

How to Get Started

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13 mistakes most beginners make

WINTER BACKPACKING IS a challenging idea for those who have enjoyed the pleasures of extensive summer and fall backpacking. Enjoying the woods and hills in their deep snow mantle and clear freezing air, with fewer people around, and no bugs, has a compelling allure.

It can be an exciting and fascinating experience—but for many the first attempt ends in a cold, unpleasant fiasco. For an unfortunate few, frostbite and hypothermia convert their mistakes, which if made in summertime would be mere inconveniences, into tragic disasters.

It is so tempting to assume that if you have a lot of experience backpacking in summer and fall, even in light November snows, it will be easy to make the transition to winter trips.

But successful winter backpacking is a whole new ball game.

The summer-experienced hiker undertaking a remote backpack on his first winter outing often encounters a new order of problems.

❧ His canteen freezes up.

❧ He becomes dehydrated for lack of drinking enough water.

❧ His clothes get wet, both from perspiration and from snow melting on his parka, his socks or his mittens.

❧ He does not make nearly the mileage he thought he would and falls short of the spot where he planned on spending the night.

❧ Darkness seems to come on shortly after lunch because of the shorter days of the winter.

❧ If he reaches a shelter, it may be filled up—not with people, but with snow.

❧ His tent is a lot more difficult to set up in deep snow, fading twilight and hand-freezing temperatures.

❧ The process of melting snow for water is trickier than he expected and requires much more snow than he anticipated.

❧ He spills his cooking pot at least once, trying to operate in the cramped space inside his tent.

❧ As his dinner finally cooks, steam clouds fill the tent, and the vapor dampens his down bag, drastically reducing its warmth.

❧ In the morning, after a cold night, his boots are frozen, and he has a difficult time getting them on.

❧ Every time he touches the tent wall in the morning, frost showers down on him and his gear, all of which is by now either wet or frozen.

❧ When he finally blunders out down the trail to his car, the battery is dead.

Before launching on their first winter trip, some people are sensible enough to study up on what to expect, what equipment to take and how to plan a reasonable first-time objective. Many are just plain lucky that the weather treats them gently.

But on far too many occasions, the experiences described above befall the apprentice winter backpacker. Of course, entertaining tales about such trips can be told for many years. But

how much safer it would be to do it the right way the first time out.

How should you get started in winter backpacking?

A four-step sequence is advisable.

1. Begin with a solid “experience base” of backpacking in warmer weather. Be thoroughly at home in the backcountry in summer. Know your equipment well, in bad weather as well as good. For example, get to know your cookstove so that you can start it quickly without fuss. Your first winter trip is no time to try to figure out how the thing works. The same goes for boots, pack, headlamp (not flashlight), everything.

Many people buy new equipment for winter and never try it out first in mild weather conditions. For example, they have used a butane stove for summer trekking and have been told that it won't work in winter. So in November they buy a gas-fueled stove, start it once in the cellar and not again until they're camping out at Faroff Lean-to 12 miles from the road in January. The chances of dinner going smoothly that night are pretty slim.

During the summer get to know the area in which you expect to pack. Get acquainted with the mountains, valleys, streams, ponds and trails. Learn to relate hiking areas with topo maps. Learn to see mountains, valleys and other features when you look at those little lines on the topos. Learn to use your compass with more authority. You will come to know which of two trails is longer but easier, and which is the shorter, steeper route. Your sense of time and distance will sharpen. Your judgment will improve. You will get to know how many hours it takes to get from point to point. Later you'll learn how to estimate how much longer winter travel will take.

Winter Backpacking



Know the local roads to the trail-head so that time is not wasted getting started hiking. No problem in summer, but in winter, a valuable hour of daylight may be lost. The delay could be more serious.

2. Learn as much about winter backpacking as you can *before* you ever set boot in snowshoe.

Learn from experienced friends with proven good judgment and leadership ability. It is best if they will take you along with them on one of their trips. There is no better way to learn. And when out there, offer to help with cooking and making camp so that you can get actual experience in these essential tasks.

Reading some good books is useful, too. Until recently there were no basic guides on winter hiking and camping. Today the westerner can consult Bridge's *The Complete Snow Camper's Guide* and the pertinent chapters of *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills*. For the very different problems of eastern winter backpacking, two good sources are the Adirondack Mountain Club's *Winter Hiking and Camping* and Dan H. Allen's *Don't Die on the Mountain*.

