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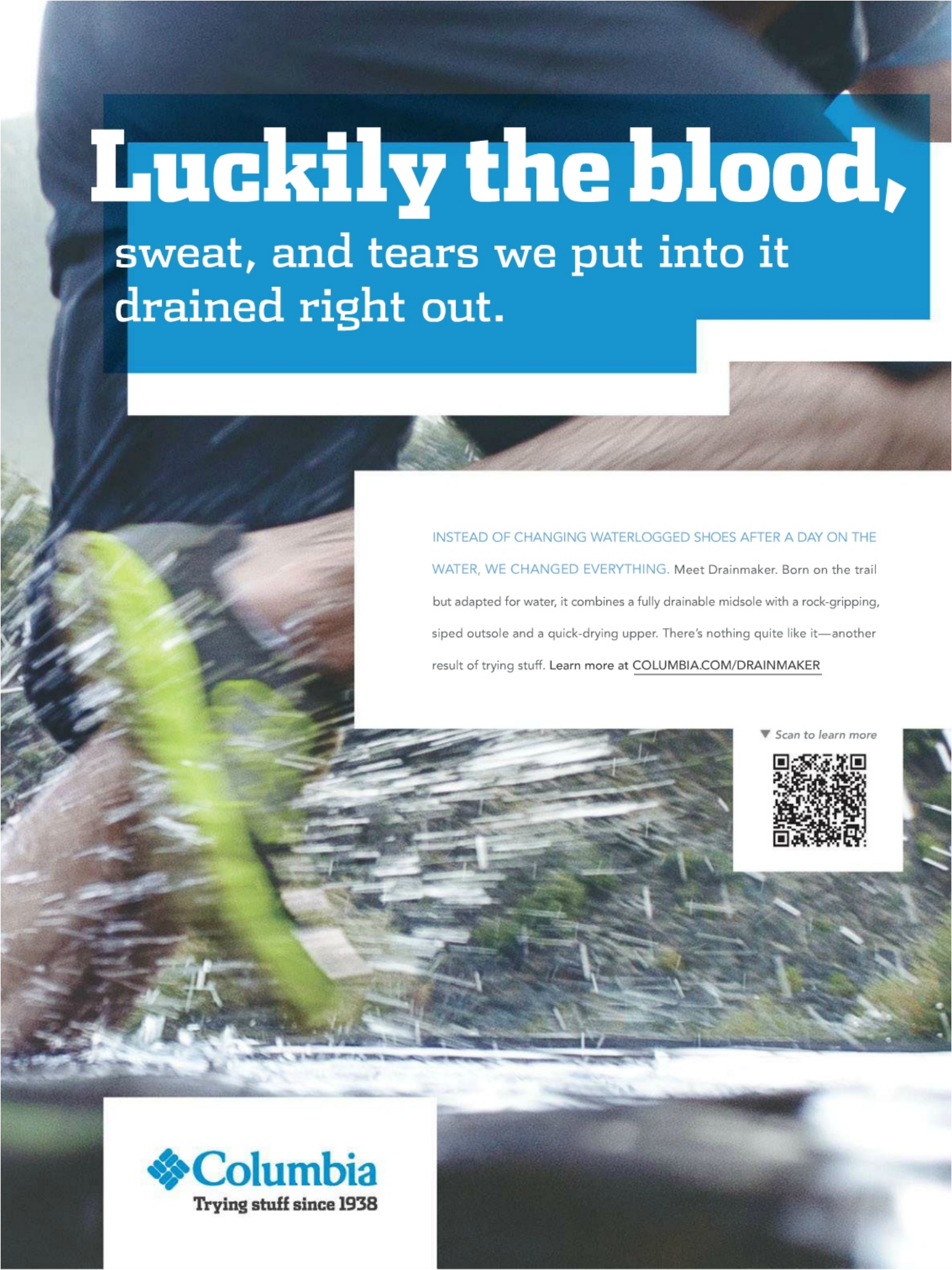

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Andrew's confidence in his gear is as critical as his outdoor skills and expertise. In his bid to trek further, faster and lighter, Andrew sticks to the absolute essentials and is extremely selective in the gear he carries. A **VICTORINOX SWISS ARMY KNIFE** is one of the few essentials to make the cut. The superior quality and functionality of Victorinox Swiss Army's outdoor products provide Andrew with the ultimate confidence and reliability he needs when traveling through remote parts of the world.

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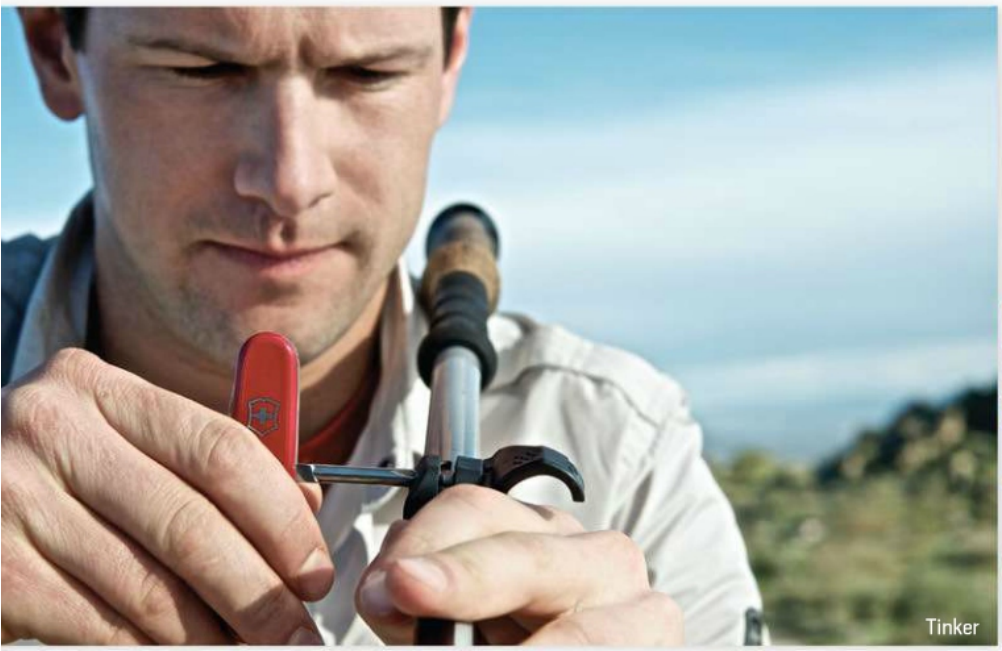
Tinker

Hunter XT

My **VICTORINOX SWISS ARMY KNIFE** is indispensable for any adventure because I simply can't do without it. Trust me, if I can leave an item at home, I do. I've gone on trips without a shelter, stove, map or compass, or even a way to call for help, but I can't recall a trip where I didn't have a knife or multi-tool. My Victorinox Swiss Army Knife is truly one of the most essential items in my pack." **ANDREW SKURKA**

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With his wife, kids and pared-down possessions packed into their pull-behind trailer, Jason and his family have left the complexities of life and society behind in lieu of a nomadic lifestyle full of adventures, laughs and learning …and we're proud and excited to be along for the ride. Enjoy the Robillard family's insights and experiences as they live the true meaning of minimalist: Check out Jason's blog at **BarefootRunningUniversity.com**

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Strengthens feet and legs

Connects you to the terrain

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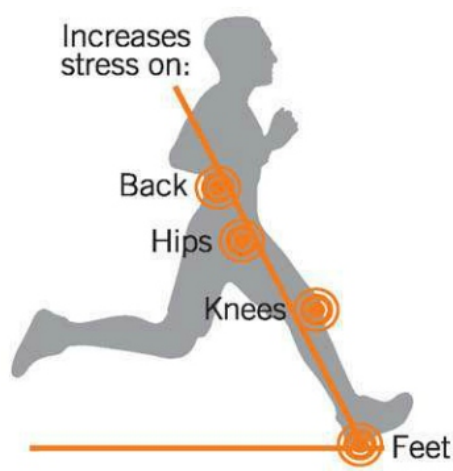

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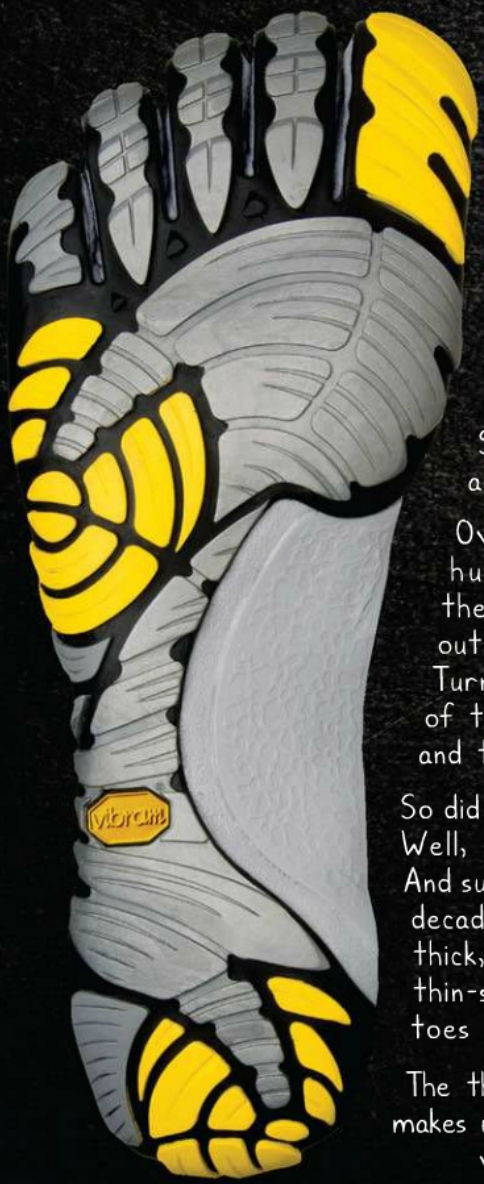
LET'S GET OUTSIDE

SO WE HAD THIS CRAZY IDEA:



shoes with toes. They'd be as close to barefoot as shoes could get. See, we'd been making soles for shoe companies for almost 80 years. And when we took our idea to them, they agreed it was crazy. Only not the good kind of crazy.

But we can be a bit stubborn. So in 2005 we went ahead and made them ourselves.

Over the next few years, hundreds, then thousands, then millions of people turned out to be just as crazy as us. Turns out, people like the idea of their feet feeling the ground and their bodies moving naturally.

So did you notice the word "millions"? Well, so did the sneaker companies. And suddenly, these folks who'd spent decades touting the benefits of thick, cushioned shoes were making thin-soled shoes — some with those toes they thought were so crazy.

The thing is, it doesn't make us mad. It makes us right. And to all those newcomers we have just one thing to say:

WELCOME TO CRAZY.

vibram

THE ORIGINAL MINIMALIST SHOE

BACKPACKER

GEAR GUIDE / April 2012

15 Rip & Equip

Don't go shopping until you've read these comprehensive guides to buying and fitting the right pack, boots, bag, and tent. Then double the life of your gear with the tear-out primers: They're filled with 66 tips from our editors and other experts on washing, maintenance, storage, and common DIY repairs.

25 Editors' Choice Awards

Step 1: Send hundreds of products into the backcountry with our army of veteran testers. Step 2: Winnow the field and take the top performers on a trek up a Chilean volcano. Step 3: Come back with a burn-any-fuel stove, a bargain ultralight tent, and 10 more items that make backpacking better than ever.

315 IN-DEPTH, FIELD-TESTED REVIEWS

38 Packs

Get the perfect load hauler, whether you're dayhiking in a local park or heading out on Himalayan expedition. We tested ultralights of every size, bargain weekenders, and more.

52 Shoes

From minimalist trail runners to Rainier-ready alpine boots—and every footwear type in between—our testers put 11,000 miles on the year's best new models.

68 Tents

Mother Nature in a bad mood? Take shelter from wind, rain, snow, bugs, and whatever else she throws at you with 34 field-tested tents for every condition and budget.

84 Bags

Your sleep is important to us. That's why our testers sought out conditions that took these sacks down to their temp rating—and often beyond. Plus: the warmest, softest pads.

96 Shells

Increase your trail time: Stay dry and warm in one of these 33 jackets. From 6-ounce wonders to all-season bargains, 2012's shells set a new standard for foul-weather comfort.

111 The 10 Essentials Stay safe with the best gear in key lifesaving categories.

119 Electronics Top cameras, GPS, and gadgets to record and share trips

122 Eyewear Improve vision in every condition with the right shades.

125 Food Eat well, hike far with taste-tested meals and snacks.

130 Women's Get the right fit with our female testers' top picks.

136 Basecamping Kick back with 10 luxe favorites for camp comfort.

142 Multisport Outfit yourself for paddling, climbing, and fly-fishing.

160 Killer Deals Score a sweet trail-tested bargain for less than $50.

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) KIM PHILLIPS (TOP); JUSTIN BAILIE (FOOD); BEN FULLERTON (3); COURTESY (3); ILLUSTRATION BY SUPERCORN.

be naturally active

be yourself
by doing the things you love to do

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Ultralight

Packs
» Boreas Lost Coast 60 & Buttermilks 55 (page 30)
» Salomon Quest 30 (39)
» Marmot Drakon 35 (40)
» Osprey Atmos 65 (42)
» REI Flash 62 (44)

Shoes
» Salomon Synapse Mid (29)
» La Sportiva Vertical K (52)

Tents
» L.L.Bean Microlight FS 2 (32)
» Mountain Laurel Designs Cricket (68)
» NEMO Obi Elite 2P (70)
» Easton Hat-Trick 2 (70)
» Mountain Hardwear SuperMega UL 2 (72)
» Sierra Designs Mojo 2 (72)
» Easton Kilo 3 (74)

Sleeping bags
» Mountain Hardwear Mountain Speed 32 (84)
» Marmot Plasma 40 (84)
» Sierra Designs Cloud 15 (88)

Pad
» Therm-a-Rest NeoAir XLite (92)

Shells
» Outdoor Research Helium II (96)
» MontBell Versalite (98)

Poles
» Helinox Featherlite (116)

Gaiters
» MontBell Stretch Semi Long Spats (160)

Killer Deals

Pack
» First Ascent Alchemist 40 (42)

Shoes
» Ahnu Mendocino (60)
» Mammut Teton GTX (64)

Tents
» L.L.Bean Microlight FS 2 (32)
» Marmot Firefly 2P (70)
» Big Agnes Burn Ridge 4 Outfitter (77)

Sleeping bags
» Lafuma Extreme 600 (85)
» REI Igneo/Joule (86)
» REI Habanera (90)

Pad
» Therm-a-Rest Z Lite Sol (92)

Shells
» REI Kimtah (98)
» Stoic Stash (100)
» Marmot Vapor Trail Hoody (106)

Apparel
» Duofold by Champion Varitherm Mid-Weight (116)

Sunglasses
» Ryders Clamor (122)

Dinner
» Knorr Steak Fajita Rice Sides (127)

Canoe
» Old Town Saranac 160 XT (145)

Family-Friendly

Sleeping bag
» Feathered Friends Spoonbill (34)

Basecamp kitchen
» Lodge Cast Iron Camp Dutch Ovens (34)

Pack
» Deuter Aircontact 65+10 (46)

Tent
» Big Agnes Burn Ridge 4 Outfitter (77)

Sunscreen
» Elemental Herbs Zinc Sunscreen Sport SPF 30 (112)

Dessert
» Madyson's Marshmallows Roasting Chip Fluffs (129)

Lanterns
» Snow Peak SnowMiner (29)
» Highgear SmartLite (136)

Child carrier
» Osprey Poco Plus (138)

Kids' gear (138)

Inflatable kayak
» AIRE Outfitter II (143)

Dog leash
» Ruff Wear Flat Out (159)

Big and Tall

Tents
» Easton Hat-Trick 2 (70)
» Marmot Firefly 2P (70)
» NEMO Espri LE 3P (75)
» Hilleberg Saivo (76)

Sleeping Bag
» Sea to Summit TkIII (88)

Pad
» NEMO Cosmo Air XL (92)

Shells
» Mountain Hardwear Quasar (97)
» Columbia Compounder (98)
» Helly Hansen Odin FastPack (100)

TEST GEAR! WIN GEAR!

› Do you have what it takes to join our official reader test team? Apply at backpacker.com/geartester.

› Enter our Gear Guide sweepstakes and you could win products we tested. backpacker.com/gearsweeps

All-Season

Stove
» MSR WhisperLite Universal (28)

Crampons
» Kahtoola MICROspikes (34)

Pack
» Vaude Terkum 75 +10 (46)

Shoes
» Scarpa Kinesis/Mythos Pro GTX (64)

Tents
» Easton Hat-Trick 2 (70)
» Exped Gemini III (74)
» Hilleberg Saivo (76)

Sleeping bags
» Valandre Shocking Blue (90)
» REI Habanera (90)

Pad
» Exped Downmat UL7 (92)

Shells
» Patagonia Super Cell (96)
» Columbia Compounder (98)
» Westcomb Switch LT Hoody (100)

Headlamp
» Black Diamond Icon (111)

Lighter
» Wenger Fidis (111)

Poles
» Dynafit Broad Peak (116)

Sunglasses
» adidas Terrex Fast (122)

Gaiters
» Rab Latok Alpine (160)

DOWNLOAD, GEAR UP, GET OUT

The iPad edition of the Gear Guide (available in the Apple Newsstand) is chock full of bonus content: in-the-field videos of our Editors' Choice winners, interactive gear checklists and packing advice, on-the-scene photos from our test trip in Chile, and more. It's gearhead heaven, enhanced. backpacker.com/ipad

PHOTOS BY KIM PHILLIPS (BOTTOM LEFT); COURTESY BEN FULLERTON (3)

Small world.

The all-new 2012 Subaru Impreza. It makes friends wherever it goes. Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive takes you wherever life leads, and 36 mpg* keeps pit stops on your own terms. It's even a 2012 IIHS Top Safety Pick, because peace of mind loves company. Experience love that lasts. Love. It's what makes a Subaru, a Subaru.

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BY JONATHAN DORN

Half the Weight, Twice the Fun

15 WAYS TO SLIM, TRIM, AND JENNY CRAIG YOUR PACK TO GREATER ON-TRAIL COMFORT

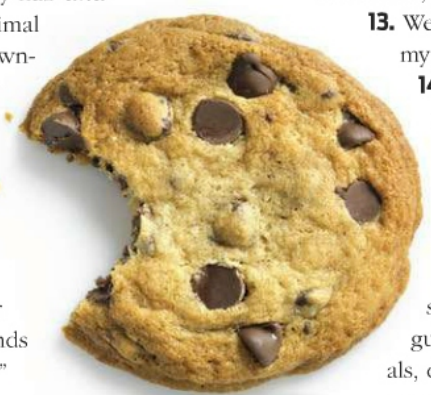
AS WE BEGAN assembling BACKPACKER's 22nd annual Gear Guide, we asked members of our reader panel what they wanted in the way of equipment advice to go along with the 315 product reviews in this issue. Topping the list were tips on fitting, buying, and maintaining gear—which you'll find on pages 15 to 22—and recommendations for making your load less burdensome. I've worked on the latter a lot over the last year, which incidentally has been a great one for ultralight gear innovations. Here are a few of the techniques and products that are working for me.

1. Set a goal weight. Mine was 11 pounds for high-country hikes last summer, counting my shelter, pack, bag, pad, clothes, stove, and accessories. Then be ruthless in your pursuit of the number. Every above-goal allowance you accept is a ball bearing on the slippery slope of pack heft.

2. Get a scale. Yeah, be ruthless *and* obsessive.

3. Lay out the gear and clothing from your last few trips. Leave behind anything you haven't used, then dump what you haven't absolutely needed. I dropped almost a pound in spare socks, batteries, and fleece pants.

4. Eat less on the trail. A minimalist menu weighs less, and it will help you shed that belly flab *and* reacquaint your body with the animal pleasure of an authentic, deep-down-growling hunger. At 6'6", I aim for 3,500 calories a day even though I burn 5,000 or more while on backpacking trips.



5. Eat less at home. Just this morning, my cycling coach said, "You can empty your bank account on a carbon-fiber bike, or you can save the same three pounds by cutting out the cookies in bed." (Damn, how'd she know!?)

6. Spend more. Okay, I'm contradicting myself, but sooner or later good gear *is* part of the plan. And with good reason: Amortize the cost of an 850-fill down bag over 10 years, and the ROI is undeniable. Consider the comfort gained, extra miles hiked, knee strain prevented, and chiropractor visits forestalled, and there's every reason to splurge.

7. Go commando. All of the cool kids are doing it.

8. Take a break from deodorant. I'm serious: Is the scent of Aqua Swagger key to enjoying Glacier's backcountry? Besides, once you ditch undies, you're halfway feral. Go all the way; we can all benefit from a little less behaving.

9. Replace your current pack with one of the sweet Editors' Choice-winning Boreas ultralights on page 30.

10. Except for desert hikes, hit the trail with half a quart of water or less. Better to refill every hour than lug bricks (a quart of water is a whopping two pounds of dead weight).

11. Don't be a style snob: Swap your pants and shorts for the Kühl Liberators (p. 32). These zipoffs don't say dorkwad, and even if they did I'd still make the trade. It's simple math: 12 fewer ounces times 18,000 steps on an average hiking day. My joints don't care about fashion. Do yours?

12. Get Icebreaker's Legless knickers. If you wear over-the-calf socks, there's no reason for full-length long johns.

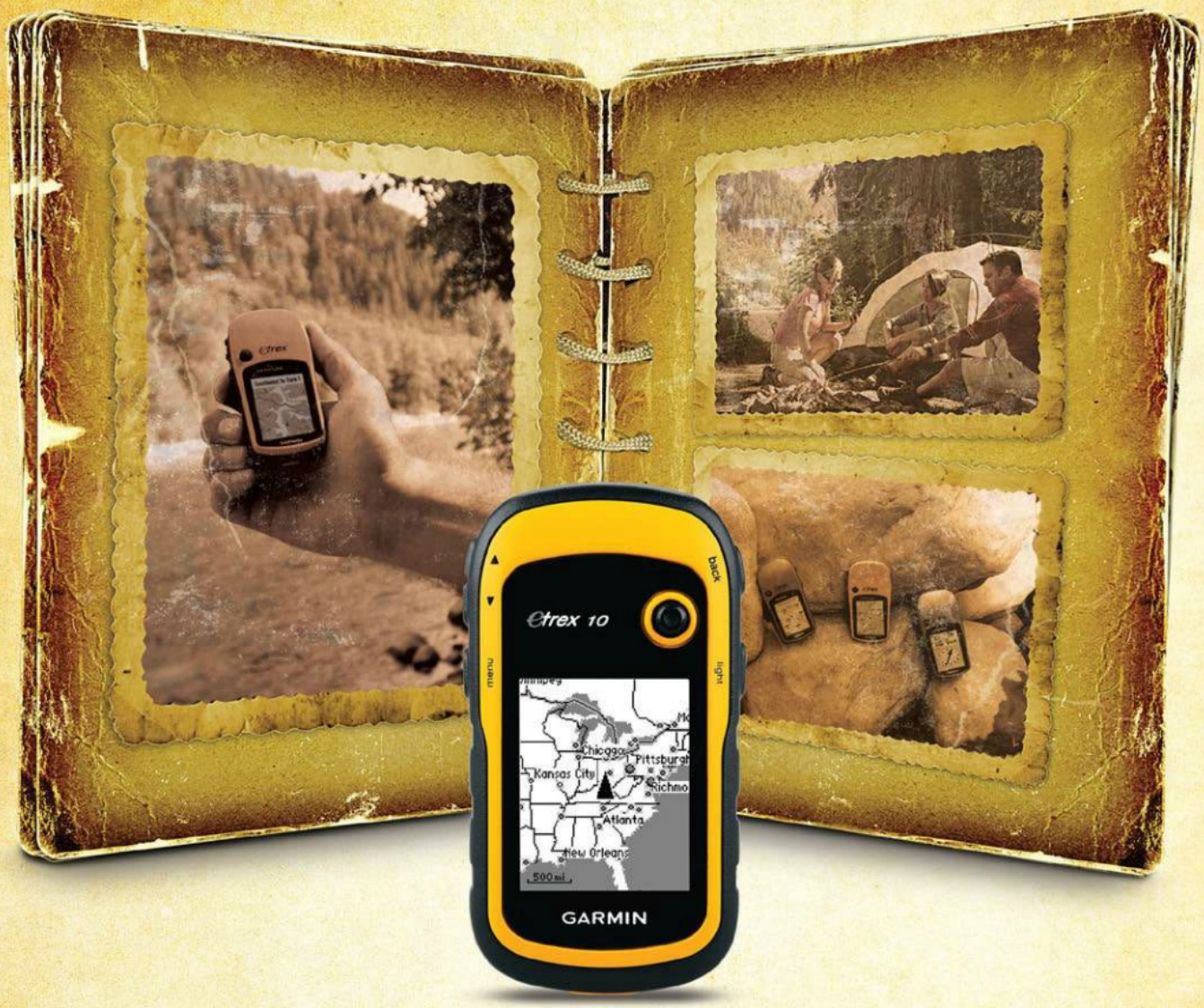
13. Wear your bag to dinner. That's how I ditched my 18-ounce fleece pants.

14. Trade your paperback, maps, point-and-shoot, video camera, iPod, and journal for a tablet. Protected by Sea to Summit's waterproof sleeve (p. 143), my iPad holds music, photos of my kids, a star chart, wildlife ID guides, survival manuals, dozens of books and magazines (including this one), and (after loading BACKPACKER's Map Maker app) all the topos I need. Shazam: entertainment, information, trip memories, and safety for only 24 ounces.

« 15. And finally, look for this icon in the following pages to find more of my staff's top ultralight picks.

ultralight

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) BEN FULLERTON (2); ANDREW BYDLON; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (2)



LEGENDARY DAD. EVEN TOUGHER MOM.

The new eTrex® 10, 20 and 30 are born from an impressive family. With millions of eTrex sold in the last ten years, only Garmin could build a better eTrex – and that's exactly what we did. We made it tougher, easier to operate and added paperless geocaching – all while retaining the legendary functionality and long battery life. Upgrade to eTrex 30 for a 3-axis electronic compass and unit-to-unit wireless data transfer between compatible devices. Then say hello to the newest member of the eTrex family – he's sure to make his mom and dad proud.

NASDAQ **GRMN**

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Packs

Shop Smart

Ask yourself five key questions before buying a new pack.

1. **How much cargo capacity?** This depends on the length and conditions of your trips, of course, and personal preferences (ultralight or ultraluxe?). As a general rule, choose a pack that accommodates your largest load, as it's easier to compress a too-big pack than to overload a too-small one.
2. **What type of pack?** If your load often exceeds 40 pounds, choose a standard internal frame, constructed with a rigid suspension and durable, higher-denier fabrics. Expect the pack alone to weigh about four pounds (exception: See the Boreas Editors' Choice picks on page 30). Lightweight packs with thinner padding and streamlined pockets are ideal for weekend loads under 40 pounds. If your base weight is 15 pounds or less, consider a true ultralight pack (less than two pounds) with thin aluminum stays or no frame structure at all (a rucksack).
3. **What's your size?** Short people can have long torsos—and vice versa—so measure your back (see right) and check specific brands' sizing. Generally, if your torso is shorter than 16 inches, try an extra small; 16 to 18 inches is small; 18 to 20 inches is medium; 20 or more inches is large. Many brands also offer interchangeable, sized hipbelts.
4. **What features?** Are you an organizer or a minimalist? Identify the extras you absolutely need—water bottle holsters, external gear attachments, shove-it or hipbelt pockets, ski loops, extendable lid—and don't waver.
5. **Does it really fit?** Packs are like shoes: Even the right size might not be a perfect fit for *your* body type or shape, so test it thoroughly in the store.
   >> **Loosen all straps**, then throw on the pack (loaded with about 20 pounds).
   >> **Buckle and cinch the hipbelt.** Padding should be centered over the hipbones.
   >> **Tighten the shoulder straps**, load lifters, sternum strap, and hip stabilizers (in that order). Now walk around and evaluate the fit: Does the lumbar pad sit snugly in the small of your back? Do the shoulder straps wrap over your shoulders with no visible gaps? Can you distribute the weight evenly between your shoulders and hips, with no rubbing or pressure points?

Measure your torso

>> **Recruit a friend** and find a soft tape measure.
>> **Bow your head** so the C7 vertebra at the base of your neck protrudes. This is the top of your torso measurement.
>> **Find your hips.** Place your thumbs on your iliac crests (tops of hipbones). Draw an imaginary line across your back connecting your thumbs. The point where the line crosses your spine is the bottom of your torso.
>> **Take the measurement.** Have your friend measure from the top of your torso to the bottom. Most adults fall between 15 and 22 inches. For a video demo go to backpacker.com/torso.

What's inside

Pack capacity is measured in liters or cubic inches. Multiply liters by sixty to get cubic inches—or use our chart to gauge real-world space.

Liters	Cubic inches	Usage
20-40	1,221-2,441	Datrip or overnight
50-70	3,051-4,272	Weekend or weeklong
80-100	4,882-6,102	Weeklong+ or family trips

Shopping Tips

In-store

To get the best fit, try on multiple packs so you can feel the differences between a variety of brands and models. Also ask about swapping components (like putting a medium hipbelt on a large pack) to help dial in the fit. When you've settled on a couple of favorites, pack them: Bring your own gear to the store (or borrow equipment from the store shelves) to double-check the pack's cargo capacity and make sure it feels good fully-loaded.

Online

Web shopping is especially tricky if you can't try the pack on first. If you're unsure about your exact size, choose a model that can be modified (with an adjustable suspension and interchangeable hipbelts) and read user reviews for hints about manufacturer sizing. Another option: Limit online buying to daypacks and overnight bags, where loads are smaller and a less exact fit will suffice. Shop outfitters, guide programs, and rental shops in the fall—many dump used rental gear then (our favorite: whittakermountaineering.com).

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN. TEXT BY KIM PHILLIPS; KRISTIN BJORNSEN AND KRISTY HOLLAND (BACKSIDE)

Care Instructions

Clean

Caked-on grime can degrade a pack's water-resistant coating and clog the zippers, so clean your pack at least annually. Dunk it in a tub of warm, sudsy water (use a mild dish soap like Palmolive), and scrub with a sponge or brush. Rinse well, stuff the inside with newspapers, and hang dry. Never put your pack in the washing machine; it will tear it apart. Also, avoid DWR-damaging hot water, bleach, and spot stain removers.

Never Do This

>> **Secure heavy items on a pack's outside.** Pack weighty gear inside for better balance, so you don't lose gear, and to avoid stressing seams.
>> **Check your pack unprotected for airline travel.** Protect your pack by putting it into a giant duffel. If it doesn't fit fully-loaded, you may be able to squeeze it in if it's unpacked. Don't have a big duffel? Ask check-in personnel for a protective plastic bag to cover your pack (they're usually free).
>> **Overstuff a zippered pocket.** If you have to yank on a zipper to get it closed, there's too much inside that compartment, and you run the risk of damaging the slider (see right). Instead, redistribute the contents so the zipper closes easily.

Repair

>> **Fabric that's no longer water-resistant** If water soaks the material instead of beading on it, spray your pack with a waterproofer, such as Nikwax Tent & Gear Proof.
>> **Zippers that snag** Vacuum out the dust, scrub the zippers with a wet toothbrush, and then grease the chain with a lubricant like McNett Zip Care (lip balm also works in a pinch).
>> **Blown-open zipper** If the chain's teeth or coils aren't aligned correctly—or if the slider has worn down and lost traction—the zipper can split open, spilling your gear. Open the zipper all the way to the bottom, and then gently squeeze the sides of the slider with pliers and move it up and down to realign the teeth and tighten the slider. If this doesn't work, replace the slider.

>> **Frayed fabric** Superglue the torn edges together for a quick fix. Apply McNettSeam Grip once it dries to make the repair last longer. Seamsters or manufacturer-approved services like stitchlines.com may be able to mend major damage (e.g., torn-off shoulder straps) for as little as $20.
>> **Packbag hole** Trim the loose threads and patch with McNett Gear Aid Fabric Repair Patches. Cut patch into a round (to prevent peeling corners) that's at least one-half-inch larger than the hole on all sides. Apply with pressure on the pack's inside. Seal the edges with Seam Grip.
>> **Broken buckles** To replace a hipbelt or shoulder strap buckle in the field, cut off a less-critical buckle, like one from a side strap or the lid. Find the thin plastic bar that the strap threads under and slice it in the center **(A)**; you can heat the plastic with a lighter to soften it. Slide the strap through the slit **(B)**, then duct-tape the bar back together (covering the slit). Tip: Repair buckles, such as Liberty Mountain Quick Attach Buckle ($1.50, libertymountain.com), have a hinged plastic bar **(C)**; pack one or more in your repair kit to ease on-trail replacement. Watch a video demo of a buckle replacement in the field at backpacker.com/buckle.

Use

>> **Wrap hard-edged items like fuel canisters inside your clothes** so the pack's fabric doesn't abrade where you rub against rocks. Stow crampons in a burly, puncture-resistant bag or put rubber point guards over the tips (both are available at most outdoor stores).
>> **Remove food—even crumbs—from your bag** at night so mice and squirrels don't gnaw their way in. Hang it from a tree for extra protection, since lingering odors and salt residue on sweat-soaked shoulder straps or padding can draw animals, too.
>> **Double-bag messy items,** like insect repellent and sunscreen. Leaked chemicals can damage fabrics and DWR finishes.
>> **Stow gear in trash bags or waterproof stuffsacks** to keep it dry.
>> **Keep pack weight to 30 percent or less of your body weight.** Some tough folks can handle more, but their knees won't like it.
>> **Give ultralight packs extra TLC.** Many of them are made with gossamer fabrics like silnylon, which weigh about 50 percent less than other materials but are also less abrasion-resistant. Follow these six tips for giving your ultralight pack a long, happy life:
1. Keep the total weight—including food, water, and fuel—below 25 pounds for frameless packs and 30 pounds for ultralighters with aluminum stays. Since the packs themselves only weigh about one to 1.5 pounds, they can't support mammoth loads.
2. Don't yank compression straps. Tug gently.
3. Avoid lashing heavy items to the side, which can blow out seams. Store them in the center, surrounded by softer gear.
4. Reinforce high-wear areas (like the pack bottom) with McNett Sil Fix (for silnylon packs) or Seam Grip for other fabrics.
5. Avoid bushwhacking if possible, and don't sit on your pack.
6. For extra support and comfort, insert your sleeping pad along the backpanel or in the backpanel sleeve made for that purpose.

Secret from the Pro

"Toss your pack around like a gym bag and it will meet an early demise. Preserve the integrity of shoulder straps and stitching by lifting your pack by the haul loop, just below the top lid. If your pack is too heavy, get help from a hiking partner, prop it on a log, or use the following method that protects your pack (and spine): Bend one leg into a shallow lunge; pick up the pack by the haul loop and place it on your front, bent thigh, making sure the shoulder straps are facing you. With one hand still holding the loop, twist your torso and slide an arm through the far shoulder strap; bend forward to shift the weight onto your back and slide the other arm through the strap."

— Excerpted from BACKPACKER's Complete Guide to Outdoor Gear Maintenance and Repair *($20, falconguides.com)*

BOOST COMFORT
Balance your load for a more comfortable fit—and to reduce wear and tear on your pack. Follow Gear Editor Kristin Hostetter's tips for on-trail pack adjustments at **backpacker.com/packstraps.**

VIDEOS

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON; ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN

Boots

Shop Smart

Ask yourself five key questions before buying new boots.

1. Where are you going? As a general rule, you'll be more comfortable with the lightest boots appropriate for your planned terrain. Dayhiking on trails? A well-cushioned, flexible low-cut should do. Carrying 50 pounds off-trail in Alaska? You'll want a high-cut, heavy-duty boot. Once you've picked a category, don't fixate on weight: With footwear, fit trumps a few ounces.

2. Do you need more (or less) support? If you have weak ankles, choose higher-cut boots with maximum stability. The extra weight is well worth the joint protection. Likewise, if you're prone to sore feet, opt for stiffer soles made for heavier loads than you typically carry. Conversely, some trekkers need less structure and can wear trail runners for ultralight trips or 2,000-mile thru-hikes.

3. Waterproof? You need weather protection for soggy trails, certainly, but don't always pick a waterproof shoe for just-in-case scenarios. If you rarely hike in cold, wet conditions, you might be better off with footwear that's more breathable and fast-drying. If you're getting a low-cut boot primarily for summer use, an airy upper can prevent sweaty feet—and blisters.

4. What size? Feet grow and change shape with age and mileage. Get yours measured on a Brannock device (gauges length, width, and arch length) by an expert salesperson who should be able to recommend specific brands and models well suited for your foot's shape. To best simulate your on-trail shoe size, shop in the evening, when your feet will be slightly swollen.

5. Do they fit? Try on boots with the hiking socks and insoles you intend to use. If you can't slip your index finger between your heel and the back of the boot, try a bigger size. Wear your top-pick boots for at least 20 minutes in the store, then answer these focused fit questions: Do your heels slip? Test movement on an incline board so you can check fit on ups and downs. Feel any pressure points? Do your toes feel pinched or bang the boot front? Remember: A boot may stretch in width, but it can never get longer.

Last *A foot-shaped mold used by manufacturers to build boots. They may vary widely across brands in width, volume, and shape.*

Scree collar *The fabric and padding around the top of the cuff; it keeps out debris and prevents chafing*

Upper *Everything above the midsole; uppers provide stability and protect against the elements and abrasion.*

Achilles notch *This cutout in the ankle collar helps relieve pressure on the tendon during long descents.*

Rubber rand *Increases durability in high-wear areas; creates a waterproof seal between the sole and upper*

Notches *Grooves in the outsole at heel and toe make a boot compatible with semi-automatic crampons.*

Midsole *Provides structure, support, and shock absorption with rigid and cushioned layers*

Outsole *The boot's rubber foundation*

Heel counter *This rigid cup in a boot's upper adds stability and helps anchor your foot and ankle for sprain-free hiking on rocky paths.*

Lugs *Raised knobs on the tread that improve traction and stability*

Waterproof/breathable membrane *A microporous layer like Gore-Tex or eVent that's sandwiched between the upper and boot liner*

Pick upper materials that match your needs

LEATHER	INFO	SYNTHETICS	INFO
Full-grain	The full thickness of the cowhide (not sanded or buffed); best quality leather. Very durable with good water resistance.	**Polyester**	Versatile and used both alone or in blends. Abrasion resistant, easy to clean, and quick drying; often stiffer then nylon.
Nubuck	Leather that's sanded or buffed for a suedelike finish and easy-break-in softness. Good water resistance and durability.	**Nylon**	Lightweight and flexible, often mesh or paired with split-grain leather. Resistant to water, tears, and abrasions.
Split-grain	Inner part of the hide that's split from the outer hide. Often paired with synthetics to add durability to light, breathable boots.	**Synthetic leather**	Less expensive, lighter weight, and lower maintenance than natural leather. Water-resistant and easy to clean.

Shopping Tips

In-store

Pressure points may not be readily apparent in the store. For a good visual, remove both insoles and stand on them. The more similar the shapes of your feet and the insoles, the better chance of a good fit. Red flags: Places where your feet overhang indicate likely snug spots. A boot may be too loose (a recipe for blisters) if its insole is wider than your foot.

Online

Because manufacturers use differently proportioned lasts, stick with brands that you know fit well. If you're unsure about sizing, order three pairs at once (your best sizing guess, plus a half size bigger and smaller) to compare. Zappos.com offers free shipping (on returns, too!), and backcountry.com and rei.com have no-questions-asked return policies. Be respectful: Restrict test-wearing to clean, indoor surfaces.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN. TEXT BY KIM PHILLIPS, KRISTIN BJORNSEN AND GORDY MEGROZ (BACKSIDE)

Care Instructions

Repair

>> Dried-out leather If your boot's leather has become stiff and light-colored, rejuvenate it with a silicone-based treatment such as Aquaseal Leather Waterproofing. Don't use oil, which can over-soften boot leather and inhibit breathability.
>> Flapping sole If the heel or toe delaminates, clean the leather and rand rubber with alcohol (use a prep pad from your first-aid kit). Evenly coat the inside of the sole with an ample amount of McNett Freesole **(A)**, then firmly press the sole and upper together. (You can use Seam Grip in a pinch, but it won't hold as long.) Smooth the excess glue along the seam to keep out water. Place a heavy object like a water bottle inside the boot, to apply constant, even pressure **(B)**. Let the glue set overnight. For a delaminating toe, wrap duct tape around the boot's front **(C)** to add pressure while glue is setting (insert a pen under the tape after applying, to increase pressure).
>> Hole in the upper A tear isn't a death sentence for your boot. Cobblers can fix holes and broken lacing systems in addition to worn-out soles. Contact local listings or boot-repair expert Dave Page (davepagecobbler.com, 800-252-1229). On trail with a hole in the toebox? Try backing it with duct tape, evenly covering the hole with Seam Grip, and letting it cure thoroughly before hiking again.

Clean

Stinky boots? Remove the insoles and clean them with a nondetergent soap, water, and a toothbrush. While insoles are drying, wipe down the interior of your boots with a 3:1 solution of water and white vinegar. (Avoid using soap, which can clog breathable fabric.) Pack uppers with newspaper, prop boots upside-down, and change out the newspaper every few hours until the boots are dry. Outside a mess too? Scrub off dried mud with a vegetable brush.

Maintain

>> Protect shoes at night. Brush them off and bring them inside your tent so that rodents don't nibble sweat residue in the liners.
>> Remove the insoles. Footbed materials retain moisture, so pulling them out for storage speeds drying and wards off mold.
>> Banish perma-stink. If your washed boots (see left) still smell, put them in the freezer overnight to kill lingering bacteria.
>> Make (or expand) the toecap. If the toes of your leather boots are prone to scuffing, preempt further damage (above): Line the area you want to protect with tape, slightly scuff the leather with sandpaper, clean with rubbing alcohol, and apply Freesole, spreading it to cover the section. (No need to smooth, it self-adjusts while drying.) Remove the tape after 30 minutes and let glue cure overnight.

Secret from the Pro

Use these three tricks to squeeze even more comfortable trail miles out of your favorite pair of boots.
>> Pack camp shoes: We like lightweights like Crocs and Timberland's Radler Trail Camp Moc (page 58).
>> Nip blisters in the bud. As soon as hot spots flare, change socks or apply moleskin or medical tape to reduce friction on skin.
>> Relace. Use different patterns to relieve pressure points. See examples at **backpacker.com/laces.**

—Excerpted from BACKPACKER's Complete Guide to Outdoor Gear Maintenance and Repair *($20, falconguides.com)*

BLISTER WARS
Don't get sidelined by painful sores. Visit our blister resource page for step-by-step tips to treating and preventing hotspots, and a grisly reader-photo slideshow. **backpacker.com/blisters**

Never Do This

>> Overwaterproof. Excessive coats of sealant make repair and cleaning difficult. Aim to apply one layer of a waterproofing product (appropriate for your upper material) each year.
>> Hit the trail with brand-new kicks. Lace them up around the house first, and do at least 10 dayhikes or dog walks first, aiming for 20 hours of pre-trip wear time in the burliest boots.
>> Dry boots by the fire. The leather might crack, the rubber melt, and the size shrink. Instead, unlace them, remove the insoles, and put chemical warming packs or a bottle filled with hot water inside. Lacking those, stash the boots at the bottom of your bag overnight or hang them upside down on trekking poles. At home, stuff them with newspaper; do *not* use a hair dryer.
>> Use oil-based treatments on leather boots. Oil softens the leather, which defeats the purpose of providing stiff support. Instead, use wax- or silicone-based treatments. Exception: Use mink oil sparingly on all-leather, full-grain boots that resist break-in.

PHOTOS BY MATT LOVAS (LEFT). COURTESY ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN

Tents

Shop Smart

Ask yourself five key questions before buying a new shelter.

1. How big? Interior space and vestibule size will make or break your tent experience. It's not just the number of people that matters, but what conditions you expect. Couples and ultralight zealots might love a snug two-person tent that would drive others crazy. Live in the Pacific Northwest? You'll want extra space for storm lounging and storing wet gear. Shop with your most frequent camping partner so you can both climb in and gauge space.

2. How strong? Choose a tent equipped to handle the worst weather you expect—not the worst weather you imagine, just what you're really likely to encounter (you can always rent a tent for Denali). For most hikers, three-season tents afford an attractive compromise between weight and protection. But there's much variation between models when it comes to wind resistance and the ability to handle a shoulder-season snow load. Going high in the Rockies? Lean into the pitched tent to gauge wind-loaded stability. Expect to camp in heat and humidity? Prioritize mesh panels.

3. How light? Don't let ounce-counting sucker you into a tent that you won't be happy with in camp. General three-season shelter rule: Expect to carry about two pounds per person. More protection will add weight, and lighter materials increase price.

4. How easy? Freestanding tents are fast to pitch and easy to erect (and move, if necessary) on difficult-to-stake surfaces like snow or sand. Nonfreestanding designs typically save weight, but can be more difficult to set up. Tarps or trekking-pole shelters offer the most weight savings, but aren't practical if bugs (or your knot-tying skills) are a problem.

4. What features? Determine your must-haves and be picky. Consider: ease of entry/exit and number of doors; vestibule size; tent color (bright and visible vs. blend-in earth tones); organizing and gear lofts; fastpitch (fly-only) setup for saving weight in moderate, bug-free conditions; ceiling mesh (for stargazing on fair nights).

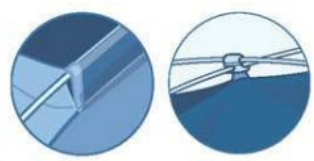
Buying Advice

>> Size right. Square footage isn't as indicative of real-world space as a tent's footprint and peak height, so check dimensions and shape. For a two-person tent, anything less than 50 inches wide will feel tight. To evaluate height, sit inside and attempt to don a pullover without hitting the walls.

>> Stump the salesman. You'll get the best help from someone who actually camps. Ask him or her what tent they use and why, and what conditions they've seen. Don't feel like you're talking to an expert? Ask to speak with another associate—or find another store.

>> Find a bargain. Look for marked-down tents in Hilton's Tent City Bargain Basement (hiltons-tentcity.com). Jonesing for a particular brand? Watch for manufacturer-specific coupons (at press time, Sierra Designs tents were marked down 20 percent or more).

>> Skip the footprint. Save money and weight by making your own groundcloth out of Tyvek. Learn how at backpacker.com/groundsheet.



Sleeves vs. Clips

Pole sleeves (far left) add strength by distributing tension across the fly, but threading them during setup can be frustrating, especially in windy conditions. **Pole clips (left)** enhance airflow under the fly and improve ventilation; they're also lightweight and a snap to pitch.

Shopping Tips

In-store

Ask to unpack and pitch the tent yourself (politely refuse help from sales clerks). Is it quick to lay out and erect? Disassemble and stuff? Are you shopping for a two-person? Ask someone to climb inside with you. Bring your gear (or raid store shelves) and see how equipment fits in the vestibule.

Online

Visit websites that allow you to view the tent from multiple angles (rei.com; most manufacturers). Do the walls angle sharply toward the ceiling? Do vestibule zippers look more than arm's-length from the door? Do this simple reality check: Use masking tape to outline the floor dimensions in your living room, and place sleeping pads inside.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN. TEXT BY TED ALVAREZ, KRISTIN BJORNSEN, AND GORDY MEGROZ (BACKPAGE)

Care Instructions

Clean

Dirt and mold compromise waterproofing and clog zippers. But don't wash your tent in a machine. Even on a gentle cycle or in a front-loader, the agitation damages the fabric and waterproofing. Instead, pitch your tent, spray it with a hose inside and out, and scrub off dirt with a soft brush or sponge and a bucket of water mixed with a drop of mild soap (Joy or Dawn work well). Rinse well so there's no soap residue, let the tent air-dry, then treat any worn areas with a sealant such as McNett Gear Aid Tent to re-waterproof. When the canopy and fly are finished drying, stuff and store them. Before packing poles or stakes, inspect them for damage, scrub, and let dry.

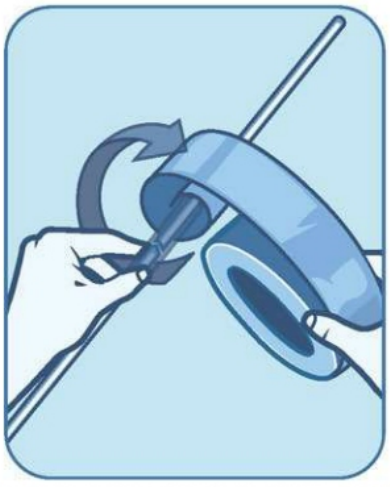
Never Do This

>> Store a wet tent One word: mildew.

>> Snap pole sections together This chips and eventually splits segment ends, making it difficult to connect them. Instead, gently place the poles together.

>> Prime a liquid-fuel stove in your vestibule Runaway flames can easily melt the synthetic fabric.

>> Fold your tent the same way each time Creating the same creases over and over can compromise the DWR coating. Vary your folds, or stuff it.



Repair

>> Leaky seams Paint on a thin coating of sealer like McNett Seam Grip on problem areas (both inside and outside) and over seams.

>> Rips and holes For holes larger than a pencil eraser:

1. Wipe the area clean with water and an alcohol prep pad from your first-aid kit. Let dry, and trim away loose threads.
2. Cut an adhesive-backed patch (round the edges) to cover the hole by at least one-half-inch on each side. Try Tear-Aid's Type A fabric patches (available at hardware stores).
3. Apply the patch to the tent's inside and smooth out air bubbles.
4. For floor or rainfly repairs, patch both sides or seal the outside with Seam Grip (for PU-coated nylon).

>> Broken pole Slide a metal sheath onto the pole (your tent likely came with one sized for your poles) and center it over the break. Duct-tape it securely in place (see left). When you get home, call your tent's manufacturer for a replacement pole section.

>> Slack pole cord Remove the cap from one end, cut off five inches of cord, reknot the end back to the pole, and replace the cap.

Use

>> Maximize airflow and prevent condensation. Use this high/low venting technique: Open the bottom of a door at one end and the top of a door at the opposite end.

>> Pitch your tent on a flat, well-draining surface. You don't want water to pool underneath, even with a waterproof floor—the vestibule will still be a swamp.

>> Prevent UV degradation. Long-term exposure (think high-elevation basecamps) can cause coatings to peel and fabric to stiffen. Treat your tent with a UV protector such as Granger's Tent and Gear Proofer; when possible, dry your tent in the shade.

>> Bombproof your tent by using every guy-out point. Fasten the pole attachments (on the inside of the fly) and stake them out securely. In snow and sand, tie the cord around rocks, sticks (turned horizontal), or fabric anchors, then bury them about a foot deep. To make the line adjustable, use MSR's CamRing Cord Tensioners ($10; msrcorp.com), or a tautline hitch **(A)**. For a knot demo see backpacker.com/tauthitch.

>> Keep snow and frost out. In wintry conditions, bring a tent brush and sweep out the white stuff before it melts.

Secret from the Pro

"Reality check: Once those ugly black mildew stains appear on your tent, they're there for life. As for that rank smell that always comes hand-in-hand with mildew stains? Try this technique for removing it: Mix 1 cup of salt, 1 cup of concentrated lemon juice, and 1 gallon of hot water. Scrub the tent down using a vegetable brush or big sponge, then air dry it."

— Excerpted from BACKPACKER's Complete Guide to Outdoor Gear Maintenance and Repair *($20, falconguides.com)*

SELECT STAKES
Learn to pick the best anchors for any condition at **backpacker.com/stakes**

PHOTOS

PHOTO BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM / MARIUSFM77 (LEFT); ANDREW BYDLON. ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN

Bags

Shop Smart

Ask yourself five key questions before buying a new sack.

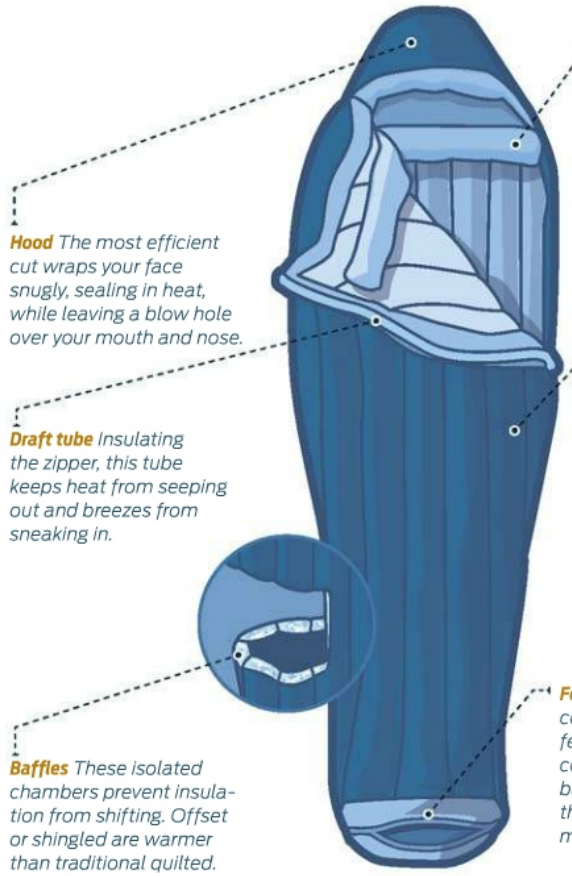
1. How warm? Determine the lowest temperature you expect to encounter while camping—then subtract up to 10 degrees for insurance. (See EN ratings, below right.) Be realistic: Do you tend to sleep hot or cold? Is your pad a deluxe, well-insulated mattress or a minimalist model that's only an inch or so thick?

2. What type of fill? Two choices: down or synthetic. Down offers superior compressibility, warmth-to-weight ratio, and long-term loft, but unless it's paired with a highly water-resistant shell, down is a bad choice for damp conditions. Synthetic bags insulate better when wet and, especially for entry-level models, usually cost less, but specific performance characteristics are associated with filament type (see right). Better warmth-to-weight ratios, compressibility, and durability add cost to bags of both types.

