



How I Got This Way

Practical Backpacking Advice

by: Glenn Roberts

Whether you're getting ready for your first backpacking trip or have been doing this a while and want to carry a lighter load, you'll need to understand some of the logic of choosing gear. Properly chosen gear should become so convenient for you that its use becomes second nature, so the journey stays in the foreground. It's the trip, not the gear, that matters.

The first (and maybe only) rule of backpacking gear is, "If you really need it, take it." Putting yourself at risk is never an acceptable way to lighten your pack. Your gear must keep you warm, dry, fed, and hydrated under the worst conditions you expect on the trip. So, your first step in choosing gear is to think about the conditions you'll expect on a typical trip. After cardiac bypass surgery at 74, my cardiologist-designed typical trip is two days max, covering 4 – 6 miles a day, minimal elevation gain and loss, and no extreme cold or prolonged rain expected. He also told me to keep my pack weight under 20 pounds. So, I became an ultralight hiker – but that doesn't mean you have to become one.

One quick way to hike with a lighter pack is to hike with a partner and share gear. Since I don't have much experience with sharing gear, I'll leave it at that and assume that you're hiking alone, too. Another way to hike lighter, if you're overweight, is to lose weight (I constantly fight that battle, too.)

How much weight can you comfortably carry? One rule of thumb is that you can comfortably carry between a fourth and a third of your "ideal" body weight (the recommended weight for a person with your height and build, in reasonably good shape.) The load you can carry includes your gear, supplies, and excess body weight. Let's look at two hikers: one a 180-pound athletic type and the other a 220-pound couch potato. The ideal weight for each is 180 pounds, so each could carry a 45-60-pound load (including the loaded pack and excess body weight.) The fit person could probably manage a 35-pound load easily, but the couch potato is already carrying 40 pounds of excess weight, which leaves only 20 pounds for gear. However, backpacking is great exercise, so (if the doctor agrees) our couch potato could start with overnight backpacking trips in gentle terrain and work up to longer trips as some of the body weight comes off.

As you choose each piece of gear, ask yourself three questions: (1) Is it essential to keep me warm, dry, fed and hydrated in the worst conditions I expect to encounter? (2) If not, will it earn its way in comfort or convenience? (3) Can I afford a lighter version? Weight and cost are the last concern on purpose and are considered only after you've determined that you do need a given piece of gear.

When you are ready to buy gear, the general rule is "light, inexpensive, good – pick two." High-end or ultralight gear is well worth its price if you take a lot of weeklong trips or thru-hikes. However, if you're a recreational backpacker, there's no significant difference in performance or durability between high-end gear and less-expensive gear like the REI Co-op brand. It's hard to find bad gear at REI, but very easy to find junk gear on Amazon – do your research and read the reviews. A good source of gear reviews (and one I rely on) is www.sectionhiker.com.

For your first trip, don't obsess too much about pack weight or about taking too much stuff. If you feel safer bringing something, bring it. (Our packs represent the sum of our fears.) When you unpack after your first trip, sort everything into two piles. Gear you used (plus must-haves like rain gear, first aid kit, water filter, and toilet kit) goes in one pile. Gear you didn't use goes in a second pile. On your next trip, don't take anything in the second pile – and think about the stuff in the first pile, to see if you can get by without it or make it do double duty. For example, a fleece jacket also makes a wonderful pillow. Eat freeze-dried food from the bag, and you won't need anything more than a spoon and a 1-liter pot to heat water. There's no clean-up, so you won't need dish soap. Drink water, and you don't need beverage mixes or a cup. Wear the same clothes for a couple of days and your extra clothing becomes a pair of socks.

After you make those changes, and try them on a couple of trips, you can buy lighter gear if you want. The goal, as you choose your gear, is to strike the balance of weight, function, and cost that's right for you. With a reasonable budget, and some discipline about what you bring, you can probably keep your load (gear, food, and water) under 25 pounds for a summer weekend. In the rest of this article, I'll describe what to look for in a typical set of gear. I'll also briefly describe how gear functions on a trip I might take. If you'd like to see my personal gear list, or if you have questions about specific models of gear, email me at glennroberts9876@gmail.com.