You can speed up your learning process by participating in one of the winter camping courses offered by many of the outdoor clubs. These programs usually combine classroom instruction with day hikes and move up to more demanding overnight trips.

3. If you are getting started on your own with the aid of books, get started gradually. Begin with winter day hikes when the ground is bare or has less than a foot of snow. Then try your skis or snowshoes in moderate snow cover. Take short trips at first, with only essentials in a knapsack. Later, take complete backpacking gear.

This enables you to experience the new problems of winter hiking and camping a few at a time rather than all at once. For instance, take on the problems of learning to snowshoe and of how to adjust snowshoe bindings when you're wearing a day pack and have plenty of time. It's a lot easier and safer than trying to do it with a fully loaded 50-pound backpack and that panicky feeling that if you don't hurry, you'll run out of

daylight before you get to a safe place to camp.

You will find it is surprisingly difficult to stay on the trail when several feet of snow blanket the woods. This is specially true when the trail is not broken and sleet or wet snow covers trail markers. In the vicinity of tree line and above, you must be aware that in winter there is virtually no trail. Losing your way on mountaintops is dangerous and a major cause of some parties failing to return.

Day trips will help you judge how slowly you travel in deep snow and, therefore, how far you can expect to travel when you set out for your first overnight trips.

You will learn how short the winter daylight hours are. In Yogi Berra's immortal phrase, this is the time of year when it gets late early.

Practice the endless task of putting on and taking off your clothing—mittens, cap or balaclava, wool shirts and sweaters—so that you don't overheat when going uphill and don't chill down too fast when you stop.

You can learn much on day trips without committing yourself to the dangers of a major "adventure."

4. Learn to operate overnight in some location where a quick retreat to civilization can be made at any time. Your first attempt at winter camping should be close to your car, lodge or home. The first test would best be made early in the winter when the snow cover is thin and temperatures are only moderately cold. Make the next trip in a bit colder weather and later in the winter. Stay below tree line until you feel really at home in the cold and know your equipment well. You will learn a limited number of new things on each trip without risking a too-advanced project.

Do not commit yourself to remote high country until you are thoroughly confident of your equipment, your technique on snowshoes or skis and crampons, your trail-finding ability in deep snow and every facet of daily backcountry living under full winter conditions.

Within this structure for gradually introducing yourself to winter backpacking, here are some additional considerations of winter camping, many of which seem obvious but are frequently underestimated by the novice winter backpacker.

The Cold.

Because we live indoors most of the time, most of us are inclined to be complacent about the cold. This attitude can lead to serious difficulties on the trail. You must make a deliberate effort to adapt mentally to cold. Do not believe that your expensive equipment or physical condition will shield you fully from it. Do not fight it or try to overcome it by brute force. You must do everything to accommodate yourself to low temperatures, including the cooling effects of wind on your body.

Snow and Ice.

Living and moving about on snow and ice present unique problems. Travel takes longer. Visibility is often drastically reduced. Your tracks may disappear quickly behind you beneath new-fallen or blown snow, making it more difficult to retrace your route. Climbing is more strenuous. Icy areas are more hazardous. Erecting your tent and keeping it up are more difficult. A heavy snowfall can quickly cover a camp, collapsing your tent and burying your equipment. Items dropped in the snow get easily lost. And there are special dangers such as avalanches and thin ice on lakes.

Weather.

The longer you stay in the mountains, the more your exposure to vagaries of weather. One day may be mild and damp with sleet or rain that dampens your clothing and sleeping bag. The next can bring a sudden temperature drop that freezes your wet gear.

Your chances of predicting local weather changes are better if you have previous winter experience in the area and—most important—if you use good judgment in deciding whether to continue. Trips have ended in disaster, or nearly so, because a decision was made to go ahead rather than turn back.

Operating.

Understand and anticipate that practically everything you do in the cold will be more difficult and time consuming: moving about, cooking, getting water, erecting your tent, putting on and removing your clothes, putting on and lacing your boots. Functioning while wearing mittens is difficult. If your body is warm

enough, you can use your bare hands for a short period to perform tasks with nonmetal equipment. But you'll be able to use your bare hands only as briefly as possible, because rewarming them takes a long time even with mittens back on.

