.

- **Hot Shot CornerConnection:** The struggle to insert the final corner end tube is over. Black Diamond's innovative "hot shot" corner, present on only one of four corners of the ledge, makes the final step of setup much easier on the hands. However, we found the tolerances so tight that your reviewer (admittedly a female with small weak hands) was unable to snap the pole in and out of position and had to use a hammer to assemble the ledge every night. Stronger people won't have a problem and the part will "break in" according to BD.



Photo of the "Hot Shot" connection corner and theoretical tube insertion.

- **Wall side bumpers:** Wall side rubber bumpers on the corners of the ledge prevent the side tubes from pinching the fly and the bed material between the side tube and the rock. We find that this significantly reduces wear on both of these key ledge components. While they will wear out (they

are rubber, based on our experiences they will probably last 30 nights), they can be replaced and are worth the trouble to protect your ledge investment.

- **“Wall Side/Air Side” Labels:** Interestingly, if not importantly, BD has conveniently labeled both the Rain Fly and the Ledges with “Wall Side/Air Side” designations so that you can hang your ledge and fly properly prior to deployment. While this may not seem important, it can help prevent unnecessary wear on the unreinforced side in the event that you are too lazy to rotate your ledge or fly. It could even prevent you from dropping it during rotation. Not a bad idea.

Black Diamond’s Wall Side/Air Side labels help you get it right before you deploy!

- **Generously Sized Ledge Bag and Fly Bag:** The only thing as frustrating than having trouble setting up your gear is having trouble putting it away. BD figured this out and provided spacious ledge and fly storage bags meaning less struggle in the morning when you’re trying to get moving. Thank you, BD!



The reviewer with the black diamond ledge in it’s very nice bag

- **Completely Waterproof Clip-In point for the fly:** There is no way that water can leak through the clip in point of this fly unless you damage it. Metal plates create a perfect seal and there is not “nylon” to wick water. Metolius should have patented this, because BD basically implemented an identical system several years later.

### **Black Diamond Ledges: The Downs:**

- **Limited Suspension Adjustment:** The suspension adjustment on the Black Diamond ledges are not fully adjustable and they are the only ones on the market that are this way. In awkward bivies, such as corners, above ledges, or even when trying to adjust the ledge for rock irregularities, maximum adjustment is a benefit. I was often frustrated by the inability to fully adjust the Black Diamond suspension. It is the only ledge on the market without full suspension height adjustment. This resulted in several uncomfortable nights when your reviewer had to set up less-than-ideal bivies at crowded stations (peanut ledge, four climbers) in dihedrals , and on less than vertical terrain.
- **Bed Material Corner Gaps:** At the four corners of the ledge, there is significant space cut out from

around the corner joints. These gaps resulted in upward spray getting into the ledge, as the fly did not overlap enough to prevent the updrafts from spraying water through the holes. Additionally, small items that might roll free on the bed could fall through these holes. We believe that Black Diamond would do well to reduce the size of these cutouts around the corner joints. However, it is nice to be able to stuff your arms through these holes to clip and unclip the fly...since you'll be wet anyway, may as well take it off. ;)



See the size of the corner gaps, could be cinched a bit tighter, but you get the point. Also note the excellent quicklink suspension setup. Also note the "Wall Side Bumpers"

- **Cluster Potential:** The A5 Cliff Cabana features 10 poles (two per side, two per end, two for the spreader bar) and 9 straps. (Six point suspension and three for the "sharkfin" separator). To us? This seems like a lot. Luckily the suspension points on the ledge are detachable as seen in "The Ups" for this ledge.

## FISH Products

**FISH Products has been making portaledges for, oh, say, 20+ years and likely has more walls under his belt than everyone on the BD and Metolius brand teams combined. If that doesn't tell you that FISH products knows how to make what may be the best ledges on the market then the following will. FISH products does NOT make a cheap compromise to the "big name manufacturers", don't assume that spending more than 1/3 less on your ledge will buy you less...it buys you more. See below!**

**Reviewer Experience:** FISH products did not provide a ledge to review, however, they did provide a factory tour, the opportunity to set-up and break-down ledges in a hanging station, and a features/benefits/flaws discussion taking the better part of a day. The reviewer, despite owning an A5 single, BD single, and Metolius Bombshelter double, plans on purchasing a FISH fly at the very least.

