



Hiking Gear Recommendations

05/01/2010 Written by: John Beringer and Bob Kramer, Sun City Palm Desert Hiking Club Members

Objective. Comfort and safety are the most important considerations in selecting what to wear on a hike. Over the years, fabrics, materials and technology have had a positive influence on hiking gear. For some of us, practical experience has been the best teacher and what works for some, may not work for others. The suggestions here are those of the writers and not the opinion of the hiking club. “Take what you like and leave the rest.” You don’t have to spend “big” to have comfortable clothing or serviceable equipment.

Clothing. Deciding what to wear and bring on a hike starts with a review of the hike description and location, elevation at the start and gained, length of hike and all that you can learn in advance. Will you be in the open in full sun or hiking through wooded areas with partial or full shade? Will it be windy? Learn about the hike. Check local forecasts for the location of the hike and to be sure, check with the hike leader in advance. The purpose of your clothing is not to make you warm but to maintain your thermal equilibrium. A 3-layer system starts with a base layer, then an insulation layer, then outer shell.

Cotton is not a good choice for the hiker. It retains moisture (perspiration) which can become a threat should a cold or even cool wind arise. A cool wind blowing across a wet shirt creates evaporation that can quickly cool down the body and may result in hypothermia, a condition that can become dangerous. (Think evaporative cooler, aka, swamp cooler.) There are many micro fiber choices available on the market today that are made to wick away perspiration rather than retain it.

Shirts. Base layer. Start with a thin, short-sleeved t-shirt of micro fiber content, which provides a soft, comfortable layer on the skin. On top of this, a long sleeved hiking style shirt with pockets and tabs for small items, tissues, sunglasses, IPOD, whistle, note pad, etc. Some have “pit vents” pleats and other flaps to permit extra venting and lots of stretching room. Lighter colors for summer and darker for winter help with temperature control. Why long sleeves in summer you say? To protect you from the sun! That’s why Bedouins don’t wear t-shirts” in the desert.

Pants or shorts. Some of the same thinking from the above clothing description applies to this section. Heavy pant material such as Levi’s can really drag you down on the trail – especially if you get caught in a bit of rain. Many good hiking pants are available in most sporting goods stores and again, micro fiber pants in a lighter color are favored. Many hike in shorts, but you can have it both ways with a zip off version of pants. The Columbia brand even has a deep back pocket for the leg portions when zipped off. Some even have zippers on the lower leg area to enable removal without taking your boots off. Most hiking pants are a bit baggy for ease of climbing and have “cargo style” pockets for all your stuff.

Hats. Many of our hikes are in areas where there is no cover from trees and a head covering is essential. A wide brimmed hat offers good cover from the sun with some having an extended flap in the back that protects the back of the neck. On cold, windy days, there is something called an ear

jock – a woven wool, or synthetic 3” headband, which will save your ears. Head or long scarves can be treacherous and a potential safety hazard and may catch on low-lying tree limbs or bushes on overgrown trails. In any event, a cap or hat is essential for your health and safety. If you encounter a sudden cold spell, (think Brite-Angel trail Grand Canyon,) you can lose much of your body heat just through an uncovered head – hair or not.

Socks. You will find many different hiking socks available on the market. Whichever choice you make, avoid cotton for the reasons explained above. Some socks are made in varying thicknesses. Others are a combination of wool and other fibers for best wear in toe and heel areas. Wool is a very good choice, if you can wear it, because it does not lose its insulating ability if it gets wet.

On occasion, “raw wool” fibers available on line (and not in many stores) can save the day for toes.) Steep downhill descents can jam those little guys to the end of your boots with plenty of pain. Raw wool inserted inside your sock at the end of your toes could save the day.

Outerwear. Shell. As you are undoubtedly aware, our hiking area is often subjected to winds...Mountain passes even more so. A good defense against the wind or cooler temperatures is a nylon windbreaker. They are very lightweight and can be folded into a small package that doesn’t take up much room. (It’s best to not have things tied around your waist that could easily snag on bushes, trees and other impediments around you, sending you flying.)

