

Backpacking Tips, Tricks, Toys, and Truths

31 Techniques

1. Have a written trip plan. Leave it with someone that loves you. Include your destination, in/out dates, members of party, equipment, make and license of car and anything else that might help them find you.
2. Eat breakfast. You've got to have fuel for sustained energy output.
3. Test things before you go. Learn how to cook your freeze-dried food, how to set up your tent and start your stove while at home, not in the wild.
4. Make friends with your stove. Learn how to disassemble (and assemble) it, carry spare parts, speak kindly to it, keep it surgically clean always.
5. Have a trip leader. Macho does not equal leader. A leader sets the pace, facilitates problem solving and is a source of optimism, goodwill and support for the beginners in the group.
6. Buy and carry an appropriate size backpack for the type of trip. The easiest way to carry too large a load is to have too much space to fill up in the first place...
7. Make, use and keep equipment lists. Triple-check off items as they are selected, checked out and placed in your pack. Referring to lists from past trips will help you remember what worked and what didn't.
8. Have a pre-trip cookout/gear dividing party. Go over last minute details. Divide the community gear fairly. Get psyched. Eat food.
9. No cotton. You'd be better off naked. No jeans, cotton undies or T-shirts, period.
10. Eat your fattiest foods first. (Like this is a problem.) Cheeses, egg stuff and the like spoil fast.
11. Drink heavily. Especially at the very start of a trip. As you are driving to the trailhead, start pounding water down.
12. Limit your use of a flashlight at night. If there is anywhere near enough moonlight, you will probably be able to see better without a flashlight than with one. This is because A) you can't possibly leave your flashlight on all the time and B) your peripheral vision is vastly improved in the dark (and peripheral vision is what makes us feel comfortable in the dark). Try giving your eyes enough time to adjust without blasting them periodically with flashlight glare - you'll be surprised how well you really can see.
13. In cold weather, eat a sweet just before bedtime. Try hot cocoa or a chocolate bar. The calories will help you to generate warmth while you sleep.
14. Check your toenails before you go. Your feet and boots are your sole means of travel out there. Pedicure carefully and lovingly.
15. Never, ever forget to call your contact person when you get back from a trip. It's the least you can do for someone you trusted your life with. Before you shower, sleep, go to the photo place or whatever, call your contact.
16. Build some "downtime" into your schedule. Take a day off on long trips. Plan to sleep in on days with shorter hikes. Allow for slower travel than expected (or trouble) on all trips. Hey, it's a vacation.
17. Have fun. Play games. Ask probing personal questions. Splash in the water. Make up lies about exotic wildlife. Play.
18. Wear a watch. Or at least carry one, preferably a waterproof one with an alarm/timer function. A watch will get you to bed at a decent hour, get you up earlier than you want to get up, and tell you (accurately) how much daylight is left so you know when to head back to camp. Watches are an outdoor tool, not a shackle.
19. Divide community gear with survival in mind. Don't give someone all the food, all the sleeping bags, all the water, all the anything. Everyone should be able to get by with what they've got in their pack.
20. Don't rest for more than 5 minutes every hour. Most groups rest far too often, underestimating their capacity. Don't let your muscles and tendons cool and stiffen up by resting too long.
21. Take care of things before they get extreme. Drink before you get thirsty. Eat before you get very hungry. Sleep before you get very tired. Put warm clothes on before you get cold. Remove layers before you saturate them with sweat. A blister is not a big problem; a nasty infected one can mean a litter rescue. Take care of the little things before they turn into big things.
22. Don't sweat (into your clothes that is). If you are sweating, delete layers until you are comfortable - but remember to put them on again at once when you stop moving or the temperature drops.
23. Wear a hat. Keep your skull cool in the summer, warm in the winter. It's where your brain lives. Use it.
24. Match your pace to your breathing, not vice-versa.
25. Set the group pace to accommodate the slowest member of your group. Don't put the slowest hiker at the end - it's psychologically oppressive back there, and they'll just be getting to the rest stop when it's time for

the group to head out again. Lighten their load if necessary, and kill instantly any macho self-appointed trip "leaders". Remember, it's only a backpacking trip.