GEAR SELECTION

Hiking Poles: A pair of poles ease the pressure on your knees on downhill stretches and provide stability on broken terrain or stream crossings. They also keep your arms working, which prevents your hands from swelling as they would if your arms just hung at your sides. Black Diamond poles are the best quality I've found, and REI Co-op poles are the best budget-friendly poles.

Tent: Choose a tent based on the number of people who will use it. If the tent feels too cramped, move up a size (solo hikers often choose a two-person tent.) Look for a tent with as much mesh as possible in our hot, muggy eastern states. The fly should come within a couple of inches of the ground all the way around the tent; partial coverage saves weight, but you may get leaks if the rain hits the inner tent or ricochets under a too-short fly. A side entry is more convenient than an entry at one end of the tent. Look for a roomy vestibule that allows you to store gear without having to climb over it to enter or exit the tent. A footprint (groundcloth) isn't necessary but resists abrasion on the tent floor. Tents are often advertised as freestanding – but no tent with a vestibule is totally freestanding since you must stake out the vestibule. On the high-quality, high-price end of the scale, you can't beat the Big Agnes or NEMO tents; if you're willing to carry a few ounces more to save significant amounts of money, the REI Co-op backpacking tents offer good choices.

Sleeping system: Your sleeping system consists of a sleeping pad and sleeping bag. You can buy a specially made "camping" pillow; I use my rain gear or fleece jacket in a stuff sack. You'll probably be most comfortable on a 72-inch inflatable pad (but try other pads in the store.) It should have an r-value of r-3 to r-5 (the r-value indicates how well a pad insulates you from the ground.) Most pads also come with a "pump" sack to make it easier to inflate the pad. Thermarest, Nemo, Sea to Summit, and REI Co-op all make good pads.

Most people choose a traditional "mummy" sleeping bag with a hood, but you might want to consider a quilt. A quilt is simply a sleeping bag with no hood or back. Unless you plan to do a lot of cold-weather camping (when you'll need a mummy bag with a hood), your choice is really a matter of personal preference. When choosing a bag, you'll want to consider two things: the type of insulation, and the temperature rating. You can choose down or synthetic insulation. Down bags are lighter, more compressible, more durable, and more expensive. Synthetic bags are heavier, bulkier, shorter-lived,

and less expensive. The type of fill is a matter of personal choice and budget. The important feature is the bag's ISO or EN "comfort" rating, which is the lowest outside temperature at which a person who sleeps "cold" will be comfortably warm in that bag or quilt using a pad with an r-5 rating. (Bags also have an "extreme" rating: you won't freeze to death in the bag at that temperature, but your new trail name will be "Popsicle.") ISO and EN ratings are testing protocols to determine comfort ratings; if the bag doesn't have such a rating, don't buy it. A down-filled bag with a 30-degree comfort rating will be just as warm as a synthetic-filled bag with a 30-degree comfort rating; the synthetic bag will weigh more and cost less. When you're shopping, get into the bags you're considering and see how they fit. NEMO and Western Mountaineering are high-end, but REI Co-op bags are very good and less costly.

Kitchen and food: I suppose, technically, food isn't "gear," but your menu determines what kitchen gear you need. For weekend trips, I'd recommend a very simple menu: instant oatmeal or granola for breakfast; some combination of beef jerky, cheese, granola bars, dried fruit, nuts, candy, or trail mix for lunch and snacks, and a freeze-dried entrée for supper. You might also want tea bags, instant coffee (Starbucks Via), or hot chocolate mix. This kind of menu requires minimal kitchen equipment. You'll need a small stove that screws onto a gas canister and a 1-liter pot with a lid; a cup is a matter of personal preference. Titanium pots are very good, but anodized aluminum is nearly as light and much less expensive. Snow Peak, Soto, and MSR make excellent stoves and cookware. Jetboil stoves are good, but over-built, over-hyped, and over-priced. Besides canister-mounted stoves, there are two other types. White gas stoves burn a refined form of gasoline (Coleman Fuel), and are heavy, bulky, and complicated; they can occasionally result in a "poof – no eyebrows" moment. They are mostly used for melting snow or in extreme conditions. Alcohol stoves are simple in design and operation but can be finicky to use in cold weather. They are very popular among long-distance hikers, and worth a look. A spork, a small microfiber towel, and a bear-bag kit (fifty feet of utility line, tied to a small carabiner) complete your kitchen.

