



**RUCKSACK GUIDE**  
**MOUNTAIN WALKING**  
**AND TREKKING**

alun richardson

# RUCKSACK GUIDE

## Mountain walking and trekking

**ALUN RICHARDSON**

 British Mountain Guides



ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE MANLEY

B L O O M S B U R Y

LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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Published by A & C Black, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP  
www.bloomsbury.com

First edition 2009

This electronic edition published 2014 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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ISBN (print) 978 0 7136 8687 6

ISBN (ePDF) 978 1 4729 0811 7

ISBN (ePUB) 978 1 4081 2599 1

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Acknowledgements**

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Designed by James Watson

Commissioned by Robert Foss

Edited by Lucy Beevor

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*Mountain Walking and Trekking* is the first book in the **Rucksack Guide** series and covers the skills required to become a competent mountain walker. For walkers, the 'real' adventure starts when you step off the paths and explore the parts of the map where only streams, crags and contour lines exist. This handy book can be kept in your rucksack and will help you to gain the experience to walk safely anywhere in the world.

The **Rucksack Guide** series tells you *what* to do in a situation, but it does not always explain *why*. If you would like more information behind the decisions in these books, go to *Mountaineering: The Essential Skills for Mountaineers and Climbers* by Alun Richardson (A&C Black, 2008).

For more about the author, his photographs and the mountaineering courses he runs go to:

[www.alunrichardson.co.uk](http://www.alunrichardson.co.uk) and

[www.freedomphotographs.co.uk](http://www.freedomphotographs.co.uk).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ideas in this book are the culmination of 25 years mountaineering and time spent discussing techniques with inspirational climbers, Mountain Guides and instructors, in particular Dave Williams, Steve Lewis, Graeme Ettle, Bruce Goodlad, Eric Pirie, Trevor Massiah, Clive Hebblethwaite, John Taylor, Twid Turner, Louise Thomas and Pat Littlejohn.

Special thanks to Lesley Jones who supported me throughout; Clive Hebblethwaite and Twid Turner who chewed over many issues with me in a tent and supplied some photographs; friends who commented on the text, some even posing for photographs – Trevor Massiah, Bas Jongmans, Paul Donnithorne, Clive Hebblethwaite, Paul Donnithorne, Emma Alsford and Gareth Richardson; Rhiannon Richardson and Molly Jones for help with text and diagrams; George Manley for his excellent illustrations; Robert Foss and Lucy Beevor from A&C Black and the manufacturers who generously supported the photo shoots: DMM, Lyon Equipment, Mountain Equipment, Face West, Select Solar, Mammut and Fritschi.

Any of the opinions expressed in this book are mine and should not be associated with any of the above people, companies or organisations.

## PREPARING FOR YOUR TREK

The secret to being safe in the mountains is to understand the environment and to be prepared for anything it can throw at you. Be independent and self-sufficient – we do not have the right to be rescued.

**Plan your route** Examine the map carefully. If the weather is poor and the route complicated, put bearings and distances on the map for key stages.

**Let friends know of your destination** Leave a map or route card with friends or family with your intended route. Inform the same people of when you return.

**Carry the correct equipment** There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing.

### RUCKSACK ESSENTIALS FOR DAY WALKING

Map stored in a watertight case	Knife (or multi-use tool)
Compass (optional GPS receiver)	Sunglasses
Extra clothing	Sunscreen
Extra food and water	Water bottle
First aid kit	Whistle
LED Head torch (extra bulb/batteries)	Emergency survival bag

**QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE SETTING OFF**

- Have you packed your rucksack with the necessary items (Fig. 3, page 17)?
- Strong winds and poor visibility slow you down – are you protected from the worst weather?
- What route are you taking? In what general direction? Break your route down into smaller sections, creating a mental picture of the legs.
- How far is the walk? How long will it take?
- Can you shorten the walk if required?
- How steep is the terrain?
- What is the ground like – will it speed you up or slow you down?
- Are there any prominent features you will pass on the way e.g. streams, paths, buildings, valleys?
- Are you going round hills or over them?
- Are there any dangers (steep slopes, rivers, hidden cliffs)?



*Trekking in the Alps*

**PACE**

- Don't walk too fast – enjoy it!
- Start slowly and speed up.
- Keep something in reserve in case you need it.
- Walk for at least an hour before stopping for your first rest.

**THE REST STEP**

- Straighten your rear leg in between every step so that it is supported by bone and not muscle.
- Relax the muscles of the forward leg.

**DOWNHILL**

- Tighten your laces.
- Bend your knees and place each foot lightly.
- Don't completely straighten your leg.
- Use the thigh muscles to absorb the impact, and not the knees.
- Keep a measured pace and zigzag to shift the strain.

**NEGOTIATING BOULDER SLOPES**

Stand in the gaps between stones, rather than on top of them.

**AVOIDING KNEE INJURIES**

Maintain the strength of the muscles supporting the knees, especially the quadriceps, which take some of the load off our joints.

The massive choice of equipment available can make buying kit a nightmare. Borrow equipment at first, and when you do buy take your time; read the latest reviews from the 'experts'.

