

# Rucksacks – choosing, fitting & packing

## DAYSACKS

People who are heading onto the hills for the day can now choose from classic daysacks with side pockets (the more advanced models come with mesh backs for maximum ventilation), to specialised ice climbing, rock climbing and cross-country skiing packs. On the other hand, if your thing is adventure racing, then dedicated rucksacks built around hydration systems abound. These designs are also popular with mountain bikers and trail runners.

The majority of daysacks fall into the 10 to 40 litre size range. (All rucksacks in the UK have their volume advertised in litres. Some other countries use different systems. For example in the United States, packs are measured in cubic inches.)

The lightest daysacks can be folded up and popped into the bottom of larger rucksacks so that you can have a small bag to use either when exploring cities en route to your trekking destination, or as an assault sack on summit day.

An increasing number of workers prefer to take their paperwork and laptops to work in rucksack-style soft luggage rather than a traditional briefcase. With this in mind, certain designs of packs incorporate padded inserts to protect expensive technology during the daily commute.

## BACKPACKING

Once you move into the 60-70 litre rucksack category, your choice of rucksack widens considerably.

It's worth taking a moment to consider whether side pockets on a rucksack of this size are a good idea. If you jump on and off buses on a regular basis, side pockets might become a pain as they can snag in doorways. By contrast, a slim sack will be no wider than you, making jostling with the crowd at the railway station a slightly less traumatic affair. Some rucksacks boast collapsible side pockets, which fold flat when not required and offer the best of both worlds with few disadvantages.

You may also have a choice between one and two compartments in the main part of the rucksack. If you like the idea of being able to keep your sleeping bag or wet clothing in a separate section, or want to be able to access the gear in the bottom of your pack easily, then a divider two-thirds of the way down the rucksack might appeal to you. Some dividers can be zipped out when not required.

The size of the top pocket (or pockets) becomes quite important in large backpacking rucksacks. A voluminous pocket allows you to carry additional bits

and bobs at the very top of the pack for easy access during the day.

## EXPEDITIONS

Rucksacks for these activities are very popular and so deserve a special mention. Expedition rucksacks are often categorised as being especially cavernous: 70 to 90 litres is not unusual. However, before purchasing a rucksack of this size, it might be worth thinking about whether there are ways of reducing your load in order to avoid having to carry around such a huge pack. That said, people heading into remote regions without support often have no choice but to pack a gargantuan amount of food and equipment. In these situations, the fit of the rucksack becomes absolutely paramount.

## GETTING THE RIGHT FIT

Ensuring that your rucksack fits your back correctly is of crucial importance. A badly-fitting rucksack can increase fatigue and create soreness around the shoulders. Extended use of a poorly-fitted, overloaded rucksack can lead to long-term problems with your spine.

If at all possible, it is better to buy a rucksack from a shop rather than by mail order. That way you will be able to put some weight in several models and walk around with them on. There's no point in trying on an empty rucksack because all empty packs feel comfortable! The amount of weight you place inside will depend on the carrying capacity of the rucksack and what you intend to carry. But as a rough guide, five kilos in a 30 litre sack, eight kilos in a 50 litre pack, and around 12 kilos in a 65-plus litre rucksack should be sufficient to give you a good idea as to whether the design is going to be comfortable. Try to ensure that this weight is evenly distributed throughout the rucksack, and not just in the base.

Rucksack back systems generally fall into one of two broad categories: adjustable and fixed. Fixed back lengths either fit you or they don't, and so many manufacturers make their fixed length rucksacks in a number of sizes. By contrast, adjustable back systems can be customised to fit your back. This is ideal if you fall mid-way between fixed back lengths, or if more than one person is going to use the rucksack. Some people claim that fixed-back rucksacks have less to go wrong with them and so are more durable, but I've never had an adjustable system fail on me (yet!).

The crucial part of the actual fitting process, especially on larger rucksacks, is to ensure that the hip belt sits on your hips and not around your waist. This way, more of the rucksack's weight will be transferred from the relatively weak shoulders to the stronger pelvic girdle. Just how much weight can be transferred is the

subject of much debate, although it is fair to say that most people find that a well-fitting, padded hip belt removes at least some of the weight from the shoulders. It is also important that the shoulder strap curve snugly over the shoulders. However, take care not to tighten these straps until the hip belt is correctly sited.

