



Ultralight Backpacking Tips

Packing light is a revered skill, one that often develops with time, experience, and lots of mistakes. Ultralight backpackers have learned through years of trial and error how to shed off the non-essential weight from their backs. Experience will teach you how to identify the unnecessary weight—and the gear you simply cannot (and should not) do without.

Luckily, a little research and planning before your trip can start you on the right track towards becoming an expert ultralight backpacker. We've compiled some ultralight backpacking tips and tricks for perfecting the art of lightening your load.

Some might help you shave whole pounds off your back, others just a few ounces. Either way, paying attention to little details helps you save big in the long term.

1. Trash compactor bag for backpack liner.

Pack covers are bulky, heavy and, sometimes, ineffective. Instead of covering the outside of your pack, line the inside of it with a trash compactor bag and keep all gear inside. Trash compactor bags are super waterproof, replaceable, affordable and weigh a fraction as much as a pack cover.

2. Rocks vs stakes.

Tie your shelter down to some nearby rocks. If necessary, make a pile to keep it more stable. Rocks can also be used on hard surfaces where stakes are unable to penetrate the ground.

3. Get a scale.

A digital scale is a worthwhile tool to invest in - it can reveal what each item actually “costs” in weight. Knowing the exact weight of your gear and supplies helps you pack more strategically.

4. Cut excess straps.

Compression straps, excess hip belt straps, sternum straps, shoulder straps, manufacturer's logo, anything. You can trim all of these to shed a couple ounces. If you pack your gear right, you won't even need compression straps.

5. Share the load.

Got company on your trip? Consolidate your resources. Chances are you probably don't need two stoves, two shelters, etc. Take some extra time to distribute and share your gear weight evenly between the members of your group.

6. Drink up at the water source.

Remember that your water supply is also one of the heaviest items you will have to carry. Drink as much as you can at the water source, plan how far your next source is and carry only what you need to get there.

7. Dry out your gear.

Morning dew can cover the entire surface area of your shelter and, subsequently, add a few ounces if packed up in your bag. Be sure to dry out tents, tarps, clothes, and any other gear before packing it away. You can always hang them on your pack to dry as you hike or lay them out in a sunny spot as you pack up and eat breakfast.

8. No duplicate anything.

Except for 2 pairs of socks, you don't need a spare of anything. Even your clothes have a strategic time and place to be worn (see 42).

9. No cotton.

When packing your clothes, choose lightweight synthetic materials over heavier clothing like cotton and denim. Not only do synthetics weigh less, they're also more water resistant than their traditional counterparts.

10. Ditch the boots.

Trail runners are lighter weight, dry faster and are more comfortable.

11. Use a one-liter plastic water bottle.

Water bladders with chords have too many excess parts. A plastic water bottle is lightweight, cheap and durable. Smart Water bottles are particularly great for their liter size and because their threads match well with Sawyer water filters.

12. Dental floss to stitch and tie.

Stronger than thread for stitching clothes and mending gear. Floss can also be used as a dry line or for tying items to your pack.

13. Duct tape saves.

Wrap it around your water bottle or roll it into itself to prevent bulk and the extra cardboard weight. Duct tape can be a great barrier to prevent blisters as well as helping mend the obvious gear repairs.

14. Ultralight stove.

Consider an ultralight alcohol fueled stove. You can make one out of a soda can.

15. Shave off your toothbrush.

Cut off the handle. Or get a travel toothbrush that comes in two pieces and discard the extension half.

16. Analyze everything.

Do you really *need* it? Is there a lighter version of it? Can it be shaved or cut down? I spent months preparing my Appalachian Trail gear to keep it as light as possible. Even five months into the hike, I was still cutting off things that I was not using.

17. Go primitive (or electronic-less).

Goodbye cellphones, watches, iPods, kindles, GPS, chargers, etc. This is the trail. Enjoy the solitude. If you're worried about safety - tell someone ahead of time where exactly you are going and when to expect your return.

18. No knife.

Use a razor blade. Very rarely do I ever miss my knife and I certainly have never *needed* my knife. A razor blade can be great an ultralight alternative.

19. Ultralight pillow.

Inflate one of your Ziploc bags and wrap it in your extra clothes and stuff sacks. The Ziploc bag will give it some loft and the clothes, some cushion.

20. Multi-use bandana.

A bandana (yes, cotton) can be used for:

- Head wear or sun blocking neck tie.
- Hanging food or other delicate items off your pack.
- A slow drip coffee filter.
- Dish cleaner and sponge.
- Hot hand for your pot.

