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I've been using various shoulder mounts for my F5 over the last year. They have all worked well for me. But at CabSat in Dubai I was lent a Vocas shoulder mount and handles to use with one of the F55's I was using on the Sony booth.

Now, I've come across Vocas many, many times before, they are not new players in this arena and their products have always looked to be well thought out and well made, but when I put the F55 rig on my shoulder and my hands wrapped around the beautifully carved wooden handles I just fell in love with it. When you use a camera day-in, day-out, how it feels in your hands or on your shoulder is really important and it's amazing how a great shoulder rig can make using a camera a much more enjoyable experience. A bad rig will make using the camera a miserable chore.



So what is it about the Vocas rig I like so much? First of all it's a fully modular system so you can buy just the bits you want or need. Many of the parts will work with other systems. Initially I just got the shoulder mount and hand grips, but after using these for a short while I realized I also wanted to replace the existing top plate and somewhat uncomfortable carry handle that I had been using with the Vocas one, so I added the top cheese plate and carry handle to my rig this week.



The thing that got my attention when I borrowed the rig back in March was the comfort of the handles. The carved wooden hand grips were developed in association with Cam-A-Lot, one of the larger high end cinematography rental houses in Europe. So they know their stuff and know what camera operators want. The design is simple but beautifully executed, a carefully shaped handgrip with an Arri style rosette. The top of the grip has a notch/extension that your thumb wraps around making your grip really secure, this won't slip out of your hands by mistake. You don't have to hang on to these handles, your grip is secure even with very light pressure. Your fingers wrap around smooth grooves in the front of the grip and it's hard to explain, but it just "feels right" and wood is much nicer to hold than plastic or rubber (Vocas also make leather hand grips).



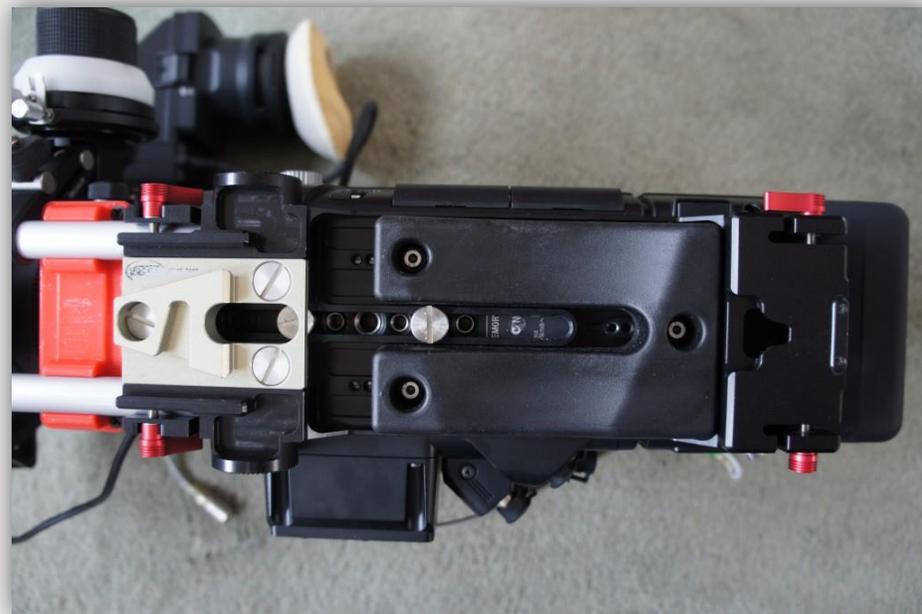
The hand grips are then attached to some extension arms and these arms then attach to the base plate. Again the design of the arms is really simple, but sometimes simple is really effective and these arms are really really light, yet very, very stiff, the quality and finish of the alloy used is excellent. You can join any Vocas arm to any other Vocas arm to create different angles and lengths and there is a range of different arms of various lengths and offsets to choose from. I've ended up with one short straight arm and one longer offset arm. Using these two arms I can configure the rig several ways.