Your winter operating time can be

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significantly reduced, as I said earlier, by practice on introductory trips and by being familiar with all features of your equipment. You can also improve your operating efficiency by "winterizing" your clothing and equipment. Attach rawhide or tape pulls on zipper tabs, secure your mittens with a cord around the neck or to parka sleeves as you do for small children. Use a parka with roomy pockets, a tent that is easy to erect, shock-corded tent poles, a quick-starting easy-to-use stove, simple foods that are quick to prepare, simple-to-use utensils, a larger stuff bag for your sleeping bag, a headlamp instead of a flashlight and tape over metal parts that you are likely to touch with your bare hands.

Keep Warm.

Always keep your clothing as dry as possible. Damp clothing and sleeping bag will not keep you warm because their insulation value is lost. Socks, underwear, mitten liners and down vests will absorb moisture, especially when you are perspiring from vigorous activity. You can minimize moisture absorption by scrupulously brushing snow off your clothes, by ventilating in every possible way and by wearing as little clothing as is necessary to retain your body warmth.

Inadequate food intake can contribute to premature fatigue and lower your body temperature. Your caloric consumption in winter is generally higher. Be sure your body is adequately fueled. You need nutritious meals that include ample beverages. Your pre-trip meals should also be nourishing.

Pack.

Use a roomy pack. Too many hikers get started in winter using packs that are entirely too small. You need extra space in your pack, not just for the extra clothing you must carry but for the clothes you shed as you warm up on the trail. If your pack is too small,

it discourages shedding, which is an essential maneuver for keeping your clothes dry. The frame should have lashing studs or D-rings for securing snowshoes, crampons, skis, ice axe. Extra outside pockets are handy for stuffing additional small items you need in winter.

Boots.

Take precautions to avoid getting cold feet and frostbite. You invite trouble if you wear hiking boots that you ordinarily use at other times of year with one pair of socks but which become tight-fitting when you add a second pair of socks. Instead, get larger boots that fit your feet with at least one pair of medium wool socks and another pair of heavy ones and allow sufficient room for wiggling your toes.

Many experienced winter hikers use leather-top, rubber-bottom boots or insulated, all-rubber boots. The former require two pairs of socks and insoles for insulation; the latter need only one pair of socks. Some all-rubber models are designed to be worn at 20 degrees below zero.

Preventing boots from freezing at night is important. The best way is to keep them inside your sleeping bag with you. Be sure to scrape all snow and ice off first. Then put them in your sleeping-bag stuff sack before stowing them at the bottom of the bag. But turn the stuff sack inside out so that any traces of snow from the boots won't dampen your sleeping bag when you stuff it into your stuff sack in the morning.

Clothing.

A good ensemble would include wool

pants and two wool shirts, a wool sweater, a nylon shell with hood, a pair of wool mittens, outer mitten shells to keep mittens dry, a ski cap or balaclava, and a pair of long johns. All your clothing should be loose fitting with plenty of built-in features for ventilation: full zipper on parka, adjustable closures at sleeves (not knit wristlets), suspenders instead of a belt. For protection around hips and legs, windproof shell pants can be used in deep snow and wind. Prevent snow from entering your boots by wearing gaiters.

When you stop hiking for the day and set up camp, put on additional shirts, sweaters and parka—whatever you have. Maintain your body heat. If temperatures are very cold, get into your sleeping bag as soon as your tent is up; then have your meal.

Stove.

Obviously, a portable cookstove, *not* a campfire, is mandatory in winter. One caution: carbon monoxide is a potential hazard wherever stoves and heaters are used in a confined space and ventilation is limited, such as in a tent. Be sure you keep your tent vents open, even if it is blowing a blizzard outside.

Food.

Nibble-food or "gorp" carried in your pocket is a good idea.

Cold air has an extremely dehydrating effect on the body, so it is important to drink as much liquid as possible. Some people like to carry a hot drink in a thermos bottle. Some people fill their canteens with hot tea or water in the morning before setting out on the trail, and after dinner, and put the warm canteen in their sleeping bag with them. (Be sure it doesn't leak if you do this.) Carry your canteen inside your pack—upside down wrapped inside your extra clothes or inside your parka to prevent its cap from freezing.

Main course meals should be simple and easy to prepare. Many winter campers carry extra margarine or butter to add extra calories and flavor to both their dinner meals and their cereal.

And one final coup de grace for late evening: a piece of candy or other sweet just before going to sleep gives you another extra surge of quick heat. ♣