



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. So, your first step in choosing gear is to think about the conditions you'll experience on a typical trip. After having quadruple bypass heart surgery at age 74, my typical trip is now one or two days, covering only 4 – 6 miles a day, and pack weight is now more important than cost. I no longer go out in below-freezing or rainy weather. I can't handle mountainous terrain anymore. So, I selected gear that keeps my load under 20 pounds and handles short fair-weather trips in late spring through late fall in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

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 is the last question in the list on purpose and is considered only after you've determined that you do want to take that piece of gear.

Cost is also a factor. Renting gear is a good option for your first trip. When you are ready to buy gear, the general rule is "light, inexpensive, good – pick two." High-end gear is well worth its price if you take a lot of weeklong trips or thru-hike longer trails. However, if you're a recreational backpacker like me, there's no significant difference in performance or durability between high-end gear and "budget" gear like the REI Co-op brand. (It's hard to find bad gear at REI; that's why I buy most of my gear there. It's very easy to find junk gear on Amazon – do your research and read the reviews. A good source of gear reviews 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 any more kitchen than a 1-liter pot, a spoon, and a stove 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. Plan your water stops, and you may not need to carry that second water bottle. You can wear the same clothes for a couple of days, so your extra clothing may only need to be a change of socks.

After you make those changes, and try them on a couple of trips, you can buy lighter (or heavier) 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 (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 have questions about specific models of gear (or anything else), email me at glennroberts9876@gmail.com; I can be boring about this stuff for hours on end.

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 for rain protection; 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.

You can also buy “single-wall” or “double-wall” tents. Single-wall tents have the water-repellent portion sewn directly to the waterproof roof; double-wall tents have a non-waterproof complete tent over which you stretch a separate waterproof wall. The double-wall is often cited as being less likely to generate condensation – but this is wrong. Two similar tents, one single-wall and one double-wall, pitched next to each other with the same ventilation system will both generate the same amount of condensation on the inside of the outer wall of the tent. The difference is that, on a single-wall tent, that outer wall is also the inner wall of the tent, so you're directly exposed to contact with the condensation. There is a middle wall in a double-wall tent that helps separate you from the outside wall. The tradeoff is that a single-wall tent is lighter weight, but requires more attention when choosing a campsite and avoiding contact with the wall, while a double-wall tent is heavier but easier to set up and live in. (My own preference was, for many years, a double-wall tent. After my surgery and the need to lighten my load, I've learned to use single-wall tents – and discovered that they're a lot like the tarps I used to use, except that the tent's mesh walls keep out all the bugs.)

On the high-quality, high-price end of the scale, you can't beat the Big Agnes Fly Creek or Copper Spur; if you're willing to carry a few ounces more to save significant amounts of money, the REI Trailmade, Flash, or Flash Air tents are good choices. (The Flash Air tents are single-wall.)

Sleeping system: Your sleeping system consists of a sleeping pad and sleeping bag. You can buy a specially made "camping" pillow; after years of using my rain gear or fleece jacket in a stuff sack as a pillow, I bought one. 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. (I have a quilt and 2 bags.) 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, try on the bags for fit.

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, or hot chocolate mix. This kind of menu requires minimal kitchen equipment. You'll probably want a small stove that screws onto a gas canister, a 1-liter pot with a lid, and maybe a cup. Soto, Jetboil, MSR, and Snow Peak make excellent stoves. Titanium pots are very popular, but anodized aluminum is nearly as light and less expensive. Besides canister-mounted stoves, there are two other types. White gas stoves burn a refined form of gasoline, 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 spoon, 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. All 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 for weekend trips, the risk isn't much greater than your tap water at home. (Check with the local land manager to see if industrial runoff or local parasites and cysts are a problem. Some areas, like Zaleski in southeast Ohio, may be contaminated by mining runoff; this cannot be filtered out; usually the agency provides potable water.)

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.

