

From Zero To Mountain Hero

EVERYTHING you need to know to
start hiking in the mountains

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Introduction

Congratulations on taking your first step toward hiking!

Hey there, adventurer! First of all, let me just say, *welcome* to the world of mountain hiking! You've just taken your first step toward what could be a lifelong love affair with the great outdoors, and I'm so excited for you.

When I put this guide together, I wanted it to be super user-friendly, like that trusty friend who's always got your back. My goal? To make sure anyone—whether you're young or not-so-young, male, female, or somewhere in between, super fit or more of a couch potato—can lace up their boots and hit the trail with confidence.

I've poured into this guide all the sweat, stories, and wisdom I've collected over more than 15 years of hiking. Yep, I've seen some trails! But here's the thing: I wasn't always this seasoned hiker who knows what gear to pack or which trail to take. Nope, I started just like you—with a huge desire to hike and a whole lot of questions.

I remember that feeling like it was yesterday—the excitement, the nerves, and all those little unknowns that make starting something new a bit daunting.

That's why I know this guide will be a game-changer for you. It's got your back, just like I wish someone had mine when I was starting out.

I know, I know—the guide looks a bit long at first glance, but I promise I'm keeping things as simple and practical as possible. My goal here is to give you the bare minimum of what you need to get started without overwhelming you with complex details that might just leave you scratching your head. At the same time, I'll make sure you're fully equipped with all the essential info to get you out there and enjoying the trails.

I decided to skip the whole "how to camp with a tent, build a shelter, or survive in the wilderness" type of content because, honestly, when you're just starting out, you really only need the basics for an easy hike that lasts a few hours. Think of it like this: just as a baby doesn't jump straight to running a marathon, but instead learns to take a few tentative steps first, you don't need to tackle Everest on your first hike.

So, with that mindset, I crafted this guide based on the principles that helped me when I was a beginner. These same ideas have kept me safe and sound on all my hikes, and I'm confident they'll do the same for you. You've got this dream of hiking, and I'm here to help you make it happen. All you need to do is believe that it's possible. I'm ready if you are—let's step into this "classroom" of nature together.

Let's get started!

Now, let me walk you through how this guide is set up. It's laid out in a way that mirrors the steps you'd take to organize any mountain hike, whether you're just starting out or already have a few trails under your belt. The idea is that these steps will still be useful even after you've ditched the "beginner" label. There are seven steps in total, and trust me, each one is equally important.

Within each step, I've tucked in chapters where you'll gather the knowledge and skills you need to be fully prepared. It's kind of like assembling a hiking toolkit—each piece you add gets you closer to being ready for whatever the trail throws at you.

The order I've laid out the steps is crucial. If you follow them exactly as I've organized them, you'll maximize your chances of success. So, let's take it step by step and get you ready for the mountains!

Step 1: Set the Reason

I get it—this step might seem a bit odd or even unnecessary. But trust me, it's absolutely crucial. Unlike the more practical parts of this guide, this one's all about your mindset. So, before you rush ahead, take a moment. Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed for at least 30 minutes. Just you and your thoughts. Now, ask yourself: **"Why do I want to hike in the mountains?"**

You see, it's super easy to get caught up in reasons that aren't really yours. Maybe you've been scrolling through social media and seeing friends post these stunning mountain photos, and you think, *Hey, I want that too!* Or maybe it's about checking off that box—conquering the highest peak, or visiting all those famous spots that people rave about. But if we're honest, these motivations can be pretty superficial. We're living in a world where social media often pushes us to do things for external validation instead of for our own genuine satisfaction. And let's be real, that kind of motivation doesn't always lead to happiness.

In fact, sometimes it can take you in the opposite direction. Ever notice how sometimes you just can't bring yourself to start something you *think* you want to do? That could be because, deep down, you're not really doing it for yourself. Maybe the motivation isn't aligned with what your soul actually craves.

My wish for you is that you hike for the love of it—for the fresh air, the silence, the incredible views, and the way the mountains can teach you about yourself. Do it because it makes you feel alive and connected. And here's a little test: would you still want to hike if there were no social media? If there was no one to "like" your photos or cheer you on, would you still hit the trails?

If your answer is a solid **YES**, then you're definitely on the right path. This hobby will likely stick with you and bring you true happiness and fulfillment. I'm genuinely excited for you!

So, go a little deeper with yourself. Get crystal clear on why you want to hike and what you're hoping to get from it. That clarity will make all the difference.

Your reasons for hiking might be as simple or as profound as:

- The breathtaking landscapes
- The peace and quiet
- The fresh mountain air
- The opportunity to learn more about yourself
- Or maybe it's a mix of all these, or something uniquely personal to you

Whatever your reason, take a moment to jot it down—whether it's in a notebook or on a worksheet. Keep it close, both literally and figuratively. This reason will become your guiding principle, like a personal motto or a compass, always pointing you in the right direction as you embark on this hiking journey.

Now that you've pinpointed your "why," the rest of this guide is all about giving you the skills and knowledge to enjoy hiking safely. The mountains are beautiful, but they can also be unpredictable and dangerous if you're not prepared. My goal is to help you get exactly what you want from your hikes without putting yourself at risk.

By the time you finish this guide, you'll have developed not just the skills to hike safely but also the confidence to be your own leader on the trail. You'll learn to organize your hikes independently, so you won't have to rely on anyone else to make your outdoor adventures a success. And with that newfound confidence, you'll realize that you're capable of making this hobby everything you want it to be.

That wraps up step one. I recommend spending at least 30 minutes on this reflection, but if you find that the topic sticks with you and your thoughts keep circling back to it in the days that follow, that's perfectly okay. In fact, it's a great sign! Don't be afraid to give yourself a few days to really dive deep into it. It just means that you're taking this seriously and giving it the attention it deserves.

Step 2: Set the Date

Now that you've figured out why you want to hike, both mentally and emotionally, it's time to take that first practical step. This is the key move you need to make right at the start. If you push it off, the odds of actually getting out there start to drop.

So here's what you need to do: grab a calendar. It can be a physical one, a planner, or even a digital version on your phone or computer—whatever works for you. The goal is to choose the exact day you'll go on your first hike. For most people, this will probably be a weekend.

Treat this date like any other important event you'd mark on your calendar—whether it's a meeting, concert, class, party, or that vacation you've already booked tickets for. **Here's a crucial part: don't consult anyone else when picking this date.** The only exception is if you're absolutely certain that you'll be hiking with just one other person, like your partner, who is as

motivated as you are to make it happen. Otherwise, avoid getting other people involved at this stage. Coordinating with a larger group can get messy, and before you know it, weeks will have passed and you're still stuck in the planning stage.

When choosing your hiking date, keep these points in mind:

- Pick a date that's about two weeks away. If it's further out, you might lose motivation. Any sooner, and you might not have enough time to finish this guide and prepare properly.
- Be mindful of any other events or commitments that you can't miss, like appointments or big plans you've already made. And, ladies, it's a good idea to avoid scheduling the hike during your menstrual period for your own comfort.

Once you've settled on the date or weekend, block it off on your calendar. This is your Plan A.

But we're not done yet! It's super important to have a Plan B and a Plan C. Why? Because if, a couple of days before your Plan A date, the weather forecast looks bad (don't worry, I'll teach you how to read and interpret weather forecasts later on), you'll need to push back your hike. And if you don't already have a backup date lined up, your chances of actually making the hike happen will drop to less than 40%.

So, to eliminate that risk from the start, pick a second date (Plan B) and a third one (Plan C). Ideally, these three weekends or dates should be consecutive if possible because the odds of having bad weather for three weekends in a row are pretty low.

This way, you've got yourself covered no matter what, and you're giving yourself the best chance to make this first hike a reality!

Extra Resources and The First Action Step.

Alright, now that we've talked about locking in your hiking dates, let's dive into how you can stay organized. If you aren't already using a digital tool like Google Calendar, I really suggest giving it a shot. It's a lifesaver when it comes to keeping track of your plans, especially if you've got a lot on your plate. But hey, if you're more of an old-school paper planner person, that's totally cool too. The most important thing is consistency—stick with one system. That way, all your key dates and plans are in one spot, and you're not scrambling to remember what's happening when.

Here's your next move: grab that calendar and jot down your three potential hiking dates—Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. And don't just leave it in your head—get it down on paper or in your app. You want to make sure these dates are officially marked, so they're hard to ignore.

Your plan might look something like this:

- **Plan A:** 15-16 September
- **Plan B:** 22-23 September
- **Plan C:** 29-30 September

By doing this, you're setting yourself up with options and flexibility. No matter what life throws at you—or what the weather decides to do—you'll be ready to hit the trails.

Step 3: Choose Your Route And Plan

This next step is a big deal, and it's where you'll want to invest the most time and energy. By the end of it, you should be so familiar with your chosen trail that you can picture it perfectly in your mind, almost like you've already hiked it. You'll know the route by heart, able to describe it with confidence.

But it's not just about the trail itself. You'll also need to figure out exactly what you're going to wear, what you'll pack, how you'll get to the starting point, and how long the whole hike will take. I know, it sounds like a lot to juggle, but I promise that once you break it all down, it'll feel much more manageable. Everything will fall into place, and you'll feel prepared and ready.

So let's tackle this step-by-step and get everything sorted!

Step 3.1: How do you choose the route?

Types of Trails:

- **Out-and-Back:** This is your classic hike where you start and finish at the same spot. The goal is usually to reach a specific destination, like a scenic viewpoint or a cozy cabin. Once you get there, you turn around and head back the same way. So, you'll see everything twice—once on the way out and again on the way back.



- **Loop:** In a loop trail, you also return to where you started, but here's the twist—you never walk the same section of trail twice. It's like doing a big circle, with new scenery the whole way around.



- **Point-to-Point:** This type of trail starts in one place and ends in another, meaning you won't loop back to your starting point. You'll need to plan how to get back—maybe hitch a ride, use a shuttle, or park a second car at the end.



These are the basic trail types you'll come across, and knowing them will make choosing your hike a whole lot easier!

There are definitely other trail variations, but these three—out-and-back, loop, and point-to-point—are the ones you'll encounter most often. Of the three, loop trails usually offer the best experience. They let you explore more new areas and take in different scenery throughout your hike. Unlike out-and-back trails, where it's easy to get fixated on reaching your destination (and maybe catch yourself thinking “Are we there yet?” on those tough climbs), loop trails keep things interesting by constantly revealing something new.

Out-and-back trails can sometimes make you focus too much on just getting to the end point, which means you might miss out on enjoying the journey itself. Loop trails, on the other hand, aren't centered on a single destination—they're all about the experience along the way.

Planning-wise, point-to-point trails can be a bit trickier. You'll need to sort out transportation, whether that means taking public transit or coordinating with two cars—one at the start and one at the finish. It's a bit more work, but for the right trail, it can be worth the extra effort!

Marked Trails:

When you're out on the trails, you'll notice a system of trail markers—usually painted on trees, rocks, or posts. These markers help guide you along officially recognized hiking routes, which are typically the safest and most well-maintained paths you can take.

Now, while there's always the option to explore unmarked trails, they come with added risks. For beginners, following an unmarked path can be tricky and increases the chances of getting lost. That's why it's generally a good idea to stick with marked trails, especially when you're just getting started.

Terrain

Most marked trails have clear, well-worn paths that are easy to follow. When you come to a fork in the trail, you'll usually find signposts with arrows, making it easy to figure out which way to go—kind of like road signs for hikers. This keeps navigation pretty simple.

That said, not every marked trail is a smooth, straightforward path. Some sections might take you across grassy fields or rocky terrain where the path isn't as obvious.

Walking across grass is usually no big deal unless it's foggy and there aren't any markers around to guide you. But rocky sections can be a bit more challenging. You don't need any fancy climbing gear, but you will need to use your hands for balance and support as you navigate these areas. This technique, known as "scrambling," is basically just using your hands and feet to climb over rocks.

These parts of the trail are often steep, so having a few basic climbing skills can really help. It's not full-on rock climbing, but you'll definitely need to be ready to get a little hands-on with the terrain!



Some scrambling sections on trails come with cables or chains to help you navigate the tricky spots more easily. However, if you're a beginner, it's best to steer clear of trails that feature these sections, even if you're in good shape. The risk of getting hurt is higher on these kinds of trails.

To figure out whether a trail has scrambling sections, you'll need to do a bit of research. Start by checking out detailed descriptions on hiking maps. Then, read at least two different blogs or trip reports from other hikers who have tackled the trail. These resources often provide real-world insights that maps alone can't offer. Watching YouTube vlogs can also be helpful, as you'll get a visual sense of the terrain and see exactly what the trail looks like.

Altitude Sickness

If you have a fear of heights, this is an important thing to consider when choosing your hiking trail. Your options might be a bit more limited, especially if your fear is strong. Even if your fear is more manageable, it's still a good idea to steer clear of trails with technical or steep sections. Experience will help you figure out what you're comfortable with, but it's essential to know your limits.

So, if heights make you nervous, do some extra homework before committing to a trail. Dive into trip reports, check out as many photos and videos as you can, and make sure you're confident that the trail won't push you past your comfort zone. And if you're unsure about a particular route, plan your hike so you have the option to turn back or adjust your path if needed. That way, you can still enjoy your hike without unnecessary stress.

Elevation Gain

"Elevation gain" refers to the total amount of climbing you do on a hike, from your starting point to the highest point of your trail.

For example, if you started at sea level (0 meters) and hiked all the way to the top of Mont Blanc, which is about 4,794 meters high, your elevation gain would be 4,794 meters. But if you started from the Refuge du Nid d'Aigle, which is around 2,371 meters above sea level, the elevation gain would be 2,423 meters (since you subtract the station's altitude from Mont Blanc's height).