## FISH Products - The Ups:

- **FISH's Sensible Features:** Based on Russ Walling's 20 year's experience making portaledges, the number of practical features included on his ledges is second to none.
  - **Fly Lockdowns:** The wall side of your fly actually locks onto the frame of the bed, which will

prevent a sharp corner of the ledge from “sneaking” out of the reinforced corners of the fly and damaging it during setup/breakdown, or storm-induced movement...this is an excellent idea and available on no other fly’s

- **Blowholes (vapor ports) on all Flies!:** Anyone who has spent a night inside of a fly knows that condensation can soak you to the bone. And being wet is dangerous. Vapor ports, not available on the Metolius fly or the BD Simple fly help manage condensation. The ports are also big enough to allow disposal of key “bodily fluids” without removal of the fly and exposing the climber to the elements. The blowholes are big enough for your head, as well, allowing a view of the outside world and a breath of fresh air...you’ll be yearning for this after spending a night under any other fly!
- **10 inch fly/bed overlap:** The FISH fly overlaps the bed a full 10 inches, more than any other fly currently on the market. Don’t discount the power of the updraft...overlap is key to staying dry in a storm. (The BD Yosemite fly will offer full wrap-around but it is not available at this time)
- **Upper and Lower Suspension Adjustments:** The two main FISH models include suspension adjustments both high on the suspension straps (like the BD and Metolius ledge) but there is also a set low on the straps. This allows for ease of adjustment without having to stand up or even kneel in the bed. This will prevent any condensation that gathers at the apex of the fly from soaking your arms while you stand thrutching in your ledge trying to adjust the suspension. Niiiiice.
- **Fully taped bed seams:** The FISH ledge is the only ledge on the market with fully taped bed seams.
- **Daisy Chains on Suspension:** The FISH ledge includes daisy chains stitched onto the suspension of the bed. The convenience of these daisy chains when it comes to hanging your stove, headlamp, shoes, personal gear, and Booze Muffler (see the FISH website) cannot be overstated. All ledges should include these. FISH is the only one that does.
- **Sensible Price:** Urgent: Read the above list again. Now read this: FISH portaledge/fly combinations average \$200 less than their Black Diamond/Metolius counterparts. But this does not make FISH ledges just the “poor man’s” option, rather, they are a very smart man’s invention. How can a good ledge cost less than \$850? Because there is next to no overhead, ledges are made to order, there are no brand managers, sales force, inventory, or anyone else to pay. (BD ledges are made in China, we are not sure where Metolius ledges are made)
- **Sensible Weight:** Despite every feature in the book and then some, FISH ledges weigh **more than a third less than any other ledge on the market.** This is thanks to thin but strong cro-moly tubing and elegantly machined corner joints that fit INSIDE the frame polls. The feature-filled, bombproof, and stable double ledge weighs just 10lbs, in comparison to 19lbs 13 oz for the Black Diamond Cliff Cabana and 14 lbs 1oz for the Metolius Bomb Shelter!
- **Continuous Shock Cord:** Continuous Loop internal cord runs through the entire frame. This is hard to describe, but know that it means that it is nearly impossible to tangle your ledge. Very nice. The shock cord is of the ultra-bombproof variety.
- **Dual Metal Construction, Low Surface Area Connectors:** The combination of two metals (Cro-moly tubes, aluminum corners) instead of aluminum poles and tubes means that FISH corners are less likely to “bind” than the corners of other ledges. Also, because the corners are small parts that fit inside of the tubes, rather than large cups that fit around the outside of the tubes, there is less surface area, meaning less friction thwarting your set-up and break-down efforts.





FISH's innovative, light, low-profile corner joints and near-full bed coverage to prevent soaking updrafts.

- **Product Line:** Don't miss out on the inexpensive but incredibly durable FISH Econoledge and the innovative One Night Stand portaledges that we don't have time/space to review at this time.

### FISH Products: The Downs:

- **No Spreader Bars:** Though he created the most innovate "spreader bar system" that we have seen, FISH Products does not offer a spreader bar. This is because of the stresses that a spreader bar places on the bedding material and the complications of manufacturing a reinforced bed. Close examination of the metolius beds shows a double layer of material at the center section impacted by the spreader bar, apparently they are aware of this important fact. We are not sure about the BD double, as we only tested the single.
- **Short Bed:** FISH beds are 6 inches shorter than the BD and Metolius beds. This would actually be nice for me, at 5'4", but it is something to consider if you're a very tall climber.
- **Traditional "Nylon" Fly Clip In Point:** While BD and Metolius have moved to a metal plate system for attaching the ledge/fly/and anchor, FISH products still uses a stitched nylon webbing that goes from the anchor, through the fly, and to the ledge. While a "tool dip" and maintenance should prevent leaking, our limited experience tells us that the BD and Metolius systems are going to be more reliably leak-proof.

