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- » Connecting to the natural world through hiking and backpacking
- » Empowering your hiking adventures through skill development, physical fitness, and sound judgment
- » Learning how to stay safe and healthy in the wild

Chapter 1

Hiking and Backpacking 101

“The civilized man has built a coach but has lost the use of his feet.”

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “SELF-RELIANCE” (1841)

The reasons people go hiking are as diverse as the people themselves. Some seek peace, solitude, and an escape from the stresses of everyday life. Others set out for adventure, looking for new environments in which to test themselves. Regardless of specific motivations, all hikers share a common bond: the sense of freedom and connection that comes when pavement gives way to wilderness.

In the following pages, you’ll find plenty of information about how to hike and backpack safely and efficiently. Alongside the practical tips and tools, I hope this book also helps to build a stronger sense of environmental stewardship. Ultimately, *Hiking & Backpacking For Dummies* is a bridge between curiosity and capability. It shows you what to expect on the trail — but once you’re out there, it’s just you and Mother Nature. I’m simply making the introduction.

Preparedness and the Golden Rules

If you read no further than this sentence, you could head into the woods right now, and there's a good chance that nothing untoward would happen. But there's a Grand Canyon-sized difference between a good chance and no chance at all. Part 1 of *Hiking & Backpacking For Dummies* is about improving your odds of having a safe and enjoyable hiking experience through planning and preparation.

One of the first and most impactful decisions you'll make while preparing for a hiking trip is who, if anyone, will accompany you into the wild. In Chapter 2, I take a detailed look at the advantages and disadvantages of hiking solo, as opposed to hiking in a group, or with kids or dogs. Each style offers its own rewards, and factors such as personal preference, the environment, and your companions' needs and abilities will all play a role in the decision-making process.

In Chapter 3 the focus shifts to the nuts and bolts of planning a successful wilderness excursion. From research and logistics to creating an itinerary and an environment-appropriate gear list, a thorough preparation combined with a well-devised trip plan, can turn what initially may seem like an intimidating prospect into a series of manageable steps.



REMEMBER

Even the best-laid plans can sometimes go awry. Never forget that Mother Nature doesn't have a copy of your itinerary. No matter how much experience you may have, every hike can teach you something, and every mistake is part of the journey. Be patient with yourself and with the process, and gradually increase the difficulty and length of your wilderness trips over time.

Manifesting your hiking plans becomes significantly easier if you arrive at the trailhead in relatively good shape. In Chapter 4, I examine the three key components of hiking fitness — aerobic conditioning, strength training, and flexibility exercises. The subjects covered include:

- » Building your aerobic base through cross-training and progressively longer and more intense training hikes.
- » Core, upper-body, and leg exercises to help you prepare for the trail, all of which can be done at home without the need for specialized equipment.

» A pre-backpacking trip training plan, which can be tailored to suit your individual needs and/or pre-existing exercise routine.

From an environmental perspective, the most significant section of *Hiking & Backpacking For Dummies* is Chapter 5, which discusses Leave No Trace principles. These guidelines are designed to help outdoor enthusiasts promote conservation and minimize their impact on natural environments. The chapter addresses key practices such as proper waste disposal, minimizing campfire impact, and respect for wildlife.

Gearing Up for the Trail

More than any other aspect of hiking and backpacking, there's a lot of hyperbole when it comes to gear. Indeed, for folks that are just starting in the sport, it's common to get sucked into a gear rabbit hole looking for the latest, greatest, lightest, and brightest.

In Part 2, I cut through the marketing hype and focus on the essential aspects of gearing up for the trail. As for specifics, Chapter 7 delves into the qualities to look for (and those to avoid) when assembling your kit, along with some trail-tested tips on how to lighten your backpacking load.

In Chapters 8 and 9 these criteria are applied to selecting big-ticket items, including your backpack, tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, and footwear. Finally, I provide some pro tips on how to assemble your backpacking kit without breaking the bank.



REMEMBER

While its role may be fundamentally important in your outdoor experiences, hiking gear should never be seen as a substitute for thorough preparation, skills, fitness, and good judgment.

Skills, Optimization, and the Three As

When it comes to the wilderness, the more you know, the less you worry. And the less you worry, the more you tend to enjoy. By equipping yourself with certain basic hiking and backpacking skills, your chances of prospering in the Great Outdoors are greatly improved. Your safety, comfort, and enjoyment will all be

enhanced simply because you'll be better prepared to manage a broader range of potential scenarios.

