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# Hiking Gear Guide

Sunshine shimmies through the treetops, illuminating snippets of the trail and casting long shadows upon the cool earth. A curious chipmunk scurries past your foot as you pause to admire a wildflower in full bloom. Emerging from the aspen stand, you step into a vast alpine meadow where the beauty of a snow-capped mountain vista stops you in your tracks. Your body is tired; but you feel inspired, energized, and free. What a great hike. There's no doubt that hiking is one of the most peaceful and rewarding ways to enjoy nature.

In the midst of our all-too-hurried lives, a relaxing hike in the woods can do wonders for the spirit; it's also a refreshing way to get a great workout. While you're distracted by the sights and sounds of the wilderness, you're also burning calories, toning muscles, and getting stronger -- not to mention getting a healthy dose of fresh air. Whether you live near the mountains, the desert, the plains, or the coast, there are bound to be hiking trails nearby. How you hike them is up to you.

You might find you like to hike alone and that solitude is a great way to decompress. Or maybe taking a hike is the perfect way to bond with your pooch, best friend, or loved one. You may want to keep a slow, observant pace or push yourself and sweat from peak to peak. You decide. What's more, you don't need a whole lot of gear to take a hike. Keep in mind, though, that you should be comfortable, safe, and well equipped. We've laid out a few guidelines below so you can pack up and hike out.

## Essential Gear for Hiking

### **Hiking boots or hiking shoes? That is the question.**

Unless your feet are made of leather, you can't hike without boots or shoes. The degree of difficulty of the hike, the terrain, and whether or not you'll be carrying a backpack will determine whether you should purchase hiking boots or hiking shoes. While hiking shoes are definitely more comfortable, their low profile doesn't provide enough stability or support for multi-day trips with a pack or hikes on steep, rocky trails. You'll need adequate ankle support as you head over varied terrain and a sturdy outsole with a sticky grip to keep your footing. Invest in a quality pair of hiking boots or shoes before you head out to save yourself from the pain of a twisted ankle.

### **Hiking Boots**

So you've decided to summit a few 14ers this summer? Or maybe you've secured that coveted backcountry permit and are headed off to spend a few nights in the woods. For backpacking or more difficult treks, you'll need a pair of high-quality hiking boots. The added stability and support of a boot is a must when carrying the added weight of a backpack.

## **Hiking Boot Features:**

- Should be waterproof or have a waterproof breathable Gore-Tex® lining to keep your feet dry and comfortable. Full-grain leather hiking boots with one-piece uppers are your best bet because leather is ultra-breathable and the absence of seams means fewer places for water to intrude.
- Have a sturdy, lugged rubber outsole. Many people swear by Vibram.
- Have solid toe and heel rands and side welts for protection and support.
- Are stiff through the ankle for proper support.
- Offer you adequate all-around protection.

Keep in mind that while hiking boots are lighter than ever thanks to innovative technologies, they will still probably be the heaviest shoes you own.

Mountaineering boots are heavy-duty, waterproof (usually leather) hiking boots used to carry heavy loads on the most challenging alpine terrain. These boots are rock solid and crampon compatible for hiking in ice and snow.

## **Hiking Boot Tips:**

- If your new boots have a measurably larger volume than your foot, you may find you get a better fit with the use of widely available inserts, such as Dr. Scholls™ or Spenco™. Inserts that are cut to match the footbed may reduce the excess volume problem.
- If you have purchased a heavy-duty leather hiking boot and find your heel lifts slightly, this is likely to stop after some wear. Leather boots typically contour to the heel as the boot breaks in.
- Look for an insulated boot if you'll be hiking in colder temperatures. Insulated boots will usually be waterproof as well.
- To choose between fabric-and-leather or all-leather boots, consider the type of hiking you'll be doing. Fabric-and-leather boots will have a shorter break-in time and be lighter in weight, but you can't beat all-leather boots with one-piece uppers for water resistance, protection and durability.

## **Hiking Shoes**

If your ideal Saturday includes a swift four-hour hike and lunch on a patio with your hiking buddies, a hiking shoe is right for you. Hiking shoes, or trail shoes, are just right for short day hikes that don't require as much support or stability. Don't attempt to backpack in hiking shoes, but if you're taking a day hike on a well-established trail, hiking shoes might be just what you're looking for. Lightweight, low-profile shoes with traction outsoles afford you the opportunity to be quick on the trail and still keep your footing on moderate terrain.

