Top 10 Lightweight Backpacking Tips

At Adventures in Good Company, we believe that backpacking doesn't need to stop when you turn 30. We also think it is never too late to start; on our Introduction to Lightweight Backpacking trip in 2012, two of our participants were in their late 60s.

But we also know that carrying heavy packs just doesn’t sound appealing, and we strongly believe that lightweight backpacking is the way to go. On our backpacking trips for women, which are between 5 and 7 days, we use a 30 pound limit.

Why go lightweight?

- **It’s safer.** Twisted ankles, sore muscles, blistered feet, and back and knee problems are just some of the common consequences of too much weight on your back. A heavy pack also affects your balance, which means that stumbling, tripping, or falling become more likely.

- **It’s more fun.** It’s more comfortable, less fatiguing and leaves you with more energy during and at the end of the day to actually enjoy your surrounding and the people you are with.

We believe that backpacking is not about proving how tough you are, but about *enjoying yourself in the wilderness*. Certainly challenges can add to the experience, but excessive suffering from a heavy backpack doesn't have to be one of those challenges.

So how do you get there? Here are our top 10 tips

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1. Adopt the correct mindset.

Going lightweight is a conscious decision, a mind set. Accept the reality that backpacking is definitely going to be different than sleeping in your bed and be willing to experience that difference. Accept that taking the ‘barcolounger’ is not practical and believe that lighter is going to translate into ‘more fun’!

Take all the stuff you know you need and think you need. Make 3 piles.

Pile A – thing you have to have.

Pile B – those ‘just in case’ items.

Pile C --- would be fun to have items.

Now – eliminate all but Pile A!

2. Learn from Experience

Use each of your backpack (and hiking) experiences to improve on the next one. Each time you go out, you can learn a bit more about yourself and what is really needed. After each trip write down those items you either didn’t use or didn’t eat. This does not include safety items such as rain gear or your hat and gloves, but does include items such as that extra pair of socks you keep taking or all that food you continue to bring home uneaten. Look at these notes each time you go out and continually refine your load.
3. Upgrade the Big 3
As long as the wallet holds out, you can make quite a big difference when you upgrade one of the ‘big 3’ pieces of equipment. Fabrics and materials continue to improve in both quality and weight. These pieces of equipment are your tent, sleeping bag, and backpack. Depending on the age and weight of your present equipment you can expect the following weight reductions when you upgrade:

* tent = 2 – 8 pounds
* sleeping bag = 2 – 10 pounds
* backpack = 2 – 12 pounds

For example: Backpacks.

Typical old backpack: 8’ 3”
Capacity: 4000L
Has a hood and external pockets

1. Requirements: 4000L
2. Decide what functions you really need
3. Find websites that give reviews and/or comparisons

New Possibilities:
1. Granite Gear Crown V.C. 3’4”
2. Osprey Ariel 75 Women’s Pack 4’ 12”
3. Gregory Deva 70 Women’s Pack 5’ 9”

Savings in weight of 2’5” – 4’9”

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4. Look for multiple function items

This is an excellent way to reduce weight. Take a critical look at all of your clothing and equipment. What can you use for several functions rather than just one?

For example; if you take both a rain jacket and a wind jacket—leave the wind jacket behind, the rain jacket is also windproof.

You’ll have several stuff sacks and at least one will end up empty after setting up camp---use an empty stuff sack with any extra clothing for a pillow rather than taking the pillow too.

Leave the trowel behind and use your hiking poles or a stick to dig ‘cat holes’ when needed.

Keep in mind that creativity is highly prized in a lightweight backpacker!
5. What can you swap out?

This step is actually a lot of fun! Take a look at your equipment and see if you can take (or buy) a smaller/lighter version. For example, that huge, heavy knife with everything on it but the proverbial kitchen sink. Do you ever use all of that? Swap it out for a smaller, lighter one with a good blade and maybe a few gadgets. How about those camp shoes you use? Swap them out for a lightweight pair of crocs, possibly another pound. Your bear rope for bear hangs big enough to hoist a house? Swap it for a smaller caliber rope --- this could save as much as 2 pounds. Weigh everything before and after this step to see exactly how much you reduce your weight by—you will be amazed!

This? at 7.5 oz

or this? at 2.6 oz?

