



THE TREK

HOW TO AFFORD A THRU-HIKE

Expert Advice for Saving Money on
Gear, Logistics, and Town Expenses for
a Long Distance Backpacking Trip.

Kelly 'Ibex' Floro

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By Kelly Floro

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Table of Contents

By Kelly Floro	2
About the Author	7
Chapter 1: Introduction	8
Bonus Alert!	12
Chapter 2: Packing List	14
The Big Three	14
Water	15
Cooking gear	15
Bathroom gear	15
Hiking clothes	15
Footwear	16
Navigation.....	16
Electronics.....	17
Emergency/safety	17
Miscellaneous.....	17
Chapter 3: Get it Right the First Time.....	19
Invest in quality	19
Do your research.....	20
Top-quality doesn't have to mean top price.....	21
Know thyself	22
Know how to use your gear—before you hit the trail	25
Be disciplined.....	27
Before You Buy Anything, Ask Yourself... ..	28
Chapter 4: Where to Splurge	29
The Big Three	29

Sleep system	30
Tent.....	33
Pack	34
Footwear	35
Chapter 5: Where to Save	38
Stuff you can go cheaper on	38
Stuff you can swap with cheap everyday items	43
Stuff you can share	47
Chapter 6: Where to Eliminate	48
Stuff you sometimes need and sometimes don't	53
Chapter 7: How to Shop on the Cheap	61
Plan ahead	61
Buy used	62
REI Garage Sales	63
Know your brands.....	64
Chapter 8: Making, Maintaining, and Repairing Gear	66
Making.....	66
Maintaining.....	68
Repairing.....	70
Chapter 9: Budget Advice.....	72
How much can you realistically save for the hike?	74
How much do you plan to spend on the trail?.....	79
Chapter 10: How to Save Money On-Trail.....	83
Don't Flip.....	84
Stay Away From Town	85

When in town.....	87
Should you mail resupply boxes?	91
<i>Chapter 11: Parting Thoughts.....</i>	95
<i>BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!.....</i>	97

About the Author

Kelly “Ibex” Floro is a writer, thru-hiker, and environmentalist from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She lives in a van with her partner, Lotus, and travels full time in search of new trails and new adventures. Ibex has racked up thousands of miles on North America’s premier hiking trails, including the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the Wonderland Trail, and many more. When not hiking or writing, she’s often found baking, winning at Settlers of Catan, or working on her latest van build.



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For decades, thru-hiking has captured the imaginations of people everywhere—and it's easy to see why. Just picture it: spending consecutive months hiking end-to-end on one of the world's many coveted long trails, traversing hundreds or thousands of miles of remote wilderness in pursuit of an achievement so epic that it can feed your soul for the rest of your life. Such an adventure can leave you with not only memories but also the skills and confidence to enjoy backpacking as a hobby for years to come.

Every trail is unique in scenery and character. Each one holds secret beauties—hidden away beyond high mountain passes and thundering streams—that the rest of the world will never know. But all long trails share the same tight-knit hiking community, the same spirit of adventure and self-determination, and the same opportunities for physical achievement, introspection, and spiritual development.



In a fast-paced world scarred by political, environmental, and public health crises, thru-hiking offers an enticing chance to slow down and reflect. Whether you crave the solitary company of the natural world or a deep bond with fellow hikers, the trail can provide that.

Yes, thru-hiking is pretty dang wonderful. The only problem? It can get stupidly expensive. Money (or lack thereof) is one of the biggest [reasons](#) people fail to complete, or sometimes even start, their thru-hikes. According to the PCTA¹: “Running out of money is one of the most commonly cited reasons for why people quit the trail.” It’s amazing how much cold, hard cash it takes to finance a lifestyle in which all you do is hike and sleep in the dirt.

¹ Thru-hiker FAQ. (2019, June 07). Retrieved August 31, 2020, from <https://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/thru-hiking-long-distance-hiking/thruhiker-faq/>

For one thing, you'll need enough money to cover your basic living expenses back home *and* on the trail while you're gone. It takes a while to thru-hike, and you have to, you know, *actually leave your house and go live on the trail for a few months*. That means you'll be out of work and probably without income for at least a chunk of the year.

On the financial bright side, that means no rent or utilities—woo-hoo! Unless you're a homeowner with property taxes and a mortgage payment to contend with, in which case...yikes. Meanwhile, other living expenses, like loan payments and insurance premiums, will keep piling up while you're gone. All of this is on top of trail expenditures like your hiker hunger-fueled, 4,000-plus-calories-per-day grocery bill. So yeah. There's that.

Also, you're definitely going to need to set aside additional funds in case of an emergency. Unforeseen family crisis on the other side of the country? Better make sure you can afford bus fare to get back home. Stuck in a motel room for a week because [insert random injury/natural disaster here]? That bill can skyrocket fast. Did a marauding band of chipmunks chew up your tent last night? Yay, get ready to fork over a few hundred for a replacement.

Finally, you're going to want to have enough money to make your journey comfortable and fun. For most people, thru-hiking is one of the most physically and mentally challenging endeavors they'll undertake in their lifetimes. It's already hard enough without extreme financial pressure making it even more difficult.

It's nice, after all, to have enough money to get out of the elements every now and then, grab a hot shower, eat a square meal, and sleep in a real bed. Small material comforts like these can make a big difference in your emotional state during a thru-hike, because—other than your friendships with other hikers—they're just about the *only* comforts you'll have out there.

And speaking of friendships, picture this: you've scraped together *just* enough money to get yourself started on the long trail of your dreams. It's everything you ever wanted it to be, and you think you can swing it financially, as long as you're careful. Sure, you might be destitute by the time you finish—but that's a problem for another day.

Along the way, you form a close bond with fellow thru-hikers who share your passion for the trail. They're more than just friends: they're tramily (trail family). Everyone in your cozy little group seems to have more financial wiggle room than you do. They spend money freely, not thinking twice about going out to dinner or the movies while in town. They're comfortable renting a hotel room for a break from trail life from time to time.

Every time a member of your tramily suggests some expensive town escapade, you're faced with a choice: go along with the fun and watch your limited financial resources dwindle, or stay behind feeling lonely and sad while all your friends go out for a good time without you. Bottom line: it sucks to be the broke-est hiker in the group.

The moral of this story is that having plenty of funds available while on trail is a really big deal for a thru-hiker. Sure, it's true that money can't buy happiness, and it also can't buy you the grit and determination you'll need to make it as a thru-hiker. But it *can* make your hike safer and more enjoyable, and it can buy you the tools that will set you up for success.

Because there's another, often overlooked expense that we haven't even talked about yet. I know what you're thinking. *What the heck?!* Unfortunately, it's true.

On top of all the other pricey nonsense we just discussed, you'll also need to budget for gear. It takes a surprising amount of *stuff* in order to survive on the trail for months on end, and that

stuff comes with a hefty price tag. Before you even set foot on your trail of choice, you'll need to put together enough cash to invest in crap like a tent, pack, sleeping bag, and water filter.

Most people spend between \$1,000 and \$3,000 to completely outfit themselves with gear for a thru-hike—and that's not even counting the cost of on-trail gear purchases. That's a lot of cash to fork over before the adventure even properly begins. For many people, it poses a significant barrier to the pursuit of thru-hiking.

Fortunately, it *is* possible to do it for less. You can absolutely get all the gear you need without compromising on quality, *and* without bankrupting yourself in the process. You can successfully complete an entire thru-hike on a shoestring budget if you play your cards right.

Gear is a big and important piece of the puzzle. It makes up for a big portion of your total budget and is crucial to the success of your hike. There's an art and a science to budget gear buying, and it's important for aspiring thrifty hikers to master it. It's the subject of this book.

Think of this e-book as a \$7 investment in your future. By following the advice in these pages, you'll be able to save hundreds of dollars on gear. In the following pages, we'll discuss how to keep your budget *and* pack weight under control by embracing the spirit of minimalism, how to get top quality stuff without breaking the bank, and even how to save money once you hit the trail.

Bonus Alert!

At the end of this book, we're giving you access to a private list of discounts from some of the most respected brands in backpacking. We're confident you'll get more than your money's worth

in the form of tried and true tips for saving money before, during, and after the trail, but even if you know everything there is to know already, these discounts are worth the price of admission.

CHAPTER 2: PACKING LIST

In order to understand how to save money on backpacking gear, it's important to first get a sense of what actual equipment you need to have in your backpack. The following list will broadly outline the basic gear items pretty much every backpacker needs.

Use this as a reference while reading this book and when it comes time to shop for backpacking gear. And remember, it's just a guideline. There might be a few items on this list you deem totally unnecessary, and you might need some stuff that's not mentioned here. That's okay. The list does include some common optional items. These items may be considered optional for personal preference reasons, or specific trail conditions (e.g. snow gear). These are denoted with an asterisk (*).

The Big Three

- Tent / Shelter
 - Groundcloth / footprint
- Sleep system
 - Sleeping bag or quilt
 - Sleeping pad

- Backpack

Water

- Filtration/purification setup
- Storage (bottles or bladders)

Cooking gear

- Pot*
- Stove*
- Fuel*
- Lighter
- Eating utensil
- Critter-safe food storage (bear canister, Ursack, or food bag + paracord + carabiner)

Bathroom gear

- Toothbrush/paste
- Hand sanitizer or biodegradable soap
- Bug spray*
- Nail clippers*
- Comb/brush*
- Sunscreen
- Ladies: pee rag or [female urination device](#), period supplies*
- Plastic pee bottle*

Hiking clothes

Baselayers

- Shirt
- Shorts/pants/skirt
- Hiking socks
- Underwear

Mid and Insulating layers

- Insulated puffy jacket and/or fleece

Outer layers

- Rain jacket and pants*
- Wind shirt and pants*

Camp clothes

- Baselayer tops/bottoms
- Sleep socks

Other clothes

- Gloves and/or mittens
- Beanie
- Sun hat*

Footwear

- Hiking shoes/boots/trail runners
- Camp shoes*
- Traction device*

Navigation

- Smartphone app*

- Paper guidebook or map and compass
- GPS device*

Electronics

- Cell phone
- Charger cables/wall plug
- Battery bank*
- Headphones*

Emergency/safety

- First aid kit
- Repair kit
- Pepper spray/bear spray*

Miscellaneous

- Trekking poles
- Headlamp + batteries
- Wallet (ID, debit card, insurance card)
- Sunglasses
- Bags for organization*
- Small knife*
- Snow traction (crampons / microspikes)*
- Ice axe*

CHAPTER 3: GET IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

It's insanely common for thru-hikers to swap out big-ticket gear items multiple times along the way. This is a very expensive practice. If you think buying a \$300 tent sounds pricey, imagine how much worse it will be if you have to buy that tent *twice*.

