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rucksacks & holdalls

As explained in the 'Independent vs. Organised Treks' panel, people on an organised trek who have the majority of their personal belongings ferried ahead by porter or pack animal might find an expensive expedition rucksack with a supportive back system superfluous to their needs. In fact, if you do want to take a large rucksack then it would be wise to invest in an all-over rucksack cover or lightweight holdall to help prevent a shoulder strap or hip fin from being accidentally damaged. (The same holdall can be used to protect your rucksack in-transit on public transport.)

Most people on a group trek find that a holdall made from a hardwearing material with a long central zip will usually prove to be more practical and easier to pack than a rucksack. Whatever type of bag you choose to put your belongings in, it is worth packing items such as sleeping bags in waterproof bags inside the main holdall. Sensitive electronic equipment, money, documents such as passports and anything you might need during the day (or early evening if your bag is delayed en route) is best carried inside a small daysack.

Of course, if you are trekking independently then a large capacity rucksack which has a back system that can handle a heavy load is exactly what you'll need.

For more detailed advice on choosing a backpack, pick up a copy of 'The Knowledge:Rucksacks'.

porters & pack animals

In many parts of the world, you will have the option of having your personal belongings carried for you by pack animal. In other places, porters rather than animals carry supplies. Porterage provides a much-needed source of income to local people. However, these porters are different to the well-dressed, English-speaking local guides who accompany you during the day. Porters are often hired and fired as the trek progresses, and often do not have the benefit of proper clothing, insurance and access to medical services that your guides enjoy. Stories of sick and injured porters being abandoned (usually without the knowledge of the western trekkers) and consequently dying on the trail prompted the formation of the International Porter Protection Group (www.ippg.net). The aim of the IPPG is to improve the health and safety of the porter and reduce the incidence of avoidable illness, injury and death by raising awareness of the issues among trekking companies, leaders, head porters and trekkers. The IPPG recommends that:

1. Adequate clothing – windproof jacket and trousers, fleece jacket, long johns, suitable footwear (leather boots in snow), socks, hat, gloves and sunglasses – should be provided to porters for their protection in bad weather and at high altitude.

2. Above the tree line, porters should have access to shelter in a lodge or tent (the trekkers' mess tent is not sufficient as porters are often left hanging around until dinner is finished), a sleeping pad and a blanket or sleeping bag. They should also be provided with meals and warm drinks, or cooking equipment, food and fuel.

3. Porters should be provided with the same standard of medical care as you would expect for yourself, including insurance.

4. Porters should not be paid off because of illness or injury without the leader or the trekkers assessing their condition carefully. Head guides must let their trek leader or the trekkers know if they are paying off a sick porter. Failure to do this has resulted in many deaths. Seriously ill porters should always be sent down with someone who speaks their language and understands their illness, along with a letter describing their complaint. Sufficient funds should be provided to cover the cost of their rescue and treatment.

5. No porter should be asked to carry a load that is too heavy for their physical abilities. Weight limits may need to be adjusted for altitude, trail and weather conditions. Good judgement and careful observation is needed to make this decision. If you are going to a remote area, select strong and experienced porters.

For info on porter clothing banks, visit www.portersprogress.org

environmental considerations

Rubbish is the most widely publicised negative affect that tourists have on trails. Whilst it is true that everything should be done to minimise packaging from supplies before departure, and that thought needs to be given on how to dispose of rubbish after it has been carried out to the end of the trail, there are other environmental considerations as important as litter. For example, in tea houses, do you have the option of staying in a lodge that uses liquid fuel or solar power rather than wood from an unmanaged source? Some other issues that you might want to consider include:

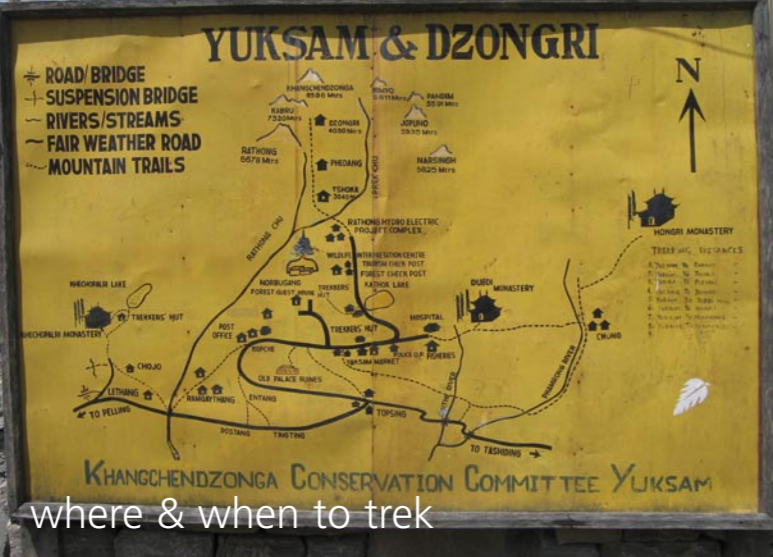
- Taking toxic waste such as used batteries back to the UK.
- Using a water filter or chemical treatment rather than buying water in plastic bottles.
- Using biodegradable soap in order to avoid contaminating water sources.
- Trekking with a small number of people in order to reduce the amount of trail erosion.
- Buying local foodstuffs to reduce the amount of air freight and aviation fuel.
- Shopping in markets with a rucksack so that plastic bags do not have to be used.

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the **knowledge**
trekking



the knowledge trekking



where & when to trek

independent vs. organised treks

The style of trek that you opt for will have a bearing on many of the equipment choices you have to make. For example, if you join a commercially organised trek then gear such as tents, stoves and sleeping mats will probably be provided. In addition, the majority of your personal kit will be transported for you by porters or pack animals. This arrangement makes a large rucksack with a complicated back system somewhat redundant as a holdall will usually prove to be more convenient, less prone to damage, and more easily carried on the side of an animal or in a porter's basket.

By contrast, if you plan to trek independently then you will need to carry all of your equipment and supplies inside a comfortable and supportive rucksack. Whether you pack a tent and stove will depend upon whether you plan to camp, or stay in tea houses and hostels along the trail.

As in most things, there is a middle ground between independent and group trekking. This style of mountain travel, which I call 'interdependent trekking', involves hiring a local guide and a couple of porters (or a mule and one or two pack animals) to transport most of your supplies and show the way, without the luxury of having things like your meals prepared and your tent pitched for you. Instead, staff and clients work together to establish campsites, cook food, fetch water and carry out other tasks.

Booking directly with an in-country operator is often cheaper than using a UK travel agent. However, in some countries there may be little or no comeback if you have booked directly with an in-country travel agent and the holiday does not live up to your expectations.

If you trek independently, be sure to build additional time into your itinerary in order to register your presence with your embassy, obtain any permits that might be required for your trek, and acquire provisions.

Bear in mind that some treks are closed to independent trekkers. For instance, if you wish to complete the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu then you must join a group trek as the authorities have banned individuals from travelling along the route. Similarly, certain countries do not permit independent trekking in any form. The most famous example of this is the nation of Bhutan, although in this particular instance it is possible for just one person to plan a 'group trek' with the assistance of a tour operator, providing that he or she is accompanied by local staff. A few places, such as India's Nanda Devi Sanctuary, remain out-of-bounds to all trekkers.

For information on hiking in the UK, pick up a copy of 'The Knowledge: Hiking'.

“Experience stunning landscapes and meet the people who inhabit the valleys which surround the world’s most picturesque mountains.”

clothing & footwear

The key word when choosing clothes and boots is 'flexibility'. Temperatures can range from sultry to sub-zero, and the weather can swing from bright sunshine to monsoon downpours. A selection of lightweight garments which between then wick sweat from the skin, trap body heat, and repel the elements are required. Known collectively as 'the layering system', the clothing you choose will depend on the conditions that you are most likely to encounter. Many trekkers heading for high altitude mountain ranges often augment their layering system with a duvet jacket. This type of garment is too hot to walk in, but is perfect for pulling on at lunch stops and in the evening whilst cooking or waiting for dinner to be served. If you are on a group trek and the majority of your belongings are being transported for you, stowing your duvet jacket in your daysack will mean you won't get cold whilst waiting for your baggage to turn up at the end of the afternoon.

The climate and terrain will determine how stiff and weatherproof your footwear needs to be. At one extreme are hot and dry treks in North Africa and the Mediterranean, a glacial demand highly breathable, fabric mesh footwear. At the other end of the scale, a glacial trek in the Karakoram will require a durable leather boot that is crampon-compatible.

