

Photographer's Guide to Backpacking

from Dave Morrow Photography



Learn the best backpacking tips for photographers with this equipment list, packing guide & video tutorial, from a pro.

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Overview - Photography Backpacking Tips

As a full time landscape photographer most of my year is spent living out of a backpack.

From hiking into remote locations to traveling internationally (with just 1 backpack) I need a travel setup that is extremely versatile and efficient.

After years of experimenting with different combinations I've found what works best (at least for me) and I'm here to share it with you.

Here are a few tips that really help with starting out.

Buy the Best Backpacking Equipment You Can Afford

Why? Higher quality backpacking gear, although more expensive, performs exponentially better, and lasts much longer.

In the long run, it's a much cheaper to invest in the beginning, and enjoy your equipment for years!

I only know this from experimenting with lower quality gear, then upgrading, then upgrading again. This is much more expensive than buying top of the line gear the first time through.

Don't Buy All Your Backpacking Equipment at Once

1. Start out with a few basics and take a 1 night backpacking trip, during a warm time of year, with no rain in the forecast, to a location you already know.
2. On your first trip take note of items that you may or may not need in your pack.

3. After returning home you can reduce or buy more backpacking gear if / as required.
4. It will take some time to find out what you actually need or what fits you the best.

Don't Be Intimidated

- This may seem like a lot of “stuff” to carry with you. After packing, as taught below, it all fits in 1 medium sized backpack. Compared to many, I carry a very minimal yet efficient pack as I'll teach you to do as well!
- Some of this gear may seem expensive. Overall getting your basic backpacking gear together is cheaper than a week long hotel vacation on a nice island somewhere.
- After purchase most gear lasts 8-10 years minimum during heavy use.
- After buying the basics the cost is minimal & the world is your playground:)

My Backpacking, Travel & Photography Gear - Video

(Watch This Before Scrolling Down)

To make things easy, I put together an in-depth video covering all the gear I carry, and the reasons why I carry it.

Upon watching the video you can scroll down for a list (including links) of all the gear in the video.

[CLICK HERE & WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

[Click Here & Subscribe to My YouTube Channel](#)

Backpacking Equipment Checklist & Packing Guide

Follow These Simple Backpacking Tips for the Best Results:

- Carry your heaviest backpacking equipment near the center of your back. This will keep the center of gravity near your back and provide better dynamic balance, stability and lifting power while moving.
- Carry camera equipment & backpacking gear that requires quick access in the top or side pockets. This will ensure you don't have to unpack your backpacking equipment every time you need something.
- Pack each item in the same place, every time. Over time you will remember exactly where you packed certain items. This will allow you to quickly pack and unpack at camp or on the trail.



Reference the Graphic Above While Reading the Following Sections

- ❑ **Backpack:** I use & recommend the [Dueter Aircontact Pro 70+15 Long Haul Bag](#) (shown above). Being a minimalist I only own 1 backpack, this is it.

Main Backpack Compartment

The main compartment is the largest part of your backpacking bag.

This is where you'll want to carry your heavy gear that doesn't required quick and easy access.

Here is what I carry in my main backpack compartment:

- ❑ **Camera Gear Insert:** [F-Stop Small ICU](#) holds all of my filters, camera gear and batteries. You'll want to have an insert like this for your backpack.

The following items are packed inside the insert:

- ❑ **Battery Charger:** [STK Nikon EN-EL15 Charger](#) - Small and lightweight. Good charger for traveling! I don't take this out on backpacking trips, but it does go into the F-Stop ICU for international trips where I only take my backpack.
- ❑ **Memory Cards in [Waterproof Case](#):** I carry [CF Cards](#) with [SD Cards](#) to back them up on the fly. Depending on the trip length I fill my Waterproof Case with the required number of CF / SD cards. For a month long trip I'll carry approx. 220GB of memory with 220GB of backup memory. The D810 holds one CF card with one SD card to back it up. I shoot very selectively so this is more than enough memory accounting for any memory card failures.