Hikers end up shelling out and swapping out for a number of reasons. Sometimes it's because their cheap starter gear wore out quickly. Sometimes, it's because they accidentally bought the wrong tool for the job. And finally, it's often because of that sneaky bastard known as buyer's remorse.

So here's some advice.

Invest in quality

If you want to save money on your thru-hiking kit, resist the temptation to buy a bunch of cheap, crappy "starter gear" from Amazon or Walmart. Thru-hiking is hard on gear, and poorly made equipment won't withstand the rigors of the trail for long.

Sure, that cheap knockoff tent might only be half as expensive as the one you saw at the outfitter the other day. But if it springs a major leak after just a few weeks on trail and you have to replace it, you'll kick yourself for cheaping out. You know what they say: buy nice or buy twice.

Do your research

Your stuff might be too heavy. It might be too complicated. It might have too many (or too few!) features. It might be fine equipment, but it's just not perfectly suited to *that* task or *those* conditions.

That's why, in addition to investing in quality, it's important to really do your research and understand the purpose and function of each piece of gear. Before you ever set foot in a camping store, take advantage of the internet and your local library. Both will have a wealth of information available. Read reviews. Research brands. Learn something about the technologies involved.

When you go to the store, have some questions in mind to ask the sales associate. Try things out in the store when possible. When that's *not* possible (for instance, if you're buying from cottage industry brands that only sell online) make sure the company offers a good return policy in case it doesn't work out. Finally, don't even think about reaching for your wallet until you've heard a second opinion about that particular item.

Yes, it's a lot of work. But here's a newsflash for you: backpacking gear is expensive. If you're serious about putting together a decent setup on a tight budget, *it's going to take hard work*. It's certainly doable, but that doesn't mean it's going to be easy or fast.

Take it one step at a time. Pick one item from the packing list in Chapter Two and start with that. Make a spreadsheet for that one item—let’s use tents as an example. Have columns for things like price, weight, materials, brand name, noteworthy features, and style. You don’t need to list every make and model under the sun, but as you do preliminary research and identify a shortlist of brands and styles you like, pop ‘em into the spreadsheet.

Tent	Price	Weight (oz.)	Free-standing ?	Double or single wall	Material	Notable features	Notes
Big Agnes Copper Spur 2	\$450	50	Y	Double	Silnylon	Awning vestibule; 2 side doors	More room than Fly Creek
Big Agnes Fly Creek 2	\$350	37	Y	Double	Silnylon	Only one door at front	Cramped for two people
Zpacks Duplex	\$600	19	N	Single	DCF	Lightweight	Condensation issues
Six Moon Designs Haven	\$335	34	N	Double	Silnylon	Floating bathtub	Lots of mesh

Table 1: A pared down example spreadsheet comparing different tents.

Don’t get overwhelmed or intimidated by the size or complexity of the task. It’s all part of your thru-hiking adventure, after all. Putting this work in now will pay dividends down the trail.

Top-quality doesn’t have to mean top price

Unfortunately, there’s a real correlation between quality and price when it comes to backpacking gear. That said, the most outrageously expensive item on the market isn’t necessarily the best one (or the best for you personally).

For instance, ultralight backpacking gear often comes with a premium price tag. The price bump is usually to do with the cutting edge, strong-but-light space-age materials used in these

products. This highly engineered equipment gets a lot of attention because it's out on the technological frontier of what's possible for backpacking gear. But you don't *have* to go ultralight (or ultra-expensive) to assemble a quality kit.

While you're researching gear, understand the tradeoffs between different materials, and make your best call. There's certainly an argument for investing in lightweight stuff (your knees will thank you). Just know that there's plenty of well-made but somewhat heavier gear out there that's available for less money.

Know thyself

Most gear choices are highly personal. You know your habits, needs, preferences, and skills better than anyone. Factor those things into your purchases so you can get it right the first time.

Do you have a bad back? Maybe you'd prefer a hammock rather than a tent. Oh, but you're a stomach sleeper? Nix that—get a tent and a really cushy inflatable sleeping pad. Do you need a fair bit of comfort to sleep at night? You should probably stick with a traditional tent rather than that ultralight tarp-plus-bivvy setup you've been eyeing.



“Just throw the tent down on top of me!” Think about your personal comfort level before you commit to an ultralight, minimalist setup.

If you’ve never backpacked before, it’s probably best to keep it simple. Avoid ultralight items that come with a steep learning curve—things like frameless backpacks, hammock underquilts, and trekking pole tents/tarps. You’ll have enough on your plate without adding more complexity to your setup.

Here’s a minor example. When I started the Appalachian Trail, I became absolutely convinced that a hiking dress was the outfit for me. After all, I love dresses! They’re so airy and comfortable! I could just picture myself, stylin’ my way through the miles, talk of the trail in my fancy little hiking dress. No boring old t-shirt and shorts for me, no sir.



The reality was different. *In reality*, it turns out I'm pathologically incapable of avoiding thorn bushes, poison ivy, and sharp rocks on the side of the trail. Mosquitoes love me. Mud loves me. My legs were *not cute* after a few weeks on trail. I also found that I didn't love the sensation of insects dive-bombing my vagina all day long. So it turns out that pants work a lot better for my individual needs. I learned my lesson and bought hiking pants in the next town I came to. Fortunately, clothing is not the most expensive category on the backpacking gear list, but still—it all adds up.

If you've got your heart set on one of those fancy, complicated setups—by all means, if you've done your research, go for it! But no matter how complex or simple your setup, it's extremely important to practice with it before starting your hike.

Know how to use your gear—before you hit the trail

Once upon a time, a hiker named Bullfrog made the fateful decision to switch his water purification system before entering the Appalachian Trail's Hundred Mile Wilderness. He was nearing the end of his thru-hike and wanted to shed weight so he could travel fast and light through this famously remote section of trail. So he swapped out his trusty Sawyer filter for a small vial of chemical purifying drops.

But things went terribly wrong. The droplets didn't work properly, and Bullfrog contracted a waterborne pathogen. He woke up one night, deep in the Wilderness, with an uncontrollable bout of explosive diarrhea. Chaos ensued. He shit himself while fumbling to escape the confines of his tent. Then he tripped over his own soiled pants as he pulled them down around his ankles in the pitch black. *Then* he lit his own hands on fire by flicking on his lighter for visibility immediately after slathering himself with alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

In case you're getting worried, Bullfrog is fine now. Despite turning himself into a blazing poop inferno in the Hundred Mile Wilderness, he finished his thru-hike and even gave permission for his ordeal to be published here as a cautionary/highly entertaining tale. Thanks, Bullfrog! And seriously—sorry that happened to you.

It wouldn't be a thru-hike if you didn't shit your pants and light yourself on fire at least once, of course, but I'm sure we'd all prefer to avoid it as much as possible. And the best way to do that is to make absolutely sure you know how to use your equipment in advance.

All that preliminary research has empowered you to make the best, most informed purchases possible. Hopefully that's paid off and you've ended up with the perfect gear for your needs.

But you won't know for sure until you actually try using the damned thing. Online research is one thing. Real-world experience is another. Once you've got the gear, you need to try it out and practice with it.

Make sure your stuff works the way you thought it would, lest you suffer the same dark fate as Bullfrog. Make sure you're comfortable setting it up and using it. If you can get out to the trail for a shakedown hike, that's great! Take a notebook with you and jot down any items/features you wish you had or don't use. If not? String your hammock between two trees at the local park. Spend a few nights sleeping in your tent in the backyard or your living room. Practice setting everything up in the dark. Pack, unpack, and pack again so you can learn how you'd like to organize your stuff.

You'll gain a lot of insight into your individual wants and needs by actually practicing with your gear. You'll also be a hell of a lot less likely to accidentally do it wrong and break it when it comes time to *really* use it on your thru-hike.

Return policies exist for a reason. If you made the wrong choice and bought something that's not going to work for you, it's really important to figure that out *before* the hike. Figure it out while you still have internet access and a regular mailing address to easily facilitate a replacement. Figure it out before your return policy is voided by time or usage. Figure it out now, so that you won't have to spend a week or more suffering with your existing gear until your new goods arrive.

Be disciplined

Everyone gets buyer's remorse from time to time. For any given item on the packing list in Chapter 2, there seems to be a dozen different brands and styles on the market. It's hard to know which is best. And once you hit the trail, you'll find yourself in the midst of a ton of other thru-hikers, each with their own unique setup. When looking at someone else's (way shinier-looking) gear, it's easy to believe your life would be better if you had *that* stuff instead.

Do not get sucked into this bottomless money pit. Keep your wandering eyes on the trail in front of you and put all that fancy *other* gear out of your mind. After all, if you have a lover, why flirt with another? As long as your setup is working for you—and it ought to be, after all the research and practice you did—stick with that. Don't double your equipment expenditure just because the metaphorical gear-grass looks greener on the other side of the fence.

Here's a little anecdote from my hiking and life partner, Lotus. When he and I started hiking together, he became enamored with my hammock setup and decided he was going to swap out his tent and get a hammock of his own.

He wanted to get the best setup possible, so he ordered a Hennessy hammock for \$200 and a top-of-the-line DCF tarp to go with it for an additional \$500. We got together as a couple less than a week later and ended up sharing a two-man tent. Suddenly that hammock setup was just a \$700 mistake that never got used.

Don't be like Lotus. Be disciplined and only buy replacement gear if you *really, really* need to. This one point alone will save you a ton of money compared to most other thru-hikers.

Before You Buy *Anything*, Ask Yourself...

1. Do you know how to set up/use the item?
2. If not, are you willing to set aside enough time to master it *before* your hike?
3. How confident are you that you'll actually use the features of a particular product?
4. Is this item a 'want' or a 'need?' If you didn't have it, would you still be able to complete your hike?
5. Have you priced out similar items and compared the features of each?
6. What's the return policy on this item?

Think also about your overall goals as a hiker before making a purchase. Are you trying to hike fast and light, or take the trail slowly and appreciate every last mile? Your personal hiking style will inform your gear choices. For instance, hikers who prioritize speed might invest in ultralight gear, while those who prefer a slower hike might enjoy heavier equipment more geared toward comfort and enjoyment.

CHAPTER 4: WHERE TO SPLURGE

In the previous chapter, we discussed the importance of investing in quality. When thru-hiking, it's important to have the best tools for the job. Well-made gear can make or break your hike, and if you don't have it, it might even put your safety at risk.

Quality can be expensive, though. Our goal is to save money on gear, not to spend out the ass and get the platinum version of each and every item on the packing list. When you're outfitting yourself from scratch, it's important to know where to splurge on quality, and where to save.

