

Introduction to

Backpacking



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1.....

 Beginning Backpacking

 Selecting your First Backpacking Trip.....

 How Far?.....

 Backpacking Safely

Chapter 2.....

 Backpacking Equipment and Gear

 Backpack

Internal and External Framed Backpacks.....

Carrying Capacity.....

 Sleeping Bag.....

 Hiking Boots.....

 Choosing a Tent

 Sleeping Pads

 Waist Pack.....

 Travelers Checks

 Personal Essentials.....

 Toiletries

 Miscellaneous.....

 Clothing and Shoes

Chapter 3.....

 Safety Matters.....

 Packing a First Aid Kit.....

 Understanding your Physical Condition.....

 Anticipating the Level of Difficulty

 Preventing Lift Injuries.....

Chapter 4.....

 Planning your Trip

Chapter 5.....

Planning International Backpacking Trips

- Passports
- Travel Visas
- Vaccinations
- A Few Words about Malaria
- Dengue Fever
- Bird Flu
- Other Health Matters

Chapter 6.....

- Transportation and Accommodation Matters.....
- Budget Airlines.....
- Traveling by Train
- Hostels

 - Advantages of Hostels*.....
 - Disadvantages of Hostels*.....

- Hostel Etiquette

Chapter 7.....

- Leaving for your Trip.....
- BACKPACKING CHECKLIST
- 3 SEASON BACKPACKING CHECKLIST
- WINTER CHECKLIST.....
- FOOD AND MEALS

 - Breakfast Foods*
 - Lunch*.....
 - Dinner*

- Backpacking Recipes.....

 - Easy Breakfast Casserole*.....
 - Banana and Peanut Butter Wrap*.....
 - Tuna Salad Wrap*.....

Conclusion.....

INTRODUCTION

Backpacking is a hobby that is enjoyed around the world in a wide variety of different manners. From casual backpackers who hit the trails on the weekends to those adventurous souls who plan months in advance to spend a year or more backpacking their way through entire continents, backpacking is a passion for many.

For those not familiar with the idea of backpacking, it is much like hiking combined with camping with the exception that everything one needs for camping must be condensed and carried in a pack while navigating the trails of the area you are exploring.

Backpacking presents a number of advantages, which is why so many people have fallen in love with it. One of the primary advantages of backpacking is that it offers an inexpensive and easily affordable way of exploring a new area. Many people are drawn to the idea of backpacking because it makes it possible to get in touch with nature in a way that simply is not possible when traveling in any other manner. Still yet, others like the idea of backpacking because of the quality time that it allows them to spend with friends and family.

When you are out backpacking, there are usually no cell phones to worry about and certainly televisions or game stations claiming your attention. You are able to enjoy good conversation, the stillness of the night, the beauty of nature surrounding you and the excitement of discovering new wildlife, flora and fauna. Others are excited at the idea of being able to conquer the challenges that invariable come with backpacking.

While backpacking you will gain the opportunity to see places and things that otherwise would not be possible and which most people will only ever be able to read about or see on a television program. Perhaps even better, backpacking presents a wonderful way to exercise and stay in shape.

If the idea of backpacking sounds interesting and intriguing, you are about to start on a journey that many people come to love so much they try to hit the trails as often as possible. In this guide, we will examine some of the basics you should be aware of when getting started with backpacking, including some of the equipment you will need, some basic safety tips and information to help guide you whether you are planning a simple weekend backpacking trip or you are planning to backpack your way through Europe.

Let's get started!

CHAPTER 1

Beginning Backpacking

Okay, so you have decided to take a backpacking trip! What do you need to know before you get started? That is what we will examine in this chapter. When you are first getting started with the idea of backpacking it can be easy to become overwhelmed trying to figure out what kinds of equipment you must have, where you should go, how far to hike and how many days you should plan to spend on your backpacking trip.

Selecting your First Backpacking Trip

Before you do anything else, it is important to give some thought to where you will take your first trip. This is important because it will help to guide many other decisions, including how long you plan to spend on the trip and even the types of equipment that you will need. Most people find when they are getting started with backpacking that it is a good idea to start out small. While the idea of backpacking your way through Europe or the Australian outback may appeal to you, the simple fact is that if you are new to backpacking you will be better off if you start out small.

