



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 would expect on the trip. 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. The other way to hike lighter, if you're overweight, is to lose weight (I constantly fight that battle, too.)

So, how much can you comfortably carry? One rule of thumb is that you can carry a fourth of your body weight comfortably and a third of your body weight at most. I agree, but we need to discuss "body weight." Let's imagine two six-foot tall people, one weighing 180 pounds and active, the other a 220-pound couch potato. The rule would say that the active person could comfortably carry a 45-pound load, but the couch potato could comfortably carry a 55-pound load. That's nonsense! We're really talking about your "ideal" 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 take another look at those two people. If the ideal weight for each is 180 pounds, then a 45-pound load (including the loaded pack and excess body weight) would be the maximum load each could comfortably carry. The fit person could probably manage this easily, but the couch potato is already carrying forty pounds of excess weight, which leaves only 5 pounds for gear. However, backpacking is great exercise, so (if the doctor agrees) that person could start backpacking in gentle terrain right away by carrying the maximum load of 60 pounds (a third of ideal weight.) After deducting 40 pounds of excess weight, this leaves 20 pounds for gear. As the weight, this load will become more comfortable.

To choose gear, ask yourself three questions about everything you consider taking: (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) How much does it weigh? Weight is the last question in the list on purpose and is considered only after you've determined that you do want to take that particular piece of gear.

Cost is also a factor, and the type of hiking you do helps determine how much you should spend. The general rule is “light, inexpensive, good – pick two.” Luckily, if you avoid big-box stores like Dick’s and knock-off Chinese brands on Amazon, it’s hard to find truly bad gear. High-end gear is well worth its price if you take a lot of weeklong trips or through-hike. However, if you’re a recreational backpacker, like me, who mostly takes weekend trips, there’s no significant difference in performance or durability between high-end gear and “budget” gear like the REI Co-op brand.

For your first trip, don’t obsess about pack weight or about taking too much stuff. If you feel safer bringing something, bring it. After you get back and start unpacking, sort everything into two piles. Everything you really used plus unused must-haves (rain gear, first aid kit, water filter, and toilet kit) goes in one pile. Everything 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. Cook simple one-pot meals and eat from the pot, and you won’t need to take a full set of pots, a whisk, separate dinnerware, and soap for cleanup. Drink water, and you don’t need beverage mixes or a cup. Plan your water stops, and you may not need to carry that second water bottle. Learn to wear the same set of clothes for a couple of days, and you may not need that extra set of clothes.

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, comfort, 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 under twenty-five pounds for a summer weekend. (I carry sixteen or seventeen pounds for such a trip.) I’ll describe a typical set of gear below and make a few recommendations. If you’d like to see my personal gear list, or if you have questions about specific models of gear, feel free to email me at glenroberts9876@gmail.com; I can be boring about this stuff for hours on end. A good source of gear reviews (and one I rely on) is www.sectionhiker.com.

I’ll also explain briefly how gear functions on a typical trip I take. I usually don’t backpack for more than one or two days, covering 6-8 miles a day. I don’t backpack as aggressively as I used to: I don’t go out when prolonged rain is forecast or when temperatures are predicted to be below 40 or above 80. I can’t handle mountainous terrain anymore. So, I’ll talk about fair-weather trips in late spring through early fall in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

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 about the best quality I’ve found, and REI Co-op poles are the most budget friendly.)

Tent: Choose a tent based on the number of people who will use it. If you find that size is a bit cramped, move up a size (solo hikers often choose a two-person tent.) Look for a tent with as much mesh as possible in the upper half of the tent body for ventilation in our hot, muggy eastern states. Pitched without the fly, it is as close to sleeping under the stars, bug-free, as you'll ever come. 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 tent body. A side entry is very convenient, but sometimes adds a bit of weight. Look for a vestibule large enough to stow your pack and boots without having to climb over them to enter or exit the tent. A footprint 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 have to stake out the vestibule. (Besides, staking a tent is no big deal.) On the high-quality, high price end of the scale, you can't beat the MSR Hubba Hubba series; if you're willing to carry a bit more weight to save significant amounts of money, the REI Trailmade series is a great choice.

Sleeping system: Your sleeping system consists of a sleeping pad, sleeping bag, and usually a pillow.

You'll probably be most comfortable on a 72-inch inflatable pad (but try out a 48-inch pad in the store.) Some people even like closed-cell foam pads (flat, hard foam), but most find them uncomfortable and cold because of their very low r-value. (The r-value indicates how well a pad insulates you from the ground; r-3 to r-5 is good for early spring through late fall use.) Most pads also come with a "pump" sack to make it easier to inflate than blowing it up by mouth. Thermarest NeoAir pads have the highest r-value (and sticker shock); Nemo and REI Co-op also make good pads.