Using just the short arm I can place the right hand grip up alongside the lens for a very secure and very comfortable single handed ENG style shooting rig. There is no need for the strap that you have on the hand grip of an ENG lens. The wooden grips are so easy to grasp and so secure that you just don't need that extra strap around the back of your hand. I could use the longer offset arm, mounted on the right side and offset to the left to place the hand grip under the lens for an alternative single handed rig.



By using the short arm on the right, angled down and the longer offset arm on the right angled down I can create a two handed rig. One thing I did find is that if you mount the single arm sections that I have on the rosettes on the shoulder mount the handles are quite close to your body. If you prefer your hand grips a little further away from your body you have a couple of options. Either double up on the arms joining two together to make a longer articulated arm, or do as I did and add the 15mm rail bracket that has a rosette at each end to mount the handles from the rods (Vocas also do a 19mm system). The rail bracket has a very neat quick release catch, so it's a breeze to fit.

But what about the shoulder mount that all this is hanging from? The one I have is the Vocas standard PMW-F5 and F55 base plate. Now, this doesn't look anything special, but looks can be deceiving. This very comfortable base plate weighs only 600g. That's quite a lot lighter than my previous base plates and lighter than the Sony equivalent. It's a VCT-14 compatible plate so snaps in and out of the very common Sony quick release plate quickly and easily. If you don't want VCT-14 compatibility the silver part with the VCT wedge in the picture above can be replaced with a flat plate for mounting directly on to tripods or other mounting systems.





The base plate can be slid forwards and backwards relative to the camera body to help you achieve perfect balance. The mounting screws run in a slot with deep shoulders that make the plate very ridged and secure. The comfortable soft shoulder pad can also be moved forwards and backwards within the base plate giving you further flexibility. On the sides of the base plate are a pair of Arri style rosettes and at both the front and rear there are holes for the usual 15mm rods.



Moving on to the top of the camera.... The comfort of the carry handle is so important, especially when the camera is rigged up with weighty accessories and heavy batteries. The last thing you want is blisters on your hands from a bad handle. So after experiencing the comfort of the hand grips I decided to add the Vocas top cheese plate and handle.



The handle has a very nice wooden grip insert which makes the camera very comfortable to carry. You also get a pair of posts to take a standard Sony shoulder strap. Oh Joy! Sony take note: please include provision for a shoulder strap on all your cameras, they are very useful! The top cheese plate is well... a cheese plate with lots of mounting holes for all your accessories. It's very slightly raised from the top of the camera body to avoid inhibiting any cooling of the camera. The handle takes a mounting bush for the F5/F55 viewfinder that can be placed either at the front of the handle or on the rear. This is handy for film style shooting from behind the camera rather than to the side. You can also use a pair of 15mm rods attached to the handle that run above your lens if you need to mount a Matte Box from above or add extra items like follow focus motors. Integrated into the handle is a pair of cold shoes for accessories such as a camera light. If you have a very heavy lens, like perhaps the new Canon 17-120mm or a Cabrio then the handle can be mounted facing forwards to get better balance.



The last part of the kit is the optional side cheese plate. This serves two purposes. The main one for me is to protect the rather vulnerable viewfinder connector that sticks straight out from the side of the camera body. With a list price of just 95 Euros, this is a really wise investment (if you don't use a cheese plate etc why not get one of my plastic viewfinder connector protectors that I sell on Ebay). The other purpose is to provide yet more 1/4" threaded mounting points on the side of the camera. I think it also looks cool! A small observation is that the rather flimsy connector still protrudes beyond the cheese plate by about 15mm, so bash it into a door frame walking through the door way and you could still damage the end of the connector. So I'm going to add a 1/4" bolt to one of the threaded holes in front of the connector. This will stick out a bit and further protect the connector from damage.

So while a shoulder rig might not be the most interesting part of your camera kit, it is one of the most important. It's what connects you to your camera, or what connects your camera to your tripod. If it isn't comfortable, your camera will feel awkward. A bad rig might compromise your shots or shooting style, so getting the right rig is important and I can highly recommend Vocas as a supplier of shoulder rigs and associated support equipment. If you get the opportunity, do try the wooden hand grips. They are a bit more expensive than most plastic or rubber based hand grips, but they are just so nice to hold. Using this rig is a delight, I love my PMW-F5 and this rig makes it very easy and comfortable to use.