The Big Three

This probably isn't what you wanted to hear, because a tent, pack, and sleeping bag/pad are all big-ticket items. Unfortunately, they're also all mission-critical. These things will have an outsized effect on your pack weight, comfort, safety, and day-to-day lifestyle. If you cheap out here, you could be putting your hike and your safety at risk. That's why you should splurge on the Big Three.

You can at least be strategic about your spending, though. There are still ways to save money on major items like these without compromising quality. Here are some buying tips to guide you through.

Sleep system

The warmer your sleep system, the more expensive it will be. All that insulation costs money, after all. You'll hate your life if you don't get a warm enough bag and pad, but there are ways to get that warmth and comfort without spending too much.

1. Synthetic insulation is significantly less expensive than down. You might pay half as much for a synthetic bag compared to a down bag of equivalent warmth. Synthetic insulation isn't very popular among thru-hikers because it's heavier and less packable. But if you need to keep your budget under control, it will absolutely do the job.

2. Another option is to pair a not-as-warm sleeping bag with a liner. Liners cost somewhere in the range of \$60 and can add a lot of warmth to your sleeping bag. This can really work to your advantage on a thru-hike, during which you might traverse several seasons and a wide range of weather conditions.

Example: you *could* buy a 15° bag for the colder sections and a 35° one for the warmer bits (for instance), but that's hella pricey. It would be less expensive to invest in one decent middle-of-the-road bag—in this example, let's say 25°—and add or remove the liner as needed. The liner will also help protect your bag from hiker stench and body oils.

3. Within certain brands, women's sleeping bags often have more insulation at a similar price point to men's bags. Women's bags are also smaller, but if you can fit comfortably in one, women's bags from brands like [REI](#), [NEMO](#), and [Marmot](#) might give you a better value.

4. Check out quilts. They're lighter than sleeping bags because they don't have a bottom half. Because they use less material, they're also less expensive on the whole. This is one of those things where you have to know yourself: quilts are all the rage these days, but they're drafty compared to traditional bags, especially if you're not proficient with the setup. It might not be the right fit for cold sleepers and people who toss and turn a lot.

5. When it comes time to research sleeping pads, you'll find that inflatables are a lot more expensive than good old fashioned closed-cell foam (CCF) bedrolls. Inflation pads are generally warmer and more comfortable, so this might be an area to splurge. Inflation pads these days are surprisingly durable, and if you do spring a leak, most come with lightweight patch kits.

Incidentally, inflatables also make excellent rafts. I've spent many a lazy afternoon tooling around on mountain lakes and streams near the trail (when I probably should have been making miles). There's no better way to enjoy a nero or a zero on trail than by camping on the shores of an alpine lake and floating to your heart's content. These are the kind of experiences you'll remember from your thru-hike for years to come.



This photo was taken just before taking to the high seas of Newton Lake on USS Leaky Sleeping Pad.

6. You can save money on both inflatable and CCF pads by getting a three-quarter length model. Again: less material, less cost. These shorter pads should protect your torso and thighs from the cold ground. If your calves and feet get cold, you can stick your backpack or some spare clothing underneath them. Again: this might not be the best choice for cold sleepers (or light sleepers).

Women's sleeping pads also tend to be smaller, lighter, and better insulated, but won't necessarily cost more.

Sleeping Bags - Suggested models by budget range:

- Low: [Kelty Cosmic 20](#) (down) / [Nemo Forte 20](#) (synthetic)
- Medium: [REI Magma 15](#)
- High: [Western Mountaineering UltraLite 20](#)

Quilt - Suggested models by budget range:

- Low: [UGQ Bandit 20](#) (800 fp), [Hammock Gear Burrow Economy 20](#)
- Medium: [Enlightened Equipment Revelation 20](#)
- High: [Katabatic Alsek 22](#)

Inflatable sleeping pads - Suggested models by budget range:

- Low: [Big Agnes Air Core](#)
- Medium: [Nemo Tensor](#)
- High: [Therm-A-Rest NeoAir XTherm](#)

Closed cell foam sleeping pads - Suggested models (foam pads are cheap so there's not really a budget range):

- [Therm-A-Rest Z-Lite SOL](#)
- [Nemo Switchback](#)

Tent

Don't spend an additional \$60 (or more) on a footprint for your already expensive tent. A footprint, or groundcloth, is a good investment in that it protects the bottom of your tent from damage, theoretically extending its life. But that doesn't mean you need to get the brand-name version. You can make your own footprint out of building materials like [Tyvek®](#) or buy an [aftermarket version](#) at significantly less cost.

And don't go full-bore ultralight on your tent. Not only is this probably going to cost way more, but ultralight shelters might require more care to keep them intact. Ultralight materials like Dyneema (DCF) fabric and carbon fiber tent poles cost a lot and sometimes lack the durability of their traditional counterparts (silnylon fabric and aluminum tent poles, respectively). For instance: Big Agnes has a notoriously delicate line of ultralight Dyneema-composite tents that are not only scary-expensive but also far too easy to rip.

This isn't to say that DCF isn't wonderful stuff in general. It's the ultralight fabric of choice, it's waterproof, and heavyweight or reinforced DCF usually makes for strong, light, shelters that aren't prone to stretching. There's no way to get around Dyneema's steep price tag, though, nor that of carbon fiber tent poles and other highly engineered ultralight staples. If you're on a budget, you can get a quality and reasonably light tent for less by sticking with good old silnylon.

Tents - suggested models by budget range:

- Low: [Six Moon Designs Lunar Solo](#) (Trekking pole tent)
- Medium: [Big Agnes Tiger Wall Ul2](#) / [Nemo Hornet 1p](#) (Semi-freestanding tent)
- High: [ZPacks Duplex](#) (Trekking pole tent)

Pack

Backpack sizes are measured in liters. For a thru-hike, most people use something in the range of 50 to 65 liters. Remember, the bigger the backpack, the more you'll be tempted to fill it with random shit you don't need.

It's generally a good idea to buy your backpack last, to make sure all your other stuff fits well inside it and that the loaded pack fits well on your body. Harkening back to Chapter 3, this is a good strategy to make sure you *get it right the first time*.

Packs - suggested models by budget range:

- Low: REI Flash 55 [men's/women's](#)
- Medium: Osprey [Exos](#) (men's) / [Eja](#) (women's) 58
- High: [Hyperlite Mountain Gear Windrider 3400](#) / [ZPacks ArcHaul 62](#)

Footwear

On a thru-hike of hundreds or thousands of miles, your feet will pretty much become the center of your existence. It's important to keep those puppies happy because they're damned important. That's why I'm encouraging you to splurge on footwear. This is absolutely *not* an area to compromise.



Do you want your feet to look like this? No? Then invest in proper footwear!

Footwear is highly personal. There are a multitude of brands and styles available. When you find your Cinderella shoe, don't let the price scare you off. Just be grateful you found it at all.

If you're doing a multi-thousand- mile trail, one pair of shoes is not going to last you the whole way. So don't forget to budget for multiple pairs of replacement shoes—and potentially aftermarket insoles, depending on your feet.

Trail runners are generally more popular than boots among today's long-distance hikers. Many people find that they're superior to boots in terms of weight and breathability while still offering adequate stability and traction.

Trail runners are cheaper up front than boots, but they won't hold up for as many miles and you'll end up replacing them more frequently. In the end, your total footwear expenditure will probably be similar either way. So again, don't think about the price when choosing between trail runners and boots—just go with the style that feels best to you. For reference, a pair of trail runners might last 400-500 miles, whereas boots might last 700-1,000.

You can get a headstart on choosing the right footwear for your needs by checking out The Trek's [most recent Appalachian Trail thru-hiker survey](#). A good place to start your search is by following the lead of those who've walked the walk. Keep in mind that you'll likely need to go up one size compared to your normal footwear as your feet will swell and flatten over the course of your first long distance backpacking trip.

If you're looking for a way to seriously save on footwear, get an REI membership so you can attend some of their used gear garage sales. Customers often return lightly used shoes that didn't work for them (again, footwear is so personal), and those returns end up getting sold at a discount at the garage sales. Once you have an idea of the brand and style you like, you can nearly always find that shoe in your size at a significant discount (assuming it's a brand carried by REI).

CHAPTER 5: WHERE TO SAVE

The “splurge” items discussed in the previous chapter can be costly, but you can still keep your gear budget under control by scrimping and saving elsewhere on the packing list. This chapter will cover stuff you can go cheaper on, stuff you can swap out for common household items, and stuff you can share.

Stuff you can go cheaper on

Trekking poles

Some might say hiking poles are optional altogether, but in my opinion, they pay dividends in the form of additional stability, joint protection, and added hiking speed. I don’t even feel like I’m hiking if I’m not stomping around with my trekking poles like some bizarre quadruped. Still, you don’t necessarily need the most expensive version on the market.

Carbon fiber poles with cork grips are very nice, but the difference in weight and comfort is pretty negligible compared to aluminum poles with foam grips. Save your money and go with

the cheaper version. Having a telescoping/adjustable length feature is worth splurging on, though.

Headlamp

So far, the sun seems to continue to rise each morning, returning much-needed lumens to the world. You'll probably survive the night even if your headlamp doesn't have a rechargeable USB battery, helmet compatibility, and 500 lumens of light. All you need is a few different brightness settings (100-200 lumens will be adequate for most purposes, including night hiking) and a red light for camp. No need to spend more than about \$30 here. [The Black Diamond Spot](#) is a good example of a suitable headlamp that won't break the bank.

Rain gear

Rain gear is one of the Ten Hiking Essentials for a reason. It's really important to have something to keep you warm and at least somewhat dry if (when) bad weather hits. But that doesn't mean you have to fork over hundreds of dollars for the latest space-age rain jacket. There have been major strides in waterproof/breathable fabric technology in recent years, but the reality is that whether your rain jacket cost \$40 or \$400, you're still going to end up sweaty, gross, and miserable in it eventually.

[Frogg Toggs](#) rain suits only cost around \$30 apiece. They're not the most durable items around, but with proper care and possibly a little duct tape you can make one last an entire thru-hike. As a happy bonus, "Toggs weigh in at just four ounces, making them just about the lightest rain jacket on the market.



I live in my 'Toggs on cold, wet hikes and also, for some reason, make this face.

Water filtration

Again, *super important* to have this. The weight of a small water filter will be nothing compared to the weight of your regret if you contract giardiasis and end up spewing out of both ends for three miserable weeks. Remember Bullfrog, guys. Always remember Bullfrog.

You don't need to spend hundreds on a pump or a UV filter, though. The majority of thru-hikers favor the lightweight, affordable [Sawyer Squeeze](#). It's versatile, easy to use, and only costs

around \$37. Frequent, thorough backflushing of your Sawyer (at least once a week) will keep it filtering fast throughout your hike.