- ❑ **Filters:** for Nikkor 14-24mm: [I carry the Polarizer](#) made by Wonderpana. These are the best filters I've used.
 - ❑ **Camera:** [Nikon D800](#) or [Nikon D810](#) plus [Go Pro Hero 4 Silver](#) (Optional).
 - ❑ **Lenses (I only own 2):** [Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8G](#) & [Nikkor 28-300mm f/3.5-5.6](#).
 - ❑ **Backup Batteries (8 Total):** I use the [non-brand batteries](#) which work just as well or better than the brand name. Make sure to check the capacity (mAh) to make sure it matches or exceeds the regular D800 batteries. Night shooting requires a lot of battery power!
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- ❑ **All Food EXCEPT my food for the current day** - Food for the current day is packed in an easy to access side pocket so I don't have to unpack my bag to access it. Over time I've created a combination of calorie dense trail mix, 1-2 oz. shots of olive oil, and protein powder that I eat at standard intervals throughout the day. This keeps my energy at full force, without having to use packaging or carry extra weight. I don't enjoy eating options or cooking on the trail. I'm here for nature, photography and hiking.
 - ❑ **Bear Container Food Storage (Optional):** Check the area you're hiking in to determine if you'll need this item! It's a must have in bear country. I prefer the [The Backpacker's Cache](#) which can hold approx. 8 days of food if you're crafty!
 - ❑ **Stuff Sack for Food (Optional):** You may need to hang food from a tree so a stuff sack is important. I use a mesh stuff sack that came with a sleeping bag for this. It also will hold the bear container when hanging it from a tree.
 - ❑ **Stove (Optional):** I use a [Jet Boil Sol](#) which is fantastic for backpacking and road tripping. I carry this, almost always, to [make french press coffee](#)

2-3 times a day if there is abundant water. I don't cook with it, just boil water:) Coffee is very light and packs a lot of energy.

Sleeping Bag Options:

- ❑ **Spring, Summer & Fall Bag:** [Mountain Hardware Lamina 35 Degree Bag](#).
- ❑ **Winter Bag:** [Kelty Cosmic Down 0 Degree](#).

Step 1: After packing my food and camera bag into the main compartment of my backpack I take the sleeping bag and stuff it into any open spaces.

This allows me to easily stuff my sleeping bag into places that would be wasted space otherwise & protects my camera gear and food from getting damaged while hiking & climbing. Don't use the sleeping bag stuff sack, it wastes space!

Step 2: Next I'll shake the backpacking bag up and down.

This allow all the gear to compress and settle into place for efficient volume and weight distribution.

When buying a sleeping bag, decide which climates you'll most often be camping in, and purchase a bag to suite your needs.

35 Degree bags tend to work great for most of the year, with a 20 degree or 0 degree bag for really cold weather.

It's hard to get away with just one sleeping bag if you want to backpack in all seasons.

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Bottom Storage Compartment

The bottom compartment is great for carrying your lighter gear, such as tent, clothes, and sleeping pad.

My goal is not to have anything on the outside of my pack that would throw off the center of gravity or get snagged or stuck on something while climbing.

- ❑ **Sleeping Pad** - [Therm-a-Rest Neo-Air Xtherm Sleeping Pad](#): This pad will work perfectly for all conditions. In my opinion it's the best, lightest, smallest and warmest sleeping pad sold. I'm 6'2" 190 lbs and the large works great.
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Tent Options:

After taking the tent out of it's storage bag I stuff it into the bottom compartment as small as possible in a small waterproof stuff sack.

I don't pack the poles or tent stakes in this compartment. They are covered below.