3. How roomy and how long? A **mummy** bag's tapered, snug cut enhances heat-trapping efficiency, but can be uncomfortably tight for large or restless sleepers. A **semi-rectangular shape** offers more roll-around room, but increases weight and bulk. Beware of a too-tight fit: compressing insulation causes cold spots. Most bags come in several lengths (excess space at your feet means excess weight, but the benefit of added storage space), as well as women's-specific models (which have different proportions and extra insulation).

4. What features? Zippers vary from full-length (great for venting) to none (great for cutting weight). Do you need a stash pocket for a headlamp and iPod? Brushed linings add a little weight, but are cozy and wicking.

5. Is it comfortable? Use warmth and features as a guide to narrow your list. Then crawl into the finalists and cinch the hood around your face to check for scratchy fabrics and drawcord access.



Hood *The most efficient cut wraps your face snugly, sealing in heat, while leaving a blow hole over your mouth and nose.*

Draft tube *Insulating the zipper, this tube keeps heat from seeping out and breezes from sneaking in.*

Baffles *These isolated chambers prevent insulation from shifting. Offset or shingled are warmer than traditional quilted.*

Draft collar *Cinching snugly around the neck, this collar or free-hanging yoke blocks drafts and keeps heat from escaping around your face. Both collar and yoke styles are effective.*

Shell *The outer fabric affects a bag's bulk, weight, and weather-resistance. The lightest fabrics may sacrifice durability, but in general, a 15- to 30-denier shell balances weight and bulk with price and rip-resistance.*

Footbox *An anatomically-correct shape allows your feet to lie naturally without compressing insulation. Some bags have zippered vents here that help you stay cool on mild nights, but add weight.*

How to Read EN Ratings

Simple is not always better. Case in point: the standardized sleeping bag temperature rating system—called EN, for European Norm 13537. At first glance, it's more complicated than the previous temp ratings, which provided a single number, say 20°F. But our testers like EN; they think the widespread use of the system has led to more accurate ratings overall. The key improvement: EN ratings provide a range to address the disparity in sleeping comfort between genders (women typically sleep colder) and from individual to individual based on myriad factors like body fat, tent, sleeping pad, clothing, hydration, and metabolism. EN tags list three specific temps: **Comfort** (the lowest comfortable sleeping temp for an adult woman), **Lower Limit** (the lowest comfortable temp for an adult man), and **Extreme** (not comfortable for anyone to sleep, but warm enough to prevent fatal hypothermia in a woman for six hours). Note: EN test dummies use a standard pad and wear baselayers and a hat.

Synthetic Fill Types

Short-staple filaments mimic down's softness and compressibility, but sometimes clump. **Continuous-filament** fills are lofty, durable, and affordable, but don't pack as small as short-staple fibers. **Multi-denier** insulation mixes fibers with different diameters to improve warmth, but they're pricier, too.

Shopping Tips

In-store

Lay all the bags you're considering on the floor, side by side, to compare loft. Wet the bags' shells with water (a good store will have a spray bottle on hand) to see how well it beads. After crawling in for a fit and comfort test (see left), stow the bags in their included stuffsacks and compare compressed sizes of bags in the same weight and warmth categories.

Online

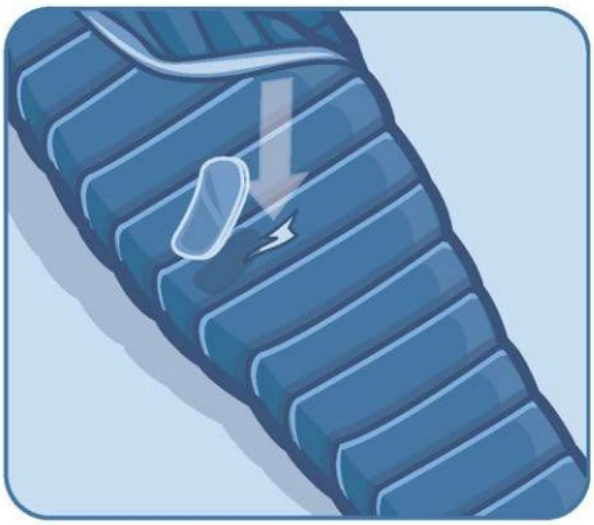
Buy in the off-season: Summer bags are cheaper in January, while winter bags cost less in July (one editor nabbed a top flight -20°F Sierra Designs bag for under $200 at steepandcheap.com). Save bucks by purchasing a lightly used bag online. Look for sales from gear-rental companies with generous return policies like LowerGear (lowergear.com) in case of a deal-breaking defect.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN. TEXT BY TED ALVAREZ. KRISTIN BJORNSEN (BACKPAGE)

Care Instructions

Repair

>> Diminished water resistance If your shell fabric wets out—water droplets no longer bead on the surface—treat it with a spray like McNett's ReviveX Spray-On Water Repellent, then throw the bag in a dryer on low heat for five minutes to set the finish.
>> Escaping feathers Don't pull down out, which widens holes and will cause you to lose more fill. Push the quills back in (or pull them in from the opposite side), then massage the shell to seal the fabric.
>> Tears and holes Patch small rips with a rounded piece of nylon repair tape like McNett Tenacious Tape. Cut it at least a half inch larger than the hole on every side. Tear bigger than six inches? Send the bag to its manufacturer (or Rainy Pass Repair; rainypass.com) for a patch and down refill.
>> Snagged zipper Pull the caught fabric aside at a right angle to the slider.



Clean

Keep your bag spick-and-span to maintain warmth and water resistance. Spot clean: Mix powdered laundry detergent and water into a paste. Hold the shell away from the insulation and scrub with the paste and a small brush. Rinse and air dry. Wash: Use a mild soap like Nikwax Down Wash and a large-capacity, front-loading washer on a gentle, cold cycle. Dry it in a commercial dryer on very low heat. See a demo at backpacker.com/sleepwash.

Use and Maintain

>> Dry a wet bag in the field by hanging it in a shady, breezy spot (fully unzipped). If you need sunlight or heat to speed drying time, drape the bag in a sunny spot, but rotate it every hour or so (extended UV exposure can damage delicate fabrics).
>> Before sleeping, "bathe" yourself with wet wipes and/or change into clean clothes to keep your bag's interior free of body oil and dirt, which impair insulation and increase stink.
>> When camping, air out your bag each day to dry sweat that can collect in the liner and insulation. Turn it inside-out and drape it on a large, shady rock or branch for 10 to 30 minutes.
>> Use a waterproof stuffsack (or line your stuffsack with a trash compactor bag).
>> Stuff, rather than roll. Stuffing is easier, and it prevents permanent creases, which may turn into cold spots. Start with the bottom of the bag to avoid trapping air in the footbox.
>> Add a liner during shoulder-season trips to add up to 15 degrees more warmth.
>> Unfurl your bag well before you go to bed so it has time to loft before you slip in to sleep.

Never Do This

>> Patch a rip with duct tape Carry nylon repair tape or a patch, like Tenacious Tape or Tear-Aid Repair Patch, in your gear kit. If duct tape is your only option, remove it as soon as you get home. You can de-gunk with Goo-Gone Spray Gel (available at hardware stores).
>> Store your bag stuffed Leaving the bag compressed for long periods of time decreases loft (ergo, warmth). Hang it in a closet or stow it in a large cotton or mesh bag.
>> Dry-clean it Harsh solvents damage loft.
>> Burrow deep into your bag Your breath's water vapor will dampen insulation. Instead, cinch the hood around your face, leaving your mouth and nose uncovered (below).

BE KIND TO YOUR BAG
A well-maintained bag can last for years. Learn how to keep your bag in top shape and reduce wear and tear on the trail with video tips from Kristin Hostetter, gear editor and author of *BACKPACKER's Complete Guide to Outdoor Gear Maintenance and Repair*, at **backpacker.com/bagcare.**

Secret from the Pro

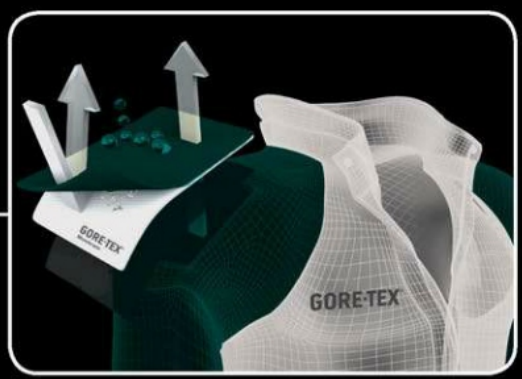
"A comfy sleeping pad is a critical complement to your bag, but sometimes the slick shells slide around, making for an uncomfortable—or cold—night's sleep. Add friction to your sleeping pad and stay comfortably on top of it with this simple trick: Apply small dots of Seam Grip to your sleeping pad's surface, focusing on the key points of contact: the head, shoulders, and hips. If your pad tends to slip around on your tent floor, also dot its underside. Once dried, the adhesive acts kind of like a boot sole—giving your pad traction against the slick nylon of your sleeping bag shell or sleeping surface."
— *Excerpted from* BACKPACKER's Complete Guide to Outdoor Gear Maintenance and Repair *($20, falconguides.com)*

PHOTO BY COURTESY; ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN

YOU STAY DRY AND COMFORTABLE OUTSIDE

WITH GORE-TEX® PRODUCT TECHNOLOGY INSIDE.

The question isn't if you're going to hike in unpredictable weather, it's how. Whether enduring gusty winds, rain, sleet or snow, GORE-TEX® products improve performance by providing durably waterproof, windproof and breathable protection and comfort—guaranteed. That's why the best outdoor brands choose GORE-TEX® product technology.



OUTDOOR RESEARCH

Outdoor Research
Furio Jacket

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FURTHER. FASTER.

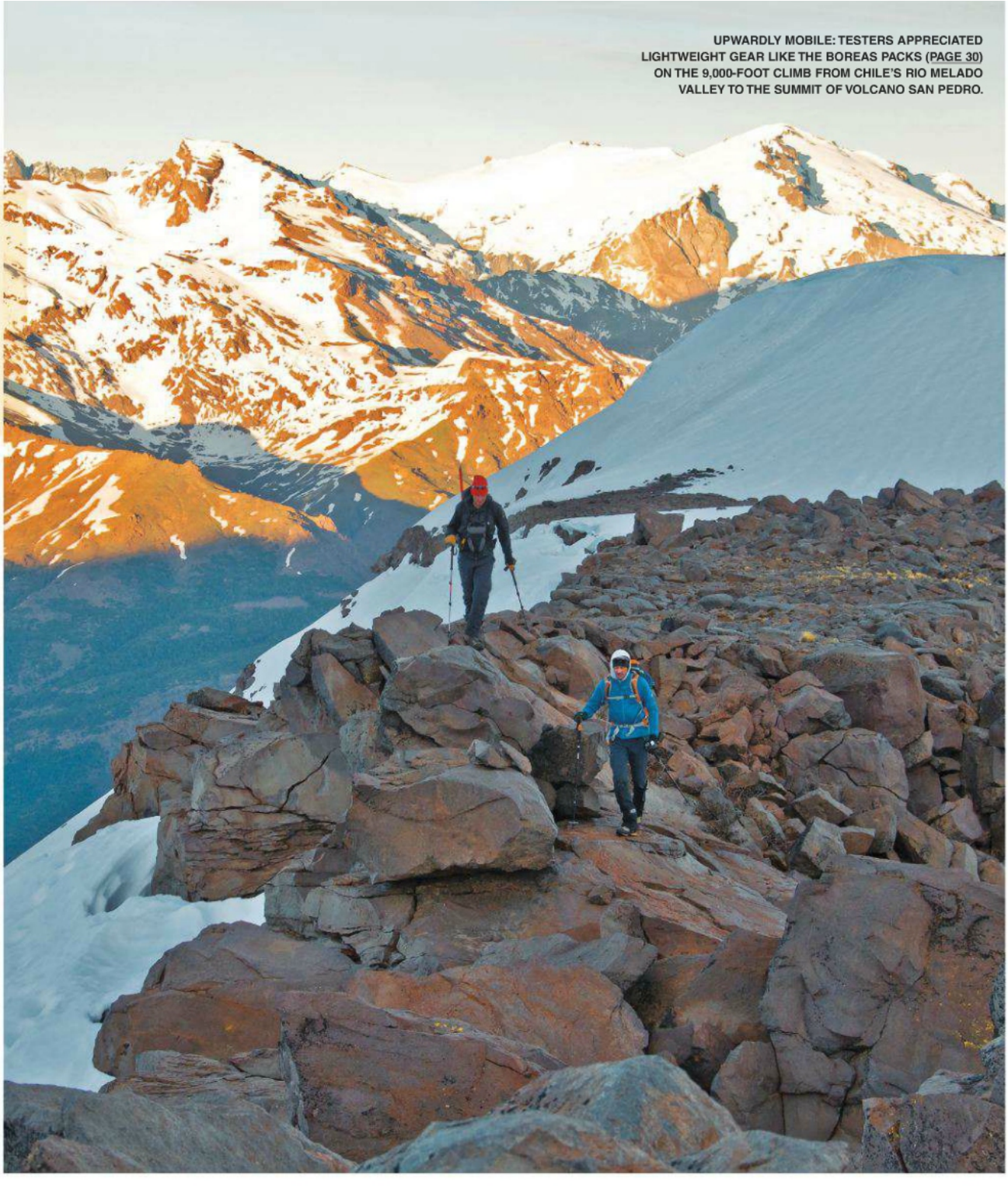
THE NORTH FACE®

FEATURING CRADLE™

Havoc GTX **Mid** GORE-TEX®

Stripped of its excess, the light and fast Havoc features innovation where you need it most. Underfoot. Biomechanically engineered Cradle™ technology provides a perfect balance of stability, cushioning and comfort critical for fast, high-mileage days in the mountains.

thenorthface.com/**havoc**



UPWARDLY MOBILE: TESTERS APPRECIATED LIGHTWEIGHT GEAR LIKE THE BOREAS PACKS (PAGE 30) ON THE 9,000-FOOT CLIMB FROM CHILE'S RIO MELADO VALLEY TO THE SUMMIT OF VOLCANO SAN PEDRO.

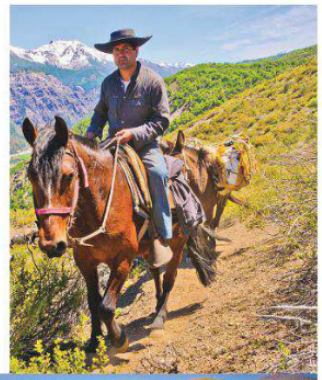
PHOTO BY KIM PHILLIPS

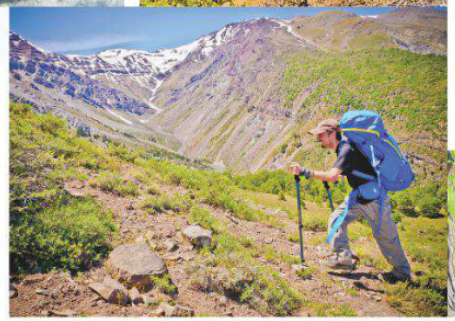
EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

From a smart-and-light pack to a groundbreaking backcountry communicator, here are the 12 products that passed the ultimate gear challenge.

EDITORS' CHOICE 2012 BACKPACKER

OPEN OUR SPECIAL FOLDOUT!





MSR WhisperLite Universal

The ultimate stove: anywhere, anytime, any gas

Finally. For years, we've been hunting for a multifuel stove that burns both liquid gas and canister fuel, burns them equally well, and easily converts from one mode to another. The Universal is that stove—and possibly the last one you'll need to buy. We cooked it side-by-side with a half-dozen current and past multifuel stoves, and testers from BACKPACKER and *Climbing* reached this verdict: It burns as hot and efficiently in liquid-fuel mode as any; it performs better in subfreezing and high-altitude conditions; and its field-fixable and -cleanable construction gives it an advantage in a category notable for the importance of durability (a failed stove would have ended our trip in Chile, as we had to melt snow for drinking water). Even better, it solves the two challenges historically plaguing multifuel stoves: lackluster performance in canister mode, and clunky conversion processes with too many steps or pieces. In controlled conditions, it beat every other multifuel stove in boil-time tests with canisters, and compared favorably with (and even beat some) dedicated canister stoves, especially in cold temps. That's unprecedented, and it's due to engineering that inverts the canister and burns the fuel evenly. The technology, called AirControl, adjusts the oxygen/fuel mix to prevent the steep tail-off commonly seen as fuel pressure drops. And switching modes only requires two steps: swapping jets on the head of the fuel line and attaching the new nozzle to the fuel pump (liquid gas) or canister. Testers had two gripes—priming can be futzy, and you must take care not to lose several small parts—but overall they agreed with an editor who called it "the new benchmark for stove versatility." **$140; 11.5 oz. (liquid-fuel mode); 9.5 oz. (canister-fuel mode); cascadedesigns.com**

All weights are on BACKPACKER scales.

PHOTOS BY KIM PHILLIPS (9), JONATHAN DORN (6), GENNY FULLERTON

Snow Peak SnowMiner

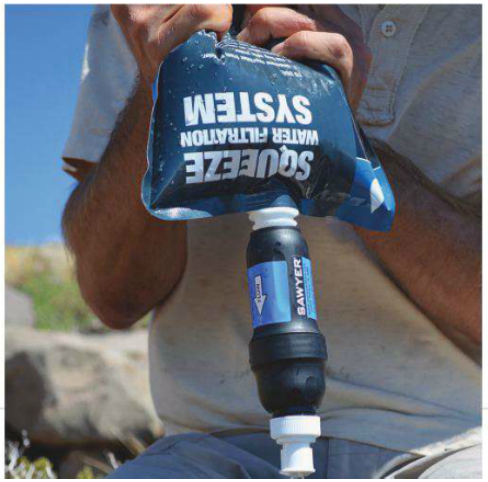
Get the right light on trail *and* in camp with this 2-in-1 lamp.

Who says there's no such thing as a free lunch? This headlamp performs just fine on trail, and it becomes a lantern in camp—at virtually no extra weight or cost. The key is an ingenious design that uses a tiny magnet to let you instantly switch between headlamp and lantern. Squeeze the silicone globe to pop it out into lantern mode; push the center back in against the lens to return to headlamp. On trail, it shoots a tiltable, 80-lumen beam bright enough for night hiking (about 100 feet on high). Retiring to the tent for cards? Convert the SnowMiner to lantern, then hang it from the included strap hook. The globe disperses a pool of ambient light that's big enough to reach the far corners of a four-person tent and lacks the dark spots we've seen in some mini lanterns. "The light is warm and even, and you can fade it all the way to two lumens, which creates a candlelit feel," says one tester. Three AAAs last 45 hours on high. **$50; 3.5 oz.; snowpeak.com**

Sawyer Squeeze Water Filter

Ultralight, affordable, and idiotproof. What's not to like?

Here's proof that outside-of-the-box thinking doesn't have to be complicated. This ingenious water-treatment device works like a simple toothpaste tube to squeeze water through a hollow-fiber membrane. Result: You get the effectiveness of a filter without the hassle of a pump. "It's light, compact, fast, and ridiculously easy to use," rejoices one tester. The soda-bottle-size opening on the Mylar bag (kit comes with 16-, 32-, and 64-ounce capacities) makes it easy to fill from all but the weakest trickles. Then screw on the cylindrical filter element, which removes bacteria and protozoa, and squeeze or roll the bag to shoot a stream of water into your bottle (or mouth). Bonus: The bag system lets you filter anywhere, not just huddled over a stream as pumps typically require. It's actually faster than most pumps, and has no complicated mechanism that can break. From California's Lost Coast to the Andes, we had zero field failures. Packed, the setup is as small as a Red Bull can. And longevity? It's cleanable, and Sawyer offers a million-gallon guarantee. **$60; 4 oz. (with 32-oz. bag); sawyer.com**

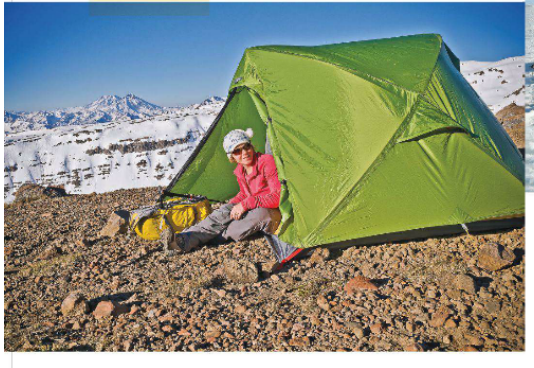


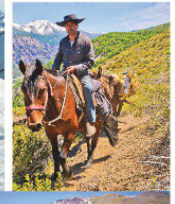
Salomon Synapse Mid

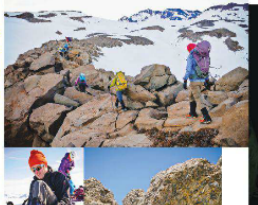
Fast and light and luxe: Get running-shoe comfort and hiking-boot stability.

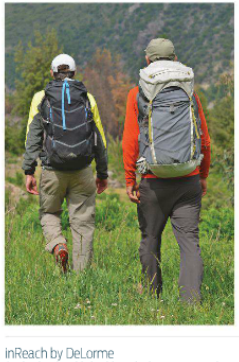
After climbing 5,100 feet from the rock-strewn bottom of the Rio Melado valley to the snowy heights of Chile's central Andes, one tester hailed the Synapse Mids as "the perfect blend of cushion and security in an incredibly light package." The performance comes from the integration of several key design features. For starters, the springy EVA midsole extends out from the heel, providing a platform nearly a half-inch wider than your footprint. That, combined with a snug synthetic upper and one-pull lacing that lock your foot in place, provides superior stability for the weight. And you still get smooth, easy striding that feels trail-runner fast. Credit a rounded heel that softens each foot strike, and the higher-than-average drop from heel to toe (14mm), which our tester says "felt like it quickened my stride." The large, staggered lugs flex on impact, while bands of plastic running from heel to toe snap the shoe back after toe-off, creating a rebound effect. Add a pronounced rocker—or curved sole—and the whole package combines to offer an "agile, full-speed-ahead feel."

Tightly woven mesh across much of the upper delivers hot-weather breathability, yet it still repelled grit and debris on dusty trails and bushwhacks. The absence of stiff midsole protection makes it best with moderate loads. Don't need the ankle support? The Synapse comes in a low-cut version ($120) that ultrahiker Jennifer Pharr Davis used to set a new Appalachian Trail speed record last year. **$140; 1 lb. 10 oz. (men's 9); m's 7-13, w's 5-10; salomon.com**









Want to know if lightweight boots can handle heavyweight hiking? Load your pack with 40 pounds of cold-weather mountain gear and ascend nearly two vertical miles, on and off-trail, across shoe-shredding volcanic rock and slick snowfields. If that sounds like overkill, it is—because that's how you find the limits of a product's performance. It's why we seek out conditions that might seem, well, a tad unfair for three-season gear. Tent-flattening wind? Check. Stove-challenging cold? Check. Fabric-tearing bushwhacks? Yep, that too. We found it all on a climb of Chile's Volcano San Pedro in the central Andes. We brought dozens of products there for our final round of testing for this year's Editors' Choice Awards. Many of them didn't pass the overkill tests that separate good from great. Which is why you know you can trust these winners.

INTO THE ANDES. (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): OUR 8,000-FOOT BASECAMP OFFERED A SWEET VIEW BUT NO WIND PROTECTION; UNLIKE IN PATAGONIA, SPRING HERE IS OFTEN SUNNY; A LOCAL HORSEMAN; EARLY A.M. START FOR 11,870-FOOT VOLCANO SAN PEDRO; RIDGE TRAVERSE; CRAMPONS REQUIRED; A ROAD-SIDE ALTAR ALONG THE RIO MELADO; THE LITTLE-USED TRAIL FADED IN AND OUT; ANOTHER ROUND OF MATÉ; A CONDOR.

MSR WhisperLite Universal

The ultimate stove: anywhere, anytime, any gas

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PHOTOGRAPH ABOVE BY JONATHAN HEDRICK; GEAR BY ALEXANDRA

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Boreas Buttermilks 55 & Lost Coast 60

Get everything you need and nothing you don't in one of these ultralight, ultracomfortable packs.

"We believe the best gear is neither complicated nor expensive." That's not the kind of statement one expects to hear from companies on the forefront of innovation, but that's the philosophy that guides product development at Boreas, the company's designers say. And judging by the Buttermilks (left) and Lost Coast (right), they're serious. They created a near-perfect suspension system and a smart packbag—and refrained from adding any unnecessary extras that increase weight or cost. "It's one of the most breathable backpanels I've ever used," says one tester after summer hikes in Rocky Mountain National Park. "I could feel cool wind across my back and never soaked my shirt, all without any loss in pack volume." The secret? Tough nylon mesh covers a variably corrugated foam backpanel that compresses as you hike to help move air. Grooves are deeper across the upper back to enhance airflow and shallower across the lumbar area to improve load transfer (inspiration: the zigzagged midsole of Reebok's Zig line of running shoes). Load transfer is similarly top-class, thanks to webbing-reinforced seams that wrap the packbag like a rib cage; they're angled to pull the load in, countering the sag that plagues many packs. Lightweight, silicone-impregnated ripstop nylon reinforces the main packbag of each model, while heavier 420-denier nylon protects the bottoms. The foam-and-mesh hipbelt distributes weight evenly, and two massive hipbelt pockets swallow a camera, GPS, or snacks. Following the clean design ethos, daisy chains and ice axe loops on both packs tuck away, literally out of sight. For utmost convenience, go with the Lost Coast, which has a detachable, three-pocket top lid. Or save six ounces with the Buttermilks; it has no lid, just a cinch collar. "Either one can handle 45 pounds," says a tester who packed a week's supplies in Chile. **Lost Coast 60: 5200; 3 lbs. 3 oz.; Buttermilks 55: 5175; 2 lbs. 13 oz.; boreasgear.com**

inReach by DeLorme

Send and receive with the ultimate backcountry communicator.

Talk about a game changer. Not only can this palm-size device send text messages, post to Facebook and Twitter, signal rescuers, and track real-time progress on an online map, but when paired with DeLorme's Earthmate PN-60w ($390, below; BACKPACKER Editors' Choice Award winner) or an Android phone, the inReach also lets you receive messages. "During treks in the Tetons and Andes, the two-way texting enabled me to maintain a running dialogue with friends and family," says our editor-in-chief. And testers weren't the only ones who welcomed the interaction. "My kids' classes followed my progress in Chile and fired me questions," says our publisher. In an emergency, the SOS feature allows you to text info back and forth with responders. (When used as a standalone rescue device, the light above the SOS button blinks faster to show that help is coming.) Setup is hassle-free. Create an account at explore.delorme.com, enter a list of contacts, and write three predefined messages that can be sent via the inReach alone. Sync it with the GPS or DeLorme's Android app, both of which allow you to write many more preset messages. Testers said that the intuitive interfaces make the system a snap to use in the field. Select the inReach icon from the menu screen to enable tracking, type or read messages (you'll receive confirmation when your message is sent), post social media updates, or initiate the SOS. When operating the inReach by itself (you're limited to sending predetermined messages, but friends at home can still follow your progress on a map) testers could power the unit roughly five days on a pair of lithium AAs. Caveat: Sharing your adventures in real-time can lead to substantial jealousy. Our editors were pinged with messages ranging from "Wish I was there!" to "As I sit here staring at spreadsheets, I must say that I hate your guts." **$250, plus a $12 activation fee (Earthmate PN-60w sold separately); monthly data rates range from $10-$50 (SOS messages don't count toward your monthly allotment); 8.2 oz. (inReach only); delorme.com**

All weights are on BACKPACKER scales.

L.L.Bean Microlight FS 2

Score an ultralight tent for two—for less.

Initially, testers who received the Microlight feared for their comfort—and safety. "No way a tent this cheap and light can offer adequate space and real weather protection," declared one tester, who then went out and promptly proved himself wrong by pitching the Microlight in Idaho's Frank Church Wilderness, where it easily withstood 25-mph winds. That performance elevated the tent to a rarefied class: less than four pounds and less than $200, but with two doors, legit floor space, freestanding convenience, and three-season weatherproofing. "Thanks to curved pole segments that maintain even tension on the fabric, the fly and tent body pitch without a ripple, so it doesn't sag or flap noisily during gusts and heavy rain," reports one tester. Setup is quick, with two Y-shaped hubs in the main pole and a brow segment that raises the crown. Two vestibules (each big enough to shelter two huge black Labs) deliver exceptional storage space for the weight. All-mesh walls virtually eliminated condensation, even on nights in the 30s in Idaho's Sawtooth Wilderness. For additional ventilation in rainy weather, testers unzipped vestibules halfway (the design prevents rain from dripping in through the door). The 31-square-foot floor is long enough for six-footers, and the 39-inch peak height, while not the tallest in this category, let two testers sit up for a game of cards. Nitpick: You get just two small internal pockets. **$199; 3 lbs. 15 oz.; llbean.com**

Hungry Hikers Murray's Hurried Curry

Yes, it's the journey that counts. But every trip is better with fast, delicious food like this.

Around day four of any backpacking trip, the thought of another freeze-dried pasta dish sounds as appealing as a few fresh blisters. Which is why—after a 10-mile hike along a dusty dirt road in Chile that followed a 5,000-plus-foot descent at the end of our volcano trek—we were thrilled to have saved this curry dish for the end. The smell of coconut milk and curry alone was enough to give us a lift. Then the texture of the al dente Israeli couscous woke up tired taste buds. And the combination of chicken (not tough and chewy) and peas (not mushy) in the coconut-curry sauce caused camp chaos: Was there enough to go around? And could we make another batch fast? Thankfully, the Hurried Curry lives up to its name: Just boil two cups of water, simmer the bag's contents for 8 to 10 minutes, and devour. **$9 (10 oz.; makes two 1-pound servings); hungryhikers.com**

Kühl Liberator

Zip-off pants? Yes, thanks to convertibles that finally bring form to the function.

When you pack gear that does double duty, you save weight and hike farther. Duh. But when multitasking efficiency has been applied to the pants-cum-shorts category, we've found the benefit offset by the dork factor. Until now. The Liberator has a trim, mountain-town style that slyly masks the two-in-one design. Mobility-enhancing spandex strips mimic the zipper lines, so they stand out less, and small slots swallow the zipper pulls. And for hikers who say the backcountry is no place to worry about looks—that function always trumps form—don't worry: The Liberator also packs a best-in-class array of clever technical features. The fabric is 77 percent nylon and 23 percent cotton—the nylon is next to skin, and the cotton is on the outer surface, lending a softer feel and greater durability. "If there's a lag in dry time, I can't tell," says one tester after wetting the lower legs during an early-winter creek crossing. "And there are no signs of wear, snags, or pilling after four months of regular use." A gusseted crotch and thin, horizontal bands of spandex above the back pockets and below the articulated knees ensure flexibility for high stepping and crouching (female testers who tried the women's version still wished for more flex). Spandex backing on every pocket securely cradles items stowed there, decreasing flop and sway. Transitioning from pants to shorts and back takes a minute or less, thanks to a foot-long, snap-closed cuff zipper that fits over all but the biggest winter or alpine boots our testers wore. Summed up one editor: "For three-season backpacking, this is my new go-to pair of pants. And shorts." **$89; 14 oz. (men's 32); m's 30-40; kuhl.com**

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) ANDREW BYDLON; JUSTIN BAILIE; JONATHAN DORN

Meet our new iPhone 4 + 4S case.

IT'S LIFEPROOF.®

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH YOUR LIFEPROOF?

FIND OUT MORE

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Feathered Friends Spoonbill

Couples camping just got a whole lot better—and lighter—with this down bag built for two.

Who says ultralight can't be sexy? This double bag weighs little more than many single sacks in its temp category, but lets you and your sweetie share, er, warmth. "I've zipped bags together and tried heavier doubles," says one tester. "This is a revelation." The 900-fill love nest is much more than an extra-wide bag. The key innovation: Independently adjustable hoods, draft collars, and footboxes that maximize insulation in subfreezing temps. Feathered Friends says the complex design took eight years to develop. Premium down, wispy Pertex UL fabric, and the absence of bottom insulation further reduce weight. The Spoonbill has no official rating, but our consensus: Five inches of loft and shared warmth make this a legit winter (above zero) bag. Our testers had to open the individual, two-way zippers because they found the bag *too* warm on a 25°F night in Arizona. Bonus: The Spoonbill fit our 6'6" tester. **$800; 2 lbs. 9 oz. (reg.); two lengths; also available with 850-fill and Schoeller Nanosphere shell for $100 less; featheredfriends.com**

GOLD AWARDS

Kahtoola MICROspikes

Tackle slick terrain with confidence—and a light load.

Moderate alpine routes often cause a safety vs. weight dilemma: Carry conventional crampons (heavy!) for low-angle snow and ice, or go without and risk a dangerous fall. Happily, MICROspikes offer a middle way, offering lightweight traction for use with any type of shoe. Since they came out in 2007, our staffers have used the low-profile spikes from the Rockies to the Alps. The steel teeth—almost a half-inch long—"bite into snow and icy trails like a mini crampon," says one editor who used them to climb Chile's Volcano San Pedro. "And the secure attachment doesn't slip or shift." They couldn't be easier to put on: Simply stretch the well-marked, elastic red band over any hiking boot or lowcut shoe and go (the XL fits over one editor's size 13 mountaineering boots). Just make sure your partner packs a pair. A pregnant tester wearing the MICROspikes felt plenty secure on a Christmas day hike along the icy Lion Gulch Trail in Colorado, but she was bummed when her husband opted for a shorter route because his rubber-soled boots weren't cutting it. Bonus: The 2012 model is updated with an easy-on heel tab, reinforced eyelets, and an even more durable band. **$60; 14.4 oz. (L); XS-XL; kahtoola.com**

Lodge Cast Iron Camp Dutch Ovens

Feed the troops or go gourmet—these pots do both.

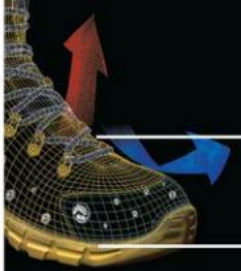
For more than two centuries, campers have been fueling adventures with meals made in these pioneer pots. Our editors have only been using them for a decade or so, but we're convinced: For car-, horse-, and boat-camping trips, when weight is no object, nothing beats these ovens for fireside meals. Our enthusiastic test crew has used them to make mashed-potato-topped shepherd's pie, hearty green chili with chicken, blueberry cobbler, and more. The technique is simple: Build a hot bed of coals (you can use charcoal briquettes, too), set the cauldron on top, and cover the flat lid with more coals. Sit back and enjoy a beverage while you rotate the pot every 10 minutes or so (to ensure even cooking). Lodge offers a slew of sizes (from 1- to 12-quart); just be sure to get one of the "Camp" models that come with legs for elevating the pot over the coals. Each includes a booklet filled with recipes and maintenance tips; never wash your oven with soap, and oil it before storing to prevent rusting. "It's a family heirloom," says one tester. "I'll be handing this down to my kids someday." **$44-$175; 18 lbs. 10 oz. (12 qt.); lodgemfg.com**

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) BEN FULLERTON; JONATHAN DORN; COURTESY

WITH GORE-TEX® INSIDE

HIKING BOOTS ENGINEERED WITH GORE-TEX® PRODUCT TECHNOLOGY

The great outdoors before you, miles of rough terrain behind you, cold water beneath you. Time to breathe deeply and relax, just like your feet. Boots engineered with GORE-TEX® product technology combine breathable climate comfort and durable waterproof protection for your outdoor activities.



Highly Breathable

Durably Waterproof

GUARANTEED TO KEEP YOU DRY
GORE-TEX® PRODUCTS

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Randy Y. Stripped to my SmartWool with Claire after our last day in the backcountry. Now back to civilization!

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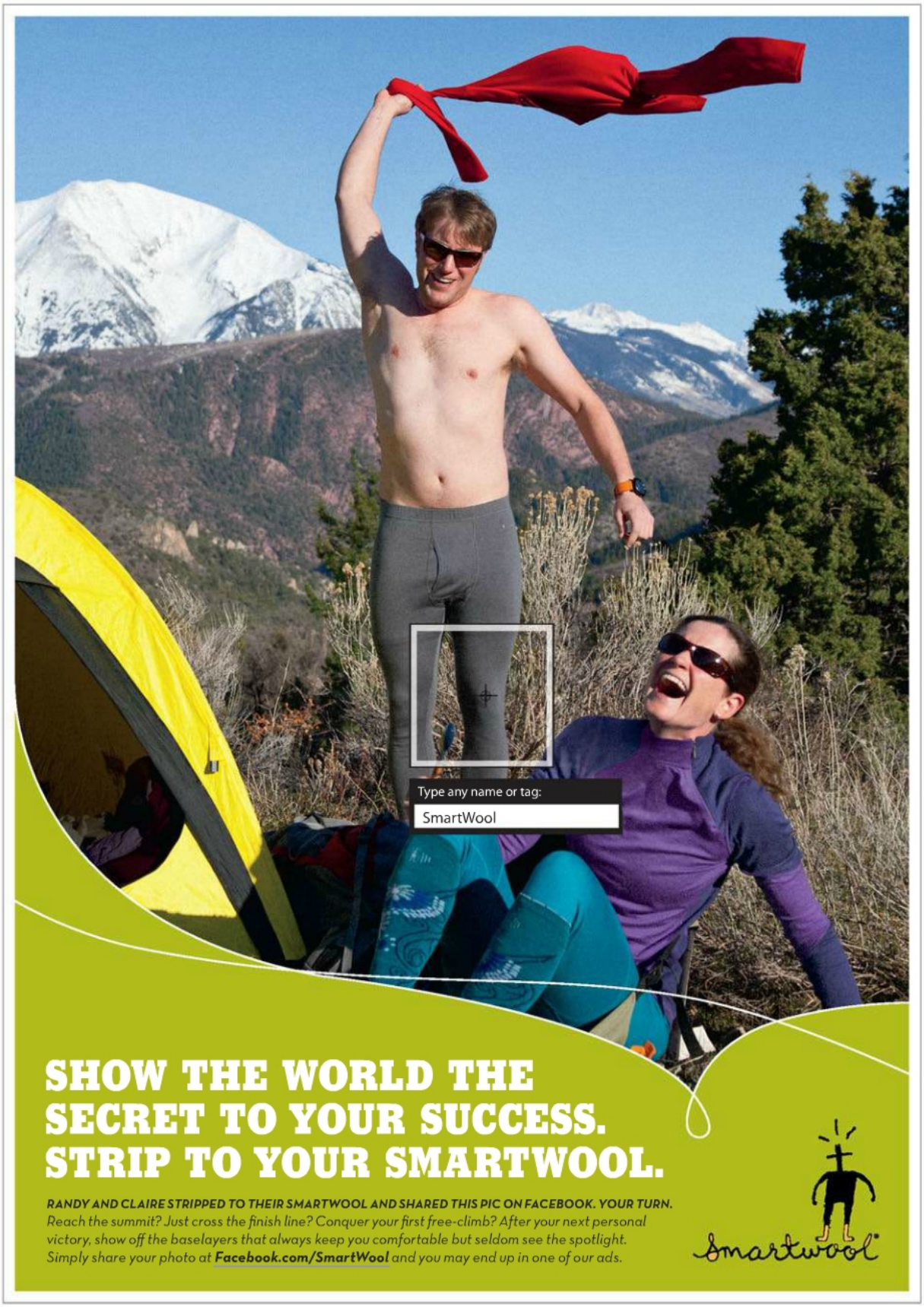

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Charina L. Stripped to my SmartWool at Marshall Mesa with my coworkers from Backpacker magazine. A perfect way to end a busy week!

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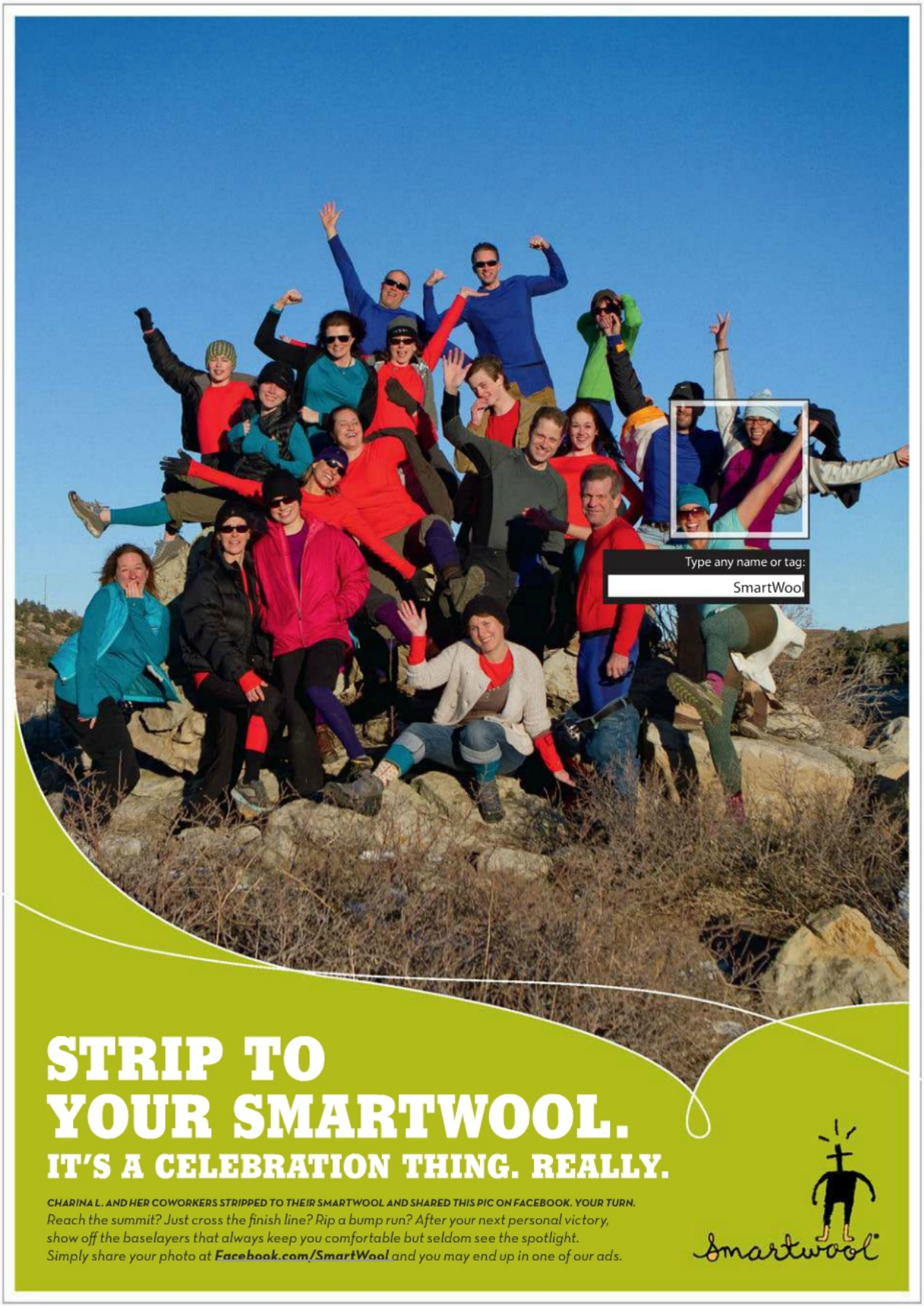

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Packs

Find the perfect load hauler for any type of trip.

Daypacks

[workhorse]

Columbia Treadlite 22

"You can stuff this deceptively supportive daypack with rocks and carry it for a dozen miles comfortably," says one tester, who literally did just that, filling it with 17 pounds of geodes from the fossil fields around John Day, Oregon. The 22-liter front-loader handles dense loads better than most due to its stiff frame and robust **trampoline-style suspension.*** An hourglass-shaped plastic framesheet combined with a crossed pair of aluminum stays creates a sturdy frame for the mesh backpanel, supporting heavy loads with a good two inches of freeflowing air between your back and the packbag. Another tester, a guide in the Tyrolean Alps, loaded it with nearly 20 pounds of water, food, and gear. "The load was as stable as my parents' multi-decade marriage," he said. Support is further enhanced by a wide hipbelt and lightly padded lumbar pad. The fixed-suspension pack has tapered shoulder straps made of a stiff, cookie-cut EVA foam with a visible mesh core—a combination that negated shoulder pain and transferred weight to the hips well. We fretted about potential pack sway due to the space between the trampoline and packbag, but four easy-to-reach load tighteners snug the weight into the shoulder straps and lower back. Testers loved the organizational features: a zip pouch on top for stashing sunglasses, a stretchy shove-it pocket with room for a puffy, and stretchy side water bottle pockets that are accessible while wearing the pack. Quibble: Excessively long webbing flaps around on the hipbelt and shoulder straps. **$129; 2 lbs. 4 oz.; 22 liters; columbia.com**

[instant access]

Ortovox Lightning 25

This climbing-oriented pack has a sleek, narrow packbag that's fully and easily accessed with a J-shaped zipper that runs three-quarters of the way around the pack. Says a California-based tester who hauled it on more than 30 day trips: "With the big zipper, I could unbuckle, drop the pack, fish out a shell or lens—regardless of where they were situated in the packbag—and be back on the trail in 20 seconds." The long zipper let him pack gear for the best balance and center of gravity, rather than for accessibility from the top. Other testers used it as a crag bag: You can lay it open on its back for easy, dirt-free coiling, and there's an inside loop to attach one end of your rope. A removable hipbelt (save a half-pound when you don't need it) has a waterproof pocket (with a leak-proof zipper and impermeable membrane) that easily holds an iPhone or GPS. The lid (also removable) and hipbelt marry to create an 11.5-ounce fanny pack with a one-liter capacity. Comfortable for loads up to 25 pounds, the Lightning holds enough for an ultralight overnight, and there are plenty of discreet little organizers inside, including a waterproof pouch for guidebooks and another zip pocket for sunglasses and headlamp. A reinforced, 500-denier nylon base is plenty durable, as one tester attested after towing it up Yosemite's Snake Dike. The upper six inches of backpanel are stiffened with two aluminum stays that tapped one tester on the head during bike-commuting; we recommend the pack for people with torso lengths longer than 17.5 inches. **$160; 2 lbs. 5 oz.; 25 liters; ortovox.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON. TEXT BY NANCY PRICHARD BOUCHARD

***TRAMPOLINE-STYLE SUSPENSION** A backpanel design with mesh suspended over a ventilation gap between your back and frame; great for hot weather, but can crimp cargo space

All weights are for regular or medium sizes and are provided by the manufacturer.