Chlorine-based chemical treatments (Aqua Mira or Katadyn Micropur tablets) kill viruses, bacteria and protozoa, but aren't effective against all cysts and parasites. They don't remove "floaters," chemicals or heavy metals, nor do they improve the color or taste of water. Chemicals are a lightweight way to treat water but do require time to work. 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 don't remove viruses.) Filters will usually improve the color and taste of water and will remove "floaters." The Sawyer Squeeze and Katadyn BeFree both use the same filter technology in different designs, cost about the same, and are the two most popular filters right now. (Perfectly good clones of each are also readily available – just check for that EPA rating.) You'll also want a few water containers. You can buy collapsible containers or re-use Smartwater bottles to save some money. I also carry some purification tablets as backup in the unlikely event my filter clogs, freezes, or breaks (because I dropped it.)

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 typically fleece, down, or synthetic insulated 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 insulation.) I don't like insulating garments with built-in water resistant shells; I can wear a shell garment over the insulation.

For shell garments, you'll want a pair of hiking pants or shorts (You might like "convertible" pants that turn into shorts when you 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 do double duty. 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 more function, lighter weight, and higher prices if you don't like them.

I'm also not going to recommend specific footwear. The only thing that matters is fit – keep trying them on with the socks you'll wear until you find the hiking shoe or boot 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: Toilet paper in a Ziploc bag with a lightweight trowel and a small bottle of hand sanitizer let you answer nature's call. 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, tree, log, or your pack. If you want more comfort (and at 74, I do) you may want to carry a portable chair (mine weighs a pound.)

You should carry a first aid kit, but it 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, insect bites, and aching muscles. For that, minimal knowledge and supplies will be adequate: a Swiss Army Knife Classic (for scissors and tweezers), some Band-Aids, a small tube of Neosporin, some ibuprofen tablets, and moleskin. If you want something more robust, you can beef up a ready-made Adventure Medical Ultralight .3 First Aid kit (replace the tweezers with a Swiss Army knife; add a mirror because you can't put a Band-Aid on your own forehead without one; and add some electrolyte tablets for a hot, sweaty day.) If you go to remote, off-trail locations and undertake riskier activities, you'll need to take a more extensive kit and a wilderness first aid course to learn how to use everything in it.

You'll also want a small headlamp, some spare batteries, a bit of duct tape, and 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 55–60-liter pack if you're carrying more than 25 pounds; the REI Flash 55 and Osprey Atmos 50 are good places to start your search. If you're carrying less than 25 pounds, you can consider an ultralight 45–50-liter pack, like the REI Flash Air 50 that I chose. The determining factor in deciding between the two types isn't just your basic gear – you also must consider the amount of food and water you'll be carrying. Figuring 2 pounds of food per day and a liter of water (2 pounds), a weeklong trip would mean carrying 16 pounds of consumables. So, with a load of 16 pounds of water and supplies plus, say, 15 or 20 pounds of gear, it would be hard to make an ultralight pack work. You'll also want a pack cover or pack liner to protect your pack from rain.

As with boots, pack fit is everything. The suspension should fit comfortably and support 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. Then wear it around the store for 15 or 20 minutes to see how it carries.

LIFE ON THE TRAIL

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

The things you won't need until camp go into the main compartment. The sleeping bag goes into a stuff sack in the 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. The stove, spoon, fuel canister, and towel go inside the cook set; that and food sit in the other corner of the pack. Clothing you'll want to put on before setting up camp goes on top of the load.

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. During these breaks, I take off my pack, 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 young hiker can probably average somewhere around 2 miles an hour (12 miles a day), but you can walk fewer hours or 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 pillow at the head end of 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 lid, placing things 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.

Then I take my food, water, kitchen, and chair to the cooking area. I assemble the chair, put on my headlamp, then set up my stove beside my chair. I put enough water in my pot to rehydrate my supper and light the stove. When the water boils, I add it to the pouch of freeze-dried food and set the pouch 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. (If you're carrying a two-pot set like the Soto Amicus Cookset or Snow Peak Mini Solo, you may prefer to put your food in the pot of boiling water, then use the smaller pot to heat your beverage.) I don't recommend cooking on a campfire. It's too much like work and cuts you off from the night. It also requires you to carry water to put the fire out before bed (not the next morning; it could flare overnight.)

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 mini bears (raccoons, mice, squirrels, and skunks) out of it. Then I head for my tent. I leave my chair outside or store it in the vestibule. I take off my shoes and put them in the vestibule or tent, and get into the sleeping bag. I 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 – and plan better next time.

In the morning, I wake up and deflate my sleeping pad while lying on it. I grab my pack and pack it the same way I did yesterday. 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.

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