26. Don't cook too much food. You won't have to carry it out that way.
27. Don't breathe in your sleeping bag. If it's cold enough for you to want to pull your head all the way inside your bag, it's plenty cold enough to worry about the quart of water vapor that you'll breathe into it during the night. Keep your nose and mouth outside the bag.
28. Read your food preparation instructions carefully. Nobody likes to eat a ruined meal.
29. Lay down in your "bed" before setting up camp. Luxury, in the wilderness, is a flat place, and places that look flat turn out, after dark, to be irritatingly sloped in one direction or another. Get down on the ground, lay down and stay there for a minute to see if your ideal bed is really perfect. If it's not, find another one - but don't move soil to make a bed.
30. Pack the heaviest items high and close for trail hiking, low and close for off-trail scrambling, climbing or skiing. It will carry easier high and close, but you'll have better balance with the weight low and close - the nearer your belly button (your center of gravity), the better.
31. Don't over extend yourself. Fatigue equals injury.

34 Tricks

1. Vaseline soaked cotton balls packed in a film canister make a reliable, cheap, non-spoiling, non-spilling firestarter.
2. Have a set of sleeping clothes you change into before bed. You can extend the temperature range of your bag by sleeping in clean bed clothes. Wearing clean clothes to bed helps protect your sleeping bag from soiling, extending its lifespan and you'll sleep warmer. Don't wear your damp hiking clothes to bed, though, even if they don't seem wet to you, they are. Put your grungy trail clothes on in the morning.
3. Polar pure concentrate can be used to quickly create a large volume of sterile solution for wound irrigation. In your haste, don't forget to wait long enough for the iodine to work.
4. Your tent rain fly makes an excellent ultra-light shelter. Some, with their tent poles, are even self supporting. Many tent flies mate with corresponding custom-fitted ground cloths creating slick hyper-light "tents".
5. A dab of butter or margarine in your evening cocoa makes it taste richer and gives you a blast of fat to kick in after the sugar for warmth and energy.
6. Using ski/trekking poles can reduce the strain on your legs and feet by up to 35%. Try it sometime.
7. Carry a "Save My Trip" kit with you - for the other guys. Stuff to silence their whining: second skin, jungle juice, ibuprofen, benadryl, sunscreen, muzzle. The trip you save may be your very own.
8. The best source for backpacking food is the supermarket. Pastas, tea bags, instant coffee and coffee bags, drink mixes, hard candy, dehydrated butter, flavored gelatin, nuts, hard salami and cheeses, beef jerky, instant oatmeal, fig bars, cocoa, soup mix, pancake mix, instant potatoes and more can be found on the cheap at the supermarket.
9. For desert hiking, a handful of premoistened towelettes are priceless. In the desert you are even sweatier and greasier than usual, and water is generally too precious a commodity to wash with.
10. Ask story-ended questions of your group. Ask about their first kiss, ten things they want to learn to do, their favorite book, etc. Everybody has to answer. Much fun.
11. Bring a pair of camp shoes to air out your feet when you get in to camp. River sandals work well for this and can be used for river crossings to keep your boots dry.
12. Use a pee bottle, especially in winter. To avoid late night disasters, make sure it's readily identifiable shape unlike anything else you're carrying, and be certain your tentmates know of your intentions.
13. Never put those little liquid dispensing flip-top bottles inside (or near) a mesh stuffsack. The holes in the mesh are just the right size to grab the flip-top spout and the jostling of your pack will dispense liquid soap, cooking oil or primer fuel all over your gear.
14. Make your gear east to find by feel. If you use a wide variety of stuffsacks, mesh bags and plastic containers you'll soon be able to find what you're looking for in the dark, or down in the bottom of your backpack.
15. Keep your ground cloth the same size as or slightly smaller than your tent. Otherwise it will act as a rain gutter, collecting water and sending it under your tent.
16. Use a bulldog clip (a super heavy-duty business "paper clip") to hold your stove's windscreen closed.