[best ventilation]

Sierra Designs Discovery 30

The trails around Lake Tahoe are hot in the summer, but the highly ventilated framesheet and backpanel on the Discovery kept air circulating, even in triple-digit temps. We didn't think it possible that a perforated framesheet could out-ventilate a trampoline-style back, but our testers discovered otherwise. One tester hauled the Discovery over more than 80 miles of trail and up and down the crags at Lover's Leap and Pie Shop. "I filled it with a full rack of climbing gear (35 pounds), which it handled comfortably and with no perspiration buildup. Later, I packed three gallons of water (for two dogs) plus food, a small bivy sack, and clothing for an ultralight overnight—and despite the hot day, I didn't get a sweaty back." The ventilation comes from the supersized molded-foam fingers that wrap around the framesheet and force air into the small cavities. Also credit the removable molded hipbelt that slips under a raised lumbar support with ventilation grooves to boost airflow (and allow for a smooth, fitted wrap with superb load distribution). The molded plastic framesheet (with oval-shaped cutouts for even more venting) is flexible and light. Our testers gave the pack bonus points for the lightly padded shoulder straps that can be easily adjusted for an extra inch of torso length. A single vertical DAC aluminum stay helps the pack bear weight vertically while still twisting and flexing in concert with your spine. Inside the roomy packbag is a single zip pouch for keys and phone. The outside features a stowaway rain cover, a stretch-mesh **shove-it pouch***, and secure water bottle pockets that unfortunately aren't accessible when you're wearing the pack. **$170; 2 lbs. 12 oz.; 30 liters; sierradesigns.com**

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[featherweight spring ski pack]

Salomon Quest 30

It's rare to find so many usable ski-friendly features in such a small pack. "My skis rode snug in the side carriers," reports one tester who toted his alpine touring gear in Oregon's Central Cascades. "The fixed, rubberized straps not only kept the skis from banging around, but they also resisted cutting from freshly sharpened edges, a must for late-spring and early-summer forays onto icy snowfields." He dubbed the hipbelt buckle and big zipper pulls eminently glove-friendly: The pulls have round, rubber stiffeners that easily accommodate a glove-encased digit. The Quest has organization aplenty: two internal side pockets (for an avalanche probe and shovel handle), a full-length exterior zippered pouch (for stuffing a puffy and munchies), and a fleece-lined top pouch for goggles, sunglasses, or other breakables. While our testers don't recommend the pack for loads of more than 20 pounds (the shoulder straps and hipbelt are a light, mesh-encased foam that distorted under heavier weight), they loved the egg-carton lumbar panel, which expelled snow better than most. Best feature: A wraparound U-shaped zipper peels back the pack's entire front panel for quick sorting and packing. **$125; 2 lbs. 6 oz.; 30 liters; salomon.com**

[ladies' choice]

JanSport Cienega

"The pack was a perfect fit for my body, with the hipbelt sitting correctly on my hips and the chest strap not too loose or too tight," says our Yosemite tester. The fixed shoulder straps are cut in an exaggerated S-curve that's anatomically friendly: They ride snug at the shoulders but contour backward at a sharp angle to minimize pressure on breasts. The sternum strap has five inches of vertical adjustment, a feature our full-figured testers appreciated. Perforated foam shoulder straps, hipbelt, and backpanel keep the framesheet and suspension system light, but it's also comfortable for 25- to 30-pound loads. After carrying that much in hardware, water, and food up El Cap and Half Dome and hiking more than 60 miles in the Yosemite high country, one tester, whose 16-inch torso perfectly conformed to the framesheet's length, concluded that she'd never hefted a better-fitting suspension system. The pack easily handled gear for an overnight, with the main compartment swallowing the heavy stuff; the lid roomy enough for a rainshell, maps, and headlamp; and the stretchy shove-it pocket for overflow or quick-access snacks. Two mesh side pockets firmly held liter bottles within reach. The hydration sleeve sits between the pack bag and framesheet, making it easy to access (via a side zipper) without emptying the pack. Caveat: When overloaded with more than 30 pounds, the packbag tended to pull away from the framesheet, making the load less stable and causing the zipper of the hydration sleeve to come undone. (See more women's gear on page 130.) **$125; 2 lbs.; 32 liters; jansport.com**

***SHOVE-IT POUCH** An open-topped pocket ideal for cramming in extra layers and snacks or for segregating wet gear

Multiday

[feature rich]

GoLite Quest 50

"What is most impressive is how richly featured it is without being excessively heavy," says one tester after using the top-loader for a multiday adventure race in the Sierra Nevada. "It's definitely welterweight, but delivers a great fit, a suspension that transfers weight to your hips, and all the features you'd expect from a much heavier pack." Even with the pack loaded with up to 35 pounds, he covered more than 50 miles through sketchy, steep terrain without shoulder or back pain. Load support is provided by a **perimeter stay*** around the framesheet; it supplies rigidity without excess weight. The padded backpanel and 2.5-inch-wide shoulder straps slide vertically along two aluminum stays to fit torsos from 17.5 to 21.5 inches. The two stays form small circles, like rams' horns, at the bottom of the pack and provide a secure mount for the removable hipbelt. "Load transfer is excellent," says one tester. "The weight rode on my hips, not my shoulders." Nice: The narrow, top-loading main compartment can also be accessed through a front zipper. The removable lid has two zippered pouches, and a stretch-mesh exterior shove-it pocket and two water bottle holders help with organization and overflow. Ding: The shoulder strap padding is short and the sternum strap rides near collar bone level. **$200; 3 lbs. 8 oz.; 50 liters; golite.com**

[quick-change artist]

Mile High Salute 34

After hauling the Salute up two Fourteeners, through three slot canyons, and on a half-dozen long weekends, our tester estimated that he'd opened and closed the pack no less than 250 times. "The snaking zipper makes zeroing in on the pack's contents remarkably easy," he says, "which is key for a father who must stop frequently to supply gummy bears, face wipes, and graham crackers to two young daughters." The two-way, S-shaped zipper winds from top to bottom; when fully unzipped, the pack can be laid out flat on the ground. "Not only could I easily access everything," he reports, "I could also use the platform for sorting gear, organizing a picnic, and even diaper changing." Our testers also raved about the pack's suspension: Contoured blocks of foam and mesh provide a soft backpanel that's stiffened by a framesheet and lightweight aluminum perimeter stay. The torsionally flexible framesheet, which fit a host of testers with torsos ranging from 16 to 20 inches, is paired with a pivoting hipbelt (the wings are each independently attached via two rotating ball joints)—the combo allowed one tester to carry 35 pounds of gear comfortably. Caveat: The waterproof zipper is grabby where it curves. **$199; 3 lbs. 8 oz.; 34 liters; mhmgear.com**

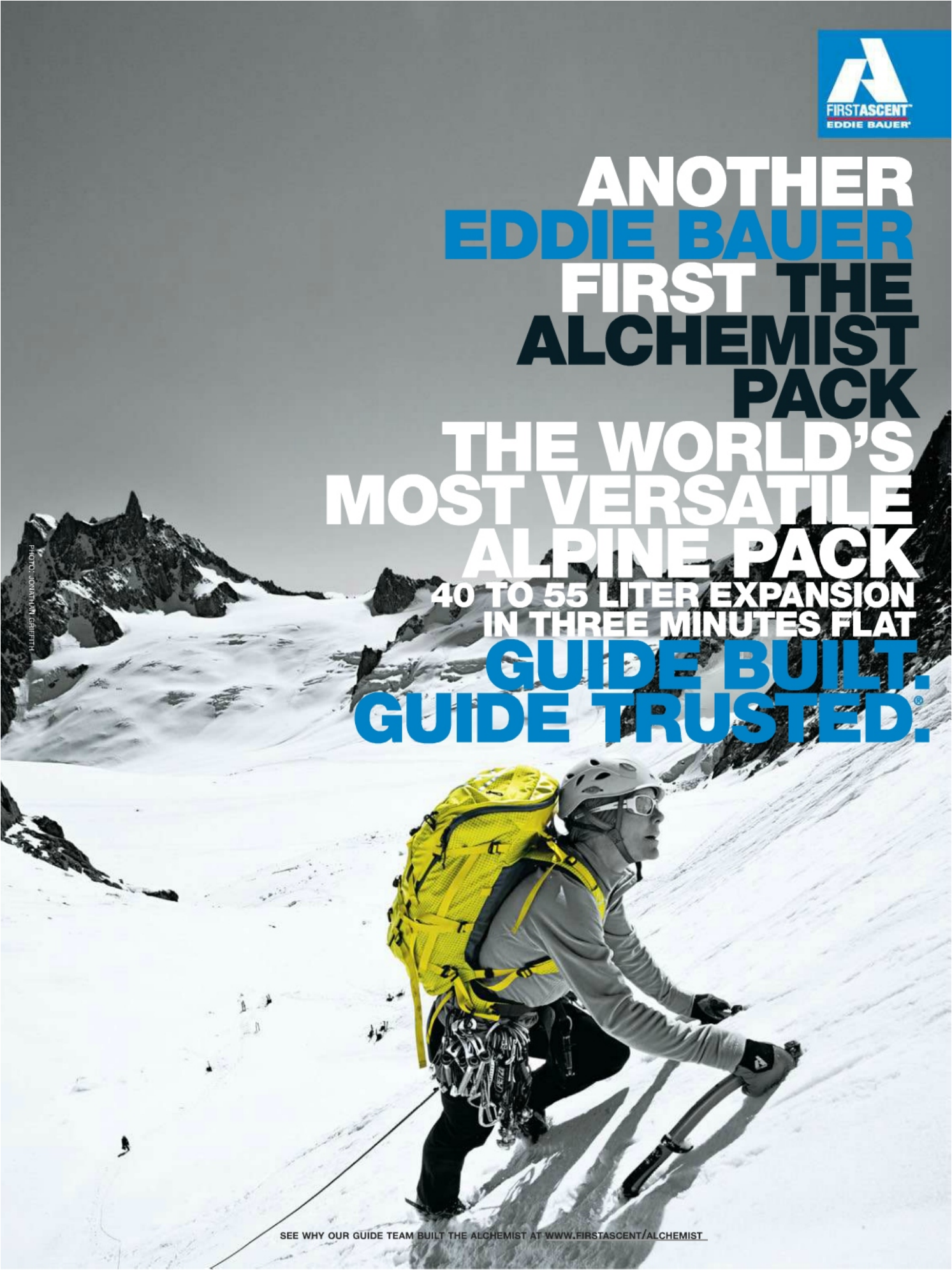
[mountaineering lightweight]

Marmot Drakon 35

"This is the biggest 35-liter pack ever," raved a tester after lugging it with 40 pounds on a three-day Grand Traverse—an enchainment of the 10 highest peaks in Grand Teton National Park that involves technical climbing, a lot of scrambling, and thousands of feet of elevation gain and loss. Despite being filled with an unholy amount of gear, he says, the pack was very stable on the super-exposed, knife-blade arêtes. What makes it different is the climbing-friendly shape—the packbag tapers like an upside-down pear, from slightly wider at the top to narrower near the hips. This gave our tester maximum arm freedom for reaching tough handholds, and it transfers weight directly onto the thin, low-profile foam hipbelt. The soft and flexible backpanel, with a removable framesheet stiffener, allows the pack to stick to your back like duct tape, handy when you're balancing on dicey terrain 1,000 feet off the deck. Tradeoff: The clingy, climber-friendly fit means minimal ventilation. **$149; 2 lbs. 9 oz.; 35 liters; marmot.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*PERIMETER STAY A thin aluminum bar that wraps around the outside of the back panel; it provides stability and load transfer to the hips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[waterproof]

Exped Torrent 50

If you find yourself constantly battling wet conditions—whether you're a Northwest backpacker, a spring skier, or a paddler—this waterproof pack will help you win the war. Made from nylon that's laminated with TPU* and finished with welded seams and waterproof closures, it's impervious to leaks, as one tester discovered after filling it with water to check for weak spots. In a mega-snowstorm on Alaska's Moose's Tooth, the Torrent kept our tester's gear bone dry. And the frameless suspension is up to snuff for backpacking with moderately heavy loads, reports another tester who loaded it with 30 pounds for the nine-mile round-trip to The Wife in the Oregon Cascades; the fully-padded backpanel has pods of foam to cushion the load. "I felt very balanced while scrambling the last quarter-mile up the steep, scree-covered arête," he recounts. The roll-top packbag with one cavernous main compartment favors a stuff-and-cram style of packing—but that also means no zippers that might fail. Initially, our testers mourned the absence of exterior pockets, but after bushwhacking through dense scrub and low branches, they saw one benefit—nothing gets hung up. Loads heavier than 35 pounds overwhelm the minimalist structure and padding. **$159; 2 lbs. 3 oz.; 50 liters; exped.com**

[hot-weather warrior]

Mountainsmith Ghost 50

Testers loved this pack's airy mesh-and-foam backpanel: It maintains a full three inches of space between the packbag and your torso for a sweat-free carry—even when they were grunting up sun-baked slopes. After a nine-mile uphill slog on Oregon's Mt. Washington in 85°F temps, our tester's back was dry. The Ghost isn't new, but this year's upgrades add a vastly improved suspension to its tough-as-nails construction. A rigid plastic framesheet flexes toward the spine via an hourglass-shaped, spring-steel hoop that's suspended at the top and bottom by a mesh- and foam-padded trampoline; the design helps with weight transfer and dynamic movement. The torso length easily adjusts from 17 to 21 inches with a Velcro wrap that testers loved for its one-handed simplicity. Our testers carried the pack on nine weekend trips of up to 20 miles and consistently praised its load transfer with up to 30 pounds (credit the new ultracurved hipbelt). They also lauded its well-armored backpanel and spongy, mesh-covered lumbar and shoulder blade pads, which kept sharp items off their spines. In lieu of a spindrift collar and lid, a U-shaped zipper opens the entire front panel for easy stuffing and grabbing. Several zippered exterior pockets hold a shell, snacks, and other essentials. Downside: When the hydration sleeve is full, it creates a bottleneck midpack, limiting access to gear at the bottom. **$180; 3 lbs. 15 oz.; 50 liters; mountainsmith.com**

ultralight

killer deal

[versatile bargain]

First Ascent Alchemist 40

This two-for-one deal defies conventional wisdom. With a top-loading main compartment that expands from 40 to 55 liters, the Alchemist's unusual design is both a large daypack and a multiday hauler that can handle big days, snowy summit bids, deluxe weekend trips, and even ultralight expeditions. "The way the packbag shrinks down is truly unique," raves one Colorado tester. You fold the lid down into the main bag and cinch a drawcord in the middle; Velcro tabs hold the lid in place. And amazingly, there's almost no weight penalty for the superior versatility. "It's a great choice for ultralight expeditions that begin with high food weight/volume and end with a 10-pound base load," he says. That's pretty good for a $199 pack that also delivers the durability needed for miles of bushwhacking through Nevada scrub oak, the waterproofness to thwart early-season Sierra snowstorms, and smart storage options that won't offend minimalists and will still please organizers. The removable foam frame doubles as a sleeping pad or camp chair; ditch it for an 11-ounce savings. Caveat: With the top lid retracted inside the pack, access to the bottom of the main compartment is inhibited. **$199; 4 lbs.; 40-55 liters; eddiebauer.com/firstascent**

[best all-around]

Osprey Atmos 65

Some backpackers like to have a designated spot for every little item. The Atmos (and the women's Aura) is ideal for the hyper-organized. After a five-day trip through the mountains of central Chile, our tester reported, "The big, top-loading main compartment swallowed my bag, clothes, food, and tent, while tons of pockets let me lay out everything for quick access during the day. Two lid pockets held my headlamp and beanie; the stretchy shove-it pouch fit my big puffy jacket; a pair of long, zippered pockets stashed my mini-crampons and gloves; and two hipbelt pockets held lip balm and sunscreen." There's also an accessible sleeping bag compartment and two stretchy side pockets for water bottles. The suspension (adjustable from 17 to 21 inches), with an alloy frame, cross struts, and a tensioned mesh trampoline, negates pack sway with up to 50 pounds and kept testers' backs cool during heavy exertion in hot weather. The hipbelt has strategically placed cutouts that create exceptional wrap around the hips and lower back for great load transfer and stability. The effective compression—two V-shaped straps on either side of the pack—adds extra stability. **$239; 3 lbs. 9 oz.; 65 liters; ospreypacks.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*TPU Thermoplastic polyurethane; a burly, flexible, waterproof fabric often used in dry bags and paddling gear

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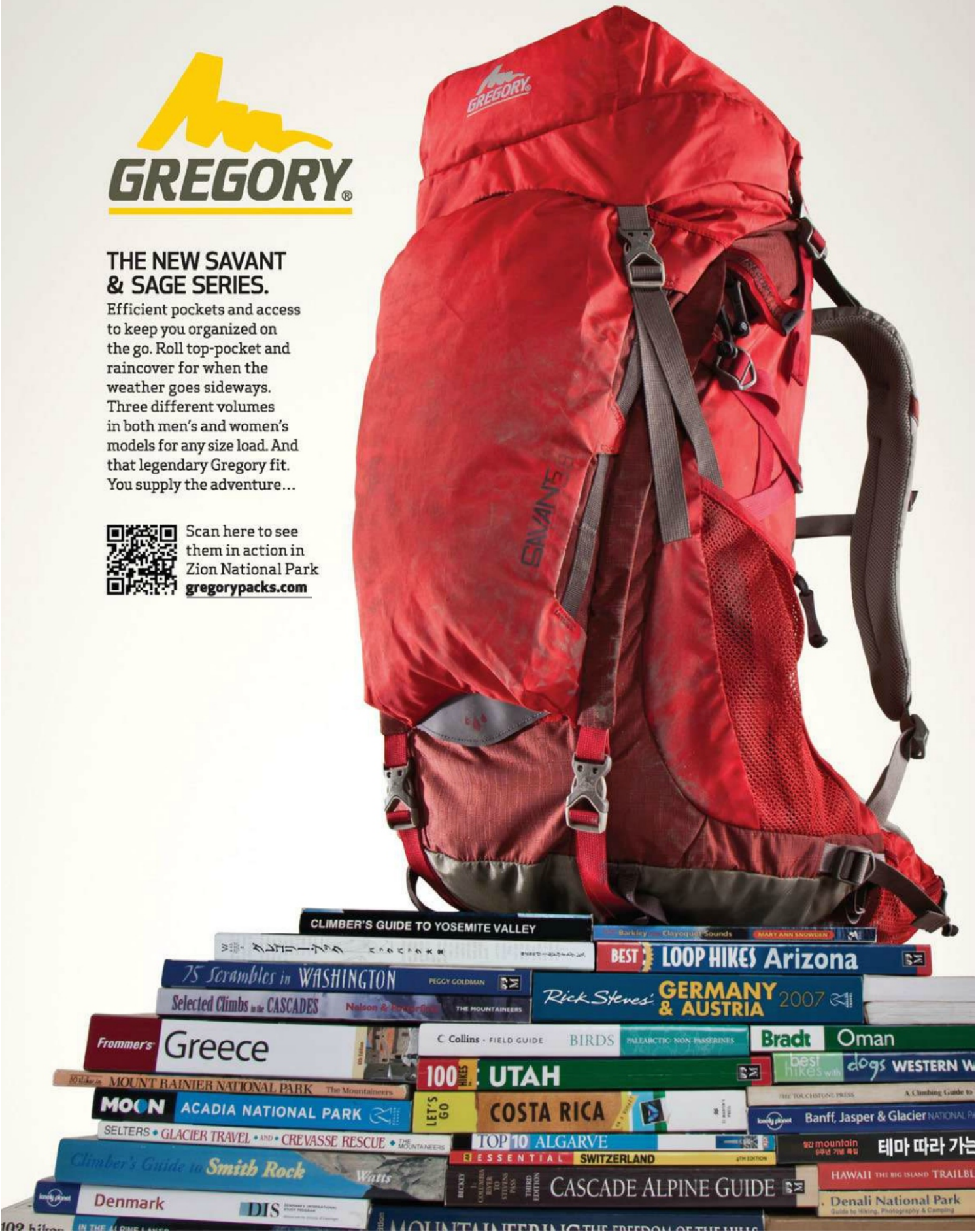

ultralight

smart weight saver

Boreas Lost Coast 60 and Buttermilks 55

Who says a comfortable, lightweight, full-featured pack has to be complicated or expensive? These two models share a well-ventilated suspension that easily carries 40-plus pounds, and a design that balances weight savings with durability and organization. Our Editors' Choice reviews start on page 25. *Lost Coast: $200; 3 lbs. 3 oz.; 60 liters; Buttermilks: $175; 2 lbs. 13 oz; 55 liters; boreasgear.com*

"Everything I want in a lightweight pack, and nothing I don't. There's not an ounce of fat or a single unnecessary feature."

EDITORS' CHOICE 2012 BACKPACKER

ultralight

[Editors' Choice update]

REI Flash 62

Yosemite climbers are tough on packs: Thin wallets and big expectations make them harsh critics. But the upgraded Flash passed muster. Our team of Valley testers liked the pack's ability to handle heavy loads without compromising their ability to move efficiently (and safely) over treacherous terrain. Like its predecessor (which won an Editors' Choice Award in 2009), the new Flash 62 is immensely versatile, from overnights to thru-hikes. After 75-plus days in the field, the top-loader's new suspension earned high praise. A tester who'd logged time in both models reported, "It felt more molded to my back, but I didn't get sweaty, even carrying 45 pounds." The secret? A new tubular aluminum frame that improves weight transfer via stays that extend deep into the hipbelt. The molded, mesh-encased foam backpanel is also thicker, with giant cut-out vents that kept our tester dry when he was hiking up Yosemite Falls Trail in 90°F temps. Gripe: The tall framesheet interferes with a helmet. **$189; 3 lbs.; 62 liters; rei.com**

[big-load stability]

Black Diamond Mercury 65

"The novel suspension seriously changed my view of how comfortable packs can feel," says our Oregon tester, who used the Mercury for two weeks in the Cascades. Credit the ball-and-joint pivot system on the padded hipbelt and the self-adjusting shoulder straps, which make for a dynamic carry* that moves with you on every type of terrain. The shoulder straps are key: They balance the load across your back, unlike static designs that weight each shoulder separately as you walk. The swivel mechanism of the hipbelt accommodates the 3D motion of the hips, allowing for in-motion weight transfer via elastic "tendons." On a Colorado Fourteener, our tester said her bulky, 45-pound load didn't rub her shoulders, even during an epic 16-mile summit day. But there is a learning curve: The pack requires you to adapt your movement to account for the increased motion in the load. But once testers stopped fighting it, what initially felt like instability turned into freedom—their hips moved independently from their torsos. Caveat: It's on the heavy side for the capacity. **$260; 4 lbs. 11 oz.; 65 liters; blackdiamondequipment.com**

PHOTOS BY JONATHAN DORN (TOP); BEN FULLERTON (2)

*DYNAMIC CARRY Suspension systems that pivot at the hips or otherwise move with your body, increasing mobility and reducing pressure at load-bearing contact points

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GOT YOUR BAK™ LIFETIME GUARANTEE

[custom-fit load monster]

Vaude Terkum 75 +10

This pack's harness and hipbelt are beefy enough to support 70-pound loads, an increasingly rare feat. Credit a six-inch-wide, mattress like hipbelt with an innovative cinching system (more below), an extremely firm internal frame, and a customizable torso that you can micro-adjust from 19 to 22.5 inches. Two testers spent a week using the Terkum in Yosemite, carrying heavy loads for the annual park clean-up. "I loaded the pack up with cans, bottles, and even someone's forgotten boots," reports one. "The hipbelt kept the weight off of my shoulders, and I never felt out of balance." In addition to a standard buckle closure, the hipbelt features a dial-to-fit Boa cable system (commonly found on snowboard boots and ski helmets) that snugs the belt in toward the lumbar area, eliminating any extra space that might cause chafing or interfere with load transfer to the hips. A tug and a twist of the small round knob on the wing of the hipbelt activates dual wires hidden beneath the lumbar panel—they allow the hipbelt to be adjusted (on the fly) in the lower back as well as the belly. Twin aluminum stays frame the backpanel, helping to distribute the load and direct weight to the mid-back and hips. The top-loader also has a U-shaped zipper that opens the pack's entire front panel, and while there are no water bottle pockets, two vertical map pockets are big enough for liter bottles. Damage report: One overzealous tester cranked the Boa wires too tight and broke the mechanism, causing the load to wobble. Fortunately, Boa offers a lifetime guarantee. **$260; 6 lbs. 3 oz.; 85 liters; vaudeusa.com**

[family hauler]

Deuter Aircontact 65+10

Big enough for hero-dad loads but adjustable down to teen-torso lengths, this was our testers' choice for gear-intensive family camping trips. A no-fuss Velcro-and-loop system adjusts the torso length from 16 to 21 inches. On a three-day excursion up Benson Plateau in Oregon's Columbia River Gorge, our tester humped 60 pounds of gear for himself and two young sons. After they devoured the food—dropping the weight by nearly 20 pounds—the 12-year-old tweaked the torso length and carried it out. The father liked the simple, stable design, as well as the pack's ability to shrink or expand with the load. An extension collar adds 10 liters; the **floating lid*** has a wraparound fit that securely covers monster loads. The pack has a plethora of useful features, including a built-in rain cover; a huge, U-shaped zippered front panel; a long vertical zip pocket that's perfect for rolled maps; and small pockets on the hipbelt. **$269; 6 lbs.; 65 liters; deuterusa.com**

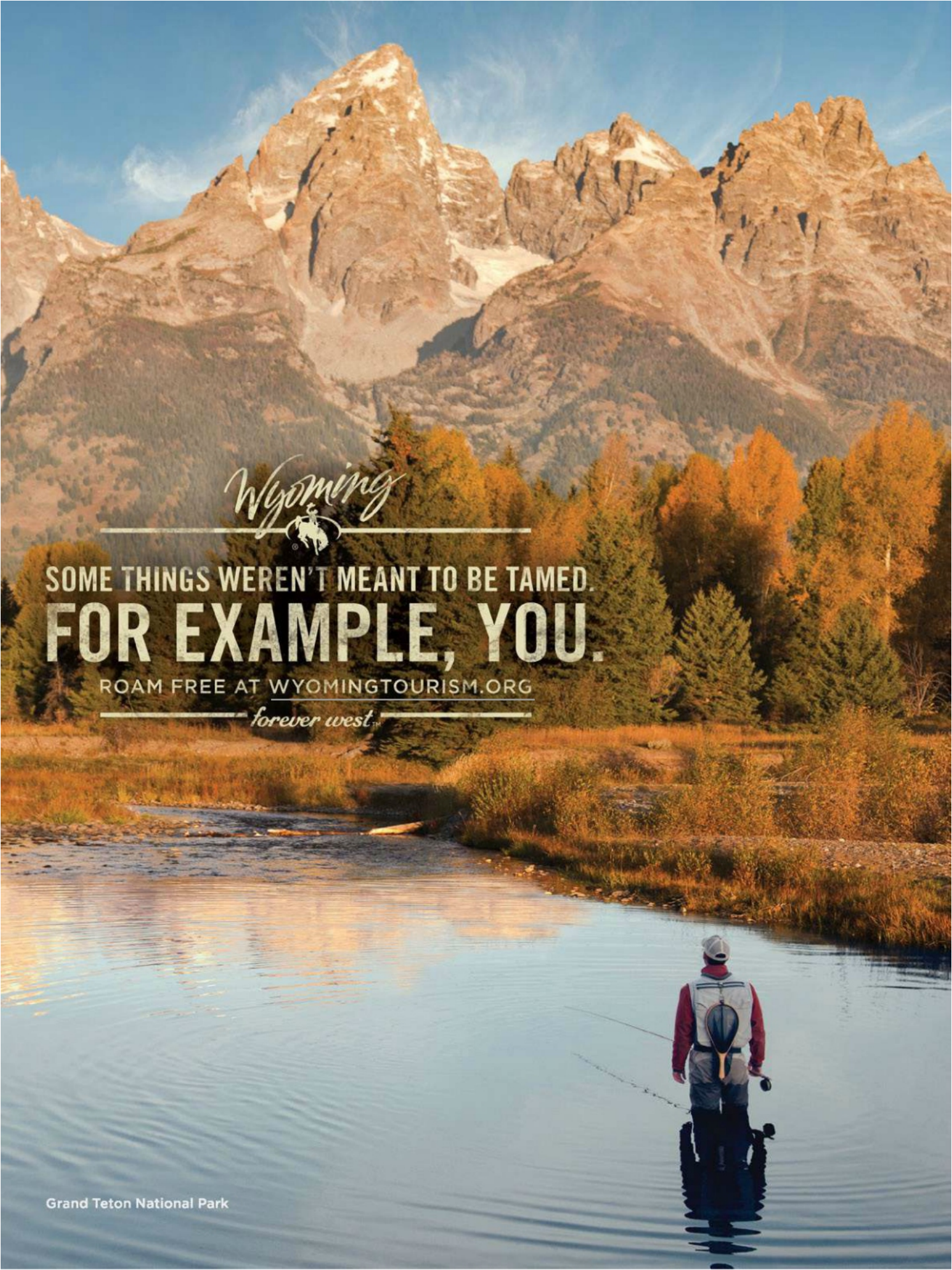
PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

[light and stable]

Gregory Savant 58

This pack's precise, effective compression nets great load stability. "There was no sway whatsoever," wrote one tester after a 10-mile epic dayhike across the rugged, uneven terrain of the Three Sisters Wilderness. Inside the capacious packbag, he carried three liters of water, an emergency bivy, winter layers, and a stove; despite the awkward 30-plus pounds of unruly gear, he never had to readjust. Compression straps aren't new, but the Savant's array of load-stabilizing straps (well-positioned above the shoulder straps and behind the hipbelt), combined with two Z-shaped straps that tug in the lid (and whatever's underneath), kept even Herculean loads balanced and snug up against our testers' backs. Side compression straps crank in the front stuff-it pocket, pulling the weight back to the framesheet and over the hips. One tester, after 11 miles and 3,000 feet of elevation change on the Benson Lake Trail in the Willamette National Forest, gave the pack's load transfer ability nine out of 10 points. Caveat: Three out of four testers gave the suspension two thumbs up, but one, after a 25-mile loop in the Wind Rivers with a 45-pound load, reported that, while he appreciated the load control, a seam near the lumbar pad rubbed the small of his back. **$199; 3 lbs. 9 oz.; 58 liters; gregorypacks.com**

***FLOATING LID** A top compartment that attaches via adjustable webbing, allowing you to overstuff your pack and secure bulky items under the lid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OSPREY

ospreypacks.com

[bombproof]

Arc'teryx NoZone 55

Wondering whether Arc'teryx packs are worth their premium price? Silly question, scoffs our editor-in-chief. "These guys consistently find superior materials and match them to smart features and impeccable tailoring," he says. Take the NoZone, a midweight weekender-plus that offers the durability and load support of an expedition pack for half the weight. A super-streamlined design is part of the reason: just a lid pocket, four compression straps, and one stretchy side pocket (that is—arrghh—too small for a water bottle). A bigger reason is the pack fabric, a ripstop nylon with an extraordinary toughness-to-weight ratio. "Three days of bashing through beetle-kill deadfall in Colorado's Gore Range ripped my softshell pants to shreds," he recalls, "but didn't leave a scratch on the pack." The NoZone's padding also justifies the premium price. "Best foam ever," he raved after a day spent caching 25 liters of water for a desert trek. "The shoulder straps, hipbelt, and lumbar pad* feel like the bed you wish you could afford: a firm memory-foam slab that cushions, supports, and never sags in the middle." Another tester concurred after an extended hike in Wyoming's Big Horns, noting that the foam's pressure dispersal is so good that Arc'teryx could make the shoulder straps narrower—and thus less cumbersome. Avoid it if you want pockets, an adjustable torso, or a system (other than the lid pocket) for carrying your hydration bladder. **$275; 3 lbs.; 55 liters; arcteryx.com**

Testers: Ted Alvarez, Kelly Bastone, Matthew Bates, Ryan Bolen, John Bouchard, Will Blount, Shawn Blount, Lili Bouchard, Nancy Prichard Bouchard, Billy Brown, Shannon Davis, Lynn Dettinger, Adam Devitt, Michael Dimitri, Jonathan Dorn, Julie Ellison, Ben Fullerton, Katie Herrell, JT Holmes, Kristin Hostetter, Mark Jenkins, Ron Kauk, Katie Lambert, Dan Larson, Dennis Lewon, Andrew Matranga, Dan McMillan, Jim Morris, Darryl Nakahira, Jan Nesset, Kim Phillips, Dean Potter, Mark Smiley, Janelle Smiley, Jeremy Vallerand, Franz Weber, Bob Woodward, Eileen Woodward

More Tester Picks

DAYPACKS

» Hydrapak Jolla
As the company's name implies, this updated pack is all about hydration, from its easy-access, three-liter reservoir to the hose's high-flow bite valve. On a 60-mile round-trip road bike ride from Bend to Elk Lake, Oregon, in 90°F temps, our tester tanked up and loaded snacks, swimsuit, and towel into the 18-liter top-loading packbag for a mid-ride soak. "I loved the suspension's ventilation," he says, citing the waffled backpad and perforated foam shoulder straps for enhanced airflow. **$145; 2 lbs. 6 oz.; 18 liters; hydrapak.com**

» CamelBak Highwire 25
On an 18-day Grand Canyon float, our tester put this pack and its (included) 100-ounce hydration bladder to the test on side hikes throughout the trip and, later, an epic Thunder River climbing adventure. The lightly padded hipbelt and shoulder straps comfortably carried 20-pound loads. **$125; 1 lb. 13 oz.; 25 liters; camelbak.com**

» Platypus Origin 32
"This is the easiest reservoir system I've used," said one tester after a long day exploring Mt. St. Helens. The three-liter reservoir snaps into the pack with a simple loop-and-toggle system. Thirsty testers praised the extra-long hose with multiple routing options and glove-friendly shut-off valve. Plus, the waterproof compartment holds enough for the most epic days. **$160; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; 32 liters; platy.com**

» Eastern Mountain Sports Free Range 38

One tester hiked in the Three Sisters Wilderness with this well-organized, top-zip daypack. In addition to a spacious packbag, outside pockets include two microfiber-lined sunglass/goggle pouches, a front pocket with padded phone pouch, a padded computer sleeve with side access, and a mesh water bottle pouch. "The load felt secure, even when I was hiking through a giant boulder field," she says, crediting the substantial shoulder straps and cushy foam backpanel with the carrying comfort. **$95; 2 lbs. 9 oz.; 38 liters; ems.com**

» Outdoor Products Gama
A surprisingly comfortable, bargain-priced top-loader, the Gama has an über-wide, plush hipbelt and a padded, U-shaped shoulder yoke that conformed to our tester's body and supported loads up to 25 pounds. "The raised foam-and-mesh backpanel provides great airflow," says a tester who used it hiking in sweltering weather in the Cascades. Only quibble? It's heavy. **$80; 3 lbs. 6 oz.; 40 liters; outdoorproducts.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON (ARC'TERYX); COURTESY (3)

*LUMBAR PAD A firm foam cushion that should sit snug against lower-back curves; a closer match means better load support

MULTIDAY

» Mountain Hardwear SummitRocket 40
For summit bids and ultralight overnights, this minimalist, strippable (save 13 ounces by removing the foam pad, framesheet, and hipbelt) pack satisfied our gram-pinching testers. Dual-density foam shoulder straps, a padded lumbar pad, lightly padded foam hipbelt, and plastic corrugated frame sheet effectively transfer loads of up to 30 pounds. A tunnel-like collar adds an extra 10 liters in vertical capacity (but be careful with loading for proper balance); the roll-top closure negates the need for a lid. **$200; 1 lb. 16 oz.; 40 liters; mountainhardwear.com**

» The North Face Prophet 52
This mountaineering-oriented top-loader is most at home on steep slopes and alpine rock. With excellent load compression, the narrow, tall packbag won't interfere with poling or reaching for awkward handholds. "It swallows a rack and rope," says one tester who frequently filled it with 40 pounds of hardware, side-country ski gear, or his overnight kit. **$189; 3 lbs. 6 oz.; 54 liters; thenorthface.com**

» High Peak USA Lightning 50
On an overnight into Washington's Alpine Lakes Wilderness, one tester comfortably hauled 30 pounds with the Lightning, thanks to a lightly padded, adjustable (14 to 23 inches) suspension system. Comfort and durability are the only bells and whistles on this pack, which offers very little in the realm of pockets and straps. Note: It lacks the support for loads over 35 pounds. **$148; 3 lbs. 6 oz.; 50 liters; highpeakusa.com**

» Mammut Trion Guide 45 + 7
With an exceptional harness that transfers weight to the hips, this alpine climbing pack has a huge main compartment with removable lid and hipbelt. "The pack proved stable when I boulder-hopped down from the 12,804-foot Middle Teton," says one editor. "Credit the tensioned, hourglass-shaped tubular aluminum frame stay, which focuses weight on your hips while flexing torsionally* with upper-body movement." Testers loved this pack for hiking, alpine guiding, and everything in between. **$200; 3 lbs. 11 oz.; 45 liters; mammut.ch**

» Black Diamond Epic 45
Heavy gear, steep, uneven terrain, and high winds can easily overwhelm a pack's suspension. One tester, who lugged survival essentials up Alaska's Mt. Hunter in subzero conditions and 20-mph winds, credits the dynamic suspension (floating shoulder straps and a ball-joint pivot system on the hipbelt) and uncluttered, streamlined profile for alpine-worthy weight distribution and stability. **$190; 3 lbs. 11 oz.; 45 liters; blackdiamondequipment.com**

» Arc'teryx Kata 45
"It's the pack version of an assault vehicle," wrote one tester after a rough-and-tumble long weekend in the Wind Rivers. Testers took the Kata everywhere—skiing, climbing, and for ultralight four-day trips. The roomy, polyurethane-coated nylon packbag is "bombproof" and the extremely light, molded-foam hipbelt can handle 40-pound loads with no hot spots. **$259; 3 lbs. 11 oz.; 45 liters; arcteryx.com**

» Granite Gear Crown 60
Following a two-day trip into Washington's Tatoosh Lakes, one tester reported that this top-loading pack's stiff plastic framesheet (with big circular cutouts) and thin-but-comfortable molded-foam backpanel provided excellent load support and transfer to the hips (up to 35 pounds). "The skinny profile hugged my back and let me thrash through brush without getting hung up," he says. **$200; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; 60 liters; granitegear.com**

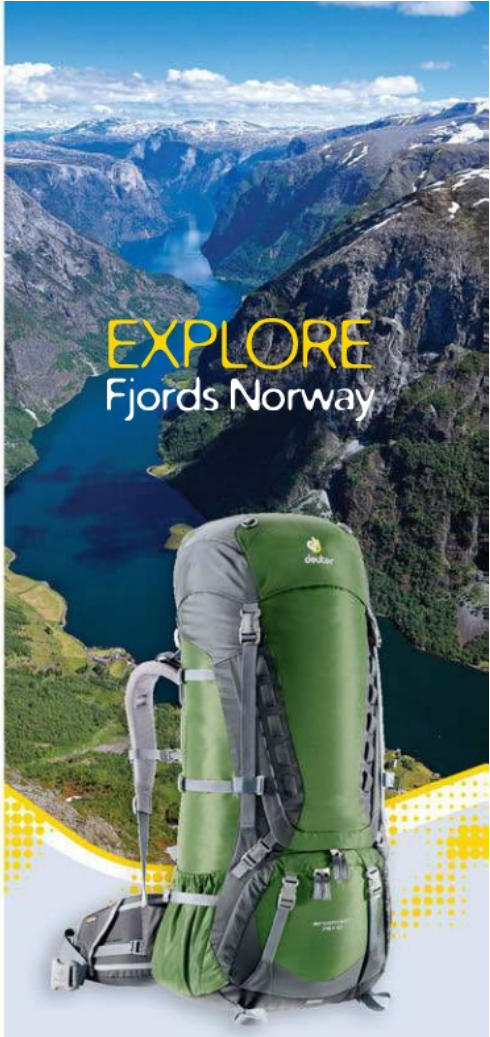
» Millet Miage 60+10
Got a bulky pile of gear for a week on the trail? With plenty of capacity for longer trips—thanks to a capacious floating lid, gusseted side pockets, and expandable storm collar—this stable, comfortable top-loader can carry it all. The plushly padded backpanel and cushioned lumbar pad subdue loads up to 50 pounds, and the suspension adjusts to fit 17- to 21-inch torsos. **$190; 4 lbs. 9 oz.; 60 liters; milletusa.com**

» Terra Nova Quasar 55
Diehard minimalists: This waterproof, welterweight pack has the guts to handle 30-pound loads in dicey terrain, like when our tester skinned 4,000 feet up Highland Peak near Aspen. It's not a plush ride (with minimal padding and a simple, double-layered fabric-and-webbing hipbelt), but that's not the point. The crinkly waterproof polyethylene (plastic) fabric is nearly indestructible. Gripe: spendy. **$300; 2 lbs.; 55 liters; terra-nova.co.uk**

» MontBell Expedition 70
Designed for light alpine ascents, the Expedition 70 is a rugged, single-compartment sack with compression straps, ice-axe loops, and a lid. This classic has all that you need and no more: zero frills, core function, durable materials, and the chops to handle 70 pounds. **$220; 3 lbs. 14 oz.; 70 liters; montbell.com**

» Wenger Zernez 60L
If you like luxe features and don't mind carrying extra weight, consider this fully outfitted mountain pack. Organization is thorough, and it has a comfortable, supportive, stay-reinforced backpanel; broad, memory-foam shoulder straps and hipbelt; and an easy, secure torso-length adjustment. **$215; 5 lbs. 1 oz.; 60 liters; wengerna.com**

***TORSIONAL FLEX** A good frame will twist with your shoulders and rotate with your spine so you're not fighting it.



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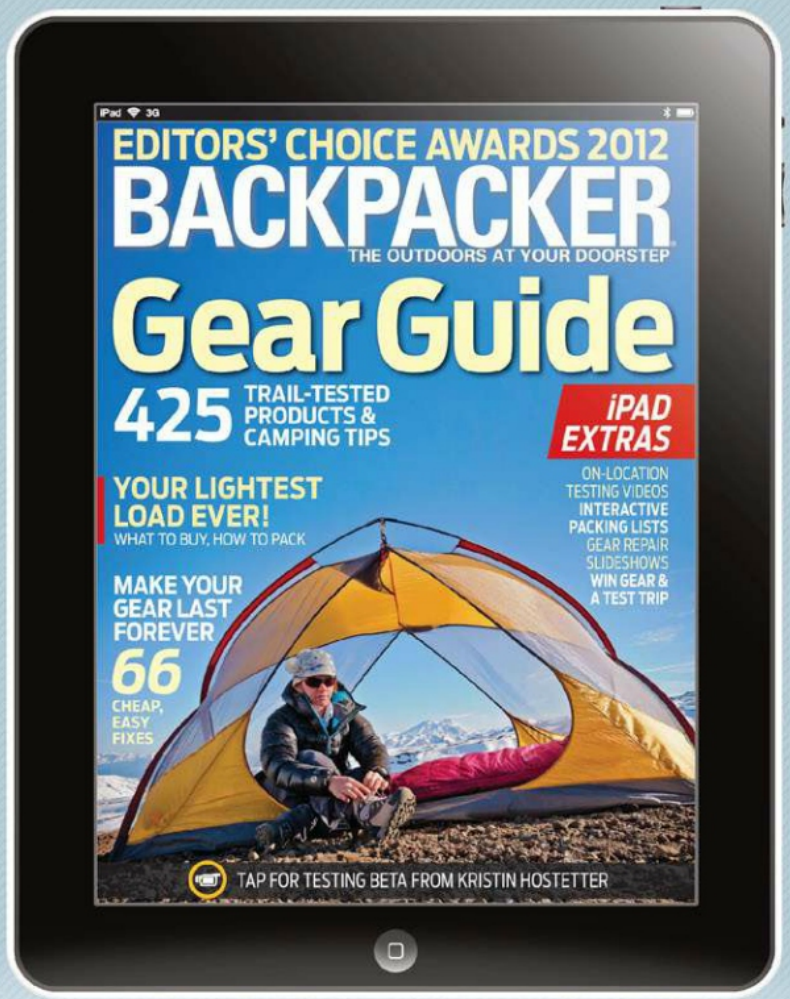

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Karl Meltzer traing on the Wasatch Crest © John Evans

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Trail Runners

[all-terrain traction]

La Sportiva Vertical K

Sporting strips of rubber on a rippled sole that looks like a tractor tire, the featherweight Vertical K amazed testers with four-wheel-drive handling on slick surfaces. "Whether on steep, rocky trails, scrambling on smooth sandstone slabs, or climbing up wet slot canyons, I felt completely sure-footed—there was zero slip," says a tester who wore the Vertical Ks on a two-day, 18-mile trip in Canyonlands National Park. The sticky tread has a unique, three-part design that gives it exceptional stability: Half-inch-wide ribs of rubber (the same stuff used on La Sportiva's climbing shoes) run horizontally across the outsole in high-contact areas for great friction on rock and scree, and form the base for a second layer of U-shaped lugs that provide lateral traction on wet surfaces like mud and snow. Between the ribs, the outsole is scooped out, completing a design that avoids collecting muck (there's less surface area to connect with the ground) and also saves weight. During trail runs in northern Arizona's San Francisco Peaks and speed hikes up Colorado's Salida Mountain, testers reported a barely-there feel thanks to the shoe's low weight and a one-piece, 100-percent Lycra upper that stretches over the foot like a sock. And even though the Vertical K is one of the lightest trail runners we tested, it proved tough and supportive in backcountry use. The thin upper endured abrasion against rocks without tears or snags (but offers little foot protection), and the spongy foam midsole was comfortable on 10-mile trail runs and dayhikes. Bonus: A plastic loop on the heel lets you clip them easily to a pack. "The light weight and slipperlike fit make it the perfect camp shoe," adds one tester. Fit runs on the small side; runners with high-volume feet will likely need to go up a half size. **$115; 13.2 oz. (m's 42); m's 36-47.5; sportiva.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON. TEXT BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY AND DAN LARSON

***SHANK** A rigid longitudinal component of a shoe's midsole that protects the foot and prevents it from overflexing (which can lead to foot fatique)

All weights are for men's size 9 (pair), according to the manufacturer. All boots run medium/average, unless otherwise noted.

[cushy featherweight]

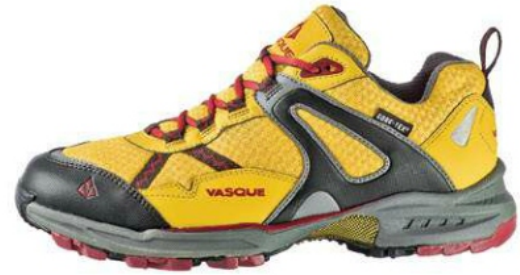
Montrail Rogue Fly

"The Rogue Fly is über light but no dainty slipper," says a tester who credits the shoe with helping him rank high in his age group in a rugged marathon on forest roads and trails around Oregon's Mt. Ashland. The midsole offers a surprising amount of cushioning and shock absorption for the shoe's low weight, thanks to a full-length wedge of dense, closed-cell foam (it's one inch thick under the heel for shock absorption and tapers down to a half inch under the forefoot for better sensitivity). The sole flares out slightly to provide lateral motion control on impact. "It's light enough that I didn't feel weighed down on the inclines, but it's also supportive enough that I could bomb down the steeps with confidence," he says. The Rogue Fly shaves off ounces with a thin and superbreathable nylon mesh upper and a thin rubber outsole that is scattered with confetti-size lugs. A lean plastic **shank*** beneath the foam adds a limited amount of rigidity under the ball of the foot and arch that helped prevent foot fatigue on long runs. The Rogue Fly is not built for rocky, rugged terrain (the tiny lugs could wear down quickly—after about 75 miles for one tester). But it's an excellent choice for groomed-trail and dirt-road runners who want to experience the benefits of a lightweight shoe without sacrificing cushioning or stability. **$105; 15.2 oz.; m's 7-15, w's 5-11; montrail.com**

[better-than-barefoot]

New Balance 110 Trail

For runners who have suffered bruising in other barefoot-style shoes, the 110 brings welcome relief. Unlike traditional running, which involves a heel-first strike, barefoot running demands a shorter stride and a more gentle mid- or forefoot strike to use the body's natural shock absorbers and compensate for less sole padding. The 110 closely mimics a barefoot shoe with a heel that's elevated just 4mm above the ball of the foot: "It let me stick to my mid-foot strike," says one tester. "But the hard plastic underfoot plate let me step on small rocks and not worry about poking my feet." The traction of the knobby lugs is solid on gravel, forest duff, and slickrock; less so in mud. The outsole is perforated under the forefoot to make the shoe lighter, but the plastic midsole plate blocks debris and moisture. A hard plastic heel cup offers lateral stability and the outsole wraps over the big toe for protection. The synthetic upper allows ventilation through tiny holes and remains in good condition after 75-plus miles of rough use. The soft polyester liner and integrated footbed actually lets you run sans socks for a more barefoot feel. "Ideal for warm-weather running," says one tester. Limitations: The minimalist design lacks support for running in rugged terrain. **$85; 15.5 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5-12; newbalance.com**



[doubles as a hiker]

Vasque Velocity 2.0

"These shoes can really multitask," says one tester who wore them both trail running and dayhiking in the foothills around Boulder, Colorado. He and others found the 2.0 not only supportive during 10-mile, rocky trail runs at Rabbit Mountain and the Sanitas Trail near Boulder, but also when hiking trails in northern Arizona's San Francisco Peaks with 15-pound loads. Credit the combo of cushion *and* rough-trail protection. The compression-molded **EVA*** foam midsole is one inch thick under the heel and tapers down to a half inch under the toes to absorb impact during foot strike. A rigid TPU plastic plate under the arch offers good support and guards against bruising on rugged terrain. The outsole has deep, multi-directional lugs that provided "tons of stability" and traction on gravel and wet, slippery rock. However, one tester who slogged through deep mud on Rabbit Mountain complained that the big lugs collected muck. A stiff rubber bumper protects the toe and extends around the sides and back of the shoe to shield against sharp rocks. Testers also appreciated the breathable mesh upper, which dried so quickly on a rainy run around Portland's Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge that one tester mistakenly thought the 2.0 had a waterproof liner. (The pictured Gore-Tex version is $150.) **$120; 1 lb. 11 oz.; m's 7-15, w's 5-11; vasque.com**

[best all-around]

Saucony ProGrid Outlaw

"Perfect for monster days on all but the roughest paths," proclaimed one tester after wearing the Outlaw on a 20-mile dawn-to-dusker on the Florida Trail carrying 15 pounds of water, snacks, mosquito repellent, and other essentials. "The shoes drained well and kept the swamp sludge out as I waded through knee-deep cypress bogs," he says. Nylon mesh uppers are breathable, yet the weave is dense enough to keep trail debris from working its way in, and a gusseted tongue and extended, elastic Achilles cuff help tighten the seal. (Caveat: The flap makes the shoes a bit more difficult to put on quickly.) The midcut cuff also lends extra ankle support. Hard plastic caps over the toes and the heel provide protection against rocks. Despite those tough features, several testers dubbed the Outlaw their favorite shoe for long trail runs because it has an almost barefoot feel. The heel is positioned 4mm higher than the forefoot (traditional running shoes are elevated 10mm—or .4 inch—or more), but a hard plastic plate in the mid-foot and dual-density EVA provide more support and cushioning underfoot than true "barefoot" shoes. "The lower-riding heel improved my stride," says one tester. "Compared to the blocky soles of traditional trail runners, I felt light-footed and efficient." Check fit: They run small, so you may want to go up a half size. **$110; 1 lb. 7 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5-12; saucony.com**

***EVA** An airy foam rubber with great cushion; it eventually compresses—retire EVA shoes every 300-500 miles—and is best paired with a denser material like PU (see p. 57) for durability

Light Duty

[most versatile]

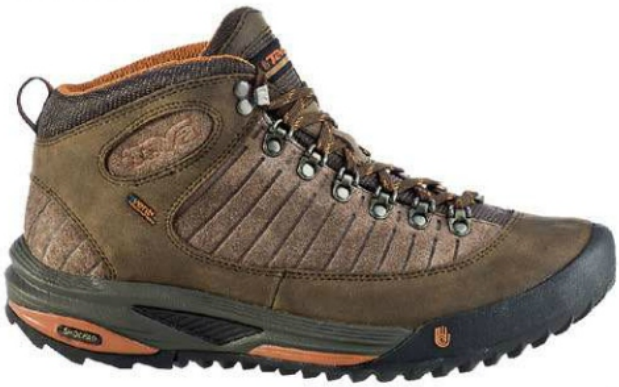
Salewa Firetail

"These low-cuts handled a huge mixed bag of conditions during a two-week climbing trip in the Cascades," says one tester. "The trip involved numerous off-trail approaches on rocky, steep terrain, including wet rocks, mud, roots, boulders, and slick logs. Through it all, they excelled in comfort, traction, support, durability, and breathability." A Vibram outsole dotted with suction cup-like nubs offered plenty of friction when she scrambled up rock slabs, but also gripped slick rocks during sketchy river crossings: "I was hopping across wet boulders as surefooted as a goat," says our tester. And unlike some other sticky soles, this tread showed no wear after months of use (Salewa mixes a durable rubber compound in with the sticky stuff). The generous rubber rand and a stiff, tapered toebox allowed testers to feel secure when bouldering class 2 and 3 slickrock cliff faces in central Arizona. The midsole, comprised of EVA foam for cushion and a TPU shank for support, "is comparable to that of a midweight backpacking boot," notes another tester who comfortably hiked through Arizona's Wet Beaver Creek Wilderness while carrying a 35-pound pack. Testers also appreciated the ability to dial in fit with to-the-toe laces. A stiff heel cup attaches to an exoskeleton*: It snugs around the back of the heel and provides lateral stability across the instep. The nylon mesh upper in this non-waterproof version (also available in a Gore-Tex model, $149, pictured) was plenty breathable in 80°F temps in eastern Washington and held up to abrasion. **$109; 1 lb. 14 oz.; m's 7-13, w's 6-11; salewa.us**

[all-day comfort]

Teva Forge Pro Mid eVent Leather

Skip the camp shoes: Even after hiking in them all day, these all-leather waterproof midcuts still feel comfortable. The magic ingredient is Teva's Mush insole (the same material used in the company's famously comfy flip flops): a 7-mm-thick slice of spongy EVA that conforms to your foot as you wear it. The midsole is fortified for backcountry trekking with a stiff, arch-shaped nylon shank that runs from heel to ball and a high-rebound EVA pad under the heel and forefoot. "The cushion, shock absorption, and forefoot flex make for a quick, easy stride," says one tester who wore the Forge Pro on dayhikes in the rocky foothills outside Boise. A roomy fit, especially in the toebox, also enhances comfort. "On steep, rocky downhills, my toes didn't jam like they often do in boots," reports a tester who hiked the Forge Pro along Washington's rocky coastline and in Mt. St. Helens Wilderness. A padded cuff snugs around the ankle to protect against sprains and rolls, and the sticky rubber outsole holds firm on slimy rocks and logs. The leather upper (full-grain along the toes, sides, and ankle for durability, and split-grain across the instep/top for weight savings and breathability) shielded our testers' feet from sharp lava and rocky Pacific coastlines, and the eVent liner breathed exceptionally well: "My feet stayed dry and didn't feel clammy even when hiking in muggy 70°F temps with lots of rain," raves one tester. Fit favors high-volume feet. **$160; 1 lb. 15 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5-12; teva.com**



[burly protection]

The North Face Havoc Mid GTX XCR

The rule: Big-time fortification and support means you're stuck with a boxy, high-top boot. The exception: the Havoc Mid. The key: A stiff nylon shank extends from the ball of the foot to the back, where it curves up slightly to cup the heel. (The waterproof shoe comes in a low-cut version as well; we tested both and loved the support of the lighter model as well.) One tester wore the Havoc on a steep, rocky trail in the Grand Canyon and reports: "The heel cradle provided great lateral stability as I stepped down ledges. The Canyon can be killer on the feet, but mine felt fresh at the end of the day." Dense EVA pads sandwich the shank from above and below; they provided effective cushioning under the ball and shock absorption under the heel for testers carrying up to 40-pound loads. Large lugs and a sharply cut heel provide braking power and prevented slipping on mud. The upper has breathable mesh side panels and plenty of fortification: A rubber toe guard and full-grain leather around the heel and forefoot protected our Grand Canyon testers from rocks and cactus. Our Colorado tester appreciated the extra support and water protection of the midcut as he hiked through puddles and up scree slopes on peakbagging and fishing excursions in Rocky Mountain National Park. "My ankles never felt torqued, and the Gore-Tex never leaked or felt clammy," he says. **$160; 2 lbs. 2 oz. (low-cut $150; 1 lb. 14 oz.); m's 7-14, w's 5-11; thenorthface.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*EXOSKELETON Made of stiff, molded plastic, this supportive web wraps a shoe like a protective cage, lending stability and durability (and often aiding fit).

All weights are for men's size 9 (pair), according to the manufacturer. All boots run medium/average, unless otherwise noted.

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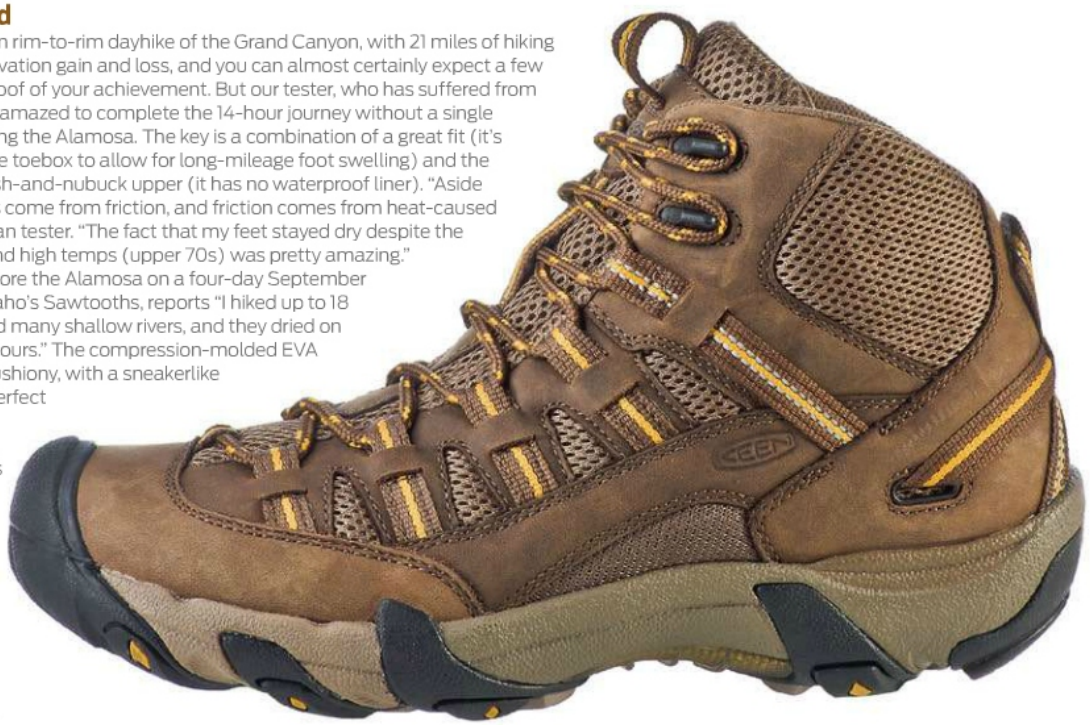
[hot-weather hiker]

Keen Alamosa Mid

Sign up for a marathon rim-to-rim dayhike of the Grand Canyon, with 21 miles of hiking and 12,000 feet of elevation gain and loss, and you can almost certainly expect a few monster blisters as proof of your achievement. But our tester, who has suffered from them in the past, was amazed to complete the 14-hour journey without a single hot spot—while wearing the Alamosa. The key is a combination of a great fit (it's especially roomy in the toebox to allow for long-mileage foot swelling) and the highly breathable mesh-and-nubuck upper (it has no waterproof liner). "Aside from pressure, blisters come from friction, and friction comes from heat-caused sweat," says our veteran tester. "The fact that my feet stayed dry despite the intensity of the hike and high temps (upper 70s) was pretty amazing." Another tester, who wore the Alamosa on a four-day September backpacking trip in Idaho's Sawtooths, reports "I hiked up to 18 miles a day and forded many shallow rivers, and they dried on my feet within a few hours." The compression-molded EVA midsole is light and cushiony, with a sneakerlike flex in the forefoot—perfect for fastpacking long miles with light loads. "But the midsole lacks the protection I need for backpacking off-trail or with more than 30 pounds on my back," says one tester. Best for mid-volume feet. **$120; 2 lbs. 3 oz.; m's 7-15, w's 5-11; keenfootwear.com**



[best for canyoneering]

Chaco Ponsul Bulloo

Cross Chaco's classic Z-sandal straps with a neoprene river bootie and you get the Ponsul Bulloo. It's ideal for river rats, but it's also more versatile than its funky look suggests. Testers found this closed-toe sandal/neoprene sock combo ideal for Southwest canyoneering treks that require wading, scrambling, and overland hiking. The rubber Vibram outsole with low-profile lugs gripped smooth slickrock with "Spiderman-like suction," according to one tester who wore the Bulloo as her only shoe on a trip in Glen Canyon. "I leapt from the bow of a moving boat onto a steep sandstone canyon wall and my feet didn't slip," she reports. "And I could transition from wet to dry rock without losing traction." The neoprene sock sealed out gravel and debris when a tester waded up slot-canyon pools in Utah's Davis Gulch, and the rubber toe bumper cushioned against rocks. A spongy, removable (to speed dry times) PU* footbed added spring to our tester's step. The Ponsul Balloo is heavier than the average sandal, but way more protective. The soft neoprene sock prevented chafing from the one-pull sandal straps; testers were amazed to finish daylong hikes with no blisters. **$120; 1 lb. 14 oz.; m's 7-15, w's 5-12; chacos.com**

[killer traction]

adidas Outdoor Terrex Fast R

What do you get when two adidas designers go for a mountain bike ride and fantasize about a shoe as sticky as their fat tires? Answer: the Terrex Fast R. After their ride, the designers adjourned to the lab and developed a hiking shoe outsole using the Continental rubber compound found on their knobbies. According to Continental, the proprietary Black Chile rubber has a 30-percent higher adhesion rate than regular tires. The unique material, combined with tirelike, L-shaped lugs, gives the Fast R exceptional traction on all surfaces including ice, slush, mud, and scree. Plenty of other hiking shoes have good traction (and some even have tread made from rubber-tire material), but the Fast R's grip on wet surfaces and steep trails exceeds any other shoe we tested. "It was like wearing instep crampons," says one tester who wore the Fast R up packed snow on Arizona's 12,637-foot Mt. Humphreys. "I was cruising up supersteep hills," reported another tester after a speed hike/run across mossy rocks in Washington's La Camas Park. "On descents, I picked up speed because I knew the grip was there." The Fast R is equipped with a thin plastic shock plate between the midsole and outsole that shifts backward up to one cm upon impact. It not only cushions during heel strike but brakes forward momentum on steep downhills. A wing-shaped plastic exoskeleton wraps the forefoot for lateral stability. **$155; 1 lb. 9 oz.; m's 6-14; adidas.com/outdoor**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*PU Polyurethane foam is denser than EVA foam; it provides a more durable layer of cushion and some underfoot protection.