## **Hiking Shoe Features:**

- Are lightweight with minimal ankle support.
- Are more flexible than a hiking boot, but less flexible than a running shoe.

- Have a solid, sturdy lugged outsole to provide sure footing. Vibram® is always a favorite.
- Can be either waterproof, water-resistant, or neither. Choose depending on the conditions and region you plan to hike. If you're hiking in the desert, you won't need boots to be waterproof, but will want them to be more breathable instead. Some hiking shoes offer extra ventilation to keep feet cool when hiking in hot temps.
- Will be more comfortable than a hiking boot with a lower profile.
- Have a toe and heel rand for protection.

## **How to Fit Hiking Boots and Hiking Shoes**

### **Size up!**

Your hiking boots should be longer than your casual shoes by at least a half size and possibly a full size. You need to make sure you have room not only for thicker socks, but for your toes when going downhill. You can perform the finger test to be sure you have enough room. Slide your foot as far forward as you can in the boot and if you can fit your index finger between your ankle and the boot, the size is right.

### **Walk down**

When trying on your new boots, take a walk downhill to be sure the fit is right and your toes aren't slamming into the front of the hiking boot.

### **Socks matter**

Try your boots on with the synthetic or wool socks that you'll be wearing when you hike. Save the cotton socks for casual outings-they are the root of all blisters.

### **Ankle hold**

While it's a good idea to size up for your toes, make sure your boot still grips your ankle enough to hold it in place. There will be slippage with most new leather boots but there shouldn't be so much that you slide right out of them.

### **Say no to hot spots**

Your new hiking boots or hiking shoes won't be as instantly comfortable as your running shoes, but they shouldn't cause rubbing, extraordinary discomfort, friction or "hot spots". In most cases, you'll be able to tell if something in the boot's construction is likely to cause you discomfort, a condition you'll notice even after it's broken in.

### **The right fit for you**

Not every hiking boot or shoe will be right for your foot. Footwear manufacturers create lasts based on average foot shape, but let's face it. Every bare foot is unique, so it's entirely possible

that your best friend's favorite brand will not be yours. It's likely that you will discover a specific brand that matches your foot's contours, offering enough room for your toes but a secure fit in the ankle and instep.

### **Break them in**

You'll want to break your new hiking boots or shoes in before you head out on a long hike or you could pay a big price in blisters. Wear them around the house, while running errands, or on a series of shorter hikes where you can get them off before they cause the new boot blues.

## **Backpacks and Daypacks**

Depending on the extent of your adventure, you'll want to invest in either a daypack or a backpack. Sierra Trading Post carries many different brands and models to outfit every trip.

### **Backpack**

For any overnight backpacking trip-you guessed it-you'll need a backpack. You'll want a bag with enough room to carry everything you need and, most importantly, one that fits you.

### **Daypack**

If your plans call for a day hike, you'll really only need a day pack to carry your essentials. Daypacks can be as simple as a waist pack or a light backpack. It's totally up to you-just make sure you're comfortable. If you have a hydration pack with extra room for storage, this should be enough to carry anything else you might need.

## **What to Bring on a Hike**

- **Map and Compass or GPS:** It's always a good idea to carry a map of the area you're exploring. The brochure at the trailhead will do (unless you're headed into true wilderness in which case a topographical map will be a lifesaver.) Even if you think you know the trail, take a map.
- **Hydration Pack/Water:** You will probably need more water than you think. Hydration packs are the best option (water bottles get heavy) and have bladders that can be used in most backpacks, too. A good rule of thumb is to drink 1 liter for every 4 miles hiked.
- **Rain gear:** It's always wise to bring a waterproof jacket with you on a hike, especially if the weather is fickle in your neighborhood. Staying dry is a big part of remaining comfortable. If you're expecting major rain, a pair of waterproof pants would be a smart addition to your pack as well.
- **Layer Up!** Dressing in layers is a smart thing to do on any outdoor excursion. Your body warms as you hike and you'll probably shed a layer or two as you power up the mountain. But as you gain altitude, temps are likely to drop and you might want to put your layers back on.

