

How Not to Backpack

Recently I was asked to go on a backpack trip in the Smokies with some friends. I had not backpacked since 1973, which means I really never had, since I had no physical memory of the event and the fact that I would never be 24 again. My friends said that they would help equip me, so I agreed. I bought a water filter and a sleeping bag, borrowed a tent and a pack, and felt increasingly ready to go. I packed my pack and kept the weight around 36 pounds and everyone told me how good that was. Of course to me it felt like 360 pounds and that was just trying to lift it.

We were going to try to do 30 miles in three days. I tried not to pay attention to weather reports that called for 80% chance of rain for two of the three days. We didn't get started until 2 PM on the first day and had to make nine miles to the campsite and water by dark. We barely made it after a long 3,000-foot climb during which my shoulders and upper back screamed in agony. I prided myself on being able to put up the tent before dark. Then I went to find the stream and filter water. It was dark by then and I couldn't find my headlight. When I found the stream and tried to filter water from it, I realized that I was in danger of being in the stream myself. So I borrowed chemicals to treat water to cook with and drink. After we ate it started raining. I got in my tent and trusty sleeping bag and was dry and toasty. I put the clothes I had worn at the bottom of the tent to dry out.

When daylight started to filter in I noticed that the tent's rain fly was not in place at the bottom of the tent. The stake had pulled out of the wet ground. Now my clothes were really wet. I had suspended my pack on bear cables. It was partially covered by a pack fly and also partially uncovered. This part had let in much water and everything in the pack was soaked. It was raining steadily and it was a rain of the cold, wet variety. I slowly packed up my wet stuff and finally got up the nerve to ask them if we could cut the hike short and hike out that day. Luckily I didn't have to twist their arms. (I wouldn't have had the strength.) I ended up hiking out in a partially dry pair of capilene long underwear, rain pants, fleece, and rain jacket. My pack now actually did weigh 360 pounds because everything was wet.

When we got back to our vehicle, I changed into dry clothes and found my headlight. All right! As I drove home that night and it rained harder and got colder, I told myself I was glad I wasn't still out there. I also consoled myself that I done the rest of them a favor.

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