- ❑ **3 Season Tent**: For nearly all weather, except 3+ inches of snow or extreme wind I use the [MSR Hubba NX 1-Person Tent](#). The 1 man tent fits me well at 6'2" while propping my feet up on my backpack at night. Get used to it!
 - ❑ **4 Season Tent**: For harsh winter and extreme wind I use the [The North Face Mountain 25](#) which is really heavy!
-

- ❑ **Clothes**: All of my clothes can pack into the bottom compartment as well. They are kept in a dry / stuff sack. Reference the Clothes & Layering Basics Section below.

Front Compartment / Pocket

The front compartment is a great place to store gear that you'll need quick access to. Here is what I keep in mine.

- ❑ **Maps:** You should carry a map for all trips! [Here is a wide selection of my favorite National Geographic Maps.](#)
- ❑ **Bug Spray:** I keep this in a small plastic bottle. It took me forever to find good bottles which don't leak. [Here they are!](#)
- ❑ **First Aid & Emergency Kit:** Band-aids, medical tape, [waterproof matches](#), pain killers, [antibiotic \(Neosporin \)](#), [water treatment tablets by Katadyn](#), [mole skin for blisters](#), + some additional odds and ends. It is up to you to pack your first aid kit with what you need. This is what I need and doesn't mean it's the setup for everyone!
- ❑ **Tooth Brush:** [Toob Refillable Travel Toothbrush Tooth Brush](#). You'll thank me for this one. It's great for backpacking, travel & road tripping.
- ❑ **Soap:** [Camp Suds Biodegradable Soap](#). I no longer use soap while backpacking due to environmental and weight savings reasons. This is the stuff I used to take with me and it works great:)
- ❑ **Camping Spoon:** [Titanium Long Handle Spoon](#)
- ❑ **SPF Sunscreen:** I've used many active sunscreens and prefer [Neutrogena Ultra Sheer Dry-Touch SPF 55](#). It's great for snow and glacier travel as well as usual everyday wear. Doesn't get sticky or nasty. Good stuff

Top Compartments



Camping in the Wilderness of Washington State

- The top compartment of my backpack is broken up into two pockets.
- The top pocket can be easily accessed from the outside of the bag.
- The other pocket, which is inside the bag, requires straps to be undone for access.
- I'll denote the first as outside, and the later as inside.

Top Outside Compartment

- ❑ **Compass:** [Suunto M-3](#) - Great lightweight compass.
- ❑ **Personal Locator Beacon:** I use the [ResQLink personal locator beacon](#) which can bail you out in rough situations. This is great to have anytime you're out in the wilderness or away from cell phone service. The peace of

mind alone helps. This is the cheapest life insurance you'll ever purchase. Even if you break a leg 2 miles from civilization or wreck your car in the middle of nowhere and don't have cell phone service this thing could save your life. I carry it with me on all trips. Why not... The battery lasts for approximately 5 years.

- ❑ **Headlamp:** I have a few, my favorite is the [Black Diamond Headlamp](#).
 - ❑ **Lighter:** Any lightweight lighter will work.
 - ❑ **Small Travel Knife**
 - ❑ **Sunglasses:** Polarized lenses are the only way to protect your eyes in snow or very intense sun. I use Maui Jims.
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PRO TIP: Having a rechargeable battery system in your house / vehicle will save you a lot of time & money.

When you're in the middle of nowhere and your AAA or AA battery dies you have backup, or can recharge them. I use the following [Rechargeable Battery Charger](#), [AAA batteries](#) and [AA batteries](#). They work great!

Top Inside Compartment

Since the top inside compartment isn't quick access I use it more for storage.