That's a significant climb, even for an experienced hiker, and it would be incredibly tough for someone just starting out. Taking on such a large elevation gain without proper preparation could leave you exhausted or even put you at risk.



Determining elevation gain from hiking maps can be a bit challenging, especially if you're new to it. Luckily, many online blogs and trip reports include this information, which can make things easier.

When selecting a trail (I'll explain how in a bit), knowing both the distance and elevation gain is key. These details help you pick a trail that won't wear you out too quickly. By choosing a manageable hike, you'll avoid unnecessary fatigue and other potential problems, making your experience much more enjoyable.

Distance

Finding details about elevation gain can sometimes be a bit of a challenge, especially when you're looking through older trip reports. And the longer the trail, the more demanding it becomes. For beginners, anything over 8-10 km might start to feel like a serious workout.

One thing to keep in mind is that elevation gain and distance are not the same thing. When someone says, "We've got 500 meters left," it's important to clarify—are they talking about 500 meters of distance or 500 meters of elevation gain? Because those two numbers can mean very different things for your legs.

Thanks to advances in technology, there are now online tools that can simulate your hike and provide both distance and elevation gain data. However, these tools can be a bit complex for beginners who aren't familiar with reading maps or understanding the nuances of mountain terrain.

You might notice I haven't focused on the estimated time it takes to complete a hike when talking about difficulty. That's because hiking times are really subjective—they depend on your physical condition, experience level, how heavy your backpack is, the weather, and more. Even the time estimates you see on trail signs can vary widely.

So here's a better approach to estimating your hike time:




1. Check several sources: Look up time estimates from at least 2-3 different sources.
2. Go with the longest estimate: If one source says 6 hours, use that as your baseline and then add an hour for every 3 hours of hiking (so in this case, $6 + 2 = 8$ hours). This way, you'll have a more realistic expectation and make sure you're not caught out after dark.
3. Get a feel for your own pace: As you hike more, you'll start to figure out your own timing. On flat ground, the average walking speed is about 4 km/h, which means covering 1 km every 15 minutes. But in the mountains, this changes drastically. On a descent, you might keep that pace, but uphill sections can slow you down to 2 km/h or even 1 km/h, especially on steeper terrain. And of course, don't forget to factor in rest breaks.

If you know the distance, the elevation gain, the elevation profile (where you'll be climbing and descending), the trail's steepness, and any technical sections, you can make a pretty solid

estimate of how long the hike will take—including time for breaks. This helps you manage your energy and ensures you finish the hike while there's still daylight.

Some examples:

		Hiker with an average pace	Hiker with a slow pace (beginner)
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Trail: - elevation profile - distance - elevation gain	Technical sections	Speed	Time	Speed	Time
 10 km	No	2 km/h	5h	1,6 km/h	6h30
 10 km	No	1,5 km/h	6h45	1,2 km/h	8h30
 10 km	Yes	1,25 km/h	8h	1 km/h	10h

Let's walk through a few scenarios to see how distance, elevation gain, and technical difficulty can change how long a hike might take.

Scenario 1:

- Imagine a 10 km trail with 500 meters of elevation gain (and the same amount to descend), without any technical sections.
- For someone with an average pace, you'd likely move at around 2 km per hour—slower on the uphill, faster on the downhill, and factoring in breaks. This would take about 5 hours to complete.
- A beginner, who might walk at a slower pace of 1.6 km per hour, would take closer to 6 hours and 30 minutes to finish the hike.

Scenario 2:

- Now, picture another 10 km trail, but this time the elevation gain is doubled to 1,000 meters up and down, still without technical challenges.
- An average hiker might slow down a bit, covering about 1.5 km per hour, meaning the hike would take around 6 hours and 45 minutes.
- For a beginner, moving at around 1.2 km per hour, this hike would take approximately 8 hours and 30 minutes.

Scenario 3:

- In this case, the trail is again 10 km with 1,000 meters of elevation gain, but this time there are technical sections to navigate.
- The added difficulty would slow an average hiker to about 1.25 km per hour, making this an 8-hour hike.
- A beginner, likely moving at 1 km per hour, could expect the hike to take around 10 hours.

These examples show how varying levels of difficulty can greatly affect your hiking time. By considering these factors, you can better plan your hikes and ensure you're prepared for the challenge.

Keep in Mind

1. The hiking speeds I mentioned earlier are just estimates. Some people hike faster, others slower, and that's completely normal.
2. Some beginners might be in great shape and can keep up with more experienced hikers who aren't as fit. However, most beginners will naturally move at a slower pace until they build up their stamina.
3. Out of the three trail examples I gave, only the first one is truly recommended for beginners. The other two were just to show how a 10 km hike can become more challenging with added elevation gain or technical sections.

Always pick a trail that suits your current fitness level and experience to have a safe and enjoyable hike!

Seasons in the Mountains

When you're hiking in the mountains, it's important to remember a few things:

- **It's usually colder in the mountains than in the city.**
- **The higher you go, the colder it gets.**

- **The seasons in the mountains don't exactly line up with those in the city.**

Weather can vary from year to year, so the best way to know if there's snow or not—especially during seasonal transitions—is by checking the forecast.

Typically, winter in the mountains starts around November, though snow can sometimes arrive earlier or later. Snow often lingers at higher elevations until the end of June or even into July. In some areas, it can stick around even longer. This means that summer in the mountains usually doesn't really kick off until around July 1st.

When picking a trail, it's crucial to consider the altitude. Some mountains are better suited for certain seasons due to their elevation, so always keep the altitude in mind when planning your hike to ensure the conditions are right.

For Example:

During May and June, hiking above 2,000 meters can be risky due to lingering snow at higher elevations. This is a great time to stick to lower mountains, ideally between 1,500 and 2,000 meters.

Now, you might be wondering: **"Is it okay to start hiking in the winter?"**

My advice is **no**, winter isn't the best time to begin hiking. Winter hiking requires more than just the basics—you'll need:

1. **Extra gear** (and the know-how to use it), which can get pricey.
2. **The ability to assess avalanche risks and snow conditions**—skills that come with experience, particularly from summer hiking.

For the safest start, I recommend beginning your hiking journey in the summer. It's the easiest time to minimize risks, and you won't need a lot of gear, which keeps your costs low. This way, you can try hiking without making a big financial commitment right away.

That said, you can also start in the spring (April or May) or fall (September or October), as long as you choose trails that are clear of snow and ice in the spring or haven't yet been hit by snow in the fall.

In spring, it can be tricky for beginners to know which trails are free of snow and ice. If you want to start hiking then, it's wise to go with someone experienced or get advice from local mountain rescue teams or seasoned hikers before choosing your route.

In fall, September is generally a good time to hike almost anywhere. In October, I suggest trails that go through deciduous forests, where you can enjoy the beautiful fall colors—mid-October is

usually the peak. November, however, isn't the best time to start hiking. The landscape can be bleak (dry, brown grass and bare trees), and many higher trails might already have ice or snow.

Picking Your First Hiking Trail

With all the basics covered, you're now equipped to choose your first trail wisely. My advice for any beginner is to start with a **one-day hike**.

Here's why I suggest avoiding two-day hikes as your first experience:

- **Two-day hikes are tougher to plan** and come with more unknowns, such as unexpected challenges.
- **They also require more gear**, which adds weight and complexity.

I also recommend holding off on camping trips during your first year of hiking. Carrying a heavy backpack right from the start, especially if you're not used to it, can lead to back issues. It's better to start with a light pack, then gradually work your way up to carrying more. Jumping straight into heavy loads increases the risk of injury.

Once you've got a few one-day hikes under your belt, you can gradually take on bigger challenges:

1. **Try staying overnight in a mountain cabin** first.
2. **Next, experiment with car camping**—where you camp near your vehicle, so you don't have to carry all your gear.
3. **After about a year**, you can consider backpacking trips with overnight camping.

For now, there are plenty of stunning day hikes that allow you to explore the mountains without the need for an overnight stay. A one-day hike means you'll head out in the morning and return before nightfall.

This first hike should build your confidence, showing you that hiking isn't as daunting as it may seem. You'll realize that you can repeat the process whenever you're ready. To make your first hike as smooth as possible, here are a few things to steer clear of:

- **Trails that are too long or difficult**—these can increase the likelihood of accidents.
- **Unmarked or partially marked trails**—getting lost is a real risk on these paths.
- **Two-day hikes with overnight stays in tents or cabins**—these require carrying heavier gear and dealing with more uncertainties, which can lead to fatigue or injury. Plus, they require more equipment, which can be costly.
- **Trails at unsuitable altitudes**—this can lead to problems like hypothermia, heat exhaustion, or even avalanche risk.

Starting with a simple one-day hike lets you ease into the experience, enjoy the journey, and build up to more challenging adventures at your own pace.

To minimize risks, consider these key points when selecting your trail:

- **Choose a trail that's fully marked.**
- **Opt for a one-day hike.**
- **Keep it short—under 10 km is ideal.**
- **Select a trail with moderate elevation gain, staying below 600 meters.**
- **Avoid trails with technical sections.**
- **Make sure the trail's altitude is suitable for the season.**

Following these guidelines will help you select a trail that's safe and manageable for your first hiking experiences.

The final step is to get a map of the mountains where you'll be hiking. Planning your route with a physical map is essential for building the skills you'll need on the trail. Using a map helps you get familiar with the terrain and improves your navigation abilities, which are crucial for safe and successful hikes.

Step 3.2: How to read the maps?

There's nothing quite like the moment when I open up a map to plan a hike. If you're already familiar with maps—maybe you're a regular Google Maps user—this step should come pretty easily. But even if you're not used to reading maps yet, don't get discouraged! With time and practice, you'll get more comfortable. The important thing is to start using mountain maps as often as possible and get into the habit of planning your routes with them.

Relying only on a blog post or a phone app to navigate a hike is like wandering around blindfolded. And we can all guess how that might end up on a mountain. So, let's dive into that map, figure out how to read it, and pick up some key tips along the way!

One thing to remember: when you unfold your map, pay attention to how it's folded so you can fold it back the same way. This will help keep it in good shape and prevent it from getting worn out too quickly.

Get Comfortable with the Map

Start by unfolding the entire map and taking a moment to simply observe it. Think of the map as a flat, 2D version of the mountain, which in reality, is 3D. Imagine you're in a plane, flying directly above the mountain—the map is like a snapshot of what you'd see from that viewpoint, but laid out flat.

Extracted from Google

As you explore the map, try to identify important features such as peaks, cabins, lakes, meadows, and other landmarks. Even if you're not familiar with them yet, these are the key points you'll want to recognize.

In the following section, I'll walk you through a few of these essential elements that I think are important to know as you begin your hiking adventures.

Alpine Meadow:

As you look at the map, you'll see some sections shaded in green and others in lighter colors like cream, white, or light gray. The green areas represent forests or thick shrubs, while the lighter areas mark the alpine zone.

In the alpine zone, you won't find tall trees—just grass, rocks, and low-growing plants like blueberry bushes and rhododendrons.



Extracted from Google

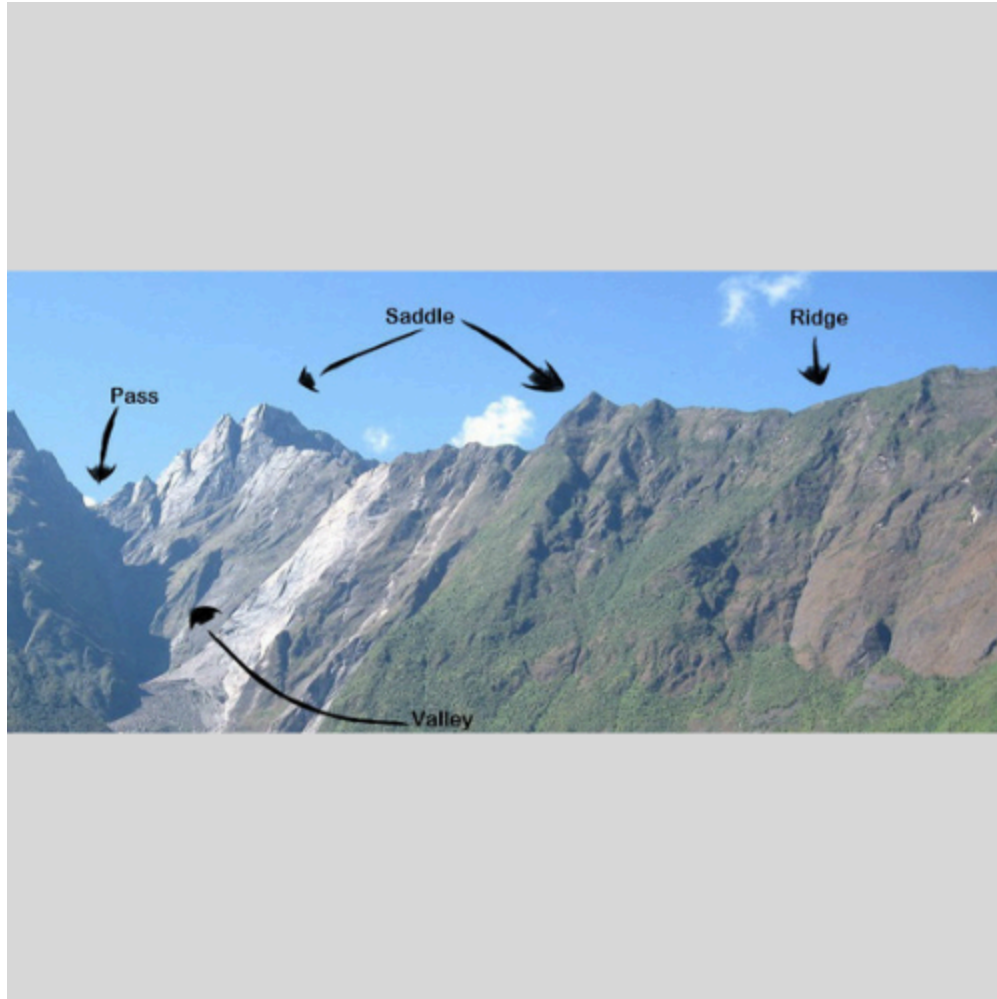
Ridge

The term "ridge" generally describes the main ridge of a mountain, acting like its spine and connecting the mountain's highest peaks.