21. Multi-use Vaseline.

Other than the obvious lip moisturizer, Vaseline is essentially petroleum jelly which can be used for a variety of things.

- Got blisters? Rub a little Vaseline in between your toes or on your heel before you get going in the morning to reduce friction.
- Vaseline is a great slow burning fuel that can be used as a fire starter.
- If you have a fresh, uninfected wound, Vaseline (plus some duct tape) can help shield the sore from outside infection.

22. Ultralight fire starter.

Cotton balls (or lent from your dryer) plus the aforementioned Vaseline make an easy-to-light fire starter. It will burn slowly and can be stuck to anything. The slow burn can be crucial to getting wet sticks to catch.

23. Keep the big three ultralight.

1. Sleeping bag. 18 oz or less. However, warmer sleeping bags contain more insulation and can weigh more.
2. Pack. 30 oz or less for a 50 liter backpack.
3. Shelter/ Tent. 2 lbs or less for a solo tent. 1 lb or less for a tarp.

24. Sleeping bag should be down material.

It is lighter, more compact, and warmer than its synthetic rival. Yes, it can get wet and become almost useless. However, with a proper dry pack liner (see 1), that won't happen.

25. Tarp, not a tent.

Tents can weigh twice as much as a tarp shelter. A tent provides two walls - an outer one for shelter and inner mesh one for a bug-free enclosure. You only need the outer one for shelter (a tarp). What about the creepy crawlies though? Use a mosquito net for your face, everything else will be covered by your sleeping bag.

26. Ultralight tent footprint/ groundcloth.

Footprints and ground cloths act as a protective barrier in between the ground and the floor of your tent. They also prevent any water from seeping in from the ground through your tent floor. Use a painter's tarp instead of buying the manufacturer's footprint. You can find painter's tarp at any hardware store. 2-3 mm thick is perfect. Cut it out to match the outline of your tent floor... and then cut off an inch border to make it slightly smaller than your tent floor.

27. Trekking poles, not tent poles.

Two trekking poles (plus your guy lines) is all you need to keep your tarp supported. Many tarp systems only require one pole.

28. Knowing the weather saves weight.

You either need a piece of gear or you don't. This is where the importance of planning ahead comes into place. Preparing for the cold, hot or rainy weather can prevent bringing unnecessary gear.

29. Embrace the smell.

Deodorant not only adds weight, it's odor can also attract unwanted insects and bears.

30. Don't bring extra batteries.

The only batteries you need should be for your headlamp. Make sure they are fresh before hitting the trail. Hike in the day to minimize use. Most headlamps have a 'red light setting' that sucks a substantially less amount of energy as well.

31. Use Lithium batteries.

They are more expensive, but last longer and weigh less.

32. Go stove less.

There are plenty of non-cook, nutritious and tasty meal plans out there. Leaving the stove, cup, fuel and spork at home can save pounds.

33. Baking soda vs toothpaste.

Baking soda is essentially dehydrated, ultralight toothpaste.

34. Stuff the fluff manually.

Leave extra sleeping bag compression sacks and tent bags at home. Instead, mash your sleeping bag and tent down by hand inside your bag. They will be more 'flexible' like this as well... not like an overly compressed ball.

35. Mini bic lighters.

They make mini Bic lighters that are a fraction of the weight of their full-length counterpart. Remove that extra "safety" guard too.

36. Cut down that long sleeping pad.

Your sleeping pad is crucial - it not only keeps you comfortable, but insulates you from the cold ground. However, a full length pad is unnecessary. Cut your foam pad in half - just to cover your torso.

37. Extend sleep pad with your pack.

If you want a full sleeping pad, not just your torso - put your pack underneath your calves and feet.

38. Ultralight gaiters.

They are like those elastic book sock covers from school. Great to keep out any debris from your shoes and much lighter than other gaiter options.

39. Leave your puffy jacket (if it's not too cold).

Even in freezing temperatures on the Appalachian Trail, I was always shedding layers and still sweating buckets while hiking. You can always bundle with your sleeping bag on breaks and at camp.

40. Wool socks.

Wool naturally fights odors and still insulates when wet, unlike cotton.

41. Lightweight camp shoes.

Sandcros and Crocs are lightweight, waterproof camp shoes. There are also a lot of DIY shoes options that are more or less foam pads and duct tape.

42. Prep by activity.

You are either hiking on the trail or resting at camp. Your clothes should be broken up accordingly. You have your hiking clothes that can get sweaty (typically short sleeves) and you have your at camp clothes which stay dry (typically long sleeves).