A sleeping bag can be a traditional bag with a hood or a hoodless quilt. A quilt is simply a sleeping bag with no hood and no back, like a comforter you'd use on a bed. Unless you plan to do a lot of cool-weather camping (when you want a hood), your choice is really a matter of personal preference. When choosing a bag, you'll want to consider two things: type of insulation, and temperature rating. You can choose down or synthetic insulation; down bags are lighter, more compressible, last longer, and cost more; 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 most people, wearing a set of long underwear, will sleep warm in that bag or quilt. (Bags also have an "extreme" rating: you won't actually freeze to death in the bag, 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.

You can buy a separate camping pillow if you want; I've never found one I like. I just stuff my extra clothing (usually my rainsuit) into a stuff sack and use that. My favorite pillow is a fleece garment folded or stuffed into a bag.

Kitchen and food: I suppose, technically, food isn't "gear", but your menu determines what kitchen gear you need. I'd recommend a simple menu: instant oatmeal or a breakfast bar for breakfast, snacks such as beef jerky, cheese, granola bars, dried fruit, nuts, candy, or trail mix at several breaks during the day (lunch being a larger and longer break), and a freeze-dried entrée for supper. If you want a hot beverage, you can bring tea bags (my preference) or instant coffee (like Starbucks' Via.)

This kind of menu requires minimal kitchen equipment. For solo hiking, all you need is a 1-liter pot with a lid that doubles as a smaller pot and mug. You'll also want a small stove that screws onto a gas canister; I'd suggest a built-in igniter, for convenience. I recommend the Soto Amicus Stove Cookset Combo (1-liter pot, ½-liter lid/pot/mug, and stove with igniter) that REI sells for less than most stoves alone cost. A spoon, a small microfiber towel, and a bear-bag kit (fifty feet of 1.8mm utility line, tied to a small aluminum carabiner, packed inside a small bag) completes your kitchen.

Water: Naturally, you won't carry all the water you need for the whole trip; you'll filter as you go, and only carry enough water to get you to the next water source. Filters come in three flavors: pump, squeeze, and bottle. If it's EPA-rated to remove 99.9999% of bacteria and protozoa, it will be fine. You'll also want a couple of 1-liter bottles. You can buy purpose-made bottles (CNOC's Vecto and Vesica are my choice), or you can recycle bottled-water bottles and save about \$45. The Sawyer Squeeze filter, with a pair of recycled bottles, is an excellent balance of function, cost, and weight. You should also carry some purification tablets in case the 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. Avoid cotton: it's heavy, chills you when damp, and doesn't dry easily. Polyester, nylon, fleece and other synthetics dry quickly, even on the trail. Wool works well but is much harder to dry on the trail and tends to shrink if it's not carefully washed. The base layer is synthetic underwear and (in cool weather) midweight long underwear. Insulating layers are typically fleece, down, or synthetic garments. The shell layer is pants or shorts, a windbreaker, and a rain jacket and pants.

A fleece vest, jacket, and pants are the most versatile insulating pieces I use. Above 40 degrees, the vest over a midweight zip turtleneck (and maybe a light windbreaker) is just right for hiking. In camp, I add midweight bottoms, fleece pants and fleece jacket. Below 35 degrees, you'll want a heavier insulating garment (down or synthetic fill, usually with a hood. 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'm already carrying rain gear, so the shell is unnecessary weight. You'll also want a pair of pants or shorts (I like "convertible" pants that turn into shorts when I unzip the legs.) For a rain shell, you will probably want a waterproof-breathable rain jacket and pants. A sun hat or ball cap, stocking cap, and gloves finish off your ensemble. I'm not going to recommend specific brands and models, 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 more function and higher prices if you don't find anything you like.

I'm also not going to recommend specific shoes. The only thing here is fit – keep trying them on with the socks you'll wear until you find the hiking shoe or boot that feels just right. For most trails in the eastern U.S., trail shoes (sneakers on steroids) are fine. A mid- or high-top “light hiking” boot is also a good choice, but a bit heavy. For trail shoes, a pair of hiking socks (midweight, perhaps a wool blend) work well; if you prefer a boot, you may want to add a pair of thin liner socks. (Carry a second set of socks and change each day.) A pair of sandals or Crocs are handy for fording deeper creeks.

Odds and Ends: Toilet paper in a Ziploc bag with a lightweight trowel and a small bottle of hand sanitizer let me answer nature's call. You'll want a map and a simple compass like the Silva Starter. You'll also want a small square of closed-cell foam (Nemo Chipper) so you have a dry, warm place to sit at breaks or in camp. You can lean against a rock, tree, or log – or use your hiking poles to prop up your pack and lean against that. You can buy low chairs, but they're unnecessarily heavy and bulky.

Your first aid kit shouldn't contain anything that you don't know how to use. If you stick to well-traveled, established trails, the worst thing you're likely to encounter are cuts, scrapes, stings, and aching muscles. For that, minimal knowledge and supplies will be adequate. (My kit is some Band-Aids, first aid cream, ibuprofen, and moleskin, plus a Swiss Army Knife Classic and Swiss Army Nail Clip.) If you go to remote, off-trail locations and limit-pushing activity, you'll need to take a more extensive kit, and to learn how to use everything in it. You'll also want a small headlamp or flashlight and some spare batteries. I also carry a tent pole repair sleeve (came with the tent) and some UCO Stormproof matches in a pill-size Ziploc bag. Finally, 3 or 4 stuff sacks (a mix of 5-, 10- and 15-liter sizes) will allow you to organize your gear when you pack your pack.