Saddle / Pass

A "saddle" is a low point on the terrain situated between two higher points, like two peaks. So, if you're hiking along a ridge and reach a saddle, it means you've descended to that point and will need to climb again afterward. Think of a horse saddle—if you look at it from the side, that's similar to how a saddle on a mountain looks. In some places, it's also called pass.



Foot / crest / edge

This term describes a secondary ridge that usually extends from the mountain's main ridge. Although they refer to similar features, a slope is usually a smaller, gentler ridge, while an edge is steeper and more pointed.



Extracted from Google

Valley

A valley is a low area in the landscape, often formed by the erosion of a river or a glacier.

These valleys are shown using either a solid or a dotted blue line. A solid line usually means there's visible surface water, while a dotted line suggests the water is underground. However, don't always count on finding water, even if it's marked with a solid blue line.

Valleys are the low points between two ridges or slopes. Valleys often start at a saddle, and this saddle often shares the valley's name, which makes them easier to identify on the map.

Many trails follow the line of a valley or a ridge. It's important to note that trails following a valley can be dangerous in winter because they are often avalanche paths. On the other hand, most trails that follow a ridge are generally safer during winter. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule.

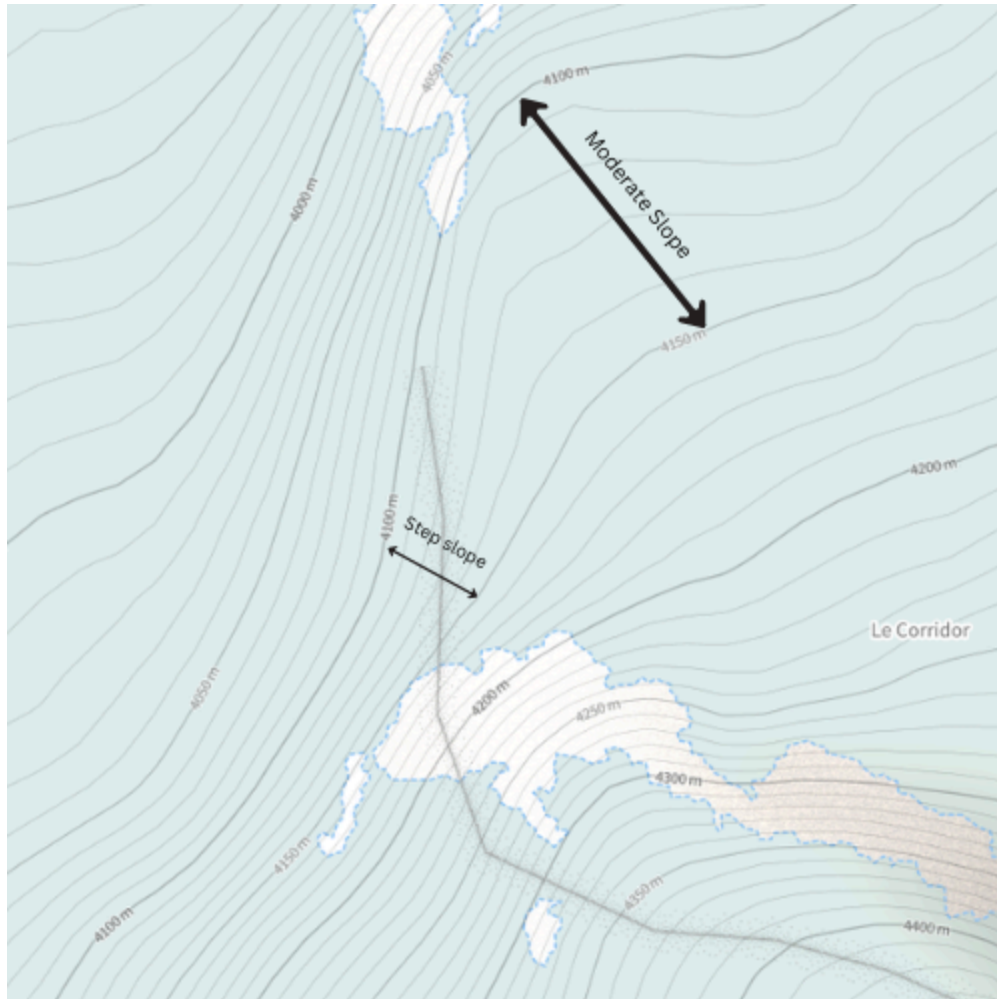


Extracted from Mapbox

Contour line

You'll notice brown lines on the map called contour lines. A contour line connects all points at the same elevation. For example, a contour line at 2,000 meters links all the spots on the map that are at that exact height. On most maps, you'll see that some contour lines have the elevation marked on them. The distance between these lines varies from map to map, but it's typically 50 or 100 meters. You can easily calculate this if the elevation is labeled on some of the lines.

Contour lines help us understand the terrain. They show us where the valleys and ridges are, and how steep the slopes are. For example, if the contour lines are very close together, it indicates a steep slope. If the lines are farther apart, the slope is gentler. Additionally, if a trail runs parallel to a contour line, it means the trail is flat (neither going up nor down).



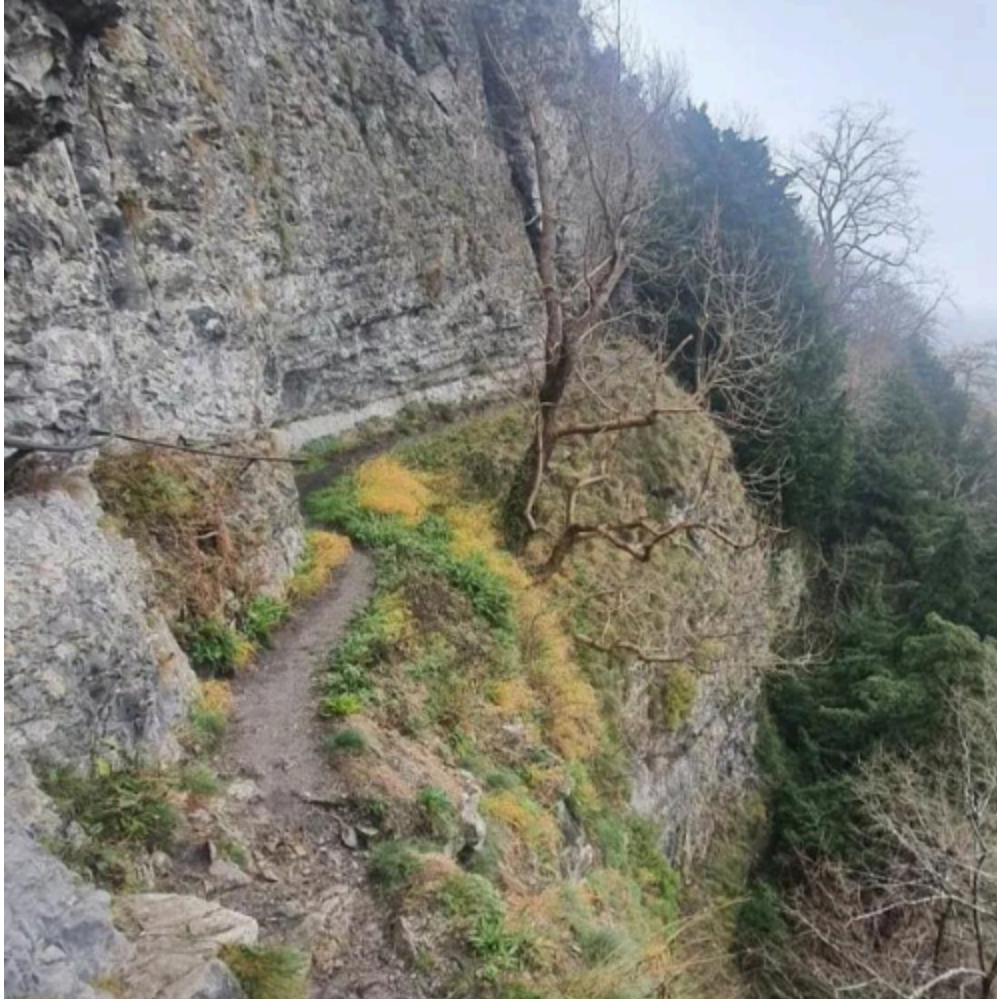
Extracted from OpenStreetMap

This information is really useful during the planning stage because it helps us identify challenging sections of the trail ahead of time, allowing us to pace ourselves better once we're out there.

Ledge / Cliff Path

A ledge trail or shelf trail cuts across the side of a mountain, usually following a contour line or with a gentle incline. On one side, you'll have the mountain slope or a rock wall, and on the other side, a steep drop.

If you have a strong fear of heights, it's best to avoid these types of trails, as the exposure can be unsettling and risky.



Glacial cirque

A glacial cirque is a large, bowl-shaped depression often found just below the main ridge of a tall mountain. These natural formations are usually carved out by glaciers and serve as the starting point for glacial valleys. Over time, as glaciers melt, these cirques can fill with water, creating glacial lakes. These areas are often stunningly scenic, with steep walls surrounding the hollow and clear, cold water collecting at the base.



Refuge

A mountain refuge is a small, often metal structure, though some are made from wood or stone. These shelters are designed to offer protection if you find yourself caught in severe weather while hiking in the mountains. Think of them as safe havens where you can wait out a storm.

Inside a refuge, you'll typically find simple wooden platforms, where you can rest. These aren't beds, but flat surfaces where you can lay down if you've brought along a sleeping bag and a mat or foam pad. The purpose of these refuges is strictly for emergencies, like unexpected weather changes or getting stuck on the mountain after dark.

It's important to note that these shelters aren't meant for planned overnight stays during multi-day hikes. They don't have the amenities of a cabin or tent, and they're usually not stocked with supplies. Refuges are there to help you in a pinch, not as a primary sleeping option. So while it's good to know where they are, you shouldn't rely on them as your main accommodation.

during a hike. Instead, plan your overnight stays in cabins, tents, or other designated areas, and keep refuges in mind as a backup for unexpected situations.



Try to get comfortable with the terms and map features we've discussed. The best way to do this is by regularly opening maps, looking at them, and seeing what you notice. Over time, your brain will get used to this way of visualizing the mountain, and you'll build the mental pathways that help you plan future hikes.

When you come across a symbol on the map that you don't recognize, check the map's legend, which is usually found in one of the corners. The legend will explain what the different symbols mean, helping you better understand the terrain and features of the area.

Finding the Trailhead on the Map

After you've taken some time to get familiar with your map, the next step is to focus on the specific trail you plan to hike. The first task is to locate the starting point of the trail. If the trail

begins in a town or village, find that location on the map. If it doesn't, pinpoint both the trailhead and the nearest town or village.

If you're taking public transportation, like a train or bus, figure out how you'll get from the station to the start of the trail. This might involve a bit of extra walking or a short taxi ride, so it's good to plan that part in advance. If you're driving, think about where you'll park your car. Check if there's a designated parking area near the trailhead, whether it's free or requires a fee, and how secure it is.

Some trailheads don't have much parking space or any at all, so it's wise to look this up ahead of time. You can use Google Maps and Street View to get a feel for the area and see exactly where you'll need to go. This can help you avoid surprises on the day of your hike.

Most parking areas are safe, but it's always a good idea to double-check, especially if you're leaving your car for an extended period. In rare cases, there have been reports of car break-ins at some remote locations, so it's worth doing a little research to ensure your vehicle is in a secure spot. This extra preparation can save you from stress and help ensure a smooth start to your hike.

Reviewing the Selected Trail

After you've settled on a trail, it's crucial to take some time to really understand it. Start by writing down all the important details. This includes the trail's description—such as notable landmarks, elevation changes, estimated hiking time, and any tricky sections you should be aware of. Also, make sure to record where the trail begins, so you're clear on your starting point.

Keeping these details in a notebook or on a dedicated worksheet will be invaluable on the day of your hike. This not only helps you stay organized, but it also acts as a quick reference guide while you're out on the trail. It's easy to forget small details when you're in the moment, so having everything written down ensures you're prepared for whatever comes your way. Plus, it adds an extra layer of confidence knowing you've done your homework and are ready to tackle the trail with a plan in hand.

Using Mountain Navigation Apps

In the age of smartphones, hikers have a huge advantage over previous generations—thanks to GPS. With just your phone, you can pinpoint your location on a map, which is incredibly helpful for staying on track, especially in tricky situations like foggy weather or when navigating poorly marked or unmarked trails.

That said, while mobile apps are fantastic for in-the-moment navigation, they shouldn't replace a good old-fashioned physical map when it comes to planning your hike. Trying to plot a route on

a small phone screen can be frustrating, and most hiking apps don't provide all the detailed information needed for thorough and safe trip planning.

