



Camping Basics

Camping offers the serenity of escape - and, if it's combined with the exercise of a hiking trip, it benefits both body and mind. The simplicity of camping combined with the beauty of nature can help us readjust and unwind from our hectic lifestyles. Whether you're in the woods, in the desert, combing the beaches, or climbing mountain trails, you'll want to keep a few survival techniques in mind to guarantee a memorable trip.

Before You Leave

Know the environment in which you'll be camping. Different terrain carries different challenges - for example, pitching a tent on sand is very different from setting up camp on land, and if you don't have the right equipment, you could find yourself sleeping under the stars on a windswept beach!

You'll also want to be prepared for any potential hazards - everything from poison ivy to potentially dangerous wildlife. Contact park rangers, an outdoors expert at your local sporting goods store, or research where you'll be going on the Internet or at a library before you hit the trail. Knowing your surroundings will help you find out what you might encounter and how you can prepare - or whether you want to avoid the area altogether.

If you'll be hiking to your campsite, practice walking with your fully packed backpack to get an idea of how the pack fits and whether the load is well distributed. This helps prevent blisters and strain. It's also a good idea to practice walking in the boots you'll be wearing.

What to Pack

Here are some camping necessities that you may want to pack:

- **A water-resistant, easy-to-assemble tent.** Before you leave, practice putting up your tent in your backyard or living room to make sure it works properly. (But be careful not to leave any important pieces behind when you set out!)
- **A sleeping bag.** There are many inexpensive sleeping bags on the market, but you'll want to choose the right one for your conditions. Temperatures can drop quickly when you're camping at higher elevations. So buy or rent sleeping bags designed to keep you warm in low temperatures. Goose down or synthetic (man-made) materials can keep you toasty in temperatures as low as minus 15 degrees Fahrenheit (26 degrees Celsius below zero).
- **Insect repellent and sunscreen.** For summertime excursions, use sunscreen and an insect repellent that contains 10% to 30% DEET. Although you can buy products that combine sunscreen with an insect repellent, these generally aren't a good idea because sunscreen should be applied more frequently than an insect repellent. Apply the sunscreen first.
- **A first-aid kit that includes:**
 - sterile gauze
 - antiseptic wipes
 - calamine lotion (for stings and rashes)
 - adhesive strips or bandages
 - butterfly closures (for wounds that require stitches)
 - adhesive tape
 - electrolyte tablets (these replace lost minerals but should be used with caution)
 - tweezers
 - disposable gloves
 - snake-bite kit
 - alcohol pads
 - basic first-aid instructions
- **Medications.** Pack a supply of any medicines that you might need to take during the trip, such as asthma or allergy medications.
- **An emergency kit that includes:**
 - a flashlight (with extra batteries)
 - bottled water (in addition to your regular supply)
 - waterproof matches
 - high-carbohydrate snacks (such as energy bars)
 - a whistle (this can be heard at greater distances than a traditional call for help)
 - a thermal reflective blanket (these "space blankets" are light and easy to carry and offer emergency protection against wind and cold)
 - a pocketknife



You may also want to consider taking along a cell phone for emergencies. Not all wilderness areas have cell phone coverage, though, so don't think of your phone as your only safety device.

Remember that saying, "take only pictures, leave only footprints?" If you're hiking in remote areas with no waste disposal facilities, you'll need to carry out your garbage and other unused items. Make this easier by packing as lightly as you can.

What to Wear

Shorts might seem like the perfect camp gear when you leave the house, but if the weather shifts from sun to storm clouds, they may leave you with the chills. Try to bring a variety of clothing, including practical clothes that dry fast.

If you plan to hike, long pants and shirts made of lighter fabrics are a better choice than shorts. They help protect against everything from ticks and mosquitoes to poisonous and thorny plant life (not to mention sunburn). Speaking of insects, you can now buy clothing that's designed to protect you from sunburn or has been treated with insect repellents - you'll still need to use a rub or spray on repellent on exposed skin though!

Layering your clothes, from tank tops to long-sleeved jackets, will allow you to add or remove layers easily depending on the temperature. And don't forget to bring extra socks, extra shoes, and waterproof rain gear. A plastic poncho and rain hat pack well and offer good protection when unexpected cloudbursts threaten to rain on your rustic parade.

A hat is a camping essential. If you're bringing a hat to stay warm, be sure it fits snugly. If you are hoping for it to provide shade during warm weather adventures, select something lightweight and well ventilated like a straw or mesh weave. And remember to pack something waterproof to keep your head dry in case of rain.

Camping Tips

Although your experiences will vary from campsite to campsite, a few tips always apply. The first rule to remember is not to camp alone. The buddy system isn't only fun, it's also smart - there's someone to help in case of an emergency.