### CHOOSING BOOTS

Boots must be well constructed, water resistant, have an aggressive tread pattern, a medium level of ankle support and, most importantly, a good resistance of the sole to lateral twisting. Use good, well-fitting socks.

Type of boot	Pros	Cons
Approach shoes/soft-fabric boots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fine for treks on simple tracks</li> <li>● Lighter and dry faster</li> <li>● Cheaper</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Don't handle well in rugged terrain or poor weather</li> <li>● Ankle support and lateral stiffness are often lacking</li> </ul>
Leather boot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Still the most popular choice with mountain walkers</li> <li>● Sturdy ankle support</li> <li>● Can handle poor weather and grassy slopes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● You require a good water proofing agent to care for them</li> <li>● Can be expensive</li> </ul>
Gore-tex boots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Light</li> <li>● Great in hot conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Terrible water-proofing in wet, muddy conditions</li> </ul>

### ***Getting a good fit***

- Put the boot on un-laced. Push your foot forwards until your toes hit the front; you should then be able to squeeze a finger down the back of the heel.
- Next, lace the boots properly by standing up to weight the foot, but not too tightly over the arch – the foot is very sensitive to pressure.
- A good fit is one where there is no pressure on your toes, you can wiggle them, there is no side-to-side movement of the foot and your heel does not lift.
- If in doubt, buy larger.
- Put both boots on and simulate uphill and downhill walking.
- Wear a loaded rucksack because this will alter the shape of your foot.
- Finally try male and female versions – you never know!

### ***Caring for boots***

Stuff wet boots loosely with newspaper and leave them to dry in a warm, but not hot, place. Apply waterproofing to clean boots a few days before it is needed, to allow it to soak in (avoid too much treatment as it can soften the leather).

### ***Socks***

- Socks should be snug with a smooth knit, good shape and elasticity, and made of wool or synthetic fibres to draw moisture away.
- A thin liner and a thicker sock will reduce the chance of blisters.
- A Gore-tex sock worn over a thin liner sock functions like a Gore-tex boot.
- Do not roll your socks over the top of your boots or tuck your trousers into them as grit gets into the boot more easily.

### LOOKING AFTER YOUR FEET

- Wash and moisturise feet every day.
- Air feet regularly.
- Use powders or antiperspirant to keep them dry, reducing blisters.
- Cut nails by following the contour of the nail, so that the nail corner is visible.

### BLISTERS

If your boots fit and they are laced correctly, you wear good socks and you look after your feet, you should never get blisters. If you feel a hot spot, act immediately. Always pop the blister, but do it neatly. Use a sterilised needle and pop several holes in the blister, press it flat and apply a small square of gauze to pad it. Hold the gauze in place with tape as it can be slippery. Plasters fall off, making a sticky mess at the first moment of perspiration.



### MODIFYING BOOTS

Check how you walk by looking at the soles of an old pair of shoes:

- **Neutral** The wear is centralised to the ball of the foot and a small portion of the heel.
- **Overpronation ('flat feet')** There is too much movement of the foot and wear patterns show along the inside edges of your shoe.
- **Underpronation (supination)** The foot rolls outwards at the ankle, resulting in wear along the outer edges.

Orthotic foot beds, volume adjusters and stretching can increase comfort and ease painful rub points.

Poles help to protect your knees, make crossing streams easier, save you energy and generally speed you up – but only when they are correctly adjusted!

- Keep poles short – when standing on flat ground your hands should be below your navel.
- A rubber grip below the handle allows you to grasp the pole lower without having to adjust it.
- Don't use the hand loops (even cut them off!)
- Adjust the pole sections equally to maintain maximum strength.
- The basket helps to cope with mud.
- A flick lock, rather than a screw system, is more reliable and enables the poles to be cut shorter to fit inside your rucksack more easily.
- Two-, three- or four-section poles are available – the more sections there are the shorter the pole is when collapsed, but it means more joints and increases the cost (and weight) of the pole.
- Dry poles before collapsing, but do not oil the tubes – the joints may never lock firmly again!

### **DOWNSIDE OF TREKKING POLES**

Poles do have downsides: they transfer the stresses to your elbows and shoulders, keep your hands full, increase total energy expenditure, and there is evidence that they prevent novices from learning essential balance. Use sparingly on simple walks, but when the going gets tough – especially downhill – they are invaluable.

### CHOOSING GAITERS

- A good quality gaiter should be waterproof.
- Nylon is cheap, but not breathable, and canvas is durable, but stiff.
- Elastic or lace bindings under the boot are easy to use, but rubberised or cable straps last longer.
- Velcro closures are easier to use and keep water out, but a zippered closure with a good storm flap will work better.

Gaiters come in three designs:

- 1 Low (stop tous)** Ankle-high and cooler, less able to keep rain and snow out, but my choice for most conditions.
- 2 High** Calf-high and helpful when you are hiking on wet, muddy trails, wading through streams or crashing through vegetation.
- 3 Full, over-the-boot gaiters** Useful when walking in very wet, boggy terrain, because they turn the boot into a Wellington. But they can be too warm, are expensive, and the rubber erodes easily, particularly the instep.



**Fig. 1** Love them or hate them, gaiters help to keep ticks off your legs and grit, water and snow from getting inside your boots.