- ❑ **30 Feet (10 Meters) of Rope:** I [use this rope](#) and cut it as required. Good for hanging food and random use.
- ❑ **Travel Towel:** [Quick Dry Small Travel Towel](#)

- ❑ **Toilet Paper & Small Shovel:** Some people like to carry a shovel for the toilet. Sticks work fine to dig holes and don't weigh anything in your pack. If you're to buy a shovel the [Sea to Summit Alloy Pocket Trowel](#) works well. It's light and compact.
- ❑ **Tent Stakes:** [MSR Mini Groundhogs](#) are light weight & very sturdy. These won't bend like the stakes that come with most tents.
- ❑ **Winter Hat:** [Minus33 Merino Wool Ridge Cuff Beanie](#) is light and works great for all weather. I usually carry this year round since it gets cold at night on the ocean / coast and in alpine environments, even in the summer.
- ❑ **Gloves:** [Manzella Men's Tempest Windstopper Touch Tip Gloves](#) work well for all seasons except very cold winter weather. I carry these year round as well, except very hot summer days.

Right Side Compartment

I use the right side compartment to carry my food for the day and a few other small items. By keeping the food in an easy to access place I don't have to unpack my bag while eating quick snacks on the trail.

- ❑ **Food for Current Day**
- ❑ **Micro Spikes (Snow / Ice Only):** If you're going into alpine environments you may need these! I use and recommend the [Kahtoola MICROspikes Traction System](#). Check snow level reports to see if you'll need micro spikes. If in doubt I'll carry these. They are a life saver when required!

Right Side Pocket

Directly under the compartment noted above is a small pocket. I use this to keep my tripod. It also offsets the weight to the leftside of the pack.

You'll want to balance the weights on both side compartments so it works well for you:)

- ❑ **Travel Tripod (Use 95% of Time):** [Feisol Tournament CT-3342](#) This is the best tripod and ball head combo I've ever used. Light, sturdy, unbeatable.
 - ❑ [Really Right Stuff BH-25 Ballhead](#)
 - ❑ [Really Right Stuff L-Bracket](#)
- ❑ **Large Tripod - Day, Backup & Road Trips:** [TVC-34L Versa Series 3 Tripod](#) This is a great tripod, but it's really heavy and somewhat annoying to use on a regular basis. This was my first professional grade tripod. If I would have known more I would not have purchased it. Live & learn!
 - ❑ [BH-55 LR Ballhead](#)
 - ❑ [BD800-L: L-Plate for Nikon D800/800E](#)
- ❑ **Tent Poles:** The most efficient place I found to store my poles is next to the tripod in the side pocket. This keeps them out of the way since they are the same length as the tripod.
- ❑ **PRO TIP:** Bear spray is a must have in certain locations. I keep mine in the vehicle at all times for protection. This also ensures I won't forget it at home. [Here is what I carry](#). When backpacking, your bear spray should be easy to access, within arms reach.

Left Side Compartment

- ❑ **Water Supply (Optional):** I only carry a "bladder" when water sources are few and far between. On most trips I'll only carry a 1 liter Nalgene bottle and that's it. If you're to carry a "bladder" I recommend the [Camelbak 100 ounce](#). Always have at least a liter of water on you. Check maps for water sources and plan ahead!
- ❑ **Water Purification (Optional):** Optional means if the water is clean you don't need one. This is something you have to judge with your own discretion. Drinking bad water can ruin your trip. If I travel to alpine / glacier melt areas I'll drink the glacier water or streams fed by the glaciers. When hiking in less remote areas a water filter is a must have! I use the [Katadyn Filtration System](#) which works great. If you are to go backpacking without a filter always carry something like [water treatment tablets by Katadyn](#) just in case you are in doubt!

Left Side Pocket

- ❑ **[1 or 1.5 Liter Nalgene Bottle](#):** Easy to access water source. Also provides balance to offset the weight of my tripod on the opposite side of my pack.