Plus, technology isn't always reliable. Your phone's battery could die, the GPS signal might fail, or the device could malfunction just when you need it most. This is why it's essential to be comfortable with a physical map—both during the planning stage at home and while you're out on the trail. Being able to navigate without relying on technology is a key part of staying safe in the mountains.

If you do use navigation apps, I recommend Komoot and AllTrails. Both of these apps are great for providing detailed maps and route information, including user reviews and photos. Komoot is especially handy for planning multi-day hikes, and it even lets you download offline maps, which is crucial when you're out of cell range. AllTrails is fantastic for finding popular trails and seeing real-time updates from other hikers about trail conditions.

However, even with these apps, I suggest making a habit of pulling out your physical map during breaks on the trail. When you stop for a rest or a snack, take a moment to match the landscape around you with what's on your map. This will help develop your natural sense of direction and improve your map-reading skills, making you more self-reliant on your hikes.

Step 3.3: How to dress for the mountains?

Three Key Things to Keep in Mind:

Before we dive into the fun part—picking out the gear you'll need for your hikes—it's crucial to understand a few important concepts. These three points will save you a lot of time, money, and hassle.

1. What's the Real Purpose of Hiking Gear?

First off, let's talk about the purpose of hiking gear. It's easy to get caught up in the latest and greatest products, but do you really know why you're buying that fancy jacket or those high-tech boots? The primary role of hiking gear isn't to make you look good on the trail—it's to **keep you safe**.

Sure, your everyday clothes have evolved to serve multiple purposes—fashion, comfort, etc. But when it comes to hiking gear, the stakes are higher. In extreme situations, your gear can literally be the difference between life and death. For example:

- A good fleece jacket isn't just for warmth; it's your defense against hypothermia, which can be deadly if temperatures drop unexpectedly.
- Proper hiking boots aren't just about comfort; they're designed to prevent slips and falls, which could lead to serious injuries or worse.

When you understand that the main goal of your hiking gear is to protect you, it becomes much easier to figure out what you truly need versus what's just nice to have.

2. A World of Consumerism

We live in a world overflowing with options, and the outdoor gear industry is no exception. Companies are constantly coming up with new products, all claiming to solve every possible problem you could face on the trail. The reality? You don't need most of them.

Over the last couple of decades, technology has brought amazing advancements in gear, but it's also created a ton of unnecessary options. Just because there are 20 different types of hiking jackets doesn't mean you need them all—or any of them, for that matter. As hikers, we don't face every challenge these products are designed to fix, and sometimes, the "problems" they solve are more marketing gimmicks than actual issues.

3. Don't Rush into Buying Everything

Now, here's something our brains aren't great at: predicting how much we'll enjoy a new hobby before we actually try it. You might be super excited about hiking and convinced it's going to be your new passion, but the truth is, you won't really know until you've gone out a few times.

That's why it's not smart to splurge on gear right from the start. Think of it like picking up a new hobby, say painting. You wouldn't immediately buy every type of brush, canvas, and paint set—especially the most expensive ones. Instead, you'd probably start with the basics and see if you actually enjoy it before investing more.

The same approach should apply to hiking. Start with what you need and add more as you get a feel for the activity.

My Personal Take on Getting Started

With these three points in mind, my advice is to keep your first hiking trip as low-cost as possible. I'll suggest the bare minimum gear you'll need, and you can look around your house or ask friends if they have any items you can borrow. Only buy the essentials that you can't find or substitute with something you already own.

To make things even easier and reduce the amount of gear you'll need, follow these tips:

- **Choose a summer hike.** It's the best time to start since the weather is generally more predictable, and you won't need as much specialized gear.
- **Only go hiking if the weather forecast is perfect.** We'll talk more about checking the weather later, but for now, just know that it's a smart move to avoid hiking in questionable conditions—especially on your first trip.

Hiking in bad weather is no fun. You won't get to enjoy the views, you'll likely end up drenched, and you'll need to carry way more gear—most of which you probably don't own yet. By starting with a sunny, clear day, you'll have a much better experience and can ease into the world of hiking without the added stress of unpredictable elements.

The Layering Method

When it comes to hiking, things are a bit different:

1. **You're constantly moving.** When you're hiking, your body generates heat quickly. After just a few minutes of walking, your circulation improves, and you warm up. Honestly, the only time I feel the chill is right when I step out of the car or train at the trailhead.
2. **Layering is key.** No matter how easily you get cold, using the right layering system will keep you warm in almost any condition.

So, what exactly is the layering system? Whether you're in the city or on a mountain, staying warm isn't just about the clothes you wear—it's about the air trapped between those layers. This layer of warm air acts as insulation, keeping your body heat close to you. That's why tight clothing, like skinny jeans, often leaves you feeling cold in winter—there's no room for that crucial layer of warm air between the fabric and your skin.

Of course, the materials you choose matter too. Wool, for example, is excellent at keeping you warm in cold weather, much better than most synthetic fabrics. But the magic really happens when you combine layers. Each layer traps a bit of warm air, creating a barrier between you and the cold.

Here's why layering is the best strategy for staying warm in the mountains: it gives you flexibility. If you start to overheat, you can peel off a layer. If the weather turns colder, you can add one. It's all about managing your body temperature by adjusting those layers as needed. This method isn't just practical—it's essential for staying comfortable and safe in the outdoors.

Mountain weather is notoriously unpredictable—it can be warm one moment, cold the next, or suddenly windy. By dressing in layers, you can easily adjust your clothing to stay comfortable as conditions change.

For instance, if you wear a thick sweater directly on your skin and start to overheat, you're stuck with it unless you want to risk being too cold. But if you're layered with a fleece over a t-shirt, it's as simple as shedding the fleece and continuing in your t-shirt. The same principle applies if you have more layers on—you can add or remove them as needed.

Ideally, when heading into the mountains, you should have at least three layers with you, whether you're wearing all of them or keeping some in your backpack. This allows you to adapt to the weather as it changes during your hike.

While these are basic rules, over time, you'll learn to fine-tune your layering system based on your personal experience. Everyone's comfort level is different, so there's no one-size-fits-all solution. That said, let's break down the three essential layers:

1. **Base Layer (Layer 1):** This is the layer that sits directly against your skin. Its main job isn't to keep you warm but to wick away sweat and keep you dry. This is why cotton is a big no-no in the mountains—it absorbs moisture and doesn't dry quickly, which can lead to serious issues like hypothermia. In summer, your base layer might be a synthetic t-shirt or one made of merino wool, both of which dry quickly and maintain warmth even when damp. In colder conditions or high-altitude hikes, your base layer might be a long-sleeve top made from the same moisture-wicking materials.
2. **Mid Layer (Layer 2):** The purpose of the mid-layer is to provide warmth. In summer, this is often a fleece jacket. It traps body heat while still allowing moisture to escape from the base layer, keeping you warm without making you sweaty.
3. **Outer Layer (Layer 3):** The outer layer is your shield against the elements—wind, rain, and snow. Typically, this is a waterproof and wind-resistant jacket, often made from materials like Gore-Tex. This layer is essential for protecting you from the harsh conditions you might face in the mountains.

By using this system, you're equipped to handle a wide range of weather conditions. You can add layers if the temperature drops, or peel them off if you start to overheat. Over time, you'll get a feel for how many layers you personally need to stay comfortable on the trail. And remember, the key to staying warm isn't just the clothes themselves but the way they work together to trap heat and keep you dry.

Just like with your upper body, the layering system also applies to pants, although in the summer, you'll usually only need one pair. Whether you prefer traditional hiking pants or leggings, the key is to choose what's comfortable for you.

For summer hikes, here's how you can think about layering:

The right combination of layers depends on the perceived temperature, which can be influenced by several factors, such as:

- **Time of day**
- **Altitude**
- **Wind speed**
- **Cloud cover**
- **Whether you're in an open area or forest**
- **Your personal tolerance to cold or heat**
- **Whether you're moving or resting**

By having multiple layers, you're prepared for any situation, ensuring you'll neither be too cold nor too hot.

The Basics of Summer Layering:

1. **Base Layer (T-shirt):**

- Your t-shirt should not be made of cotton. Instead, opt for synthetic materials or merino wool. On the trail, sweating is inevitable, and cotton tends to absorb moisture and dry slowly, which can lead to discomfort or even hypothermia in colder conditions.
- If you know you sweat a lot, consider packing an extra t-shirt in your backpack. However, there's no need to invest in expensive merino wool shirts right away. Look around your home or borrow from a friend. Affordable synthetic t-shirts can be found at stores like Decathlon.

2. **Mid Layer (Fleece):**

- A lightweight fleece with a zipper is ideal for summer hikes because it's easy to take on and off as needed. Again, check your wardrobe—maybe you already have a suitable lightweight jacket that can replace a fleece.
- If not, budget-friendly fleece jackets can be found in most supermarkets.

3. **Outer Layer (Jacket):**

- The outer layer should be a lightweight, unlined, waterproof jacket with a hood. If you already have a jacket that meets these criteria, try it on over your base and mid-layers to ensure you can move comfortably. You'll want enough room to move your arms freely.
- If you need to purchase something, you have two options:
 1. A **windbreaker**—this is more affordable and works well in dry weather with no rain forecast. You can pair it with a cheap plastic rain poncho for minimal rain protection.
 2. A **waterproof and windproof jacket**—more expensive but more versatile since you only need to carry one item instead of two. It's also a more reliable long-term investment.
- **Important Note:** A waterproof jacket alone won't be enough for prolonged rain. If you plan to hike in such conditions, you'll eventually need additional rain gear, like a poncho or waterproof over-pants.

Hiking Pants:

When it comes to pants, remember: **jeans are a no-go** for hiking. Denim is too rigid, and on the trail, you need something flexible that won't restrict your movement. Tight jeans are even worse—they can cause circulation problems and discomfort on longer hikes, leading to issues like bruising or, in severe cases, blood clots.

Instead, check if you already own a pair of comfortable, loose-fitting pants that can work as hiking pants. For women, fitness leggings are a great option. Personally, I recommend leggings for anyone, especially in summer, when ticks are more common.

Shorts are generally not recommended unless you're hiking at very low altitudes and the forecast is consistently above 20 degrees Celsius. At higher altitudes, you're more likely to get cold, and there's a risk of hypothermia.

Footwear for Hiking:

Footwear is one of the most critical pieces of hiking gear in terms of safety and comfort. Wearing the wrong shoes can turn your hike into a painful ordeal. For a well-chosen beginner trail, you don't necessarily need heavy-duty hiking boots. A good pair of hiking shoes or mid-height hiking boots will work just fine.

However, completely avoid **canvas shoes, sneakers, or regular tennis shoes**. These have slippery soles that lack grip on mountain terrain, making accidents more likely—ranging from twisted ankles to more severe injuries like head trauma or spinal injuries, which can have permanent consequences or, in extreme cases, be fatal.

Tips for Choosing Hiking Footwear:

- **Try on your hiking shoes or boots in person whenever possible.** If you can only order online, be prepared to return them if they don't fit properly.
- **Wear hiking socks when trying on shoes.**
- **Ensure a proper fit:** Push your foot forward as far as it will go. You should be able to fit your index finger comfortably between your heel and the back of the shoe. Hiking shoes typically run a size larger than your everyday shoes. They should feel slightly roomy.
- **Test them out:** Once laced up, walk around, climb some stairs, and make sure they don't pinch your toes, rub the sides of your feet, or press against your ankles. Never go by the idea that "they'll break in over time"—if they're uncomfortable now, they'll be even worse on the trail.

A Crucial Reminder:

Never hike in brand-new shoes. Break them in with at least a 2-3 kilometer walk (even in the park) to ensure they won't cause blisters or discomfort on the mountain. The last thing you want is to deal with painful feet or blisters on your hike.

Something for Your Head

If the weather forecast predicts warm temperatures and your trail isn't entirely shaded by trees, you'll need something to protect your head from the sun. A hat, cap, or buff will do the trick. A buff is particularly versatile since it can protect you from the sun when it's hot and keep you warm if it gets chilly. Plus, you can wear it around your neck when not using it on your head. If you don't have a buff or don't want to buy one, you can always improvise with something you already have at home.

Lightweight Gloves

While not absolutely necessary for an easy summer hike, lightweight gloves can be handy, especially for early morning starts or if you encounter wind in exposed alpine areas. For your first hike, you can simply pack a pair of gloves you already own, just in case you need them.

Hiking Socks

Socks are incredibly important on the trail. Regular city socks aren't designed for intense hiking and can cause blisters and other issues. For your first hike, you can use good-quality socks you already have, just make sure they're not made of cotton and aren't too short. Ideally, your socks should cover your ankles to protect them from chafing and ticks.

Over time, you might want to invest in specialized hiking socks, but for now, focus on what you already own.

A Reminder About Gear:

You don't need to rush out and buy everything right away. Start by checking what you have at home. When I first started hiking, I didn't have fancy gear either. I wore a pair of sturdy sports shoes with good grip, grabbed a random non-cotton t-shirt, and put on a pair of loose jeans since I knew tight ones weren't suitable. I didn't have a fleece, so I used a light sweater, and the only thing I actually bought was a small, affordable backpack from Decathlon. I packed some basic gloves and something to cover my head, just in case it got cold.

I chose an easy trail that took about 3-4 hours in the Alps Mountains, with good weather and no rain. Everything went smoothly, and after that first hike, I knew I loved it. That's when I started slowly building up my gear collection, researching, and upgrading my equipment.

Important: Watch the Weather

If you don't read the weather forecast correctly and head out on a hike with rain or extremely low temperatures in the forecast, the basic gear mentioned here won't be enough if you get caught in bad weather. Getting soaked can lead to hypothermia, which is dangerous and can be fatal. This is why it's crucial to only hike in good weather when you're just starting out. Once

you've gained more experience and gradually acquired more gear, you'll be able to tackle the mountains even when the weather is a bit uncertain.