Once you are happy with the general fit of the rucksack, you can adjust the top and side stabiliser straps. Stabiliser straps help to draw the load in towards the body in order to prevent the rucksack swaying around. By loosening and tightening these straps you will soon discover for yourself the tremendous difference they can make to the overall fit of your pack.

## PACKING A RUCKSACK

Packing a rucksack is something of an art and a science, and no two people pack their bags in precisely the same way. Nevertheless, for the first-time packer here are some general guidelines that might be of some help.

Firstly, consider drawing up a kit list. Many outdoor books include such lists, and if you are travelling with a trekking company or tour operator they should be able to supply you with one. Using a kit list means that you'll be less likely to forget something.

Secondly, try to collect the gear you need several weeks in advance of your departure. That way, if you need to buy something and the store is temporarily out-of-stock, you'll be able to allow extra time for the item to be ordered and delivered to your door before departure.

Many explorers adhere to the maxim, 'If in doubt, leave it out.' By only taking items along that you know you will use, your load should be considerably reduced. Fewer items mean fewer things to lose and a lot less time spent packing and unpacking. That said, if you have to take something along that is absolutely vital to the success and safety of the trip, consider taking a spare. For example, if you are going climbing in the high Himalaya, a pair of sunglasses is essential to prevent snowblindness. Therefore, taking one spare pair between two or three people makes a lot of sense.

Over time, you're sure to develop your own packing order, but to help get you started the diagrams below may help you to get started.

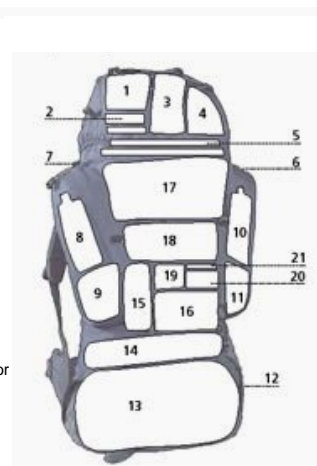
If you are climbing or walking on uneven terrain, try to keep the weight close to the spine. By contrast, walkers following well-maintained paths sometimes prefer to get the weight higher up in the rucksack. Slipping something soft down the rear of the rucksack reduces the chance of a sharp object digging into your back.

Don't be afraid to take a moment to re-pack your load during a break: walking for several hours with an uncomfortable rucksack is something to be avoided at all costs.

Whilst rucksacks are made with waterproof fabrics, it is simply too expensive to seal all the seams. Investing in an inexpensive, seam-sealed, waterproof liner or

rucksack cover in order to keep all your equipment dry during extended downpours is a wise move.

1. Bits and pieces bag: suncream, camera film, lipsalve, sunglasses
2. Guidebook and phrasebook
3. First aid kit
4. Energy bars, dried fruit
5. Maps, compass, money etc
6. Tent poles (under side compression straps)
7. Trekking poles (under side compression straps)
8. Water bottle
9. Energy powder for water, additional high energy snack food
10. Stove fuel
11. Stove, matches
12. Camera bag on hip belt
13. Sleeping bag and liner
14. Self-inflating mattress
15. Spare base layer clothing and socks
16. Stove pan, lid, utensils, food
17. Share of tent, waterproofs, gaiters (near top for easy deployment in wet weather)
18. Spare mid layers, hat, gloves
19. Wash kit
20. Sandals
21. Notebook, reading book



Information above from Cotswold Outdoors 'The Knowledge'

## WHERE TO BUY

We'd advise that you go to a larger shop to buy your rucksacks. Millets in Chester are OK, but I'd go for a more specialist shop like Field and Trek, or preferably take a trip to Cotswold or any of the other shops in Betws-y-Coed.

## KIT LISTS

### Kit for ALL camps/expeditions

- rucksack to put kit in
- sleeping bag
- insulation mat (Karrimat, Thermarest etc)
- changes of socks / underwear
- changes of clothing
- spare footwear
- warm coat / fleece etc
- waterproofs (top & bottoms)
- warm hat & gloves or sun hat & sun lotion
- boots (wear so there's more room in rucksack)
- wash kit
- towel
- tea towel
- torch plus spare batteries & bulb
- water bottle
- necker

### Extra kit for normal camps

- uniform (to be worn to travel to camp)
- small daysack for trips out
- small tripod type stool (OK strapped to outside of rucksack)

### Extra kit for expeditions

- plate, bowl, mug, knife, fork, spoon
- share of tent
- share of cooker & fuel
- share of food
- camera
- notebook & pen

Full kit list available in New Members' Leaflet: [check it!](#)