Pack: You'll want a 50- to 60-liter pack (the Flash 55 and Osprey Exos are a good place to start your search.) Again, the only important thing is fit. The suspension should comfortably support a 30-pound load and place most of the weight on your hips. (If possible, take your gear, food, and 2 liters of water to the store and load it into the pack.) You'll also want a pack cover or pack liner to protect your pack from rain.

LIFE ON THE TRAIL

Packing the Pack: I organize my pack so that I rarely have to open it during the day. My water bottle and filter go into the side pockets of the pack. My map and compass (in a gallon Ziploc bag) and my windbreaker go into the shove-it pocket on the front of the pack. My toilet kit, first aid kit, car keys, wallet, and cell phone (in a Ziploc bag) go into the lid compartment. My lunch and snacks go into the hipbelt pockets. My foam seat 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 into the very bottom of the pack, with the sleeping pad and spare clothing on top of it. Tent poles go in the corner of the pack on the same side as the filter. Food and stove sit in the center of the pack, against my back and over my center of gravity. The tent fly and body tuck in around the front of the pack, locking the food

and stove in place. My rain jacket, rain pants, and pack cover go on the very top of the load, in a stuff sack, where I can get at them quickly. (If I know it's going to rain, they might go into the shove-it pocket where they're a little easier to reach.)

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 forty-five minutes. At the morning and afternoon breaks, and at lunch, I take off my pack, take out my seat, lean against something, relax, eat a snack, and drink some water. I'll also take a some "standing" breaks to catch my breath, take a drink of water, and perhaps adjust clothing layers as the temperature changes. These breaks rarely exceed two or three minutes. After taking various breaks, I'm left with about six hours of actual walking. Depending on the terrain, you can probably average somewhere around two miles an hour. This means you could probably plan for twelve miles a day, in nice weather on moderate terrain, but I can't walk that fast anymore. I find that covering six to eight miles in six hours of walking, from about nine in the morning until about five in the evening, leaves me pleasantly tired but not exhausted. It also allows me the time to enjoy the beauty of the area I'm walking through, and to set up camp before dark.

I'll refill my water bottle at each source I come to (if I know the next source is only an hour away, and I've still got a half-full bottle, I might wait.) If I'm not camping near water, I'll carry three quarts of water from the last source, enough to get me to the first water source next morning.

Camping: When I'm ready to camp, I choose a well-drained, flat, open area for my tent. If it's chilly, I'll also put on some warm clothes.

My tent, at 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 on my groundcloth 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 the tent.

Next, I remove the stove, food sack, water bottles, and filter, and set them aside. I take out the sleeping pad, inflate it, and put it into the tent. Then I put my spare clothing and rain gear into the tent's stuff sack (my pillow) and put it at the head end of the tent. Next, the sleeping bag gets laid out on top of the sleeping pad to fluff a bit. Finally, I unpack the small stuff. My headlamp goes on my head and the first aid and toilet kits go into a corner of the tent. My empty pack usually goes in the vestibule, unless I'm using it as a backrest at supper.

Next, I go filter water (if I'm camping by a stream.) Then I take the food bag, filtered water, seat (and maybe pack and poles) to the cooking area. I position the seat to take advantage of any view. I set up my stove beside my seat and light it. I put a pot of water on to boil. When the water boils, I turn off the stove, prepare dinner, sit back, eat, and enjoy the evening.

After supper, I clean up, 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 raccoons, mice, and skunks out of it. Eventually, I take the rest of my gear and head for the tent. I sit down on the sleeping pad, 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, put my pillow under my head, and go to bed. If it turns unexpectedly cold, I can wear my fleece layers inside my sleeping bag.

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 stuff the sleeping bag into the bottom. I roll up the sleeping pad and put it into the pack. Finally, I load all the remaining gear and water bottles into my pack, set it outside the tent, swivel my legs out the door, put on my shoes, and stand up. I retrieve the food bag and remove that day's breakfast, lunch, and snacks. I put the food bag back in the pack and put my lunch and snacks in the hipbelt pockets. I put any clothes I won't be wearing while I hike into the pack. In cool weather, I'll often start the day's hike wearing long underwear with my pants and T-shirt. Usually, by the first rest stop, I'll take them off and put them back in the pack. Then I take the tent down, and finish packing. (If the tent is wet, I do this after breakfast so it can dry a bit.) I boil water for tea and eat breakfast, 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.

FINAL THOUGHT

Remember, it's not about the gear. Properly chosen gear should fade into the background and free you for the important part: enjoying the trip and experiencing the full pleasure that backpacking in a wonderful (or even ordinary) place can give you. And now, like any good backpacking trip, we've ended up right back where we started. Happy hiking!

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.