




Mistakes backpackers and hikers make



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Just about every trip I make, I forget something. I take the time to make a thermos of hot coffee for later in the morning, pack a great lunch, place it all on the kitchen table and head out the door.

Later in the day, I reach for the thermos and a bite to eat, suddenly realizing it is back home on the kitchen table. While I am out hiking, Murphy of Murphy’s Law fame is back home at the kitchen table eating my lunch and drinking the coffee from my thermos.

Some of the mistakes made by hikers and backpackers are more of an inconvenience, while others can get you to paradise a bit ahead of schedule. Most mistakes come from rushing through the preparation stages of the trip and not thinking thing through.

Starting out with a serious mistake, forgetting to tell someone responsible back in town where you are going, ranks near the top. If someone does not know your plan, and expected times of return, that peaceful trip can turn into a disaster.

You must have a person who knows your itinerary, starting point, vehicle, plate numbers, return time and direction of travel. This person will summon help when you are overdue. Even the short half-day trip can turn into an emergency, so play it safe and let someone know. Search and rescue folks need a starting point, and having one can save time and lives.

Less serious, but still important, is having proper footwear. I see people in the high country with tennis shoes, flip-flops, moccasins, and every other improper for terrain footgear you can think of. On a good day, you may end up with blisters and sore feet, while on a bad day it could be frostbite, broken ankles or worse.

The same holds true for taking off with a new pair of boots that is not broken in. I once went on a hunt, which I knew was going to involve a great deal of walking with a heavy pack and a rifle. I bought a pair of new lightweight boots for the trip.

The boots fit very well, and were quite comfortable when I tried them on at the store, so I never bothered to break them in. By the afternoon of the first day, my heels were consumed with blisters because of the heel slip in the boots. The second day in those boots was a new experience in foot pain. Note to self: break in the boots at home.

Another common mistake I see folks make is not preparing for the elements. It may be summer here in town, but add 4,000 feet and a few mountains, and you could be back in



An unorganized backpack is a mistake many beginners make. I admit I am still guilty of this error occasionally. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

“Items you may or may not need, like rain gear, can be stuffed in the bottom of the pack.”

the middle of winter. Some days in the high country start out summer, then Old Mother Nature throws a freak snow squall at you. Have extra clothes and rain gear with you, lest you pay the price later.

A mistake I am guilty of committing involves my foods for the trip. When I am packing, I bring along too much trail mix and power bars, probably because they are convenient and easy to pack. I once lived on granola bars for four days on a Canadian trip because the only other food provided was sardines and kippers. I would sooner eat rock lichen than fish in a can, and granola bars rank there as well after that trip.

Take the time to bring an assortment of food with you. Peanut butter crackers, sesame sticks, dried fruit like bananas and mango, cheese sticks, Fig Newton’s, salted sunflower seeds and peanuts, will give you a wide assortment of healthy trail snacks. If you get stuck longer than expected, having that variety of food helps. Always pack more food than you think will be necessary.

The right pack is essential for the trip. Just as important is packing the pack properly. The items you need most should be in side pockets, easily accessible without stopping or having to remove the pack.

Items you may or may not need, like raingear, can be stuffed in the bottom of the pack. I have been on trips where half the day is spent digging around, emptying and repacking, for every little item. I remember searching every pocket for my rain gear, during a cloudburst. Experience and a little planning can prevent this all too common mistake.

Purchasing cheap and inferior equipment ranks near the top of mistakes people make. When I was in the Quickie Mart, I bought a neat little compass designed to live on a pack strap. I thought this a great idea and purchased the little thing. Fast forward to a day trip where I took a look at the compass to orient myself to a few landmarks, and noticed the flaw.

The needle of the compass had as much trouble finding north as I did. Each time I looked at it, the compass took another wild guess as to where north was located. That particular piece of outdoor equipment is now somewhere in the woods on Love Mesa, probably still trying to decide where north is. You get what you pay for.

A cardinal sin of hiking mistakes is over packing. Carrying along camp chairs, hammocks and sleeping pads can really weigh you down. I have seen people’s packs so overloaded, a cherry pickers is necessary to get the pack on their back. When you are loading up that pack for your trip, remember you are going to have to carry it around, uphill, and at altitude.

Just as bad as over packing ranks under packing. It is a good idea to bring several methods of fire starting, multiple means of direction finding, and lots of food and clothes. These are the areas you don’t want to skimp. Leave the heavy binoculars and cameras at home if you are trying to go ultra light.

When the dawn of the trip arrives, you notice a sore throat coming on. As the morning progresses, the sinuses begin to clog up. Sure enough, a cold is coming on. The last thing you want to do is head up to the high country.

If you are ill, adding altitude, strenuous activity and a harsh environment

is certainly not going to make you better. Rather than risk getting worse, it is better to put the trip off until you are well. Colds and flu are tough enough at home; you don’t need to be in the back-country with one if you can help it.

Do a little research before you purchase your outdoor gear. Talk with people in the know about what works for them and why. Don’t rely on a commission driven store clerk for outdoor advice, and don’t choose equipment passed on price tags.

Buying quality equipment builds confidence. Having confidence is important for your survival mindset. Try out all that equipment at home, before the trip. You don’t want to discover the tent has a hole in it, on the side of a mountain, in the dark, with rain pouring down. Check things out at home first.

Lastly, I would mention cleaning up and not leaving a trace when outdoors. Think about other people enjoying the outdoors. Folks don’t want to see garbage left in fire rings or candy wrappers and pop cans scattered about. Maid service does not come along and clean up after you.

I am a guy who can’t remember anything anymore, so I write it down. I make lists, days ahead of a trip, all in an effort to not forget an essential item. Here I am on a nice hike near Matterhorn, realizing I forgot my lunch and coffee at home. Murphy is at my kitchen table, drinking coffee, eating my lunch and reading my list. And so goes the hike.

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