All weights are for men's size 9 (pair), according to the manufacturer.

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Mid Duty

[maximum stability]

Five Ten Pursuit

The Pursuit is a boot with a mission: prevent ankle rolling. Developed specifically for tactical forces of the U.S. military—guys who jump out of airplanes and scramble along cliffs at night—this sturdy midcut hiker is just as effective for backpackers who prize security and traction on dicey terrain. Superior lateral stability comes from a dense-foam PU cage that slings around the back of the boot like the rear bumper on a car. It completely cups the heel, providing anchorlike landings upon heel strike. A padded collar extending just above the ankle stops rolls, and you get more stability from the lacing than usual: Made from superstrong, military-grade parachute cord, the Pursuit's laces cinch extra-snug around the ankle and instep. Five Ten's signature Stealth Phantom outsole is made from a high-friction rubber compound with flat, multi-directional lugs. "The sole is awesomely sticky for scrambling up boulders and slabs, and it works equally well on mud and gravel," reported one tester after a long day of hiking and climbing at Idaho's Castle Rocks State Park. The midsole is comprised of compression-molded EVA foam and a layer of stiff, puncture-proof Kevlar*; it has enough support and stability to handle 30-pound loads. The split-grain leather upper and rubber toe guard still look new after months of use. Drawback: The monochromatic, blend-in colors may suit soldiers, but most testers weren't fans (it also comes in black). Fit runs small; consider going up a half size. **$160; 2 lbs. 3 oz.; m's 7-14; fiveten.com**

backcountry slippers

Timberland Radler Trail Camp Moc

Tired of trying to find space in your pack for dusty camp shoes, not to mention the unwanted extra ounces? The Camp Moc is your palm-size solution. These fleece-lined sneakers—with a light nylon upper and plush, removable footbed—fold in half and zip shut. You can then attach the tidy package to the outside of your pack via a sturdy elastic loop on the heel. In camp, simply detach, unzip, and pamper your piggies. Laces tighten with a cinch cord for secure fit, and the lugged rubber tread provides traction and foot protection. "The Mocs gripped on rocks and crusty snow during 2 a.m. bathroom breaks. And they were warm enough that I opted to wear them in camp instead of my hiking boots," says one tester who used them on a mountaineering trek when nights dipped into the 20s. Ding: The zippers require futzing to operate in freezing conditions. **$65; 12 oz.; unisex 4-13; timberland.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*KEVLAR A very strong synthetic material used for, in this case, underfoot protection

All weights are for men's size 9 (pair), according to the manufacturer. All boots run medium/average, unless otherwise noted.

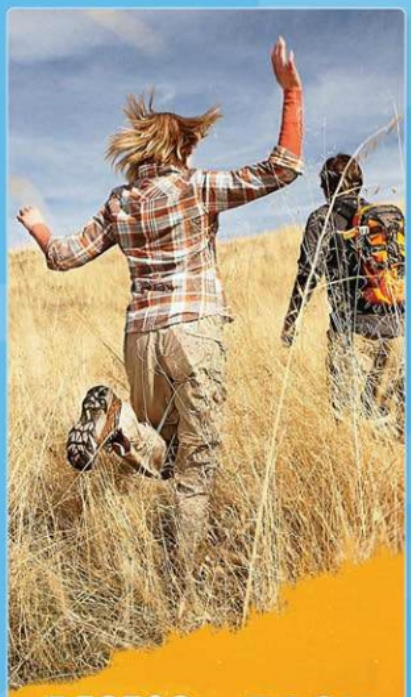
[cushy comfort]

Patagonia P26 High

Long days of pounding down trails with heavy loads can tenderize the soles of your feet and cause joint pain. The P26 High can help, thanks to exceptionally thick underfoot padding (1.5 inches under the heel, tapering down to half an inch at the toes) made from a high-rebound EVA. "It gives the sensation of walking on spring-loaded shocks," says one tester who logged 10-mile days with a 35-pound pack on Grand Canyon trails. "My feet felt fresher, and my knees didn't ache even after longer days with huge elevation change." A contoured plastic shank and a tall collar that laces up snugly gave her the ankle and arch support* she needed to negotiate the 5,000-foot descent from the rim to river in a day. And even with the heavily padded sole and an all-leather upper (note: no waterproof lining), the P26 is exceptionally light for this class of boot, which adds to its springy, airy feel. The tradeoff for the thick, spongy sole: The boot can feel unstable and imprecise when you're scrambling off-trail and sidehilling. **$200; 2 lbs. 6 oz.; m's 7-15; patagonia.com**

*ARCH SUPPORT Learn how to measure your arches and get the right support at backpacker.com/howtowalk.

KEEN



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[superior weatherproofing]

Ahnu Mendocino

Full-grain leather boots usually require a down payment of sizeable break-in time (or blisters) in exchange for the sturdy protection they provide. But the Mendocino's comfort was "instantaneous," reports one tester who wore them out of the box for a backpacking trip on Oregon's rocky Deschutes River Trail. The upper is not only supple but tough, protecting against scree and rocky terrain above treeline in the Chilean Andes during a climb of Volcano San Pedro. And the waterproof/breathable eVent liner performed better than average when our tester spent an afternoon postholing through wet snow; they breathed well despite all the surface moisture, and dried overnight despite subfreezing temps. A nylon mesh tongue provides extra venting: A tester in Arizona says her feet stayed dry while splashing through shallow creeks but did not get sweaty when she hiked in temps in the mid-70s. Both male and female testers liked the snug (but not cramped) fit and they praised the way the boot conformed to the top of the foot like a well-worn slipper. But this user-friendly hiker has its limits for backpacking support: While our tester in Chile reported no soreness after climbing more than 5,000 feet with a 45-pound load, another tester said the lack of a stiff shank makes these boots best suited to loads under 40 pounds. **$165; 2 lbs. 12 oz.; m's 7-13; ahnu.com**

[off-trail champ]

AKU SL Trek GTX

"These are legit backpacking boots that weigh about the same as my river sandals," says one tester who wore the Treks on numerous rocky and snowy backpacking trips in Colorado. Another tester happily logged more than 200 miles in this Gore-Tex-lined boot on soggy, off-trail hikes in Washington's Alpine Lakes Wilderness and along the state's rocky coastline. The low-profile sole saves weight, and provides close-to-the-ground stability that let testers safely pick their way across tricky off-trail terrain. A rigid, full-length TPU shank proved supportive when testers carried 40-plus pounds, although one said it took him two weeks of continuous wear to finally break in the stiff-soled boot. A flexible plastic exoskeleton adds "excellent lateral stability," according to one weak-ankled tester who was grateful for the extra support as she hiked across slimy rocks. The fabric/nubuck upper and protective toe guard allowed one tester to bash through mixed terrain of snow and rocks without toe stubs. A gusseted, flat tongue, plus a high, snug-fitting collar seal out debris and snow. The Vibram sole has deep lugs around the perimeter that dig in to mud without getting clogged, while **multi-directional lugs*** under the ball provide a cleatlike grip when ascending slushy and scree-filled slopes. The smooth "climbing zone" tread on the inside edge of each boot gave testers secure purchase when they scrambled up cliffs. Ouch: the price. **$330; 2 lbs. 12 oz.; m's 7-13; aku.it/us**

best all-around

Salomon Synapse Mid

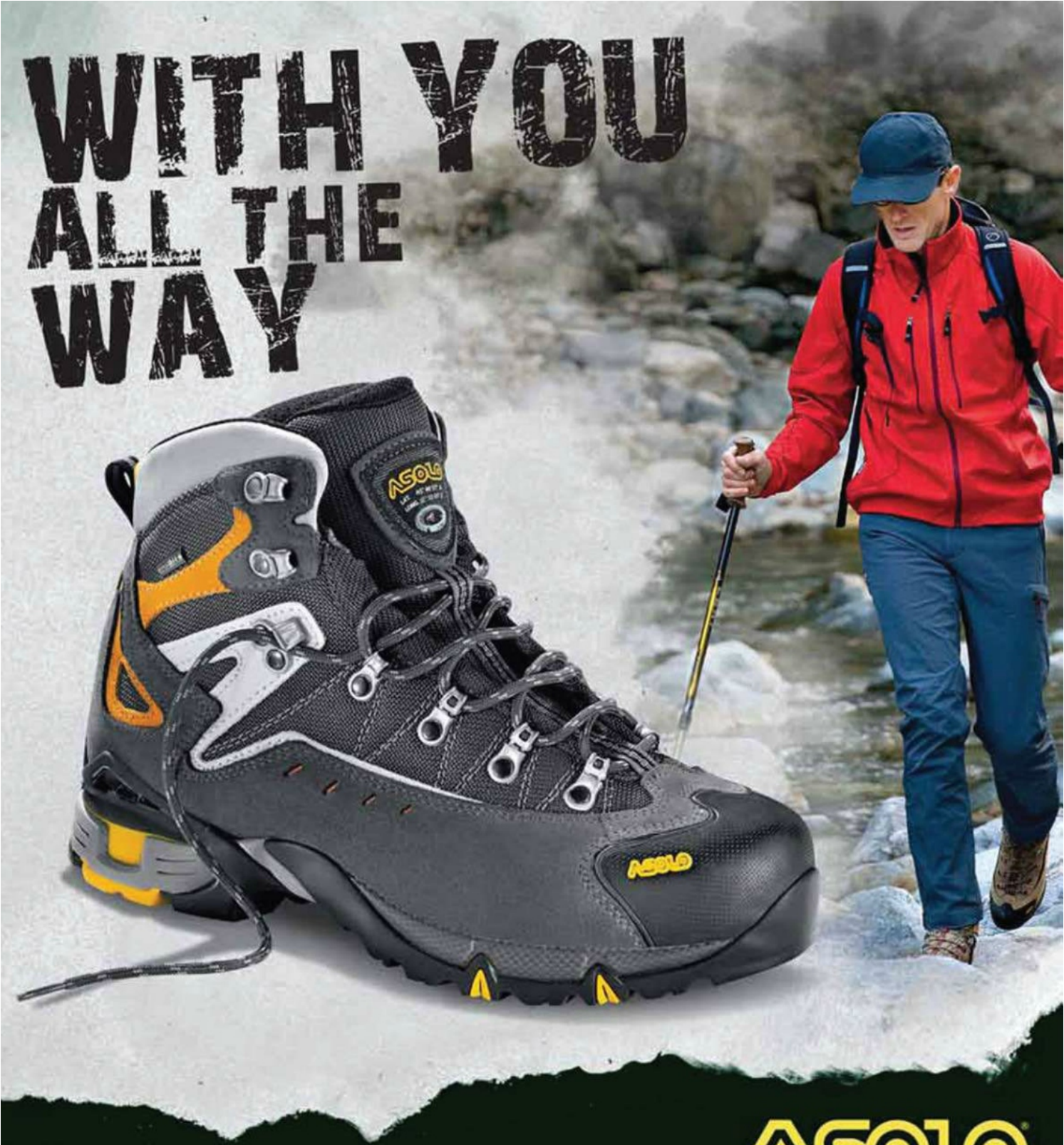
"The comfort of sneakers with the stability of hikers," says an editor who wore the Synapse on a Chilean trek. It handles multiday loads in mountain terrain (in Chile, our testers crossed rocky slopes and climbed a snowy volcano with mini-crampons attached), but is also light enough for fastpacking and dayhiking. Our 2012 Editors' Choice reviews start on page 25. *$140; 1 lb. 11 oz.; m's 7-13, w's 5-10; salomon.com*

"Get the holy grail of light-hiker performance: bootlike stability with training-shoe comfort."

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON; KIM PHILLIPS (SALOMON)

***MULTI-DIRECTIONAL LUGS** are angled in varying ways to provide universal, 360-degree traction on different surfaces and slopes.

All weights are for men's size 9 (pair), according to the manufacturer. All boots run medium/average, unless otherwise noted.



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GORE-TEX

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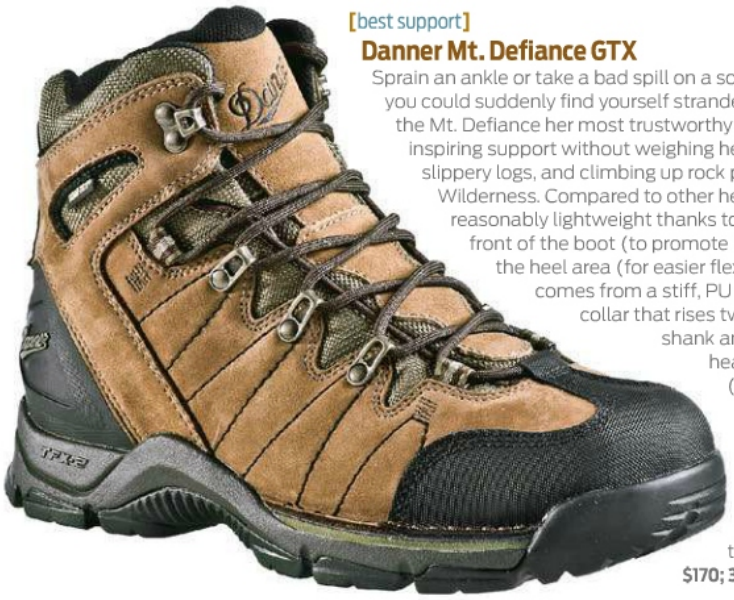
Heavy Duty



[best support]

Danner Mt. Defiance GTX

Sprain an ankle or take a bad spill on a solo backpacking trip, especially in a remote, off-trail area, and you could suddenly find yourself stranded in a life-threatening situation. That's why one tester deemed the Mt. Defiance her most trustworthy "solo hiking partner," as it provided plenty of confidence-inspiring support without weighing her down. "I felt very stable when crossing creeks, walking across slippery logs, and climbing up rock piles," she said after a solo trip in West Virginia's Dolly Sods Wilderness. Compared to other heavy-duty boots, the Mt. Defiance is exceptionally stable yet reasonably lightweight thanks to a unique hybrid sole design: It's stitched to the upper in the front of the boot (to promote lateral stability when walking on uneven ground) and glued in the heel area (for easier flexing and responsiveness when striding). Additional stability comes from a stiff, PU heel cup that steadies the foot during heel strike and a snug collar that rises two inches above the ankle to prevent rolling. With a full-length shank and stiff PU midsole, the Mt. Defiance offers rigid support for heavy loads and rocky terrain that's more boardlike than pillowlike (and the sole is relatively compact; an inch thick under the forefoot and up to 1.5 inches under the heel). Serious protection also comes from a hard plastic toecap that one tester likened to a steel-toed work boot. The nubuck upper and Cordura tongue, along with a Gore-Tex liner, endured rocky balds, a foot of snow, and swampy bogs with barely a scratch. Long-life design: The forefoot's welted (sewn) construction means there's no chance of sole delamination in that vulnerable spot.

$170; 3 lbs. 5 oz. (m's 10); m's 7-15, w's 5-11; danner.com

[most breathable]

LOWA Khumbu II GTX

Heavy-duty boots, with their myriad layers of protection and support, have a common flaw: They tend to be hot. Not so with the Khumbu, thanks to a unique combination of fabrics in the upper: a thin, breathable Cordura nylon overlaid with a plastic polyurethane mesh (holes are the size of a pencil tip). Compared to other waterproof boots with thicker and more densely woven fabric uppers, the Khumbu allows heat to escape more easily through its Gore-Tex liner, yet it doesn't sacrifice big-boot protection. "Through slushy snowfields and over scree-filled passes, my feet never got clammy," said one tester after a summer trip along Colorado's Highline Trail. The toebox and sides are fortified with split-grain leather over the fabric upper, while V-shaped side cutouts promote venting. Testers reported the fabric upper also made the boots feel light on the feet and increased stride comfort. "I liked the balance of flexibility and protection," says one tester. "They're stiff enough to sidehill up mountain slopes, but the slight rocker* allows a natural gait on groomed trails." The Vibram outsole has blade-shaped lugs on the heel that gripped "like a tractor through loose shale and on narrow, exposed, rocky paths," says another tester who wore them in Colorado's Pikes Peak Wilderness. Gripe: Two testers complained that the stiff tongue tends to shift around and is too narrow to provide adequate cushioning for the lower shin. Fit favors high-volume feet. **$250; 3 lbs. 15 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5–10.5; lowaboots.com**

[best off-trail]

Crispi Nevada Legend HTG GTX

"Burly, bushwhack-worthy boots are easy to find," says our editor-in-chief, who logged more miles off-trail than on in 2011. "But expedition-worthy crapkickers that feel comfortable after 10 miles in brutal terrain aren't." Which is why he gave these all-leather, Gore-Tex-lined extra-high-cuts a superior grade. "They're heavy compared to traditional backpacking midweights," he says, "and my quads definitely felt more fatigued. But I'll accept that for the absolute confidence I developed in their support and stability during cross-country explorations of Colorado's Gore Range." Carrying 40 to 60 pounds, he followed game trails up steep slopes, sidehilled for miles on loose duff, stomped through deep snow and beaver meadows landmined with hidden sinkholes, and climbed talus fields and knife-edge ridges in pursuit of bighorn sheep photos. Through it all, the high cuffs and deep heel cups kept his bad ankles perfectly stable—without cramping his stride. Best of all, his feet felt fresh at day's end. Credit the stiff sole package and lush, partial-leather lining. Other pros: The smooth leather lining reduces friction and pressure points; our testers didn't experience any blisters. Cons: The leather lining is slow to dry once soaked, and breathability overall is below average. **$399; 3 lbs. 10 oz.; m's 6-13, w's 6-10; crispiusa.com**

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PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*ROCKER Heel to toe curvature of the sole that encourages easy striding and a natural gait

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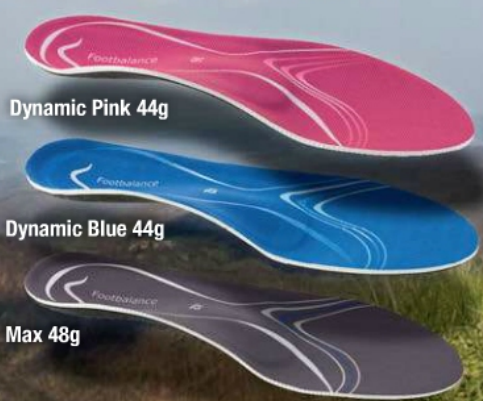

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Shoes

[all-purpose favorite]

Mammut Teton GTX

If you want one affordable boot for all seasons and conditions, check out the Teton. A tester who wore it for a full year's worth of trips, including a trek up snowy Mt. Shasta and a summer hike along the PCT, reports that the Gore-Tex-lined boot kept his feet comfortable and protected through it all. "My feet stayed dry and warm when hiking through deep snow on Mt. Shasta," he says. "But they didn't get sweaty during rainy summer days in the 70s, either." The upper is made of suede and Cordura that keep the Teton flexible and relatively light, but proved plenty tough when exploring off-trail in the Grand Canyon. A Vibram outsole has deep, sharp-edged lugs that were exceptionally grippy on packed snow, scree, wet rock, and mud. Fit was universally excellent: Testers with both low- and high-volume feet liked the snug-but-not-cramped shape of the Teton. The toe/forefoot area is tapered, not boxy like some burly boots, so it doesn't feel clumsy when maneuvering off-trail. **$159; 3 lbs. 4 oz.; m's 7.5-14, w's 5-10.5; mammut.ch**

[easy striding]

Asolo Khumbu GV

Testers usually prefer all-terrain mountain boots like these only for big-load, multiday trips. But the Khumbus are so comfortable that testers also chose them for dayhikes. Says one: "Unlike with some burly hikers, making the morning transition from camp shoes to these boots was easy." Credit a design that promotes comfortable walking without compromising protection. Our tester reports that ticking off miles in Rocky Mountain National Park was a breeze thanks to the boot's slight rocker, low weight (for the category), and flex point at the ball. But it's still plenty rigid for off-trail travel. The boot's full-length PU shank and EVA shock pads under the heel and ball provided all-day comfort on rock slabs and boulder fields in Pikes Peak Wilderness. Deep lugs and a well-defined heel provide braking on dicey slopes. The 1.8-mm-thick suede upper protected against stones but molded to the foot. And they're dry, thanks to a Gore-Tex liner, full rubber rand* (which seals upper to sole and prevents abrasion), and a snug collar that kept out rain, slush, and snow on weeklong Rockies peakbagging trips. **$285; 3 lbs. 4 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 6-11; asolo.com/**

[big-trip boot]

Scarpa Kinesis/Mythos Pro GTX

The invasive Russian olive trees that overrun many Southwest riparian areas are notorious for shredding human skin and hiking boots with their four-inch-long, nail-like thorns. But the Kinesis (Mythos is the women's version) was unfazed by the ruthless plant, reports one tester who wore it on an eight-day removal project along Utah's Escalante River canyon. "My colleagues were getting stabbed left and right, but I just bashed over and through the thorny bastards," he says. Credit the 2.8-millimeter-thick, one-piece, full-grain leather upper, tall collar (three inches above the ankle bone), stiff toecap, and an inch-wide rubber rand that encircles the boot. The equally hardcore sole is comprised of a rigid, full-length shank and a dual-density PU midsole that protects feet from rough terrain, and has the support and shock absorption to handle big-trip loads. "I carried a 55-pound pack, plus an awkward 20-pound chainsaw, down rocky, off-trail canyon slopes," says our Escalante tester. "More than once, these boots saved me from twisting an ankle." The Gore-Tex-lined Kinesis was also stellar when worn with instep crampons on winter hikes in three feet of snow in Arizona's San Francisco Peaks. Given the beefy exterior, it's surprisingly gentle inside, thanks to a memory foam pocket that conforms around the heel and Achilles, and a soft, padded collar and tongue that cushion as the legs flex. "I usually get heel blisters with boots this stiff, but the padded interior hugged the back of my foot and prevented chafing," reports another tester. **$299; 3 lbs. 12 oz.; m's 40-48, w's 37-42; scarpa.com**

Testers: Ted Alvarez, Kelly Bastone, Matthew Bates, Jason Boyle, Billy Brown, Andrew Bydlon, Anthony Cerretani, Tom Coffin, Dan Corbett, Shannon Davis, Adam Dickerson, Clyde Dixon, Jonathan Dorn, Julie Ellison, Ben Fullerton, Genny Fullerton, Donovan Grabowski, John Harlin, David Hart, Katie Herrell, Kristy Holland, Kristin Hostetter, Jennifer Howe, Steve Howe, Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan, Mike Lanza, Dan Larson, David Levine, Dennis Lewon, Scott Lind, Angel Mahon, Andrew Matranga, Jackie McCaffrey, Riley McCammon, Annette McGivney, Lauren McLean, Madeleine McLean, Meg Mullen, Dan Nelson, Joel Nyquist, Kim Phillips, Rohan Roy, Steve Roy, Seth Ruggles, Crystal Sagan, Sam Schilling, Colin Schour, Ed Shanley, Dan Silvernail, Colby Smith, Garrett Stevens, Caitlin Stewart, Lesley Suppes, Stephen Wade, Lindsay Westley, Allison Woods, Rachel Zurer, Arianne Zwartjes

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON (2); COURTESY (ASOLO)

*RAND A protective band—often rubber or synthetic leather—that wraps around the boot's lower perimeter and increases abrasion resistance

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MORE TESTER PICKS

TRAIL RUNNING

» Columbia Peakfreak Low OutDry
"The support is superb," said one tester after wearing these during a hard day of trail work at Colorado's Heil Ranch. At day's end, she felt fresh enough to run fast down an ankle-bender trail full of rocks and roots; a mid-foot shank and toe guard protected her feet from bruising and twisting. **$145; 1 lb. 10 oz.; columbiasportswear.com**

» Hi-Tec V-Lite Infinity Hpi
"One of the most comfortable trail running shoes I've ever worn," says one tester. "My feet felt grounded and stable with the deep and secure heel pocket, arch support, and bands on the side of the foot that snug the fit when you tie the laces." Stability and all-day, cushiony comfort make it a good fit for everything from trail running and hiking to adventure racing. **$155; 1 lb. 5 oz.; hi-tec.com**

» Montrail Badwater
Named for the brutal 135-mile race from Death Valley to Mt. Whitney, the Badwater is a comfortable and highly breathable hybrid road and trail runner for training and adventures of any speed and distance. Over nearly 100 miles of Oregon asphalt and singletrack, our tester reports that the resilient EVA foam and deflecting lugs on the outsole provide the durability and cushioning needed for any hard surfaces, while multi-directional lugs grip trails' uneven roots and scree. **$120; 1 lb. 3 oz.; montrail.com**

LIGHT DUTY

» GoLite Scram Lite
Equally at home on city streets and challenging vertical terrain, these featherweight shoes were so comfortable they became an instant tester favorite for dayhiking and scrambling. The confetti like lugs, inspired by gecko traction, stuck well to smooth slickrock, while a rubber rand and toe guard protected against rocks when a tester scrambled canyon walls near Sedona, Arizona. A flat "barefoot" profile, slipper-like fit, and a soft, durable suede upper will make you want to wear it every day. **$120; 1 lb. 10 oz.; golite-footwear.com**

» Hi-Tec Sierra Lite I WP
These waterproof midcuts wrap a great deal of support and protection into a lightweight package. A leather and mesh upper with an Ion Mask treatment—a waterproof nano-coating—keep the weight low and protection high for wet adventures of any distance. "Ankles lace tight for exceptional support, and chunky lugs gripped wet rock and muddy trails around LaCamas Lake, Washington," says one tester. **$180; 2 lbs. 3 oz.; hi-tec.com**

» La Sportiva Xplorer Mid GTX
A breathable and versatile boot, the Xplorer Mid is lightweight and supportive enough for easy trail running, dayhiking, and light backpacking. "Airy mesh and a Gore-Tex Extended Comfort lining (it's more breathable than regular Gore-Tex) "kept my feet dry and sweat-free," said one tester after a 13-mile hike in the Boise foothills. **$180; 2 lbs.; sportiva.com**

» Merrell Chameleon 4 Ventilator Gore-Tex
This low-cut light hiker is durable and supportive for big loads and long miles of backpacking in rough terrain. The secret sauce is pig suede leather, which is tougher and stiffer than cowhide and less prone to abrasion and tearing. A full-length nylon shank and dense EVA in the sole provide a solid platform for heavy hauling in harsh terrain. Fits low- to medium-volume feet best. **$145; 2 lbs. 4 oz.; merrell.com**

MID DUTY

» Patagonia Drifter A/C Mid
At the weight of a light hiker with the support of a burlier boot, these midcuts excel at fast-and-light backpacking and scrambling, according to one tester who wore them climbing rocky Mt. Adams in Washington. Breezy mesh panels

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

keep the interior ventilated, while the ample, anatomical EVA midsole provide plenty of cushion and support for carrying up to 40 pounds. **$160; 2 lbs. 4 oz.; patagonia.com**

» Salewa Alp Trainer Mid GTX
There are few guarantees on the trail, but Salewa offers one: no blisters. The key to the Alp Trainer's success (Editors' Choice 2011) is a secure and adjustable fit, the result of a Y-shaped exoskeleton with a tiny steel cable for a snug heel that won't rub, plus a dual-layer insole to adjust overall boot volume. **$179; 2 lbs. 6 oz.; salewa.us**

» Scarpa Moraine Mid GTX
Looking to scale down from heavier boots without sacrificing support and protection? Get these: The surprisingly lightweight Moraine has a comfortable, roomy toebox and snug heel cup that kept an Idaho tester's feet happy as he bashed them into rocks while trail running and scrambling in the Boise foothills. **$145; 1 lb. 14 oz.; scarpa.com**

» TrekSta Evolution Mid GTX
The fit and comfort of this ultralight waterproof hiker earned it a 2011 Editors' Choice Award. Ideal for fastpacking and heavy-load backpacking (up to 50 pounds), the midcut Evolution earned praise for solid ankle stability, low weight, and a supportive but flexible midsole—and an affordable price. **$140; 1 lb. 15 oz.; trekstausa.com**

» Vasque Talus UD
"Supercomfortable, with good grip on slickrock," one Colorado tester says of these classic-styled, waterproof, nubuck leather boots. With good ankle support and a PU midsole for underfoot protection, the Talus let another tester easily carry a 35-pound pack on a trail of rock and ice. **$150; 2 lbs. 9 oz.; vasque.com**

HEAVY DUTY

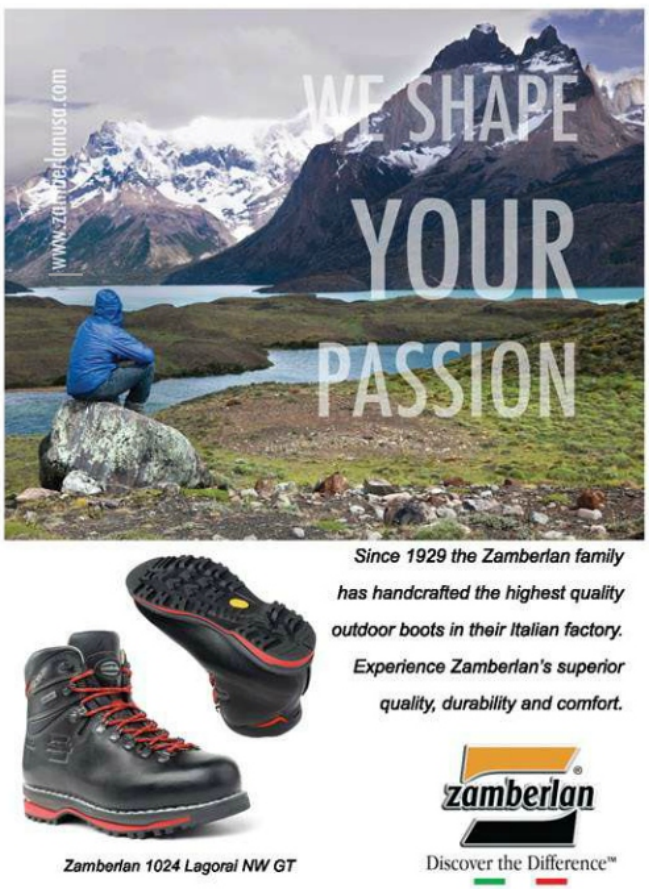
» La Sportiva Omega GTX
After hiking Lower Wolfjaw and Hurricane Mountains, one seasoned tester in the Adirondacks had high praise for the Gore-Tex-lined, full-grain leather Omega: "superstable, grippy, and stiff, yet incredibly lightweight." The Vibram soles held on wet, slippery, steep rock and roots, even light ice. Best for low-volume feet; order a half size larger for comfort. **$280; 2 lbs. 14 oz.; sportiva.com**

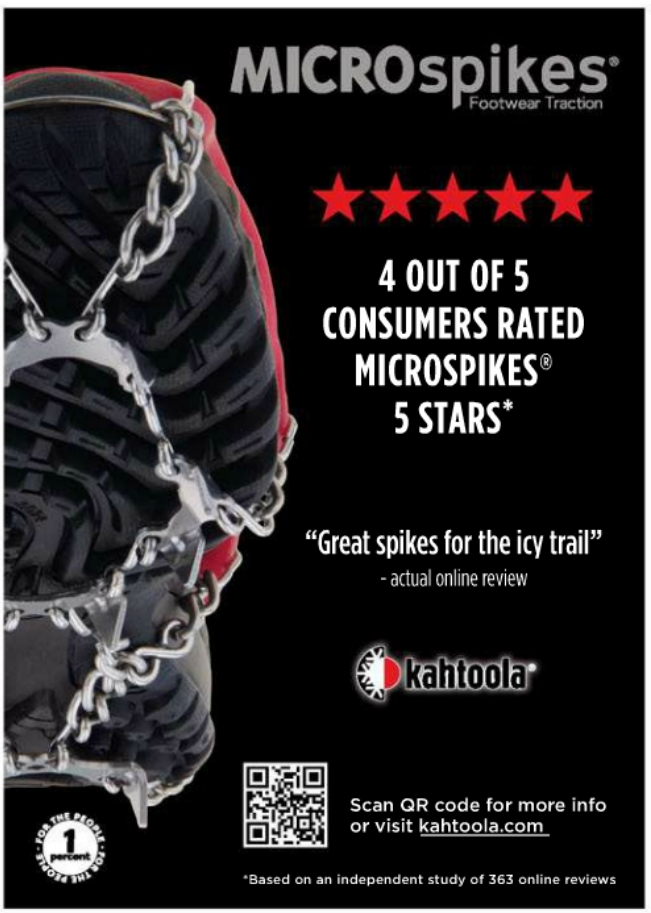
» L.L.Bean Katahdin Hiker Gore-Tex
A good value for a quality boot that can carry monster loads, these waterproof, all-leather hikers feel like others that cost twice as much. The six-inch-high ankle, Gore-Tex liner and well-padded, gusseted tongue provide solid weather protection. Fit favors high-volume feet. **$139; 3 lbs. 2 oz.; llbean.com**

» LOWA Ticam GTX
Deep Alaska snow, class 3 scrambling, and a whole lot of rain were no match for one diehard tester wearing the Ticams from the box to the trail—no break-in required. "They worked flawlessly climbing Odyssey Mountain, where I plowed through the snow to the summit with completely dry feet and full protection from exposed rocks." **$350; 4 lbs. 3 oz.; lowaboots.com**

» Oboz Beartooth BDry
These built-up, high-cut boots are good for hikers who carry heavy loads and like heel-hugging stability on and off-trail. One tester wore these climbing steep terrain on Chile's San Pedro Volcano over loose dirt, scree, rock, and snow, with and without crampons, and experienced great support and stability the entire way. Best for wide, high-volume feet. **$200; 3 lbs. 13 oz.; obozfootwear.com**

» Scarpa Zanskar GTX/Hunza GTX
For serious backcountry roamers who have a thing for tall, beautiful Italian boots, these high and stiff, but comfortable, nubuck Scarpas fit the bill. "I stayed dry and happy while snowshoeing in 30°F weather," says one Colorado tester who was nursing a sore foot. "And while bushwhacking in Colorado's Roosevelt National Forest, I found the traction and support excellent over rough ice, scree, and rock outcroppings." **$259; 3 lbs. 2 oz.; scarpa.com**





Tents

Find lightweight shelter for every budget and weather scenario.

Solo

[minimalist]

Mountain Laurel Designs Cricket

Your rain shell probably weighs more than this tent, which hits the sub-pound weight class without major compromise. It lacks poles, but unlike some trekking-pole tents, stability doesn't suffer. Thanks to catenary seams (they're curved, not straight, which creates a supertaut pitch), the three-season, double-wall shelter let our tester sleep through 30-mph winds with minimal flapping. Setup is easy, reports an AT thru-hiker who routinely pitched it in less than four minutes (mark your poles with the correct lengths to speed the process). There's one D-shaped side door and an eight-square-foot vestibule that adjusts in height. Shorten the support pole for more wind protection; lengthen it to increase ventilation. One 5'3" camper found the 18-square-foot interior adequate, but six-footers deemed it "cozy." Fabric options let you choose between ultralight (silnylon) and crazy light (**Cuben Fiber***). After 2,200 miles, the Cuben Fiber looked worn but worked fine. Tradeoffs? Hard rain occasionally bounced inside through the mesh despite the fabric panel designed to repel it, but it was rare and little moisture came through. **$295/1 lb. 3.5 oz. (silnylon); $500/13.3 oz. (Cuben Fiber, standard version, as tested); mountainlaureldesigns.com**

[best all-around]

REI Quarter Dome T1

Hikers who want conventional convenience—freestanding pitch, ample elbowroom, double-wall protection—in a solo-sized tent praised the redesigned Quarter Dome. Setup is quick and easy, thanks to the single hubbed pole and clips. This year's version uses asymmetrical pole geometry to position the 37-inch high point over the sleeper's head rather than in the middle, which makes the tent feel roomier when you're sitting up and creates more space for changing clothes. That, along with expanded dimensions (39 inches wide at the head and 85 inches long), makes this three-season dome 37 percent more spacious than its predecessor—while still weighing less than three pounds. (Ounce saver: The 20-square-foot floor tapers to 24 inches wide at the foot end, which trims space where it's least useful.) "I've always had to carry much heavier tents to get this kind of head and shoulder room," says our 6'3" tester, who found it a stable, protective refuge in 20-mph wind and rain in Colorado's canyon country. "The fabric panels along the bottom edge also prevented sand from getting blown inside," he reports. Large mesh panels on the tent body and a closeable rainfly vent facilitate ventilation: In most conditions, testers experienced little to no condensation. The vestibule over the single side door is just big enough for pack and boots. Downside: Exiting the vestibule's smallish door is a little cumbersome, and you can't avoid brushing against wet rainfly fabric after a rain. **$219; 2 lbs. 14 oz.; rei.com**

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) ANDREW BYDLON; COURTESY (3); MICHAEL CLARK. TEXT BY KELLY BASTONE

***CUBEN FIBER** Superlight and superstrong (and superexpensive) fabric made by sandwiching reinforcing fibers (typically Dyneema) between two layers of polyester film

[breathable single-wall]

The North Face Asylum Bivy

It's a bivy in name and weight only. The single-wall Asylum pairs unusually generous dimensions with best-in-class ventilation. "Other bivies often become steam chambers," says our tester, who logs three out of every seven days outdoors, "but the Asylum trapped only scant moisture at 20°F." Credit the DryWall polyester fabric, which doesn't need an extra chemical coating to make it fire-retardant. Less coating makes DryWall lighter and more breathable than most tent fabrics; two mesh vents further improve ventilation. The six-stake pitch is fast and drum-taut—it easily shed storms in Arkansas's Hurricane Creek Wilderness—and the arched pole over the head creates good headroom with a 25-inch peak height. "I could stash extra clothes, a headlamp, and a water bottle at my head. It's roomy," reports our 6'2" tester. Tradeoffs: No vestibule, and in rain testers had to close the door vent to seal out windblown drops, making ventilation merely adequate in soggy weather. **$229; 1 lb. 10 oz.; thenorthface.com**

Two-Person

[best all-around]

Exped Mira II

Comfortable living space, sturdy weather protection, low weight: We've seen other shelters hit this trifecta in recent years, but few do it as well as the Mira, which comes in under four pounds without sacrificing durability—or going over $400. The trick? By reducing support at the foot end—with no loss in stability as long as the reinforced end is angled into the wind—Exped designers eliminated 3.5 ounces of pole. That lets Exped use tough fabrics like 70-**denier*** nylon for the floor and 30-denier for the fly, which are heavier than average for this weight class. And space is adequate: A 30-square-foot floor and 43-inch peak height let our six-footers pack up simultaneously without swatting each other. Seven-square-foot vestibules shelter packs and boots, while a dry-entry design prevents water from rolling off the fly and dripping inside through the door during stormy comings and goings. The Mira kept our Washington testers cozy through an epic, only-in-the-Olympics deluge. And while the pole sleeves are a hair slower to set up than clips, the payoff is a taut and strong pitch. Testers called the Mira "heavy-storm protection in a lightweight package." **$379; 3 lbs. 14 oz.; exped.com**

killer deal

➜ SAVE WEIGHT *AND* MONEY!

L.L.Bean Microlight FS 2

This two-person tent resides in a rarefied class: less than four pounds and less than $200, but with two doors, legit floor space, freestanding convenience, and three-season weatherproofing. Setup is quick, and two vestibules deliver exceptional storage space for the weight. For more reasons why this bargain shelter won an Editors' Choice Award, see the full reviews—along with all of this year's winners—starting on page 25. *$199; 3 lbs. 15 oz.; llbean.com*

EDITORS' CHOICE 2012 BACKPACKER

The rainfly and tent body pitch without a ripple, so it doesn't sag or flap noisily during gusts and heavy rain.

***DENIER** A unit of measurement for the thickness (and therefore durability) of individual threads used in making cloth. Higher numbers denote heavier, more durable fabrics.

All weights include tent body, fly, and poles, and are provided by the manufacturer.

Tents

[two-door featherweight]

NEMO Obi Elite 2P

Like the idea of a two-pound tent for two, but want two doors as well? Instead of cutting such conveniences, NEMO designers exploited weight-saving fabrics: The three-season shelter uses wispy 10-denier nylon for the fly and 20-denier for the floor, but their high tensile strength makes these fabrics as tough as some heavier materials—testers had no durability concerns after months of use. Setup is simple, using one Y-shaped, hubbed pole. The fly features deep cutouts that shave weight and improve ventilation. Meanwhile, the bathtub floor reaches higher than most to block windblown rain and sand. "No condensation accumulated, even on humid nights," reports our Washington tester, who used it in North Cascades National Park and the Pasayten Wilderness. Strong gusts never rocked the Obi, though rain does drip inside when the vestibule is fully unzipped for stormy exits. With no **brow pole***, two 5'9", 190-pound testers found the 28-square-foot interior cramped. But this tent is for those who care more about weight. **$480; 2 lbs. 3 oz.; nemoequipment.com**

[basecamper]

Marmot Firefly 2P

For boat- and car-camping and short-mileage overnight hikes, our crew loved the comfort of this double-wall dome. "So much headroom, it's like sleeping in an R.V.," says one tester who enjoyed five unconfined nights in the Firefly while paddling Utah's Green River. Instead of just one brow pole to steepen tent walls, the Firefly uses two (one on either side of its two doors) to create a larger, squared-off space around its lofty, 43-inch peak height. All pole segments are hubbed together in a symmetrical configuration, so setup is a no-brainer: Just lay the assembly from end to end and clip it into place. The 92-inch length lets tall campers (up to 6'5") stretch out, and 26 square feet of storage (vestibules measure 17 and nine square feet) provide ample real estate for packs, stoves—even a St. Bernard-size third sleeper. Ventilation is excellent, thanks to two closeable fly vents and strips of mesh along the bottom perimeter and near the ceiling. The squared-off ceiling sheds rainwater when guyed taut, and there's minimal flapping in moderate winds. The Firefly is heavier than many tents of this capacity, but it's bigger and also priced relatively low, thanks to cost-saving ingredients like polyester fabric and DAC Pressfit poles (which are weightier than Featherlite). While the polyester ripstop is not as abrasion-resistant as nylon, it resists UV degradation better and sags less when wet. Bonus: A gear loft and footprint are included. **$289; 5 lbs. 9 oz.; marmot.com**

[four-season featherweight]

Easton Mountain Products Hat-Trick 2

Many lightweight winter shelters save ounces by trimming space, making occupants feel like sardines, but the cavernous Hat-Trick offers genuine comfort for two. Even our 6'6" editor-in-chief found its 40 square feet roomy enough for some morning yoga. Credit: 1) the lightweight carbon poles, which Easton says are 59 percent lighter than standard aluminum, and 2) an innovative geometry (using an angled hoop design) that requires less pole material overall but still delivers impressive stability and headroom. And the weight-saving poles let Easton use sleeves as well as clips, which adds a little weight but makes tension more even in key places. It can be pitched with the fly attached to the tent body, so the interior remains dry during stormy setups. Ventilation is outstanding, thanks to mostly mesh walls; testers didn't experience condensation on snowy, 25°F nights. And the Hat-Trick stayed as stable as a rock through 25-mph sustained winds in Colorado's Park Range. There's just one door, but its eight-square-foot vestibule proved large enough for cooking when cleared of most gear. Caveat: While the Hat-Trick is billed as a winter-worthy shelter, we deem it best for moderate fourth-season conditions; those mesh walls limit insulation in frigid temps, and snow blew in beneath the vestibule unless its edges were buried. **$525; 4 lbs.; eastonmountainproducts.com**

[most versatile]

Mountain Equipment Co-Op Volt 2

"It's a two-fer deal," says one tester of the double-wall Volt 2, which kept her comfortable in both summer and winter conditions. Huge floor-to-ceiling mesh doors and fly vents on the two vestibules facilitate cross-breezes and virtually eliminate condensation. Through rainy nights in the Cascades, our tester saw zero moisture inside—even when she camped in a drippy meadow. And by zipping the doors' fabric panels closed, testers converted this freestanding dome into a warm refuge on subfreezing fall nights. Bonus: The fly extends closer to the ground and provides more protection than is typical with many three-season tents. A short brow pole above the doors straightens walls and creates excellent headroom. "And since the door extends right up to the ceiling seam, I don't have to fold myself in half to get inside this tent," says one tester. Living space is adequate for six-footers (but not taller). And the nine-square-foot vestibules accommodate packs and boots with room to spare for exits. Transparent window panels on the fly brighten the interior on rainy days. Downside: It's a tad heavy for the floor space. But for comfort in a range of conditions, the Volt is hard to beat. **$309 CAN; 4 lbs. 6 oz.; mec.ca**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

*BROW POLE A short segment at the tent's apex, often running perpendicular to the main poles, that pulls the walls out, increasing stability and interior elbowroom

All weights include tent body, fly, and poles, and are provided by the manufacturer.

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Tents

[foul-weather featherweight]

Mountain Hardwear SuperMega UL2

Our tester felt like a true guinea pig taking this two-pound shelter to Canada. But after a month-long epic through northern Ontario, he says this three-season double-wall easily handles big weather. "The **bathtub floor*** was waterproof enough to 'waterbed' during several Canadian deluges, and the well-designed overlap between floor sidewalls and rainfly kept out the howliest 30-mph winds," he reports. One hubbed pole with forks at both ends creates a freestanding structure with a single door, and the overhanging, dry-entry design prevents rain from dripping into the tent when the vestibule is unzipped. With a 27-square-foot interior and six-square-foot vestibule, space is lavish for one and workable for two not-tall occupants. "Getting dressed or packing up at the same time requires some choreography," says one tester. Ventilation proved outstanding: The all-mesh canopy releases interior moisture, and the fly's taut pitch shunts condensation to the perimeter, rather than letting it collect and drip onto the mesh canopy. The ultralight fabrics—gauzy, 10-denier nylon fly and 30-denier floor—proved more durable than they look, and held up well with careful use. Downsides: In windy conditions, the fly rubs noisily on the poles and sent testers groping for earplugs. And the thin nylon fly-tensioners are flimsier than conventional webbing-grommet fittings (carry spares for extended trips). **$430; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; mountainhardwear.com**

[alpine weight saver]

Sierra Designs Mojo 2

Problem: Single-wall tents shave ounces, but usually collect condensation. Solution: The Mojo's effective single/double-wall hybrid construction, which combines mesh walls at the tent's head end (protected by a partial fly) and single-wall technology at the foot. The result looks like something Batman would deploy, and it foiled moisture buildup in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. In challenging 8°F temperatures, frost accumulated only on the foot of our tester's bag. The freestanding Mojo pitches lightning-fast, thanks to one hubbed pole that clips to the tent's exterior. The stout geometry and taut pitch make it a bombshelter in strong winds; 35-mph assaults along the Colorado Trail didn't budge it. And although there's just one door, its large dimensions (opening to a 38-inch peak height) make for easy coming and going. A pair of 6'1" testers deemed its 27 square feet and 84-inch length adequate for fast-and-light types; that means sleeping space is tight, and their feet brushed the tent walls. Weight-saving fabrics proved plenty durable over a 20-day thru-hike. Caveat: Storage space isn't the Mojo's strong suit—the seven-square-foot vestibule is too small for more than one pack. **$400; 2 lbs. 11 oz.; sierradesigns.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

***BATHTUB FLOOR** Waterproof fabric band around the base of the canopy; keeps out bouncing rain

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Three-Person

[foul-weather champ]

Exped Gemini III

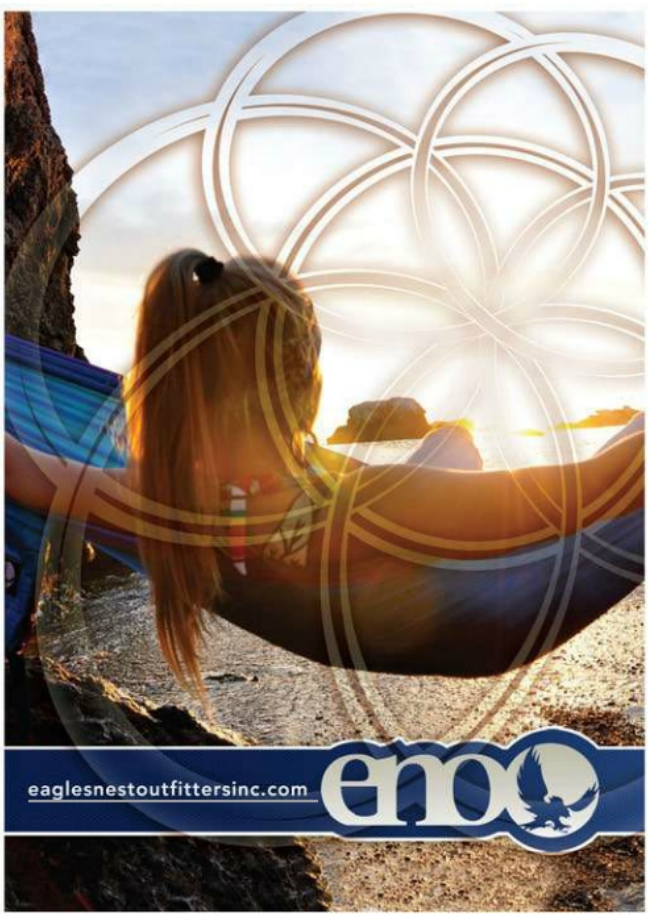
"It's one of the sturdiest freestanding tents I've ever used," raves our veteran tester, reporting that the three-season Gemini withstood near-40-mph gusts in Washington's Alpine Lakes Wilderness and barely shuddered—even without full guyouts. That's because its four equal-length poles cross at both ends and plug into connectors above the doors to create a winter-strength geometry, as well as a drip line that keeps water from rolling inside the open door. Two 11-square-foot vestibules provide ample cooking and storage space, making the Gemini a convenient foul-weather refuge. Two huge, teardrop-shaped doors unzip almost completely to make access easier-than-average. Ventilation is excellent, thanks to broad swaths of mesh and two fly vents. And durable fabrics withstood careless treatment from a 68-pound yellow Lab. The 86-inch length let two six-footers sleep comfortably with the dog at their feet, and the wall-spreading pole structure (together with a soaring, 45-inch ceiling) creates excellent headroom. But it's tight for three (the 63-inch width barely accommodates three pads), and setup requires muscling the poles into connectors above the doors. **$499; 5 lbs. 9 oz.; exped.com**

[stable featherweight]

Easton Mountain Products Kilo 3

We don't know why this three-pound tent is called the Kilo. No matter. Here's the math that counts: one pound per person for a three-person shelter. And unlike some ultralights, which employ futzy trekking-pole setups or wispy fabrics, this three-season dome achieves its low weight by using innovative carbon-fiber poles with connectors that use short monofilament tethers rather than one long piece of elastic cord. Ergo, best-in-weight-class stability. Pitching the Kilo takes two minutes, and even without guying, it withstood 30-mph gusts in the Sierra. Headroom is adequate, with a 40-inch peak height that lets campers play cards without crouching, but the 43-square-foot floor was a snug fit for three thru-hikers on the John Muir Trail. Downsides: The 4.5-square-foot vestibule shelters little more than three pairs of boots. Condensation dampened testers' bags with just two campers inside, and in rainy conditions, the fly sagged onto the mesh, further compromising airflow. (Update: Easton says Velcro attachment loops have been added to the inside of the fly to improve stability and reduce sag. We didn't test the new version.) **$499; 3 lbs.; eastonmountainproducts.com**

