

How To Choose A Backpacking Pack



Nothing quite compares to the experience of heading off into nature with a pack on your back that contains just the essentials.

But picking that backpack for your adventure can be anything but simple. There is a wide range of pack options out there, making it daunting for beginners and experienced backpackers alike.

The first step is to determine what size (capacity) pack you need. Another way to think of it is, how much are you willing to leave behind? This will vary based on activity (will you be doing something gear-intensive, like climbing or fishing?), length of trip (days), the season or weather you may encounter, as well as personal needs.

One note about measuring capacity—sometimes you will see a pack's capacity expressed in cubic inches, and sometimes in liters. For reference, one thousand cubic inches equals just over 16 liters.

We (and most retailers) break down backpacking options into three major categories: overnight packs, weekend packs, and packs designed for trips of a week or longer (often referred to as Expedition packs).

OVERNIGHT PACKS: 2000-2999 CU IN (33-49L)



The smallest of the overnight workhorses, overnight packs are designed to accommodate enough gear and food for a light packer for one or two nights. Things you will likely be fitting in here (or strapped to the outside) would be your sleeping setup (tent, sleeping bag, pad), and possibly an extra outer layer. Think desert camping, likely without a tent, sleeping under the stars on a warm summer night. This size pack can also be used as an extended day pack.

WEEKEND PACKS: 3000-4500 CU IN (49-74L)



Weekend packs are big enough to carry a backpacking sleeping bag, small tent, and pad, as well as extra clothing and layers. Other things you'll need to carry include a small stove, food, and basic cookware; water filter/purifier, first aid kit, and navigation tools. Depending on your packing skills you may also have room for some glamping items such as a coffee press, lightweight chair, or small camp lantern.

WEEKLONG PACKS: 4500+ CU IN (75+L)



A light packer will have ample room for five nights or more with these bags. These are designed to carry more food and cooking fuel than a weekend pack, as well as extra clothes and layers. Packs specifically for expedition or winter camping will be on the larger side (over 6000 cu in) to accommodate a warmer sleeping setup, mountaineering equipment, as well as first aid and survival gear. Look for a super burly suspension as well as ample straps and loops for gear attachment or hauling of the pack itself.

BACKPACK FEATURES

Once you've decided on a size, you'll want to figure out what features are important to you. You are going to pay more for extra features, but they may make your trip more enjoyable. Ultralight packs, as well as ones with an advanced suspension and/or ventilation to keep you cooler, are going to cost more.

Internal Vs. External Frames



Before looking at features, a quick note about overall type of backpack—internal vs. external frames. Packs with an external frame can be considered the original style of backpack. This is what my grandfather and father used, and was also the style of my first pack. They're no longer as popular, and only a few brands, like Kelty, still make them. That being said, they do have some advantages, such as the ability to carry a heavier load, the option to strap a lot more gear on the outside, better ventilation against your back, and generally higher durability and lower prices.

Because the suspension systems of internal frame packs are smaller and use a variety of lighter-weight materials, internal frame packs tend to be lighter weight and lower profile than external frame packs. This lower profile makes them more functional in tight quarters such as overgrown trails. Because the load is carried closer to the body in a more compact configuration, your balance and mobility will be better. Off the trail, its more streamlined shape means that it's going to be easier to transport in a car or plane than an external frame pack.

There are a number of features you can look for when shopping for a pack. Many will increase the cost of a pack, but greatly increase comfort and convenience as well. Features to look for include:

Shoulder And Hip Belt Padding

You can expect to carry most of the weight of your pack on your hips—80-90%, in fact. The heavier the pack you intend to carry, the more padding becomes a factor. So for weekend and weeklong packs in particular you will want ample hip and shoulder padding. Some companies offer hip belts that can be customized by heat molding, which can greatly increase comfort; however, this generally should be done at a certified dealer. Pivoting hipbelts can aid in comfort as well as increased balance in the suspension of the pack, because the pack won't shift around as much as your hips move. The use of mesh and lighter weight foams can make a pack much more comfortable in hotter weather. Hip-belts with accessory pockets make getting to cameras, snacks and other small necessities a breeze.

Ventilation

If you're backpacking in warm weather, this can be very important. You will see materials used that include light weight mesh, perforated foam as well as framing systems that keep much of the back panel away from your skin. Although it is generally understood this does not affect the overall performance of a pack, it can greatly increase your comfort.

External Attachments



This is a nice feature as it can add versatility to your pack. Loops, daisy chains, and bungees can increase capacity by enabling you to lash additional gear to the outside of your pack. Compression straps will let you cinch your pack down to a smaller size when it is less full, so it doesn't shift around unnecessarily.

Sleeping Bag Compartment, Multiple Access Points

These are features to consider if you want to keep your gear more organized, since a lot of packs consist of one main compartment where everything goes. Multiple or larger access points to the main compartment (top, front, back, or side access) become important for longer trips, camping with kids, or through-hikes, as you can expect to be getting in and out of your pack more frequently and wanting to access individual items without unloading everything. Keep in mind that the more 'organization' a pack has, the more it will usually cost; if decide to go with a more minimalist option, you can always invest in some pack organization tools like stuff sacks, compression sacks, and dry sacks. These have the advantage of being useable when you're not on the trail as well.

Rain Cover



Some packs will come with an integrated rain cover that tucks away, while other models have rain covers available separately. If you anticipate to frequently backpack in rainy conditions, it could be an important consideration.

Removable Lids

Many packs have lids (top flaps) that are not only good for holding small items you want to have easy access to, but they are often removable so you can use them as a lumbar pack. This feature is nice if you are setting up a base camp and planning to do day hiking from there, giving you a convenient way to carry a water bottle and other small items.

Hydration Compatibility



There are two ways to carry and access your water on the trail. Water reservoirs (bladders) make getting enough liquids really convenient. They range in capacity, generally averaging around 13 liters. If your pack is compatible, it will have a separate sleeve for this to slide into as well as a hook to keep the bladder vertical. The shoulder harness will have a port and clip to keep the tubing and mouthpiece easily accessible. Water bottle pockets are nice, especially if you are not using a hydration system. The advantage of water bottles is that they are less prone to failure and much easier to fill with a water filter. Many people will use a combination of both.

SIZING YOUR PACK

It is very important that your pack fits correctly. There are two elements to this: the size of the hip belt and the length of the suspension system. If your hip belt is too large, you will not be able to carry the load efficiently. Remember that most of the weight should rest on your hips, so that they can disperse the weight to your larger bones and muscles. All packs are going to have an adjustable hip belt, but some go further and offer interchangeable belts to get an even more dialed-in fit.

This goes the same for the shoulder harness system. Packs are not sized by your height but the length of your back or, more specifically, torso. Sizing is not standardized between manufacturers, so it's essential to measure yourself. You can easily measure this with a partner (or not so easily on your own.) The measurement you are looking for is from your C7 vertebrae (the more prominent one at the bottom of your neck) down to your iliac crest (essentially, the line running between the tops of your hip bones). You will likely measure in the 16-23 inch range; look at a specific pack's sizing charts based on that measurement. Many packs out there, such as some made by Deuter, feature a suspension adjustment so you can get the fit just right.

Learn more about sizing a pack here:

Women-specific packs are not just for women; I know several smaller men who take advantage of the features these can offer. These packs are going to be narrower and have shorter torso options; the shoulder straps are going to be more contoured as well.