

INTRODUCTION TO BACKPACKING

"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." (John Muir)

What?

Backpacking is hiking with your home on your back. Some of the most scenic trails in the province can be reached only by backpacking: sections of the Voyageur Trail, Pukaskwa's Coastal Trail, Killarney's Silhouette Trail and the Ganaraska Trail's Wilderness section, to name but a few. So here are some ideas for getting started.

When?

Start with "fair-weather" camping. Although you will probably choose the summer for your first trip, early spring, late summer and fall have their advantages: fewer crowds, no biting insects and cool nights for sleeping.

Where?

For your introductory trips, select trails that are somewhat familiar and close to civilization. You will still be "getting away", but you will be able to handle any emergencies that arise, such as bad weather or equipment problems. .

How long?

Start first with a weekend trip. When you have developed your confidence and skills, you can then embark on longer expeditions.

Plan carefully

Take care of the details at home; then things should go well on the trail. Select your route carefully and plan travel times with a detailed map. On well-maintained trails, allow one hour for every three level kilometres, and add one hour for every 300 metres of elevation gain. Allow additional time in case of poor trail conditions or bad weather or simply "to smell the roses". Get into shape; you will enjoy yourself more if you are fit. Regular aerobic exercise such as brisk walking, bicycling and running will help your cardiovascular system and legs.

Equipment

In the wilderness, less is usually best. Most beginning backpackers, even some experienced "old hands", overestimate their needs and carry too much. Think light! Backpacking gear should be as light as possible but strong enough to stand up to extreme conditions. Before leaving home, weigh your fully-loaded pack. Your summer weekend pack should be no more than 16 kg. A good rule of thumb is not to exceed 30% of your body weight. Any pack weight of more than 20 kg will take the fun out of the experience, so leave all unnecessary items at home. .

Clothing:

Quality gear will keep you warm, dry and comfortable. Dress in layers to give greater warmth and versatility. Include moisture-wicking polypropylene underwear, an insulation layer, and a windproof/waterproof outer layer.

Take care of your feet

Well-broken-in hiking boots are your most important piece of equipment. They must give good support to handle the extra weight of a full pack. Comfortable socks are also vital. Many backpackers prefer a thin wicking liner sock and an absorbent outer sock.

Backpack

This is another critical item. Make sure your pack is fully adjustable and fits your frame properly. The shoulder straps and shaped hip belt should be padded, and the volume should be large enough to stow all your gear - 80 litres is probably sufficient unless you have a bulky sleeping bag. It's wise to avoid hanging stuff all over the outside, where it may get wet, lost or damaged. It's crucial that your gear remains dry, so use a large plastic bag liner that can be closed completely at the top. For additional protection, put your sleeping bag and clothes in separate water-proof sacks, and take additional plastic bags; they don't weigh much.

Tent

Choose a free-standing, light-weight tent with good ventilation, a rainfly, adequate space, a minimum of seams, and a "tub" floor that will keep out water. Don't order it from a catalogue, sight unseen! Go to one, preferably two or more outdoor stores and talk to a knowledgeable salesperson before making your choice.

Food

Have fun in preparing your menus: choose foods that are light-weight, easy to prepare, will not spoil, and can be eaten with a spoon. To save weight, avoid food that contains a substantial amount of water, such as fresh fruit and vegetables. Take dried foods that produce tasty meals when simply added to boiling water (pre-soaking often helps). Quick-cooking foods are best, as they require less fuel. Good packable sources of carbohydrates are minute rice, thin spaghetti, oatmeal, breads, and sugars. Packable proteins and fats include salami, cheese, nuts and peanut butter. Outdoor stores stock a wide range of dried foods, as well as cookbooks devoted to trail cooking. Tins and bottles should be avoided at all costs; they are heavy, and are banned in many parks because of potential pollution. Remember to include high-energy trail snacks.

Water

ALWAYS carry water. ALWAYS boil for eight minutes, filter or chemically treat any water from a natural source. Plan on three litres of drinking water per person per day in temperate weather (this includes water for cooking), and up to six litres in hot weather.

Packing

Before packing, assemble all the gear you think you'll need, and ask yourself if you really must take everything. Let's go through some of the questionable items now, at home, rather than part way in the wilderness! First the clothing. Toss out that spare pair of gloves; you can use socks at a pinch. That bulky wool sweater, pants and insulated parka should be replaced with thin, light layers such as polypropylene (preferably not cotton) underwear, a light fleece mid-layer and a waterproof, breathable outer layer. Why? Not only do they save weight, but they dry quickly, so you probably don't need a complete change of clothes. If you must take a sweater for extra warmth, pack two light-weight synthetic ones instead of that heavy wool one. Leave behind those cotton jeans, shorts and T-shirts unless you're hiking in hot, dry conditions. They take forever to dry after a rain storm. Next check your cooking equipment. Get rid of that knife and fork; a spoon is all you need. Remove the mug and plate; the bowl will double for eating and drinking. Why do you need two pots and lids? One larger pot will be fine for heating up enough water for meals, brew-ups and washing.