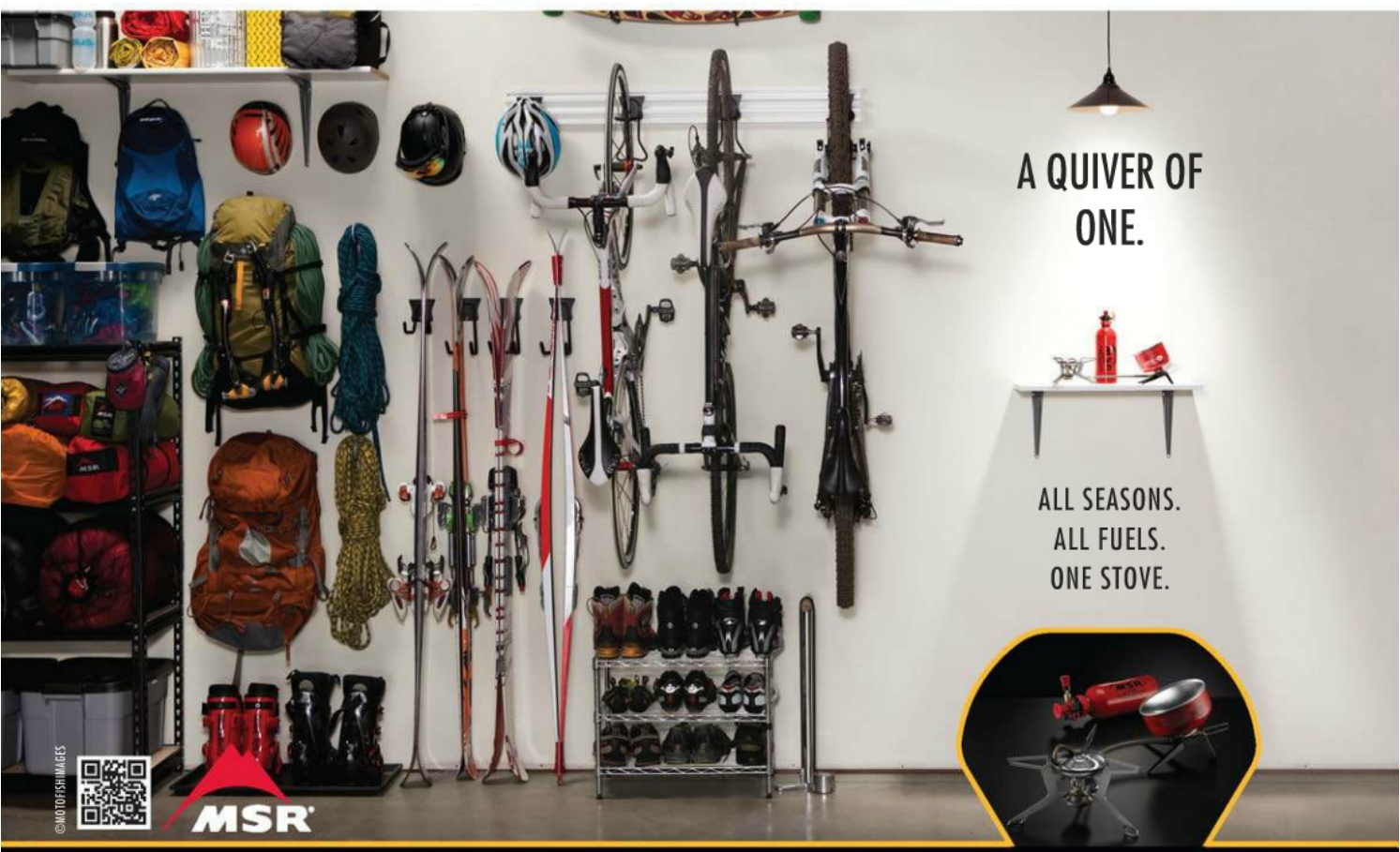
PHOTOS BY COURTESY



[most versatile]

NEMO Espri LE 3P

At a tick under five pounds, this freestanding dome is already lighter than most three-person tents. And the removable, 15-square-foot vestibule lets hikers go even lighter by leaving three ounces at home: Just zip off the vesti and zip in the waterproof door panel (included) when rain is unlikely or mileage high. Or turn the entrance into a full-blown front porch with the optional Trekking Pole Vestibule ($130, 1 lb.), which uses a staff to support the ceiling of a 24-square-foot vestibule that's big enough to seat four people or stash a pair of bikes (with front wheels removed). Setup is straightforward: "The color coding made it easy to pitch, even in blowing, miserable sleet," reports one tester. Hammered by rain and snowstorms in Colorado's Gore Range, the three-season Espri held firm—and stayed quiet, reports our tester. "We slept soundly as others were kept awake by rattling tents," she notes. Ventilation is better than most, thanks to big mesh panels and a rear fly vent that enhances airflow: Testers only saw condensation in subfreezing temps when seven people lounged inside. The 89-inch length and 40-inch height made it comfy for campers up to 6'1", the width accommodates three sleepers, and the large door provides easy exits from anywhere in the tent. **$390; 4 lbs. 15 oz.; nemoequipment.com**



Tents

[mountaineering]

Hilleberg Saivo

"It's as sturdy as much heavier expedition tents," raved one tester after hunkering down in the Saivo through snowstorms at 10,000 feet in Colorado's Park Range. The weight savings come primarily from Kerlon 1800 fabric, a high-quality nylon that's coated with three layers of silicone for consistent strength (ultralight silnylons sometimes use one or two layers, which can leave gaps or weak spots). Result: Kerlon is stronger than typical winter-tent fabrics, but also lighter (and yes, more expensive). The freestanding geometry also achieves impressive strength: Seven pole crossings make the Saivo rigid enough to withstand crushing wind and snow loads. "It stayed blissfully quiet through 40-mph gusts," says our tester. Ventilation is outstanding, thanks to closeable vents on the vestibules and the crown of the tent. And dimensions are generous: The 46-inch peak height and 91-inch length lets tall campers (up to 6'6") sit and sprawl. Two 14-square-foot vestibules offer lavish storage space—enough for winter gear with room to spare for cooking. The integrated fly and body speeds pitching and keeps the interior dry during foul-weather setup. Interior storage also earned props, since 12 pockets enabled three campers to locate headlamps and snacks quickly. Downside? It's a big investment. **$995; 8 lbs. 13 oz.;** hilleberg.com

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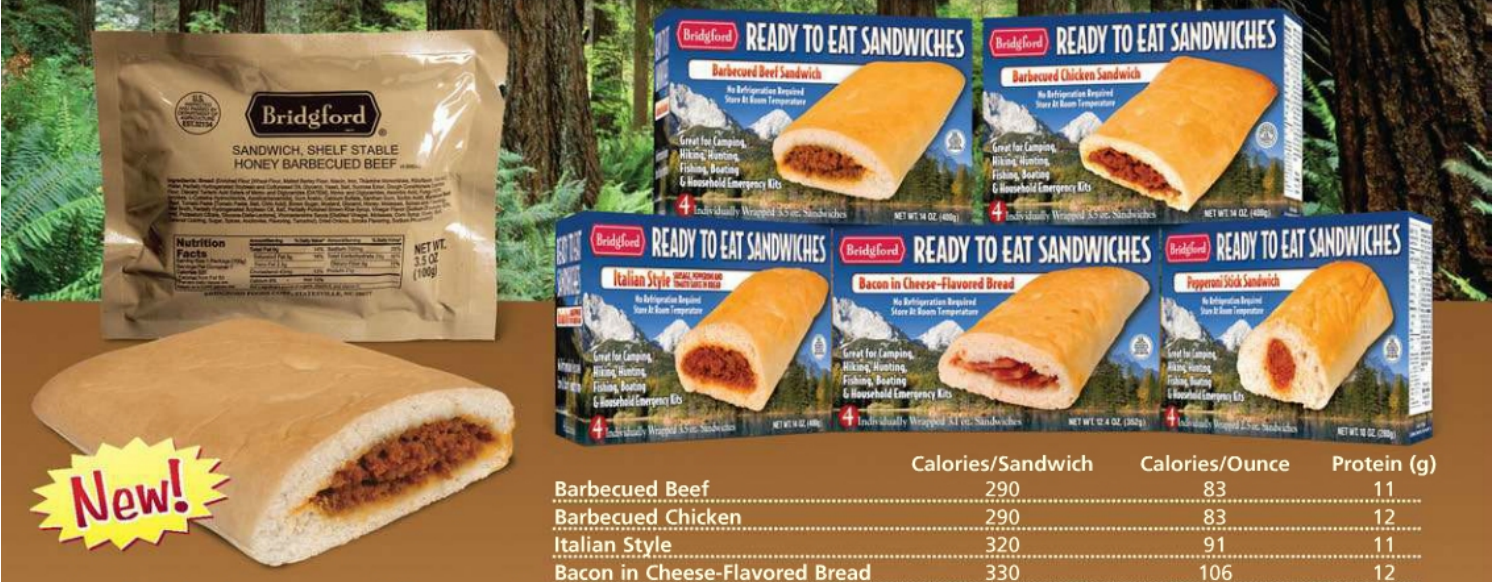

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Four-Person

killer deal

[family bargain]

Big Agnes Burn Ridge 4 Outfitter

This dome isn't the lightest in its class—the freestanding Burn Ridge weighs four pounds more than ultralight options—but it costs half as much, making this two-door, four-person shelter a fantastic buy for families seeking an affordable backcountry shelter. Our testers used it on paddling trips and short-haul hikes, and loved the generous space and headroom. The 60-square-foot floor measures 96 inches on the longer side, which keeps even the tallest campers happy. Using polyester instead of nylon fabric lowers the cost. (Poly is nearly as strong as more expensive nylon, resists UV damage better, and sags less when wet, but it's not as abrasion-resistant.) DAC's 6000-series aluminum poles, which are heavier than Featherlite models, also keep the price down. Setup is simple, with an H-shaped hubbed pole that creates airy headroom and a soaring, 50-inch ceiling. Two 13-square-foot vestibules offer ample storage for boots, packs, or the family dog. One family of five used it for a weeklong float along Utah's Green River, as well as overnights in the Rockies, and had no problem with condensation. Credit plenty of mesh and a taut pitch that encourages airflow between canopy and fly. D-shaped doors keep mosquitoes out during entrances and exits (by unzipping only the bottom edge and keeping most of the door closed, testers sitting inside the tent could lace their boots in the vestibule). Downside: It's bulky (24" x 8") when packed, so hikers divvied the components. **$300; 8 lbs. 8 oz.; bigagnes.com**

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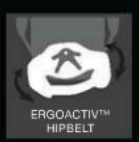

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More Tester Picks

SOLO

» Eastern Mountain Sports Velocity 1
This all-arounder blends convenience, adequate space, and excellent weather protection in a package under three pounds. The nine-square-foot vestibule offers ample storage, and ventilation is excellent: Testers saw zero condensation in Texas's Enchanted Rock State Park. **$259; 2 lbs. 14 oz.; ems.com**

» GoLite Eden 1
For chronic rain, you can't beat the Eden. This roomy, 23-square-foot solo shelter makes waiting out extended foul weather a pleasure. Tradeoff: It's heavier than many solos. **$300; 3 lbs. 7 oz.; golite.com**

TWO-PERSON

» Big Agnes Fly Creek 2 Platinum
This lighter version of the Fly Creek 2 (a 2010 Editors' Choice Award winner) shaves five ounces, thanks to thinner-diameter poles and low-denier, high-thread-count fabric. "It's easy to pitch, bomber in storms, and surprisingly roomy given the weight," reports our New Mexico tester. But the fabric requires some TLC. **$500; 1 lb. 13 oz.; bigagnes.com**

» Black Diamond Stormtrack
Ample floor space and headroom make this mountain tent comfy for two big or tall campers, and the spacious vestibules hold plenty of winter gear. This double-wall weathered a month in Antarctica, but practice setup before pitching in a storm. **$500; 6 lbs. 8 oz.; blackdiamondequipment.com**

» Brooks-Range Foray Tent
Downpours and winds assaulted this one-door dome in Idaho's Sawtooths, but the stable structure barely shuddered, and the dry entrance (with an outward-tilting front door) kept rain out during wet exits. Ventilation is above average, thanks to vents on the vestibule. Downside? The 28-square-foot floor is tight for two people. **$425; 2 lbs. 10 oz.; brooks-range.com**

» Hyperlite Mountain Gear Echo II
This specialized ultralight is for gear tinkerers with a big budget. The trekking-pole system includes a Cuben Fiber tarp, an optional vestibule, and a bug-proof mesh insert. "Pitched tight, it did well in 20-mph wind on Utah's Miners Mountain," says our tester. **$595; 1 lb. 12 oz.; hyperlitemountaingear.com**

» Kelty Salida 2
This sturdy, free-standing tent won a 2011 Editors' Choice Award for making ultralight affordable: It kept testers dry during storms on Vancouver Island's notoriously soggy West Coast Trail, and the simple, stable two-pole support exhibited no ultralight shudders in gusty weather. Tradeoffs: Interior space is tight, and there's only one door. **$160; 3 lbs. 12 oz.; kelty.com**

» Mountainsmith Morrison
This value-priced, freestanding dome stood strong through 25-mph gusts in southern Utah. Two crossing poles make for fast, easy setup. Despite the 43-inch peak height, though, the gently sloping walls limit headroom. **$170; 4 lbs. 11 oz.; mountainsmith.com**

» MSR Nook
Hikers who prefer racking up miles to lounging in camp praised this lightweight, one-door tent, which merely shivered in the face of howling wind in Idaho's White Cloud Mountains. The 28-square-foot floor just fit two broad-shouldered six-footers, and ventilation is excellent, thanks to a mesh top and two big side vents on the fly. Downside: small vestibule. **$400; 3 lbs. 2 oz.; cascadedesigns.com**

» NEMO Meta 2P
"The sturdiest trekking-pole design I've used," raves one tester. This two-door, non-freestanding shelter earned a 2010 Editors' Choice Award for its impressive weather protection, cavernous interior space (36 square feet, plus 25 more in the two vestibules), and better-than-average ventilation. **$370; 2 lbs. 15 oz.; nemoequipment.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

ADVERTISEMENT

Taking the Ground Out of Campground

The appeal of hammock camping lures many outdoor enthusiasts off the ground and into the trees. Hammock camping enthusiasts favor the off-the-ground method of camping over the traditional on-the-ground tent for its versatility, comfort and low impact on the environment. Hammock camping allows for more choices when choosing a campsite location and keeps campers off-the-ground protected from rainwater runoff, small animals and off of rough and uneven terrain—resulting in a dry and comfortable in-camp sleep.

Dispelling the Myths about Hammocks

Myth: Hammocks are not comfortable.
Truth: Product innovation has led to steady hammock beds that allow for versatile sleeping positions. Clark Jungle Hammocks recently introduced its first hammock designed specifically for side and stomach sleepers, providing for a flat sleeping position that resembles your own bed at home.

Myth: Hammocks do not offer warmth and protection in adverse weather conditions.
Truth: Clark Jungle Hammock's four season models include insulating pockets that offer a barrier between the occupant and cold air. Winterizing underquilts called Z-Liners can be added to create warmth when sleeping below 32 degrees F.

Myth: Hammocks are not stable.
Truth: Stability of hammocks has long been questioned by camping enthusiasts, but Clark's unique no-tip hammock design keeps your center of gravity between the supporting trees, allowing you to move about freely without the fear of falling out.

For more product features and information visit:
JungleHammock.com

CLARK JUNGLE HAMMOCK

» REI Half Dome 2
This standard-bearer earned two Editors' Choice Awards (2002, and Gold in 2010) for its outstanding value and space-to-weight ratio. A "Plus" model is 10 inches longer and 4 inches wider. **$189; 5 lbs.; rei.com**

» Sea to Summit Specialist Duo
"Remarkably stable given the limited structure," says our tester of this ultralight trekking-pole shelter after using it in Zion National Park. "And it packs smaller than a two-liter water bottle!" Downsides: The 23-square-foot interior is scrunched for two, vestibules are small, and condensation accumulated even in arid environments. **$499; 1 lb. 13 oz.; seatosummit.com**

» The North Face Meso 2
Get low weight and great ventilation from the Meso's all-mesh canopy. Testers also praised the organizational pockets. But there's just one door, and interior space is tight. **$279; 3 lbs. 13 oz.; thenorthface.com**

» Wenger Rothorn 2
"Face it head-on into the wind, and you have the quietest tent ever," says our tester, who weathered October storms in Alaska's Chugach Wilderness in this freestanding mountaineering tent. He also called its ventilation "near-perfect." Ding: weight. **$450; 9 lbs. 13 oz.; wengerna.com**

THREE-PERSON

» Cabela's XPG Ultralight 3
This bargain dome sheltered three 6'5" campers from raging storms near Utah's Cedar Breaks; the wild weather didn't penetrate or budge the sturdy, two-pole design. Trade-offs: Sloping walls trim headroom, and vestibules are shallow (gear stored there blocked the exits). **$190; 5 lbs. 8 oz.; cabelas.com**

» Marmot Boreas 3P
"Like sleeping beneath a ceiling fan," one tester says of this freestanding, two-door dome. Two large vents at the head and foot of the fly enhance airflow, and an all-mesh canopy—separated from the fly by a gap of several inches—promotes excellent air movement. Headroom is generous, the length accommodates 6'4" campers, and the taut pitch repels 30-mph winds—but vestibules are too shallow for a trio's gear. **$389; 5 lbs.; marmot.com**

FOUR-PERSON

» Big Agnes Jack Rabbit SL4
"It's rock-solid stable for such a spacious tent," says our Colorado tester, who also reports zero condensation even with four bodies inside. Roomy, 13.5-square-foot vestibules provide adequate storage, and 30-mph gusts caused only slight flapping. **$500; 6 lbs. 2 oz.; bigagnes.com**

» Sierra Designs Lightning HT 4
Outstanding space-to-weight-to-price ratio earned it's predecessor a 2009 Editors' Choice Award, and this freestanding dome gets better for 2012 with a new pole configuration that yields more headroom. "Floor space—57.5 square feet—is comfortable for two couples, and luxurious for adults with kids," reports our tester, who praised its rain-and-wind performance after stormy nights in Rocky Mountain National Park. **$460; 6 lbs. 15 oz.; sierradesigns.com**

Testers: Ted Alvarez, Kevin Anderson, Kelly Bastone, Matthew Bates, Tyler Bounds, Nancy Bouchard, Andrew Bydlon, Shannon Davis, Jonathan Dorn, Julie Ellison, Ben Fullerton, Emily Jeffers, Ken Haag, John Harlan, Jay Heinrichs, Kristy Holland, Kristin Hostetter, Steve Howe, Rachel Jones, Mike Lanza, Dennis Lewon, Casey Lyons, Krista Mann, Cameron Martindell, Andrew Matranga, Merrill McCauley, Dan Nelson, Joel Nyquist, Shayla Paradeis, Kim Phillips, Steve Pulford, Tiffani Miller Pulford, Marko Ross-Bryant, Ben Russell, Mark Shisler, Tim Shisler, Becca Stubbs, Allison Woods, Rachel Zurer, Arianne Zwartjes

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1 FIND ADVENTURE ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Hikers can enjoy 544 miles of the world-famous Appalachian Trail that runs through Virginia—covering more miles than any other state on the Trail and 101 of them through Shenandoah National Park and scenic Skyline Drive. The Appalachian Trail also parallels the iconic Blue Ridge Parkway and passes through Mount Rogers National Recreation Area in George Washington and Jefferson National Forests.

- The 54 miles on the Appalachian Trail's northern end is best hiked in the spring and fall. Be sure to check out **Sky Meadows State Park**, which is only a short drive from Washington, DC. An inviting 4.7-mile hike in this park provides scenic overlook views (including views of Blue Ridge) and covers rolling hills. Additionally, in the **G. Richard Thompson Wildlife Management Area** along this leg of the Trail you can spot many of Virginia's woodland birds and other attractive wildlife.
- The portion of the Trail that runs through **Shenandoah National Park** is best hiked in the spring as well as September and October. If you are up for a nice 13-mile hike in the spring, you'll experience haze-free views stretching for miles as you trek from Big Meadows to Skyland and back. In the central areas of the Trail, you'll follow the **Blue Ridge Parkway** to Roanoke. This route brings you through **George Washington and Jefferson National Forests**, which both offer primitive campsites.
- Towards Virginia's southern portion of the Appalachian Trail, it becomes more remote and less traveled. However, this allows for some memorable outdoor opportunities. At **Big Walker Lookout**, the most spectacular views of the Appalachian Mountains can be seen. **Grayson Highlands State Park** provides an array of camping, biking and hiking options. If you're looking for a challenge, load up your packs and gear up for a 4-day hike from Damascus to Massie Gap. You'll travel through beautiful bald mountains, roaring hills and even witness wild ponies passing you by.

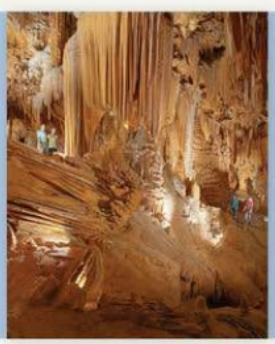
2 TAKE AMERICA'S FAVORITE DRIVE: THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

The **Blue Ridge Mountains**, named for their bluish hue when viewed from a distance, is partnered by the **Blue Ridge Parkway**, a 469-mile scenic highway located alongside the Appalachian Trail. The Parkway boasts some of the most spectacular scenery in the world and includes over 100 species of trees, flowering shrubs and plentiful mammal and bird wildlife. If a hike is in your plans along the drive, the unique landscape of **Humpback Rocks** will definitely get the legs working. Located just six miles south of the northern entrance of Blue Ridge Parkway, Humpback Rocks circles 800 miles along the Parkway and the one-mile hike to the top affords an 800-foot incline. It's exposed rocky summit offers a distinct contrast to the heavily vegetated peaks of the surrounding mountains and you won't be complaining when you get to the summit and witness the breathtaking views north and west over Shenandoah Valley.

3 EXPERIENCE THE FORESTED WETLANDS OF THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

Located in Suffolk, Virginia, the **Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge** spans 111,200 acres and boasts miles of trails for hiking and biking. Hiking trails range from unpaved paths to raised wooden boardwalks so not to miss the natural swamp habitats. Also, home to black bears, bobcats, river otters and over 200 species of birds, the Great Dismal Swamp wetlands is the perfect location for wildlife viewing opportunities. You can even pick up a loaner backpack at the Refuge Headquarters, complete with binoculars, species guides, maps and magnifying glasses.

From the awe-inspiring scenery of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah National Park to the paths along the Appalachian Trail, Virginia is an ideal destination for outdoor enthusiasts. For more information, visit **www.Virginia.org.** ***LOVE is at the heart of every Virginia vacation.***



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Bags

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Summer

[minimalist]

Mountain Hardwear Mountain Speed 32

It won't help you climb 26,289-foot Shishapangma in 10½ hours like Ueli Steck did, but if you're into unburdened pursuits of any kind—as our tester found after three straight weeks on the John Muir Trail—this sub-one-pound bag surely won't hurt. It's one of seven components of Mountain Hardwear's new Ueli Steck Alpine Speed Climbing kit, which ruthlessly cuts weight to aid his superhuman pace. The Mountain Speed is seven-plus ounces lighter than the company's previous ultralight 32°F bag (the Phantom), a feat accomplished by upgrading some materials and eliminating others. The upgrades include a proprietary shell fabric that's ultralight yet tough and water-resistant and premium 850-**fill power*** down (penalty: cost), while the reductions come in the form of a half-length zipper and a markedly slim cut (penalties: minimized venting and access, and less roll-around comfort. It's not for claustrophobes, but the compact shape delivers superior thermal efficiency and packability—the bag compresses down to the size of a typical puffy jacket. And our JMT tester says a comfortable face gasket and shaped footbox help offset the minimalist cut. Warmth? Spot on, thanks to a form-fitting hood that enhances insulation in freezing temps. One tester used it in the Andes and says, "I didn't shiver at 29°F." **$400; 15.5 oz.; 32°F;** mountainhardwear.com

[featherweight comfort]

Marmot Plasma 40

This addition to the 2011 Editors' Choice Award-winning Plasma line takes the best of its three-season siblings—excellent warmth-to-weight *and* all-around comfort—and packages it in a summer bag. Critical ingredient: Insotect's Flow construction. The vertical baffles transmit heat more easily from your core to your extremities, and the FlowGates hold the down in place for even distribution. Combined with plush, 900-fill down, this design lets Marmot use a shape that's less hyper-efficient than some ultralight sacks. The girth at the shoulders is 60 inches (that's four more than the Mountain Speed's, left), which enhances comfort, especially for big or restless sleepers. The Plasma kept one tester warm right down to the 40°F rating in Joshua Tree National Park. Expecting milder temps? Our tester in the Channel Islands praised the breathability of the water-resistant Pertex Quantum shell, which made warmer nights (up to 60°F) quite comfortable. "It looks wimpy, but the shell is surprisingly durable," says another tester. "We used it as a duvet while stargazing in California's notoriously abrasive Mojave Desert, and the Plasma showed no weakness." The contoured hood—Marmot's superior design doesn't use face-scratching Velcro—cinches snugly, and the full-length zipper doesn't snag. Packed size (think liter soda bottle, just slighter larger than the Mountain Speed) is impressive. Bummer: The price is steep for a mild-weather bag. **$399; 1 lb. 3 oz.; 40°F;** marmot.com

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*FILL POWER refers to the amount of space (in cubic inches) one ounce of fully lofted down consumes. A higher number equals loftier down that's warmer for its weight.

[ultralight synthetic]

Lafuma Extreme 600

Eighty bucks for a bag that can take on the hardest miles along the AT? Sold. Our tester packed this synthetic sack for the northern end of her thru-hike—all of New Hampshire and Maine in July. She came home impressed by the packability (cantaloupe size, which, while not as small as the much pricier Plasma 40, left, is still extremely rare for such a bargain bag) and the accuracy of the 45°F rating. How do you squeeze so much performance into an affordable package? Lafuma used its most compressible (proprietary) microfiber to create one blanketlike sheet of **short-staple insulation*** for the whole bag, which eliminates sewn-through seams (read: cold spots). The construction saves weight and bulk, and still kept our tester warm during a chilly period in the Mahoosuc Mountains, when lows hit the bottom end of the bag's rating. And it's also comfortably cool at the other end of the spectrum, thanks to a roomy fit and full-length zipper; our AT tester could open it wide for increased comfort on muggy nights, with temps up to 70°F. Bummer: One tester wished there was less material in the hood, as it bunched up and caused gapping when she tightened it all the way. Bottom line: This superaffordable bag gets the job done without any unnecessary glitz or glam. **$80; 1 lb. 5 oz.; 45°F; lafumausa.com**

[most versatile]

Sierra Designs Pyro Maniac 15/30

You could splurge on a summer-weight bag and another that can handle three-season temps. Or you could buy this two-fer. The Pyro Maniac is a 30°F down bag that comes with an extra set of baffles (a 38-by-45-inch quilt, pictured below outside the sleeve) that slides into a top-side compartment where it serves as another layer of core insulation. It adds about 15 degrees of warmth for just 10 ounces. Alone, the bag was "warm down to 33°F when I was sleeping under a tarp," said one tester after a trip in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Another used it with the topper for a week of hiking around Tanis Mesa in Alaska, and he reports, "The extra baffles kept my core plenty warm when temps dipped to the low 20s, but I did wish for more insulation in the footbox." All testers praised the roomy cut, which worked well even for 6-foot, 200-plus-pound big guys. The 30-denier polyester ripstop shell is water-resistant: "I spilled water on the bag and it rolled right off," says one tester. "And when morning condensation on my tarp soaked the footbox, I didn't feel cold, and it dried quickly in the sunshine." Nitpicks: The full-length zipper snagged. **$319; 2 lbs. 13 oz. (with extra baffles); 15°F to 30°F; sierradesigns.com**

[wearable warmth]

Selk'bag 4G Lite

Who hasn't been there? Warm bag on a chilly morning, and the last thing you want to do is get out and shiver through coffee prep. Problem solved. In this bag, just sit up, swing your feet outside the tent, and make your way to the cooking area, all without leaving the comfort of your cocoon. The union-suit design is a head turner, to say the least, but testers loved the results. And not just for camp-duty convenience. With the 4G's separate arm and leg chambers, fidgety sleepers could crash in practically any position—no wrestling with bag cut required. Velcro-sealed portals on each arm allow the use of your hands for cooking and other fine motor skills, and reinforced nylon "soles" let you amble around camp without tearing up the bag's feet. "Normally, I skip out on stargazing because I get too cold," says one tester. "With this bag, I could stay out well past dark, make some hot cocoa, and feel just as warm as if I were in the tent." Testers slept comfortably right down to the 45°F rating, and they liked the large, adjustable hood that can be pulled on and off like a hoody. Downside: It's heavy, and the polyester fill isn't as compressible as other insulations. But you do save weight and space by skipping extra layers (like a down jacket) for camp lounging, and there's nothing wrong with the price. **$99; 3 lbs. 3 oz.; 45°F; selkbagusa.com**

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Three-Season

[eco-friendly]

Rab Genesis 3

This British company has created a synthetic sack that advances green sleeping bag design to a new level of sustainability. Every component of the Genesis is optimized for eco-friendliness. The Eco 3D short-staple insulation is made from 100-percent-recycled polyester, and it's arranged in an overlapping shingle design to prevent cold spots. The Pertex Classic Eco shell fabric, threads, labels, Velcro, and stuffsack are also made of recycled polyester, and even the plastic components (like the drawcord toggles) all come from Bluesign-approved* sources. The eco-friendly approach doesn't compromise warmth, say our testers, but it does boost weight and bulk, making this a comfort-oriented pick for car- and boat-camping. "I'm a big fan of the cut," says one 6-foot, 175-pound tester who used the Genesis in the Laguna Mountains near San Diego. "The extra roominess around the torso and in the footbox is great for rolling around or stuffing in extra clothes (or fuel on cold nights), but I never felt like it was so spacious that I had trouble heating it up." The roomy hood easily fit a standard backpacking pillow, yet testers could still cinch it down effectively. The three-quarter-length zipper ran smoothly thanks to effective anti-snag zipper tape. Tip: BYO compression sack. The Genesis is bulky (17 x 10 inches) when packed in its included (noncompression) stuffsack. **$160; 4 lbs. 2 oz.; 19°F; us.rab.uk.com**

[durable featherweight]

Sierra Designs Cloud 15

If you want packability above all, this is your bag. It doesn't have a gram of fat in features or material. By combining 900-fill down, vertical baffles with Insotect Flow technology (like the Marmot Plasma), a half-length zipper, and a trim fit (it's tighter than the Plasma, but not quite as small as the Mountain Hardwear Mountain Speed), Sierra Designs created a bag that had our ultralight zealots raving. "It scrunches down even smaller than my puffy jacket!" exclaimed one. Despite the compact packed size, the bag still lofts to six inches—plenty of insulation to keep one of our editors warm into the mid- to high 20s in the central Andes. (However, some testers complained that the lack of a full draft collar made it difficult to completely seal in heat when temps dropped to frigid levels.) Testers were impressed with the comfort and durability of the 10-denier nylon shell. "It's silky smooth against the skin, keeps feathers inside where they belong, and is seemingly weightless," says one. "After rolling around on granite slabs and snoozing on coarse sand to test the fabric's durability, I have total confidence in this shell." Bummer: The zipper snagged consistently. Also, the regular length was a tight squeeze for our 5'10" tester. **$499; 1 lb. 12 oz.; 15°F; sierradesigns.com**

[best all-around]

REI Igneo/Joule

You won't find a better deal on a sub-two-pound, weather-resistant bag unless you get lucky on Craigslist. Indeed, we've seen bags that cost at least $150 more and don't have the performance or durability of the Igneo and Joule (the women's version). The 800-fill down and waterproof/breathable ripstop nylon shell (it uses a rolled-on coating, not a membrane) kept testers warm and dry in everything from windy bivies in the Sierras to subfreezing temps in Wyoming to the perennially soggy Pacific Northwest. (Note: The bag itself is not completely waterproof because the seams are not taped.) Moisture from one tester's single-wall tent didn't faze the shell, and another tester slept sans shelter through 20-plus-mph winds without feeling chilled. He also got in and out of his bag repeatedly that same night to take photos during an adventure race, and even though he returned to the bag overheated from the exertion, the sweat vapor passed through the shell and he awoke fully dry for each shoot. "The temperature rating is dead on," reports one tester who slept comfortably on 20°F nights in Montana's Medicine Bow National Forest. "The differential drawcord on the hood (one flat cord and one round cord to provide better shape around the face) seals nicely, and the draft collar is effective without giving me that restrictive, claustrophobic feeling." Durability is high, too: One tester dragged the sack around like Linus while bivying on granite in the northern Sierra, and the shell showed no sign of wear. It packs to volleyball size for easy stowing. **Igneo: $329; 1 lb. 15 oz.; 19°F; Joule: $339; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; 22°F; rei.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

*BLUESIGN-APPROVED This independent assessment agency evaluates (among other things) the sustainability and harmfulness of materials and manufacturing.

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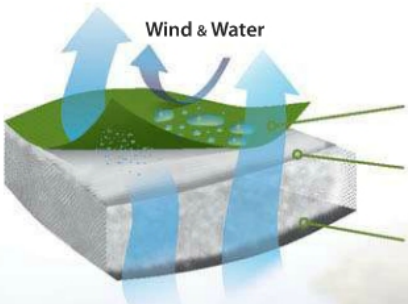

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Bags

[instant heat]

Columbia Moonstone 15

It looks like a disco party on the inside, but when it comes to heating up quickly, this bag is all business. Thousands of tiny silver dots on the liner reflect your body heat, claims Columbia. And it's no gimmick, report our testers. They heated up faster in this bag than any other, and the lining still breathed well enough to prevent clamminess. After getting seriously chilled while pitching camp in blowing snow at 10:30 p.m. in Colorado's Gore Range, one tester said she was toasty just a few minutes after hopping into the Moonstone. Though it's not as lofty as competitors, the Moonstone's Omni-Heat liner and 800-fill down worked well enough in tandem that multiple testers reported having to vent the bag in temps in the 20s to avoid overheating. However, the thinner loft showed its weakness when we pushed the bag near its 15°F rating in Boise National Forest. One tester reports that the initial burst of warmth was not sustained throughout the night at such low temps. Minor gripe: The Moonstone is not heavy, but for the price, we still wish it was a bit lighter. **$499; 2 lbs. 5 oz.; 15°F; columbia.com**

[top synthetic]

Marmot Cloudbreak 20

This synthetic-fill bag is so compact that one of our testers actually thought it was a down bag before she read the tag. The secret sauce is Marmot's use of two types of short-staple synthetic insulations—a shingled, high-loft fill throughout the bag, augmented by a highly compressible, finer-denier fill in the torso and feet. The short-staple insulations are more compressible than their **continuous filament*** cousin, and testers were impressed by the ample loft (about six inches). "I was toasty on nights in the upper 20s," says one 5'8" female tester from Alaska. "Even after the bag got damp from condensation dripping off the tent, I stayed warm through the morning." However, a similarly sized male tester deemed the rating about 5 degrees too generous. "On a 20°F night in Alaska's Chugach Mountains, I resorted to a bag liner and four-season sleeping pad," he says. The generous cut—60 inches of circumference around the shoulders and 57 at the hips—is best suited to big folks or warm-sleeping skinny ones. "I had plenty of room around my shoulders and hips, which allowed me to sleep in my preferred fetal position," says one average-size tester. Props: The Cloudbreak compresses down to the size of a medium watermelon, which is good for this class of synthetic bag. Bummer: The zipper is snaggy. **$199; 2 lbs. 14 oz.; 20°F; marmot.com**

[big-guy favorite]

Sea to Summit Trek TkIII

Slim mummy bags are great for their thermal efficiency, but if you're tall, wide, or both, you might want something with a little more elbowroom. Big guys loved this spacious, semi-rectangular, 650-fill down bag, which still packs reasonably small despite its increased internal dimensions. Our 6'2", broad-shouldered tester raved about the extra room in the ever-so-slightly tapered footbox: "There was adequate kicking room so I didn't feel like King Tut." And he loved the option to vent the bottom of the bag and lay the hood fully flat for mild nights. The self-described "very, very warm sleeper" appreciated this extended-temperature-range versatility on several 55°F nights in Channel Islands National Park, where he slept "comfortably without waking up in a pool of sweat." You can even use the wrap-around zipper to open the bag fully and use it like a blanket for cabin camping. The 2D Permashell fabric, a 33-denier nylon with DWR finish, breathed extremely well on both steamy and chilly nights. "It did a magnificent job at keeping me nice and cozy down to 22°F," said one warm-sleeping tester after a trip in Joshua Tree National Park. "I usually end up feeling clammy sometime around 2 a.m., but this bag breathed so well that I stayed dry." That helps the down stay dry as well, preserving loft. Downside: Due to the Trek's semi-rectangular cut, it's slightly heavier and a bit bulkier than other bags in its class (11 x 9 inches in its included compression sack), but for bigger-framed folks, it's a worthy tradeoff. **$289; 2 lbs. 11 oz.; 12°F; seatosummit.com**

[extra warm]

Eastern Mountain Sports Mountain Light 15

This bag is a rare beast: It tested warm down to 15 degrees *below* its temperature rating. Our tester, wearing just a single layer of long johns, slept comfortably on a winter trip in Utah's Bear River Range: "This bag puffs up like it has an internal compressor, and the 800-fill down with vertical baffles kept me in a constant bubble of warmth," he says. "The hood surrounded my noggin in a cloud of down, and it cinched down tight without a bunch of extra material in my face." Despite all this warmth, the Mountain Light packs up to bread-loaf size. The fit is trim across the chest, but our 5'8", 165-pound tester thought the increase in thermal efficiency was worth the tradeoff. The DWR-coated, 15-denier Pertex Quantum shell is both light and water-resistant. "I woke up covered in frost after an open bivy in Utah's Cache National Forest, and no moisture penetrated the shell," reports one tester. The full-length zipper offers easy ventilation on warmer nights, and it ran smoothly every time, thanks to an effective snag guard (sometimes a challenging feature with these ultralight shell fabrics). **$369; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; 15°F; ems.com**

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

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[warmest]

Valandre Shocking Blue

With a unique "Marie Antoinette" draft collar, which seals snugly around the neck with a zipper on one shoulder and Velcro on the other, the Shocking Blue creates a luxurious cocoon good enough for a queen (or king). "I felt frustrated and tangled while first learning how to work the collar," says one tester who used the bag in the wintry Sierra. "But once I figured it out, I was able to lock my body warmth in the bag, and I stayed warm down to -7°F, even with blowing snow and ice accumulating on the outside of the bag." The 850-fill down lofts up like a hot air balloon, and the bag warms up fast and stays that way throughout the night. Testers also raved about the shape. The torso is roomy enough to wear a down jacket in extremely cold temps, and baffles of varying heights (loftier ones around the feet and torso, where you need the extra warmth, and thinner ones in the legs, where you don't) provide precision-controlled insulation. The result is a superior fit that minimizes dead space while still providing enough volume to roll around. "I had room in the torso to spread out my soaking-wet clothes after a winter hike through Zion's Virgin River," says one tester. The angled trapezoidal footbox* also received high marks: "It creates a floating cloud of down that kept my feet warm, yet I still had enough room to stuff my boot liners into the bottom of the bag." Sticker shock is the only fly in the ointment. **$745; 3 lbs. 1 oz.; -10°F; valandre.com**

couples' choice

Feathered Friends Spoonbill

What happy camping couple *wouldn't* want to snuggle up in a double bag? None, but two-person sacks have traditionally been frontcountry-only because of bulk and weight. No longer. The Spoonbill is a winter-worthy, 900-fill down love nest that has dedicated hoods for each sleeper, packs down to basketball size, and *saves* weight. Our 2012 Editors' Choice reviews start on page 25. *$800; 2 lbs. 9 oz.; featheredfriends.com*

More Winter Bags

For reviews of six other cold-weather bags from our Fall Gear Guide, go to **backpacker.com/winterbags.**

[down bargain]

REI Habanera

If it seems like every down bag with legit winter warmth is a budget breaker, you'll love this steal. It kept one female tester warm down to zero on stormy nights in Vermont, and our coldest-sleeping tester (who packs a winter bag on spring and fall treks) stayed warm in the 20s high in the central Andes. How does REI achieve the low price-to-warmth ratio? A little more bulk and weight than you get with the most expensive materials. The down is 650-fill, for example, which is just as insulating as the premium stuff but not as light and compressible. And the low cost doesn't mean there's any feather rationing: The top baffles (60 percent of the insulation is in the top of the bag) are stuffed to near bursting. Testers liked the relaxed cut, which has a bit of extra space in the shoulders and hips to allow for rolling around or stuffing in extra clothes. Guys: Score a similar bargain with the **Marmot Never Summer ($289; 3 lbs. 14 oz.; 0°F; marmot.com)**, a 600-fill toaster with an exceptionally well-shaped hood and impenetrable draft protection at the neck and along the zipper. **$299; 3 lbs. 9 oz.; 1°F; rei.com**

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) MICHAEL CLARK; BEN FULLERTON (2)

*ANGLED TRAPEZOIDAL FOOTBOX A bottom chamber sculpted and canted to mimic the shape of the feet; allows down to fully loft around the feet for maximum warmth

Somehow it always feels like the first time.
Marmot
FOR LIFE
Marmot Tent Collection
Just one way Marmot helps
you bond with nature.
Photography: Gabe Rogel | Location: Jackson Hole | Athlete: Alex Gilbert
marmot.com • facebook.com/marmotpro

Pads

[warmest]

Exped Downmat UL7

Thought down was just for sleeping bags and jackets? Think again. The Downmat UL7 is stuffed with 700-fill feathers, and tester feedback can be summed up with this direct quote: "Zzzzzzz." Says one happy camper: "I skipped the extra closed-cell foam pad I usually pack on cold-weather trips, and I stayed warm below freezing, despite the fact that I was in a 40°F bag." Cushioning is tops, too. At 2.8 inches thick, the Downmat can absorb any lumps and bumps: "Due to limited campsite selection, I had to sleep on top of an immovable rock that was protruding two inches from the ground—right into my back," said one tester after a trip in Joshua Tree National Park. "I slept like a baby." Smart: The side baffles are slightly larger than the rest, which helps keep you centered. The 20-denier nylon shell requires some ultralight care, but our testers didn't see any reason for concern after routinely sharing the pad for stargazing in the Rockies. It comes with the Schnozzel Pumpbag (1.4 oz.; $26 if purchased separately), which inflates the pad in minutes. Of course, luxury ain't always cheap. **$209; 1 lb. 4 oz.; 72" x 20" x 2.8"; exped.com**

[Editors' Choice update]

Therm-a-Rest NeoAir XLite

We gave the original NeoAir an Editors' Choice Award (2009) for its unprecedented comfort-to-warmth-to-weight ratio, and this latest tapered version has even more performance for six ounces less. The internal reflective barrier now returns 25 percent more body heat: One tester used it in lieu of his standard four-season pad on an early-winter summit of Mt. Whitney, and reported staying warm in below-freezing temps on snow (it's not, however, as insulative as the Exped, above). Another tester thru-hiked the John Muir Trail and says, "I never ceased to be amazed with its comfort and packability (a miniscule 9 x 4 inches), and deceptive durability." Downsides: price, and broad-shouldered users might not like the mummy shape. **$160; 12 oz.; 72" x 20" x 2.5"; thermarest.com**

[durable bargain]

Therm-a-Rest Z Lite Sol

This dot-patterned, indestructible, **closed-cell foam*** pad gets updated this year with a thermal reflective barrier that improves warmth by 20 percent. Use it alone or to boost the insulation of an air pad in cold temps. "It's handy to throw down on the snow for breaks," says one tester. And the dimpled surface is plenty comfortable for the weight and price, he says. "I laid this out after an exhausting winter ascent of Mt. Whitney, and it felt so good I didn't even inflate my regular pad." It folds easily for packing, but is still a bit bulky (20" x 5" x 5"). **$45; 14 oz.; 72" x 20" x .75"; thermarest.com**

[best for big guys]

NEMO Cosmo Air XL

Many campers find an inflatable air-tube pad a bit tricky to stay on all night; they tend to bounce off. (Hint: Blow it about 75-percent full to reduce the rebound effect.) For big-and-tall types, the problem is magnified, because they're often stuck sleeping on a slab that's already too short and/or narrow. Enter this gloriously mammoth mat, on which our 6'6" editor-in-chief has been getting such good sleep that he doesn't mind carrying the extra 13 ounces compared to Nemo's standard 72-inch air mat. It inflates in about 90 seconds via an integrated foot pump, but there's no insulation; our tester says his comfort tipping point is about 40°F (NEMO also makes an XL version of its Cosmo Insulated; it's six ounces and $20 more). **$160; 2 lbs. 1 oz.; 80" x 30" x 3"; nemoequipment.com**

[most comfortable]

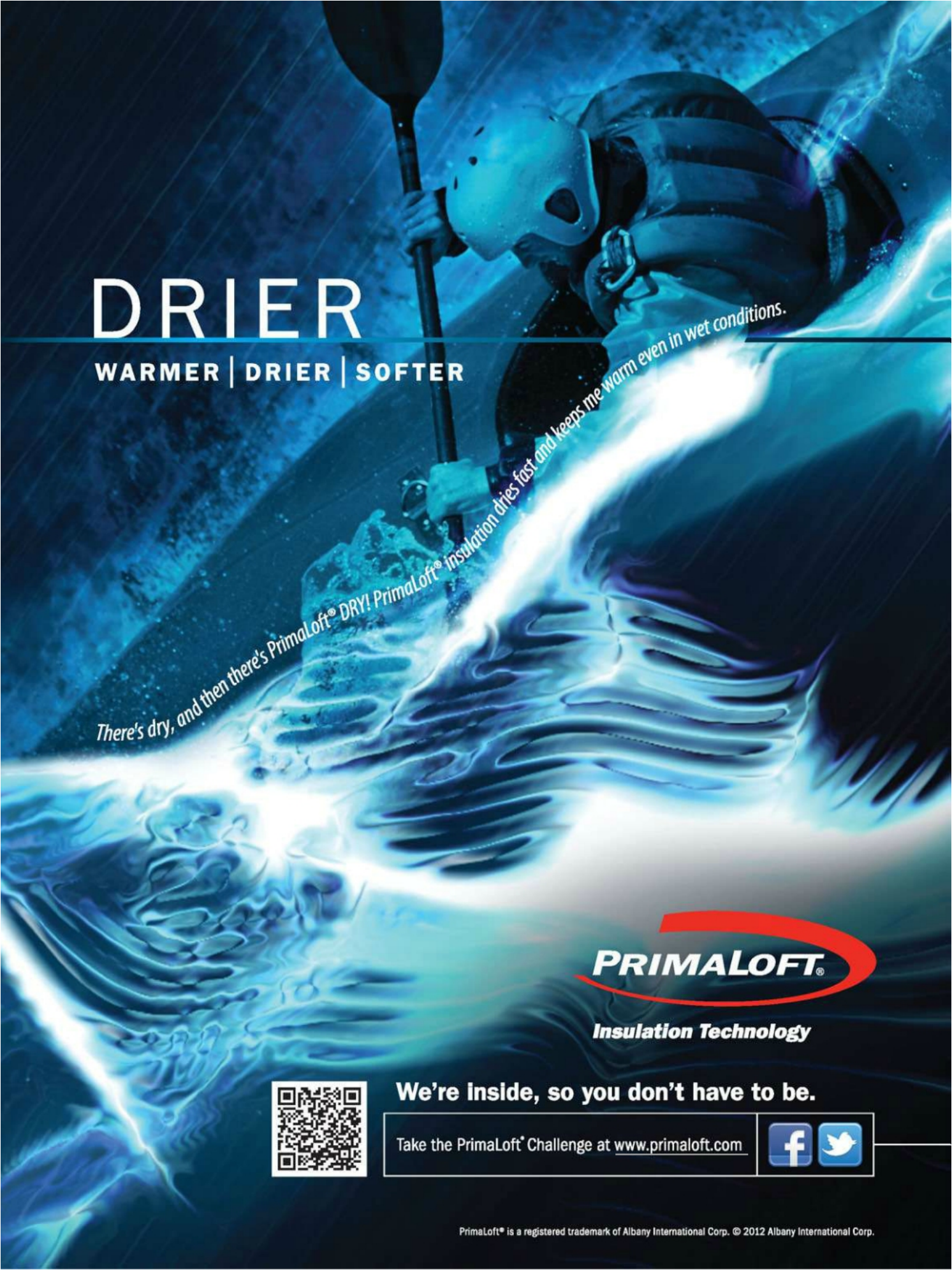
Big Agnes Insulated Q-Core

"I have not slept on anything more comfortable in 40 years of backcountry travel." That was the conclusion of one of our most experienced testers after he packed this 3.5-inch-thick pad on a three-week Himalayan climb. The secret: welded horizontal *and* vertical tubes, which give the pad its quiltlike appearance and a more uniform and supportive feel than pads with either horizontal or vertical baffles alone. "It's as close as you can get to carrying your own bed," reports another tester. Warmth comes from the polyester insulation that's woven with heat-reflective silver filament; we tested it well below freezing on snow. It packs down to water bottle size, but there is a downside: All that cushion takes about eight minutes to inflate with your lungs; get help from the Pumphouse ($20, 1.5 oz.), which also serves as a pillow. **$140; 1 lb. 11 oz.; 72" x 20" x 3.5"; bigagnes.com**

Testers: Ted Alvarez, Matthew Bates, Tyler Bounds, John Bouchard, Nancy Bouchard, Jason Boyle, Andrew Bydlon, Shannon Davis, Kyle Kranich, Ben Fullerton, Charlie Harlan, Adam Harmon, Joseph Hanseling, Katie Herrell, Sara Henrichon, Jeremy Hoefs, Courtney Holden, Kristin Hostetter, Tanner Jackson, Emily Jeffers, Mark Jenkins, Rachel Jones, Michael Lanza, Brian Leitten, Dennis Lewon, Josh Long, Charlotte Long, Krista Mann, Merrill McCauley, Shayla Paradeis, Justin Paynter, Jason Ritter-Lapowski, Will Rochfort, Drew Staniewski, Becca Stubbs, Lindsay Westley, Allison Woods, Rachel Zurer

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

***CLOSED-CELL FOAM** A urethane material composed of millions of closed air cells that trap warmth; it's light, tough, and affordable, but typically bulky


DRIER
WARMER | DRIER | SOFTER
There's dry, and then there's PrimaLoft® DRY! PrimaLoft® insulation dries fast and keeps me warm even in wet conditions.
PRIMALOFT®
Insulation Technology
We're inside, so you don't have to be.
Take the PrimaLoft® Challenge at www.primaloft.com
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MORE TESTER PICKS

SUMMER

» Deuter Dreamlite 500
This bargain synthetic bag is compressible down to the size of a liter bottle, thanks to Polydown, a short-staple polyester insulation. A long zipper makes venting easy, and the cinchable hood and puffy draft tube make it cozy to its moderate rating. **$95; 1 lb. 5 oz.; 50°F; deuterusa.com**

» GoLite Adrenaline 1+ Season
Like to spend some extra time in your bag in the morning? Try out the center-zip design of this 800-fill down sack. "I liked being able to sit up and still do my morning routine without getting out of my toasty bag," says a tester. "Plus, I'm a side sleeper, and I appreciated not having any zippers digging into my shoulders and hips." Heads up: Cut is on the trim side. **$280; 1 lb. 8 oz.; 40°F; golite.com**

» Jacks 'R' Better Sierra Stealth
Wear it or sleep in it. This ultralight, 800-fill down quilt has a hole in the middle so you can wear it like a poncho around camp (leave the puffy behind), or cinch up the foot area and use it as a more traditional mummy-style sack. "This is the Swiss Army knife of sleeping bags," says our tester. **$210; 1 lb.; 40°F; jacksrbetter.com**

» Stoic Somnus 30
If you're a broad-shouldered cold sleeper, check out this 850-fill down bag: It's a wide 66 inches at the shoulders, but the bottom tapers down like a traditional mummy for maximum thermal efficiency. "Even on damp, near-freezing nights, I found myself stripping down to boxers after just a few minutes," says one Alaska tester. Bonus: The zippered footbox pocket holds a hot water bottle to keep toes toasty. **$299; 1 lb. 4 oz.; 30°F; stoicgear.com**

3-SEASON

» Cabela's XPG Evader
Our testers found this rugged, synthetic-filled bag perfect for basecamping, canoeing, and car camping. Pros: low price, snag-free zipper, and a puffy, overstuffed draft collar. Cons: bulk and weight. **$130; 3 lbs. 8 oz.; 15°F; cabelas.com**

» Exped Dreamwalker 650
Our executive editor is a huge fan of this wearable 750-fill down sleeping bag. With a drawcord opening at the feet and zippered armholes, he says, "it's the perfect multitasking solution." Downside? You'll get asked to get up and make coffee for everyone. **$450; 2 lbs. 7 oz.; 20°F; exped.com**

» Feathered Friends Swallow
"Way warmer than its rating." That's what one tester said after sleeping in the Swallow. It's ultralight, ultrapackable (think soccer ball), and ultratoasty; our tester slept comfortably down to 15°F while camping in the Rockies. "I'm always cold," she says. "But this bag felt like it was warmer than some 10°F bags I've slept in." **$439; 1 lb. 11 oz.; 20°F; featheredfriends.com**

» Kelty Lightyear XP 20
Based on its solid performance, testers were pleasantly surprised at this bag's budget-friendly price tag. The Climashield XP insulation and thermally efficient cut kept our tester warm on chilly, tentless nights in Iceland and throughout New England. The bag's a bit on the heavy side for its class, but its compression sack (included) gets it down to about soccer ball size. **$150; 3 lbs. 5 oz.; 20°F; kelty.com**

» Lafuma GR20
Bargain alert: "The performance far exceeded my expectations," said one tester after using it in Great Sand Dunes National Park. "The (proprietary) synthetic bag lofts well, kept me warm with lows in the 20s, and still packs down to two-liter bottle size." **$130; 2 lbs. 15 oz.; 20°F; lafumausa.com**

» L.L.Bean Katahdin 20
This bag's durability impressed our testers after numerous tentless nights out in the Rockies. "Plus, the DWR* coating did a superb job of repelling light precipitation," says one tester. The PrimaLoft Synergy fill only stuffs down to about the size of a watermelon, so it's best for short-mileage treks or car- and boat-camping. **$169; 3 lbs. 3 oz.; 20°F; llbean.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

*DWR Durable water repellent; a coating that makes water bead up and roll off fabric

» Marmot Helium 15
This 2008 Editors' Choice Gold winner is still getting rave reviews. "This thing really does loft like it's full of helium," said one tester after using this 850-fill down bag while cross-country skiing in Yosemite. "I slept comfortably right down to the 15ºF rating." The cut is wide enough to store some clothes that need to dry overnight, but not so large that skinnier hikers will have trouble keeping it warm. **$399; 2 lbs. 3 oz.; 15ºF; marmot.com**

» Marmot Plasma 15
Last year's Editors' Choice winner is still one of the best ultralight bags on the market. From Alaska to the Adirondacks and from the Tetons to Capitol Reef National Park, this 900-fill bag has kept testers warm down to and even below its rating. And with its scant weight and volleyball size when packed, you'll hardly believe you're carrying a shoulder-season bag. **$499; 1 lb. 14 oz.; 15ºF; marmot.com**

» MontBell UL Spiral Downhugger #1
Warning: This 800-fill down bag is so comfortable that you might not get out of bed before lunch. "I've never had a such a hard time," says one tester. "I was just too cozy." Credit the stretchy baffles* that move with you as you toss and turn, as well as the lofty, 800-fill down that surrounds you in a cocoon of warmth. **$379; 2 lbs 2 oz.; 15ºF; montbell.us**

» Mountain Hardwear ExtraLamina 20
Big guys liked the extra space this semi-rectangular bag has to offer. "On trips when weight and packed size weren't a huge deal, it sure was nice to have the extra room," says our 6'5", 220-pound tester. The Thermic Micro synthetic fill kept him warm in the 20s, and when things heated up, he appreciated the option to unzip the footbox for extra ventilation. **$200; 3 lbs. 3 oz.; 20ºF; mountainhardwear.com**

» Rab Infinity 500
Twenty straight nights in the Pacific Northwest will challenge most down bags. This one came through with a near-perfect record: "Possibly the loftiest ultralight I've tested," says our tester of the 850-fill Infinity. Bummer: The wispy Pertex Quantum GL shell wet out easily from moist tent walls. **$500; 1 lb. 14 oz.; 19ºF; us.rab.uk.com**

» Sea to Summit Traverse Xt1
Problem: Waterproof down bags can lose their loft over the course of a long trip due to the buildup of moisture from sweat vapor in the down. Solution: Sea to Summit's proprietary NanoShell, which has a DWR coating and a thin layer of continuous filament fill underneath. That allows sweat vapor to pass through while keeping external moisture out. Does it work? The 850-fill bag "maintained its loft after a week of subfreezing temps in Capitol Reef National Park," says a tester. **$499; 2 lbs. 6 oz.; 19ºF; seatosummit.com**

» Vaude Ice Peak 400
The devil's in the details? Not with this 650-fill down bag. "This had one of the better-fitting, simpler (via snaps) draft collars I've used. It didn't feel constricting and still fully sealed out the drafts," says one tester. "And the microfiber shell shed all moisture after I accidentally dumped water over it while camping in the Olympics." Bonus: The stuff-sack doubles as an emergency backpack. **$550; 1 lb. 7 oz.; 25ºF; libertymountain.com**

WINTER

» Big Agnes Hahns Peak SL -20
Big guys: Get this 800-fill down bag, and enjoy a winter-ready lightweight that has plenty of space in the shoulders and hips (the long size has a whopping 72.5 inches at the shoulders). You'll need a good sleeping pad, as some of the weight savings is due to eliminating insulation on the bottom of the bag (there's a sleeve for your sleeping pad). And the rating? One tester slept comfortably down to -15ºF in Colorado's Mt. Zirkel Wilderness. **$580; 3 lbs. 6 oz.; -20ºF; bigagnes.com**

» Eureka Kaycee 0
Looking to try out some winter camping, but don't plan on going far from the car? Try this affordable four-season solution (pictured above). At nearly five pounds, it's not for backpacking, but the rating is accurate; it kept our tester comfortably warm at 10ºF when he was ski-touring in Washington's Wenatchee National Forest. Heads up: The cut was a little too trim for some of our testers. **$160; 4 lbs. 12 oz.; 0ºF; eurekatent.com**

» Mammut Altitude Winter
Pack insurance against the worst weather. This 800-fill down sack and its waterproof/breathable shell fabric saved one tester's bacon after he spent an overnight bivy exposed to rain, hail, and sleet (the seams aren't taped for total weatherproofing). Winter-worthy details: a dual draft tube, fleece face mask, and mesh chest pocket for drying clothes. **$650; 3 lbs. 10 oz.; -13ºF; mammut.ch**

» Western Mountaineering Lynx GWS
The eight inches of loft in this 850-fill sack will incite bag envy among your friends. After a freezing rainstorm on Mt. Rainier, one tester said, "I avoided hypothermia thanks to this highly weatherproof, Windstopper-shelled bag. It kept me warm even though I was soaked, and all of the moisture on my body passed right through the shell's membrane as I dried off and warmed up." **$720; 3 lbs. 8 oz.; -10ºF; westernmountaineering.com**

*BAFFLES Chambers within sleeping bags that keep down from shifting around

All weights are for regular size, according to the manufacturer.