Water: Naturally, you won't carry all the water you need for the whole trip; you'll treat water as you go and only carry enough water to get you to the next water source. Backcountry water sources should be considered unsafe to drink without treatment. The main problem is biological: bacteria and protozoa. Viruses are a problem overseas – but that's beyond the scope of this article. You'll hear talk about the hazards of chemical runoff, heavy metals, and microplastics, but there are currently no reliable methods to remove them. (Check with the local land manager to see if industrial runoff or local parasites and cysts are a problem.)

There are four ways to make water safe to drink: boiling, purification, chemical treatment and filtering. Boiling is time-consuming and fuel-intensive, which makes it impractical for most backpacking unless your filter breaks. Purifiers, which are filters that also remove viruses, are expensive and aren't really needed inside the U.S. That leaves us with chemical treatment and filtering.

There are a wide variety of filters available. If a filter is EPA-rated to remove 99.9999% of bacteria and protozoa, it will be fine for use in most of the United States. Filters will usually improve the color and taste of water and will remove "floaters." The Sawyer Squeeze is the most popular filter because you can re-use Smartwater and similar bottles instead of buying purpose-made water bottles like Nalgene, HydraPak, or CNOC. The Katadyn BeFree is lighter than the Sawyer and uses the same filter technology in a filter-cap-with-bottle design. Clones of both filters are readily available – just check for that EPA rating. Chlorine-based chemical treatments (Aqua Mira or Katadyn Micropur chlorine tablets) kill viruses, bacteria and protozoa, but aren't effective against all cysts and parasites. They don't remove "floaters" nor do they improve the color or taste of water. Chemicals are a light way to treat water but do require time to work. I always carry some in case my filter clogs or breaks.

Clothing: Clothing needs to keep you warm and dry; it does not need to be changed every day. A layered system (base layer, insulating layers, and shell layers) gives you a light, versatile wardrobe. The base layer is underpants and a T-shirt with midweight long underwear added as temperatures drop. Insulating layers are usually “puffy” garments. The shell layer is pants or shorts, perhaps a shirt or windbreaker, and a rain jacket and pants as needed. You don’t need a lot of “extra” clothes on a weekend trip; at most, a spare base layer and socks is plenty.

Avoid cotton: it’s heavy, chills you when damp, and doesn’t dry easily. Polyester, fleece, and other synthetics dry quickly on the trail. Merino wool works well but is more expensive.

Insulation will depend on the temperature and your level of activity. Below 50 degrees, a midweight half-zip turtleneck top over a wool or synthetic T-shirt is plenty. Below 40 degrees, a fleece jacket worn over midweight long underwear is just right for hiking. In camp, as the temperature falls and you’re no longer active, you can add an insulated jacket and pants (down or synthetic fill; see the sleeping bag discussion for a summary of down versus synthetic fills.) I don’t like insulating garments with built-in water resistant shells; I can wear a shell garment over the insulation if I need to.

For shell garments, you’ll want a pair of hiking pants or shorts (I like “convertible” pants that turn into shorts when I zip off the legs.) You’ll also want a waterproof-breathable rain jacket and pants. You may want a windbreaker, although your rain jacket can double as a windbreaker. A sun hat, ball cap, stocking cap or balaclava (ski mask) and gloves finish off your ensemble.

I’m not going to recommend specific brands and models of clothing, since much of your selection will be personal preference. If you’re not sure where to start, look at the various REI Co-op offerings and move toward brand names (more function, lighter weight, and higher prices) if you don’t like the REI brand.

I’m also not going to recommend specific footwear. The only thing that matters is fit – keep trying on hiking shoes, trail runners, or boots with the socks you’ll wear until you find the one that feels just right. Most people carry a second set of dry socks to sleep in and let the sweaty set air out overnight. You may want to bring a pair of sandals or Crocs to wear in camp, or if you’re fording knee-deep creeks. (Of course, they’ll add a pound or two to your load.)