- **Wool or synthetic socks:** You'll definitely want a nice pair of wool or performance synthetic socks. When hiking on rough terrain, your feet and shoes will most definitely rub together and cotton socks encourage blisters in these spots.
- **First Aid Kit:** Be sure to bring a first aid kit on every backpacking adventure. It's also not a bad idea to bring a few band-aids, a tube of antibacterial ointment, and maybe a butterfly bandage on a day hike, too. Just in case. Throw some moleskin in your pack and you'll be set should a blister appear.
- **Whistle:** Carrying a whistle is just a good idea. If someone in your party is injured, gets lost, or if you need to make noise to scare a wild animal, a whistle is a lot more effective than your voice.
- **Trail Food or Energy Bars:** It's smart to carry a little something to keep your energy up if you're doing a half-day hike or more. And this way, if you take a wrong turn, you won't starve along the way.
- **Sunscreen:** It's easy to get a sunburn and not notice when you're having this much fun. SPF 45+ is recommended.
- **Sunglasses:** You want to be able to see all the beauty around you and not have to squint from the sun. Look for 100% UV protection.
- **Bug Spray:** With West Nile Virus in full swing, you don't want to forget bug spray! DEET is recommended for the best protection, but there are also many natural options that work well in all but the buggiest of places.
- **Cell phone:** Can be helpful in pinpointing your location if you get lost. It's a good idea to carry one of these things in case you become lost-especially if you're backpacking in the wilderness.
- **Hiking poles:** Provide stability and distribute some of the hiking load to your arms. You'll burn more calories and take a little stress off your legs. Sierra Trading Post carries Komperdell poles that are great for walking and help immensely when carrying a heavy pack.
- **Bear repellent:** The chance that you'll encounter a bear while hiking is low, but that's why they call it "chance"-you just never know. Bear spray or repellent can also be used to ward off mountain lions and other predators, too. Minus the repellent, making a noise of some sort (talking to hiking partner for example) will provide warning of your approach so animals have time to get out of the way. That's what they prefer to do.
- **Binoculars:** I can't tell you how many times I've been on the trail and wished I'd had a good pair of lightweight binoculars.
- **Camera:** Say cheese!

## A Word About Backpacking

The only thing better than a day hike is a multi-day hike! Multi-day hikes, or backpacking trips, require preparation for a night on (or near) the trail. In addition to the things you need on a day hike, you're also going to need your camping gear and a backpack big and sturdy enough to carry it all without weighing you down.

If you're planning on backpacking in a local, state, or national park, call ahead to see if you need a permit and to learn about any restrictions you might encounter.

## **Here's a quick list of additional items you'll need on your backpacking trip.**

Remember that you'll be carrying everything on your back and every ounce counts. You can always tell a more experience backpacker by the amount of stuff he isn't carrying.

- Lightweight backpacking tent: If you're backpacking with other people and sharing a tent, you can split it up into pieces and distribute the parts amongst the group. You'll want as light a tent as possible if you're carrying it all by yourself. Just make sure to bring a footprint for protection and get a tent with a rainfly in case of showers. See our Tent Guide.
- Sleeping bag and sleeping pad: A mummy sleeping bag is your best option for backpacking. Not only are mummy bags lighter in weight, but they provide a warm place for your head and maintain more body heat. A down bag will be lighter, but loses all insulating properties when wet. Synthetic bags dry much quicker and are equally as warm as down. Buy a bag rated to a little below the lowest temperature you expect to encounter.
- Water filter/iodine tablets or extra water: If you'll be camping near a water source, you can pack a water filter or iodine tablets to purify the water that you'll need. This will save weight in your pack. If you won't be near a river or stream, or if you're not sure, pack in plenty of water. You'll need to drink at least four liters a day.
- Lantern, flashlight, or headlamp: Some people find that a strong headlamp offers all the light they need while backpacking. Others like to have a battery-powered lantern and a flashlight or headlamp.
- Multi-purpose tool/knife: A knife of some sort is great to have in case you need to cut rope or the dinner you accidentally charred in the fire.
- Camp food and utensils: Dehydrated meals are the easiest-just add boiling water. But feel free to get as ambitious as you like. Trail mix and snacks are always nice to have, too.

## **Always Remember to Leave No Trace**

Please follow the seven principles outlined below to ensure future enjoyment of your favorite hiking trails.

- Plan Ahead and Prepare
- Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces (Stay on the trail!)
- Dispose of Waste Properly
- Leave What You Find
- Minimize Campfire Impacts
- Respect Wildlife
- Be Considerate of Other Visitors