



Backpacking Glossary

A

Altimeter – A device that measures altitude. Useful for tracking elevation gain/loss and navigating mountainous terrain, especially when maps include contour lines.

Alcohol Stove – A lightweight stove that burns denatured alcohol. Popular with ultralight backpackers for simplicity and low weight.

Aquamira – A chlorine dioxide water purification system (liquid drops). Common for purifying water on the trail without adding strong taste.

Appalachian Trail (AT) – One of the most famous long-distance trails in the U.S., stretching over 2,000 miles from Georgia to Maine. A symbol of thru-hiking culture.

Approach Shoes – Hybrid footwear between hiking boots and climbing shoes. Often used when scrambling or doing technical backpacking routes.

ATC (Air Traffic Control) – A common belay device for climbing. While not standard in backpacking, it may be used on alpine or mixed trekking routes that require ropework.

B

Backpacking – Traveling and camping while carrying all necessary gear in a backpack. Ranges from overnight trips to multi-month thru-hikes.

Backpacking Stove – Portable stoves used to cook meals in the backcountry. Common types include canister, liquid fuel, and alcohol stoves.

Backpacking Tent – Lightweight shelter designed to pack down small and provide weather protection. Typically includes poles, rainfly, mesh body, and stakes.

Bail – To exit a trip early due to weather, injury, exhaustion, or safety concerns. Knowing when to bail is an important part of safe backpacking.

Base Layers – The moisture-wicking layer worn next to your skin (e.g., thermal tops/bottoms). Helps regulate temperature and manage sweat.

Base Weight – The weight of your fully loaded pack minus consumables (food, water, fuel). A key metric in ultralight backpacking.

Bear Canister – A hard plastic container used to store food and scented items, required in some areas to prevent bears from accessing human food.

Bear Hang / Hanging Kit – A rope system to suspend food bags from a tree branch, typically 10–15 feet off the ground and 6+ feet away from the trunk.

Bear Spray – A pressurized deterrent used in grizzly country to repel aggressive bears. Carried for personal safety, especially in remote areas.

Biodegradable Soap – Environmentally friendly soap used to minimize environmental impact when cleaning dishes or yourself outdoors.

Bivy (Bivouac) Sack – A minimalist waterproof shelter used instead of a tent. Often combined with a sleeping bag for fast-and-light setups or emergencies.

Bladder (Hydration) – A soft plastic reservoir with a drinking hose, stored inside a backpack. Useful for sipping water while hiking.

Blaze – A painted or marked trail indicator (e.g., white blaze on the Appalachian Trail) that helps hikers follow the correct path.

Blister Kit – Part of your first aid kit that includes moleskin, tape, and antiseptic to treat foot blisters — a common backpacking nuisance.

Blowdown – A tree that has fallen across the trail. May require climbing over, under, or rerouting around, especially in poorly maintained areas.

Blue Bag – A bag used to pack out human waste in sensitive environments (e.g., alpine or desert regions). Part of Leave No Trace ethics.

C

Cache – A supply drop of food or gear left ahead of time (or mailed to a resupply point). Used on long-distance hikes.

Camp Shoes – Lightweight footwear (e.g., sandals or crocs) worn around camp to rest your feet after hiking in boots all day.

Canteen – A traditional water container, often metal. Replaced by modern water bottles or bladders but still used by some hikers.

Cat Hole – A small hole (6–8 inches deep) dug to bury human waste in the backcountry. Essential for following Leave No Trace principles.

Cervical Collar – Rare but included in wilderness first aid kits in group expeditions, used to stabilize neck injuries.

Closed-Cell Foam Pad – A lightweight, durable sleeping pad made from dense foam. Offers insulation and won't pop like inflatable versions.

Compression Sack – A stuff sack with straps to compress bulky items (e.g., sleeping bags) to reduce pack volume.

Consumables – Items that get used up during a trip: food, water, and fuel. Excluded from base weight calculations.

Cordage – Lightweight cord or rope used for tarp setups, bear hangs, repairs, or guylines.