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Winter Backpacking Gear Considerations



Backpacking / Snowshoeing in the Sierra Nevada Range of California

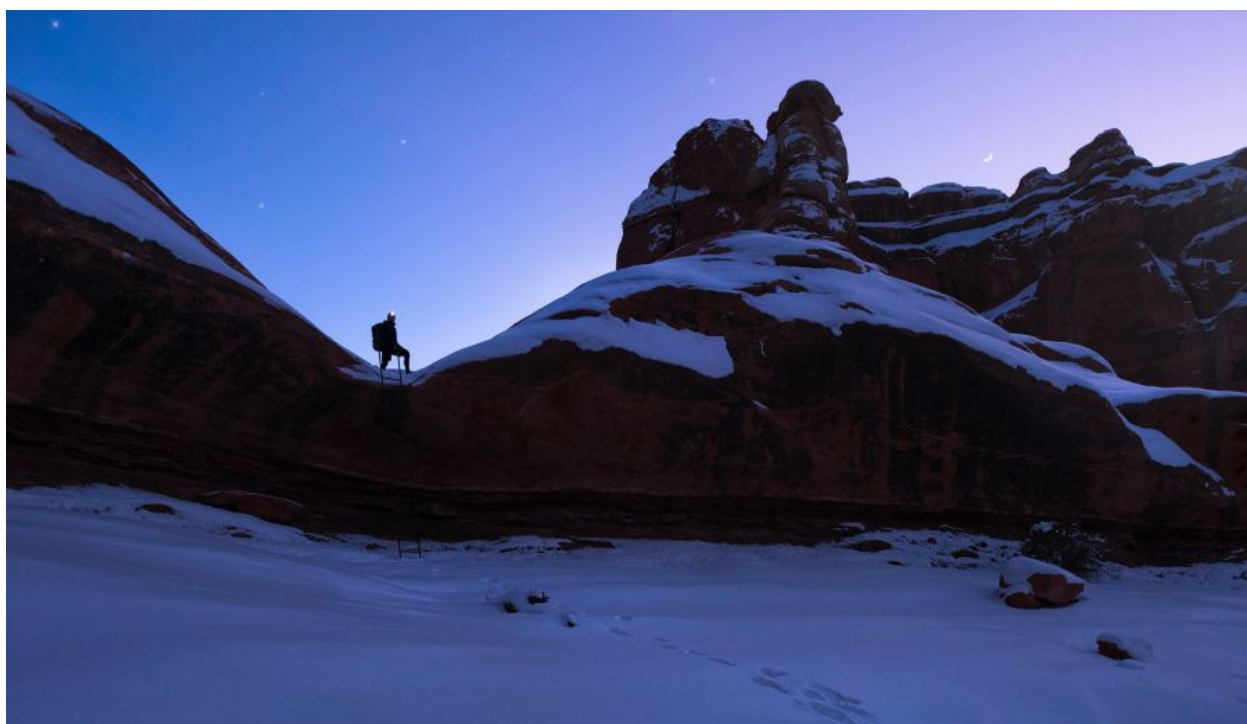
Backpacking in the winter will require you to strap some gear to the the outside of your pack. Here is what I carry during the winter only.

- ❑ **Snowshoes:** [MSR Lightning Ascent 25"](#) are really light weight snowshoes which always get the job done! You can easily strap them on top of your backpack when not in use. 6+ inches of snow. I recommend the [microspikes](#) noted above for 6" or less.

- ❑ **Snow Shovel:** [Snowclaw Backcountry Shovel](#). When setting up camp at night you will most likely need a shovel. This is easy to carry and light. Warning! This is not an avalanche / rescue shovel, do not treat it as one!

- ❑ **Climbing / Ice Axe:** [Grivel Nepal SA Ice Axe w/ Leash](#) is what I use and recommend.

Clothes & Layers - What I Carry & Why



Backpacking Through Utah's Canyonlands at Twilight

No matter what, there are always a few clothes items which you should carry with you. Always check the weather and pack an extra layer accordingly for emergencies.

Layering Basics for Backpacking

- No one piece of gear should perform the same function as another piece of gear. When it's really cold more layers are added. When it's warm the layers are removed.

- If it's wet the shell coat and pants are added over whatever you're wearing. You get the gist... a mix and match of all your layers should always provide you with the ideal outfit without any overlap or extra weight! This is an art.