Trowel

You'll need some kind of tool to dig a cathole when nature inevitably calls...but do you need to spend \$20 for an ultralight titanium one? No! A [snow stake](#) from REI only costs a few bucks, weighs very little, pulls double duty as an *actual tent stake*, and digs just fine.

Remember, whatever tool you select for this delightful daily task, make sure it can do the job properly. Do you like looking at hikers' unburied turd piles and toilet paper gardens when you're out and about in the solitude of nature? Me either. So make sure you cover yours under a solid six to eight inches of soil, 200 feet away from any water source, and pack out your toilet paper.

Tip: *It helps to measure your chosen digging tool in advance so you can judge the depth of your hole accurately.*

Sunglasses

First of all, depending on the trail, you may not even need sunglasses most of the time. The Appalachian Trail, for instance, travels mostly through a shaded, forested "green tunnel." Many, many hikers complete this trail sans sunglasses.

Second of all, you can get adequate sunglasses for [less than \\$20 from Amazon](#), a gas station, or the grocery store. No need to spend hundreds for an expensive pair from the outfitter (especially given the pretty high likelihood that you'll sit on your sunglasses or accidentally drop them in a swamp at some point during your hike).



Fit-over or clip on sunglasses, while dorky, are a cheap and easy solution for people who wear glasses.

Before buying cheap-o sunglasses, check to make sure that they block 100% of UVA and UVB radiation. You can find this information on the label. If they *don't* block UV rays, you'll just end up doing more harm to your eyeballs than good by wearing them.

Also, it's best to get polarized sunglasses, which cut down on glare from reflective surfaces like water, snow, and ice.

Stuff you can swap with cheap everyday items

Plastic bags

Use plastic bags to organize your gear and protect it from water. You can buy an entire bag of giant Ziplocs for a mere fraction of a fancy dry bag from an outfitter (standard backpacking dry bags cost \$30-\$40 apiece and have an unfortunate tendency to rip). Same deal with trash compactor bags, which can serve as liners to keep the entire contents of your pack dry when it rains. And why pay a premium for waterproof socks, shoes, or gloves when a handful of empty bread bags—secured with rubber bands if need be—will do the job? As a bonus, thin plastic bags are very lightweight. If you do nothing else to save money on gear, following this one bit of advice has the potential to save you literally hundreds of dollars.

I once had a brush with hypothermia in the mountains—the result of a very unfortunate hurricane that soaked me to the bone while rapidly dropping the temperature from the mid-90s

to the mid-30s—that nearly ended my Appalachian Trail thru-hike. It wasn't any piece of fancy gear that saved my butt that day: it was a big plastic trash bag and a handful of Ziplocs.

Although I stumbled into camp half-frozen and miserable, I was relieved to discover that the contents of my pack had remained miraculously dry throughout the downpour. Thanks to those plastic bags, I had a dry set of clothes to put on and a warm, dry sleeping bag to snuggle into. Dry sleeping stuff is of paramount importance on any backpacking trip, and my low budget, ultralight solution had just survived the ultimate test.

Clothing

Technical, performance hiking clothes can get scary expensive—think \$50-\$100 or more for a single garment. All you really need is a lightweight, synthetic shirt and shorts, ideally with a pocket or two. You can find that in the Active Wear section of any big box store, or even at a thrift store. The performance difference between inexpensive exercise apparel and pricey hiking clothes is often overstated. In any case, after a few months on trail your outfit will be reduced to stinky rags anyway, regardless of how much you paid for it.

***Note:** If you favor hiking pants, you might have a harder time finding a suitable substitute at Walmart or Goodwill. In this case, you can still save on your hiking shirt but will probably spend a little more on technical pants from an outfitter.*

Water bottles

Nalgene-type bottles and bladders are heavy, inconvenient, and cost money. In contrast, Smart Water bottles are cheaper, (albeit overpriced for bottled water), lighter, and still durable enough to be used for weeks on end. Also, they can mate with the Sawyer Squeeze. This one's a no-brainer.

Toiletries

You really don't need to pay an upcharge at an outfitter for "backpacking" toilet paper, toothbrushes, and the like. Just use a regular toothbrush. If you want to make it backcountry-ready, saw off half of the handle to make it more packable. And backpacking toilet paper? As far as I can tell, the only difference between backpacking TP and regular is that the former is like asshole sandpaper and lacks the little cardboard thingy in the center. That, and it's overpriced.

Emergency kit

You can assemble your own. A lot of thru-hikers just carry a bit of Ibuprofen and some Band-Aids. If you want something a little more complete, but still packable and light, include the following in your DIY kit:

- Ibuprofen
- Band-Aids
- Neosporin
- Antihistamine

- Antidiarrheal (diarrhea in the backcountry can lead to a dehydration disaster)
- A few gauze pads
- A few alcohol wipes
- [Leukotape](#) (the only blister control you'll ever need)
- Needle and floss (field repairs for torn fabric)
- Duct tape or [Tenacious Tape](#) (field repairs for...everything)
- Waterproof matches or small lighter

All of the above should fit in a snack-sized Ziploc.

Cutlery

You're probably never going to eat anything on trail that requires a fork or knife. Just carry a spoon. And you don't even need a fancy titanium camping spoon, either. Save the plastic spoon from your Wendy's Frosty and you'll be good to go.

Sunglasses case

You don't need expensive sunglasses, and you don't need an expensive case for them, either! Get a sunglasses-sized plastic container of Crystal Light (or similar) drink mix and use that. This trick will also boost your ultralight trail cred.

Pack towel

If you need to wipe something, use a bandana, your sleeve, or your hiking partner.

Freeze-dried backpacking meals

They make it easy to get your calories, but they're overpriced. Many backpackers carefully track the calorie-per-ounce ratio of trail foods, but for thrifty hikers, it's also important to note calorie-per-dollar ratios. Freeze-dried backpacking food might cost two or three bucks per hundred calories. Knorr pasta and rice sides, by contrast, cost about 20 cents per hundred calories.

Stuff you can share

If you're planning to thru-hike with a partner, you might consider sharing some of your gear. This will reduce both parties' pack weight and the total cost of gear. Shelters, water filters, cooking gear, and emergency kits are all examples of commonly shared equipment.

***Note:** You should only do this if you're fairly confident you'll stick with this person throughout the hike. Too often, one partner hikes faster or has different goals than the other, and the two end up parting ways along the trail. That's totally fine in principle, but if you're sharing a bunch of gear, it will be a mess to sort out.*

CHAPTER 6: WHERE TO ELIMINATE

The spirit of minimalism is alive and well in the backpacking community. No one wants to carry too much when space and weight are at a premium. Many hikers have rightly concluded that the best way to keep their base weight under control is to simply have less stuff.

Whether or not going ultralight is a goal for you, embracing the spirit of minimalism will be a powerful way to save money on gear. Less is more, after all: the less you spend on useless crap you don't need, the more you can invest in big-ticket "splurge" items.

Before you buy something for your thru-hike, think long and hard about whether you'll really need it. Is it on the packing list? If not, is it something you want badly enough to justify the added expense and weight?

Most backpackers do carry one or two "luxury items" that make their lives happier and more comfortable. That's fine. Just be careful not to end up with four or five expensive luxury items rattling around the bottom of your pack.

Small and simple luxuries, like a notepad for journaling or a small foam pad to sit on during breaks, can be just as fulfilling as flashy, expensive backpacking gadgets like camping French presses and mini GoPro cameras.

There are a number of common backpacking items that hikers think they need but really don't. These items are useless because they're redundant. Chances are, you already have another piece of essential gear in your pack that could do the same job.

Some examples of redundant gear:

Camp pillow

Camp pillows cost money! No one wants that. Stuff your extra clothing in a bag and use that as a pillow instead.

Puffy + hiking fleece

For most warm-blooded creatures under three-season conditions, one or the other will suffice. Puffies are generally warmer and more wind-resistant than fleeces, but fleeces are less expensive.

The caveat here is that some people run really cold, and might benefit from having both. For instance, I reek of hypocrisy for even typing the above paragraphs, since I literally never venture out without a down puffy, softshell, wind shirt, and rain jacket.

I can acknowledge that not everyone is like me, though. Just be aware of your own physiology before you make any decisions regarding gear meant to keep you warm.

Wind shirt and pants

Don't get me wrong, I love me a good ultralight wind shirt. But if you're on a budget, it's really not essential to spend money on this. Your rain gear can be used to protect you from wind if need be.

Umbrella

Umbrellas are admittedly pretty versatile. They can keep you cool in the sun and dry in the rain. Some hikers strike the rain jacket from their packing list altogether and instead swap in an umbrella paired with an ultralight rain or wind jacket. Still—it's not mission-critical to have an umbrella, and as of 2020, they're still relatively niche. As always, make your best call.



Umbrellas can provide much-needed shelter from both sun and rain.

Battery bank

A battery bank (aka portable charger) is great for recharging on-trail, but it's definitely a luxury item. It makes sense if you expect to use your phone heavily on trail. Many hikers like to listen to music and podcasts while they walk, for instance, or read/watch videos at camp. But if you keep your phone powered down or on airplane mode and mainly use it for occasional photos and navigation guidance, one charge will probably last you three or four days between resupply stops.

If you *do* want to recharge on-trail, make sure you choose the right tool for the job. For instance, lightweight, portable solar panels are a popular (and pricey) purchase among first-time backpackers, but they don't work very well on heavily forested footpaths like the Appalachian Trail and often get sent home. Some go way overkill with their portable chargers. For most people, [a 13000mAh portable charger](#) offers plenty of juice.

Cup or bowl

Just eat from your pot.

A million carabiners

One or two small ones will probably suffice. You don't need many, and you don't need expensive climbing 'biners rated to hold the weight of an adult man just to affix your bandana to the outside of your pack. Not only is that pointlessly heavy, but it's expensive, too. Small bungees and paracord loops can also substitute for carabiners.

Camp shoes

They're nice, but when you're in camp you'll probably be sitting or laying down anyway. If it's been raining, it can admittedly suck to wear sodden hiking shoes around camp, but that's where the bread bag technique from Chapter 5 comes into play. First, put on dry camp socks, then a waterproofing layer of bread bags, then wet hiking shoes, and *voila!* Acceptably dry, lightweight comfort at no added cost.

Giant knife

Before starting the AT as a solo female, many concerned loved ones wanted to know what sort of weapon I planned to carry for self defense. A handgun, surely, or maybe a machete? At the very least, everyone wanted to hear that I would carry some giant Bowie knife strapped to my thigh in case I met trouble. In reality, I had none of these things. Like many thru-hiking women, I found a keychain pepper spray more practical for self defense, and only used my knife for cutting cheese and bits of Leukotape to cover blisters. A [mini Swiss Army knife](#) (the kind that's about an inch long) was more than sufficient for this purpose.