Crampons – Spiked metal devices attached to boots for walking on ice or hard snow. Used in alpine or winter backpacking.

Crazy Creek Chair – A popular folding camp chair among backpackers. Provides back support on the ground.

Cuben Fiber (Dyneema) – A high-end ultralight fabric used in tents, tarps, and backpacks. Extremely light and waterproof, but expensive.

D

Daypack – A smaller backpack used for short hikes or summit attempts from base camp. Typically 10–30L in volume.

Deadman Anchor – A snow anchor used in mountaineering and snow camping. Not common in regular backpacking but relevant for winter trips.

Dehydrated Meals – Lightweight, just-add-water meals used by backpackers for convenience and calorie density.

Down Jacket / Sleeping Bag – Insulated with goose or duck down for warmth with minimal weight. Performs best in dry conditions.

Dry Bag – Waterproof bags used to keep clothing, electronics, or food dry inside a backpack. Essential in wet conditions.

Dromedary Bag (Drom Bag) – A heavy-duty water storage bag, usually large-capacity (6–10L), used for camp water or group trips.

Duct Tape – Universal repair tool for gear fixes, blisters, and emergencies. Often wrapped around trekking poles or water bottles to save space.

Dump Station – Not relevant for backpacking, but common in RV camping. Sometimes mentioned in extended travel discussions.

E

- **Elevation Gain** – The total vertical feet climbed during a hike. Important for planning effort and difficulty.
 - **Emergency Bivy** – A lightweight reflective bag used in emergencies to retain body heat. Often carried as a backup shelter.
 - **Emergency Whistle** – A loud whistle used to signal for help (three short blasts = distress). Lightweight and essential for safety.
 - **Energy Bars** – Calorie-dense, portable snacks for quick fuel while hiking. Includes granola bars, protein bars, and trail bars.
 - **Entrenching Tool (Trowel)** – A small, lightweight shovel used to dig catholes for human waste.
 - **Epipen** – An emergency auto-injector for treating severe allergic reactions. Critical for hikers with known allergies.
 - **External Frame Pack** – A rigid backpack with a visible external metal frame. Older style, still preferred by some for heavy loads and ventilation.
 - **Electrolyte Tablets/Powders** – Supplements used to replace salts lost through sweat. Helps prevent cramps and dehydration.
 - **Extended Trip** – Any multi-day trip requiring advanced logistics, resupply planning, and increased self-sufficiency.
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F

- **Fastpacking** – A hybrid between trail running and backpacking. Prioritizes lightweight gear and high mileage.
 - **Feathered Friends** – A respected manufacturer of down sleeping bags and jackets. Known in the backpacking community for premium gear.
 - **Field Repair Kit** – A kit containing patches, safety pins, zip ties, cord, needle and thread, and duct tape for fixing gear in the backcountry.
 - **Filter (Water)** – A device used to remove bacteria and protozoa from water sources. Comes in pump, gravity, or squeeze styles.
 - **Firestarter** – A waterproof or reliable method of starting fire (e.g., ferro rod, matches, lighter). Important for warmth and cooking.
 - **First Aid Kit** – A collection of basic medical supplies (bandages, antiseptic, meds) carried for treating injuries or illness on the trail.
 - **Flip-Flop Thru-Hike** – A long-distance hike that begins in the middle of a trail and continues in both directions (e.g., northbound, then southbound).
 - **Footprint** – A protective ground cloth placed under a tent to prevent wear and add moisture protection.
 - **Food Bag** – A sack used to store food and scented items. Usually hung or stored in a bear canister.
 - **Freeze-Dried Food** – Lightweight meals with long shelf life that require only hot water. A backpacking staple due to low weight and convenience.
 - **Fuel** – The energy source for stoves (e.g., isobutane canisters, white gas, alcohol). Trip length and stove type determine what to bring.
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G

- **Gaiters** – Fabric covers that go over boots and ankles to keep out dirt, rocks, and snow. Especially useful in wet or rugged terrain.
- **Gear Loops** – Small loops found on backpacks or harnesses for attaching gear externally.