Step 3.4: What equipment do you need?

When heading out for a hike, it's not just about what you're wearing. You'll also need to bring along a few essential items to make your adventure more comfortable and safe. These items fall under the broader category of "gear." Some of it is specifically designed for outdoor use, while others are everyday things you might already have at home.

1. A Good Backpack:

One of the most critical pieces of hiking gear is your backpack. It's not just about carrying your stuff—it's about how comfortable you'll be on the trail. For your first hike, there's no need to splurge on a high-end hiking backpack. You can use almost any backpack you have lying around at home, even something as basic as a laptop bag. The key is that it's big enough to hold everything you need for the day.

However, if you find yourself without any suitable backpack and can't borrow one, it might be worth considering a small hiking pack. When shopping, you'll notice backpacks are measured in liters (L). For a beginner hike, a small pack of up to 20 liters should be enough.

Even if you start the hike wearing all your layers, your backpack needs to have room for them when you take them off as the day warms up. If you're hiking with a partner, you can often share one backpack, especially on shorter trails. Just do a test run at home—make sure everything fits, including snacks and water.

Tips for Buying a Backpack (If You Need One):

- **Quality vs. Budget:** Good hiking backpacks, especially from top brands like Deuter or Osprey, can be pricey, but they're built to last. If you're serious about hiking, it might be worth the investment eventually.
- **Fit Matters:** For women, a women-specific backpack is usually more comfortable since men's packs tend to be longer and might not fit as well.
- **Look for a Hip Belt:** A proper hiking backpack should have a wide hip belt, not just a thin strap. This is crucial because it helps distribute the weight from your shoulders to your hips, making the load much easier to carry. Without this, all the weight sits on your shoulders, which can lead to discomfort and even pain.
- **Multiple Adjustment Points:** A good backpack will have several adjustable straps—at the waist, chest, and shoulders. This allows you to customize the fit and make sure the weight is evenly distributed. Some packs also have an extra adjustment at the top of the shoulder straps to fine-tune the fit.

- **Try It On:** If you're buying in a store, always try the backpack on with weight inside it—most outdoor shops have weights or pillows to simulate a full load. If you're ordering online, be ready to return it if it doesn't fit right. At home, load it up with everything you plan to bring on your hike and walk around for a bit. Climb some stairs or go for a short walk to see how it feels.
- **Proper Adjustment:** When putting on your backpack, follow this order for adjusting: start with the hip belt, then tighten the shoulder straps, adjust the chest strap, and finally tweak the shoulder straps if needed.

For your first hike, don't feel like you need to buy all the gear right away. Start with what you already have at home, and build your collection gradually as you get more into hiking. The most important thing is to make sure your backpack fits well and is comfortable to carry, as this will have a huge impact on your overall experience. With a well-packed and properly adjusted backpack, you'll be able to enjoy your hike without worrying about unnecessary discomfort.

2. Sunglasses

Sunglasses are a must-have on the trail, as the sun can be especially harsh in the mountains. If you have sensitive eyes, this is even more important. For your first hike, any pair of sunglasses you already own should do the trick, even if they aren't specifically designed for outdoor use. Later on, you can consider upgrading to a pair made for mountain adventures.

When you're ready to invest in a pair of hiking sunglasses, it's important to pay attention to a few key details:

- **CE Mark:** This indicates that the sunglasses meet European safety standards, ensuring they provide adequate protection.
- **Lens Category:** Sunglasses come in categories ranging from 0 to 4. Category 0 has the lightest lenses, allowing the most sunlight through, while category 4 has the darkest lenses, blocking almost all sunlight.
- **UV Protection:** Make sure the sunglasses offer UV protection to shield your eyes from harmful rays.

For hiking, category 3 lenses are ideal for summer, while category 4 lenses are best for winter conditions when the sun is even more intense at higher altitudes.

A Word of Caution:

Sunglasses made for driving usually aren't the best choice for hiking, and vice versa. For example, category 4 sunglasses are too dark for driving and are actually prohibited behind the wheel. Always check the label to ensure your sunglasses are suitable for your activity.

3. Sunscreen SPF 50:

When you're out in the mountains, the risk of sunburn and even sunstroke is significantly higher than at the beach. In extreme cases, sunburn can lead to severe swelling of the face, which might require emergency medical treatment (I've experienced this firsthand, and trust me, it's no fun). That's why sunscreen is absolutely essential on the trail.

Don't underestimate the protection you need, even if you don't have particularly fair skin. A sunscreen with SPF 30 just won't cut it in the mountains, no matter your skin tone. You need SPF 50 to adequately protect your skin from the intense mountain sun.

Luckily, SPF 50 sunscreens are easy to find in pharmacies and larger supermarkets, especially starting around May or June. Look for small containers—around 50 ml—so you're not lugging around a heavy bottle in your pack. A little goes a long way, and it's worth every ounce when it comes to protecting your skin.

4. First Aid Kit:

When it comes to packing a first aid kit for your hike, you don't need to go overboard or buy anything too fancy. Sure, there are pre-made kits available, but you can easily put together your own with just the basics. The goal is to be prepared for the common issues that can pop up on the trail, like:

- **Headaches**
- **Stomach troubles**
- **Blisters**

Now, for a short hike, the chances of needing your first aid kit are pretty slim. You might even feel okay leaving it in the car or at your accommodation if you're staying close by. But personally, I've made it a habit to bring mine along on every hike—better safe than sorry, right? Here's what I suggest tossing into your kit:

- **A couple of headache pills** (you don't need the whole box, just a few)
- **Some Imodium** or whatever you prefer for stomach issues
- **A few blister bandages** (because blisters can ruin a good hike in no time)
- **Any personal meds** you might need—like an inhaler, allergy meds, or anything else specific to you

If you're hiking in the summer, I'd also recommend throwing in a tick remover or at least a pair of tweezers, just in case you run into any unwanted little hitchhikers on the trail. You might be far from a pharmacy, so it's better to be prepared.

All of these items can easily fit into a small, lightweight pouch—something with a zipper or drawstring to keep everything secure and organized. Nothing too bulky, just the essentials to give you peace of mind on the trail.

5. Light Source:

If you've planned your hike carefully, as outlined earlier, you likely won't need a light source. However, it's always a good idea to pack one just in case something unexpected happens—like an accident or a delay—and you find yourself still on the trail as night falls.

While your phone does have a flashlight, it's not the best option. The light isn't very powerful, and using it drains your battery—something you'll definitely want to conserve in case of an emergency.

You probably have a flashlight lying around the house, or maybe you can borrow one from a friend (just make sure it's not too heavy). If you don't have access to a flashlight, you could consider getting a headlamp. A headlamp is the go-to light source for hiking because it keeps your hands free, making it much easier to navigate in the dark.

That said, I wouldn't rush out to buy a headlamp for your first short hike. But if you do get one, don't forget the batteries! It's also a good idea to keep the batteries out of the headlamp until you actually need to use it, to prevent any accidental drainage.

6. Survival Blanket

While the risk of injury is low if your hike is well-planned, it's always wise to be prepared for the unexpected. A survival blanket is a lightweight and compact item that could be a lifesaver in extreme situations. If you find yourself needing to stay put due to an injury or other emergency, especially in the woods, having one of these blankets can make all the difference.

Survival blankets typically have two sides—one silver and one gold. The silver side reflects body heat back to you, helping to prevent hypothermia in cold conditions. The gold side, on the other hand, can help reflect heat away, which is useful if you're dealing with extreme heat.

These blankets are easy to find in outdoor stores and even at most pharmacies. They're small, lightweight, and definitely worth tossing into your pack, just in case.

7. Fire Source

As a precaution, it's also a good idea to carry a fire source, such as matches or a lighter. While you're not allowed to start a fire just anywhere, in an extreme situation—like being stuck in the forest overnight—you might need to build a fire to stay warm. Always be mindful of fire regulations, but in a survival situation, keeping warm becomes a priority.

Gear You Don't Need for Your First Hike:

Let's talk about some gear that you **don't** need to worry about for your first hike. One of the most common items people think they need right away is **trekking poles**. I was one of those people who bought trekking poles almost immediately, thinking they were essential. But for short and easy hikes with a light backpack, not only do you not need them—they can actually be more of a hindrance.

According to a study conducted by the UIAA (the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation), trekking poles can be counterproductive on easy hikes. It's recommended that beginners start hiking without poles to learn how to walk properly, with a natural, springy step that helps protect the knees.

Trekking poles are generally only recommended in specific situations, such as:

- **If you're carrying extra weight** (whether in your pack or body weight)
- **If you have medical issues** diagnosed by a doctor, particularly joint problems
- **If you're carrying a heavy backpack** (which won't apply for your first hikes)
- **On steep or tricky terrain**, where they can provide extra stability (but this doesn't apply to beginner hikes).

Other Gear You'll Need Later On:

As you get more into hiking, there are other pieces of gear you might eventually need. However, for a simple, short summer hike with great weather, you can safely leave these items off your shopping list for now:

- **Down jacket** (preferably thin)
- **Rain poncho or waterproof jacket**
- **Compass**

For Non-Summer Seasons:

If you're hiking outside of summer, you'll eventually need additional gear for warmth and protection, such as:

- Thermal base layers
- Winter socks
- Softshell pants
- Softshell gloves
- Over-gloves
- Gaiters
- Beanie

- Balaclava
- Winter boots
- Microspikes or crampons
- Ice axe

For Camping:

If you decide to start camping, you'll need even more gear, including:

- Tent
- Sleeping bag
- Sleeping pad
- Inflatable pillow
- Warm jacket (like a mid-weight down jacket)
- Stove + fuel + cookware

But don't worry about all of this just yet. Focus on enjoying your first hike and see how you feel about the experience before diving into the world of advanced gear.

Step 3.5: What do you eat on the mountain?

When it comes to eating on the trail, the good news is you can pretty much bring whatever you like! But, as with most things in hiking, a little planning goes a long way. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Hiking burns a ton of calories, so you need to pack enough food to keep you going without turning your backpack into a portable pantry.
- Along with your main meals, don't forget to pack some sweet snacks for quick energy bursts.
- Your body works harder to digest food when you're constantly moving, so be mindful of what you're eating.
- Heavy or bulky foods can make your pack a burden, so choose lightweight options when you can.

Foods to Skip:

- **Heavy fruits** like apples or peaches—they'll weigh you down.
- **Glass containers**—not only are they heavy, but they're also breakable.
- **Foods that are tough to digest**—you don't want to feel sluggish on the trail.
- **Messy snacks** that could spill or leak inside your pack.

As you get more into hiking, you'll start to see how important it is to keep your backpack as light as possible. Over time, you'll naturally start avoiding heavy items and finding clever ways to trim down your load.

For most day hikes, **sandwiches or wraps** are a solid choice. If you have time, make them the night before and store them in the fridge. Fill them with your favorites—whether it's cheese, ham, veggies, or even plant-based options. If you're in a rush, you can grab pre-made sandwiches from a store or gas station on your way to the trail, though they might not be the healthiest or most cost-effective choice.

Snacks to Keep You Going:

To keep your energy levels up, pack some tasty, easy-to-carry snacks like:

- Dried or candied fruits
- Nuts, like almonds or sunflower seeds
- Chocolate or glucose tablets
- Chocolate chip cookies or brownies
- Cereal bars or granola bars
- Biscuit salami (a sweet treat)

For a half-day hike, I usually stick with two small sandwiches and a handful of energy-packed snacks like dried fruit, nuts, or something light like puffed rice cakes. Everyone's appetite is different, and as you hike more, you'll get a better sense of how much food you actually need based on the trail's difficulty and your personal hunger levels. Longer hikes typically call for more fuel, so don't be afraid to pack a little extra.

Step 3.6: What do you drink on the mountain?

When you're out on the trail, sticking to **water** or **tea** is your best bet—especially if you're hiking in colder weather, where a warm drink can do wonders. If you want to get a little fancy, you can bring along some **isotonic drinks** that help replenish electrolytes and give you an extra energy boost.

What to Avoid:

- **Sugary or fizzy drinks:** These might taste great at home, but on the trail, they won't do much to keep you hydrated.
- **Alcohol:** This is a definite no. Not only does alcohol impair your judgment (a dangerous thing when you're hiking), but it also dehydrates you, which can lead to exhaustion. A lot of mountain accidents, unfortunately, have alcohol as a contributing factor, and some even end tragically. It's just not worth the risk.

Water: Bottles vs. Hydration Systems

You've got two main options for carrying water: **bottles** or a **hydration system**. Hydration systems are popular because they allow you to drink on the go with a tube that feeds directly from your pack, so you don't have to stop and rummage for your bottle. It sounds super convenient, right?

But, I'll be honest—I'm not a huge fan of hydration systems. Here's why:

1. No matter how high-quality the system is, the tube always has a bit of that unpleasant plastic taste.
2. They require careful cleaning with special tools to prevent bacteria growth, which is more hassle than it's worth for me.
3. You miss out on that satisfying gulp of water from a bottle, which can feel pretty refreshing when you're parched.
4. Refilling them on the go can be a pain, especially compared to just topping off a bottle.
5. If you want to cool off by splashing some water on your face or neck, a bottle is much easier to manage.

For your first hike, I'd say there's no need to rush out and buy a hydration system. Regular bottled water works just fine.

Avoid buying those giant 2-liter bottles! Instead, carry a few 500 ml bottles. They're easier to pack, distribute weight better in your backpack, and make managing your water supply more straightforward.