Here is a basic overview on layering.

Provided below this I'll denote the actual gear I carry and for which seasons.

Base Layer: This is the layer directly next to your skin. The goal of the base layer is to keep your skin dry by removing moisture. When done correctly the base layer will keep you cool in warm temperatures and warm in cool temperatures. You'll wear a base layer year round, no matter what season.

Middle Layer (Warmth & Insulation): During cool summer nights, autumn or winter you'll also need a middle layer. The goal of the middle layer is to keep you warm, but also allows the skin / body to breath. Good middle layers are breathable material that also provides warmth such as fleece or down. I prefer to carry a lightweight down jacket as well as a Polartec® fleece as denoted below.

Top Layer / Shell (Weather Protection): The goal of the top shell layer is to protect you and all of your layers below from the weather. The best top layers are made from materials such as Gore-Tex. The top layer is just as important as your other layers if not more so. If your middle or base layers are completely wet they won't work very well. Just remember not all Gore-Tex is created equally. [Gore-Tex Pro](#) is what I would recommend to ensure you stay dry. It is expensive, but it works and lasts a long time.

IMPORTANT: To keep this section clear and concise I'll also denote which seasons this gear is used for.

You'll want all gear to be additive so I'll start with warm weather gear and finish with cold weather gear.

My body temp runs high so I don't wear as much as some do. Test and see what works for you!

Backpacking Shirts & Coats

Base Layer (Short & Long Sleeve)

- ❑ **Short Sleeve Shirts (2 Pairs):** The [North Face Flash Dry](#) are fantastic. I only carry 2 of these at all times. Wash one and hang on your pack to dry while wearing the other. Dry time 15-20 minutes in direct sun. (All Seasons)
- ❑ **Long Sleeve Shirts (1 Shirt):** [Men's Capilene 2 Lightweight Long Sleeves](#) are the best I've found for all season use. (All Seasons)
- ❑ **Warm Long Sleeve Shirt (1 Shirt):** [Men's Capilene 3 Midweight Long Sleeves](#) are great for when the weather gets colder. I wear the Capilene two as a base layer and the Capilene 3 overtop. (Autumn & Winter)

Middle Layer (Fleece & Down Jacket)