These at 1 lb 6 oz? a pair

or these at 5.3 oz for the pair?
6. Decrease the weight of your food (but don’t eat cardboard)

Tasty nutritious food is as important on the trail, maybe more important, as it is at home. Think about how you cook on trail. Are you an aspiring trail gourmet or do you stick to basics with as little ‘real’ cooking as possible. For lightweight backpacking, with a little re-education and creativity you can do both!

- Check out your local grocery store for those items that require only boiling water to create. Maybe you don’t use them at home but on trail they actually can provide the nutrients and other minerals that you need more when you are exerting yourself.

- Consider dehydrating your own meals—easier than you might think.

- Learn about ‘freezer bag cooking’. This eliminates the necessity of taking extra cooking pots and pans and decreases the weight load.

- Consider using pre-packaged dehydrated meals. There are lots of brands on the market available online or in your local outfitter ranging from vegetarian to organic and everything in between.

Regardless of what you take to cook and eat, remember to re-package. Discard all that extra packaging. Place similar and like items in the same ziplock, put all of your oatmeal for the week in one zip lock—you get the picture. Extra packaging serves no purpose other than to add weight to your trash bag!
7. Choose your clothing carefully

This is an area that can quickly become very personal! We all have our favorite things but sometimes those favorite things just aren’t quite what might be called for and they are difficult to let go—-but let’s try!

First—remember---NO COTTON.

Cotton is a fiber that is wonderful on a hot summer day when you’re in your backyard and that cotton fiber makes you feel nice and cool. There’s a reason for that---cotton fibers, as they absorb the moisture from your body, wick away the heat. Now—think of that out backpacking---sweating a bit doing one or those familiar ‘ups’ – stop for lunch and rest. If you are wearing cotton you will quickly become chilled. Even putting another layer on is not as helpful as you might think, since cotton takes a really long time to dry - which means it is still taking away your body heat and faster than you can replace it! So—no cotton means no hyperthermia!

- Consider the possibility of multiple use for all your clothing. A rain jacket doubling as a wind shirt, a buff that can be used as a hat, etc
• *Don’t go overboard with the ‘just in cases’.* Better yet, take none of them - although it is hard to do without them until you have several experiences where they are not used. (Exception: rain gear. Always take rain gear.)

• *Evaluate your clothing with not just function in mind but also weight.* Choose the appropriate clothing for the season but eliminate those items that have the extra ‘bells and whistles’ – for example, decorative zippers only add weight! Switch out that leather belt for a lightweight fabric belt.

• *And don’t forget the footwear!* The old saying ‘a pound on the foot is 5 pounds on the back’ really is true. Think of how many times you pick each foot up and put it down---picking up that weight each time. Choose the lightest weight hiking boot that still gives you the support and comfort that you need for the terrain and the season.

• *Layering is the answer!* Develop your system of layering your clothing for maximum efficiency and weight savings.

8. **Lose that hidden weight**

Look for weight in items that usually goes unnoticed. It is true---ounces turn into pounds! Yes, really, those tags in your clothing and the handle on your toothbrush do contribute to the weight. So does the packaging on food and equipment, extra cords and buckles on backpacks, the center paper core of the essential TP, those tiny medicine bottles (use a tiny zip lock)---and the list goes on and on. Try it---it’s fun. Make sure you weigh everything before you start this exercise and then weigh it afterwards - you’ll be surprised!
9. Practice sharing!

This is such an excellent way to reduce weight and at the same time increase the enjoyment of backpacking---take a friend! Then you get the benefit of having fun together plus you can share the weight of much of your heavier gear. Those items to share include:

- **stove**
- **shared fuel**
- **tent**
- **bear rope**
- **water filter**
- **sunscreen**

10. Ten Essentials:

OK—not really a weight saving tip but could be a life saving one! And, yes---be creative in reducing the weight of your ten essentials.

- Classic Ten Essentials (+3)
  - Map
  - Compass
  - Sunglasses and sunscreen
  - Extra clothing
  - Headlamp/flashlight
  - First-aid supplies
  - Fire starter
  - Matches
  - Knife
  - Extra food
  - Plus: Rain Gear, Duct tape and whistle

So---there they are---10 tips to help lighten your load. Hope you find them helpful and remember---lightweight is the way to go!