
TRAIL TIPS

Helpful Hints for Hiking

Pack It In, Pack It Out



We've all heard it before and have seen it on numerable signs at trailheads. Pack it In, Pack it Out. If you don't have a furry companion like the one pictured above, it means you're carrying a bit of extra weight with you.

How much weight? That's a very personal question, and I'll thank you to mind your own business.

Well, OK, we're all friends here. I normally carry around an extra 14 pounds whilst moseying through the wilderness on a day hike. This includes the backpack itself.

Fourteen pounds?! What? No, really, I just weighed myself on the scale, and there's 14 pounds back there. What the heck is in my backpack? All right, since you were kind enough to ask:



Starting at the top right and working down and across to the bottom left:

A 3 Liter Hydration Bladder, First Aid Safety Pamphlet, Small Memo Book, Sunscreen, Splint, Elastic Wrap, Adhesive Wrap, First Aid Kit, Vial of Life, Spare Boot Laces, 3 Paper Towels, Emergency Poncho, Binoculars, Pocket Knife, Hemostats, Pen, Flashlight, Whistle, Lip Balm, 2 Electrolyte Packs, a Lifesaver(?!), 3 Kerchiefs, Chips, Sandwich, Fruit, 2 Wet-naps, 2 Glasses Wipes, Cell Phone, Dark Glasses, and Gloves.

Whew! I'm not sure where the Lifesaver came from; I think it's been in there awhile...but I'll have minty fresh breath when the EMTs come to get me.

The spare boot laces; as I was lacing up my boots after parking the car at a trailhead, a bootlace broke. I had to unlace it, salvage the longer half, and skip several holes to fasten the boot. Since then I always carry a spare set. They don't weigh much...

And Rene' created a nice First Aid trail pamphlet condensed from other material we have studied. The Club paid for the printing. I'll start distributing them to hike coordinators and leaders. Just ask one of us if you'd like to have one.

So, 14 pounds. Six pounds of that is the three liters of water. Almost two pounds is the weight of the pack itself. The other six pounds are accessories. That means that the absolute minimum weight I will safely go out on a six mile hike with is eight pounds.

Eight pounds does not sound like a lot. Try holding eight pounds straight out by your side, even with your shoulder, for a few minutes. Use a gallon of water or milk. Go ahead. I'll wait...

Well, that didn't take too long! That sucker got heavy pretty quickly, didn't it? Carrying that weight close to your center of gravity, supported by your shoulders, is the secret to a backpack being comfortably carried for long distances. But there are other methods to carry that load even more comfortably. To illustrate a few of these options, let's take a look at several different ways to lug your stuff around.

The Fanny Pack



These are great for shorter hikes. The weight is distributed across your hips, your derriere helps to support the load, and one can often access the water bottles without having to remove the pack.

However, carrying capacity is small. My sammich gets squished. No way am I gonna fit all that First Aid stuff. And I want way more water than can comfortably be carried in there.

Having said all that, these packs are great for short hikes, two or three miles. I see them a lot on the trails. One can also sling an extra holster or two on the belt for more water, but that can start to get pretty heavy, and my belly starts to feel squished, along with my sammich.

The Standard Backpack



This is the North Face Borealis Day Pack I lugged around for about 13 years. It's pretty rugged, fairly comfortable up to around 12 pounds, and has a waist belt. Note that said belt is not fastened by the fashion model on the left. Also note how low the backpack is riding on said fashion model's back.

Here's a couple of those little tips about distributing the load of a pack on your body. First off, the closer to the vertical line of your center of gravity the pack is, the closer the weight is to being directly over your feet. This helps your balance and reduces strain on your back, hips, and knees. By having the backpack low on the back, it hangs rearward of your center of gravity, and acts as a lever on your shoulders, and contributes to shoulder pain. The pack should be worn as high on your shoulders as possible.

Secondly, the waist belt is a HUGE addition in distributing the weight on your body. Instead of using only two load-bearing points, you can take advantage of three; the waist or hip belt will support a percentage of the weight on your lower body, reducing the load on your shoulders.

