

Solo Backpacking - Four Reasons, Eight Tips

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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Another reason to backpack alone is related to the first: simplicity. For example, if you like to go light, you may have conflicts with friends who want to share the weight of heavy cooking gear and tents. You may prefer cheaper trips, rather than joining others on a flight to some distant locale that isn't any more beautiful than the trails within hours of you. In other words, you might not want to trade three affordable adventures for one expensive one.

{bot_wrgoogle}Going solo gives you freedom as well. Even the best hiking partners will not need breaks at the same time, get hungry at the same time, want to hike the same distance each day or do the exact same things. When you're alone in the wilderness, there is a natural rhythm that can never be there when several people's needs have to be taken into account, and you are free to follow that rhythm.

Finally, if you have ever wanted to "commune with nature," or have a more spiritual experience in the wilderness, backpacking solo is the way to go. Most of us cannot help but talk too much when we're with others. Of course, that scares off wildlife, but it is also true that when alone most people just plain notice the environment more.

Being alone can deepen certain experiences. There is nobody there to define you - just you and the nature around you. If you've ever sat quietly and enjoyed a great view, you know that it is a different experience than when you sit there talking with someone about it. And while some friends can sit in silence for long stretches while sharing the sun set or the cloud-shadows passing over the mountains, it isn't common.

Alone, you begin to realize how entirely indifferent - but not hostile - the wilderness is. Whether you take this trail or that one doesn't matter to anything or anyone but you. Whether you stay warm or get cold, live or die, is a matter that is mostly irrelevant to everything around you. Yet as a human we are actually equipped to survive here.

On a solo backpacking trip in the Sierra Nevadas, I ate my fill of wild currants at 13,000 feet. As I walked by small lakes the trout scattered. Sunshine warmed me as I took naps on soft grass, and moonlight lit my way during night hikes. It is true that a misstep here or there could lead to death, that lightning could strike me down, or rain could soak me and make me hypothermic. But because of this I pay attention when I am alone out there.

Alone, you become very aware of your surroundings, of the clouds forming in the sky, of any little pain in your foot or back. It is an awareness without worry. This in-the-moment experience is worth having.

Solo Backpacking - Some Tips

Fortunately it has become much safer to get out there alone. This is because of technologies that can turn what would have been a disaster in the past into an inconvenience. Lose your maps? Just turn on the GPS unit on and find the landmark setting for your car to get out. Break your ankle? Turn on the emergency locator beacon or get out your cell phone.

To make it safe without giving up the experience of solitude, then, start by leaving the cell phone charged but off. Don't allow calls to you and don't call a soul unless you have a serious problem. As mentioned, a locator beacon is another

safety option, but don't let such safety devices lure you into a false sense of security that gets you into trouble. Leave your basic itinerary with a trusted friend or family member, so they'll know when to call for a search if you don't return.

If you have a GPS unit, be sure to "mark" the car or trailhead before hiking in isolated areas - especially in difficult terrain. I recently was in an area where it took three hours (no trails) to travel a bit over a half-mile to the car. Without the GPS it would have been easy to get lost.

Finally, learn some skills to make solo backpacking safer. Being able to make a fire in any conditions is a good place to start. Knowing how to construct a few different kinds of emergency shelters is a good idea too. Also, while food is not usually the first concern in a wilderness emergency, it can't hurt to be familiar with a few wild edibles. And learn how to treat the most common injuries and illnesses you might encounter out there.

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