Odds and Ends: You’ll need toilet paper in a Ziploc bag and a lightweight trowel to you answer nature’s call. You should also tuck 5 or 6 sanitizing wipes into your kitchen sack (and a few more in a hipbelt pocket) for each day you’ll be out. You’ll want a map and a simple compass like the Brunton Tru-Arc 3. You’ll also want a way to sit comfortably. This could be as simple as a small square of closed-cell foam to sit on while you lean back against a rock or tree, or a portable chair from REI, Helinox, or Nemo.

You should carry a first aid kit, but it shouldn’t contain anything that you don’t know how to use. (Exception: it’s always a good idea to carry a CPR face shield – and to take a CPR course to know how to use it.) If you stick to well-traveled, established trails, the worst thing you’re likely to encounter are cuts, scrapes, insect bites, and aching muscles. For that, you’ll need minimal knowledge and supplies. The simple choice is to buy a small Hart Outdoors or Adventure Medical first aid kit. You can also build your own kit in a Ziploc bag. A minimal kit for weekend trips on well-maintained trails should include sanitizing wipes (clean your hands before treating a wound), non-latex examination gloves, folding scissors, tweezers, nail clippers, some Band-Aids, alcohol prep pads, triple antibiotic cream, burn ointment, sting relief cream, aspirin tablets, acetaminophen tablets, ibuprofen tablets, electrolyte replacement tablets, antacid tablets, moleskin, gauze pads, and a mirror (you can’t treat a cut on your own face without one; don’t ask.) If you go to remote, off-trail locations for extended trips or

undertake riskier activities like climbing or rappelling, you'll need to take a more extensive kit and a wilderness first aid course to learn how to use it.

You'll also want a small headlamp, some spare batteries, a bit of duct tape, a small pocketknife, and a Bic-style lighter or some strike-anywhere matches in a waterproof container. A few nylon stuff sacks (a mix of 5- and 10-liter sizes) will help you organize your gear when you pack your pack.

Pack: You'll probably want a traditional 50 or 60-liter pack with a sturdy suspension if you're carrying more than 25 pounds (including food and water.) If you're carrying less, you might be able to use an ultralight 45 or 50-liter pack. REI Co-op and Osprey packs are good places to start your search. You'll also want a pack cover or liner for rain protection.

As with boots, pack fit is everything. Good pack makers offer gender-specific models in several sizes and adjustable suspensions in most of their packs. The suspension should fit comfortably with the heaviest load you plan to carry, placing most of the weight on your hips. When you're shopping for a pack, take your gear, food for your typical trip, and a liter of water to the store and load it into the pack. (The weighted bags the store gives you to use won't distribute the weight properly.) Wear the loaded pack around the store for 15 or 20 minutes to see how it carries.

LIFE ON THE TRAIL

Packing the Pack: My goal in loading my pack is to balance it from left to right and center the weight over my knees. I organize my pack so that I rarely open it during the day. My water bottles and filter go into the side pockets of the pack. My map and compass (in a gallon Ziploc bag), toilet kit, first aid kit, wallet, and car keys go into the lid pocket. My headlamp and repair kit go into one hipbelt pocket; my lunch and snacks go into the other hipbelt pocket. My cell phone (in a Ziploc bag) goes into the shoulder strap pocket or the lid. My pack cover, rain jacket, and rain pants go in the "shove-it" pocket on the front of the pack or in a stuff sack on top of the main compartment of the pack. My chair goes in a side pocket or between the lid and main compartment.

The things I won't need during the day go into the main compartment. I stuff the sleeping bag into a stuff sack and put it into the very bottom of the pack, with the sleeping pad and spare clothing (usually in a stuff sack) on top of it. The tent goes in one corner of the pack opposite the chair kit. My stove, spoon, fuel canister, and towel go inside my cook set. My food, toothbrush, bear bag kit, Ziploc trash bag, and pouch cozy go in a dry-bag style stuff sack. My cook set and food sack sit in the other corner of the pack. In cold weather, my down jacket goes on top of the load in the main compartment or in the shove-it pocket since I'll want to put it on at breaks and as soon as I get to camp.