Shells

Core protection for any weather and environment

Hardshells

[versatile value]

Patagonia Super Cell

You want: a light, packable, breathable, do-it-all shell to get you from summer backpacking to winter snowshoeing and skiing, all for a moderate price. Your shell: the Super Cell, which takes the middle path between packability and protection. "Comfortable in everything from a summer hike in the Rockies to a windy ridgewalk in 40°F temps on the High Divide in Olympic National Park," raves one tester. "I didn't overheat while hiking hard in steep, wet conditions. And when I stopped on the exposed trail to take pictures, the midweight shell blocked gusts and kept me from freezing." A heavy-duty, 40-denier nylon outer fabric repels brutal mountain weather without excess bulk (like some similarly protective shells) thanks to the lightweight Gore-Tex Paclite membrane* construction, which shaves weight by skipping a separate inner liner in favor of a protective, oil-repelling coating. This design sacrifices some breathability, but well-placed, 14-inch-long waterproof pit zips vent extra heat effectively. The two large chest pockets sit high enough to play nice with both harnesses and packs. Testers also appreciated the adjustable, helmet-compatible hood with an extended brim that keeps drips out of the eyes. The fleece-lined neck and zipper garage eliminate skin irritation when the shell is sealed up. Cut is perfect: roomy enough to fit several layers, but not cavernous when worn with just a light baselayer. Downside: Like many waterproof zips, the main zipper and pit zips are stiff. **$249; 13 oz. (m's M); patagonia.com**

[featherweight bargain]

Outdoor Research Helium II

You always have room for an apple in your pack, right? That's all you need to carry—size- and weight-wise—for legit storm protection with this wispy shell. "It kept me bone-dry in everything from a summer squall in Seattle to a cold November shower on Washington's Tiger Mountain," reports one tester. The 2.5-layer Pertex Shield DS—a nylon face laminated to a polyurethane membrane—is lighter and cheaper than a three-layer fabric. And while it sacrifices some breathability, it delivers reliable weather protection with a barely-there feel. The Helium also saves weight with the oldest—and still one of the most effective—tricks in the book: less stuff. You get one chest pocket and one inner pocket, one hem toggle, no pit zips, and simple, nonadjustable elastic cuffs (which still sealed out drips and didn't ride up when testers raised their arms). Testers also praised the stay-put hood, which cinches tight and preserves excellent peripheral vision (but won't fit over a helmet). "The hood never got floppy on me, even while I was bouncing around on a trail run," says one tester. The athletic cut allows for layering with a light puffy, but this shell works best for milder temps, as the 30-denier fabric doesn't seal out cold wind like burlier material. It also doesn't have the tear strength of a heavier fabric, and the lightweight zippers might need TLC over time. Bummer: We steamed up during highly aerobic hiking and trail running. Bonus: This is the lightest *and* least expensive shell here. **$150; 6.4 oz.; outdoorresearch.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY TEXT BY TED ALVAREZ AND ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

*MEMBRANE **This superthin, waterproof/breathable layer has microscopic pores that are too small for water drops to pass through yet big enough for sweat vapor to escape.**

All weights provided by the manufacturer for men's large unless otherwise noted.

[minimalist armor]

Mountain Hardwear Quasar

This streamlined pullover was a huge hit with set-it-and-forget-it testers who wanted maximum protection, supreme breathability, and little else. "DryQ Elite is some of the most breathable stuff I've ever used—even during constant climbing, I never felt clammy," says one picky Colorado tester. "I started slipping this on in advance of yucky weather, rather than waiting until the last possible minute to 'shell up,' as I usually do." The reason? The proprietary DryQ Elite membrane doesn't require high humidity to move moisture: "The greenhouse effect you get with some membranes never happens," he says. And while the Quasar's 15-denier fabric doesn't insulate against cold like a heavier material, it provided amazing protection for the weight. One tester who wore the pullover during all-day, horizontal sleet on a late-season climb in the North Cascades reports, "When the sky really started rat-tat-tatting, it deflected ice pellets like Kevlar." While the jacket is light on extras (you get zero pockets), testers mooned over its lone special feature—stretchy-soft wrist gaskets with thumbholes. These internal waterproof cuffs kept out trickles when we reached overhead. The anorak design tucks cleanly beneath a pack's hipbelt and is compatible with a climbing harness. The long, trim cut fits a (very) lightweight puffy underneath, and a half-zip that reaches to mid-chest allows ample venting. Extended sleeves accommodate even ape-armed hikers. So what's the tradeoff? Like all anoraks, the Quasar is a struggle to pull over your head when it's wet. And the hood is easy to tighten the first time, but the sewn-in, spring-loaded device that loosens it is tricky to use—more so with gloves. "But once you tighten the hood to your preference, you'll feel like you're taking shelter in a cave," says one tester. **$375; 9 oz.; mountainhardwear.com**

[most breathable]

Montane Trojan/Athena

"Simply the best combination of maximum weather protection with maximum breathability I've tried," reports a tester. Others echoed the sentiment after comfortably braving fire-hose rainstorms in Olympic National Park, snow squalls in Colorado's Mt. Evans Wilderness, and freezing fog in the North Cascades with the Trojan (women's version is the Athena). The ultrabreathable shell, made with an eVent membrane, bested all others on multiday excursions in Mt. Rainier, North Cascades, and Olympic National Parks. "I kept expecting to sweat out while huffing and puffing in clammy rain up a brutal ridge, but there was only a little dampness at the small of my back against the pack," says one especially hot-blooded tester. The superior breathability is not due to the fabric alone; it's enhanced by the jacket's athletic, streamlined design, which has no excessive flaps or extra pockets to interfere with moisture transfer. Testers also praised the articulated arms, which enabled unencumbered movement for scrambling and self-belaying on snow slopes in Washington's Glacier Peak Wilderness. Two large chest pockets carry snacks or folded maps and provide additional venting; testers never complained about the lack of pit zips. A slim, bendable wire in the brim let testers adjust the rollaway hood without forming a rain-catching lip, and simple drawcords make one-hand volume adjustment a snap (there's room for a climbing helmet, but only just). Gripes: Extra-crinkly fabric means the jacket "rattles like a trash bag," and long-limbed testers complained the sleeves were a bit short. And it's not cheap. **$449/$419 (w's); 12.7 oz.; montane.co.uk**

[climbing champ]

Millet LTK Active Shell

In big-mountain terrain, going too light can backfire on you. But it sure hurts to carry more than you need. Enter the LTK, a well-balanced jacket that our testers packed on a three-week expedition in eastern Tibet. Excellent breathability, low weight, and alpine-friendly features make this shell a top pick for the fast-and-light climbing crowd. The breathability comes from Gore-Tex Active Shell, which our testers have deemed about 20 percent more breathable than previous Gore-Tex iterations, but there's no compromise when it comes to weatherproofing: "I wore this jacket the entire time on ridges where the always-windy weather went from sunny to snowy to rainy in minutes, and I never felt clammy or had moisture buildup inside," says one Himalaya tester. Hikers also welcomed the soft, supple feel, which made for a quiet jacket in driving wind when most "pop like firecrackers." That suppleness helps the LTK shrink to grapefruit-size so testers could stash it in a pack lid or outer pocket. An anatomical shape hugs slim torsos and long arms but affords top mobility and won't lift above the waist, making it ideal for reaching and ropework. (Caveat: The athletic design fits only a baselayer underneath, and it clung to some barrel-chested testers like Saran Wrap.) The hood is snug over a helmet, but the LTK's thin-and-flexy fabric tucked under one comfortably. Ding: The **pocket vents*** are a little *too* efficient: "It's fine if you don't have anything in them; otherwise, there's a chance you'll lose sunglasses when venting a 'pocket.'" Note: Gore's lightest membrane is designed to favor breathability and low weight over durability (as compared to the company's heavier Pro Shell), and could wear down over time under big-load pack straps. Still, none of our five Active Shell samples (from five different brands) have showed any damage over a season or more of testing. **$349/$329 (w's); 13 oz.; millet.fr**

***POCKET VENTS** Mesh liners (instead of solid fabric) in large chest pockets allow air in and sweat vapor out when the pockets are open.

Shells

[year-round workhorse]

Columbia Compounder

There's more than one way to enhance a jacket's breathability, as Columbia proves with its new technology, called Omni-Wick EVAP. The claim: Hydrophobic microparticles increase the liner's surface area for speedier evaporation, and break up perspiration molecules for faster transfer through the membrane (traditional membranes use hydrophilic wicking fibers, which can absorb moisture and slow the evaporative process). The result: "I stayed completely dry in heavy rain at 11,000 feet on the Colorado Trail, despite working hard to hightail it off a ridgeline," says one tester who armored up against a season of hard-luck weather in Colorado and Utah in the Compounder. "I sweat a lot, but I stayed dry and comfortable on cold mornings with just a light fleece—and I barely used the pit zips, even on 1,000-foot climbs in the Collegiate Peaks," she says. Testers agree that the breathability is nearly as good as some fabrics that cost much more. A relaxed fit with long arms leaves plenty of room for winter layering. The Compounder hits the major creature-comfort marks: comfy, easy-to-adjust hood; soft face lining; internal mesh pockets handy for storing gloves. Caveats: While waterproof pocket zippers all run smoothly, the main zip requires wrestling. The Compounder is also the heaviest hardshell we tested, though the weight is mitigated by burly fabric that offers multisport potential: It crosses over into skiing and mountaineering, yet it's not too heavy for backpacking. **$300; 1 lb. 2 oz.; columbia.com**

Compare Specs for 290+ Shells

We've put the entire outdoor industry at your fingertips. Download comprehensive product listings—complete with price, weights, fabric details, and other key specs—and easily compare models across dozens of brands. **backpacker.com/gearcharts2012**

[bargain breathability]

REI Kimtah

An eVent jacket for less than 250 bucks? We don't know how those REI bean counters cooked the books on this one, but we love the results: The Kimtah delivers top-notch breathability and weather protection for a few twenties less than the nearest shells in its class, making it a superb value. "I felt totally comfortable powering uphill in a central Cascades rainstorm with temps in the 40s, while wearing just the Kimtah and a baselayer," one tester reports. "And on a late-fall ascent of Washington's Mailbox Peak, the Kimtah shed everything from drizzly rain at the trailhead to wet snow flurries at the summit." Credit the eVent membrane for the above-average breathability; it vents sweat vapor without the need for a humidity differential between the shell and the outside air, which helps prevent moisture buildup inside. The jacket easily accommodates a midlayer for colder weather, making it more versatile than a standard lightweight shell (downside: it's a bit heavy for a three-season jacket). Other smart features: Velcro cuffs that seal out precipitation and angle over the back of the hand for enhanced coverage; an adjustable, wide-brimmed hood; two handwarmer pockets placed high enough to clear a hipbelt; a fleecy zipper garage* that doesn't chafe the chin; and a cinchable hem with toggles that rest below the waist (so they don't dig into the hips while you're wearing a pack). Drawbacks? A baggy cut and extra features, like storm flaps over the non-waterproof zippers, make the Kimtah a shade less breathable than more expensive eVent shells. Another quibble: The hood adjustments around the face require two hands and are tough to grasp while wearing gloves. **$239; 15.5 oz.; rei.com**

[full-featured featherweight]

MontBell Versalite

While many featherweight shells ruthlessly cut extras to save grams, the Versalite reaches rock-bottom weight while preserving key features, like two pockets, 12-inch pit zips, a low (protective) hem in back, and adjustable Velcro/elastic cuffs. And it's more affordable than most, too. MontBell's thin, proprietary 2.5-layer laminated fabric paired with water-resistant zippers shrugged off all-day precip: "I hiked through heavy mist, extended drizzle, and several cloudbursts," reported a tester after a trek in Washington's Henry M. Jackson Wilderness. Another hiker praised its ultralight wind protection in 30-mph gusts. The relaxed cut accommodates a light puffy, but the shell still packs down to papaya size (smaller in the included stuffsack). Breathability is only average, but the pit zips help compensate. Dings: Testers wished for a stiffer brim, and the fabric is a tad crinkly. **$179; 6.7 oz (m's M); montbell.us**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

*ZIPPER GARAGE A small, covered portal at the top of a zipper track that prevents water from leaking into the slider.

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[bombshelter]

Westcomb Switch LT Hoody

"When it gets truly nasty out, there's nowhere I'd rather be than huddled inside the Switch—it protects like a portable yurt," says one tester. The Polartec NeoShell fabric deflected hours of fat Colorado flakes, while days of pouring Cascade rain beaded up and "flowed off like mercury." Swatches of heavy-duty ripstop nylon and stronger-than-average stitching per inch make the Switch supremely tough, too. It looks off-the-rack new after a season and a half of abuse on rock, sand, mud, and ice. But all that protection doesn't make the jacket steamy, thanks to NeoShell's fibrous membrane, which allows a tiny amount of air in to lower the jacket's internal humidity. Testers reported superior breathability even on punishing uphills. A medium fit maintains an athletic profile while preserving space for a warm puffy, and increased volume from armpit to cuffs keeps multiple layers from bunching up. Intuitive details abound: Hood and hem snug up easily with just a one-handed tug, and toggles stay tucked away from chafe points like hipbelts. Features are generous for the weight, and include two Napoleon pockets*, an internal media pocket, and a triceps stash. A high collar keeps out spindrift and mist while cradling the face in baby-soft velour lining. It's not the lightest of the bunch, and it costs major coin, but in return you get a true year-round performer: "After a summer of backpacking, I can't wait to go skiing in this thing," says one tester. **$430; 15 oz. (m's M); westcomb.com**

[4-season bargain]

Stoic Stash

Most bargain shells compromise on fit, features, versatility, or all three. Not so with the Stash, says a former pro adventure racer who held onto this tough, sub-one-pound shell like a security blanket on wet summer traverses in the Olympics, fall trail runs in the Rocky Mountain foothills, and on alpine and cross-country ski days across Colorado. On a storm-cloud-shadowed trail run, the jacket's proprietary Bombshell Lite fabric breathed well enough over a short-sleeve baselayer to keep our tester from overheating (though he had to open the pit zips for uphill stretches). On a windy, 20°F powder day with blowing snow, he stayed toasty and dry wearing just a baselayer and a light fleece underneath. Tall, athletic testers raved about the stretchy fabric and ergonomic cut: "I've worn a lot of shells, and this one fits me like no other—plenty of length in the arms and a snug, tapered midsection that still let me move easily," says one 6'2", 210-pound tester. Features aren't flashy, but they work: Soft fabric prevents zipper chafe, internal storm flaps seal out zipper leaks, and the jacket features two smallish, lined handwarmer pockets and one internal stash pocket. Smart: Waist drawcord loops are inside the handwarmer pockets, keeping them clear of hipbelts. Caution: Medium-to-large hikers may find the jacket too tight. **$189; 13 oz.; stoicgear.com**

[all-purpose ultralight]

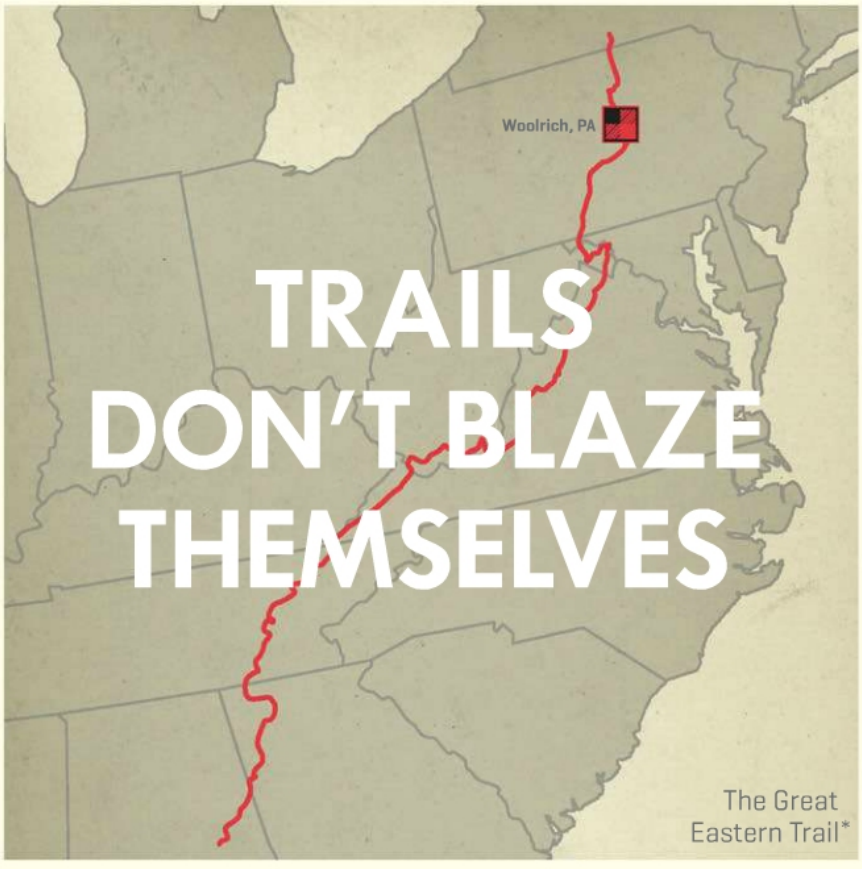
Helly Hansen Odin FastPack

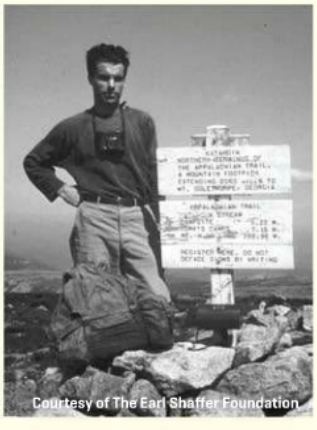
For a couple of ounces more than the lightest shells available, this featherweight delivers category-leading versatility and smart details. One tester used it while bike-commuting in the rain, paddling the Arkansas River, and climbing the Grand Teton, where it fended off 25-mph gusts of blowing snow. The Helly Tech Performance fabric's breathability rivals eVent or NeoShell, but that's not the only highlight. The jacket goes from good to great because of backpacker-savvy details: Where many ultralights are cut short to save weight, the FastPack's generous rear hem "actually extends over the hips, so your butt doesn't get soaked from rain running off your pack," says one tester, and it protects lower backs from gusts and updrafts. Testers dug the near baseball-cap-length brim for delivering superior visibility in gnarly precip; hood cords were easy to operate with gloves, and their tunneled design kept them from flapping in the breeze. The FastPack shaves weight by eliminating pit zips, and testers said "the superlong pocket zippers help it vent enough that you don't miss them." The athletic cut sports sleeves long enough for one of our most spider-limbed staffers. Packed size equals about a 20-ounce bike bottle; it fits in a pack's side pocket. Drag: Cuffs seal with Velcro, but lack stretch. Also, the jacket approaches four-season price without being burly enough to rely on for tree skiing and mountaineering. **$300; 8.5 oz.; hellyhansen.com**

PHOTOS BY ANDREW BYDLON (2); COURTESY (HELLY HANSEN)

*NAPOLEON POCKET A flat (non-bellowed) chest pocket for small items like a GPS, map, or lip balm; designed for opposite hand reach (right hand to left breast)

All weights provided by the manufacturer for men's large unless otherwise noted.





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Softshells

[alpine protection]

Rab Scimitar

Shoulder-season hikers reached for the Scimitar when high-output alpine activity was on the agenda, praising its one-two punch of breathability plus impressive weather protection. Rab's proprietary stretch fabric pairs a wicking inner surface with a durable, abrasion-resistant outer weave, adding heavier-denier fabric panels for extra strength on the shoulders, sides, and hood. Protection from sloppy weather was above average for a traditional softshell: "Rain rolled right off, and snow, sleet, and freezing stuff didn't make a dent," reports one tester who wore the Scimitar in New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest. The fabric's exceptional DWR* coating beaded light to moderate precipitation without any sign of wetting out, but the non-waterproof zippers are vulnerable to leaks and the jacket won't handle a sustained downpour. Breathability is enhanced by three large, mesh-lined pockets (two handwarmer pockets big enough to swallow a map or pair of gloves, and one Napoleon pocket), which cooled steamy testers efficiently when unzipped. Props also went to the stylish, athletic cut that allowed for unhindered movement, plus long sleeves that "kept my wrists completely covered, even while I searched for my next handhold on a snowy climb," says one wearer. Testers also praised the Scimitar's easy-to-adjust, rollaway hood, which stays in place and features a moldable wire brim to keep precip clear of eyes (though some found the shape was too baggy without a helmet). Caveats: The main zipper can take some fiddling to get started, and the Scimitar is heavier than competing softshells. **$175; 1 lb. 4 oz.; rab.uk.com**

[next-to-skin comfort]

Helly Hansen Odin Light Softshell

Any softshell worth the name delivers weather protection paired with breathability and durability—but how many are comfy enough to do double duty as an insulation piece? The Odin Light's slim profile and supersoft lining had testers toting the jacket in place of a fleece, making it a legit part of a multiday layering system (when many softshells get left behind). "The fabric felt cozy where most jackets get clammy," says one fan. The Odin Light also scored praise for versatility, a key feature of any softshell. One tester reports it handled sleet in Colorado's Gore Range just as well as windy, sunny days in Rocky Mountain National Park. The double-weave fabric easily repelled short-lived alpine storms, thanks to a DWR coating and waterproof zippers. The jacket earned high marks for its excellent breathability: "I didn't overheat while climbing Colorado's 14,150-foot Mt. Sneffels, even though the class 3 scrambling had me working hard," says another hiker. "Then it kept me toasty on the windy summit." Also appreciated: backpacker-friendly details like a long hem that won't ride up under a hipbelt, two high chest pockets that are easily accessible while wearing a pack, and sleeves that extend far enough to keep our long-limbed testers' wrists warm and dry even with arms raised. Dings: Testers got lost in the roomy hood without a helmet; one out of three samples showed wear in the small of the back and elbows after one season of hard use; curvy female testers found the slim cut of the women's version too restrictive for comfort. **$200; 1 lb. 4 oz.; hellyhansen.com**

[waterproof]

Outdoor Research Mithrilite Jacket

A conventional softshell sacrifices some degree of weather protection to get that highly breathable, stretch-with-you performance. Not the Mithrilite. Made with a proprietary waterproof/breathable membrane and fully taped seams, this shell shielded climbers from surprise showers in Joshua Tree National Park, skiers from snowy weather in Oregon's Three Sisters Wilderness, and hikers from biting wind on Mt. Hood's Timberline Trail. "It's a multiuse, extremely versatile climbing/biking/hiking/skiing/travel piece," raves one tester. While the Mithrilite doesn't breathe as well as a non-waterproof softshell, testers were impressed with its comfort during high-output activity, thanks to hip-to-pit zips that can be opened from both sides for extra venting (and easy access to a harness or climbing rack). Another smart multisport detail: a hood that fits over low-profile bike and climbing helmets (but not ski helmets) without sacrificing mobility or peripheral vision. Testers also loved the well-placed pockets (both handwarmer and Napoleon), the cozy microfiber lining against the neck and chin, a back hood adjustment that's easy to grasp while wearing gloves, and street-ready styling. But choose this jacket for daytrips: It's heavy, and dries slowly if the fabric does wet out (the face fabric got soggy but didn't leak in all-day soakers). Bummer: The adjustment cord site leaked when snow built up on the hood. **$199; 1 lb. 6 oz.; outdoorresearch.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

*DWR Durable water repellent treatment; a surface coating that sheds rain, so the fabric doesn't "wet out" (absorb water) and get cold and heavy

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[best fitting]

Arc'teryx Gamma SL Hybrid Hoody

Superior mobility, softshell protection: This magic combination kept the Gamma SL on the backs of our high-octane hikers, trail runners, and snowshoers. "It's a perfect outer layer for aerobic sports in most any season—light enough to pack anytime and tough enough to handle some bushwhacking or chimneying abrasion," says a tester who wore it while snowshoeing through bitter headwinds at 9,000 feet on Utah's Boulder Mountain. Arc'teryx achieves optimum flexibility by employing two fabrics in key areas: A durable, nylon/spandex combo offers near-waterproof weather protection and a wide range of motion in high-wear areas like the shoulders, arms, and hips, while a thinner material lets vapor escape from the chest and armpits. The shell's climate range and breathability are superb: In high-and-dry Colorado and humid coastal Washington alike, our testers hammered on trail runs and only felt minimal sweat. The Gamma's "immaculate" cut drew raves: Comfy, action-ready, and roomy without being baggy, and the "neck fit couldn't possibly be any better—it's snug enough to keep out drafts without strangling you," says one tester. Bummer: The two large waist drawcord toggles fall right on the hips, where they can rub under heavily loaded packs. **$269; 13 oz. (m's M); arcteryx.com**

[bargain]

Marmot Vapor Trail Hoody

From Cascade trails to squall-lashed sailing trips, one Pacific Northwest tester couldn't quit the do-it-all Vapor Trail. "I used it alone as an outer shell during drippy dayhikes, an insulating midlayer on colder, high-altitude backpacks in Olympic National Park, and as an emergency shield during downpours on brief in-town commutes—I never ran out of uses for it," he says. Mist, drizzle, and even short periods of moderate rain didn't penetrate the Vapor Trail (though heavy rain will seep through pressure points, like where pack straps hit the shoulders). The 100-percent polyester stretch material and generous cut under the arms offers excellent range of motion, but a medium overall cut leaves room for layering. It's silky and pliant enough to sub for a puffy as a pillow, and media, sleeve, and dual chest pockets offer ample space for iPods, cameras, maps, and sunglasses. Smart design: Pointed cuffs draw beads of water off the sleeves. Tradeoffs: It's not the most breathable of the bunch, and the elastic drawcord hem always seems a little tight. Some logos are peeling off after two seasons of heavy use (otherwise, signs of wear are minimal). Bonus: Testers declared the Vapor Trail one of the most stylish picks. "I appreciated being able to go from trailhead to brewpub without having to change clothes." **$150; 14.5 oz. (m's M); marmot.com**

[most versatile]

The North Face Alpine Project

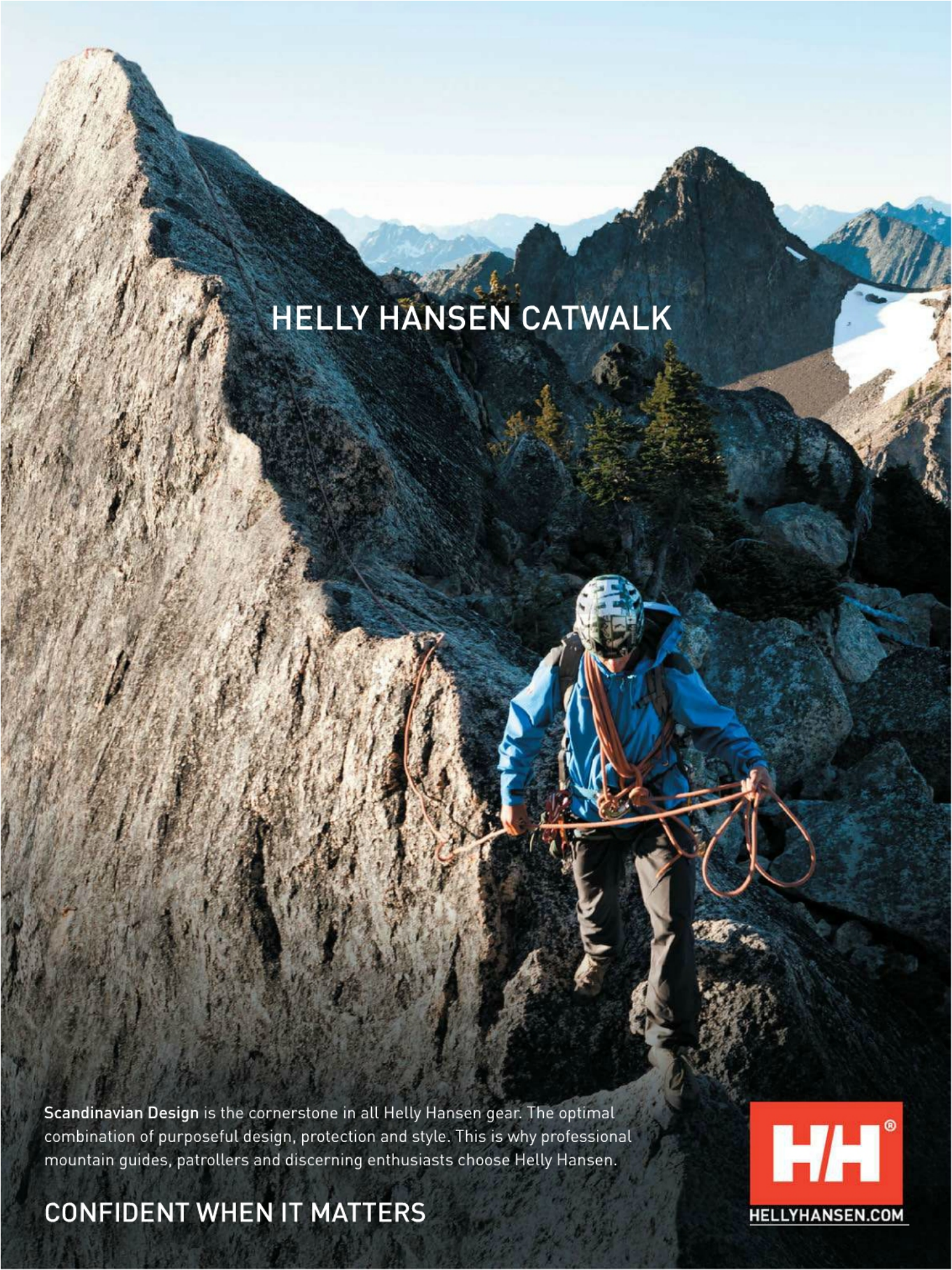
Call it a happy case of mistaken identity: This softshell thinks it's a hardshell. "I was in a saturating deluge during two long desert trail runs and the DWR on this jacket beaded *all* water—zero leak-through, no wet seams, no chilled shoulders," says a tester. Windstopper X-Fast, a new version of Gore's three-layer softshell fabric, has four-way stretch and an open-weave nylon that enhances moisture transfer. Testers called the breathability-to-weatherproofing "freaking amazing." They report: It lets sweat escape faster than a hardshell while providing bomber windproofing and extreme water resistance over a broad temperature range (20s to 60s). A streamlined design helps eliminate leak points, making this a go-to "almost-stormshell" for everything but multiday backpacks in the wettest locales (it doesn't have **taped seams***, so it's not intended for long-term rain). A moderately full cut allows athletic mobility, and the slightly stretchy fabric slides over insulation layers without binding. Long sleeves, no-bulk cuffs, two small handwarmer pockets and one small Napoleon pocket, and a brimmed and sculpted storm hood round out the minimalist, "easy-to-live-in" features. One tester calls it "a revelation when it comes to classic softshell performance: It's got all you need for summer squalls or winter blizzards, and nothing you don't." **$250; 12 oz.; thenorthface.com**

Testers: Ted Alvarez, Kelly Bastone, Jason Boyle, John Bouchard, Nancy Bouchard, Catherine Buni, Dave Casey, Joel Charles, Shannon Davis, Jonathan Dorn, Nira Duvan, Jon Frankel, Austin Gibney, Adam Harmon, Katie Herrell, Michael Hodgson, Kristin Hostetter, Jennifer Howe, Steve Howe, Emily Jeffers, Mark Jenkins, Rachel Jones, Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan, Dennis Lewon, Casey Lyons, Emily Lyons, Ben Nachtrieb, Joel Nyquist, Laura Onstot, Shayla Paradeis, Kim Phillips, Brad Pogue, Kyle Ramer, Evelyn Spence, Becca Stubbs, Julia Vandenoever, Dave Voss

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

***TAPED SEAMS Even with the best fabric, you need taped or welded seams for total waterproofing.**

All weights provided by the manufacturer for men's large unless otherwise noted.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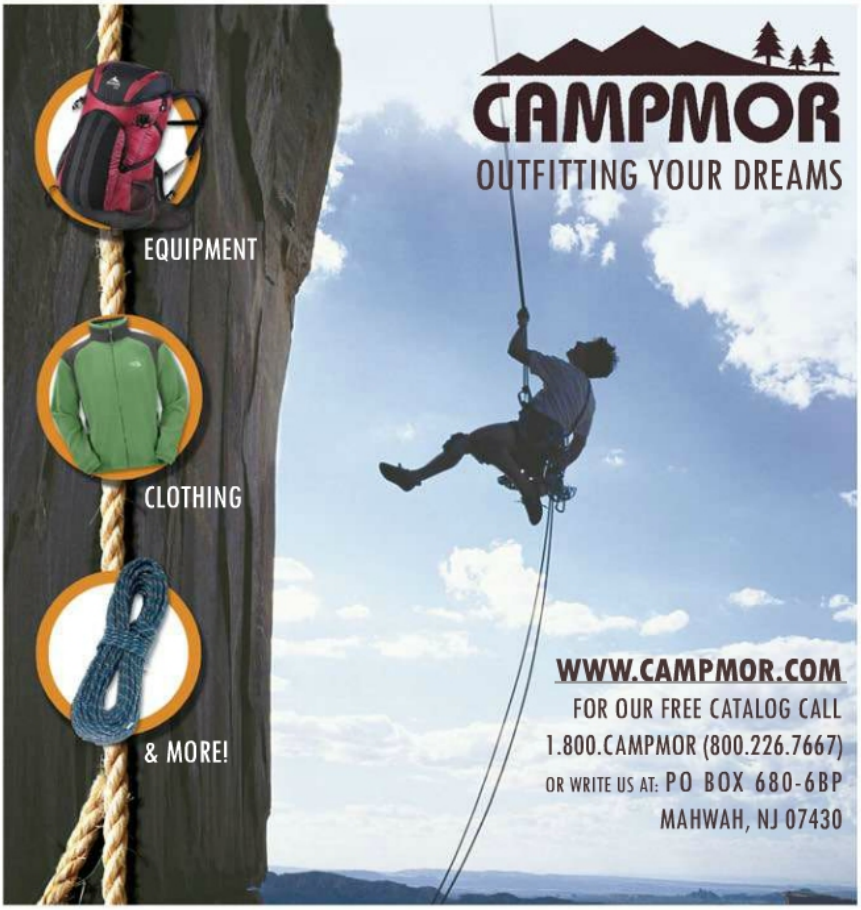

More Tester Picks

HARDSHELLS

» Helly Hansen Odin Superstretch
Feels like a softshell, protects like a hardshell, say testers of this fully waterproof shell with four-way stretch. It shielded one Colorado backpacker from extended rain, yet felt "quiet and soft" and allowed for unrestricted movement. The comfortable, easily adjustable hood also drew raves: "Fantastic—one of the best hoods I've ever worn." Ding: Baggy cut. **$400; 1 lb. 4 oz.; hellyhansen.com**

» Arc'teryx Beta FL
Hard-charging testers seeking high breathability and low weight loved this Gore-Tex Active Shell jacket. It packs to demi-baguette size and "breathes so well I didn't get sticky, even on humid spring days," reports one tester. Another raves, "Of the Gore-Tex jackets I've worn, this one performs the best under aerobic conditions in foul weather." Also: Get top-tier features and toughness for the weight. **$450; 11.4 oz. (m's S); arcteryx.com**

» GoLite Kenai
This ultralight shines in awful weather, making it ideal for ounce-counters on multiday trips. The Pertex Shield fabric fended off sudden downpours, and 13-inch-long pit zips kept one tester from overheating on a sunny, windy ascent of Mt. Shasta. **$200; 10 oz.; golite.com**

» L.L.Bean Trail Model
For rain protection at a rock-bottom price, reach for this superlight 2.5-layer shell. One Oregon tester called it "impenetrable" after a cloudburst that had her contemplating digging moats around the tent. The tradeoff for this price is limited breathability and venting, so it's best for in-camp protection and sedentary activities like fishing. **$69; 11.6 oz.; llbean.com**

» Mammut Felsturm Half-Zip
"Unparalleled temperature range," declares one tester who hiked and skied this lightweight shell through rain, sleet, and snow on Utah's Lake Peak. Breathability is top-notch, thanks to a Gore-Tex Active Shell membrane and open-weave nylon face fabric. And the streamlined design (half zipper, single pocket) translates to a ridiculously small packed size. **$390; 10.5 oz.; mammut.ch**

» Merrell Chameleon
Get a durable, Gore-Tex Paclite shell for less than $250. One Colorado tester praised its move-with-you, four-way stretch fabric and

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

waterproof pit zips. Tradeoffs: It's a bit heavy, pockets sit under a pack's hipbelt, and the hood feels roomy without being big enough for a helmet. **$249; 1 lb.; merrell.com**

» MontBell Thunder Pass
An impressive performance-to-price ratio makes this shell a smart bet for backpackers on a budget. "It's perfect for shoving in your pack for chilly summits and late-afternoon thunderstorms," says one Colorado tester, who stayed dry in a Routt National Forest downpour. Cons: You'll pay for the savings with a baggy cut, tough-to-adjust hood and hem toggles, and only average breathability. **$99; 14.6 oz. (m's M); montbell.us**

» The North Face Venture Jacket
An innovative castor-oil blend makes the fabric in this bargain waterproof shell almost as breathable as standard technologies, and TNF eliminated about 50,000 pounds of petroleum-based production pollutants from the line it replaced. It shielded our Pacific Northwest tester from both wind and deluges; breathability is solid, enhanced by long pit zips and mesh-lined pockets. Great backpacking performance plus eco-friendly construction earned this jacket an Editors' Choice Green Award in 2011. **$99; 12.4 oz. (m's M); thenorthface.com**

» Rab Stretch Neo Jacket
This air-permeable Polartec Neoshell jacket earned near-perfect scores on breathability, even in tough slogs through foggy, humid conditions in the Columbia River Gorge. Other smart features: The helmet-ready hood "sheltered my head and face so well I felt like I was sitting in a tent," reports a Mt. Whitney tester, and the roomy cut makes cold-weather layering a snap. **$365; 1 lb. 2 oz.; us.rab.uk.com**

» The North Face Leonidas
"The perfect combination of fit and features at an affordable price," raves one tester of this proprietary 2.5-layer HyVent shell. Stretchy nylon fabric let him reach for pole plants and handholds without binding, and an elasticized band keeps the hood snugged closely to the head. Reliable weatherproofing and long pit zips kept testers comfortable from rainy hikes in Colorado National Monument to snowshoe trips in wind-driven hail. **$199; 11 oz. (m's M); thenorthface.com**

SOFTSHELLS AND WINDSHIRTS

» Feathered Friends Jackorak
"If money is no object, this is the windshirt you want," says one Colorado tester of this hooded, über-light Pertex Endurance UL shell, which is waterproof enough to weather prolonged drizzles and passing showers (even without fully taped seams). A full zip enhances breathability, and the minimalist, climber-friendly cut keeps weight down without sacrificing features like chest pockets and a hood brim. Gripe: noisy fabric. **$144; 3.7 oz.; featheredfriends.com**

» Marmot Ether DriClime Jacket
One Colorado tester declared this the most breathable wind layer she'd ever worn. Mesh panels behind the arms and in the pits make it ideal for gusty summit hikes and high-output winter activities such as skate-skiing. The two-layer DriClime knit lining wicks sweat away from the skin by pushing it to an outer layer where it can dissipate. A DWR coating also sheds light rain. **$100; 8 oz. (w's M); marmot.com**

» Mountain Hardwear Shadowland
This featherweight softshell's brushed tricot lining adds warmth like an extra layer, making it perfect for wearing over a baselayer in chilly shoulder-season weather, reports one Mt. Whitney tester. The lining adds weight and reduces breathability a bit, but the Conduit laminate stops wind dead and repels precip (but seams aren't taped; it's not waterproof). Ding: Loose elastic cuffs let wind creep in. **$130; 14.2 oz.; mountainhardwear.com**

» Outdoor Research Ferrosi Windshirt
Dry-weather warriors who place a premium on packability will dig this windshirt. "It balls up like an orange," says one tester. Clamminess was never a problem: Long side zips and mesh underarms allowed for excellent venting, but the shell was substantial enough to keep hikers toasty in strong winds on exposed ridges. Testers gave high marks for fit and range of motion, but a single Napoleon pocket only holds "a doubled-over trail map or an iPod, and not much else." It's also heavy for its category. **$85; 10.1 oz.; outdoorresearch.com**

» Patagonia Nine Trails
Sweat-prone testers loved this ultralight hoodless windshirt, thanks to the combo of ripstop nylon in the front and sleeves with stretchy, breathable polyester in the back and pits. "My back gets sweaty when I'm wearing a pack, so at rest stops I get chilled quickly," says a tester who wore it in California's Whiskeytown National Recreation Area. "But I stayed drier in this shell." Ding: It wets out fast. **$99; 5 oz.; patagonia.com**

» Rab Boreas/Aurora Pull-On
Our gear editor declared this quick-drying jacket the first softshell she'd take backpacking, thanks to its extremely high breathability, light weight, and solid weather resistance. During a daylong storm of wet snowflakes in Capitol Reef National Park, it never wetted out. The fuzzy lining and snug fit make it wearable as a baselayer and softshell in one. Testers also praised its four-way stretch, long cuffs, and deep-venting chest zipper. **$80; 8 oz. (w's M); us.rab.uk.com**

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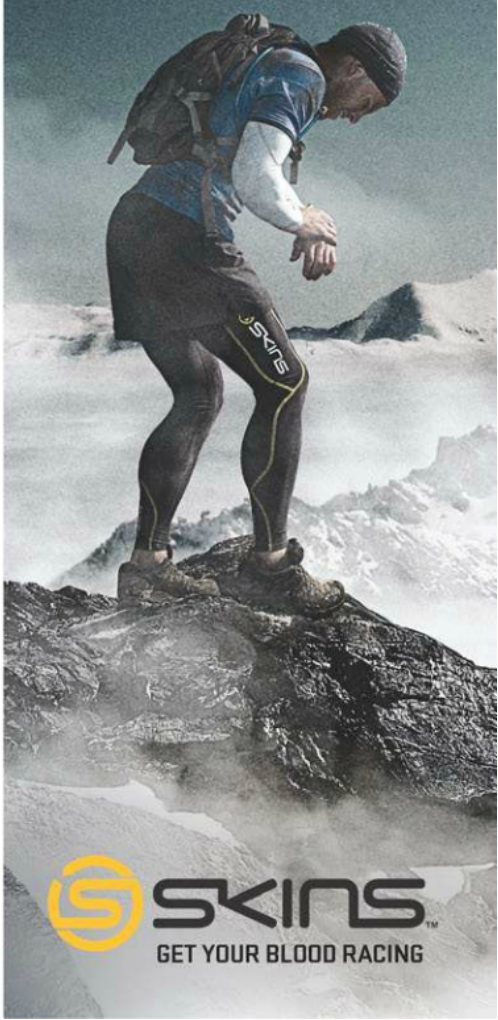

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The 10 Essentials

First Aid

[minimalist kit]

Adventure Medical Kits SOL Survival Medic

For minimum weight penalty, this iPhone-size kit combines the first-aid must-haves most hikers pack (bandages and ibuprofen) with the survival essentials (space blanket, whistle, compass, and firestarter) many leave at home. One patch of duct tape delivers blister prevention, but hot spot-prone hikers will want to add moleskin. **$15; 4 oz.; surviveoutdoorslonger.com**

Fire

[lighter]

Wenger Fidis

Let there always be light: The Fidis uses liquid fuel and a wick instead of a butane torch (which can be balky in extreme cold). Result? A windproof flame capable of lighting a stove despite gusts—or igniting tinder as one tester did during a squall in Colorado's Indian Peaks Wilderness. The tail of the lipstick-size shaft houses two screw-top compartments: One is a spare fuel tank, and the other stores extra wicks and flints (not included) that ensure you'll be able to field-fix the Fidis. Bonus: The cap's polished inner surface acts like a mirror, reflecting the flame and making it bright enough to read a map. **$110; 3 oz.; wengerna.com**

Hydration

[water treatment]

SteriPen Freedom

Last year's Editors' Choice-winning Adventurer Opti set the standard for reliable and packable water treatment. The Freedom is even lighter, more compact, and easier to use.

Employing ultraviolet light, it treats a half-liter of water in 48 seconds, and you don't even have to push a button: Just dip the UV lamp into the water and swirl. **$119; 2.6 oz.; steripen.com**

Navigation

[long-trail maps]

Pocket Profile Maps

One type of map—huge paper topos—existed when The Mountaineers first published the 10 Essentials, the club's checklist of must-pack gear for any dayhike or backpacking trip. Nowadays, the options are endless. Case in point: These waterproof guides pack Webster's-worthy detail into a pocket-size package for AT and JMT thru-hikers. Mileages, elevation profiles, water sources, and routes appear on one foldout sheet that weighs just four grams. The complete sets comprise nearly two dozen individual maps, so you just carry the pages you need. **$4 each; pocketprofilemaps.com**

[custom maps]

MyTopo / BACKPACKER Pro Maps

We teamed up with partner MyTopo to deliver the best hiking maps on the market. See a GPS-enabled trip you like on backpacker.com? Log in and order it as a waterproof map with your choice of shaded-relief topo, aerial, or hybrid background. Then choose lat/long or UTM* grid overlays and custom-center it. No more buying a full park map that lacks route detail. You can also choose BACKPACKER PRO Maps, which give turn-by-turn directions and campsite info for our editors' favorite weekend trips. PRO Maps come in medium (24"x36", $20) and large (36"x48"; $35), while custom maps range from $10 to $230, depending on map type, size (up to 5'x8' for wall-worthy art), and paper (such as waterproof, glossy, or laminated). **backpacker.com/promaps and myTopo.com**

[compass]

Brunton O.S.S. 10B

Heading off trail? "Grab a length of P-cord and loop this simple compass around your neck," says our senior editor, who used the O.S.S 10B to maintain course during a whiteout on Mt. Rainier's Muir Snowfield. "For ultraprecise navigation, you'll want a spendier compass with a sighting mirror, but for spot checks while following a bearing (a common compass use for hikers), this is one of the simplest yet most reliable models out there." Bonus: A clear baseplate allows you to overlay it on a topo during map consults, and adjusting declination requires no tools—just twist the housing. **$13; 1 oz.; bruntonoutdoors.com**

Illumination

[headlamp]

Black Diamond Icon

"BD crossed an M1 Abrams with a Prius," declared our tester after a three-week expedition in Nepal. "The Icon is tank-tough, yet it sips fuel as economically as a hybrid." Credit the four-AA power source and a dimmer switch, which let testers dial down the lamp's brightness to the minimum required, like the subtle glow needed for reading in the tent. "Dimming dramatically extended burn time," he reports. After running the lamp for 63 hours on the same batteries over the course of his trek, he didn't notice any drop in power. At the brightest setting (200 lumens), the center LED shines 100 meters. In the lower setting, less powerful LEDs cast diffuse light for close-up tasks; a red setting proved handy for nighttime map consults and midnight tent exits. Bonus: It's waterproof to three feet. Ding: Testers wished for padding on the battery case. Plus, expedition-tough and long-life power equals heavy. **$80; 9 oz. (with batteries); blackdiamondequipment.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY; ANDREW BYDLON (MAPS, 2). TEXT BY KELLY BASTONE

*UTM (UNIVERSAL TRANSVERSE MERCATOR) A reference grid that divides topo maps into 1-kilometer squares for easy and accurate navigating

All weights provided by the manufacturer unless noted.

