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# TRAIL TIPS

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## Helpful Hints for Hiking



## Sticks or Freestyle?

Welcome back! Temperatures are finally cooling off, and it's time to get back out on the trails here in the Southwest. I thought we'd take a look at the benefits and disadvantages of using hiking sticks whilst moseying through the desert.

Walking sticks and trekking poles are the technical names for what we wanderers generally refer to as hiking sticks. Simply put, a staff is a single hiking stick and trekking poles are a pair of hiking sticks. It's a matter of personal preference as to the number of poles one wishes to use when ambling down the trail. Arguments can be made that two are better than one, but I believe it's more a matter of being comfortable with your stride and gait.

I personally have used a staff for quite a number of years now. I only recently began using a set of trekking poles after they were given to me as retirement gifts from my work associates (who were making a gentle hint at my needing canes, I thought at the time).

I was hesitant about using two poles rather than one. I'd seen many hikers using them on the trail, of course, and the motion just looked awkward to me. I must admit that it was also somewhat of an affront to my macho, trail busting pride to use what amounted to two canes, assisting my decrepit body to perambulate across the wilderness.

But my comrades had really gone all out, and given me a set of really nice Black Diamond carbon fiber trekking poles, made of three pieces that collapsed down to a compact 18" length when not in use. So I felt obligated to at least give them a shot.

The first few miles with two poles felt a tad awkward, but as the miles went by, I fell into a comfortable rhythm. I felt more sure-footed going down scree-filled descents, and less winded climbing up steep grades. I was able to recover more quickly if I stumbled across an unseen stone sticking up in the middle of the trail. Water crossings were much easier to navigate. The carbide metal tips really bit into the rocks as I wobbled my way across. (Whether one uses the rubber caps or the metal tips, it's purely a personal preference.)

And in one of my conversations with the helpful folks at REI, it was pointed out that using trekking poles also helps build upper body strength. Well, duh. That simple concept never really occurred to me. And what a great benefit to utilize as we all enter this next phase of our lives.

To sum up, hiking stick benefits are:

- Increased Stability

- Reduction of Leg Fatigue

- Improvement of Upper Body Strength

- Prodding that Slowpoke in Front of You in the Derriere

Disadvantages are:

Hmm...Well, if you have to go to all fours to scramble, you'll have to toss them down or something. I bought a new backpack recently that has straps for my trekking poles. I honestly can't think of any disadvantages, other than that whole macho stigma thing.

One must also exercise caution on placement of one's hiking sticks in rocky terrain. If you're relying too heavily on a stick to hold you up and it slips, you could be in for a nasty fall. I've never had this happen to me, but the possibility exists.

I have gone on a few hikes where I did not take my poles, because the hikes were short, I thought it would be flat, or I was just being lazy. On many of those hikes, I regretted not having my sticks with me. I now never hike without them, unless I'm sure it's flat and less than half a mile or so.

I almost always have a spare set of trekking poles and a staff in the car with me at the trailhead if you'd ever like to try using them. Just look for the guy wobbling across the parking lot to the bathroom on his hiking sticks...

Be SAFE out there!