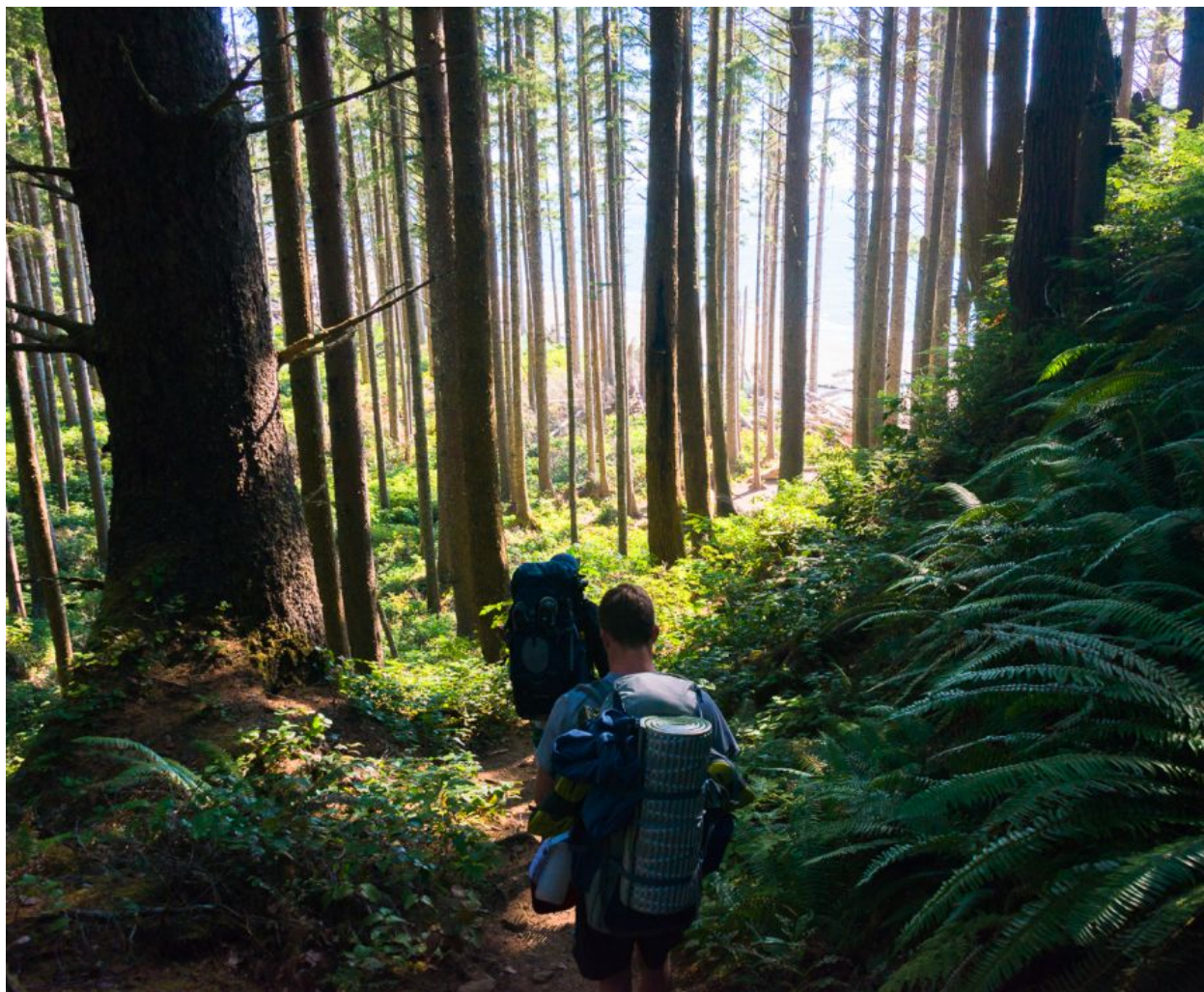
- ❑ **Breathable Fleece Layer (1):** A breathable layer is necessary for hiking in cold weather. Unlike the down jacket it will allow your body to regulate it's temperature much better keeping you warm and dry! I use a Mammut fleece hoodie which is now discontinued. (All Seasons)
- ❑ **Mid-Weight Down Jacket (1):** The [Outdoor Research Men's Transcendent Hoodie](#) is a fantastic down jacket which I have been using for a few years. (Autumn & Winter)
- ❑ **Heavy Down Jacket 800 Fill (1):** [Marmot Men's Greenland Baffled Jacket](#). This jacket is fantastic! This is used instead of my mid-weight down jacket mentioned in the Autumn Section above. (Very Cold Winter Weather Only).

Top Layer / Shell (Weather Protection)

- ❑ **Wind Breaker Coat:** I use and highly recommend the [Alpha AR Shell from Arc'Teryx](#). When it comes to wind and water protection you're not going to find anything that beats this.

It's highly breathable and doesn't get wet inside like most shells. I can hike for hours in this shell and it's dry! Even if you don't think it will rain it's always good to have a shell just in case. (All Seasons)

Backpacking Pants & Shorts



Backpacking on the Wilderness Coast of Washington State

Base Layer (Shorts, Tights & Underwear)

- ❑ **Base Layer Underwear (2 Pairs):** [Men's Give-N-Go Sport Shorts](#). You won't find anything that beats Exofficio for Men & Women. They are smell resistant and dry very quickly (10-15 min in direct sun). I only carry 2 pairs even for 30 day trips. You can hand wash them as required! I use the Men's Give-N-Go Sport Mesh 9-inch Boxer Brief linked above. I carry a single pair of cotton underwear for sleeping. Always wash before wearing clean sleep gear:) (All Seasons)

