

Wild Country Helium Friends Review - Trad Climbing by Ryan Williams Oct 13, 2011

I think the first SLCD I ever held was a Friend. I can't be sure about that, but what I do remember vividly is being taught how to place cams and equalize anchors with the original Wild Country Forged Friends. At the time I didn't even know what a Camalot was, and Mastercams hadn't been invented yet. Aliens were still being produced, but I had never heard of those either.

Fast forward to the summer of 2010. I had just made the decision to leave Thailand for good, opting for a move to England with my wife. Afraid that years might go by before I had the chance to road trip in the US again, I planned to spend a few months traveling around out west, climbing in all of the best areas. A problem that I immediately faced was not having enough gear. While I did get to trad climb in Thailand, I usually only placed gear in North Carolina and since I was only there for a few months a year, I had just eight or nine cams. Stoppers, tricams and my partners' racks went a long way at Moore's Wall and Linville Gorge, but I had my mind set on places like Indian Creek and Yosemite Valley – places where a double rack of cams is just the beginning.

I bought a set of Forged Friends on eBay, and a few "flexi" ones as well. Knowing that I wouldn't be using them in the horizontal placements that characterize many of the classic areas in the southeast, I figured the old school rigid stems were the best bang for my buck. How right I was.

Forged Friends are actually pretty light (maybe lighter than Camalots) and they are sized a bit differently. A #1 Camalot falls between a 2.0 and 2.5 Friend, and a #2 falls between a 2.5 and 3.0. This might not seem like a big deal, since both companies manufacture cam sets to cover the entire range, but once you head up a crack with Friends supplemented by Camalots, you see the benefits of having both. There are definitely placements where you'd rather have a 2.5 friend than either Camalot that covers that size, and vice versa.

So what does all of this have to do with the new Friends? Nothing I guess, but the Heliums have been hyped as a rebirth of the cam, and they are finally here. After falling in love with my set of rigid stems, I simply had to find out what these state of the art cams were like.



First, let's be real about a few things. We all have Camalots, even if just a few. They represent today's standard, and are almost always on sale somewhere. Hell, I have climbed with plenty of people who have never even seen a Wild Country cam! This creates a tough market for the expensive Helium Friends. I'll just say that I got a killer deal on mine, and within the next few years, you will start to see them go on sale just as often as every other piece of climbing gear. So for the rest of the review, we will pretend that money doesn't matter.

A few weeks ago I received three Heliums – 2.0, 2.5 and 3.0. Like I said above, these three cams cover the same range as red and gold Camalots, as well as a bit more on both ends. Combined they weigh just 371 grams, while the two BDs come in at 292 grams. The Friends sport a Camalot-esque thumb loop and stem, a floating trigger, and the quality craftsmanship that you'd expect from climbing gear manufactured in the UK.



While some of the sizes aren't a whole lot lighter than the previous generation Friends, the new cams are noticeably featherweight. They are not the lightest on the market, but when someone brought it to my attention that they are a bit heavier than Mastercams of the same size, I had to look it up for myself. Maybe the weight is balanced better in the Heliums, or maybe I'm just biased toward my newly made Friends but my 2.0 feels lighter than the black Metolius.

The stem is about an inch longer than that of the Camalot, making deeper placements possible. This was an obvious advantage the other day on an overhanging hand crack at the New River Gorge. As I came to a bulge about 30 feet off the ground, the crack began to flare. Getting a cam deep into the crack here is essential, but also difficult. Aside from the fact that a green Camalot would have been tipped out and a red over-cammed, the 2.0 Helium was easier to place and to clean because of the long stem.

I did take a whip at said bulge, and the red Helium performed beautifully. It held just fine in the bullet-proof Nuttall Sandstone, and the resulting marks on the cam lobes looked normal to me. Can't wait to fall on it next time I pull through the first crux of "Surge Control" at Fern Buttress.

We warmed up that day on "Cresenta," a finger and hand crack that traverses under a big roof and then pulls through at a weakness. My buddy Rob slipped at the crux and took a ride that ended close to the deck. He finished the route and I followed, noting that a few of his cams had walked, making them hard to remove. The worst case was a Mastercam that had strolled deep into the crack. It's stem was short and flimsy, making it that much harder to reach and clean.

At the end of the day Rob went up “Cresenta” again to cool down and get a clean ascent. Rob is a meticulous red point climber and is obsessive about his rack. He remembers every single piece he places, and on a second attempt he will rack up in order, taking nothing but what he needs. It was hard but I convinced him to take a few Heliums, just to see if Wild Country’s attempt at a stronger spring would keep them from walking. Sure enough, he placed one exactly where the Mastercam had walked. As advertised, the Friend stayed put. And I don’t want to downplay this but it’s simple: The Mastercam walked and the Friend did not.

I recently took the new gear up “Fathom” at Laurel Knob and it was nice having three light cams on those long pitches. They didn’t really fit in more places than any other cam would have, but the Heliums have strength in numbers. Nine Wild Country Helium Friends cover the same range and weigh less than eight Black Diamond Camalots. Ask any climber and they’ll tell you, they’d take that extra cam.

Even if you only have the three hand sized pieces that I use, you still get an extra piece. I went to Looking Glass last week for an on-sight attempt at “Hyperbola” (direct). The first half of the route is protected by two bolts and a few stoppers and Aliens. You can see this from the ground, but being a North Carolina classic there is absolutely no gear beta to be found and it is hard to tell what size the crack is up high. I decided to take singles in hand sized pieces for the hundred foot pitch, which in Camalot speak is three cams. I opted instead for the Heliums, which ends up giving me four cams when you count my 25 year old HB Wales 3.5 (there is now a Helium Friend in that size as well). For an extra 50 grams, you get 4 cams instead of three. I like that.



Finally, I have to comment on durability. I've only been using these cams for a few weeks but I have been climbing on them non-stop and I tend to put a beating on gear. I've only taken the one fall, but they have all held up well and I expect them to endure everything I can throw at 'em. I can't imagine having any problems.

It is hard to write a review without commenting on competing products, and obviously I haven't tried. Thankfully my discount has nothing to do with my writing, so I can pretty much say what I want. There are a lot of companies out there making quality products, but the Heliums are going to be hard to beat. They are the lightest cams on the market without sacrificing durability. The stems are longer than Camalot stems and also stiffer and more durable than the largest Mastercam stems. And perhaps most importantly, they got it right where DMM, their main competitor, went wrong: they have an easy to handle thumb loop and a thicker, more durable sling.

Final Verdict: Helium Friends aren't "the cam reborn" but they are pretty close. The design, beautiful. Execution, perfect. I hope to climb many pitches and take many falls on mine. They are now my first choice when I take singles, and they will be complimented well by the rest of the gear I carry around.

Review By - Ryan Williams

Ryan grew up in the south and learned how to climb in the mountains of North Carolina and West Virginia. Upon graduating from NC State University in 2007, he travelled all over the world working as a guide, bartender, furniture mover, farm hand and anything else that would fund his next trip. Ryan is currently living in London with his wife, trying to get his life together and use the UK as a home base from which to explore the mountains of Europe.