Boots or hiking shoes. Footwear is one of the most important decisions you will make as a hiker. Ill fitting boots or hiking shoes will result in blisters, which are the Bane of the hiker. Most of our hikers wear a hiking shoe, which is cut lower than the hiking boot. It is lightweight and easier to break in than the higher topped hiking boot. The hiking boot on the other hand, offers more support to the ankles and can be waterproofed if needed. Our hiking club member policy states, “Hiking boots with deeply cleated soles of hard rubber are strongly recommended for all hikes and are required for all moderate and advanced hikes.”

Good boots/shoes do not have to cost an arm and a leg, but neither should you skimp on them. Good sources include REI, Sports Chalet and Sports Authority. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO PURCHASE THEM ON-LINE. You must try them on wearing socks of the weight you will wear while hiking and walk around the store with them on. Some sports stores have an incline ramp, which simulates walking up and down a hill. This gives you a good feel for fit. If the shoes/boots are too big, your feet will slip forward and back, a good indication of blisters to come.

Sunglasses.

A polarizing lens in a variety of shades is often best to reduce glare. Glasses, which wrap around the sides and fit lightly and snugly around your eyes, should give you protection from all sides including the top. Plastic construction all around gives a lightweight and does not conduct the temperature (hot or cold) like metal frames or rims

Hydration. It is imperative that you remain hydrated. While the amount of fluids required seems to vary from hiker to hiker, it is better to err on the side of carrying too much than not enough. Drinking plenty of fluids the day before the hike is advisable so that you start the hike well hydrated. Water is a good choice although some hikers prefer drinks like Gatorade, which contain

sugar and hydrolytes to replenish those lost during the hike. One of each type might be good for moderate hikes. For super long hikes double up and check with the hike leader for the recommended amount of water. A good tip is to think “when ½ of your water is gone, its time to head back.”

There are several ways to transport your choice beverage. Some hikers prefer carrying bottles that fit into the side pockets of a daypack or fanny pack. Some prefer a “Camelback”, a pouch that fits into a pack and has a hose with a mouthpiece for drawing the water out into your mouth. Its advantage is that you can drink while hiking without reaching for a bottle.

Other hiking gear. *Back Pack or Fanny pack.* Choices vary from hiker to hiker. Many prefer a fanny pack which fits around the waist, has side pockets for water bottles and a small section in the middle for carrying items such as lunch, a light weight nylon jacket, or sun screen. It is lighter than a backpack.

The backpack is carried on the back with straps going over the shoulders. It holds much more gear than the fanny pack but, naturally, adds more weight. Also, perspiration tends to collect beneath the pack where it rests on the back, one of the tradeoffs you will have to make. These packs come in a variety of styles, weight and storage capacity. For most of our club’s hikes, a simple smaller pack with or without a Camelback is appropriate.

Hiking Poles or “sticks” (As they are called by the pros) are adjustable poles much like ski poles, which help to maintain balance on a rocky trail and take weight off the knees when going downhill. Some hikers use two poles, some one, and some use none at all, another matter of personal choice. Using two poles can help you with your hiking cadence. (Would you ski with one pole?) Many are adjustable and some even have shock springs to ease the strain on wrists and elbows (Think pricey.) Rubber tips are available for use on rocky or paved surfaces to prevent slipping and can easily be installed or removed.

Other Useful Accessories. First aid kits, a small knife, mittens, leather gloves (minus finger tips), sun screen, binoculars, GPS devices and scads of other devices can be fun, add weight and prove very useful. Some of these may be described in some detail at a later time.

Resources and references.

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| www.abc-of-hiking.com | Good tips on hiking clothing. |
| http://halbertri.tripod.com/tips.htm | A list of hiking and backpacking tips |
| http://www.rei.com/ | Website for REI sporting goods for serious enthusiasts. |
| http://www.icebreaker.com/ | Amazing new technology in men and women’s clothing. |
| http://www.columbia.com/ | Hiking clothing and latest designs |
| http://www.exofficio.com/ | High-quality hiking gear for men and women |