17. Leave a duffel bag with a change of clothes, a hat, a gallon of water and some hand lotion in the car. You will love being able to take a one-gallon shower with the water, change into clean clothes and rub lotion into your hands after a long hike.
18. When camping near snow, use snow instead of toilet paper. This technique is extremely low impact and works great.
19. Don't carry more than one pair of pants. Your underwear, shorts and wind/rain pants, in various combinations, will provide any additional protection you need.
20. Carry your toilet paper in several ziplock bags. Wet toilet paper is no toilet paper. Place a small bottle of hand sanitizer inside of the toilet paper tube and use it. Most backcountry stomach ailments are due to poor sanitation.
21. Heavy-duty "trash compactor" bags make pretty durable pack covers, stuffsack liners and ,when cut open, groundcloths. They even make good trash bags.
22. Molefoam/athletic tape blister treatment: 1) Cut an oval of molefoam bigger than the blister 2) Cut a blister sized hole out of that 3) Tape the molefoam donut over your blister. Your blister gets padded from further irritation and it can breathe.
23. If you put longer tie-downs on your tent, you'll be able to use stones as anchors. Use rocks instead of stakes in sand, on rocky terrain or any time that bashing a dozen holes in the ground doesn't seem like such a good idea. In other words, OFTEN.
24. 35mm film containers. Spices, hand lotion, vitamins and drugs, matches, stove parts, margarine fit wonderfully. Label lids or use the clear canisters from Fuji. Wash them carefully first to remove any film residue.
25. The rest step. Lock your knee as you rise above each uphill step, creating a little rest in the middle of each stride. Especially useful on steep grades with heavy loads.
26. Start your stove before you go. Boy, it sure would be stupid to get out there and find something is broken or bent on your stove...
27. You can keep melted snow liquid overnight by burying it under a foot or so of snow. The snow itself is such a good insulator that it will keep the water liquid until morning. Just make sure you mark the spot well...
28. Correct lifting procedure for a heavy pack: 1) Face the upright pack harness with your strong leg and arm nearest it, grasping the shoulder straps with both hands. 2) Lift the pack smoothly and rest it on the bent knee of your strong leg. 3) With the pack balanced there, slip your strong arm through its shoulder strap. 4) Standing, slip your other arm through its shoulder strap. Presto.
29. Carry hydrocortizone cream for rashes, cuts, insect bites and poison ivy encounters.
30. Develop eyes in your feet. Although it sounds funny, experienced hikers develop "eyes in their feet" that are invaluable to them in scrambling, stream crossings, off-trail hiking and canyoneering. Look where you are placing each foot. Evaluate every step: is it solid, loose, tippy, sandy or slick? Where will your next step be? Are you stepping too high or too low? Watching an experienced backpacker negotiate a steep slope or deep creekbed is to discover you need to learn to walk again. Become acutely aware of your stride when backpacking. One misstep could mean the end of your trip.
31. When melting snow, cover the bottom of the pot with water before filling it with snow. This will melt the snow faster and avoid a disgusting burned water taste.
32. Duct tape can be carried by wrapping a short length around a water bottle or your trekking poles. Among other uses, it makes a passable emergency moleskin substitute.
33. A small sponge saturated in ammonia placed in your soiled toilet paper bag will kill offending bacteria and make the entire scenario more pleasant. Double up those bags.
34. A hanging multipocket shoe organizer is a cheap and efficient way to organize all your backpacking gear at home. Those clear vinyl pockets are a perfect way to find your toys.

25 Toys

1. Polar pure. Elemental iodine that never goes bad, works quickly, is lightweight (compared to a filter), is safe, cheap and simple to use.
2. Potable aqua. A lightweight, cheap and long lasting (when kept sealed) emergency backup for your expensive water filter. What did you plan to do if your filter broke?