Now you are ready to pack it all in your backpack, which you have already lined with that large plastic bag. Think about the order in which you'll need things, both on the trail, and when you pitch camp. Think backwards! First, if you have some useful "emergency items" such as a space blanket, a couple of energy bars and a spare large garbage bag, put them at the very bottom of the main compartment where they can be forgotten about. Next put in the sleeping bag, then the sleeping pad. If it's a Therm-a-Rest inflatable mattress, roll it up tightly and place it at the bottom. If it's the bulky closed cell foam type, either line the pack with it and load everything else inside it, or (if your pack is too small) roll it up as tightly as you can and attach it outside to the bottom or side of the pack in a tough protective waterproof bag). Food, cooking equipment, stove, fuel and spare clothes go in next, including a pair of insulated booties, moccasins, sandals or light running shoes to wear around camp. Cram as much as you can into your cooking pot to save space. Near the top of the main compartment put the tent and tent fly. The bag containing the tent poles and pegs, and flashlight (preferably headlight) can be strapped securely to the outside if there's no room inside. At the top of the pack, and in easily accessible side pockets, put those items you may need on the trail; snacks, rain gear, first aid kit, small repair kit, toilet items, notebook and pencil, camera and film, and water. Some backpacks have a water bottle holder attached to the hip belt. If yours doesn't, make sure your water container isn't buried deep inside your backpack, where it won't be used as often as it should be! Finally, light items that should be carried on your person include car keys, pocket knife, sunglasses, sunscreen, insect repellent, spare waterproofed matches, whistle, compass and map, and an energy bar or candies. In bear country, bear spray is highly recommended (as long as you know how to use it!).

Special Considerations

If you want to make use of streams and lakes for your drinking and cooking water, you'll need water purification tablets, or a mechanical filter. If the water supply is far from your campsite, consider a collapsible container for carrying it. If open fires are permitted where you are going, you might be tempted to dispense with stove and fuel to save weight, if you don't mind dealing with a messy pot. Don't be tempted! Gathering material to start a fire is a pain at the end of a hard slog on the trail, and if it's raining you'll regret leaving that stove and fuel behind. Besides, open fires are not environmentally friendly. In bear country you must pack at least 20m of line, lightweight pulley and carabiner to hang your food and garbage (in separate bags, not your backpack) from a convenient tree. Even if there aren't any bears, there are always racoons, and they love soap and toothpaste as well as food and garbage! So always hang these items at least 4 metres off the ground, and 3 metres away from tree trunks and branches. Another helpful item is a trekking pole, or a pair of them. They reduce stress on the legs, and provide support on slippery surfaces. If you are backpacking in a group, keep the numbers reasonably small in order to minimize environmental damage, noise and garbage. Leave your campsite as you found it, and pack out all of your garbage.

An Equipment List for Beginners

Basic: backpack, tent (freestanding with fly), sleeping bag, sleeping pad, compass, whistle, map in a waterproof container, water bottle, water purifier, Swiss army knife, 20m of light nylon cord (with pulley and carabiner), headlight or small flashlight (with spare batteries and bulb). In bear country, add bear spray.

Kitchen: food, cookset (pot with lid, gripper, scrubbie), backpacking stove with fuel bottle (in summer, 250 ml of fuel per day for two people), spoon, bowl, lighter or matches in a waterproof container, heavy duty plastic bag for storing and packing out garbage.

Clothing: hiking boots, sandals or running shoes, 2 pairs liner socks, 2 pairs outer socks, underwear, long-sleeved shirt, fleece jacket or sweater, long pants (not jeans!), shorts, sun hat, bandanna, gloves, toque (wool), rain gear (jacket and pants) or poncho.

First Aid: moleskin, bandaids, tensor bandage, antibiotic cream, personal medication.

Emergency Kit: duct tape, garbage bags (heavy duty), zip-loc bags, strong needle and thread, safety pins, shoe laces.

Personal: sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm, toothbrush and toothpaste, biodegradable soap, towel, insect repellent, toilet paper and trowel, camera and film, notebook and pencil, and binoculars.

References and Acknowledgements: Explore magazine (www.explore-mag.com), March/April 2000 edition, "Summer Backpacking: Packing the Essentials" by Peter Thompson.