- ❑ **Tights (1 Pair):** I love to hike in tights with shorts over them. They keep you warm in the morning and keep your legs fresh through out the day. I use [Nike Running Tights](#). Make sure they have zippers at the bottoms of the legs so you can easily roll them up when it gets warm! (All Seasons)

- ❑ **Shorts (1 Pair):** [Prana Vargas Shorts](#). These go over the tights or can be worn alone. Great for regular wear around shorts too! stretchy & quick drying. I like to go with pocketless shorts without the liner because they dry faster. www.pрана.com has a large selection. These are amazing shorts! (All Seasons)

- ❑ **Base Layer Pants:** Merino Wool Mid-Weight - These are great for sleeping or for night shoots when it's getting cold! [Here are a great pair](#). (Autumn & Winter)

Mid-Layer

- ❑ **Pants (1 Pair):** I use an array of different pants depending on the weather outlook and the type of backpacking I'll be doing. Even on long trips I'll only carry 1 pair of pants along with the tights noted above. Here are the pants I use. Summer through fall my go to is the [Prana Stretch Zion](#). I love these pants so much that it's all I'll wear around the house anymore. You can find these on sale! Great hiking & climbing pants. For winter and alpine climbs my go to is the [Black Diamond Dawn Patrol](#) Pants. (All Seasons)

- ❑ **Down Pants:** [Mountain Hardwear Compressor™ Pant](#) (Winter Only).

Top Layer

- ❑ **Waterproof / Windproof Pants (Optional for Weather) (1 Pair):**
Check the weather report to see if it's going to be wet. These keep your boots and legs dry! I prefer the [Arc'teryx Beta SL Pants](#) when it's wet or raining outside. They can also be used during the winter in snow conditions.

Backpacking Boots & Socks

Backpacking & Trekking Boots

- ❑ **General Use Boots** - My favorite boot by far is the [Salomon Men's Quest 4D GTX Backpacking Boot](#). It's extremely light weight and waterproof! (Summer - Autumn)
- ❑ **Winter Boots** - When it's really cold you'll need more than the regular hiking boot. The [Salomon Men's Nytro WP Winter Boots](#) are fantastic for hiking and backpacking in the snow. Your feet won't get cold! (Winter Only)

Hiking Socks

- ❑ **General Use Hiking Socks** - I only carry 3 pairs even for long trips. Wash & hang from inside of tent or backpack when not wearing! [Smart Wool](#) is my preferred brand. One clean pair is used at night.
- ❑ **Winter Hiking Socks** - These are my favorite pair of winter socks. They are great for all uses even around the house. [-30 Below Thermal Hiking Sock \(Merino Wool \)](#)

Final Backpacking Tips for Photographers

Just remember one persons' essentials may be completely different than another persons. I would highly recommend running & physical training as part of your weekly year round routine at least 5-6 days a week, when not backpacking.

Distance running (varying 6-12 miles a day on a schedule), squats, bike riding, and body weight endurance such as sit ups and push ups are the only way I've found to maintain energy for photography during and after a long day of backpacking. Plyometrics and balance exercise is also essential.

Squats are key to core strength and legs which are the most important aspects of backpacking strength. My pack usually weighs between 30-65 lbs depending on the season. Winter always makes for a heavier pack due to more gear and more food required to sustain energy in cold weather.

There is a fairly steep learning curve when you're first getting into backpacking and backcountry exploration. After your first 5-10 trips you'll start to feel much more confident and also narrow your backpack weight down to only the essentials you use.

If you're really interested in going on a photography tour with backpacking included, check out my [Workshops & Tours Page](#) for more information.

Enjoy & Have Fun!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dave Morrow', with a stylized, flowing script.

Dave Morrow - [About Me Page](#)