How Much Water to Bring?

On the mountain, you'll need more water than you're used to, especially on hot days. As a general rule, an adult needs **at least 2 liters of water per day**—but depending on the intensity of your hike and the heat, you might need more.

Always plan your water supply based on the availability of **water sources** along your route. If there are no reliable sources on your trail, you'll need to pack all your water for the day. But if there are streams or other refill spots, you can lighten your load a bit and top up as you go.

Step 4: Choose Who You Go With

Finding a hiking partner can feel like the hardest part of getting started. You're all pumped up and ready to go, but convincing someone to join you? That's a different challenge. If you're one of the lucky ones who already has a friend or partner eager to hit the trails with you, congrats!

You can skip this step. But for the rest of us, here's how to make finding a hiking buddy a little less daunting.

The best way to get someone on board is to be fully prepared yourself. If you can walk up to someone and say, “Hey, I’ve got this hike planned. It’s X miles long, it’ll take us about Y hours, it’s Z difficulty, and we can get there by car/bus. I’ve got all the details covered—what do you say?” you’re making it really easy for them to say yes. People are much more likely to join you if all they have to do is check their calendar and maybe grab a few essentials.

Don’t stress about gathering a whole group for your hike. Focus on finding just **one** person to go with you. If others decide to join later, awesome! But if it’s just you and one other person, that’s perfectly fine. Sometimes, the best hikes happen with just a pair of good boots and good company.

Timing is Everything.

Start looking for a hiking buddy at least **a week before your planned hike**. Don’t leave it until the last minute—people need time to prepare and rearrange their schedules. And let’s be real, you don’t want to be scrambling to find someone the night before, texting everyone you know in a panic.

Begin your search with the people closest to you—friends, family, or coworkers. They’re the most likely to say yes, especially if you frame it as a fun adventure rather than a daunting task. If that doesn’t work, don’t be afraid to expand your circle. Consider posting in local hiking groups, community boards, or even social media. There are plenty of people out there who, just like you, are looking for someone to share the trail with.

Bonus Tip:

Sometimes, finding the right hiking partner takes a bit of persistence. Don’t get discouraged if your first few attempts don’t pan out. Be flexible with dates and trails if that helps your potential partner commit. Remember, the goal is to get out there and enjoy the hike, so keep an open mind and don’t be afraid to explore all your options. Before you know it, you’ll have a trusty hiking buddy (or two) by your side, ready to tackle the trails.

Step 5: Check The Forecast

Gone are the days when hikers had to rely on a barometer and a bit of luck to predict the weather. These days, technology has made weather forecasting much more accurate, and it's something every hiker should take advantage of. Back in the day, people would head into the mountains with little more than a hopeful glance at the sky, and unfortunately, many were caught off guard by sudden storms. This led to numerous accidents, some of which were fatal. Now, thanks to

modern weather websites, we can make informed decisions about whether it's a good idea to hit the trail or stay home.

It's crucial to check the weather forecast before heading out on a hike—especially if it's your first one. Your first hike should be done in excellent weather, so learning how to check and interpret weather forecasts is a must.

A Few Key Points About Weather Forecasts:

1. Weather forecasts are based on models and predictions, not guarantees. They give you a likely scenario, but the weather can still surprise you—especially in mountainous areas where conditions can change rapidly.
2. While phone apps are convenient, they often don't provide the level of detail that you can find on full websites. For a more thorough check, use a computer or laptop to access detailed weather information.
3. Start checking the forecast **no more than two days before your hike**. While you can keep an eye on it earlier, the accuracy significantly improves as you get closer to the date. Especially in summer, a forecast made on Thursday for a Saturday hike is usually reliable. Don't forget to double-check the forecast the day before you leave.
4. It's a good idea to compare the forecast from **2-3 different sources**. If they all predict similar conditions, you can be more confident that the weather will behave as expected. If the forecasts vary wildly, it's a sign to be cautious and perhaps rethink your plans.
5. Don't just check the weather for the town or the entire mountain range where your hike starts. Focus on the highest point of your hike, as conditions can vary dramatically with altitude.

By following these guidelines, you can better prepare for the weather and reduce the risk of encountering unexpected and potentially dangerous conditions on your hike. The key is to stay informed, plan ahead, and always be ready to adapt your plans based on what the sky—and your weather apps—are telling you.

Weather Icons:

Those little weather icons we all rely on—like the sun, clouds, or raindrops—are helpful for a quick glance, but they can be misleading if that's all you're looking at. While they give a general idea of the expected conditions, they don't tell the whole story. So, don't make your decision to hike based solely on what those icons show.

Here's the deal: weather forecasts are based on multiple models, each with its own predictions. When a weather site shows you an icon, it's usually a blend of these models. For example, if half the models predict sunshine and the other half predict clouds, the icon you'll see might be a sun

peeking through clouds. But that doesn't necessarily mean the day will be a perfect mix of both. It could turn out to be all sunshine or just overcast skies.

The takeaway? If you see an icon that shows mixed weather, it's a sign that the forecast models are divided, which usually means the weather could be unstable. This is why it's so important to dig a little deeper into the forecast and not just trust the icons at face value.

Look at other details, like hourly predictions, temperature changes, wind speed, and potential weather alerts. By doing this, you'll get a much clearer picture of what to expect and can make a more informed decision about whether to head out on the trail or stay safe at home.

Temperature Felt vs. Actual Temperature:

One of the most crucial things to remember when hiking, especially in the mountains, is that the temperature you **feel** can be quite different from the actual temperature. This isn't just true in the mountains—it applies everywhere—but the effects are much more pronounced when you're out on a trail.

Several key factors influence how warm or cold you'll feel:

1. **Wind:** Even if the thermometer says it's a mild day, a strong wind can make it feel much colder. Wind chill is no joke and can quickly turn what seems like a pleasant hike into a frigid experience.
2. **Cloud Cover:** If the sky is clear and sunny, you'll likely feel warmer than the actual temperature suggests. This can be helpful at higher altitudes, where the air is naturally cooler. But at lower elevations, too much sun can make you feel uncomfortably hot.

When you're deciding whether or not to go on a hike, it's essential to consider the **felt temperature** rather than just the actual forecasted temperature. This is the number that will determine how you dress and prepare for the conditions you'll encounter. Always check for wind speed and cloud cover in the forecast, as these can drastically change your experience on the trail. And when in doubt, pack an extra layer or two—better to be too warm than too cold!

The Wind Factor:

Wind is one of those sneaky elements that can take a perfectly pleasant day and turn it into a chilly challenge. It's not just an inconvenience—it significantly impacts the temperature you actually feel on your hike. Even if the air temperature seems fine, wind can make it feel much colder, and that can be a big deal when you're out in the elements.

Let's break it down:

- If the air temperature is 10°C (which is pretty comfortable for hiking at altitude in summer), a light breeze at 10 km/h will make it feel like **8°C**. Not too bad, right?
- But if the wind picks up to 20 km/h, suddenly it feels like **3°C**. That's a noticeable drop.
- At 30 km/h, it feels like **1°C**—and now you're thinking about how glad you are that you packed that extra layer.
- If the wind reaches 40 km/h, the temperature drops to a **chilly -1°C**. Now, what started as a reasonable day for a hike could turn into a freezing experience if you're not dressed for it.

The lesson here? **Wind matters**. It can take a mild day and make it feel downright cold. Always check the wind speed in your weather forecast and plan your clothing accordingly. That cozy-looking t-shirt might seem like a good idea when you're standing at the trailhead, but once you're exposed to strong winds on an open ridge, you'll wish you had layered up. The right gear can be the difference between a challenging adventure and a dangerous situation.

It's wise to avoid your first mountain hike if the forecast predicts wind speeds over 25 km/h. Strong winds can make the experience less enjoyable and even unsafe, especially if you don't have all the necessary gear to handle the conditions.

However, if the forecast shows winds up to 20 km/h, you're generally in good shape to go ahead with your hike. Just remember, this means you'll need to dress for the **felt temperature**, not just the actual air temperature.

The good news? You don't have to do the math yourself every time to figure out the felt temperature. Most weather websites automatically display this information, factoring in wind speed and other conditions. So, before you head out, make sure to check the full forecast—including the felt temperature—and dress accordingly. This will ensure you're prepared for whatever the trail throws your way.

Precipitation - includes rain, snow, sleet, and hail:

A little bit of rain doesn't have to ruin your plans—as long as it's just a light sprinkle and you're prepared. If the forecast predicts only a small amount of rain, especially with a low chance of it actually happening, you might still be good to go. But this requires some judgment, and it's something you get better at with experience.

Here's a simple guideline: if the forecast says less than 1-2mm of rain over a three-hour period, it's likely just a light drizzle. With the right gear, that's manageable. But once you start seeing predictions of more than 3mm in three hours, you're looking at a heavier downpour that could make the hike uncomfortable or even unsafe.

Another important number to check is the **chance of rain**. If it's below 35%, odds are you'll stay dry. But as soon as it goes above that, the likelihood of getting caught in a shower increases. And if it hits 60% or more, you can pretty much expect rain and should think twice about heading out.

It's not just the percentage that matters—look at the amount of rain too. A high chance of heavy rain is a clear sign to reschedule. Hiking in poor conditions isn't worth the risk, so always prioritize safety over sticking to your plans.

Sunlight hours:

The amount of sunlight during your hike is definitely something to pay attention to, but it can be a bit tricky. You might think that more sun is always better, but that's not necessarily the case—especially in the summer.

In theory, lots of sunshine sounds perfect, but when you combine that with little to no wind, you can end up with what I like to call “too much of a good thing.” Even at altitudes above 2000 meters, where the air is cooler, a sunny day with barely any breeze can create conditions that are surprisingly hot.

This can lead to dangerously high temperatures, even if the thermometer doesn't show it. Hiking under these conditions, where the sun is beating down relentlessly, can be just as hazardous as hiking in bad weather. Prolonged exposure can lead to heat exhaustion or even hyperthermia, which in severe cases can be life-threatening.

So, while a bright, sunny day might seem like the ideal time for a hike, too much sun can actually make things pretty risky. Always consider how intense the sun will be and think twice before heading out in what might seem like perfect weather.

The 0°C isotherm:

Is a useful detail to keep in mind during fall, winter, and spring hikes. It tells you the altitude where the temperature hits freezing. In the summer, this is usually way up around 3000-4000 meters. So, it's not much of a concern then.

But in the cooler seasons, the 0°C isotherm becomes more relevant. It helps you gauge when you'll start hitting freezing temperatures on your hike. For instance, if your trail starts at 800 meters and goes up to 1700 meters, you might be shedding layers at the base, only to find yourself bundling up as you ascend into freezing conditions.

One more thing—this freezing line isn't static. It's usually lower in the early morning and evening and rises during the day when the sun's doing its job. So keep an eye on those temperature shifts as you plan your hike.

After you've checked the weather forecast from at least two different sources, it's time to make a decision.

If the weather looks iffy, with rain or unstable conditions predicted, or if the forecasts don't match up, it might be wise to hold off. You can either check the forecast again the day before and decide then or cancel the trip altogether. This is where Plan B comes into play. If your first choice doesn't work out, no worries—you've got backup dates.

That's why in step 3, I suggested having two different days or an entire weekend set aside. If you've planned a one-day hike, having a couple of options doubles your chances of catching good weather. For example, if Thursday's forecast shows that Saturday will be rainy, but Sunday looks clear, you can easily adjust your plans.

And if you want to fully enjoy the weekend, you could book a night at a nearby spot. That way, even if you only hike on one day, you still get to spend two days soaking up the mountain vibes.

Step 6: Pack Your Bags And Make The Final Preparations

A key point to remember: pack your hiking backpack the night before your trip, not on the morning of the hike. Trust me, if you try to do it last minute, you'll likely forget something important because you'll be in a rush. Plus, you want to hit the trail as early as possible, not waste precious time scrambling to get your gear together.

Packing your backpack usually takes about 30 minutes, give or take, depending on how familiar you are with the process. Since this is your first hike, I recommend doing a trial run a few days before. This way, you can ensure everything fits and make adjustments if needed, so you're not stressing out at the last minute.

Step 6.1: What are you bringing with you?

To make sure you don't forget anything essential for your hike, it's crucial to have a checklist. In the downloaded packet, you'll find a digital checklist ready to go. You can either use it on your phone (where you can check things off directly), print it out, or even write it down on paper, depending on your preference.

- T-shirt
- Sunglasses
- First aid kit
- Fleece jacket
- Sunscreen
- Headlamp/flashlight

- Windbreaker
- Lip balm
- Spare batteries
- Pants
- Thin gloves
- Emergency blanket
- Footwear
- Socks
- Tissues/toilet paper
- Buff (neck gaiter/headwear)
- Fire starter
- Whistle
- ID/documents
- Money/cash
- Water
- Food
- Snacks/sweets
- Map
- Phone

This checklist won't just be useful for your first hike; it'll serve as a foundation for all future hikes. Over time, you'll add more items depending on the season, the length of your hike, and other factors.

Here's what to do: lay out everything on your bed, then check it off the list as you go. If you're using a paper list, highlight or circle the items you can't pack until the morning (like food from the fridge or your phone) and leave the list somewhere visible, like on the door, so you won't miss it on your way out. If you're using a digital list, set an alarm on your phone for 15 minutes after your wake-up time as a reminder for those last-minute items.

If you already have empty water bottles, you can fill them up in the morning, but still place them on your bed the night before. If you're using bottled water, go ahead and pack them full.