On the trail: Mostly, the day is spent walking. During an eight-hour day, I tend to stop about three times: mid-morning and mid-afternoon breaks of fifteen minutes to half an hour each, plus a lunch break of half an hour to an hour. During these breaks, I take off my pack, put on my jacket if it's cold, take out my chair, relax, eat a snack, and drink some water. I'll also take some "standing" breaks to catch my breath, take a drink of water, and perhaps adjust clothing layers as the temperature changes. These breaks total about two hours, which leaves about six hours of actual walking. A fit hiker can probably average somewhere around 2 miles an hour (12 miles a day), but you can walk fewer hours or do less mileage if you want. Fill your water bottle as you come to creeks or springs; if you're not camping near water, carry a couple extra liters of water from the last source you pass.

Camping: When I'm ready to camp, I choose a well-drained, flat, open area for my tent. My tent, near the top of the pack, is the first thing I unpack. Since even an apparently level spot will usually have a slight slope to it, I lie down to figure out how to orient the tent with the slope from head-to-toe, not

side to side. While I'm lying there, I look up into the trees for any dead branches that might decide to fall on my tent (and me) during the night. Then I pitch my tent.

Next, I remove the cook set, food sack, water bottles, and filter, and set them aside. If it's chilly, I'll also put on some warm clothes. I put my clothing sack into a back corner of the tent where it's out of the way. I take out the sleeping pad, inflate it, and put it into the tent. Then I put my rain gear into the sleeping pad's stuff sack for a pillow and put it at the head end of the tent on the sleeping pad. Next, the sleeping bag (or quilt) gets laid out on top of the sleeping pad to fluff a bit. Finally, I empty the pack lid, placing the map, first aid kit, and toilet kit in a corner or pocket of the tent. My now-empty pack goes in the vestibule if there's no room for it inside the tent.

If I'm camping beside a stream, I go filter water. Then I take the cook set, food bag, filtered water, and chair to the cooking area. I assemble the chair and position it to take advantage of any view. I put on my headlamp, then set up my stove beside my chair. I put enough water in my pot to rehydrate my supper and then light the stove. When the water boils, I add it to the pouch of freeze-dried food, put the food in the pouch cozy to keep it hot, and set the food aside to rehydrate. While that happens, I refill my pot and boil water for tea. Then I sit back, eat, drink, and enjoy the evening. I don't recommend cooking on a campfire. It's too much like work and cuts you off from the unique beauty of the night.

After supper, I clean up (dry my pot, lick my spoon), re-pack the kitchen, bag the trash in a Ziploc bag, and hang the food and trash bag from a tree limb. Unless I'm in bear country, it just needs to be high enough to keep the mini bears (raccoons, mice, and skunks) out of it. Eventually, I take the rest of my gear and head for my tent. I leave my chair outside (unless it looks like rain or heavy dew, when I disassemble it and store it in the vestibule.) I sit down inside the tent, take off my shoes and put them alongside the pad in the tent, swing my feet into the tent, and get into the sleeping bag. I arrange my water bottle and other items around my head, put my headlamp and glasses in the tent's mesh pocket or into a shoe, put my pillow under my head, and go to bed. If it turns unexpectedly cold, I can wear my fleece or insulating garments inside my sleeping bag or quilt.

In the morning, I wake up and let the air out of my sleeping pad while lying on it. I grab my pack out of the vestibule and pack it the same way I did yesterday (except for kitchen if I'm having a hot breakfast.) I retrieve the food bag and put my breakfast, lunch, and snacks into the pack. If the tent is wet, I let it dry while I eat breakfast, then pack it. I refill my water bottle, finish packing, put the pack on, and start walking – it usually takes less than an hour from the time I wake up.

Glenn Roberts is a Guide for Outdoor Adventure Connection and a gearhead. He is a recreational backpacker, not a long-distance hiker. Now in his mid-70s, he provides insight and perspective for older hikers, whether they are just taking up backpacking or looking for ways to continue to backpack.