Backpack with Padded Hip Belt with Side Pockets



I acquired this pack a little over a year ago. My old pack had an unpadded belt, and no pockets I could access without removing the pack. My new pack has two small pockets on the belt, perfect for little things like lip balm, whistle, cell phone, maps, etc. The padding on the belt is a huge comfort improvement (I have bony hips; no snickering, please). This pack also has more compartments, a larger hydration pocket, and a built in rain fly stowed in a lower zippered compartment. Not that I use the rain fly much, but I did use it in the Superstitions during a unpredicted wet morning. That's also why I added the disposable rain poncho to my arsenal.

When donning my pack, I hunch over a little bit, and tighten the hip belt first. Then I cinch up the shoulder and chest straps. That way I can get a feel for how much weight is being carried by the hip belt. And as the hike progresses, if my hips get a little sore, I'll loosen the belt and carry a bit more weight on my shoulders. Then, when my shoulders get a little sore, I'll shift more weight to my hips. And repeat ad nauseam. This system really works well to relieve sore pressure points.

Here's another reason why I went with this particular pack:



See that black mesh? It's what actually contacts my back when hiking. There's about half an inch of air between my back and the backpack itself. My back used to become completely drenched with sweat after just a few miles on the trail, even in cooler temperatures. This webbing has greatly reduced that discomfort. I've noticed less heat transfers to my hydration bladder as well.

There's an internal back piece that is stiff and goes from top to bottom. This aids in keeping the pack from mushing down, and keeps the weight transferred from your hips through the entire length of the pack.

Let's take a look at the back padding on my good old North Face pack:



This is pretty typical of older daypacks. Not a lot of breathability back there. There's no internal back support, so the pack can't take full advantage of the belt support.

Note the little flaps that did provide a little relief for my poor hips from that nylon belt. But alas, no pockets. This pack was also a little short for my torso. Newer packs usually come in three sizes, short, regular and long.

You can see the difference in the next photo of our fashion model wearing yet another backpack:



See how high up the belt rides on the waist? Squished stomach city. This is Rene's backpack; it's a woman's model, and it's sized for a shorter torso. This pack fits her very well, but if she were to wear my backpack, the hip belt would wrap around her thighs. Waddling like a penguin is not the most fashionable way to hit the trail.

Oh, and her pack also has the Air Mesh and hip belt pockets as well.

There are other sizing tips on modern backpacks. Generally, their carrying capacity is rated in liters. My pack is an Osprey 26; that means it's interior cargo capacity is 26 liters, or about six and a half gallons. Yes, it's a little big, but I have room to stuff a full rain jacket in there if needed, or to stow that fleece I started out wearing at the trailhead and ditched after the trail headed straight uphill for two miles. Cue the stripper music...

Rene's pack is an Osprey 9 liter model, or about a third the capacity of mine. Yes, her sammich gets a little squished at times. But it proves to be adequate for her needs, even if I have to occasionally carry some gear for her. I am her Beast of Burton...



And speaking of burdens, how you pack your pack can have a bearing on how much leverage your load will exert on your spine. Pack heavier items close to your back, with lighter items toward the rear, or outside of the pack. Again, this keeps most of the weight close to your center of gravity. That's one reason a backpack's hydration bladder pocket is always right next to the back frame. Almost every newer backpack has a hydration pocket and hose port, and some even come with a bladder assembly. My Osprey did.

I have always been a Jansport and North Face fan. I mention the Osprey line because I had never heard of them before. Osprey has been around for a few years, but I hadn't been in the market for a new backpack for quite some time. When I did my due diligence, Osprey kept popping up as a very well rated pack. The reviews are very good and the company boasts of a lifetime warranty. NO, I'm not getting any kickbacks here. It IS the most comfortable pack I've ever owned.

Whatever backpack you own, or are thinking about getting, think about all of the things I've rambled on about here. Second only to boots, it's probably the most important piece of gear you will have on the trail. Your pack should fit you well, serve your needs, and most of all, be as comfortable to carry as possible. An ill fitting pack is a pain in the...back.

If you decide you are in the market for a new pack, check out REI. Their associates are well trained in assisting you to find the right model, they can measure your torso to find the right size, and they even have bags of ballast on hand to load into your prospective new best friend so you can waddle around the store and see how much it hurts.

Should you run right out and get a new pack? That's entirely up to you, and how uncomfortable your current pack it in, pack it out system is. Hiking can get pretty tough in the desert. There's no reason to make it any tougher than necessary.

Have a **SAFE** hike out there!