As for food, you can't really put that on the bed overnight. If you're making your own sandwiches, prepare them the night before and store them in the fridge. If you haven't bought everything you need for your meals and snacks yet, now's the time to hit the store!

Step 6.2: How to organize things in a backpack?

Once you've laid out everything on your bed, organizing your backpack becomes much easier. Set aside the clothes and shoes you'll wear in the morning, so that only the items you need to pack remain in view.

The key to a comfortable hike is ensuring your backpack's center of gravity is close to your body and ideally at shoulder level. This way, the weight stays aligned with your own center of gravity and won't pull you backward.

Here's how to arrange your items:

1. **Light items** go at the bottom of the backpack.
2. **Medium-weight items** (like clothing or food) should be placed above the light items, but closer to the outer half of the backpack.
3. **Heavy items** (like extra water bottles) should be positioned as high as possible, at shoulder level, and close to your back, on the inner side of the pack.
4. **Avoid hanging items** from the outside of the backpack.
5. **Keep the weight of the pack between 15-20% of your body weight.**

A few extra tips, especially for your first hike:

- **Small items you'll need quickly** (like tissues or lip balm) should be easily accessible in side pockets or waist belt pockets. If your current backpack lacks these, don't worry—you'll manage just fine without.
- **Remember where you've stored essential gear** like gloves, hat, or buff. If your backpack has a small top pocket, this is a great place for them.
- **Water bottles** should be placed in external pockets if your backpack has them.
- **Place items you're least likely to need** at the bottom of your pack so you won't have to dig through everything to find something.
- **Separate food and snacks** from other items if possible. This helps with organization and accessibility.

Though it might take a couple of tries to perfect the packing process, the goal is to arrange everything logically so that you know exactly where each item is and that the weight is well-distributed for comfort.

When you're on the trail, it's common to ask a hiking buddy to grab your water from the side pockets, so you don't have to take off your pack every time you need a sip. The same goes for quickly accessible items like gloves or your buff—let your hiking partner know where you've stored them.

Even if you start your hike wearing all your layers, make sure there's still room in your backpack to store them if you warm up and want to strip down to a t-shirt. Test how everything fits, including your water bottles (ideally filled during the test), to make sure the backpack is comfortable and not pulling you backward.

Once everything is packed and fits snugly, leave the pack open for easy access in the morning. That way, you only need to add your water and any perishable food from the fridge before heading out.

Step 6.3: Final Preparations

The night before your hike isn't just about packing your gear—there are a few other key steps you should take to make sure everything goes smoothly and safely:

Check Your Health:

Even minor health issues can become a big deal on a hike (things like toothaches, stomach problems, or menstrual cramps). If you're feeling off, it's better to cancel or postpone the hike. The last thing you want is to get stuck on the trail feeling worse, especially when medical help could be hours away.

Save the Mountain Rescue Number:

Make sure the local mountain rescue number is saved in your phone. If you run into trouble or get lost, you'll want to have this number handy. It's also a good idea to double-check that the number works in the area where you're hiking.

Optional: Contact Mountain Rescue for Trail Info:

If you have any doubts about your chosen trail, call the mountain rescue service ahead of time. They can provide you with the latest trail conditions and any potential hazards.

Inform Someone of Your Plans:

Always let someone know where you're going, what trail you're taking, and when you expect to be back. This is crucial in case something goes wrong, as it gives search and rescue teams a starting point. Make sure you agree on a check-in time after your hike, and let your contact know to alert rescue services if they don't hear from you by then.

Charge Your Phone:

Don't forget to fully charge your phone the night before your hike. A dead phone is the last thing you want in an emergency.

Set Your Alarms:

Avoid the temptation to sleep in and miss your hike. Set multiple alarms to make sure you get up on time. If you're hiking with a buddy, have them set an alarm too. Place your phone or alarm clock somewhere out of reach, so you have to physically get up to turn it off. This will help you avoid the snooze button.

Get Enough Sleep:

Make sure you get plenty of rest the night before. Aim for at least 8 hours of sleep so you're

well-rested and alert. If you usually stay up late, try shifting your sleep schedule in the days leading up to the hike. An early start is key for a successful hike, so you'll need to adjust accordingly.

Start Early:

One of the most important hiking rules is to start early. Finishing your hike with daylight to spare is far safer than getting caught out in the dark. If you've got a long drive to the trailhead, plan to wake up around 5 or 6 AM, depending on sunrise.

For those who aren't naturally early risers, don't worry—many hikers find that the excitement of the adventure gradually shifts their routine. You might even start enjoying those early mornings more than you thought possible!

Step 7: Hit The Road

Step 7.1: What do you do before the hike/trail?

Breakfast – Fuel Up Right: Aim to eat breakfast about an hour before you hit the trail. If there's too much time between eating and starting your hike, you might find yourself running low on energy when you need it most. But don't eat right before you start hiking—doing strenuous activity on a full stomach can make you feel queasy.

Put Your Phone in Airplane Mode: To save your phone's battery life, switch it to airplane mode before starting the hike. Also, make sure the screen doesn't light up accidentally—there's a setting to prevent this unless you press a button. Close all unnecessary apps, and avoid using your phone for non-essential things like music or games. Save the battery for checking your position using GPS or for emergencies.

Apply Sunscreen: Right before you set off, slather on that sunscreen, especially if you'll be hiking in sunny conditions. It's easy to miss spots, so make sure to remove your sunglasses (if you're wearing them) and roll up your sleeves to get every area. Pay attention to:

- Nose
- Forehead
- Ears
- The back of your arms
- The back of your hands
- Neck and collarbone area
- Wrists and around your watch

These are the places most prone to sunburn.

Adjust Your Backpack: Before you start hiking, put on your backpack and make sure it's adjusted correctly:

1. Loosen all the straps fully.
2. Adjust in this order:
 - Hip belt
 - Shoulder straps
 - Chest strap
 - Upper shoulder straps (fine-tune the hip belt again if needed)

As you hike, keep adjusting your backpack, especially if you add or remove something heavy. This will keep things balanced and comfortable throughout your trek.

Step 7.2: What do you do on the trail?

One of the most crucial aspects of hiking is the mindset you bring along. When we head out into the mountains, it's important to remember just how small we are in the grand scheme of nature. Some people hike to show off, make noise, or prove how tough they are—like they're bringing a bit of city life into the wild. But being in nature doesn't mean we have to act wild.

In fact, hiking requires a level of humility and respect that's even more important than what we practice in our day-to-day lives. The right attitude for hitting the trail is one of modesty, respect, and appreciation—for both nature and the people you might meet along the way.

Here are some essential rules to keep in mind when you're out on the trail:

- **Leave No Trace:** This means taking all your trash with you, from wrappers to bottles. And please, no carving your name into trees or rocks—nature isn't your personal autograph book.
- **Keep It Quiet:** The mountains are not the place for blasting music or shouting. Enjoy the peace, and let others do the same. Plus, you don't want to scare off the wildlife.
- **Respect the Plants:** Especially if they're protected species. If you're not sure, it's best to leave them be. Let everyone enjoy the beauty.
- **Stay on the Path:** This helps protect the plants and environment around the trail.
- **Be Fire-Wise:** Only light fires in designated areas, and be careful with cigarettes or matches. A little carelessness can cause a big disaster.
- **Watch Your Step:** It might seem fun, but it's dangerous and could cause landslides or hurt someone below.
- **Protect the Water:** Don't bathe or wash in glacial lakes. These pristine water sources should stay that way.
- **Be Friendly:** Say Hi to hikers. It's a simple gesture that goes a long way. Plus, it's just good manners.

- Listen to the Pros: Heed advice from mountain rescue teams. If they give you tips or warnings, take them seriously. They know the area better than anyone.
- Lend a Hand: If you see someone in trouble and you're able to assist without putting yourself in danger, do it.
- Bathroom Etiquette: Go at least 50 meters away from the trail and water sources. If you need to use toilet paper, dig a small hole to bury it. For more serious needs, dig a hole first and make sure everything, including the paper, is buried.

By following these guidelines, you'll help preserve the beauty of nature and ensure that others can enjoy it too. Plus, you'll be hiking with the right mindset—one of respect and appreciation for the incredible world around you.

These guidelines are super simple to stick to if you understand the basics behind them.

A lot of people think democracy means doing whatever you want whenever you want. But real democracy is about balancing your freedom with the freedom of others. It's about not doing things that infringe on someone else's rights. For example, you wouldn't blast music at full volume at midnight because your neighbors have the right to a good night's sleep.

The Golden Rule:

Treat Others How You Want to Be Treated

If you hate seeing trash on the trail, don't leave any behind. If noise from other hikers bothers you, don't be the one making a racket. If you love admiring wildflowers, let them grow for others to enjoy too. And if you want to take pictures of beautiful views, don't hog the best spots—share them. The idea is simple: respect others' experiences just like you want yours respected.

And don't steal! Not just things, but also peace, quiet, and the breathtaking views that others come to the mountains for. If you're not on the trail for the tranquility, that's cool, but try to put yourself in the shoes of those who are and don't take that privilege away from them.

How to complete the trail/hike safely?

The right attitude when hiking, one of humility and respect, is also what keeps you safe. Curiosity about nature is great, but remember that you're mortal, and one mistake can cost you dearly. Especially as a beginner, there's so much you don't know, and that's perfectly okay. But it does mean you might encounter unexpected situations.

However, if you've taken the time to educate yourself (like going through this guide), chosen a trail suited to your abilities, gone out in good weather with the proper gear, and stuck to the marked path, you're setting yourself up for success.

Someone with the right mindset knows that if something unexpected happens on the trail, the wisest move is often to turn back or take the necessary precautions to ensure a safe return. There's no shame in turning around if continuing puts your life at risk.

Mountain accidents are almost never just bad luck. People of all experience levels can get into trouble, and the common factor is usually overconfidence—either from not knowing enough or from thinking you know it all. Beginners can misjudge things out of ignorance, while seasoned hikers sometimes believe they're invincible because of their experience.

Safety Rules for Hiking:

- No alcohol on the trail. It clouds judgment and increases the risk of accidents.
- Don't touch plants or mushrooms you don't recognize. Many are poisonous.
- Avoid eating wild berries or plants unless you're sure they're safe.
- Keep your hands off wildlife. Some creatures, like certain reptiles, can be toxic.
- Stay away from cliff edges, especially for photos. Many fatal accidents occur this way. Always stand still when taking a photo—never walk and snap pictures simultaneously.
- Don't venture onto unknown trails. Stick to paths you're familiar with or have researched.
- Avoid wild animals. (More on that below.)
- Don't drink from unsafe water sources. (More on that below as well.)
- Watch your step. Avoid walking on wet rocks, fallen branches, or loose ground. Many accidents happen when people slip, leading to broken limbs or worse.

Orientation on the route:

From the very start of your hike, find that first trail marker. Don't begin until you've located it. At every fork in the trail, take out your map and pinpoint your location. Follow the direction indicated by the arrows on the trail markers.

Keep in mind that the estimated times listed on signs can vary. While most are accurate, some are overly optimistic or overly cautious. That's why your pre-hike research is key—knowing beforehand how long the hike should actually take will help keep you on track.

What to Do If You Encounter Problems While Hiking

1. **Losing the Trail Marker:** When hiking on a marked trail, it's important to keep an eye out for the next marker and stay on the path. However, sometimes markers can be spaced far apart or hard to spot. If you suddenly can't find the next marker, don't panic—just retrace your steps to the last marker you saw. Once there, take a closer look around in all directions. If the marker still isn't visible, search carefully but don't stray too far from the last known point. Staying calm and methodical can help prevent you from getting lost.

2. **Struggling to Find the Start of the Trail or Having Other Navigation Issues:** If you can't locate the beginning of the trail or if you're unsure about your location on the path, don't hesitate to call the mountain rescue service (Salvamont) for guidance. Just keep in mind that cell service can be spotty in mountainous areas, so be prepared for the possibility that you might not have a signal.
3. **In Case of an Accident:** If you or someone you're with suffers an injury that requires medical attention (like a fracture or other serious issue), your first step is to call the emergency number and let them know you're on a mountain. The operator will take your information and then connect you with the mountain rescue service (Salvamont). This is the standard procedure in such situations. While you can contact Salvamont directly, they will still ask you to notify the authorities as part of the official protocol.

Being prepared and knowing what to do in case of emergencies is key to staying safe on the trail.

What To Do If It's Too Hot or Cold During a Hike?

When you're out on the trail, it's crucial to maintain a balance between staying warm enough and not overheating. The trick lies in adjusting your clothing layers based on how you feel and the conditions around you.

If you start feeling chilly, whether because the wind picked up or the sun ducked behind the clouds, don't keep moving while cold. Add another layer right away—it only takes a minute. If you ignore the cold, your body will start burning more energy just to keep you warm, which can lead to hypothermia if the chill persists. And trust me, once you get into that downward spiral, it's hard to pull yourself back out.

Whenever you stop for a break, throw on an extra layer immediately, even if you don't feel cold right away. Your body cools down fast when you're at rest, and you don't want to find yourself shivering after just a few minutes of sitting still.

On the flip side, if you're feeling hot, don't hang on to unnecessary layers. If you keep them on, you'll sweat more than necessary, and having a wet base layer can quickly turn into a problem if the temperature drops or the wind picks up. This could lead to discomfort at best and something more serious, like pneumonia, at worst.

For those scorching days on the mountain, where it's all sun and no breeze, managing your body temperature becomes even more critical. Even with the best planning around weather and season, you need to stay vigilant and adjust your layers as the day progresses to avoid overheating.