Make sure the folks back home have your camping itinerary and check in with them at regular, previously arranged intervals. Many park areas offer an opportunity to sign in at the beginning of a trail. Take advantage of this system (or tell a ranger at the park's ranger station when you're setting out). That way, if conditions get rough, your chances of getting help are better. Of course, most campers breeze through their outdoor adventures without a snag. But part of the serenity of camping is knowing someone will know how to find you if you need help.

Your Campsite

How can you keep your campsite safe, beyond using common sense and the buddy system? Here are some tips from the pros:

- **Plan your site.** Pick a clear spot on a hill or slope to avoid potential flash flooding after a sudden rain. There's nothing like the power of water in motion to wash away your love for camping along with your gear. If you're in an area that may attract bears or other wildlife, plan your site so your cooking area is well away from your sleeping area (the U.S. National Park Service recommends people sleep about 100 yards, or 90 meters, uphill or upwind from where they cook).
- **Don't play with fire.** Make sure open campfires are legal before you start one (consult a park ranger or campsite staff member to find out). Once you've determined it's OK to have a fire, carefully consider where your fire will burn. Ten feet (3 meters) away from your tent is a good rule of thumb.
- **Store food safely.** Food that's not stored properly can attract all kinds of wildlife, including animals that are potentially dangerous, like bears. The National Park Service recommends hanging food above ground in special bags; you can also rent special bear-proof containers at some ranger stations.
- **Be aware of what's going on around you.** Make a mental note of your surroundings, including who is nearby and what they might be doing. Lock your car, even if you think no one is around. Be friendly, but not too friendly. Be ready for the unexpected.

Your Water

Don't forget to take along plenty of drinking water, even if you're headed to a mountain retreat where the water looks clear, cool, and tempting. No matter how crystal clear stream, river, or lake water looks, it can be contaminated with parasites like *Giardia* that make people seriously ill. Sure, packing water may seem heavy, but it's one of the essentials of camping. Bottles are unwieldy to carry (and you have to carry the empties back with you), so many seasoned campers find it easier to take along drinking pouches filled with water.

Wildlife species native to remote areas also use the waterways, and germs from sick animals can contaminate lakes, streams, or rivers. These can make people sick, too. You can bathe and swim if it's not restricted, but bring your own water to drink - and drink plenty of it, to avoid dehydration.

Your Eats

There are many edible plants along the trail, but don't try harvesting them unless you know what you're doing. Some berries, leaves, mushrooms, or roots look yummy but they can make you sick. If you want to harvest goodies on your trip, study up by reading books or visiting reputable Internet sites before you head out - and then take pictures with you.

Animal Encounters

National parks and other campsites are alive with wildlife, from birds to bears or chipmunks to snakes. It may be tempting to lure the animals into your campsite with food just to get a closer look. But do yourself (and the animals) a favor and resist.

Wild animals need to stay wild. Not feeding them helps preserve their survival - as well as your own. It's easy to think of animals like horses as domesticated, but any wild animal can bite and even smaller animals can do substantial damage to a campsite. Even if you escape the close encounter without losing a finger, the next family to land in the same campsite might not be so lucky.

Once an animal knows it can be fed at a certain location, it will instinctively return. Just as the next person to encounter the animal may not fare as well as you, the same animal may not be as fortunate with other people. Attracting animals to campsites puts them at risk for cruel treatment from people who may not be as kind as you.



Finding Your Way

Getting lost while camping and hiking is probably the biggest problem most campers face. It's a good idea to learn how to use a compass and map to get from place to place - most campers have no idea how to use a compass. To avoid getting lost, stay on well-marked trails and never camp without a friend or family member along for the ride. Before you start on your adventure, obtain maps from the park or forest ranger.

If you and your buddy do get lost, follow trail markers to the nearest ranger station and wait for help to arrive. If you can't find a ranger station, look for a safe, sheltered place and wait for help to come looking for you (it will if you've followed procedures such as signing in on trails and leaving information at home on where you'll be). An ordinary sports whistle is a camper's best friend when it comes to calling for help. The regular repeat of the clear tone can help guarantee your cries for help will be heard at distances the human voice can't travel. If you have a cell phone and can obtain a signal, try contacting park rangers by phone.

If you do have an unexpected problem, no matter how small it seems to you, don't hesitate to ask park rangers for help. Asking directions or advice can mean the difference between a treasured memory and a nightmare.

If you really want to head for the hills and none of your buddies are into it, take along a parent or other relative. Sharing the beauty of the great outdoors can actually help you get to know the adults in your life better, without all the usual distractions of life. A great camping trip not only leaves you with memories to treasure, it may start you on a lifelong passion.

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