

HOW TO PACK FOR AN APPALACHIAN TRAIL THRU-HIKE

The Essentials

1. Shelter

Most AT thru-hikers carry a tent. A smaller although not insignificant minority carry a hammock. **There is no one right answer**; it's a matter of personal preference.

Because the AT offers more than 250 backcountry shelters, at an average of one shelter every eight miles, some will set out on the trail without a tent or hammock, relying solely on these three-walled structures. *Don't do this.* Shelters on the AT are first-come, first-served. If you arrive to a shelter already at capacity, you must either hike on to the next shelter, which could require several more trekking hours, or ask people to make room for you, which is poor etiquette and offers no guarantees.

What to look for: Regardless of whether you prefer a tent or hammock, weight and durability are two important criteria.

2. Pack

As the contents inside hikers' packs get lighter and more compact, so too does the pack itself. Nowadays the ideal pack capacity is going to fall somewhere in the 40L–65L range, depending upon how much gear a hiker is carrying, the gear's compression, and how much food a hiker requires.

Simple, internal frame packs dominate the trail nowadays. More likely than not, added bells and whistles are unnecessary for the purposes of a long-distance trek.

What to look for: Again, durability and weight are important, but fit is the most important criteria for a pack. Different brands feature different fits, so it's advisable to head to your local REI to discover which **pack is right for your torso and hips**.

3. Sleeping Bag

The vast majority of thru-hikers are going to see sub-freezing temperatures. For this reason, it's advisable to look for a sleeping bag in the 15–20 degree range. Some will try to get by with a 30-degree bag, which is doable, although can present bone-chilling nights for anyone starting in Georgia prior to mid-April and anticipating finishing after late August.

The next biggest question is insulation material: **down or synthetic**? Each has its own advantages. Down is lighter and more compressible than synthetic materials at the same insulation value, but synthetic holds up better in damp environments and is cheaper. If pack weight is your primary concern, down is the best option.

What to look for: Again, pick a bag in the 15–20 degree range. If you're sleeping in a quality, waterproof tent (i.e., you're able to keep your bag completely dry), down is the preferred choice. Some bags contain water-repellent down, which offers some insulation even if it gets damp. If you're sleeping in a tarp tent or a tent sans footprint or ground cloth, pick synthetic. A bag at three pounds or less is good, although most ultralight backpackers will aim for something closer to two pounds.

4. Sleeping Pad

A good night's sleep is absolutely essential to peak physical performance, and consequently, so is a sleeping pad. Whether you opt for a **foam or inflatable pad**, you'll want *something* to cushion yourself against the wood floor of a shelter or the rocks and roots under your tent.

What to look for: The ideal sleeping pad will be lightweight (around one pound or less for a regular-length pad), insulated and from a reputable brand.

5. Clothing

This is often the category where aspiring thru-hikers end up overdoing it. Hikers need clothing appropriate for the range of conditions they will encounter on the AT with minimal-to-no redundancies and nothing more. Anything beyond what's absolutely necessary is considered a luxury, and will often be shipped home within the first week or two. To put this in perspective, hikers need no more than two pairs of underwear (and some opt for zero), two pairs of socks, and for women hikers, one sports bra. This section could be a standalone article. You can get our [full clothing recommendations here](#).

As for material, the important takeaway is this: **never cotton!** Cotton both absorbs moisture and fails to wick it away from your skin. It's a poor insulator and retains odor more than its synthetic and wool counterparts. In other words, cotton garments put you at a higher risk of hypothermia and will have you smelling like a sewer faster than other fabrics (which won't help your odds of catching a hitch into town).

For insulating layers, down offers the best insulation-to-weight ratio, but is also rather finicky. It's important to keep your down gear completely dry and may require a wash after any particular humid spells.

On a final note, hikers will want to designate a particular set of clothing exclusively for camp. Not only is reserving a dry set of clothes absolutely essential for protecting oneself against hypothermia, but having something clean(ish) to change into serves as a nice morale boost at the end of a grueling day. For many, this set includes a clean pair of leggings, underwear and socks, plus a down jacket.