Part 3 of *Hiking & Backpacking For Dummies*, examines the knowledge, skills, and mindset required to optimize your time hiking and backpacking. I get the ball rolling in Chapter 11 with some actionable strategies — both practical and sensory — to enhance your hiking day. These include pacing, fueling, and making the most of your breaks, as well as some advice on wilderness etiquette and reconnecting by disconnecting.

In Chapters 12 and 14, you'll channel your inner-Liam Neeson (from the 2008 action movie *Taken*) and learn about a particular set of skills that will help you navigate the challenges inherent to any hiking and backpacking trip. These include tips for fording rivers, tying knots, hiking downhill efficiently, and the navigation techniques required to stay on track in the wilderness.

In Chapter 13, the emphasis is on wildlife, specifically, how to observe animals without disturbing them. The practice boils down to a combination of research, respect, patience, and adaptability — with a sprinkling of good fortune thrown into the observational mix.

Later in the same chapter, I examine how to handle encounters with two animals that typically cause hikers the most angst — snakes and bears. The focus is on precautionary measures and preventive techniques, while also addressing what to do if your encounters are of the cheek-clenching, knee-shaking, too-close-for-comfort variety.

Part 3 of the book concludes with Chapter 15, in which I discuss how to manage surprises in the wilderness. The key is striking a balance between preparedness, recognition, and being able to adjust on the fly. A fundamental aspect of this balance is the “Three As” of hiking and backpacking — accept, adapt, and appreciate. These principles encourage us to process challenging situations as steppingstones rather than stumbling blocks.

Home Away from Home

You've reached camp after a long day on the trail. Now it's time to reflect, relax, and rejuvenate. Applying the three Rs isn't difficult — but it may not come naturally at first. Part 4 walks you

through the camping process, from finding and setting up your site to establishing evening and morning routines.

In Chapter 16, I discuss the pros and cons of designated and dispersed campsites, each of which offers a distinct outdoor experience. Following that is a deeper dive into the dispersed option — what to look for and what to avoid in a site, along with some tips on how to minimize your environmental impact and set up your tent in the rain (spoiler alert — the same way you do when it's dry, only faster).

Chapter 17 picks up where Chapter 16 ends, providing a step-by-step guide to my evening and morning camp routines. I emphasize how maintaining a consistent process can lead to a more relaxed and comfortable evening, which sets the stage for a positive and worry-free start to the following day.



REMEMBER

A well-selected campsite and an efficient camp routine can mean the difference between a restorative slumber and a fitful night of tossing and turning.

Hiking Health and Safety

A solid understanding of wilderness health and safety is essential for minimizing risk and reducing the likelihood of injury or illness on the trail. Think of it as an insurance policy for the Great Outdoors. As Woodrow F. Call famously observes in Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, "Better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it."

Part 5 begins with the fundamentals of proper nutrition and hydration — both critical to sustaining energy levels and maintaining overall well-being while out in the woods. Chapter 18 examines the seven key elements of eating well while hiking and backpacking: quantity, regularity, quality, density, taste, variety, and simplicity. Chapter 19 shifts the focus from food to water, offering practical guidance on staying adequately hydrated, how to respond when anticipated water sources are dry, and understanding the various methods available for purifying H₂O in the wilderness.

Although serious accidents can and do occur, most health issues encountered by hikers and backpackers are inconveniences rather

than trip-ending emergencies. Chapters 20 and 21 address the prevention and treatment of common backcountry problems, including bites and stings, skin conditions such as blisters, chafing, and poison ivy, as well as gastrointestinal issues.

Chapter 22 focuses on *thermoregulation* — how the body maintains a safe internal temperature despite changes in the surrounding environment. For hikers and backpackers, thermoregulation is one of the most critical skills to master; it's essential for preventing hypothermia in cold, wet conditions and avoiding heat-related illnesses in hot and humid environments.

In Chapter 23, the spotlight shifts to high-elevation hiking, with a step-by-step guide to acclimatizing safely and clear advice for recognizing and responding to altitude sickness. The next chapter tackles natural hazards — from wildfires and electrical storms to flash floods — with a simple rule in mind: avoid trouble when you can, and know exactly what to do if you can't. Chapter 25 wraps up the section with a practical rundown of first-aid essentials and must-know techniques every hiker should have before hitting the trail.