The danger of hyperthermia on the trail is real, and it's a situation you want to avoid at all costs. To protect yourself from overheating, you should take these measures:

- **Keep Your Head Covered:** Always wear something on your head to shield yourself from the sun. If you don't have a hat or cap, you can improvise with a t-shirt or any piece of clothing you have in your pack.
- **Take Frequent Breaks:** Even if you don't feel tired, make it a habit to stop more often than usual. Sit down, relax, and let your body cool off naturally. Overexerting yourself in extreme heat can be dangerous.
- **Cool Down at Any Water Source:** If you come across a stream or lake, use it to your advantage. Splash water on your face, hands, and neck—wherever you can. If you're wearing quick-dry pants, feel free to get those wet too. This might not come naturally to everyone, but don't wait until you're already feeling overheated to start cooling down. Some people don't realize they're in trouble until they're too far gone to recover easily, or worse, they might faint from heat exhaustion.
- **Bring Extra Water:** If the trail has limited water sources, carry more water than you think you'll need. That way, you'll have enough not just for drinking but also for splashing on yourself to stay cool.
- **Reapply Sunscreen Regularly:** After every cooldown session with water, reapply sunscreen to ensure you're protected throughout the day. The sun's rays are relentless, especially at higher altitudes, so don't skimp on this.
- **Stay Hydrated:** Sip water frequently, even if you don't feel thirsty. Staying ahead of your hydration needs can make all the difference in preventing heat-related issues.

How to avoid wild animals?

Bear:

I know that one of the biggest reasons many people hesitate to hike, even though they want to, is the fear of wild animals, especially bears. But there are some simple things you can do to avoid encountering one:

1. Stick to well-traveled trails frequented by other hikers.
2. Pack your food securely, preferably in airtight bags, to minimize any enticing smells.
3. If you're in the forest with only a small group and there aren't any other hikers nearby, make some noise now and then—clap your hands, chat with your hiking buddies, hum a tune, or call out briefly (just don't go overboard and scare off all the innocent animals too!).
4. Carry bear spray for protection. I have one myself, though I've never had to use it.
5. Avoid being in the forest very early in the morning (before 7 AM) or late in the evening, as these are times when bears are most active.
6. Don't hike alone in areas known for bear activity, especially if there have been reports of aggressive behavior.

If, by some rare chance, you do encounter a bear, here are some basic steps to protect yourself:

1. **Don't run!** I know it's hard, but if you run, the bear might chase you, thinking you're prey (it triggers their hunting instinct). Try to stay calm and slowly back away while facing the bear. You don't need to stare it down (and it's probably best not to), but try to avoid fully turning your back on it.
2. **Avoid direct eye contact.** Bears may perceive this as a challenge.
3. **Don't panic if the bear stands on its hind legs.** It's likely just trying to get a better look at you since their eyesight isn't the sharpest.
4. **Check for cubs.** If it's a mother bear with cubs, you need to be extra cautious. Make sure you're not between her and her cubs, and slowly back away to give them space.
5. **If the bear doesn't move or blocks your path,** and you absolutely need to continue (like if it's getting dark and you need to get to your car), try making some noise from a safe distance to encourage it to leave. In most cases, bears will ignore you if they're not threatened.

In 99.99% of cases, following these tips will end the encounter peacefully.

But if the bear does approach you (a very rare scenario) or seems like it might attack, get your bear spray ready, but don't use it immediately. First, try to make yourself appear larger by raising your arms or standing on something elevated. If you're with others, stick together and do the same. Usually, the bear will back off. Only use the spray if the bear continues to come toward you despite your efforts.

Wolf:

Wolves, along with other animals of similar size like lynxes, are wild creatures that go out of their way to avoid humans. The chances of encountering a wolf while hiking are virtually zero—unless, of course, you're actively seeking one out and have taken steps to blend into the environment. Because of this, wolves don't pose any real threat on the trails. In fact, I've never even seen a wolf during my hikes.

Vipers:

In some regions, vipers are present, and their bite can be dangerous. I've only had a few run-ins with vipers myself—twice with small ones and once with an adult. There was another instance where I might have seen one, but it darted under a rock so quickly I couldn't be sure.

Vipers typically hang out in smaller mountain ranges, but they can also be found in the wilder sections of larger mountains. Thankfully, they're usually pretty easy to avoid. They often sunbathe on rocks or trails, making them visible from a distance, and they tend to slither away when they sense vibrations from approaching footsteps.

While I don't personally know anyone who has been bitten by a viper, here's what you should do if it ever happens:

1. Stay calm—about 70% of viper bites aren't dangerous.
2. If possible, snap a photo of the snake to show the medical team at the hospital.
3. Call the emergency number right away. If you're out of signal range, someone should go find a spot with reception.
4. Ignore any old-school remedies—don't try to suck out the venom, make cuts, or apply ice.
5. If you can, loosely tie an elastic band above the bite, ensuring it's not too tight (you should be able to slip a finger under it).
6. Clean the wound with hydrogen peroxide or, if that's not available, clean water, and cover it with a sterile bandage.
7. The person who's been bitten should remain as calm and still as possible, ideally lying down.
8. Keep the bitten limb immobilized with a splint.

It's crucial to keep the person still to slow the spread of venom. And remember, most viper bites aren't fatal.

Shepherd Dog:

The shepherd dog, while not a wild animal, is the one creature you're most likely to encounter on a hike that could cause trouble, even if you're a dog lover. Here are a few key things to keep in mind:

- Sheep herds are typically only on the mountains during summer, usually from late May to late September.
- Shepherd camps (or "stâne") are marked on mountain maps, so when planning your route, consider their locations.
- Herds generally return to the stână toward the end of the day and stay there overnight.
- During the day, the herds roam the mountains, so you might encounter sheep and their guard dogs in areas not marked as stâne on your map.
- These dogs are there to protect the sheep from wild animals, but they'll bark at any unfamiliar presence, including humans.
- Shepherd dogs usually obey the shepherd's commands.
- Most shepherd camps don't cause any issues, but there are a few where the dogs can be more aggressive, especially on less-traveled trails.

To avoid or handle encounters with shepherd dogs, here's what you can do:

1. Avoid routes that pass directly through stâne if possible, though this can be tough after a certain point in your hike.
2. If you spot a herd from a distance, try to detour around it, keeping as much space between you and the sheep as possible.
3. Carry a spray (the same one you'd use for bears) and have it ready if you see a herd from afar.
4. Don't hike alone. If you're in a group, especially with trekking poles, you can keep the dogs at bay by pointing the poles at them if they approach.
5. Call out for the shepherd. Most of the time, they'll come quickly and control the dogs, which often become docile once the shepherd arrives. Don't get too close to the herd if you can't see the shepherd.
6. If surrounded by dogs, try to back away from the sheep while facing the dogs. It's tough, but they'll usually leave you alone once you're far enough from the flock.
7. You can try distracting them with food. Throw some towards the alpha dog (there's usually one leader), and if he leaves you alone, the others will follow suit.
8. As a last resort, if nothing works and the dogs are very close and threatening, use the spray—but only if they're about to bite.

Being cautious and prepared can help prevent any unpleasant encounters with these protective pups while hiking in the mountains.

How do you know if a water source is safe to drink or not?

Knowing where to find water on your hike is essential so you can plan how much to carry. Most marked sources on hiking maps are either springs that have been outfitted with pipes or small streams emerging from rocks—both usually safe for drinking.

However, it's also crucial to know how to evaluate water sources yourself. You might stumble upon unmarked streams, and you'll need to determine if the water is safe to drink. Drinking from contaminated sources can lead to severe stomach problems, which can be dangerous, especially when you're out in the wilderness. To avoid these risks, keep the following in mind:

- Avoid drinking from lakes, even glacial ones—any stagnant water source is a no-go.
- Not all flowing water is safe. If there's a cabin or shepherd's camp upstream, assume the water could be contaminated.
- The closer you are to the source, the cleaner the water. Collect it as close to where the stream starts as possible.
- Steer clear of large streams, as they're more likely to be polluted.
- If you find a small, seemingly clean stream, try to collect water from a spot where it tumbles over rocks—this natural filtering helps clean the water.

- In extreme cases, if you're out of water and only have access to a glacial lake, try to gather water from where it starts flowing out of the lake as a stream, ideally from a point where the water has had some distance to filter naturally.

These precautions can help you find safe drinking water even when you're far from marked sources.

How to make sure you have a pleasant hike?

How to Move on the Trail:

- **Keep your hands free:** It's best to avoid carrying things in your hands (like water bottles, jackets, or bags) while hiking. Keep everything in your backpack so your hands are free to help you balance and move more efficiently.
- **No hand-holding:** While it might seem nice to hold hands with your hiking buddy, it's safer and more comfortable to keep your hands free for balance, especially on uneven terrain.
- **Use your whole foot:** When hiking, especially uphill, make sure you step with your entire foot. Beginners often have the habit of stepping on their toes, which tires out your calves much faster and leads to quicker fatigue.

How to Pace Yourself on the Trail:

Hiking, especially uphill, requires significant effort. The steeper the climb, the more challenging the hike. Properly pacing yourself is crucial, not only for enjoying the hike but also for staying safe. If you don't pace your energy properly, you risk exhaustion, which can make it difficult or even impossible to safely descend from the mountain.

Starting the hike at a fast pace might feel fine at first, but it can quickly lead to heavy fatigue and shortness of breath. Everyone hits this wall at different times—some sooner, some later—but it's important to pace yourself to avoid it.

More than just tiring you out, exhaustion can really mess with your ability to focus and make good decisions. In extreme cases, you might find yourself so drained that getting back down the mountain safely becomes a real challenge—often without even realizing how bad things have gotten.

To avoid this, it's essential to learn how to pace yourself effectively:

- **Start slow:** Always begin your hike at a gentle pace. It's tempting to charge ahead when you're feeling fresh, but you'll pay for it later.
- **Keep a steady pace:** Hiking is all about steady, deliberate movement. Avoid running or jumping, which can sap your energy quickly.

- Monitor your breathing: If you find yourself gasping for air or unable to talk while walking, slow down. You don't necessarily need to stop, but adjust your pace to a comfortable level.

This issue often comes up when hiking in groups, especially when beginners try to keep up with more experienced hikers. It's crucial not to push yourself too hard just to match someone else's pace—don't let embarrassment lead to overexertion.

Group Hiking Rules:

- The slower hikers should always lead, setting the pace for the whole group. This way, the faster hikers have to adjust, ensuring everyone stays together.
- If someone isn't following this rule, politely ask to take the lead if you need to slow down. Experienced hikers should be aware of this guideline.

Taking Breaks:

- Long breaks (15+ minutes): These are for eating and resting, and should happen 1-3 times during the hike, depending on the trail's length.
- Short breaks (1-5 minutes): Take these more frequently for things like snapping photos, using the bathroom, or just catching your breath.

If you frequently feel the need to "catch your breath," that's a sign you're moving too fast—slow down a bit to find a more sustainable pace.

When you do stop, especially for longer breaks, it's generally best to sit down. However, as a beginner, you might feel the need to rest more often, which is normal. Feel free to use benches or logs to take a quick breather, but try to limit your sitting time to 2-5 minutes. Otherwise, it can be harder to get back into your rhythm.

Also, when you pause, be mindful of others. Don't block the trail or obstruct the view for anyone trying to pass or take photos. For longer breaks, step at least 10 feet off the path to avoid being in the way.

Step 7.3: What do you do after the hike/trail?

Now that you've conquered all the challenges, faced down bears, and even mastered the art of going to the bathroom in the wild, all that's left is to enjoy the experience. If you've followed the steps in this guide, there's no doubt you'll have a fantastic first hike. Here are a few important things to remember once you've completed your trek:

Immediately After Finishing the Trail:

- Check for ticks (especially in summer): Do a thorough inspection to make sure none of those sneaky little critters have latched onto you.
- Contact your safety buddy: Call or message the person you set up your safety protocol with, to let them know you've made it back safely.

At the Shower:

- Double-check for ticks: Do a full-body scan again, and if possible, ask someone to check your back.

The Next Day

- Don't freak out if you're sore: Muscle soreness is normal after a hike, and it often peaks on the second day. You don't need to do anything special, but staying hydrated and moving around a bit (even just a walk) can help ease the discomfort.

A Few Days Later

Once a few days have passed and you've had time to reflect on your adventure, it's a great moment to decide if hiking is something you'd like to continue. Make this decision based on your own experience, without external pressure. If you find you enjoyed it and want to keep going, here are some essential next steps:

- Keep learning: Continue to educate yourself about hiking, improving your skills, and understanding the terrain better.
- Invest in the right gear: Gradually start acquiring proper hiking equipment as you gain more experience.
- Stick to easy trails: For now, focus on beginner-friendly hikes, and only start tackling more challenging ones once you're ready and confident.

That's it! Congratulations on making it through the entire guide. Your persistence, curiosity, and eagerness to learn are truly commendable. I hope you enjoyed reading this guide as much as I enjoyed writing it for you.

Thank you so much for supporting the thetraveler.org project and for purchasing this guide. I would greatly appreciate it if you could take a moment to send me a quick email with your thoughts—whether you found the guide helpful, if you have any questions, or if you feel there are topics that I might have missed.

You can reach me anytime at: contact@thetraveler.org. Feel free to contact me if you get stuck on any of the step.

Also, if you'd like to stay in touch, I invite you to subscribe to my newsletter, where you'll receive updates from me.

Lastly, I kindly ask that you do not share this guide with others. I've invested a lot of time and effort in creating it, and I would deeply appreciate it if you respected this work by not distributing it without my permission.

With that said, I wish you many more wonderful hikes and adventures ahead!

Warm regards,
Andrei Alexandru Cornici
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