Firestarter*

I expected to build tons of fires and become some kind of campfire-building genius on my very first thru-hike. In reality, like most thru-hikers I was so tired that most nights I just wanted to set up camp, eat, and pass out as quickly as possible. Accordingly, I ditched my firestarter after

the first week or so and wished I hadn't bought it in the first place. I did know a few fire-building thru-hikers, including the so-called "Fire Whisperer" who built a small cookfire every evening without fail (I followed him around a lot so that I could take smoke baths while he was cooking), but they were by far the exception. Anyway, campfires are often banned in certain wildfire-prone areas, like the southern California section of the PCT.

*A small lighter or matchbook in your emergency kit is the exception.

Extra clothes

It's prudent to have a set of dry, dedicated clothes to wear around camp in case you roll up to your tent site soaking wet and freezing. But other than that, just wear the same outfit every day and embrace your new identity as a gross hiker.

Stuff you sometimes need and sometimes don't

Rain pants

These are often unnecessary, but in cold, wet conditions they can be a literal lifesaver. If you expect to spend significant time in cold, exposed places on your hike, you should bring a pair. As a bonus, they'll give you something other than loaner clothes to wear in town while you're doing laundry. Frogg Toggs will suffice.

Bear canister

These suckers are expensive, bulky, and uncomfortable to carry. Unless you're required to use one under local regulations (or you'll be in an area where you anticipate critter activity to be a definite problem), you can save a lot of money and inconvenience by just hanging your food bag from a tree. Study up on best practices for bear hangs and practice before you hit the trail: remember, try to hang the bag 12 feet above the ground, four feet from the trunk, and well away from your sleeping area. This method isn't perfect, but it should suffice to keep all but the most determined bears and rodents out of your grub. After a while, it will become second nature.

Any old bag will work as a bear bag (some people even use plastic grocery bags), but if you want something specifically designed for bear bagging, [ZPacks](#) sells a nice, ultralight, wide-mouthed bear bag. Those seeking more security in their bear hangs might opt for the [Ursack AllMitey](#). This Kevlar bag offers some of the physical protection of a canister without the uncomfortable bulk, but isn't foolproof and won't replace a bear canister in areas where they're required. Whatever system you choose, the addition of a [LOKSAK OPSAK](#) (odor proof sack) can help cut down on smells to reduce your chances of attracting animals.

Note for Pacific Crest Trail hikers: bear canisters are required throughout the Sierras, roughly a 300-mile stretch of trail. To save money, you can rent a bear canister for the duration of this segment from [Triple Crown Outfitters](#). The [BV500](#) is the most popular model on the PCT². Many hikers simply sleep with their food outside the Sierra (there are few trees up to the task of supporting a bear hang on this trail). Obviously, you assume a level of risk by doing this. A more foolproof way to store your food outside the Sierra would be to use a bear canister or an Ursack secured to the trunk of a tree.

² Mac. (2020, April 20). The Pacific Crest Trail Hiker Survey (2019). Retrieved August 31, 2020, from <https://www.halfwayanywhere.com/trails/pacific-crest-trail/pct-thru-hiker-survey-2019/>

Emergency beacon

GPS devices like the SPOT Gen3 and Garmin InReach are a great safety net. Depending on which model you buy, you can use these devices to communicate with friends and family, navigate, check the local forecast, and call for help in an emergency.

On remote trails with known hazards (like snow and ice), it's prudent to carry a GPS beacon, just in case. However, on well-traveled paths like the Appalachian Trail during peak hiking season, many hikers opt against carrying one due to the often proximity of roads, towns, cell towers, and fellow hikers.

Whether you carry a GPS device or not, do make sure you have some sort of navigation tool. The smartphone app Guthook Guides (free download, trail maps as in-app purchases) works well for many people. It's a good idea to supplement that with a hard copy guidebook or map and compass. Emergency preparedness is one area where a little redundancy isn't a bad thing.

GPS beacons compared: The [Garmin InReach](#) and the [SPOT Gen3](#) dominate the market for emergency GPS devices. The InReach line is at least three times as expensive up front, depending on which model you're looking at. In exchange for the higher price tag, it uses the more reliable Iridium satellite network (compared to SPOT's GlobalStar), and offers more features. These include SOS, two-way communication, navigation, weather forecasting and other capabilities.

The SPOT, in contrast, only offers one-way communication in the form of a few pre-programmed messages and an SOS button. Economical and compact, the SPOT is more popular

on the Appalachian Trail, where cell connectivity is higher and overall risk is lower. In contrast, the pricey but more tricked-out Garmin devices reign supreme on remote, high elevation paths like the Continental Divide Trail.

Both devices require a paid subscription plan (both month-to-month or fixed term are available). It's also a good idea to spring \$20 or so for insurance so that you won't be bankrupted if you do end up needing search and rescue.

Stove

If it's going to be chilly out, it's important to have the ability to heat up food and water to maintain your core temperature (I get the vast majority of my hydration from hot chocolate on winter hikes, and I regret none of it). Otherwise, whether or not you bring a stove is entirely up to personal preference. Going stoveless eliminates the cost of the stove *and* the ongoing cost of replenishing fuel.

If the comfort of a daily hot meal or cup of coffee is important to you, know that you still don't need to go with the most expensive backpacking stove on the market. For instance, the inexpensive [Etekcity stove](#) available on Amazon is increasingly popular among thru-hikers. You can even make your own alcohol stove out of a cat food can if you want to go as cheap as possible.

Underwear

Plenty of thru-hikers go commando. Doing so makes for just that much less gross, smelly fabric to have to deal with. Whether or not to wear underpants (and a bra if applicable) is mainly down to your personal preference and whether and how much you chafe.

If you do wear underwear, many hikers report that it's worthwhile to splurge on expensive anti-odor undies like those from ExOfficio or Saxx. Whatever you do, avoid cotton.

Hiking gaiters

Hiking gaiters cover the gap between your shoes and ankles. They're nice because they'll keep dirt, sticks, pebbles, and even a limited amount of snow from getting into your shoes. On the Appalachian Trail, they're more or less nonessential, though some AT hikers still favor them.

They're worth seriously considering on sandier trails like the Pacific Crest Trail, though. Whether or not they're "necessary" depends largely on your tolerance for stopping every half hour to dump sand from your shoes. Either way, opt for small, lightweight gaiters like those made by Dirty Girl or Altra.

Traction devices

Traction devices like [Kahtoola Microspikes](#) or [Hillsound Trail Crampons](#) slip over your regular footwear and help you to dig into snow and ice so you don't slip. They're rarely necessary on the Appalachian Trail. But if you'll be traversing a lot of steep snow and ice, they're critical for your safety. On the PCT and CDT, for instance, most thru-hikers in recent years have needed traction at some point on their hikes.

If you *do* need it, even if only for a few miles, this is one of those things you should commit to paying for and carrying. Practice putting on and hiking in your traction devices and self arresting with your ice axe before you hit the trail. Don't rely solely on books or Youtube videos to learn these important skills.



I was glad to have crampons to help me safely traverse this snowfield near Mount Humphrey, AZ.

My own failure to invest in traction before an early season hike on the Pacific Crest Trail serves as a cautionary tale. I was cocky, and given the recent drought winter, I assumed I could get through the high-elevation stretches of the southern California desert without traction. I'd heard

there was little snow in the mountains that year and that the trail would be easily passable in normal footwear. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Conditions changed for the worse in the high places just before I ascended 9,000-foot San Jacinto. I took a bad fall on a steep, slippery stretch above a precipice. Chunks of ice were shaking down from the trees above as I traversed, pelting the ground around me and piling up on the trail like slippery ball bearings.

I fell and slid sickeningly toward the cliff's edge as the ice balls rained down like a hail of bullets, and a softball-sized chunk came within inches of my head before rocketing over the cliff. If it had hit me, I might easily have been knocked silly and gone over the edge. In any case, I'm sure only adrenaline gave my frozen fingers the strength to dig into that ice and stop my inexorable slide.

I had grossly underestimated the danger of snow and ice in the mountains, and that naivete almost got me killed that day. A hiker fell and died in that same area just days later. The moral of the story? Don't skimp on traction, because this piece of kit could make the difference between life and death.

Notes for PCT hikers:

1. In recent years, many hikers have encountered significant snow and needed traction as early as the San Jacinto area (starting around mile 165). With this in mind, you should be prepared to mail your ice axe and foot traction to the Paradise Valley Cafe if you hear of snow from fellow hikers or the San Jacinto [Trail Report](#). Don't wait to get your traction in Idyllwild, as this may be too late.
2. As of 2020, Triple Crown Outfitters is launching a [gear buy-back program](#) for items like ice axes and crampons purchased from their store. Once you've finished the Sierra

section of the trail, you probably won't need this stuff anymore. Triple Crown will take these things off your hands for about 40% of the original price.

CHAPTER 7: HOW TO SHOP ON THE CHEAP

Now that you know *which* items to save money on, it's time to talk about *how* to save money when shopping time comes around. In this brief chapter, we'll discuss strategies that will help you get the best price on the exact gear you want.

Plan ahead

First, timing is everything when it comes to buying outdoor gear, so plan ahead. It takes time and deliberation to search out the best deals on a variety of products. With enough advance notice, you can time big purchases to annual sales and shop off-season. Cold weather gear usually gets marked down in late March, for instance, just before spring comes around and warmer weather prevails. Likewise, at the very beginning of the season stores often discount last year's colorways so they can make room for new looks. The Trek highlights many of the big sales throughout the year; you'd be wise to [subscribe to their newsletter](#) so you can keep track.

With that in mind, try to start researching and casually shopping for gear six months to a year in advance of your hike. That way you can slowly acquire items you need whenever the opportunity presents itself, like at the end of winter for next year's puffy, or the end of summer for seasonal camping items.

This strategy will also enable you to spread the expense out over a period of time, rather than stretching your bank account to breaking point by buying everything at once. Plus, buying in advance will give you enough time to test your gear and exchange things you don't like before hitting the trail.

Finally, with enough lead time before your hike, you'll be able to take your time and scan used gear markets for items you need.

Buy used

The great thing about used gear is that you can often get top quality at bargain prices. This requires diligence, of course. You'll have to scan used gear markets regularly, keeping an eye out for specific stuff you need. If you do this for long enough, you'll be amazed at some of the great deals that turn up.

The good news is that used gear exchange has largely moved online. This is a lot more convenient for all parties and widens the playing field of prospective sellers and buyers.

Great online gear marketplaces include:

- eBay

- Facebook Backpacking [Gear Flea Market](#)
- Facebook Backpacking [Gear Flea Market for Women](#)
- Reddit [Gear Trade](#) and [UL Gear Trade](#)
- REI's online [used gear department](#)
- Backpacking Light [Gear Swap](#) (requires a paid \$7/year membership).

