

You'll hear the words, "Everyone is different" about 7 billions times as you ask questions and try to prepare for your hike. It's true, but won't get you very far if you don't at least understand the basics.

There are three major things that everyone needs to consider before leaving for the trail: gear, finances and physical ability.

Gear: There are differing opinions on what a hiker *must* have to have a successful and safe thru-hike. The following categories were developed by considering what a hiker absolutely must have before setting foot on the trail, what I found to be necessary, what can be purchased along the way, what most hikers carry but many eventually discard and what may make your hike more enjoyable

Absolute musts: shelter, pack, sleeping bag, water bottle, cord (to hang food), personal hygiene kit, ground cover, adequate footwear

VERY strongly suggested: sleeping pad, second pair of socks, hat and gloves, first aid kit, multi-purpose tool (Swiss army knife, Leatherman), rain gear, headlamp, waterproof stuff sack for food

Strongly suggested: guide book and/or map, stove and cook pot, water filter or purification, raincover for pack or large waterproof stuff sack to line inside of pack

Suggested: second full set of clothes, gear repair kit, bandana

Completely optional but worth suggesting: compass (practical only if you're carrying a map), hiking pole or poles, notebook and pencil, camera, book, camp shoes, MP3 player

Finances: There are two aspects of finances that must be considered, non-trail expenses and trail expenses. Non-trail expenses are those fixed expenses that most will have to pay whether they choose to hike or not. These can include: mortgage, car payment, credit cards and utilities. Only a fortunate few are able to eliminate these non-trail expenses while they are hiking, the rest of us need to either pay these expenses in advance (not always possible), schedule automatic payments, or have a trusted friend/family member manage the bills.

Trail expenses are those expenses that you will only incur on the trail. These include: supplies (food and possible gear replacements), hotel and hostel expenses, other town expenses (movies, restaurants, etc.) Most hikers spend more than they initially anticipate on trail expenses. The rule of thumb used to be \$1/mile, which is entirely feasible, but probably more realistic to say \$2 to \$3 per mile, especially if you need any gear replacements.

Physical Ability: It is very strongly suggested that anyone considering a thru-hike talks to their doctor before setting foot on the trail. This is especially important if you are over 40, overweight, have medical problems or are very inactive. The first few weeks on the trail will be an adjustment period. The more out of shape a person is walking onto the trail, the longer and more difficult this period will be. I am not going to sit here and lay out an exercise routine that will prepare your body for the rigors thru-hiking, only thru-hiking can do that. Just remember to: take it slow, the miles will come; stretch *after* you warm up; listen to your body (if you have a severe pain, stop); if it's that bad, see a doctor.

Where exactly do you start once you've decided that you are physically and financially able to start a thru-hike?

I would start by purchasing the absolute essential gear items and going on many day hikes. Once you become familiar with your gear, try an overnight hike and *use every single piece of gear that you take with you.*

Now it's all a matter of *how* you want to do it. After all, everyone is different!

Good luck and happy trails!

-Bobcat