The 10 Essentials

Knife/Multitool

[do-it-all]

Gerber Steady

Smartest multitool innovation in years: The addition of flexible, tripod legs and a standard quarter-inch camera screw so hikers can get no-blur images and video without schlepping an extra piece of gear. The Steady even has a clever adapter that lets you suction-cup a smartphone to the tripod. Of course, the device also has a dozen other tools, such as long and short blades, three screwdrivers, can opener, wire cutter, needle-nose pliers, and more. And its ergonomic design allowed our testers to apply more grip force than standard straight-sided tools. Note: Although the ball-and-socket tripod screw supports point-and-shoot cameras and smartphones, the system is too weak for DSLRs, midsize video cameras, and the largest compacts. These heavier and less center-balanced cameras list forward or to the side (but can work with some creative positioning/support). Our testers also wished for locking blades. The Steady fits big hands best. Bonus: Thanks to the plastic housing, it's light considering the features. **$65; 5.5 oz.; gerbergear.com**

Extra Food

[emergency calories]

Bridgford Ready To Eat Sandwiches

Whether you're heading out for one day or 10, it's wise to pack an extra day's food, ideally something you can eat without cooking. Pair the Cinnamon Bun with the Barbecued Beef Sandwich flavors to have more than 700 calories on standby—and that you can keep in your pack for three years. "These shelf-stable sandwiches are surprisingly moist and tasty," says one tester. MRE-style food not your thing? See page 125 for our favorite new bars and dehydrated meals. **$4 (each); 3.7 oz.; bridgford.com**

Sun Protection

[shirt]

Columbia Solar Polar ½ Zip

Most long-sleeved sun shirts feel suffocating in summer temps—but not the Solar Polar. It uses flat (not round) polyester yarns, which increase the surface area of fabric touching your skin to transfer sweat faster. "It kept me comfortable in direct sun and 85°F temps," says one tester, who issues props for the shirt's UPF* 50 coverage (which eliminates the need to slather sunscreen repeatedly on long treks). A deep, 14-inch zipper let her enjoy cooling breezes while cranking out steamy bike rides. Downside: Some testers balked at the torso-hugging, superhero styling. **$70; 5 oz. (w's S); columbia.com**

[hat]

Outdoor Research Revel Convertible Cap

On multiday trips, you'll likely want more versatility than a typical sun hat offers. Now, you don't have to carry two lids, or sacrifice comfort with a hat that works in one environment but not another. The Revel has two domes—a thin, stretchy nylon inner cap for breathability and sun protection, and a seam-taped, waterproof/breathable Pertex Shield DS stretch rain cover that unfurls from a pocket in the brim. The Pertex beaded melting snow on trail runs and let tons of sweat escape on power hikes. Nice feature: The easy-adjust Velcro strap locked the hat to our tester's melon in high winds. **$36; 2 oz.; outdoorresearch.com**

[sunscreen]

Elemental Herbs Zinc Sunscreen Sport SPF 30

Some sunscreens contain chemicals purported to diminish water quality and pose a cancer threat, but this reformulated lotion from Elemental Herbs uses pure zinc oxide (the non-nano particles are large enough that they don't get absorbed by your skin) to shield you from solar radiation. Testers found it thick but spreadable; once applied, it doesn't leave a greasy residue. "It kept my fair skin unburned during a five-hour hike at 11,000 feet," reports one Colorado tester. **$16; 3 oz.; elementalherbs.com**

Emergency Shelter

[bivouac sack]

Escape Bivvy by Adventure Medical Kits

Most emergency blankets and survivalist bivies provide insulation but don't breathe, making you damp. The Escape Bivvy solves that problem by using a proprietary waterproof/breathable fabric that lets moisture escape while reflecting body heat to boost warmth inside. Our tester used it alone, without a sleeping bag or pad, on a 43°F night and felt instant heat. A drawstring hood closure further prevents heat loss, although it doesn't cinch shut entirely, compromising the shelter's weather protection in hard rain. A side zip running to the knee makes it handy for non-emergency uses like adventure racing. **$50; 8 oz.; surviveoutdoorslonger.com**

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The 10 Essentials

Apparel

[puffy]

The North Face Think About It Jacket

With a wind-blocking nylon hood and sleeves married to an insulated PrimaLoft ONE torso, this full-zip blends the protection of a windshirt with the warmth of a vest. The result is a low-bulk, long-cut hybrid that's perfectly suited to everything from brisk summer alpine days to cold-weather workouts. It became a go-to jacket for one editor, who reached for it for three-season use in the Rockies, where he stayed warm moving in sub-20°F windchills and while sitting around camp with temps in the 50s. Bummer: While the brushed-fabric underarms enhance wicking, the lined sleeves reduce breathability without adding obvious function. (Women's version is the Kaleidoscope.) **$149; 11 oz. (w's S); thenorthface.com**

[shorts]

Mountain Hardwear Rifugio Trek Shorts

These wispy, nylon-elastane blend shorts have a barely-there feel—ideal for managing the desert heat of Utah's Castle Valley, as our tester did. An incorporated belt ensures custom fit without rubbing under a pack belt. A brushed lining at the waist and crotch make going commando comfortable. Benefit? "AC!" **$75; 7 oz. (m's M); mountainhardwear.com**

[minimalist pants]

Stoic Microlith Softshell Pant

Streamlined is an understatement—the Microlith doesn't even have a fly, just an elastic waistband with built-in belt, and one welded-zipper thigh pocket. What you do get: hardworking nylon/spandex fabric that's comfortable in a wide range of temperatures, keeping our tester from overheating at 75°F and from getting chilled while crossing snowfields in the 40s. The stretchy, midweight fabric has a DWR finish that repels light moisture. "Light, tough, simple," says our tester. **$99; 15 oz. (M); stoicgear.com**

[super-fit pants]

Helly Hansen Odin Quick-Dry Pant

Seeing a lot of Helly in this issue? That's because the Norwegians are killing it with smart features our testers love. These summerweight, stretch-nylon trousers feature a unique clasp that never comes unsnapped, perfectly placed pockets (including one on the thigh for maps), and (best of all) an innovative waistband that permits custom sizing. Built-in elastic belts slide forward and back from the hip, attaching securely via wide Velcro patches however snug you like. Bummer: no sizes for women. **$100 (shorts are $85); 13.6 oz. (36); hellyhansen.com**

[underwear]

Polarmax TransDRY Cotton

Dilemma: Synthetic skivies can get odiferous after just a day of wear, and wool can irritate sensitive undercarriages. Solution: this new-school cotton, which uses a **hydrophobic*** treatment on half of the cotton fibers. The treated fibers move moisture to the untreated so they disperse sweat over a greater area and speed evaporation. "It feels soft like my Fruit of the Looms, but wicks moisture and kept me dry," reports one tester, who wore the Men's Sports Brief for three days in Colorado's Flat Tops Wilderness. Another tester wore the Women's Bikini Brief while hiking near Moab, Utah, and issued props for its stay-put waistband (men's and women's models feature flat, anti-chafe seams). **$25; 3 oz. (m's L); polarmax.com**

[socks]

ULTRALIGHT Testers love the **Patagonia ULW Merino Crew** as a liner sock (it's uncushioned), but they also praise its comfort when worn alone in hot weather (one used them on 90°F days in Utah's Arches National Park). The wool/synthetic blend (53 percent merino, 45 percent nylon, two percent spandex) makes this crew more breathable than most all-wool socks, resulting in drier dogs. That, along with the unobtrusive toe seam, prevented blisters on high-mileage days. **$18; 1 oz. (m's M); patagonia.com**

LIGHTWEIGHT "These make all of my hiking shoes fit better," raves our tester of the **FITS Performance Trail,** a low-cuffed sock with a deep, C-shaped heel pocket that doesn't shift—even after days of wear—and cushions this friction-prone area better than any sock she's worn. "They're like skin armor, preventing blisters even when my boots slip," she attests. The wool/synthetic blend (58 percent merino, 32 percent nylon, seven percent polyester, and a whiff of Lycra) adequately manages moisture, but sweaty-footed hikers found them warmer than most lightweights. **$18; 2 oz. (w's S); fitssock.com**

MIDWEIGHT Most socks get warmer as they get thicker, but the **Balega X Athlete Multisport Crew** cushions feet without cooking them. Balega uses larger-diameter yarns and a "spacier" weave to promote airflow and moisture movement, and the durable polyester/mohair blend absorbs impact from rocky trails and heavy loads. A padded band across the front of the ankle prevents chafing. Bummer: The thin instep bunched. **$12; 2 oz. (w's S); balega.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

*HYDROPHOBIC Water-repelling, so the fabric fibers don't absorb moisture

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The 10 Essentials

[baselayers]

MIDWEIGHT Even merino snobs were impressed with the **Duofold by Champion Varitherm Mid-Weight Long-Sleeve Crewneck and Ankle-Length Bottoms.** This synthetic combo (96 percent polyester and four percent spandex) has a cottony feel. Plus, these affordable baselayers deliver excellent performance for all but the sweatiest endeavors: Testers who wore them backpacking and skiing report that moisture management is good (they're slower to dry than spendier synthetics, but faster-wicking than wool). "I never felt clammy when I wore these beneath a hardshell," reports one wearer, who hiked up Colorado's Hahns Peak in them. The superstretchy fabric delivers a skin-tight fit, and after months of wear and tear from backpacks and washing machines, both pieces retain a like-new plushness. Tradeoff? Fit sags after a full day's wear. **$28 each; 6 oz. (w's M crew); duofold.com**

HEAVYWEIGHT Get warmth without bulk. **Cabela's E.C.W.C.S. Thermal Zone Polartec Power Dry Crew Top and Bottoms** use gridded, heavy-weight Polartec Power Dry in the core, paired with mid- and lightweight fabric panels under the arms and around the cuffs to reduce bulk when layered beneath jacket sleeves and glove gauntlets. The result: "Warmth where you need insulation, breathability where you don't," says our tester, who used the layers while climbing Colorado Fourteeners from fall through spring. The Power Dry's impressive loft makes the core exceptionally warm. And the strategic mapping works equally well in the bottoms, says another tester who used them in the Chilean Andes. Fit is appropriately snug, and there are tall and XXL sizes for big guys. **$80-95; 9.6 oz. (XL tall); cabelas.com**

[rain jacket]

Hardshell

Staying dry is key to staying warm and comfortable. Peruse our favorite shells starting on page 96 to find the one that's right for you.

Trekking Poles

3 ways to increase stability and save your knees

LIGHTWEIGHT Testers liked the ounce savings of the three-section **Helinox Featherlite poles,** but it was their durability that really wowed. "I placed 200 pounds of body weight on them when I leaned in for balance in steep terrain," says our tester, who used them from Arkansas' Ozarks to Nepal's Everest region. "Through it all, they sustained only one small dent from impact." The impressive strength-to-weight ratio comes from DAC's light and strong proprietary TH72M aluminum alloy. Further weight savings come from the twist-lock mechanism, which is lighter than levers. The molded-foam grips proved comfortable through hours of hiking, and the foam extension on the shaft let our tester choke up on the pole during short, steep climbs. Bummer: The twist-lock loosened in freezing or wet conditions. **$120; 10 oz. (for 120 cm, also available in 135 cm); bigagnes.com**

PACKABLE If you prefer to stash your poles while scrambling, get the **Leki Micro Stick.** "It's the fastest, easiest assembly of any pole I've used," declares our tester, who carried it through 10,000 feet of relief in Chile's central Andes. Available in three models (for a max length of 51 inches), the Micro Stick collapses and expands like a tent pole, with a Kevlar cord running through each aluminum shaft: Just fit the lower sections over the aluminum connectors and close the lever-lock at the top, beneath the grip. Although length isn't adjustable, a foam extension let our tester change grip when climbing or sidehilling. That, plus the supershort packed length (16 inches) lead her to this conclusion: "The ideal blend of weight savings, strength, and packability." **$150; 1 lb. 2 oz.; leki.com**

ALPINE Ski mountaineers who want adjustable poles (but not collapsible, because they rarely store them on their pack) raved about the **Dynafit Broad Peak.** This two-section carbon pole telescopes from 45 to 57 inches (shrinking to 35 inches for storage) and uses a unique, glove-friendly locking mechanism: A rigid arm on the upper segment clicks into notches along the lower segment, and a lever cinches the connection. After months of use during snow climbs and ski-tours in Iceland's Westfjords and Colorado's Park Range, the lock never loosened inadvertently. The carbon composite displayed no fatal signs of wear or nicks, and the ergonomic foam grip is comfortable in a variety of hand positions. Plus: "The light **swing weight*** gives them a snappy, responsive feel." **$145; 13 oz.; dynafit.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

***SWING WEIGHT** The way a pole feels as you swing it forward and back; it's affected by design as well as ounces

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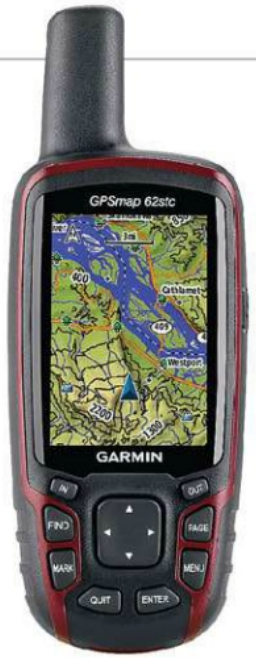

[GPS]

Garmin GPSMAP 62stc

Great things *do* come in small packages. Take the pea-size digital camera inside this top-performing GPS unit. The new photo-location capabilities enable hikers to savor the scenery rather than staring at a screen. "Instead of constantly trying to type out cryptic waypoint descriptions along the trail, I can simply take a picture of what I want to record," raved one tester. "Since the location is embedded into the file, I can look that up and add a more detailed note back home." The autofocus camera captures 5-megapixel images (the quality is okay for web viewing, not great for printing), plus their lat/long coordinates; it places a corresponding photo icon on the LCD screen map. Click on the icons to view your shots on the 2.6-inch color screen, or to navigate back to that spot. Even better: In addition to intuitive menus and pre-loaded 1:100K topo maps of the entire U.S., the waterproof 62stc has advanced features like a tilt-compensated, three-axis compass (displays accurate headings even when you're stopped or aren't holding the unit level) and a **barometric altimeter***. And thanks to the high-sensitivity GPS receiver, our testers recorded clean, continuous tracklogs even when the unit was stored in reception-challenged places like packs and jackets. At home, connect to your computer's USB port and easily drag GPS data and image files to your hard drive; no proprietary software is required. **$600; 7.7 oz.; 3.5GB internal storage (200 tracks); microSD slot; 2 AAs; garmin.com**

[iPhone case and battery]

Mophie Juice Pack Plus Outdoor Edition

Problem 1: Continuous use of your phone's GPS functionality quickly drains its reserves. Problem 2: iPhones are fragile. Solution: the latest Mophie Juice Pack, a burly update of the version that won a 2010 Editors' Choice Award. "I shot four days of photos and videos on a single charge in Chile," raves our gear editor. "That's almost double the previous performance." The Juice Pack's rechargeable lithium-polymer battery (thinner and lighter than traditional lithium-ion batteries) brought another editor's dying iPhone back to full power in less than three hours deep in the backcountry, even though her phone was simultaneously running a navigation app in the background. The plastic housing has a soft-touch coating for solid grip, and a TPU band around the edge increases impact protection. "I fumbled my phone while trying to snag a photo on a blustery ridgeline at 10,000 feet," says our gear editor. "No nicks." The case attaches to the iPhone at the bottom through Apple's standard 30-pin connector, and a small switch allows you to toggle between standby and charging modes. Testers also liked that they could check the Juice's battery life by pressing a button that ignites LEDs (four lights means fully charged). Bonus: The Outdoor Edition comes with a one-year subscription to Mophie's Outdoor nav app ($30 value), which lets you record tracks and waypoints, geotag photos, search for nearby trailheads and points of interest, and cache AccuTerra topo maps for offline viewing. Cons: The case isn't waterproof, there's no screen protector, and it's only compatible with iPhone 4 and 4S. A $19/year subscription is required to continue using the app after the first year. **$120; 3 oz.; mophie.com**

EDITORS' CHOICE 2012 BACKPACKER

backcountry communicator

inReach by DeLorme

When paired with the DeLorme Earthmate PN-60w GPS or an Android phone and app, this two-way satellite messenger lets you type and send messages to the folks back home—from anywhere in the backcountry. The best part: Now they can write you back. Injured? The interactive SOS feature allows you to text back and forth with first responders about your emergency. We were so impressed that we gave it an Editors' Choice Award (full review on page 30). *$250 (plus service plan); 8.2 oz.; delorme.com*

[pouch]

Backcountry Solutions Geek Pocket

Waypointers adore this protective sleeve, which attaches to a pack strap and secures a GPS (or smartphone) without inhibiting signal access. A tab over the open top kept contents from sliding out when testers scrambled or bent over to adjust their boot laces, and the fleece lining protects lenses and LCD screens. "I got shots with my iPhone that I would've missed fumbling with an unnecessarily complicated compartment," says our gear editor. **$23; 1.7 oz.; backcountrysolutions.com**

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) COURTESY (2), ANDREW BYDLON, JONATHAN DORN
TEXT BY TED ALVAREZ, ANTHONY CERRETANI, AND KIM PHILLIPS

***BAROMETRIC ALTIMETER** Gauges elevation based on air pressure, which drops as you move higher (but is also affected by weather)

Testers: Ted Alvarez, Kelly Bastone, Anthony Cerretani, Jonathan Dorn, Katie Herrell, Kristin Hostetter, Kim Phillips
Weights (including batteries) are on BACKPACKER scales.

Electronics

[DSLR]

Nikon D5100

In temps ranging from 15°F to 75°F, from the Rockies to the Andes, and from sea level to the summit of an 11,879-foot volcano in Chile, we tested this camera in a multitude of light and weather conditions. Our editor-in-chief praised it as "the perfect all-purpose upgrade for point-and-shooters looking to take their photos to the next level." He was particularly impressed by its performance on bright snow, a notoriously tough shooting environment: "Once I got the exposure dialed," he said, "it produced excellent whites, shadows, and sunrise colors, plus rich texture in shots I took of *penitentes* [sun-baked snow cones]. You could see individual crystals and complex, multi-angled reflections."

Other pros for backpackers include an easy-to-use, intuitive interface and above-average battery life. "I took about 1,200 pictures and a dozen videos in Chile on about 1.75 charges," he said. "The average user, who will likely review pictures a lot more than I did, could expect 400 shots per battery in cool to cold weather and 500 in warmer temperatures." The controls are also smartly placed: The video record button is located on the top front of the housing, where you can easily—but not inadvertently—press it. The cons compared to other DSLRs in this price class: Although it shoots **1080i*** HD video, the D5100's color is slightly less vibrant. The 18-55mm lens in the standard kit also has a somewhat limited focal distance that prevents super-macro close-ups. The viewfinder is relatively dark, and the foldout screen can be tough to read in direct and dappled light. **$850 (includes AF-S 18-55mm VR lens and rechargeable lithium-ion battery); SD card; nikonusa.com**

[all-in-one watch and trainer]

Highgear Axio HR

Track elevation, weather, and workout intensity with this powerful watch, which is also svelte enough for everyday wear. On trail, the Axio HR logs vertical speed and predicts weather changes; the built-in barometer accurately forecast increasing clouds in Chile's central Andes. Three altimeter presets speed calibration at your most-used trailheads. For serious training, pair it with the included chest strap, and it monitors your heart rate and stores up to 10 workouts (so you can compare performance and track fitness gains). Caveat: The sensitive side buttons get pushed inadvertently when scrambling or skiing, so testers attached the watch to a pack strap instead of a wrist. **$190; 4.6 oz.; highgear.com**

[video camera]

Kodak Playfull

Bulky cameras often get left behind when space is tight, but even ounce-counters happily toted this granola bar-size unit. It's waterproof down to three meters, fits into a chest pocket, and image quality is solid: Photos (five megapixels) and videos (**1080p*** HD at 30 frames per second, or 720p at 60 fps) are sharp enough for digital uses. Bonus: No cords or special software required. An attached micro USB (which charges the battery *and* exports files) tucks into the camera body and is sheltered from gunk behind a super-protective (but tough-to-open) tab. The main buttons, located on the middle back of the unit, are thumb-sized, and features like sharing files via Facebook are easy to navigate once you connect the Playfull to your computer. The glare- and scratch-resistant screen proved big enough (1.5 inches) to let shooters see what they were capturing at a glance, but is too small for expertly framing wide shots or seeing detail in close-ups. Battery life is decent, with enough juice to power three days of intermittent shooting. Gripe: Footage shot in bright sunlight can look washed out, and dark interiors like tents remain shadowy. But those are acceptable tradeoffs, testers concluded, given the camera's relatively low price and tiny size. **$130; 3 oz.; kodak.com**

[multi-use solar charger]

Eton Raptor

Is it an all-purpose survival tool or a bomber solar charger? Both, say our testers. The Eton Raptor stuffs a compass, altimeter, thermometer, barometer, stopwatch with alarm, multiband radio, LED flashlight, and bottle opener into a slim, 11-ounce, rubber-shielded exterior that 'biners onto a pack or belt loop. Meanwhile, a monocrystalline solar cell face feeds a lithium-ion internal battery with both USB and mini-USB outputs (perfect for charging point-and-shoots and cellphones that aren't full-size USB compatible). In our testing, a full charge required 17 hours of direct sea-level sun, eight hours yielded an 80-percent iPhone charge, and three hours topped off an old-school flip phone. Altimeter and thermometer readings were acceptable (if not quite as precise as dedicated devices) and rendered in a clear monochrome digital readout. Tough test: Scrapes while scrambling against rock walls in the North Cascades couldn't dent the Raptor's exterior, and a night left out in a rainstorm couldn't swamp it. Caveat: It uses a Byzantine combo of nine buttons to access all of its features; spend a good hour with the confusing manual before you take it out into the wild. "It took forever to figure it out, but once I did, it could replace five other tools," says one tester. "And I don't have to worry about it ever running out of batteries." **$100; 11 oz.; etoncorp.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

***1080p AND 1080i The number denotes a high-def resolution; the letter refers to scan type, with "p" capable of more pixels than "i".**

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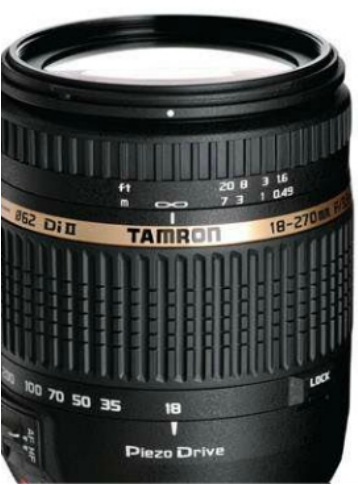
TIPS FOR AN AWARD-WINNING NATIONAL PARK PHOTOGRAPH

- **USE A TRIPOD:** For the sharpest image possible, a tripod is a must. Even with a tripod, the pressure on the shutter button causes a slight vibration, which softens the photograph a bit. Do not think of your tripod as a burden—think of it as a necessity to capture that pristine image you're looking for.
- **CHANGE YOUR POINT OF VIEW:** Think outside the box. Maybe the best shot is from behind a tree and through the brush. Wander around the environment and squat, climb or crawl for different shot options.
- **CONSIDER THE FOREGROUND:** Is the foreground interesting? If so, raise the horizon of your photograph to include more of it. If not, find a shot angle where it is interesting. The viewers of your photograph will then have a way into the image you are capturing.
- **TRAVEL LIGHT:** When you have serious miles ahead of you, but don't want to sacrifice the quality of your shots, its important to travel light. Reduce the bulk in your pack by taking one lens. **Tamron's all-in-one zoom lenses** give you the ultimate in shooting flexibility. When you need to travel light or in dusty conditions, the all-in-one zoom is the intelligent choice since you can keep it on the camera and capture virtually any subject—near, far or close-up—without changing lenses.



Tamron is a recognized leader in the manufacture of precision optics, offering a broad selection of meticulously engineered interchangeable lenses for professional photographers and photo enthusiasts. Tamron lenses deliver a superb fusion of performance and value, enabling today's high-resolution digital SLR cameras to perform at their peak. For more, visit **www.tamron-usa.com**.

NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN. A PURCHASE OR PAYMENT OF ANY KIND WILL NOT INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF WINNING. You must be a legal resident of the United States and be 18 years of age or older at the time of entry to win. Contest begins March 5, 2012 at 12:01 PM (ET) and ends May 31, 2012 at 11:59 PM (ET). For complete rules, log on to www.backpacker.com/tamron.

Eyewear

See (and look) better in more conditions with these tester favorites.

[interchangeable]

Switch Tioga

Most full-rim, interchangeable sunglasses make switching lenses a chore, but the Tioga requires no wrestling. "The lenses pop out (and back in again) with a smooth, easy motion, like a fine switchblade," says our tester. But thankfully, they also stay put during wear. Credit the tiny yet powerful magnets embedded into the nosepiece and temples, which secured the lenses while our tester hiked windy tundra in Rocky Mountain National Park. The optics are sharp enough to let our tester also distinguish hazardous mud pits while blasting down singletrack near Winter Park, Colorado. And a sticky nosepiece (which is rubberized across the bridge of the nose, not just on the sides) kept it from sliding down our tester's schnoz while she was creeping through ovenlike slots in Canyonlands National Park. The relatively thin stems felt comfortable—not pinchy or clunky—after hours of wear, and the polarization eliminates glare, allowing our tester to cross snowfields without eyestrain. When clouds thickened, she popped in the rose amber tint and enjoyed heightened contrast. **$149; 1 oz.; switchvision.com**

[multisport]

Julbo Dust

This is no one-trick pony: Not only is the Dust ideal for hiking, it's also superior for climbing and mountain biking, thanks to slim (and super-sticky) earpieces that tuck unobtrusively beneath a helmet. Plus, its **photochromic*** Zebra lenses adapt to a wide range of conditions. "I never had to squint, since the tint darkens quickly when moving from woods to open ridges," says a tester. The polycarbonate lenses provide enough coverage to block distracting reflections off snow and water, yet the gaps around the perimeter let in enough breeze to prevent fogging (an anti-fog treatment is also integrated into the lens material; unlike a coating it can't be wiped off over time). On a lowlands-to-crater spring climb up Chile's San Pedro volcano, "They never steamed up, whether I was slogging through dusty scrub or kicking steps into snow," says one wearer. The ultralight construction and snug fit from temples to ears limited bouncing when our tester hit singletrack downhills. But they're best for low to medium sunlight: Although they're versatile enough for most activities, they're not as dark as dedicated glacier glasses. **$170; 1.2 oz.; julbousa.com**

[mountaineering]

adidas Terrex Fast

Perfect for high-octane hikers who spend most of their time on windy, treeless summits—or executing acrobatic climbing moves—the Terrex Fast stays put in situations that send normal sunglasses flying. A lighter, trimmer version of the Terrex Pro (see our review at backpacker.com/terrexpro), the Fast also provides gogglelike coverage. The frame is lined with removeable hydrophobic foam that hugs your face to keep sweat from dripping into your eyes, providing total wraparound protection from high-altitude sun and wind. Yet ventilation is excellent, thanks to perimeter vents that let moist air escape. "They never fogged while I was climbing or running, or when I stopped moving after being on the go," says our tester, who wore them through 14-hour days of hiking and issued kudos for their comfort and versatility. By swapping out the standard stems for an elastic headband (included) while climbing near Yosemite, our tester kept these shades secure while executing moves that would've jilted other sunglasses. The stems also pivot to customize the lens angle. Curved, wraparound lenses provide unimpeded peripheral vision (interchangeable dark and orange lenses are included). In fact, the Fast proved so valuable to our tester, he actually wore the women's pink-and-purple test pair. "They're that good," he raves. Downsides: Even with the darkest tint, testers wished for more light reduction in the intense sun of Colorado's high Rockies. The lenses are more scratch-prone than most: Careful storage is essential. And they cost more than some tents. **$210; 1.2 oz. (with foam); adidas.com/eyewear**

[bargain]

Ryders Clamor

killer deal

Demanding environments tend to reveal shortcomings in bargain sunglasses that perform just fine in town—we're looking at you, gas station aviators—but the value-priced Clamor actually has the performance cred to go high and wild. "The lens prevented eyestrain while I was backpacking in the sun-soaked Yosemite high country," says our tester, who also wore them in the Grand Canyon. Both environments demand glare-cutting polarization, which is injected into the Clamor's polycarbonate lenses (instead of applied to the surface, where it can get rubbed off) and prevents eye fatigue over hours of wear. The curved frame also keeps light from sneaking in over the top and sides, and silicone nosepieces hold it firmly in place, even during runs. The dark gray tint is ideal for bright sun: "Dark enough for open tundra, but light enough to be functional in forests," says our tester. Tradeoffs: Ventilation is good only in breezy environments; without vents or anti-fog lens coatings, they fogged in still conditions and warming temperatures. And check fit: One tester dinged comfort, saying they pinched behind the ears after a few hours' wear. **$70; 1.3 oz.; ryderseyewear.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY TEXT BY KELLY BASTONE

***PHOTOCHROMIC** Lenses that can become darker or lighter based on UV intensity.

Testers: Kelly Bastone, Jonathan Dorn, Ben Fullerton, Steve Howe, Annette McGivney, Steve Pulford, Ben Russell
All weights on BACKPACKER scales.

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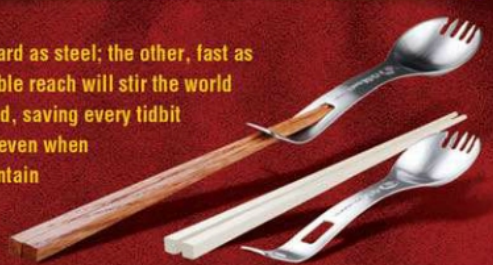
Twin dragons, teeth sharpened from years of fighting, one hard as steel; the other, fast as titanium. Uniting east and west, the Kung Foons' unimaginable reach will stir the world as they heroically scrape, spear and dig their way into legend, saving every tidbit from the dark corners of pouch meals and narrow pots. Yet, even when circumstance separates them, both foon and chopsticks maintain their mythic individual strengths, making them the ultimate compact utensils for any epic.



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Breakfast

Bridgford Foods Corporation Filled French Toast

Testers were skeptical—an MRE with a three-year shelf life?—but liked the strong cinnamon flavor and hearty, bready bite of this syrup-filled breakfast sandwich. The long life makes it a good addition to your weekend grab bag or as a staple in your survival kit (see more essentials on page 111). Bonus: Each 4.4-ounce, individually-wrapped serving has 350 calories, which is about the same as a Pop-Tart two-pack, but has more than twice the protein and four times the fiber of that pre-trip supermarket grab. **$4; 1 serving; bridgford.com**

« Packit Gourmet Delta's Sweet Rice Pudding

"This currant-sprinkled porridge will give oatmeal a run as my go-to backcountry breakfast," says a tester who savored a serving in the Chilean Andes. The mix made from dry butter and milk makes this sweet, water-only-prep meal taste creamy, and dried currants add natural sugar and a bit of crunch. Despite having eight grams of fat, eight grams of protein and a whopping 78 grams of carbs per serving, some hard-hiking testers noted that the quick-burning meal left them craving more calories well before lunch. **$4; 1 serving; packitgourmet.com**

Rise Breakfast Bar

The chewy nut-and-honey base of this flavor-packed line of breakfast bars is crammed with crunchy amaranth (a seed that contains more amino acids and is a more complete source of protein than other grains). Testers appreciated the small bars' balanced blend of fat, protein and carbs for light, but satisfying, summit-day starter meals. All five flavors are free of GMOs, preservatives, peanuts, soy, and gluten, but the Crunchy Cashew Almond and Macadamia Pineapple are tester favorites. **$1; 1 serving; risebar.com**

Smarter Snacking

Pack a variety of energy bars to get the right boost at the right moment for optimal on-trail performance.

ON-DEMAND ENERGY: HIGH-CARB BARS

Fast-burning carbs are an important on-the-trail energy source, especially for aerobic hikes lasting longer than 90 minutes. Most bars mix fast-absorbing simple carbohydrates (like processed sugars or fructose from fruits) with longer-lasting complex carbs (like those from whole grains and fiber-rich seeds). Carbs also restore depleted glycogen, which is necessary for muscle recovery. **Strategy** Keep from bonking by scarfing 30 to 60 grams of carbohydrates every hour during hikes longer than 90 minutes; speed recovery by eating about .5 grams of carbs per pound of your body weight (along with protein) within 30 minutes of finishing your hike.

>> Bobo's Oat Bars Maple Pecan; 64 grams of carbs (gluten-free), 380 calories; **$38 for 12-bar box; bobosoatbars.com**
>> Lärabar Carrot Cake; 32 grams of carbs, 190 calories; **$25 for 16-bar box; larabar.com**

MUSCLE MAINTENANCE: PROTEIN-PACKED BARS

You need complete proteins—animal products like jerky or combinations of plant-based foods like rice and beans—to help repair muscle tissue. Amino acids (proteins' building blocks) also help maintain electrolyte balance, boost immune system function, and synthesize hormones. They aren't as easy to digest as carbohydrates, so protein-heavy snacks like nuts and cheese will make you feel fuller longer than carb-centric ones. Don't load up all at once: Protein-dense meals during exercise may cause stomach upset and contribute to dehydration. Plus, protein won't convert to usable energy as quickly as carbs. Instead, consume a small amount at every meal and snack, especially on high-intensity hiking days and at the beginning of extended trips, when your body will need to build backpacking muscles. **Strategy** Repair muscle damage and combat fatigue from huge days (think Rainier ascent) by consuming a total of .5 to .75 grams of protein per pound of your body weight per day.

>> Clif Builder's Bar Chocolate Mint; 20 grams of protein, 270 calories; **$21 for 12-bar box; clifbar.com**
>> Balance Bar Bare Sweet & Salty Peanut Butter; 15 grams protein, 200 calories; **$18 for 15-bar box; balance.com**

SLOW-BURN POWER AND WARMTH: FAT-FUELED BARS

With a higher calorie-to-weight ratio than carbs or protein, fat is a key element in most backcountry menus. It's valuable because of its high caloric density, because digesting fat boosts body temperature in cold weather, and because it fuels low-intensity activities like post-dinner strolls around camp. Avoid transfats (often added to processed foods to extend shelf life) and focus on heart-healthy mono- and polyunsaturated fats like those from nuts, seeds, and plant-based oils. **Strategy** Maintain energy for slow-paced, long-haul days (and to warm up on frigid nights) by munching .5 grams of fat per pound of your body weight per day.

>> ProBar Peanut Butter Chocolate Chip; 23 grams of fat, 393 calories; **$39 for 12-bar box; theprobar.com**
>> Stoats Blueberry and Honey Porridge Oat; 15 grams of fat, 310 calories; **$4 for 5-bar box; stoats-porridgebars.co.uk**

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) JUSTIN BAILIE; ANDREW BYDLON; COURTESY (6). TEXT BY KRISTY HOLLAND

Nutritional data and weights provided by the manufacturer.

MUKA
STOVE
OD-1NP Patent Pending

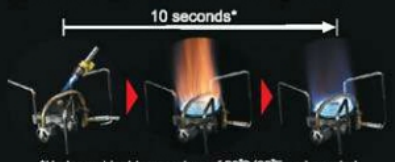
Gas or liquid?

EDITORS' CHOICE SNOW 2011 BACKPACKER

MUKA STOVE

No Priming required

The flame stabilizes and turns blue approximately 10 seconds*after ignition.



*Under ambient temperature of 20℃/68℉ and no wind.

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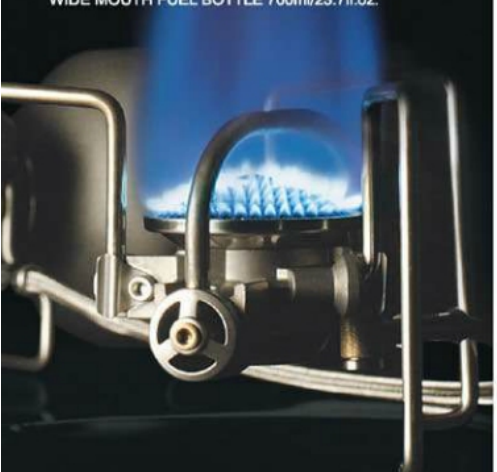
Control Dial at the pump
Control Dial operates ignition, flame control, and extinguishing of the flame.

Pressure Indicator
The Pressure Indicator provides the operator a visual for ensuring successful ignition of the stove.

Flexible hose
Flexible hose stows easily.

< Sold separately>
WIDE MOUTH FUEL BOTTLE 1000ml/33.8fl.oz.
WIDE MOUTH FUEL BOTTLE 700ml/23.7fl.oz.



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Lunch & Snacks

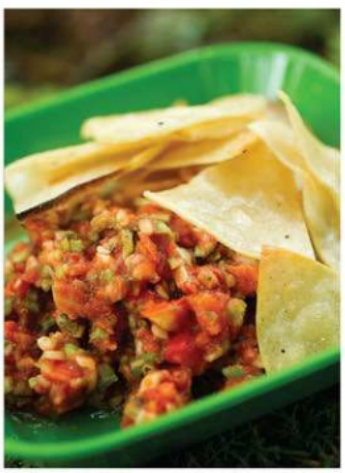
Backpacker's Pantry Potato Salad
"It's not exactly potato salad," says one tester. "But peas, eggs, cheddar, and a ranchy kick make this light meal satisfying without weighing me down." Twelve grams of fat per serving come mostly from an olive oil (instead of mayo) base, and the fresh taste is enhanced by cold-water prep. Just soak the contents for 10 to 15 minutes while you hike. Tester tip: Bring crackers or bread and use the salad as a spread or sandwich filling. **$8; 2 servings; backpackerspantry.com**

Barney Butter Almond Butter Snack Packs
Smooth and creamy, with a pleasantly nutty flavor, this snack-size spreadable was one tester's go-to for healthy, high-calorie energy. "I squeeze it onto apples, crackers, or even straight into my mouth," says a three-pack-a-day tester who has one request for the manufacturer: "Make it in a bigger tube." **$1; 1 serving (1 oz.); barneybutter.com**

Honey Stinger Caffeinated Lime-Ade Energy Chews
A tester favorite for their smaller-than-average size and a mix of quick-absorbing organic sugars, these chews are perfect for fueling eat-or-bonk hikes, runs, and bike rides. Both new flavors (Lime-Ade and a noncaffeinated Pink Lemonade) were hits in the field, scoring points for their "summery, citrusy, and tart flavor." Some critics say they're too sweet and turn rock-hard in temps below freezing. **$2; 1 serving; honeystinger.com**

Journey Bar Coconut Curry
Surprise your taste buds with this salty-yet-exotic snack. The Thai-inspired bar combines unsweetened coconut with almonds, amaranth, chili powder, and turmeric for a savory bite you should consider for short trips; the crumbly bars turned to dust during rugged or multiday treks. Note: Journey's lineup is all about strong, unusual flavor combinations—they hit every tongue differently. While testers liked the Parmesan Romano, Pizza Marinara, and Rosemary bars, many found Wasabi Ginger and Hickory Barbecue unpalatable. **$2; 1 bar; journeybar.com**

Kate's Real Food Stash Bar
Loaded with omega-3-rich flax seeds and protein-packed hemp, this moist, dense, peanut-and-chocolate energy bar is great for on-the-go snacking or to supplement a dull trail meal. Testers loved it so much, they crumbled it into plain granola for a morning energy boost. Prefer a fruitier flavor? Try the tart dark chocolate-and-cherry Handle Bar. **$3; 1 bar; katesrealfood.com**



Packit Gourmet Happy Hour Dips Pico de Gallo
Fresh salsa on a multiday trip? Believe it. A quick cold-water soak hydrates the chunky, cilantro- and lime-spiced Pico de Gallo Salsa. "It tastes like it's fresh, but this salsa is so much easier to carry than delicate tomatoes," says one tester who now carries it to spice up provisions on every weeklong outing. None of the dips in Packit's "Happy Hour" line are complete meals in themselves, so combine the prep-in-bag mixes with pan-fried tortillas for a hearty snack. There's also a Chorizo Bean Dip and Queso Rico mix (sold individually). **$5; 2 servings; packitgourmet.com**

Roo! Natural Foods Rice & Beans Stew
These single-serving, boil-in-bag pouches are perfect for short trips where flavor and convenience trump weight worries—a single, low-cal serving weighs 12 ounces. The thick, tomato-laced stew was a hit with testers who say they'd even eat it at home (the herby Tuscan Bean Soup flavor earned similar praise). At only 120 calories per serving, it's a light midday meal on its own, but one tester recommends wrapping the rice and beans in a tortilla with cheese or avocado for a "no-fuss burrito." **$4; 1 serving; roonaturalfoods.com**

Sahale Snacks Maple Pecans
"A modern twist on gorp," says one tester. "This blend of pecans and walnuts, dried whole cherries and apple bits, and a cinnamon glaze is perfectly chewy, crunchy, and sweet." Testers noted that the individual-serving sizes are pricy. One suggests: "Buy the 15-ounce bag and repackage in smaller bags for family trips—so you don't eat it all in one sitting." **$11; 14 servings; sahalesnacks.com**

 Testers: Kelly Bastone, Matthew Bates, Andrew Bydlon, Shannon Davis, Jonathan Dorn, Ben Fullerton, Genny Fullerton, Bree Halax-Winans, Katie Herrell, Kristy Holland,

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) JUSTIN BAILIE; ANDREW BYDLON; JUSTIN BAILIE; ANDREW BYDLON

Dinner

Coleman Ziti Spaghetti

"Satisfying simplicity," says one tester who appreciated the seven-minute cook time of this easy-prep pasta meal after a 13-mile day. "Quick-to-make carbs were just what I needed, the portion size is spot-on for a healthy appetite, and the smooth sauce has a fresh tomato flavor but isn't overpowering or too thick." Spice it up with included packets of Parmesan and red-pepper flakes. **$5; 1 serving; trailfoods.com**

EDITORS' CHOICE 2012 BACKPACKER

Hungry Hikers Murray's Hurried Curry

Real chunks of chicken and a Moroccan-inspired blend of spices with a coconut-and-curry zing wowed our hard-to-impress food testers—and will upgrade any camp menu. Our 2012 Editors' Choice reviews start on page 25. **$9; 2 servings; hungryhikers.com**

Knorr Steak Fajita Rice Sides

killer deal

"A budget-friendly, one-pot meal with three pots' worth of flavor," says one tester of Knorr's newest just-add-water cuisine. In less than 12 minutes, this packable five-ounce pouch transforms into a moist and flavorful rice blend with a tasty, red-pepper tang. With 525 calories per pouch (a hungry backpacker's portion is the entire 2.5-serving bag) it's a meal on its own, but testers' favorite BYO mix-ins included packaged chicken, avocado, and chunks of a smoky cheese. Other new flavors also scored big: spicy Buffalo Chicken and tangy Baby Back BBQ. **$1.30; 2.5 servings (1 pouch); knorr.com**

Mountain House New Orleans Style Rice with Shrimp and Ham

"Surprisingly flavorful" and "amazingly delicious" were the two most common tester responses to this Southern-inspired entrée (pictured above), our favorite in Mountain House's new low-sodium line. Testers loved the robust taste and portions, reporting that the hearty serving of veggie-rich, tomato-sauced rice was easily enough for two. The only complaint? The tasty chunks of ham and shrimp are ample, but rehydrate a bit chewy. Allow a few extra minutes of soaking if you prefer a softer texture. **$7; 2 servings; mountainhouse.com**

Packit Gourmet Texas State Fair Chili

The bane of some camping food: lack of texture. The bane of most: lack of flavor. This stewy meal ups the ante on both. The base is a meaty, tomato-based broth packed with as much flavor as the Lone Star State itself. But the proverbial icing on the cake? Included toppings of crushed Frito-style corn chips, shredded cheese, and a packet of Texas Pete Hot Sauce that will warm your insides on a cold night. **$6; 1 serving; packitgourmet.com**

Packit Gourmet Potato Samosas with Mango Chutney

Rehydrate this curry-flavored potato and pea stuffing, fold it into a tortilla, fry the wrap until it's hot, and you have an exotic meal inspired by an authentic Himalayan trekking snack. The three-step preparation is more involved than most of the add-boiling-water dinners reviewed here, but the result is well worth the effort. "Sometimes I need more to do than just wait for my food to rehydrate," says a tester. "This meal added some simple prep, but the cleanup is still really easy to manage at camp, and it's a satisfying dinner or snack." Another winning element: the spicy mango chutney, a sweet complement to the savory Indian spices in the filling. The frying oil is included, but tortillas are BYO. **$6; 1 serving; packitgourmet.com**

Kristin Hostetter, Dennis Lewon, Andrew Matranga, Katy Marquadt, Jackie McCaffrey, Kim Phillips, Jon Pickett, Crystal Sagan, Emily Seagrave, Kenzi Wilbur, Rachel Zurer

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAKING IT TO BREAKFAST

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Liquid Gold

From a morning cup of joe to easy-sipping fireside nightcaps, here are our staff's most-requested trail beverages.

HOT

>> "Ever since we gave **Starbucks Via** instant coffee ($10; 12 servings; starbucks.com) an Editors' Choice Award in 2009, the packets have been a staple in my pack. And with an expanding repertoire of blends and flavors, it's the trail java to beat."

—Anthony Cerretani, deputy editor

>> "**Good Earth Tea's Original Sweet and Spicy Tea** ($5; 25 servings; goodearthtea.com) is really flavorful, and you feel instantly warmer after a few sips. It's the perfect bridge between setting up camp and eating dinner. Also good cold or with rum!"

—Shannon Davis, senior editor

COLD

>> "On big dayhikes, singletrack rides, and adventure races, I pack **Gu Electrolyte Brew** ($20; 12 servings; guenergy.com). The electrolytes and calories prevent the bonk and cramping that can happen after moving many miles on just plain water."

—Jonathan Dorn, editor-in-chief

>> "Popping a few of **Nuun's Natural Hydration** cucumber mint tabs ($8; 12 servings; nuun.com) gives my water all of the good electrolytes I want, but without a cloying sweetness that so many other drinks have. A tube of a dozen tablets is indestructible, and makes a week's worth of 16-ounce batches."

—Kristin Hostetter, gear editor

>> "You can't beat the smoothness of **Gran Centenario Anejo Tequila** ($30; 750 ml.; proximospirits.com), and a little goes a long way, so it's not too heavy to schlep on a long trip."

—Dougald MacDonald, Climbing editor-in-chief

>> "**Acli-Mate Mountain Sport Drink** ($1; 1 serving; acli-mate.com) has a rich flavor, like kids' punch, and just the right amount of effervescence. I'm not sure if it's the vitamins and herbs or that the taste keeps me drinking, but it feels good in my stomach and keeps me hydrated during long, active days up high."

—Genny Fullerton, photo editor

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) GENNY FULLERTON (2); COURTESY

Dessert

Enertia Trail Foods
Bananas Foster Bread Pudding
"The banana flavor is so real," says one tester, "that I kept expecting to bite into a section of flambéed fruit." Though this dessert doesn't have caramelized bananas like a real-deal Foster—you won't spot a single bananalike bit in the moist bread pudding—testers loved the rich texture, the creamy vanilla mix-in, the strong (but not artificial) banana taste, and supereasy prep of this sweet-tooth-satisfier. **$5; 1 serving; trailfoods.com**

« Madyson's Marshmallows
Roasting Chip Fluffs
The original campfire dessert gets a delicious update: "Putting chocolate chips inside a creamy marshmallow revolutionizes s'mores!" says a tester who noted the smooth melting and even roasting of these single-serving puffs. Each larger-than-bite-size confection is layered with chocolate, butterscotch, mint, peanut butter, cinnamon, or toffee chips for a luxe twist on the quintessential camp treat. Making s'mores? BYO graham crackers. **$8; 12 servings; madysonsmarshmallows.com**

Packit Gourmet Boston Crème Parfait
Mix, layer, repeat, eat. This dessert is as delicious as it is fun to make: Alternate spoonfuls of cold-water-prep pudding, drizzles of chocolate fudge frosting, and sprinkles of sweet, croutonlike vanilla "toastees." The two-serving packet provides generous helpings—easily enough for four hikers after a satisfying dinner, say testers. **$7; 2 servings; packitgourmet.com**

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Women's Gear

Trail tested, female approved

[do-it-all shell]

Marmot Athena Jacket

The Athena's attractively trim fit flatters ladies' curves better than any other rain jacket we tested this year. This waterproof/breathable shell features four-way stretch—exceeding some softshells' elasticity and giving the Athena outstanding freedom of movement. Plus, the balance of weight, breathability, and waterproofness made it our multisport testers' favorite for backpacking, climbing, and mountain biking; it eliminates the need for a closet full of jackets. "The 40-denier fabric feels unusually light, so it doesn't add unwanted warmth on strenuous ascents," one wearer reports. "But it's also tough, suffering no rips or scuffs after bushwhacks." Breathability is good: The 2.5-layer construction trims weight and helps evacuate perspiration by eliminating a full layer of fabric on the inside. Features are surprisingly numerous, given the low weight: Zippered pockets double as vents, adjustable cuffs are angled to reduce bulk without compromising wrist protection, and the brimmed hood shields faces from rain, snow, and glare better than most. **$260; 13 oz.; XS-XL; marmot.com**

[pack]

Kelty Rally 45

The bigger the payload, the bigger the consequences of an ill-fitting pack—but the Rally tailors the cargo to women's curves and levitates big, 40-pound loads as if by magic. Credit the dogbone-shaped aluminum stay (aligned vertically, with flared loops at the top and bottom of the back panel) that transfers weight to the lumbar zone of a women's-specific hipbelt: Its conical shape (the top edge has a smaller circumference than the bottom) adapts to women's wider hips and proved more comfortable than flat belts over hours of wear. Raised padding in the shoulders and lumbar area further cushions heavy loads, and contoured shoulder straps reduce chafing around women's necks and arms. A mesh trampoline backpanel maintained a three-inch airspace between the pack bag and our tester, who praised the Rally's ventilation on hot hikes along California's John Muir Trail. "The pack moves in unison with me, which is a real asset for log crossings and boulder-hopping," reports a tester. Gripe: The side waterbottle pockets are cut so tight they're impossible to use when the pack is full. **$175; 4 lbs. 1 oz.; one size: 14.5 to 18.5 inches; 45 liters; kelty.com**

[bag]

Feathered Friends Egret

Women sleep colder than men, so they rarely find a bag's rating accurate and have to carry a colder-rated sack. (See page 21 for info about EN ratings.) But the ultralight and football-packed-size Egret bucks that trend. "It's the warmest 20° bag I've slept in," raves our tester, who was so cozy in this mummy that she stripped off layers on subfreezing nights in Chile's central Andes. Credit the gauzy, 10-denier Pertex Endurance UL shell fabric: This 2012 update allows the 900-fill down to balloon to its maximum loft (approaching six inches). There's also more fill in the footbox to warm womens' typically cold feet. A "passive" draft collar drapes over the neck opening and reduces heat loss without the weight of a traditional collar. And the chin baffle* has a reverse differential cut that uses a larger piece of shell fabric on the inside than outside; it keeps down loose and conformable without the need for a drawcord. A DWR treatment on the outside of the shell and polyeurethane film on the inside keeps condensation from soaking into the down. Yet breathability is excellent: "I felt no clamminess, despite how warm I was," says one tester. Available in small (fits women up to 5'3") and medium (up to 5'9"), the Egret is just roomy enough for comfort, with a girth that's not baggy. It's narrow at the shoulder, but stays wider through the core and hips. Nitpick: The zipper jams on the fabric piping that runs along the coils. **$439; 1 lb. 12 oz. (M); 20°F; featheredfriends.com**

[pad]

Therm-a-Rest Women's NeoAir XLite

Female testers swooned over the Editors' Choice (2009) Award-winning NeoAir pad, and doubted that this "women's" version could offer substantial improvements. Turns out, it does: This inflatable mattress is warmer than the original NeoAir, thanks to an additional layer of aluminum that reflects and retains body heat to help cold-sleeping ladies stay cozier. "It made my 20-degree bag feel warmer," reports one tester, who enjoyed blissful slumber despite early-winter conditions in Colorado's Mt. Zirkel Wilderness. Yet at 11 ounces, it's also lighter, in part by using a tapered shape and trimmer dimensions (20" wide and 66" long). The smaller square footage still offers plenty of sprawl-space for women 5'5" and under; taller testers who sleep curled on their sides also found it a proper fit. And like the original, the Women's NeoAir XLite deflates to pint glass-size, resists punctures from sandstone, granite, and twigs, and provides 2.5 inches of cushy, sleep-inducing comfort. **$160; 11 oz.; cascadedesigns.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY (3); BEN FULLERTON (EGRET); TEXT BY KELLY BASTONE

***CHIN BAFFLE** A thin tube of down around the inside edge of the hood that cushions the face from tightened drawcords.

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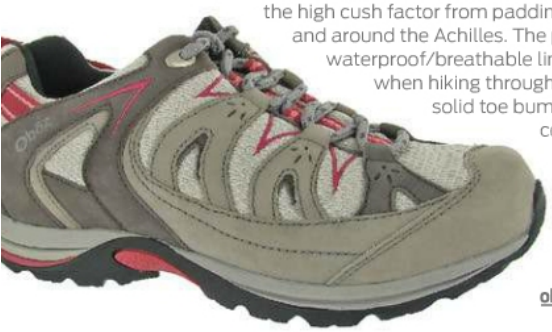
Women's Gear

[low-cut hikers]

Oboz Mystic Low B-Dry

Tired of sloppy-fitting shoes? The Mystic dials in female fit without compromising protection and support. Oboz studied the dimensions of women's feet to design this gender-specific model, trimming volume in select zones rather than overall—as many women's boots and socks do. The shoe has less width in the heel and ball and more curve in the arch compared to men's hikers. "They cradled my narrow feet nicely," says a tester who usually tapes her heels when hiking in new shoes but found the precautionary measure unnecessary with the snug-fitting Mystic. The Mystic midsole is amply cushioned and supportive via dual-density EVA and a nylon shank that allowed one tester to carry a 25-pound pack comfortably off-trail in Arizona's Coconino National Forest. "Thanks to the stiff midsole, this low-cut shoe provides boot-like support underfoot, but without feeling clunky," she said. Testers also appreciated the high cush factor from padding in the tongue and around the Achilles. The proprietary waterproof/breathable liner kept feet dry when hiking through wet slush. A solid toe bumper and stiff heel counter protected against sharp rocks during off-trail scrambles. **$125; 1 lb. 9 oz. (7); w's 6-11; obozfootwear.com**



[pants]

Arc'teryx Palisade Capri

"I love capris for hot-weather hiking and daily wear," says our gear editor, who wore the Palisade while backpacking in Chile, bouldering in Massachusetts, and cycling through downpours in Vietnam. "And these offer the ideal blend of style and performance." Because they stop just below the knee (inseam is 19"), they offer more protection from sun and brambles than shorts, but with more air-conditioning than full pants. Fit is superb, with a slightly low-rise waist that gives them a fashion-forward style and an integrated belt that eliminates gaps. A brushed polyester lining prevents chafing beneath a pack. **Articulated knees*** and gusseted crotch allow for full freedom of movement, and two zippered cargo pockets are big (they secure a map or GPS) but low profile, thanks to pleats that keep fabric from ballooning. Two open hip pockets and minimal seaming throughout give the pants an appealingly casual look. The three-season softshell fabric (94 percent nylon, six percent spandex) beads up light drizzle, resists abrasion, and features four-way stretch that facilitates high-stepping and helps the pants maintain their shape after days of wear. **$129; 7 oz. (8); 2-14; arcteryx.com**

[baselayers]

Terramar HotTotties Thermolator Pro Crew and Tight

Of all the baselayers in her overstuffed drawer, our tester kept reaching for this affordable, all-season combo for nighttime wear while backpacking and beneath shells on cold-weather hikes. Fit is better than most: HotTotties is Terramar's women's-only line, and it emphasizes femme-specific fit details. For example, the Thermolator Tight features flat-stitched panels around the hips that are far less bulky than a standard gathered waist. The wide waistband layers comfortably beneath an outer shell without rolling or twisting. A gusseted crotch facilitates ease of movement and let our tester hike and scramble off-trail in Colorado's Park Range, where fabric wicked well on moderate climbs (in terms of wicking, it ranks in the middle of the pack compared to other baselayers we've tested). "They maintain their shape without sausage-casing discomfort," she says. Plus, the buttery knit (a blend of 90 percent polyester and 10 percent spandex) feels surprisingly plush for a midweight material. Streamlined, zipperless pockets on the tight's waistband and the crew's lower back stash a key or a lip balm, but don't chafe beneath a pack (though the waistband pocket is hard to access, especially when worn beneath a shell). Downsides: The fabric's spandex content makes these pieces slower to dry than some synthetics, so they're best for low- to moderately-aerobic hikes. **$36 (crew), $25 (tight); 7 oz. (top and bottom); XS-XL; hot-totties.com**

[sports bras]

MULTIDAY COMFORT Because it's comfy from sunup to sundown, the **Icebreaker Sprite Racerback Bra** is ideal for backpacking. "I didn't feel compelled to yank it off in camp like I do with so many sports bras," says our tester, who wore this tank-style pullover for three days straight in Chile's central Andes. The merino wool (with four percent Lycra) stayed fresh right to the post-hike shower and delivered good moisture management. Though not as quick to dry as some synthetics, the wool effectively disperses perspiration even on hot days. Downside: Its subtle support serves small-chested gals best. **$50; 1.5 oz.; XS-2XL; icebreaker.com**

FULL SUPPORT Need more structure? Large-figured testers preferred the **Moving Comfort Serena**, a seamless pullover that delivers it without wires or clasps. "Compression is effective but not constricting," says our tester. "No movement, no chafing, no digging into my shoulders." **$38; 2.6 oz. (M/L); movingcomfort.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

***ARTICULATED KNEES** Intricate sewing and extra fabric panels mimic the shape of the joint for uninhibited bending.

Weights are for size small (unless noted) on BACKPACKER scales.