What to look for: Synthetic and/or wool fabrics for hiking. Down, wool and/or synthetics for camp. Choose durable materials from reputable brands.

6. Footwear

Footwear is simultaneously the most important yet difficult item to prescribe to those looking to spend significant time on trail. This is a good reason to head to your local REI and have one of the green-vested gurus help you find an option with the appropriate fit for your foot.

There are a couple of points worth noting, however.

First, although the stereotype is for hikers to don a thick, heavy leather boot, in recent years more and more thru-hikers have been opting for trail runners. Some will do a combination of boots and trail runners depending on season and terrain. Others use trail runners exclusively regardless of circumstance. Trail runners dry out faster, typically cause fewer blisters (due to their less-rigid material), and are much lighter, allowing hikers to cover more ground, faster. Boots offer more ankle stability and protection against rocks, and are better suited for heavier pack weights.

Also, it's important to purchase something .5 to 1.5 sizes larger than your current fit. Hikers need enough space in the front of their shoe to prevent their toenail from bumping against the toe box while hiking downhill. The consequence for not adhering to this will be several lost toenails. Additionally, during the course of a thru-hike, feet will both lose their arch and swell. It's hard to predict how much a hiker's foot will grow, but one full size is usually a good starting point.

7. Water Purification

Some will claim that you do not need to treat water along the Appalachian Trail. As someone who has contracted giardia while backpacking, I am not in this camp. Treat your water.

8. Hydration Reservoir / Water Bottle

Water is important. Consider using a reusable water bottle or hydration reservoir to stay hydrated.

9. Stuff Sacks

Hikers will need a minimum of two waterproof stuff sacks: one for their sleeping bag and another for clothes. It is absolutely vital to keep both your sleeping bag and camp clothes dry at all times. Most thru-hikers will carry a third stuff sack for food.

10. Guidebook

AT guidebooks are essential for planning resupply options, shelter and campsite information, and learning about amenities offered at nearby towns. Maps offer the greatest detail for the surrounding terrain and provide the best insurance against getting lost. However, because the trail is well-marked with a white blaze about every 70 feet, the majority of thru-hikers choose not to carry maps, opting for a guidebook instead. The guidebook of choice for AT thru-hikers is **AWOL's AT Guide**.

11. First Aid / Hygiene

This is another area where a lot of hikers overpack. **First-aid kits** can be simple and hygiene products should include only the essentials.

What to include: Antiseptic wipes, gauze pads, antibiotic cream, duct tape, ibuprofen, sunscreen, hand sanitizer, a sewing needle, mini toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, toilet paper, fire starter and multipurpose soap.

The Almost-Essentials

1. Hiking Poles

Although technically not essential, I always recommend that hikers use trekking poles. Not only do they absorb much of the impact on the downhill and consequently save your knees, poles can help to stave off the dreaded “T. rex effect”—large, muscular legs with disproportionately small, weak arms. And for those who use a tarp tent, hiking poles can also double as tent poles.

2. Knife / multi-tool

Although I went into my thru-hike thinking a knife would be as important to my getup as it is to Rambo’s, it only ever got use cutting summer sausage. You really only need something sharp enough to cut through a dried cylinder of meat.

Popular options: A simple yet high quality pocket knife will do.

3. Stove / Cookwear

Believe it or not, not all thru-hikers use stoves. When battling excessively heavy pack weights, a warm meal at the end of the night can feel more like a luxury than a necessity. That said, most thru-hikers do carry stoves because a cold bowl of oatmeal or instant mashed potatoes tastes like punishment.

4. Headlamp

It gets dark in the woods. Look for something lightweight with at least 70 lumens; more if you plan on doing significant night hiking.

5. Electronics / Luxury Items

A smartphone is arguably one of the most versatile pieces of gear. It can double as a hiker’s phone, computer, MP3 player, camera, notetaker and flashlight.

Although many set out into the woods to disconnect, keeping in touch with the spouse or parent on a regular basis can prevent a lot of gray hairs back home. Other common luxury items include a mascot (action figurine or other memento), camp pillow, books or an ebook reader, among others.

And there you have it. A non-consensus, not-quite-exhaustive list of what you will and will not need to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.