3. Headlamps. They do everything a flashlight can and more. Although great for setting up camp in the dark, they are most valuable in nighttime retreats and other unexpected epics, when having your hands free is critical. Your friends will only laugh for the first few minutes. Then they will want to borrow it.
4. Capilene glove liners. All the glove you need for most hiking situations. Weightless.
5. Crazy creek chair. At 21oz, it's only a few ounces heavier than a standard 3/4 thermarest, just as comfortable, and a great camp chair too.
6. Lightweight capilene. Especially in white, this is an unbelievably flexible garment. It's light, warm when cold and cool when warm, offers protection from the sun, launders well, dries quickly, is warm when wet, and doesn't hold odors.
7. Second skin. Amazing stuff. Moleskin on steroids. Second skin stops pain from blisters, even really nasty ones, and is a great sterile wound or burn dressing, too.
8. Acorn polartec socks. Wear with sandals for wading, protecting your feet from the sun at the same time. Recommended as comfy ultra-light camp slippers.
9. Group toilet trowel. Carry one. A good way to develop good camp toilet habits is to hang the group trowel in some central location in camp. When everyone decides on a single latrine location and uses one group trowel, it's easy to educate beginners in proper sanitation technique.
10. Fill-a-pill. A sorta heavy stuffsack with a panel of polartec sewn inside. When you turn it inside out and fill it with extra clothing, it becomes an embarrassingly decadent pillow. Way worth it.
11. Packtowel. Light, cheap, quick-drying, durable, rinses clean easily. Vastly superior to a bandanna (although you can bring one of these too).
12. 3M Ultrathon insect repellent. Nothing else works as well.
13. Sorbothane insoles. Seemingly expensive insoles made out of some kind of flubber-like miracle rubber, these things absorb a ton (literally) of the shock and punishment that your feet would otherwise have to endure.
14. Tecnu poison oak-n-ivy treatment. For those sensitive to poison ivy (just about everyone), this stuff is a godsend. Put it on before you go out to prevent a rash, or wash with it afterward. It works.
15. A signal mirror with a sighting hole in it. An old CD or DVD works quite well. Without a sighting hole, nobody can aim a mirror accurately. Especially under stress, which of course, exactly what you would be under if you had to use the thing.
16. Whistle. Louder and a lot less work than yelling. Buy a bunch, one for everyone in the group. Put them on lanyards or clip them to your pack in an easily accessible location. Explain that they are to be carried at all times, but used for emergency signaling only. Wind, distance and rushing water make human voices very frail and faint. Use a whistle.
17. Lexan cup and bowl. Lighter, easier to clean, more durable, and cooler on the lips and hands than any other cup or bowl. Cheap.
18. Lexan "silverwear". Light, strong and inexpensive, these things actually feel like nice, real-life-grown-up utensils, but be careful with them near open flame - they melt. Actually, a spoon is all you really need.
19. Lighter. Lasts seemingly forever on the trail, dries if it gets wet (and works afterward, unlike matches), and you don't have to worry about what to do with hot spent matches.
20. Bandannas. Sunshade for your neck, arm sling, headband, pirate hat, water strainer, sponge, potholder, miniature tablecloth, dust mask, handkerchief...
21. Chums. Sure would be stupid to lose your sunglasses out there.
22. Balaclava. A dumb-looking but stunningly effective piece of headgear for colder conditions. Carry a pile or capilene one all the time; they are virtually weightless, really warm, make a goofy-looking but functional hat when the bottom is rolled up, and are wonderful for sleeping in.
23. Dial-a-spice. A 3oz bundle of assorted spices that make any trail diet (especially a freeze-dried one) much more interesting. Although it may be lighter or cheaper to carry just a few of your favorite spices on a solo trip, dial-a-spice is a great thing to have along on a group trip, when everyone has differing tastes (and there is somebody to care it).
24. Sunglasses. At elevation or in the desert, sunglasses are an essential Survival item. Get good ones, put them on chums and wear them. Up to 30% of your total energy can be wasted in the stress of squinting, blinking and just being miserable without sunglasses.
25. No fires. If you don't have a fire, you will hear (and maybe see) wildlife you otherwise wouldn't, you'll look into the eyes of the people you are talking to instead of staring like a zombie into the fire, you won't broadcast your presence to other hikers in the area, and you'll have a lot more time to enjoy yourself