REI Garage Sales

If you prefer in-person shopping, far and away the best option is the REI [Garage Sale](#). Garage Sales happen numerous times each year, but the schedule is somewhat unpredictable. It's at least partially based on the amount of used inventory each store has on hand at a given time.

REI has a pretty generous one-year return policy, and the company stages these events to offload lightly used returns on bargain shoppers at a minimum 40% discount. It's a win-win situation. The store gets to clear merchandise from their warehouse, the consumer gets to save money, and we can all feel warm and fuzzy about contributing to the circular economy.

These events are only open to co-op members. This is fine, though, because as a thrifty gear shopper you'll want an REI membership anyway. Lifetime membership only costs \$20, and you'll earn 10% dividends (redeemable as cash or store credit) on full-priced items.

Garage Sales are insanely popular. Once you figure out the date of the next one, plan to get there an hour or two early to get a good spot in line. A limited number of customers are allowed into the sale at a given time, so the closer you are to the front, the more likely you are to have a shot at the really sweet deals.

And I have to underscore here that you can score some *really freaking sweet deals* at REI Garage Sales. I'm talking barely used top-shelf gear that's half off or more. We already touched on the abundance of footwear at these events in an earlier chapter, but you can also find backpacks, tents, sleeping bags, jackets, and more at extreme bargain prices.

The biggest disadvantage of buying used, of course, is the fact that there's usually no return policy on used gear. Once you've bought it you're stuck with it. On a similar note, when buying used gear online you won't even have a chance to look the stuff over in person before whipping out your credit card. It's a risk to buy used, especially online, but the rewards are often worth it.

Know your brands

REI isn't the only outdoor brand with sweet perks and a great return policy. The outdoor industry is blessedly crowded with companies boasting top-notch customer service, warranties, and return policies. When buying *new* gear, this sort of thing should factor into your research.

To be clear, these generous policies aren't a way for you to re-up your worn out gear after you've used it up and worn it out on your thru-hike. They're a way for you to experiment and tweak your system by exchanging lightly used items prior to your hike, and they're a way to ensure that if something breaks or wears out prematurely, you won't have to waste money on a replacement. Please prove to the universe that we all deserve nice things and don't abuse these systems.

Customer service aside, some companies are well-known for offering good workmanship at a reasonable price. It's good to have a shortlist of these sorts of brands on the tip of your brain. This will give you a starting point when you begin shopping. Brands like [Six Moon Designs](#),

[Hammock Gear](#), [REI Co-op](#), [Gossamer Gear](#), [Columbia Sportswear](#), and [Uniqlo](#) (for down) are all go-to options when it comes to affordability without sacrificing on quality.

CHAPTER 8: MAKING, MAINTAINING, AND REPAIRING GEAR

If you're feeling crafty and you're extra hardcore about saving money on gear, you might consider embracing the DIY spirit and making some of your own equipment. That way you can cut out the middleman and just pay for the cost of materials.

You can also use your mad DIY skills to rehab damaged equipment rather than spending down your budget on replacements. And a little routine maintenance of big-ticket items, both at home and on the trail, can help extend the life of your gear so that it lasts your entire thru-hike and beyond.

Making

Time is money, and it's not always cost-effective to make your own stuff. But some simple projects, like homemade alcohol stoves and tent footprints, require little skill and only a handful of basic materials and tools. They're quick, easy weekend projects that will definitely save you money and will give you a satisfying sense of ownership over your backpacking kit. A simple tent footprint is a great example.

Make your own tent footprint

Footprints are probably the easiest “make your own gear” (MYOG) projects on the planet. You can order small quantities of Tyvek® meant for use as footprints online; you might even be able to scavenge some from a construction site if you’re lucky.

Once you have your Tyvek®, all you have to do is trace the shape of your tent, cut it down to size with a pair of scissors, and *voila!* You’re done. Congratulations, you probably just saved yourself at least \$50. If you want to get all fancy, you can glue down the corners to reinforce them and add grommets using a simple grommet kit from a hardware store.

Big Ticket MYOG

There are certainly more complicated and involved MYOG projects—things like backpacks, tents, and sleeping bags—for those with the skill and the brass balls necessary to take them on.

You can save money by making these things yourself, but you’ll also invest a lot of time in such projects. And if you don’t already have the necessary tools, like a sewing machine, the cost of buying them will kind of defeat the purpose of making gear to save money.

If you end up making complex, big-ticket items yourself, approach it as a fun side project/labor of love rather than a cost-saving strategy. On the plus side, you’ll be able to customize everything to your exact specifications.

If this is something you're interested in, there are some great MYOG resources online.

For advice, inspiration, and instructions, use forum sites like [Reddit](#) and [Backpacking Light](#).

For ready-made gear kits, patterns, and specialized raw materials, check out [Ray-Way Products](#), [Ripstop By the Roll](#), and [Dutchware Gear](#).

Maintaining

Basic gear maintenance is a lot less involved than making your own kit from scratch, and it's something every thru-hiker should know how to do. Routine maintenance will make your stuff last longer.

The small amount you'll spend on products to help keep your gear in top shape will be far outweighed by what you'll save in extending your equipment's life. Below you'll find descriptions of common gear maintenance tasks you'll have to do on your thru-hike.

Backflush your water filter

Filters eventually get gummed up with sediment after being used enough. After a while, you'll notice a reduced flow rate from your filter, and if you don't do anything about it, it'll eventually clog altogether and you'll have to replace it. The solution is regular backflushing. By flooding water in the reverse direction through your filter, you can wash the gunk away and keep your filter in top shape.

The Sawyer Squeeze comes with a syringe meant for backflushing, but you can also just stick the tip of a [squeezezy Smart Water bottle](#) in the “good water” end of the filter and squeeze until you see water start to come out the other end. Sawyer also makes a double female [coupler](#) that allows you to screw a Smart Water on directly and flush that way (incidentally, this coupler also makes for an excellent gravity filtration system).

Run at least a liter or two of water through the filter each time you backflush, and periodically tap the filter against a hard surface as you flush to help unstick any clogs. Do this once a week during your thru-hike and your filter should last the whole time.

Seam seal your tent

Some tents come seam sealed from the factory, but others don't. It's important to know whether or not yours is pre-sealed when you buy it. You can get silicone seam sealer at any camping or hardware store, though. Just set the tent up in an area that's not too windy and paint the sealant generously over any visible seams. Make sure to pay extra attention to the seams on the rainfly and the bathtub floor, where leaks are most likely to occur.

Treat your gear with permethrin

Permethrin is an insect repellent meant specifically to treat your clothing and gear. It is *not* meant to be sprayed directly on human skin, as it's a neurotoxin when it's still wet. It's available as a spray-on product at most outfitters, but you can often get a better price on the stuff from Walmart or Home Depot. [Sawyer](#) is the go-to brand for many hikers.

Take everything you want to treat outside and be sure to stand upwind of the work area so you don't accidentally spray yourself. Wear gloves and a face mask. Spritz everything down generously with permethrin, and leave it out all day to dry in the sun. Once it feels dry to the touch, you're good to go. The treatment will last about seven weeks or six wash cycles, whichever comes first, so you'll have to periodically re-up during your hike.

You can use permethrin on pretty much all your gear, and if you're not a fan of ticks and mosquitoes, I highly recommend spraying everything you own other than underthings and insulated products (sleeping bag and puffy). Do be sure to spray your boots, hat, backpack, and tent.

Important note to pet owners: Permethrin is toxic to cats when wet. Like with humans, once the treatment dries it should be safe for your furry friend.

Repairing

Thru-hiking gear tends to get a lot of wear and tear. Before you shell out for a replacement for a damaged item, really think about whether you can reasonably fix it. Many repairs are simple and can be managed in the field with basic materials like duct or [Tenacious tape](#) and seam sealer.

You can carry some of these materials in your backpack. For instance: tape, whatever splints and patch kits came with your tent and sleeping pad, and a needle and floss (floss makes an excellent, strong thread for field repairs). Other stuff, like seam sealer and replacement buckles and zipper pulls, can often be found at hardware stores and outfitters in trail towns.

Tip: Leaky sleeping pad? Pinpoint the source of the leak by immersing your pad in soapy water. Then, simply follow the trail of bubbles to find the hole and patch it after drying thoroughly.

CHAPTER 9: BUDGET ADVICE

You've got a good idea by now of what gear you need and how to find it at the best price. Now it's time to set a budget and stick to it. Rather than picking a random dollar amount out of thin air, you can follow a few guidelines to get a rough estimate of how much you can realistically spend. This chapter will help you to get a sense of your overall budget and break it down further into gear and on-trail expenditures.

First, use budget data from thru-hikers who came before you to get a broad idea of what the hike might cost. For instance, let's again take a look at responses to The Trek's 2019 Appalachian Trail [thru-hiker survey](#):

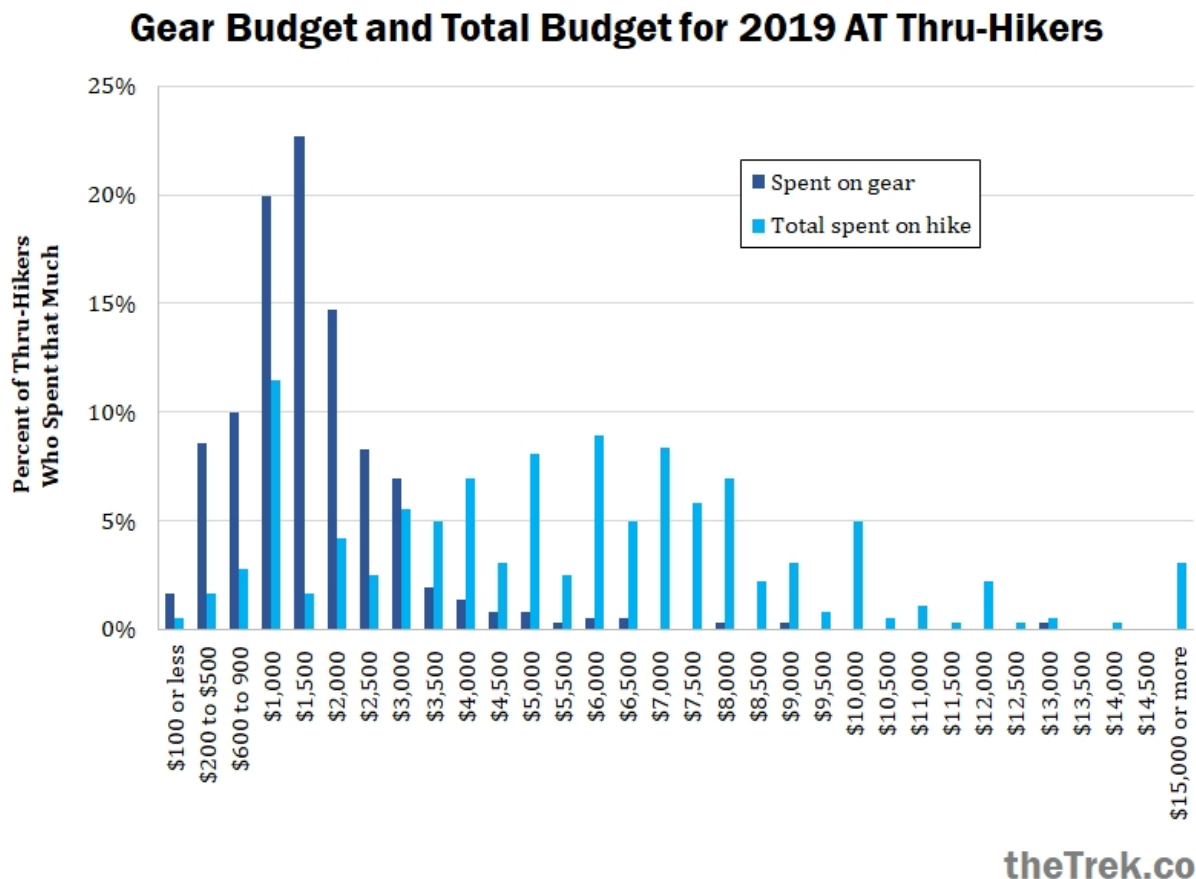


Figure 1: [The 2019 Hiker Survey: General Information](#) by [Mariposa](#).