For more information on boots, pick up a copy of 'The Knowledge: Footwear'. Consult 'The Knowledge: Cold & Wet Weather Kit', for advice on the layering system.

sleeping options

Trekking can be enjoyed in so many ways that there are no hard and fast rules as to what you will need in order to enjoy a comfortable night's sleep on your trek. However, at the very least I would suggest packing a silk or fleece sleeping bag liner. A liner can be used on its own in warm climates, or inside a sleeping bag if you are on an organised trek which issues a bag to each client.

If you are buying your own sleeping bag, then a versatile system that can deal with varying temperatures is important. This is because on a camping trek to, say, a Himalayan Base Camp, you might start walking in from a low altitude that is quite warm. But at the highest camp on your route you will be exposed to sub-zero temperatures. Most sleeping bags these days come equipped with full-length zips, allowing you to use your bag like a duvet on sultry nights. Or you could carry two relatively lightweight sleeping bags. This might sound daft, but if one is sufficiently oversized to permit the other to be slipped inside then you will be the owner a highly versatile sleeping system. Few (if any) manufacturers make bags specifically designed to be used like this, but there is no reason why you should not purchase an inexpensive summer bag and combine this with a bag designed to handle lower temperatures. The cocoons can then be used separately or together as appropriate. A fleece liner and a 3 season bag is a good option.

essential kit

One of the most versatile items you can carry on a trek is an umbrella. Not only can this be used during monsoon downpours, it also provides protection from the midday sun.

A lightweight headtorch is more practical than a regular handtorch. If you are on an organised trek then it is worth carrying this item in your daysack, in case it takes longer to complete the day's route than you anticipated.

A medical kit is vital. Depending on your destination, its contents may need to go beyond first aid to include antibiotics and other prescription-based medicines. If you are travelling to a remote area, then a dental kit might also prove to be a worthwhile purchase. Be sure to take extra quantities of any medicines that you take regularly, and store these in a separate place from your regular supply in case one set becomes lost or spoilt.

The concept of using trekking poles, which originated amongst European trekkers, has now taken a firm hold amongst British trekkers. Using poles improves balance on rough terrain, and helps to spread the load from the legs to the arms. Poles with integral shock absorbers help to protect the elbow joints from becoming sore. Poles should never be used instead of ice axes above the snowline in situations where an unchecked slip could result in disaster.

Even when I join an organised trek that supplies sleeping mattresses, I pack my own lightweight self-inflating or closed cell foam mat for additional comfort and insulation. Some supplied mattresses can be quite thin, making camping on stony ground unpleasant.

Hydration is a critical aspect of trekking, so do invest in a couple of durable water bottles or a hydration bladder. A hydration tube attachment will allow you to drink regularly whilst on the move. Carrying your own mug will help to reduce the risk of infection in tea houses. A method of purifying water (be this iodine droplets or a pump) is essential in areas where regular access to clean water cannot be guaranteed.

Protection for the eyes and skin from the sun is also essential. Sunglasses that block out 100% of the sun's harmful rays are de rigeur, as is a high-factor sunscreen and wide-brim sunhat. An increasing amount of outdoor clothing now comes with a Universal Protection Factor (UPF) rating, which helps you to gauge how much protection from the sun your clothing provides.

For information on water bottles and water purification systems, pick up a copy of 'The Knowledge: Eating & Drinking'. For advice on medical matters, consult 'The Knowledge: Health & Insurance'. 'The Knowledge: Gear For Hot Weather' provides additional information on the UPF rating system.

Everest, Fitzroy, Annapurna, K2... their summits might be the preserve of climbers, but the treks to these mountains and thousands of other peaks around the world require no technical climbing experience whatsoever. Over the past two decades, trekking has become one of the most popular forms of adventure travel. Every year, tens of thousands of trekkers head for the Alps, the Himalaya, the Pyrenees, Patagonia and dozens of other mountain ranges in order to experience stunning landscapes and meet the people who inhabit the valleys which surround the world's most picturesque mountains.

If you decide to take the plunge, then Cotswold staff are on hand to guide you through the maze of trekking clothing and equipment available, to help ensure that you enjoy a comfortable trek.

Enjoy the mountains!

Paul Deegan

Paul has spent 17 years trekking in places such as the Himalaya, the Andes, the Pamirs, East Africa and the European Alps. He is the author of the award-winning 'The Mountain Traveller's Handbook', published by the British Mountaineering Council, and a contributor to the Royal Geographical Society's 'Expedition Handbook'. Both titles are available from Cotswold Outdoor.