because you won't be wasting it destroying the wilderness gathering wood, building ugly fire rings, struggling to start a fire and ensuring that it's out. Best of all, because you won't be fussing with an obnoxious fire, you'll actually experience the magic transition of night to morning, from evening to night; the rapidly changing colors of twilight and dawn, the animals calling out to each other, the stars, moon and sun making their silent entrances and exits. No fires.

23 Truths

1. Carry out more than you carry in. Trash, that is. Packing out all of your trash earns you a barely passing grade, nothing at all to congratulate yourself about. Pack out all your stuff and all the trash you encounter, too. You'll feel better, I promise.
2. The difficulty of finding a trail is directly proportional to the consequences of not finding it.
3. Don't overfill fuel tanks. There needs to be air space in there for the pump to pressurize. Fill tanks about 80% full.
4. Don't cook inside your tent. It's dangerous (the tent is made, after all, out of gasoline), it releases a ton of water vapor into your sleeping environment (a very bad idea), and, worst of all, when you spill something (and you will), it makes an ungodly mess you have to sleep in. Cook outside, even in bad weather.
5. Once you are lost, a compass and a map are nearly worthless. Use your compass and map. A compass and map are not some kind of emergency parachute that will save you when things go wrong. If you don't know (specifically) how you got there or where is, a compass and map won't tell you where to go to get home. Take a bearing at the start of your trip, and keep taking bearings throughout the hike so you have some kind of reference when things start to look a little weird.
6. Mosquito density is the inverse of your remaining repellent.
7. The chocolate rule. When deciding what to bring and what to leave behind on a backpacking trip, the chocolate rule is helpful. Simply ask: "would I rather have this (insert name of gadget here), or an equal weight of chocolate?"
8. A wise soldier sits whenever he can. So does a wise hiker.
9. Staying dry is easier than getting dry.
10. Wash at least 200 feet from water. You are not the exception to the rule. Carry a pot of water to a nice private spot away from the water to do your bathing, laundry and dishes. The only thing harder than walking uphill is walking downhill.
11. Leave no "biodegradable" trash. One of the biggest myths is that some GARBAGE is "biodegradable", and is therefore somehow okay to leave strewn about in the wilderness. It is not. Food scraps, in particular, are harmful; animals dig it up (even when they don't eat it) and become habituated to that campsite. Lots of biodegradable trash takes forever to decay. It is GARBAGE. Your garbage. Pack it out.
12. Learn CPR and basic first aid. Boy, sure hope somebody knows how to save your life if you need it. Are you set to return the favor? Take a CPR and basic first aid class, now.
13. Keep it clean. Good hygiene is important in the wilds. Clean wounds don't turn into major problems. Clean hands and cooking utensils don't cause intestinal trouble.
14. Buy the best gear you can afford. Money is important here, but it has no value in the wilderness. And a single equipment failure can have catastrophic consequences far from home. Quality is important.
15. Light is right.
16. When lost, S.T.O.P. (Stop Think Observe Plan).
17. Movement overcomes cold. Stillness overcomes heat.
18. No plastic tarps. They're good for (maybe) one trip and then last for 1,000,000 years in a landfill. Get a real groundcloth instead.
19. "Adventure" is when you are doing something that you would rather be home talking about.
20. Hold yourself to your highest standard in wilderness areas. These are the most protected, most remote and pristine outdoor areas left in America. Be on your very best behavior when in wilderness areas.
21. No matter where you go, there you are.
22. The heaviest single item you can bring with you on a backpacking trip is a date.
23. The single most important survival tool you can bring with you is your brain.