### Currently Available Portaledges: Size, Weight and Price

	Single Portaledges			Double Portaledges		
	FISH Single	Black Diamond Single	Metolius Single Bombshelter	FISH "Double Whammy"	Black Diamond "Cliff Cabana"	Metolius "Double Bombshelter"
Dimensions	2'6" x 6'5"	2'6" x 7"	2'6" x 7"	3'6" x 6'5"	5'3"x7"	3'9" x 7"
Ledge Price	\$695 (includes fly)	\$690	\$650	\$665 (includes fly)	\$700	\$700
Fly Price		\$200	\$200		\$250	\$250
Ledge Fly Combo	\$695	\$890	\$850	\$665	\$950	\$950
Ledge Weight	8 lbs	14 lbs 15oz	12 lbs 7oz	10 lbs	19 lbs 13 oz	14 lbs 1oz
Fly Weight	5 lbs	4 lbs	6 lbs 5 oz	6 lbs	5 lbs	7 lbs 5oz
Total Weight	13 lbs	18 lbs 15oz	18 lbs 12 oz	16 lbs	24 lbs 13 oz	21 lbs 6 oz

### Currently Available Portaledges: Materials

	FISH Double/Single	Black Diamond	Metolius
Corner Material	6160 aluminum		CNC milled
Tubing	4130 cromoly		1 1/8" aircraft quality 6061-T6 Aluminum
Bed Material		210d micro ripstop	960/1080d Montana Polyester
Haul Bag Material	Durathane Haul Bag Material	Various nylon, jr. ballistic nylon	Durathane Haul Bag Material
Suspension Buckles	6 upper = Metal Cam Lock 6 lower = fastex	Metal Cam Lock	Metal Cam Lock
Bed Abrasion Guard	Durathane Haul Bag Material	Jr. Ballistics Nylon	Durathane Haul Bag Material
Drain System	Grommet	Mesh Patch	Small Grommet
Wall vs Air Side	None	Lable/Color Code	Color Code
Fly Material		Polyvinyl coated nylon	Polyurathane coated 420d Oxford, all seams hot taped

### **Conclusion: The smallest ledge manufacture may well be the biggest FISH in the pond**

In summary, while we have enjoyed many nights in both the BD/A5 designs and the Metolius Bombshelter, we believe that there is still room for improvement in both ledges. However, both are outstanding ledges and both product teams are ever striving to make the small improvements to get a competitive edge and provide a better product.

The good news is that the FISH ledge already features many of the improvements we would hope to see from BD and Metolius in the future...and they do it for 1/3 less weight and 1/3 less cost! Contrary to what many new ledge purchasers may be thinking and what corporate size may imply, FISH may truly be the biggest fish in the pond, even if the bed is a little smaller than the rest!

### **General Ledge Tips:**

**Single vs Double Ledge Selection:** Some schools of thought say “the more space the better.” This reviewer used to agree and soloed many walls on a huge double ledge. It took only one wind storm for me to change my mind. The portaledge and fly are like a ship and a sail and the climber is the ballast. You can attach your haul bag to the ledge as ballast, which is nice if its heavy, but if its not it just continues to rock the boat! And on harder walls, you may not find a suitable downward directional anchor...”I’ll just clip into the string of hooks and heads that got me to the anchor...or put a cam behind this loose flake... yeah right. If you solo and you won’t be climbing in perfect weather, consider a single ledge.

### **Ledge Maintenance:**

- **Fly and Ledge Material:** Be sure not to leave these in the bag wet after a wall. Rotting and mildew

can quickly turn your investment into a stinky and even unreliable ledge.

- **Joint Maintenance:** The joints of a ledge can become worn and sticky over time. Use steel wool to smooth the joint pieces and consider using silicon on the joints.
- **Wall Side Damage Prevention:** The reviewer always coats the wall side of the ledge and fly in a layer of duct tape. No matter how durable the material and reinforcement, one night of scraping on a rock protrusion can leave your ledge bed or even your fly permanently damaged.

### **Windows and Doors**

- The only base-level fly with a window is the Metolius Bombshelter, with one small triangular window. It uses Mountain Hardware's proprietary clear film, UVX, that won't cloud like PVC or plastic film and it won't tear. It is nice to see outside, to be sure. The FISH blow holes are large enough to see out, so we suppose that this counts as a window.
- Doors, while a nice option, are one more point of failure for your fly. Carefully consider whether or not you want a fly with doors and consider very carefully whether or not you want to add one in the aftermarket. There is a reason that most fly's don't have doors and it isn't all about cost.

**Hauling your Ledge and Fly:** When hauling, always clip both the ledge powerpoint and the hauling bag, not just the hauling bag, into the bottom of your haul bag or your haul bag tether. Additionally we highly recommend hauling your rainfly in your haul bag. One low-angle pitch or roof could damage your fly material, and this is not something that you wan't to discover when the storm clouds are rolling in!

**Staying Dry:** Bring a Bivy Sack **NO MATTER WHAT:** I recently had the pleasure of spending an evening with one of Yosemite's more prolific El Cap climbers. Oddly enough, his stories of taking fly's **DOWN** in a storm were some of the most interesting. Yes folks, there are times when you have to remove your fly in high winds to keep from destroying it, your ledge, and possibly yourself in the process!!!!

And don't forget, if you "pitch your tent" on the side of a cliff, the rain can wash debries down onto your fly, which can be punctured by sticks, pine cones, rocks, ice etc. Addiitonally, frozen webbing whipping around can cut the material of your fly leaving you exposed to the elements if you have no bivy sack!