WENGER

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The first Wenger multi-functional Swiss Army Knife featured a sharp blade, screwdriver, reamer and can opener. It became an essential tool for soldiers whose survival depended equally on food and a working rifle. To this day, this same knife is the inspiration behind Wenger's mission to create multi-functional equipment for the outdoor enthusiast.

SwissArmyKnife.com

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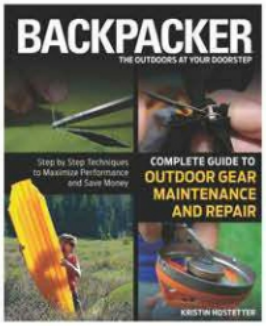

The Gear Pro

Our resident expert assembles the tools to save any trip.

Tips and equipment insights from Kristin Hostetter grace almost every page of our annual Gear Guide—just as they have for 18 years. Heck, she practically invented this issue. Since 1994, our gear editor has tested thousands of products and fixed more stuff than most hikers will ever own. That's why we asked her to write our latest book, *The Complete Guide to Outdoor Gear Maintenance and Repair* ($20; falconguides.com). The troubleshooting manual covers more than 300 maintenance tips, repairs, and gear upgrades for hikers, campers, paddlers, and climbers. (See some of her advice in our tear-out Rip & Equip sections starting on page 15.) Here, she shares the core ingredients of her perfect repair kit; add or subtract items to customize it for your trip's conditions and gear list.

» "A **multitool with scissors**—which are hard to improvise in the field—simplifies repairs like trimming fabric patches," says Hostetter. "I like Leatherman's Juice S2 ($65; 4.4 oz.; leatherman.com). It also has good pliers and a three-inch blade for slicing salami."

» There are 1,001 uses for **McNett's Seam Grip** ($7; 1 oz.; mcnett.com), from sealing boot soles to patching tents and reinforcing ultralight fabrics.

» "Include a few **Type A Tear-Aid Repair Patches** ($10; 1.2 oz.; tear-aid.com)," advises Hostetter. "Elastic and transparent, they stick to almost any fabric, even silnylon." Toss in a couple of alcohol wipes, too; cleaning surfaces before patching makes repairs last longer.

» A **tent pole repair sleeve** is light, cheap, very rarely used—and almost impossible to DIY on the trail. Most tents come with one, but you can also buy them at any outdoor shop for a couple bucks. Tip: Bring a pole to the store so you're sure to buy a sleeve of the proper diameter.

» A busted hipbelt buckle or blown section of webbing can ruin a trip. Carry a **replacement hipbelt buckle** (sized to match your pack), a **Slik Clip,** and a **ladder lock** with a slit, which are designed to join pieces of webbing without sewing (various prices; mcnett.com/gearaid).

» Using a liquid-fuel stove? Fix dinner-killing leaks by packing a few **O-rings** (found in the repair kit that came with your stove or at an outdoor shop for pennies).

» Store everything in a freezer-weight **zip-top bag.** It's lightweight, waterproof, cheap, and see-through, so you can get to your supplies quickly.

» **Desiccant packs** draw sensor-busting moisture out of wet electronics. Seal the affected gizmo in a zip-top bag with a few packets (pilfer them from your dehydrated meals!).

» Wrap three feet or so of **duct tape** around a bottle, pencil, or trekking pole for fixing *and* making things. "I've fashioned zipper pulls, removed cactus spines, even twisted a length to create a guyline," says Hostetter.

» Clean camera, sunglass, or goggle lenses with a **microfiber cloth.** Avoid using wood-based tissues or paper towels, which can cloud expensive optics with microscratches.

PHOTOS BY JONATHAN DORN (TOP LEFT); COURTESY; ISTOCK (BOTTOM). TEXT BY KRISTY HOLLAND

Baby Jogger
FOLD
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Basecamping

Pack the trunk or load the boat with luxe stuff.

[camp throne]

Kelty Lowdown Chair

We've busted dozens of cheapo chairs over the years, but the Lowdown is built for long-term schlepping and chilling. The frame is steel (not aluminum, like some models), and the pack-strength nylon fabric is reinforced in key spots with climbing-style webbing. "The ample seat is nearly a foot off the ground—comfortably high—but you can still fiddle with a stove," says our tester. The backrest is angled for serious lounging, armrests move up and down for a custom fit, and the right-handed beverage holder adjusts to accommodate anything from a wide-mouth bottle to a mug. Nice touch: A bottle opener is tethered to the cozy. **$48; 8 lbs. 8 oz.; kelty.com**

[stove]

Primus Profile Duo

Cheeseburgers and corn on the cob in camp? Heck yeah! Grill-and-cook combo menus are easy with this piezo-ignited*, propane-fired, clamshell two-burner. "I grilled burgers on one side while boiling a giant pot of water for corn on the other," says our gear editor. "At breakfast, I set a big griddle over the entire cooking surface and cranked out pancakes for a crowd." The stainless steel casing proved bombproof through a season of garage-trunk-camp trips, and the removable, nonstick grill surface is easy to clean. Bonus: Sensitive flame control allows for simmering or lightly charring hot dogs. **$120; 12 lbs.; primuscamping.com**

[table]

Snow Peak Ozen Solo Table

It looks like a toy, but don't be fooled. This tiny table proved worth the weight on both car-camping and group backpacking trips, where it served as a stable, level stove platform and prevented the burner's heat from scorching picnic tables and other surfaces below (can you ever be *too* LNT?). The anodized aluminum is kick-around sturdy, and in sandy campsites the 16-by-12-inch table keeps cooking ingredients off the ground and grit-free. Packed, it's no bigger than a trifold brochure. **$50; 8 oz.; snowpeak.com**

[rechargable lantern]

Highgear SmartLite

Most camp lamps burn disposable batteries at a frightening rate, but this one gets juiced through a USB cable (included). After 15 hours of charge-time at home, it burns for four hours on high (or 10 hours on low, perfect for a weekend trip). A spherical reflector in the lid lets it double as a flashlight or pendant lamp—which imitates candlelight and turns a camp dinner into a romantic date. Forgot to charge the battery pre-trip? A hand crank nets 10 minutes of burn time in three minutes. **$35; 7 oz.; highgear.com**

[shower]

NEMO Helio Pressure Shower

Luxurious at the end of a long day in the backcountry: 11 liters of sun-warmed water, enough for a seven-minute shower. "It's the finest I've felt after a gritty day of mountain biking," attests one user, who rigged it to a tree at her basecamp near Moab, Utah. After dinner, she set it on the ground, where it made short work of rinsing dishes (the pressurized chamber forces water out even when the reservoir is not suspended). It's not for ultralighters, but car- and boat-campers and backpacking groups of six or more found it totable. Compressed, the Helio is cantaloupe-size. **$100; 1 lb. 8 oz.; nemoequipment.com**

[pump]

Camp-Tek Microburst

Save your lungs for campfire singing—use this palm-size, ultralight pump to inflate air pads. It puffed up a three-inch-thick mattress in about five minutes. Top it off yourself to dial in firmness. (It uses three AAA batteries.) **$30; 2.7 oz.; camp-tek.com**

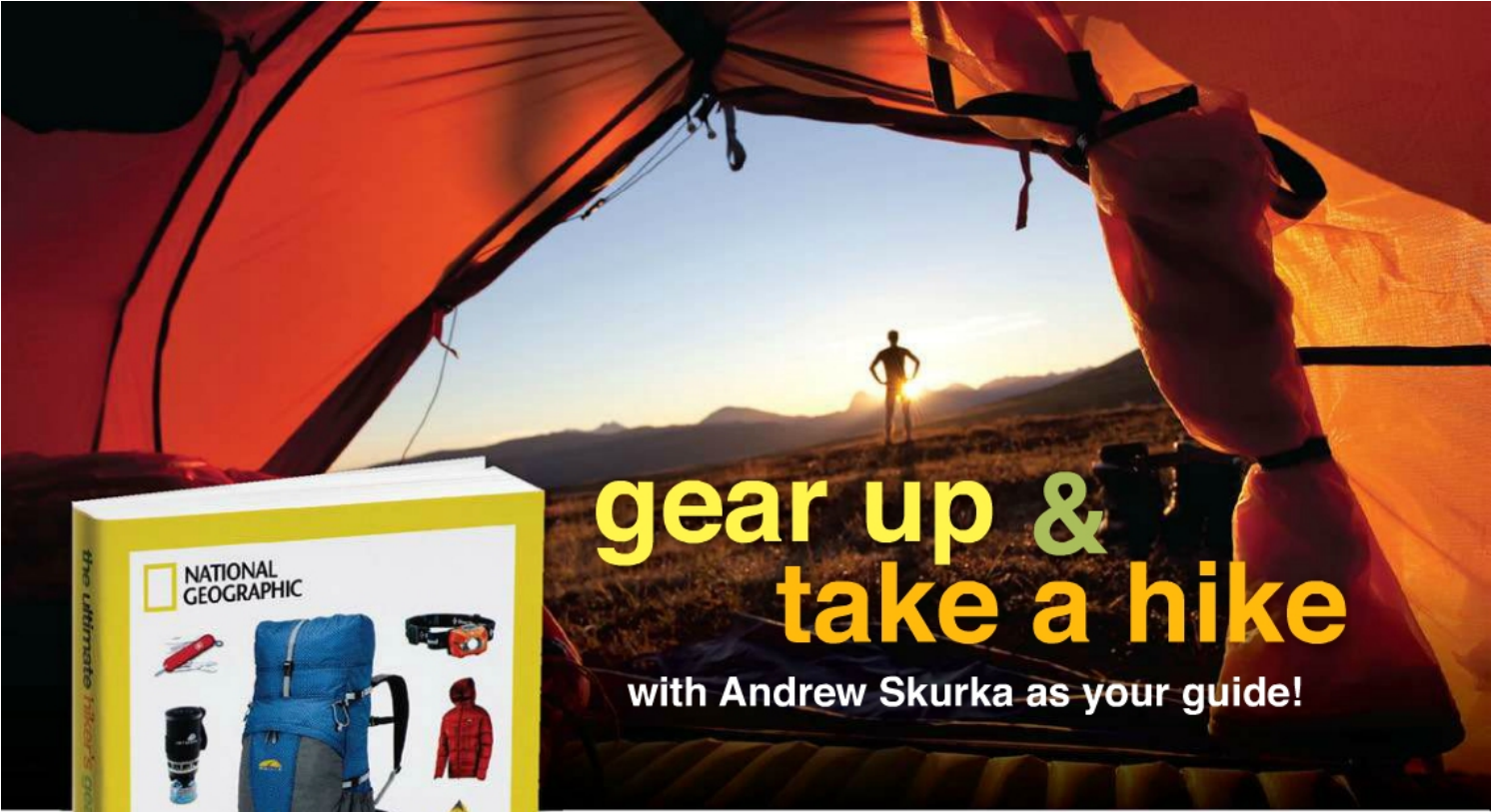
dutch oven

Lodge Cast Iron Camp Dutch Ovens

Crank your campground cooking up several notches with one of these pioneer-worthy, chef-pleasing pots. Prop one over a bed of coals, place more coals on top, and you have an oven that can produce mouthwatering entrées, fluffy breads, and delicious desserts. Our Editors' Choice reviews start on page 25. $44-$175; lodgemfg.com

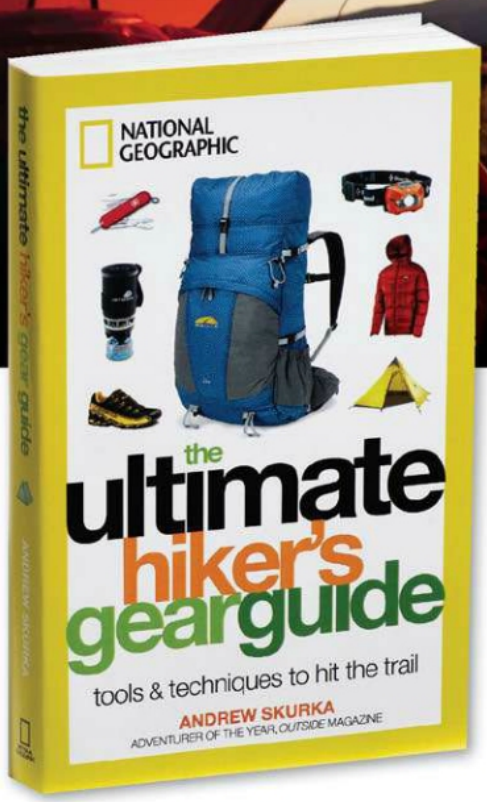
PHOTOS BY COURTESY TEXT BY KELLY BASTONE AND KRISTIN HOSTETTER

*PIEZO IGNITION A push-button mechanism that generates a spark to automatically light a stove



gear up & take a hike

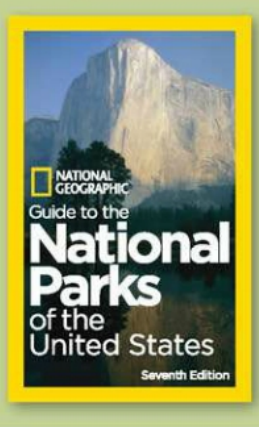
with Andrew Skurka as your guide!

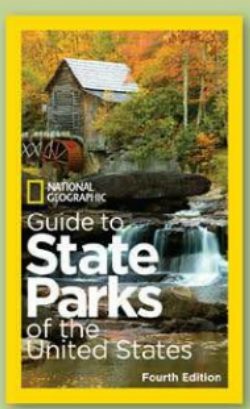


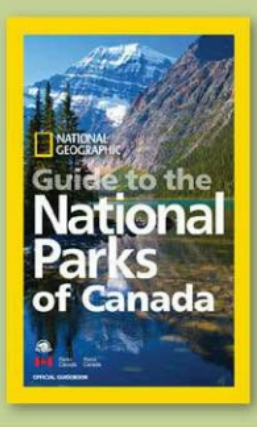
Ultimate hiker **Andrew Skurka** shares his hard-earned knowledge in this essential guide to backpacking **gear, supplies, and skills.** Described by *National Geographic* as "a superman among trekkers" and named "Person of the Year" by *Backpacker*, Skurka recounts what he's learned from more than 30,000 miles of long-distance hikes.

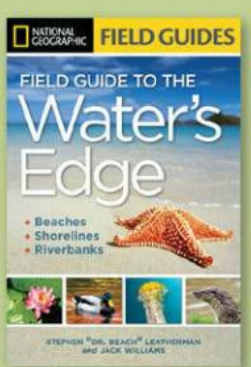
▶ *A show-and-tell of clothing, footwear, backpacks, shelter and sleep systems, and more, plus tips on foot care, campsite selection, and hiking efficiency are drawn from tried-and-true experience.*

National Geographic Guides Are Your Gateway to the Great Outdoors









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[cooler]

Kelty Folding Cooler

This sturdy icebox (made from foam-lined polyester with a reinforced plastic bottom) not only keeps your cold ones cold, it keeps them from spilling, too. In camp, it doubles as a handy cocktail table with four cup holders built into the lid. Back home, the soft sides collapse, making it easy to store. Available in 20-, 35-, and 50-liters. **$46-$76; 2 lbs. 2 oz. to 2 lbs. 15 oz.; kelty.com**

[game]

Hive

Meet some insects you'll gladly welcome to camp: the ants, bees, grasshoppers, and spiders of this two-player strategy game. The goal: surround your opponent's queen bee without getting cornered yourself. "It's simple but challenging, and totally addictive," says our tester, who credits the quick-to-learn, quick-to-play game's elegant rules (each insect moves in a unique way) for many evenings of fun with adult partners and kids age eight and up. And since there's no board, the hexagonal pieces quickly pack into an included carrying case the size of a bagel. And they're hefty enough to withstand careless packing, dirt, and other campground abuse. **$25; gen42.com**

[kid carrier]

Osprey Poco Plus

This pack is lighter and more customizable than most child haulers, and both parents and tots were fans. "The higher seat placement gives my 1-year-old an unobstructed view," says one tester. "And resizing the **torso length*** (15 to 22.5 inches) and hipbelt is superfast, so it's easy for my husband and I to trade Sherpa duty." The Poco borrows the same light yet supportive suspension used in Osprey's Atmos backpacks (see page 42). It's rated for loads (kid and gear) up to 48.5 pounds, and testers shouldered that comfortably. The child compartment adjusts in height and girth, and stirrups reduce kids' tendency to kick dad in the kidney. Bonus: Ventilation is excellent; a climb in intense Colorado sun didn't steam our tester's back. **$259; 5 lbs. 13 oz.; ospreypacks.com**

Kids' Gear

Our littlest testers give a thumbs-up to these field-proven products.

SLEEPING BAG Most adult bags are too big for kids, so they're heavier than necessary—and colder—since there's extra space to heat. Solution: the **Big Agnes Floyd (and girl's Maggie)**, which are scaled for youngsters' smaller proportions, but don't dumb down the tech features. The 600-fill down bags include a snug hood and vertical baffles that keep the down from migrating, and the water-resistant nylon shell survived two spilled water bottles in a tent full of middle schoolers. And the legit 15°F rating ensures your kid won't grow up thinking camping equals cold. As our 9-year-old tester put it, "I liked it because it was really comfortable, warm, and soft." A pad sleeve on the bottom accommodates a 20-inch-wide mattress. Bonus: Kids can't lose the stitched-on stuffsack. Fits kids (or small adults) up to 5'6". It's spendy for a kid bag, but it's hand-me-down durable. **$240; 2 lbs. 10 oz.; 15° F; bigagnes.com**

SHOES Our 6-year-old tester's big brothers wished the **La Sportiva Wildkids** had been around when *they* were little. They liked the looks; he liked the sticky-rubber traction, breathable mesh uppers, easy-pull lacing, and kick-anything toecap. He also praised the way they made him "look fast." **$75; 2 lbs. (pair); 29-35; sportiva.com**

BACKPACK Common sense: If you want your kid to love backpacking, don't saddle him or her with a too-big adult pack or a glorified book bag that makes every step a chore. The **Deuter Fox 30** packages the best of the company's Aircontact series—a perennial staff favorite for its easy-access packbag, rugged materials, and well-padded, adjustable suspension—in a model sized for kids down to about kindergarten age (also available in a slightly bigger 40-liter version). **$99; 2 lbs. 12 oz.; 30 liters; deuter.com**

TREKKING POLES Little hands can operate the lever-lock adjustment on the two-section **Black Diamond First Strike** poles. And with downsized rubber grips, the aluminum sticks—length adjusts from 26 to 43 inches—were a hit with testers from 6 to 12 years old (and one height-challenged grandma, who loved the low weight). **$50; 14 oz.; blackdiamondequipment.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

*TORSO LENGTH The key measurement to determine the best pack size for your body type (see page 15)

All weights are according to the manufacturer.

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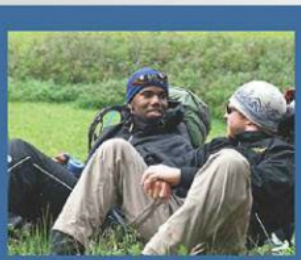

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APRIL 12	7:00pm	Mountain High Outfitters	127 Summit Blvd	Birmingham, AL
APRIL 14	2:00pm	Mountain High Outfitters	300 The Bridge St NW, Ste 120	Huntsville, AL
APRIL 17	7:00pm	Rock Creek Outfitters	301 Manufacturers Blvd	Chattanooga, TN
APRIL 18	6:00pm	Half-Moon Outfitters	1225 South Milledge Ave	Athens, GA
APRIL 19	6:00pm	REI*	1800 Northeast Expy NE	Atlanta, GA
APRIL 21	2:00pm	Mast General Store	111 North Main St	Greenville, SC
APRIL 22	2:00pm	Mast General Store	Highway 194	Valle Crucis, NC
APRIL 26	7:00pm	Mast General Store	402 South Gay St	Knoxville, TN
MAY 1	6:00pm	Nat's Outdoor Sports	1121 Wilkinson Trace	Bowling Green, KY
MAY 8	6:00pm	Benchmark Outfitters	9525 Kenwood Rd, #24	Cincinnati, OH
MAY 10	7:00pm	The Outdoor Source	3124 Kingsdale Center	Upper Arlington, OH
MAY 12	2:00pm	Blue Ridge Mountain Sports*	1560 South Main St, #100	Blacksburg, VA
MAY 18-19		Appalachian Trail Days	**FESTIVAL**	Damascus, VA
MAY 22	6:30pm	Outdoor Trails	4925 Boonsboro Rd	Lynchburg, VA
MAY 23	6:30pm	The Sole Source	1790-82 East Market St	Harrisonburg, VA
MAY 24	6:30pm	REI*	600 Settlers Ridge Center Dr	Pittsburgh, PA
MAY 26	1:00pm	Appalachian Outdoors	123 South Allen St	State College, PA

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Paddling

Top picks and values for backcountry lakes and rivers

[expedition canoe]

Nova Craft Prospector 17

Tripping-style canoes are known for their shallow-arch hulls, which combine the initial stability of a flat hull with the secondary stability (steady when leaned over on edge) of a rounded hull. This makes them hard to capsize—and a good all-around choice for paddlers who rank long-haul performance over short-course speed. Nova Craft's 17-foot version of this iconic design stays faithful to the original, but uses modern Royalex Lite, a heat-bonded composite of vinyl, plastic, and foam that's both rugged and lightweight. With two inches of rocker (end-to-end curve), the bow stays well above the water. "I stayed plenty dry through rolling waves and wind chop," reports a tester who paddled through Utah's 52-mile Stillwater Canyon. The Prospector scored well in tracking and ferrying (paddling across the current). The liberal 15-inch depth results in extensive capacity (up to 1,200 pounds), ideal for long-and-luxe trips: "Pack the bacon-filled cooler, the Dutch oven, the table, and camp chairs," says our tester. "This boat can handle it all without getting tippy." Bonus: Nylon lace seats are cooler than cane on hot days. **$1,679; 68 lbs.;** novacraftcanoe.com

[pack raft]

Alpacka Denali Llama

Few gear innovations spawn entirely new sports, but that's exactly what pack rafts—backpackable inflatable boats—have done. From Alaska tundra routes to remote desert canyons, hike-and-float fans are using these craft to explore terrain that was formerly all but off-limits. The one-person Denali Llama is slightly oversized at 7'9", allowing you to ferry all your gear across rivers and even transport two paddlers in a pinch. Durable urethane-coated nylon makes the boat light, 12-inch-diameter tubes keep waves from swamping it, and a newly designed, pointy "big butt" stern (wider than the bow) increases speed, tracking, and stability. "It holds its line really well once you get it going," says a tester who packed it in to Colorado's Mt. Zirkel Wilderness Area to fish a remote lake. Inflated in five minutes with a bellowslike nylon sack, the tub-floored (non self-bailing) Llama can easily handle up to Class III whitewater. It packs down to 9 by 24 inches (in its included sack) and can be stashed in or lashed on a pack. **$850; 5 lbs. 3 oz.;** alpackaraft.com

PHOTOS BY COURTESY (3); ANDREW BYDLON (CASES); TEXT BY EUGENE BUCHANAN

Bryan Smith | Adventure Filmmaker | Expedition Kayaker | Squamish, BC

At OR we know finding perfect balance takes hard work. So does Bryan Smith, a kayaker and filmmaker who splits his time between documenting National Geographic expeditions and pursuing his creative visions for projects such as the web series "The Season". But the work isn't all waterfalls and jettsetting: It's all-nighters in the editing bay, lugging heavy gear into the field and 2am packing marathons that have led to trips of a lifetime, such as a helicopter insertion into Kamchatka's Karnosky Reserve to run the Semelyichik and Karimsky rivers. A dream job? Perhaps. But it's the immersion in remote, pristine wilderness that keeps his creative inspiration flowing. Learn more at outdoorresearch.com/verticulture.

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[inflatable kayak]

AIRE Outfitter II

While hardshell boats are great for carrying gear on flatwater adventures, they can be unwieldy in rapids and a hassle to store and transport. Inflatable kayaks offer multiday gear-carrying capacity with legit whitewater stability (and the ability to bounce off boulders that would taco a hardshell craft). This buoyant tandem is perfect for wilderness runs that might be out of reach in less stable floaties and touring craft. Oversized side tubes (12.5 inches versus 11.5 inches on other models) provide a steady ride and keep splashes at bay, while near-hardshell rigidity means the craft won't buckle in big drops. "Great for Class I to III trips with the kids," says one tester who took the Outfitter on a three-day float down the Colorado River. It has a whopping 34 tie-downs along the self-bailing floor to secure up to 525 pounds of payload. Sweet feature: Behind each seat is a map pocket and drink holder, complete with, yep, built-in coozies. And durability? One staffer has had an AIRE for 15 years, and has never experienced a puncture or leaky valve. **$1,459; 46 lbs.;** aire.com

[iPhone armor]

LifeProof iPhone 4/4S Case

Drop it, dunk it, roll it in dirt. Lots of cases out there offer similar protection from hard knocks and the elements, but none are as svelte and pocket-friendly as this one. It adds a barely noticeable 1/16 of an inch to the perimeter of your phone. Bonus: The optical glass lens won't dull the quality of your photos and videos. **$80; 1 oz.;** lifeproof.com

[iPad protection]

Sea to Summit TPU Guide Waterproof Pouch for iPad

Slip your iPad into this sturdy nylon and TPU sleeve and don't give rain or canoe trips a second thought. Its drybag-like seal is the best we've seen: roll down the flexible (touch screen compatible) TPU, then secure it in two places with Velcro Strips. **$40; 2.4 oz.;** seatosummit.com

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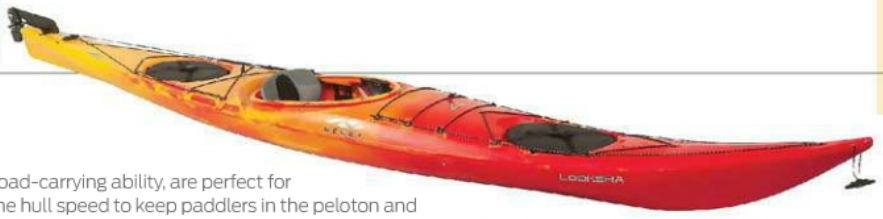

[sea kayak]

Necky Looksha 17 Polymer

Sea kayaks, with their big-swell stability and buoyant load-carrying ability, are perfect for backpacking via water. This versatile 17'4" cruiser has the hull speed to keep paddlers in the peloton and enough storage space for long, Walden-esque escapes into the wilderness. While not as light and fast as fiberglass or composite boats of the same length, its durable polyethylene construction means you don't have to worry about dragging it over rocks or cobblestone beaches. Its multichined hull design—featuring subtly angled edges instead of a smooth curve—offers high initial and secondary stability. On a Belize trip, testers could even hop out of the cockpit with snorkeling gear on and climb back in without wobbles. "Even when running broadside to the prevailing swell, I felt in control," says one tester. The relatively streamlined 23.75-inch beam (width in middle) enhances speed and glide (which saves energy), while a high-volume bow (more space up front than in the stern) keeps waves at bay. Oval-shaped bow and stern hatches allow easy access for storing food and gear (maximum capacity: 375 pounds). Bottom line: You get the performance attributes—stability, durability, and ample gear-hauling capacity—of Necky's higher-end boats in an affordable package. **$1,750; 65 lbs.; neckykayaks.com**

[waterproof kayak storage]

NRS HydroLock Dry Bag

Sacks in this series are a giant roll-top and zip-top in one. Most drybags employ a simple roll-down-and-buckle closure that can leak if you roll it wrong or load it too full. But this foolproof bag also has an interior zipper-type seal for an added layer of protection. Plus, it makes it harder to overload; if you can't fasten the HydroLock seal, you're carrying one too many pairs of socks. Made with a light-and-tough 70-denier urethane-coated nylon, the bag's "smooth surface makes stowing it into tight hatches easy," reports one tester who took it island-hopping in the Caribbean. Bonus: A clear window lets you find the toilet paper in a hurry. Available in four sizes (6, 10, 22, and 38 liters). **$22 to $43; 4.2 oz. to 9.6 oz.; nrsweb.com**

[chair]

Wenonah Super Seat

Arm fatigue isn't the hardest part of extended canoeing trips; it's a sore back that'll get you. Wenonah solves that with its Super Seat, a downsized Crazy Creek-like chair that securely fastens to either bench or bucket seats to support and cushion your back and butt. Adjustable side straps let you change its recline for that stern-position snooze when your partner isn't looking. Bonus: On dry land it doubles as a comfy fireside camp chair. **$40; 1 lb. 6 oz., wenonah.com**

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[life vest]

Kokatat Aries

The low-profile, adjustable Aries PFD features soft, PVC-free foam, which molds around your body for custom-fit-like comfort. Pull straps on each side and shoulder (as well as a quick-release waist belt) keep it in place if you find yourself in the drink. "It didn't rise up over my shoulders at all," says one swimmer after a gunwale-jumping cannonball. With foam relegated to the front and back instead of the sides, generous arm openings allow full-motion paddle strokes. A 500-denier Cordura outer layer resists rips and abrasion while a nylon inner keeps it smooth against the skin. Nice touch: Thin foam in the lower back, topped by thicker foam higher up, accommodates low-rise seat backs without jutting you forward. **$99; 1 lb. 14 oz. (XL); kokatat.com**

[bargain canoe]

Old Town Saranac 160 XT

This budget-friendly boat made from durable thermoformed polyethylene offers a plush ride for everyday paddling. One tester called it the minivan of canoes—"comfortable and fully-loaded but heavy." It's geared toward relaxed daytrips and short overnighters. And the loaded part? The two contoured seats have cushy back rests; cup and rod holders are ideal for afternoon float-and-fish sessions; molded storage trays on the sides keep snacks and fishing gear within easy reach; and a mini-cooler (big enough for a cold sixer) in the center doubles as a bench seat for a third paddler. (This compartment restricts the boat's ability to carry large cargo items like expedition-size drybags, but the boat can hold up to 850 pounds.) The 16-foot-long craft has a narrow shape and a flat, stable bottom with a moderate rocker. "It handles quite well compared to other recreational or entry-level boats," says one tester. And you can't argue with the price. **$750; 89 lbs.; oldtowncanoe.com**

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[rope]

Petzl Xion 10.1

The editors at our sister magazine, *Climbing*, deemed this all-purpose cord their "go-to workhorse rope" after using it for everything from top-roping vertical pitches in Boulder Canyon to leading overhanging sport routes on Colorado's Shelf Road. Why? Despite its stout 10.1-mm diameter (which adds strength and durability), it handles easily and is very flexible. Other ropes of this size felt stiffer and a bit more unruly. "This is the perfect rope for a beginning climber who wants to try a little bit of everything and have one rope to do it all," says *Climbing*'s gear editor. Nice touch: The rope comes from the shop ready to flake out—no specialized uncoiling or tedious untangling required. **$199; 8 lbs. 11 oz. (60m); petzl.com**

[harness]

Metolius Climbing Safe Tech Comp

Rarely is a harness great for both beginners and experts. The former desire comfort and durability, weight be damned, while the latter want to cut as many grams as possible. The Safe Tech Comp appeases the entire spectrum by packing maximum strength into every component of the still-svelte harness. From belt to leg loops to the two gear loops, all are rated to hold weight during a fall (normally just the belay loop earns that degree of engineering). And it comes in a tiny package that even first-time climbers found comfortable. "I never felt restricted raising my leg looking for footholds, and when I took a fall, nothing pinched," says one tester. **$89; 13 oz. (M); metoliusclimbing.com**

PHOTOS BY COURTESY; TEXT BY SHANNON DAVIS AND JULIE ELLISON

[carabiner]

Trango Smooth Quickdraws

Testers fought over the Trango Smooth Quickdraws, which pair a standard straight keylock (not wire) gate on the bolt end with a bent gate on the rope end. Why the fracas? "They're big and beefy," says one devotee. "This inspires confidence whether you're a newer climber learning to lead or a seasoned redpointer working on a pet project, both of whom are almost guaranteed to grab the draw to avoid taking a long fall." Testers also praised the smooth, snag-free clipping action. "It takes minimal pressure from the bolt hanger to the carabiner's gate to clip the draw," says one tester after an outing at Colorado's classic Shelf Road area. "This is fantastic when your body is fully extended and your brain has just one thought: don't fall, don't fall." Bonus: With à la carte ordering, you can choose wire gates to save weight. **$70 (as tested, for five); 3.5 oz. (each); trango.com**

[helmet]

Mammut El Cap

If helmets are all rated and tested to meet the same rigorous standards, what makes one brain bucket better than another? "The best helmet is the one that you forget you're wearing," says one tester who donned the El Cap on a climb of Chile's snow-capped, 11,879-foot Volcano San Pedro. "It sits lower on your head, so it's easy to pull your hood on and off; 12 vents guarded against brain bake; and microfiber-covered padding and a smooth chin strap never irritate." Nice feature: A small visor adds sun protection. Could be better: Size adjustments take two hands, making on-the-fly changes tricky. It's best to set it and forget it. **$70; 12 oz.; mammut.ch**

[shoes]

Scarpa Reflex

"From gym to sport climbing to bouldering to multipitch routes, this shoe does it all," says *Climbing*'s gear editor. "Scarpa nailed the balance between technical performance and comfort, and this means wider versatility." Credit the flat last which provides all-day comfort and the asymmetrical shape which adds power when edging. Two opposing, contoured Velcro strips let testers dial in the fit across a wide range of foot shapes. The suede and stretchy-synthetic upper ensures a snug fit that won't disappear over the life of the shoe. Testers found it a bit soft for precision edging (standing on really thin holds that require stiffer soles), but it was perfect for smearing the slabs of Yellow Spur (5.9+) in Colorado's Eldorado Canyon. **$99; 1 lb. (pair, m's 40); scarpa.com**

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[lumbar pack]

Fishpond Dragonfly Guide LTE Chest/Lumbar Pack

"It disappears in my overnight pack and can even pull double-duty as a waist pack for short dayhikes near home," says our tester of this 300-cubic-inch-capacity fly pack. The main compartment swallows a fly box, tippet spools, tools, a shell, a camera, and snacks—the perfect size for a day on remote waters. Compression straps help dial in hip fit, while a shoulder strap prevents the pack from sagging; wear it front-facing for easy access or rear-facing to keep it out of the way. Killer feature: A stiff, zippered "fly bench" folds down so you can easily sort and change flies on the go. Nitpick: The two water bottle pockets are only big enough for bike bottles. **$90; 1 lb.;** fishpondusa.com

[fly box]

Montana Fly Company Plastic Fly Box

Never confuse a drab fly box with a fishing buddy's identical model again. This series of brightly colored storage containers is covered with trout-inspired artwork by Tennessee artist A.D. Maddox. "But it's more than just a pretty box," says a tester who used one while fishing alpine streams in Rocky Mountain National Park. "It's light, not much bigger than your hand, and its 12 foam rows and compartments hold enough flies, beads, lures, and weights to handle virtually any water conditions and hatch." **$20; 4 oz.;** montanafly.com

[rod and reel]

Redington Voyant Outfit

Choosing a rod, reel, and line can seem as boggling (and shockingly pricy) as assembling a home entertainment system. No more. Redington makes it easy to get into this notoriously complicated (yet ironically meditative) sport by offering complete kits, each including leaders and a cloth-covered rod tube. "The backing, line, and leader are prespooled too," says our tester. "All I had to do was strap this four-piece kit to my pack and hit the trail." Our tester praised the four-weight Voyant's fast, snappy action after landing eight brown trout on Colorado's Big Thompson River. All rods are nine feet long and available in four, five, six, or eight weight. Bummer: The rod tube is heavy. **$300; 8.9 oz.;** redington.com

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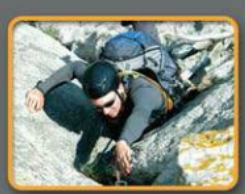

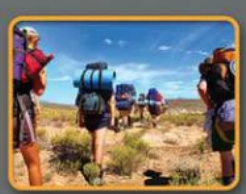

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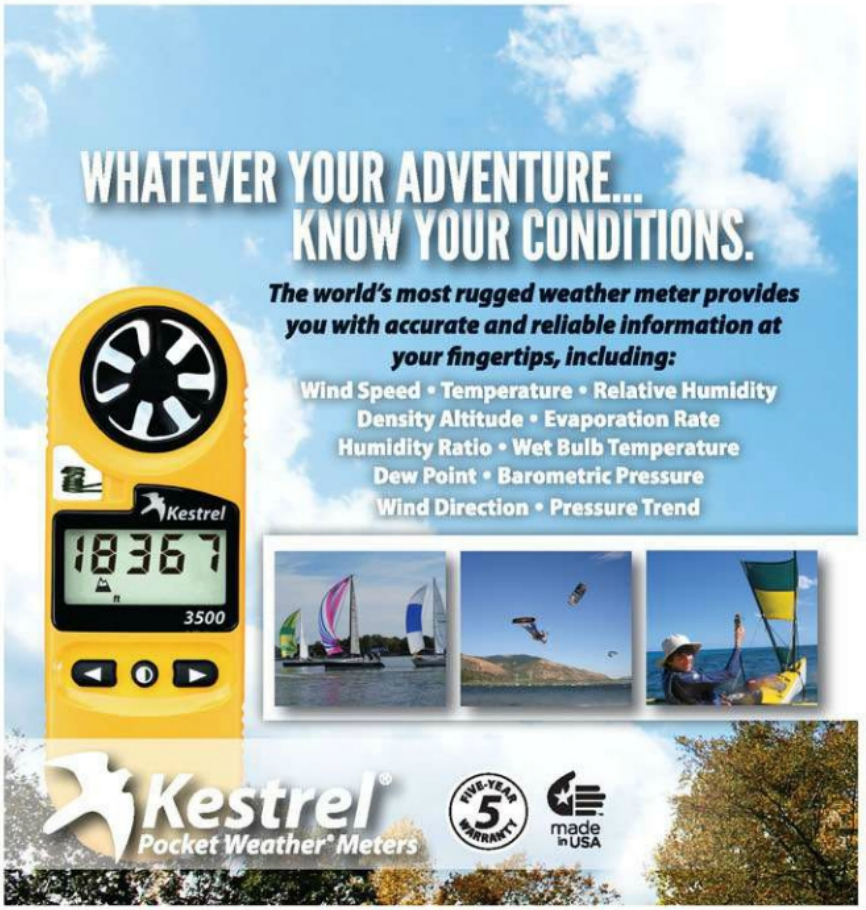
Adventure Travel

Recent finds that make the outdoor explorer's life simpler, safer, and more comfortable

DUFFEL The **Victorinox CH-97 2.0 Explorer** is like a lot of big-trip rollers, long enough for an ice axe and easily accessed via a long U-zip, but our tester became a fan because of what it lacks: an extendable handle. Just grab the end strap and go. That saves breakable parts (no sliding hardware), and having your hand closer to the load enhances stability. **$280; 10 lbs. 4 oz.; swissarmy.com**

WATER TREATMENT One of our veteran staff travelers loves the **CamelBak All Clear UV Water Purification System** because it's fast (60 seconds for a liter), integrated (just pack the bottle, there's nothing to lose), rechargeable via USB (no hunting for batteries in Kashmir), and lets you unobtrusively purify water in the bottle when you're in Third World restaurants or filling up from your new friend's suspect well. **$99; 7 oz.; camelbak.com**

SHIRT "Plane to trail to pub, **Helly Hansen's Odin Series LIFA Long Sleeve** is ultraversatile," says an editor who racked up 30,000 air miles last year. "The stretchy fabric was comfortable on 10-hour flights, the fast-wicking mesh back kept me cool on summer backpacking trips, and the close fit and snappy styling didn't make me look like Safari Guy when eating out in Reykjavik." **$90 (also in short-sleeve, $75); 12 oz. (M); hellyhansen.com**



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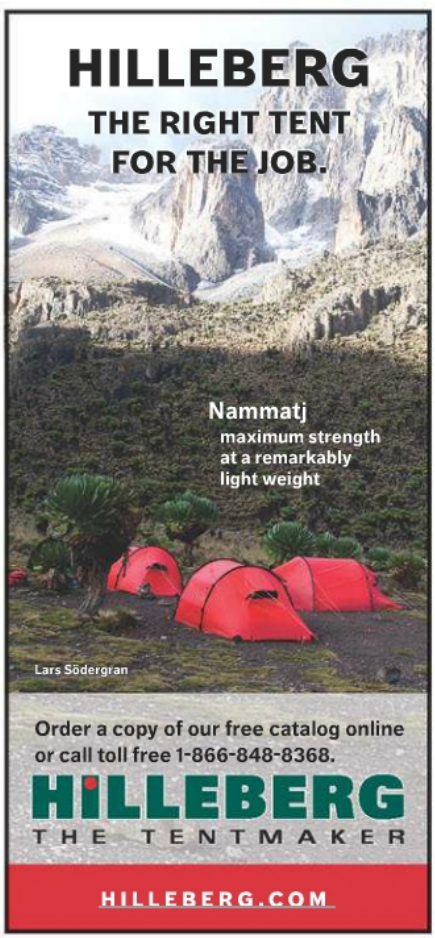

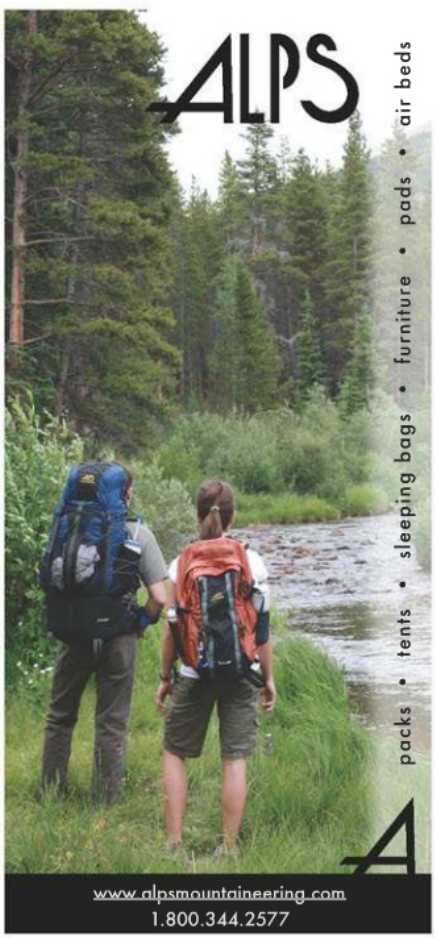

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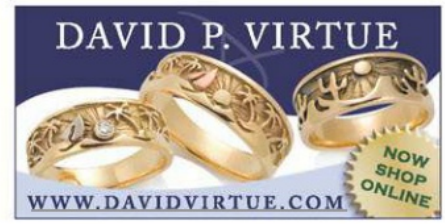

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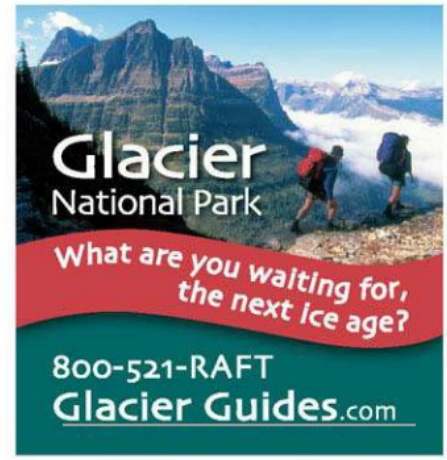

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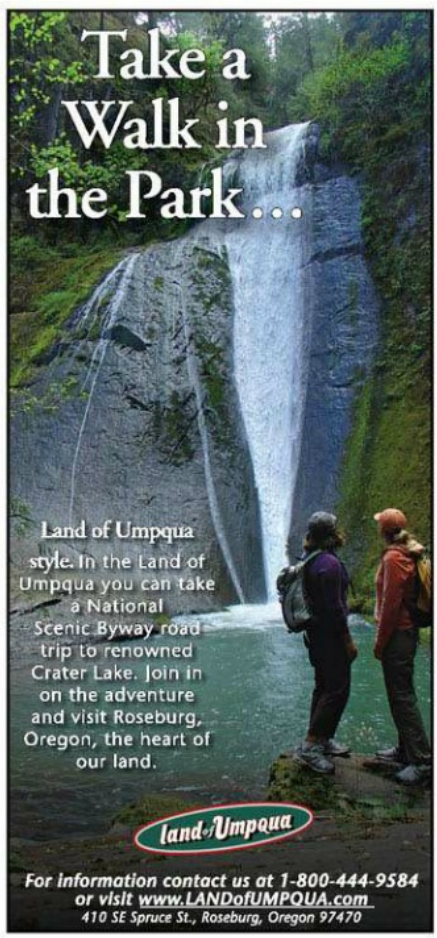

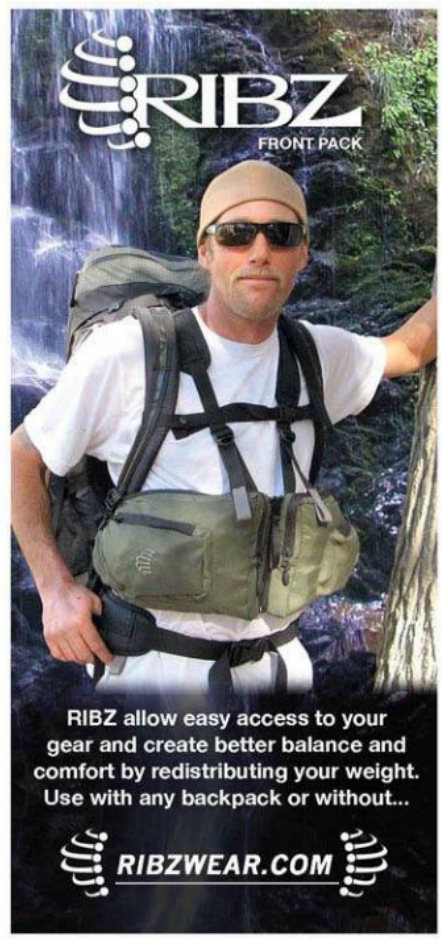

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[backpack]

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[dog leash]

Ruff Wear Flat Out Leash

"The best, most versatile leash I've used," our tester says of the six-foot tether, which converts from traditional hand-held to a waist-worn option or a fixed tie-out. Bonus: A grab loop near the clip facilitates speedy restraint maneuvers when Bowser charges a squirrel—or another hiker. **$30; 3.9 oz.; ruffwear.com**

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A Happy Life is a Happy Wife

Our solution to knee pain gives us back our lives.

By: Rick and Jan Herr

I first read about Lurosil in Tennis Magazine. I was impressed with the article, but I was reluctant to purchase it since other glucosamine supplements we tried had failed to make any noticeable improvement in my wife Jan's knees. Jan then sustained a serious injury to her "good" knee requiring immediate surgery. Moreover, the injury was placing an additional stress on Jan's "bad" knee. Now we were desperate. I ordered a 6-month supply of Lurosil to assist in Jan's recovery.

Lurosil arrived in the mail a few days after Jan's surgery. However, by this time the surgically repaired knee would often make a "clicking" or "popping" sound that was accompanied by great pain and an inability to withstand any weight at all. Jan would have to sit back down and try to stand again until the knee didn't "pop." The surgeon said that this would likely go away "eventually." On top of this Jan had increasing pain in her other knee. She was not doing well at all. We started Jan on Lurosil immediately. From the first day on, Jan just seemed to start doing better. After four days on Lurosil, the "popping" stopped and never returned. By the end of the first week, Jan stopped complaining about the other knee. I was sure Lurosil was making the difference.

I had to tell my tennis partner, Brooke, about Lurosil. He has had two cartilage operations on his right knee and must wear a large metal protective brace when playing since he has no cartilage left on the outside of the right knee. He agreed to try one bottle. He, too, had been using a glucosamine supplement (triple strength) without much success. Thirty days later while we were playing each other, I noticed that he seemed to be quicker around the court than in the past. After he rocketed one particular winner past me, I heard him exclaim, "My knees feel better than they have felt in years!" I stopped and pointed directly at him and said, "That's Lurosil!" After soundly beating me, he purchased his second bottle from me that very day.

In a weak moment, I asked Jan if she would try some of the "triple strength" stuff that some of my friends swear by. After three days Jan was doing so poorly that she asked to go back on Lurosil. After three days on Lurosil, Jan emailed me from work that she was doing "much better." I think Jan and I are finally both convinced. Lurosil is the finest product of its kind on the market.

Sincerely Yours,
Rick and Jan Herr
York, PA

P.S. Jan has only been on Lurosil for a little less than 6 months. I am anxious to see what improvements might be forthcoming after a year, or two, or three, etc.

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Bargains!

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[camera strap]

Keyhole Hands-Free Camera Harness

Bull moose amble away while you struggled to get your DSLR out of your chest pack? Nab the next shot with this nifty system. "It's the best for rapid-fire photography," says our tester, who captured an Andean condor's flyover in Chile. A plastic knob screws into the camera's tripod mount, and a plastic plate (with a keyhole-shaped cutout) attaches to your pack straps: Sliding the knob into the chest plate stabilizes the camera when worn with a neck strap. Keep a rain cover handy (our tester used a shower cap). **$30; 1.5 oz.; backcountrysolutions.com**

FULL-COVERAGE Crampons, ice, talus—none penetrated the **Rab Latok Alpine Gaiters**. Credit the 500-denier Cordura and three-layer construction with an eVent membrane that testers ranked among the most breathable they'd ever worn. Stretch fabric on the calves trims up the fit and prevents crampon snags, while rubber underfoot straps hold them in place—even when a tester postholed in afternoon snow. **$50; 7 oz. (S); S-L; us.rab.uk.com**

[gaiters]

ULTRALIGHT With no zippers or Velcro weighing them down, the pull-on **MontBell Stretch Semi Long Spats** register at just two ounces. And worn over low-cuts, they're surprisingly effective. Four-way stretch fabric keeps duff and scree from infiltrating on off-trail forays. A hook loops over shoelaces to keep the fabric snugly in place, and an elastic cord (encased in rigid polyurethane) runs underfoot. "The DWR coating repels light drizzle," says our tester. **$30; 2 oz.; montbell.us**

[flask]

Innate Trad Flask

This is one attention-getting flask—and not solely for what it holds. Its shapely curves and rich luster (courtesy of premium stainless steel) give this boozer top-shelf good looks that "seem worthy of the finest single malt," declares our tester, who admits that she also filled it with lesser stuff once or twice. It holds six fluid ounces and slides comfortably into pants or backpack pockets. A wire hinge attaches the cap so you'll never lose it. **$20; 5 oz.; innate-gear.com**

[stoves]

Olicamp Xcelerator Titanium

"If it's weight you hate, this is a great cooker," concludes our AT thru-hiking tester. Instead of screwing directly onto a canister, the Xcelerator attaches via a hose that places the burner on the ground, giving pots more support, which is perfect for small group meals. **$40; 2.7 oz.; libertymountain.com**

[headlamp]

Princeton Tec Spectrum

Here's your chance to play gear designer: Order online and you can choose the strap design and colors for the body, button, and bracket on the four-LED Spectrum. The 60-foot beam, three brightness settings (plus flash mode), and beam-angle adjustment make it perfect for camp chores as well as basic night hikes. The estimated 146-hour burn time (on three AAAs) proved accurate when a tester ran hers on high for a weeklong trip in the Rockies. **$35; 2.75 oz.; princetontec.com**

[gloves]

LIGHTWEIGHT "This glove never sweats out," rejoiced our tester after using the **Marmot Glide Softshell**. The stretchy, proprietary M2 shell paired with a moisture-wicking DriClime lining proved so breathable, her hands stayed dry (and therefore warm) during hard-charging ski tours and early-spring hikes and climbs. A Velcro wrist tab cinches the cuff, and sticky, polyurethane-coated fingers ensure enough dexterity to adjust ski poles and helmet straps. **$50; 4 oz. (L); S-XL; marmot.com**

MITT Big peaks on your summer tick list? Pack these toasters for camp and summit: Warmer than mitts costing twice as much, the **Mammut Kompakt Mitten** kept digits cozy through subfreezing temps, thanks to the proprietary Ajungilak OTI Element insulation (a synthetic fiber imitating down's loft). Downside: The lofty insulation compromises dexterity—testers' fingers slid on the pillowy surface. **$49; 5 oz.; 6-12; mammut.ch**

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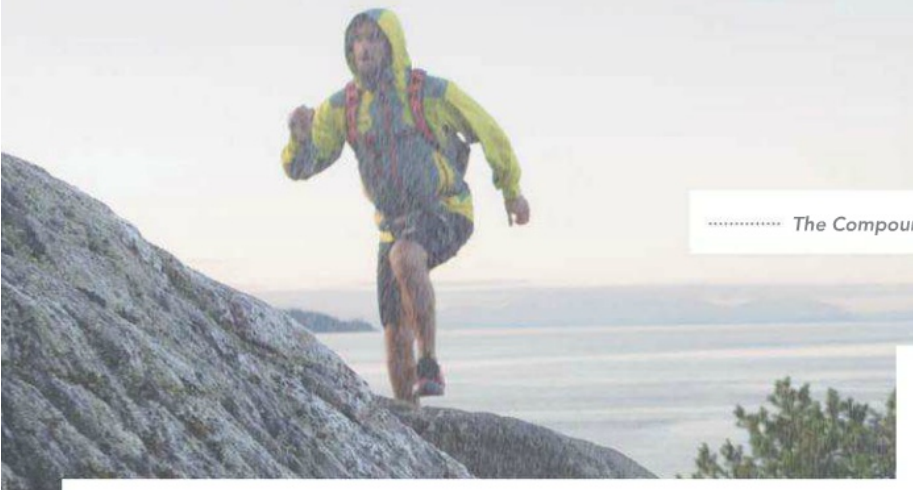

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