As you can see, hikers’ spending varied widely for both gear and total spending. According to the survey, “the median amount hikers spent [overall] was between \$5,500 and \$6,000,” and “the median amount hikers spent on gear alone was between \$1,000 and \$1,500.”

The left side of the above graph should be encouraging to budget-conscious readers. With careful budgeting, we can see that it’s realistically achievable to spend less than \$1,000 on gear and to complete the entire hike on a reasonable budget. Remember: the less you spend on gear, the more you can spend on trail—and vice versa.

How much can you realistically save for the hike?

The more money you can save for your hike, the better. What's your monthly income? How much are you currently able to save each month after your bills have been paid? These numbers will help get you started in planning your budget.

Pre-Hike Budget V1	\$/Month
Income	2400
Rent	-850
Utilities	-120
Phone bill	-60
Health insurance	-90
Car insurance	-80
Food	-150
Gas	-110
Gym membership	-50
Spotify + Netflix	-20
Entertainment	-100
Misc.	-75
Emergency fund	-300
TOTAL SAVED/MONTH	\$395
x SIX MONTHS SAVING	\$2,370

Table 2: A \$2,370 total thru-hiking budget (remember, this includes gear and on-trail costs) might be doable, but it would be extremely tight. Time to figure out how we can boost our savings.

Don't look to your savings account or your 401k to bankroll your thru-hike. Leave that money for emergencies, or at least save it until the end of your hike so you can use some of it to help you transition back into normal life. If your current rate of saving doesn't seem like enough to fund your thru-hike, try to cut down on your daily expenses and increase your income to raise thru-hiking money.

Take a hard look at your current finances and try to think of strategies to boost your monthly savings. That could mean taking in more income by getting another job (a job at an outdoor store is a big win because you'll learn a lot and save money with your employee discount). It could mean reducing your living expenses by moving into a cheaper place (or moving back in with mom and dad for a few months). It could even mean simply avoiding eating out or switching from Starbucks to Folgers to reduce your discretionary expenses. Every additional dollar you manage to set aside for your thru-hike is a win.

And there's no time to lose: the sooner you start saving, the better. These examples assume you'll start saving six months in advance of your hike, but imagine how much more money you could raise for your hike if you started saving nine months or a year in advance.

Tip: Raise funds by downsizing before you hike. Many hikers return from the trail with a newfound spirit of minimalism. After living out of a backpack for weeks or months, they realize that they don't need many material possessions to survive or be happy and end up downsizing dramatically when they get home.

Rather than waiting until after your hike to downsize, why not do it beforehand? Quit buying crap you don't need and sell some of the stuff you already have. You might be surprised by how much money you can raise selling used items at a garage sale or through an online medium like Facebook Marketplace. With significantly less stuff to keep track of, you might be able to save on rent by moving into smaller quarters, and you'll certainly make it easier on yourself when it comes time to store your things before hitting the trail.



I downsized from apartment life to a Toyota Sienna minivan after completing the AT. It felt palatial after living out of a backpack for months on end.

Pre-Hike Budget V2	\$/Month
Job 1 income	2400
Job 2 income	450
Rent	-750
Utilities	-120
Phone bill	-60
Health insurance	-90
Car insurance	-80
Food	-150
Gas	-110
Gym membership	0
Spotify + Netflix	0
Entertainment	-50
Misc.	-75
Emergency fund	-300
TOTAL SAVED/MONTH	\$1,065
x SIX MONTHS SAVING	\$6,390

Table 3: By finding a cheaper apartment, axing the gym, Spotify, and Netflix subscriptions, and cutting down on entertainment, we've managed to save over \$4,000 additional dollars compared to Version One of our fanciful and grossly oversimplified budget.

Once you have an approximate planned start date and an approximate dollar amount you can realistically set each month until you leave, you can calculate the total amount of money you'll have available for the thru-hike. Next, we'll estimate your on-trail expenses; whatever money is left over after that will be your gear budget.

How much do you plan to spend on the trail?

The biggest determinant of your hiking budget is the amount of time you spend on trail. It's impossible to predict exactly how long a thru-hike will take, but chances are you've already got an approximate timeline in mind.

An Appalachian Trail thru-hike, for instance, typically takes five or six months. If you're in extraordinary shape, you might do it in three or four. If you'd like to take your time, plan for seven.

What expenses will you still have to manage back home during this time? These could be things like monthly student loan payments or phone bills. Don't forget to account for likely expenses when you get back from your hike (first month's rent plus security deposit, a trip to the mechanic to fix whatever vehicle issues cropped up from leaving your car parked for several months, etc.).

What about health insurance?

Your risk of injury is higher on a thru-hike. It's fairly likely you'll at least visit an urgent care center at some point on your journey, so it's a good idea to make sure you have health coverage to defray these expenses. Many hikers take out policies from the travel insurance company [World Nomads](#): it's fairly affordable and ensures coverage anywhere except within 100 miles of your home.

Lastly, the transition from thru-hiking to reentering the workforce is a major soul-crusher for many Hiker Trash. If possible, try to budget for at least a few weeks of decompression time after this life-changing journey.

Add up all these monthly expenses and multiply them by the number of months you expect to spend hiking. For many people, these at-home expenses will make up a healthy chunk of their hiking budgets. The good news is that these numbers are fairly predictable.

It's hard to say the same for the rest of your hiking budget. On-trail expenses like grocery bills and lodging are a lot harder to predict; it's tough to know what the cost of goods will be in different regions of the trail. Moreover, you can't know for sure what or how much you'll eat, or how often you'll want to stay in town. Actual on-trail expenses can't be pinned down with any degree of exactness, but a rough estimate of your food and other expenses will still be very helpful. Check out Carl Stanfield's [detailed accounting](#) of his own on-trail expenses during his AT thru-hike for an example.

Let's start with food. You'll probably start out eating a somewhat normal amount, but once your metabolism gets going your caloric needs will grow. Let's say you'll consume an average of 3,500 calories per day over the course of the hike.

Come up with a hypothetical daily menu that meets those caloric needs and consists of backpacking-appropriate foods (no tin cans or glass bottles, please). Instant potatoes, Knorr Sides, ramen noodles, tortillas, tuna packs, nut butters, and snack bars are all examples of popular hiking foods.

Go to your local grocery store and price out the cost of a day's food based on your imagined meal plan. Multiply that number by the total number of days you plan to hike. Just like that, you have your approximate food budget.

How often will you want to take a rest day, or zero? Some hikers take only one or two zeroes in the course of a multi-thousand-mile hike. Others take dozens. Be realistic about your wants and needs here. If you think taking a day off once per week is important to you, just make sure your budget reflects that.

As an example, let's say you spend two nights per week in a hostel in town. Hiker hostels usually cost between \$25 and \$45 per night. Some towns only have motels, which might cost closer to \$80 per night. Let's say you spend \$60 per week on average on zero day lodging. Assuming 25 weeks on trail (around six months), that's \$1,500 for lodging alone over the course of your thru.

There are additional hiking expenses to consider, of course. Just for grins, let's say you spend an additional \$10 per week on average on various expenses like showers, shuttles, and laundry (such services are sometimes, but not always, provided at hostels).

The last major expense you need to account for is the cost of transportation to and from the trail. This will vary widely depending on your individual situation. Price out different options, figure out which is going to work best for you, and add it to the budget.

Hiking Expenses	\$/week	Total \$ (assume 25 week hike)
Lodging	60	1500
Trail Food	80	2000
Restaurant Food	20	500
Laundry, shuttles, etc.	10	250
Transport TO trail	-	125
Transport FROM trail	-	125
SPOT Gen3 Subscription	4	100
Travel Health Insurance	20	500
Phone Bill	15	375
TOTAL ON-TRAIL COST	\$209	\$5,475

*Table 4: In Version 2 of our pre-trail budget, we calculated we could save about \$6,390 for the hike. That's enough to cover the on-trail cost of the trip and leaves a slim **\$915** left over for gear and emergencies.*

You should now have a rough estimate of the amount of money you'll spend on trail. Whatever's leftover is your gear budget (including on-trail gear replacements). If it doesn't seem like enough, you have two choices: revisit your pre-trail budget and figure out how to save even more money for the hike, or pare down your on-trail budget so there's more available for gear.

CHAPTER 10: HOW TO SAVE MONEY ON-TRAIL

As we discussed in the previous chapter, no single variable will affect your hiking budget as much as the total duration of your hike. The easiest way to slash the cost of your thru-hike is to simply *hike faster*. You can imagine how a four-month thru-hike is almost certainly going to cost less than a six-month one.

Hiking Expenses	\$/week	Total \$ (assume 20 week hike)
Lodging	60	1200
Trail Food	80	1600
Restaurant Food	20	400
Laundry, shuttles, etc.	10	200
Transport TO trail	-	125
Transport FROM trail	-	125
SPOT Gen3 Subscription	4	80
Travel Health Insurance	20	400
Phone Bill	15	300
TOTAL ON-TRAIL COST	\$209	\$4,430

*Table 5: Finishing the trail in 20 weeks instead of 25 brings the cost down by about \$1,000. We now have **\$1,915** for gear and emergencies. This is starting to look more doable.*

Thru-hiking is already a major physical challenge, though. As the saying goes: it's a marathon, not a sprint. If picking up the pace isn't a realistic option for you, there are other ways to meaningfully reduce your expenses.