A great way to approach backpacking is to consider taking a trip in a national or state park. Many such parks have an excellent array of trails that are 12 miles or less and are ideal for beginning backpackers. Focus on choosing a trail that forms a loop so that you will end your trip where you started. If you choose a linear trail instead of a loop you will be forced to either pre-arrange to have a ride waiting for you at the end of your trip or back track to make it back to your vehicle. If you backpack with a partner you can take two vehicles for a linear trail, allowing you to easily leave a vehicle at each end of the trail.

You should also consider the terrain when you are choosing a trail. Remember that a six mile hiking trail that has a number of steep ascents and descents will naturally be far more difficult than a flat trail that is actually longer in distance. Look for a trail that has been well blazed and established as well. This is particularly important if you are just starting with backpacking. Even trails that are well established can sometimes be difficult to follow because of side trails.

How Far?

When determining how far you should go on your first trips it is extremely important to know your pace and keep it in mind. For your first trip, it is usually a good idea to plan a hike that will allow you to cover a reasonable distance overnight. Smaller trips will present you with the opportunity to learn about your equipment as well as your own abilities. During smaller trips you can also take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about your pace, which you can then utilize when you plan a longer trip.



Introduction to Backpacking



You may find it helpful to take notes and record when you start and when you finish a hike as well as the distance you have traveled. This information can then be used to calculate your average pace and for calculating distance for future hikes. For instance, if you discover that your average pace is 1 ½ miles per hour then you will know that if you want to travel 15 miles per day on your next trip you should plan a minimum of 10 hours for your hike. Understanding this and adding in time for breaks will allow you to estimate when you need to hit the trails to reach your destination at a particular time. Of course, remember that you always need to take into consideration the differences that can exist on terrain between various trails.

Taking smaller trips is an excellent way to determine your own physical limitations before you attempt a trip that is longer in terms of distance as well as time. You may find that you are only able to hike comfortably for 4 or 5 hours before you must break for camp. Always remember that even when you do stop to make camp you will still have quite a bit to do, including pitching your tent, gather water, cooking and then cleaning up. If you take the time when you are first starting out to learn your limitations you will find that your trips will be far more comfortable and enjoyable. Ultimately, backpacking should not be about how many miles you can cover within a certain period of time, but enjoying the experience.

Once you have given some thought to how far you will initially travel for your first backpacking trip, you will then need to give some thought to a few other details. Begin by choosing a date for your trip. Go ahead and mark it down on your calendar.

Select a specific trail within the geographical location that you want to hike. Be aware that if you are hiking in a national or state park, there are likely to be numerous trails, so take the time to find out as much as possible about each option and then select a specific trail based on the distance and time that you would like to hike for your trip. Remember that some trails are either closed or inaccessible during certain times of the year. Other questions you should consider when choosing a trail include:

- Where will I leave my vehicle?
- How much water is available along this trail?
- Where are ideal campsites located on this trail?
- Will I need to register?
- Is there a fee for using this trail?

You can usually find the answers to these questions by researching the trail on the Internet or contacting the park office. Along with the questions listed above, you also need to make sure you are aware of any local fire regulations and hunting seasons that may be in effect.

Backpacking Safely

Backpacking can certainly be a wonderful experience, but in order to enjoy that experience as much as possible it is always important to keep safety considerations in mind.

First, remember that it is always safest to backpack with a partner. If something should happen while you are out on the trails, having a partner with you will make it possible for someone to either provide assistance or go for help. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you can rely on your cell phone for help while you are out on the trail. In many areas where you will be hiking, you will not be able to receive a signal on your cell.

Regardless of how far you plan to travel or how long you plan to be gone on your trip, always make sure that you let someone know where you plan to hike and when you plan to return. If you fail to show at the appointed time, at least someone will know there is a problem and be able to send a search and rescue crew.

Although we will go into this in more detail in the next chapter, keep in mind that it is always important to make sure that you have a first aid kit with you anytime you plan to be on the trail, even if you are only taking a short trip. Emergencies can occur even on short trips and it is always best to make sure you are prepared in advance.