Don't Flip

One is to avoid a "flip-flop" itinerary. Rather than starting at one end of a long trail and hiking to the other, flip-floppers start someplace in the middle of the trail, hike to one end, and then go

back and hike the remaining section that they had previously skipped. There are a number of advantages to this approach, but frugality isn't one of them.

This is because flip-flopping can add significantly to your transportation costs. On a traditional, end-to-end thru-hike, you only have to pay for transport to one end of the trail and back home from the other end.

On a flip-flop, you have to pay to get to your starting point, pay to get *back* to your starting point once you've hiked to one end of the trail, and then pay to get home from the other end of the trail when you're done (or some combination of the above). This might add hundreds of dollars to the cost of your hike.

Stay Away From Town

The other way to save on trail is to *stay the fuck out of town*. Town is way too much fun. It's full of expensive temptations: things like fried food, beer, outfitters, and indoor plumbing. Town is where your budget goes to die. Once you step from the dirt to the pavement, your wallet will start hemorrhaging funds like no one's business. It's best avoided whenever possible.

That said, you're going to have to visit civilization every now and then in order to survive your thru-hike. At a minimum, you'll probably emerge from the wilderness once per week to pick up supplies and recharge your phone. Avoiding frivolous town visits is a must, but since some of them are unavoidable, it's also important to keep town time to a minimum and exercise discipline while you're there.



For instance, you easily can cut in half the amount of time you actually spend in town by substituting “neroes” for zeroes. Neroes are days on which you only hike a few miles.

To pull off a traditional zero day, you might hike into town late one afternoon and stay that night and the next. In contrast, the evening before a *nero* you would set up camp on the trail two or three miles outside of town. On the morning of your nero, you’d hike the short distance to town, spend the rest of that day and the night in town, and get back on trail the following morning.

You can see that on a nero, you only have to pay for one night of lodging, rather than two. By not spending that first evening in town, you’ll also skirt the temptation of eating out for dinner, another big financial win.

Another strategy is to limit town stops to a couple of hours per week to run errands and spend zero days out on the trail, sleeping in your tent. It takes a lot of discipline to shun the luxuries of hostels and motel rooms altogether, but people can and do hike this way. It's a winning strategy if you're on a shoestring budget. Identifying fun camping spots to zero at, like on the shore of a lake or near a scenic spur trail, can help to make on-trail zeroes more fun.

Hiking Expenses	\$/week	Total \$ (assume 20 week hike)
Lodging	30	600
Trail Food	80	1600
Restaurant Food	20	400
Laundry, shuttles, etc.	10	200
Transport TO trail	-	125
Transport FROM trail	-	125
SPOT Gen3 Subscription	4	80
Travel Health Insurance	20	400
Phone Bill	15	300
TOTAL ON-TRAIL COST	\$194	\$3,830

*Table 6: We can save another **\$600** by taking zeroes instead of zeroes, cutting our lodging costs in half. Now we have over **\$2,500** for gear and emergencies. If we play our cards right, we might even have something left over for a security deposit when we get back!*

When in town...

Check the hiker box

Hiker-friendly establishments in trail towns often have “hiker boxes” where trail users can leave behind items they no longer want to carry. Other hikers can take whatever they want or need from the hiker box, free of charge. Extra food, not-quite-empty fuel canisters, worn-out paperbacks, and gear items deemed superfluous by their previous owners all commonly end up in hiker boxes.

It’s always a good idea to check the hiker box *first* before you go shopping. At the very least, you’ll almost certainly be able to save a few bucks on ramen and granola bars. Before you leave town, rummage through the contents one more time, because they can change in a matter of hours.

***Note:** just make sure not to abuse this system. Take only what you need, leave some behind for other hikers, and contribute to the boxes when you can.*

Have a shopping list

If you go to the store without a plan, you’ll end up overbuying things you don’t really need. Make sure you’ve got a shopping list before you set foot in a grocery store, and do your best to stick to it.

Don't eat out

Okay, you're definitely going to want to eat out in town. You're pretty much guaranteed to be ravenous at all times, after all, and after eating nothing but rehydrated mush and candy for days on end, it's pretty hard to turn your back on a hot meal.

So rather than avoiding restaurants altogether, at least try to limit eating out to once per town. All you can eat buffets are a great option and a thru-hiker favorite. An inexpensive alternative to restaurant food is to treat yourself to something fresh from the grocery store—the kind of thing you can't get out on the trail, like fresh produce or ice cream.

Share with other hikers

Even if you're flying solo, chances are there will be other hikers in town with you, and you'll spot each other pretty quickly. You can all save a lot of money by sharing things like laundry machines, motel rooms, shuttle rides, and bulk supplies like toilet paper and Band-Aids.

Hitch instead of shuttling

Some trail town residents make a living offering paid shuttle rides to town for tired hikers. This is an excellent service, especially in areas where it's notoriously difficult (or even illegal) to hitchhike.

More often than not, though, you can catch a ride for free by simply sticking out your thumb. People who live near the trail are used to seeing hikers thumbing it by the side of the road, and

many make a habit of picking up hitchhikers. This is usually a good way to save money on transportation to or from town. Bear in mind that it's polite to offer your ride some gas money, especially if it's a longer hitch.

Hitching best practices

Choose well-trafficked but slow-moving roads. The speed limit should ideally be less than 45 miles per hour. Stand someplace where drivers can see you well in advance so they have time to decide if they want to stop. Ideally, situate yourself near an easy pull-out or a wide section of shoulder. When forming a group of people to hitchhike, remember that drivers are usually more likely to pick up women and smaller groups of people (just one or two is best). For longer hitches, it can be helpful to hold a sign indicating the town you're trying to reach.

If you're anxious about trying to catch a ride with a stranger for the first time (I know I was), try to find one or two other hikers to hitchhike with you. Speak to the driver before getting in their car, and if you get a bad vibe don't be afraid to turn down the ride. If it helps, have some ready-made excuse as to why you can't ride with them. Keep your cell phone handy, as well as your knife or pepper spray (if you carry these things).

Seek out less expensive lodging

Hostels are cheaper than motels, and campgrounds are cheaper than hostels. Some establishments have work-for-stay programs to defray lodging costs for hikers, while many towns have free camping areas.

You can also seek out trail angels willing to host a hiker or two for the night. Try using social media to connect with trail angels willing to help out. In exchange for their hospitality, you can always offer to help out around the house or do something nice for your host. This is a great way to get to engage with trail town communities; not only is it a money-saver, but it can make for a more memorable and meaningful hike.

For instance, my partner and I remain friends to this day with a trail angel couple that helped us through a large portion of the Appalachian Trail in Maine by feeding, hosting, and shuttling us on numerous occasions. We still talk regularly and visit each other at least once a year. That relationship is one of the best things that came out of our thru-hike.

Remember to approach any potential trail angel with an attitude of gratitude and humility. They provide an invaluable service to the hiking community and often ask for very little in exchange. Do what you can to show thanks and remember that you're not entitled to their help.

Should you mail resupply boxes?

There's a misconception that most thru-hikers get all their supplies via the Postal Service. In reality, mail drops are far from the most popular resupply strategy these days. Most hikers just shop for the things they need in town.

This enables more flexibility: you can shop for the foods you're craving at that moment in time, rather than getting stuck with a meal plan you developed months ago, and you can adjust your resupply schedule on the fly.

A photograph showing a row of cardboard boxes stacked on a light-colored wooden floor. The boxes are for 'Key Photo' and feature the slogan 'PACK LIKE THE PROS' with a smartphone icon. One box in the foreground has a shipping label with a barcode and the address '10316 DELIVERY SPRINGS, CA 92086'. The boxes are arranged in a line, receding into the background.

Springs on the Pacific Crest Trail has no grocery store and a very limited supply of snacks at the convenience store. Therefore, nearly all thru-hikers mail themselves a box at Warner Springs. Here's a suggested [list of places to send supplies on the Appalachian Trail](#) and [another for the Pacific Crest Trail](#).

Another situation in which mail drops make sense is for hikers with highly specific dietary and medical needs. If you need certain foods or medications that you're not certain you'll be able to find regularly on the trail, your best bet will be to stock up on those supplies in advance and mail them to yourself.

Finally, if you anticipate replacing certain gear items (swapping out hiking shoes every 600 miles, for instance, or adding a warm puffy to your kit when you reach a high-elevation section of trail), it might be cost-effective to buy these things in advance, using all your bargain gear shopping skills, and mail them to yourself on trail.

***Note:** A word of caution on pre-purchasing footwear: remember, many hikers find their feet swell so much that their shoe size grows a size or more over the course of a hike.*

Maildrop best practices

Send your boxes to hiker-friendly businesses rather than to the post office whenever possible. Businesses are likely to have more open hours than the post office, giving you more flexibility in your schedule. Make sure to call ahead and get permission before mailing a box to a private business.

Squeeze your supplies into a USPS priority [flat rate](#) or a USPS priority [regional rate](#) box if possible. Regular flat rate boxes have a fixed cost regardless of weight and destination—a large one is usually big enough to fit a resupply and costs around \$20.

Regional rate boxes are a lesser-known alternative to flat rate, but they're often even cheaper. The price of regional rate boxes is affected by weight and destination, but it's still usually less expensive than other methods. You'll need to order your regional rate boxes and shipping labels online.

CHAPTER 11: PARTING THOUGHTS

So there you have it. Thru-hiking doesn't need to be a crushing expense. Both on-trail and at the camping store, with a little care it's possible to save money. In particular, it's easy to save money on gear if you know what you're doing.

Once you hit the trail, you'll be living an adventure most people can only dream of. Each day will promise difficult challenges and rich rewards. Once you get out there, you'll probably be entirely focused on the difficult and wonderful task of thru-hiking. It's not so easy to save money by that time.

But in the months before you start hiking, you'll find that you still have a lot of control over your budget and savings. In particular, you can control the amount of money you spend on gear. Unlike the unpredictable nature of the hike itself, gear is tangible and quantifiable. It can be planned, researched, and tested meticulously.

If you work hard at it, you can assemble an excellent backpacking kit without spending too much money. Not only will this set you up for success and enjoyment of your thru-hike, but it will also position you to enjoy an awesome, healthy hobby inexpensively for years to come.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

Congratulations, you made it to the end of the book! With any luck, you're now armed with the knowledge and skills you'll need to outfit yourself for a hike of any length.

As a special thanks for sticking with this ebook to the bitter end, The Trek has provided some exclusive deals and discount codes just for you. Click on [this link](#) and use the password **"THANKYOUREADER"** to gain access to all the latest and greatest deals from our favorite outdoor brands.

Happy Trails to you—now go forth and save!





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