- **Gear Shakedown** – The process of reviewing and trimming down your gear to eliminate unnecessary weight before a trip.
 - **GPS (Global Positioning System)** – A satellite-based navigation tool. Used via handheld units or smartphones with offline maps.
 - **Guy Lines** – Cords attached to tents or tarps that help secure them in wind. Typically staked into the ground.
 - **Guylines Tensioner** – A small clip or slide that allows adjustment of guyline tension without tying knots.
 - **Gram Weenie** – A term for ultralight hikers obsessed with cutting every possible gram of weight from their pack.
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H

- **Hammock Camping** – A shelter system using a hammock suspended between trees, often with a tarp and bug net. Preferred in forested areas.
 - **Hang Kit** – A rope, carabiner, and sack used to hang food from a tree branch (bear hang). Requires skill to set up properly.
 - **Hard Shell** – A waterproof outer layer (e.g., rain jacket) designed to protect against wind and precipitation.
 - **Headlamp** – A hands-free light worn on the head. Crucial for night hiking, cooking after dark, or finding the bathroom at night.
 - **Hiker Hunger** – A phenomenon where long-distance hikers develop huge appetites due to caloric output. A real and glorious part of backpacking.
 - **Hiking Poles / Trekking Poles** – Adjustable poles that reduce joint stress, aid balance, and improve stability on difficult terrain.
 - **Hip Belt** – A padded strap on a backpack that transfers weight to your hips, reducing shoulder strain.
 - **Hydration Bladder** – A water reservoir (usually 1.5–3L) stored in a backpack with a hose for sipping water on the go.
 - **Hydration Tablets** – Electrolyte-replacement tablets added to water to prevent cramps and dehydration.
 - **Hypothermia** – A dangerous drop in body temperature due to cold exposure. Prevented with proper layering and staying dry.
 - **Hyperlite Mountain Gear** – A premium ultralight backpacking brand known for using Dyneema fabric in shelters and backpacks.
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I

- **Ice Axe** – A mountaineering tool used for balance and self-arrest on snowfields or icy slopes. Relevant in alpine or glacier trekking.
- **Inflatable Pad** – A sleeping pad filled with air, providing insulation and cushioning. More compact than foam but can puncture.
- **Insulated Jacket** – A warm layer (usually down or synthetic) for cold weather. Often used at camp or during breaks.
- **Insulating Layer** – The middle layer in a clothing system, used to retain body heat. Typically fleece, synthetic fill, or down.
- **Internal Frame Backpack** – A modern backpack with support rods built into the fabric. Offers better balance and comfort than external frame packs.
- **Itinerary** – A detailed trip plan shared with someone back home. Includes route, campsites, dates, and emergency contact info — essential for safety.

- **Isobutane Canister** – A fuel type used for lightweight backpacking stoves. Convenient and widely available.
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J

- **Jetboil** – A popular integrated cooking system known for rapid water boiling and fuel efficiency. Ideal for dehydrated meals and hot drinks.
 - **Journal** – A lightweight notebook for recording trail thoughts, sketches, or mileage. Adds a personal touch to the backpacking experience.
 - **JMT (John Muir Trail)** – A classic 211-mile trail in the Sierra Nevada, known for alpine beauty. Common among experienced backpackers and section hikers.
 - **Jump Start** – Starting a thru-hike earlier than ideal conditions and skipping forward/back to avoid weather or fire closures.
 - **Jerky** – Dried meat used as a high-protein snack. Lightweight, calorie-dense, and long-lasting—perfect for the trail.
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K

- **Kahtoola Microspikes** – Traction devices worn over hiking shoes for grip on ice and snow. Common in shoulder seasons or alpine environments.
 - **Knot (Backpacking)** – Common knots include the taut-line hitch, bowline, and trucker's hitch. Used for tarps, bear hangs, and gear repair.
 - **Kindling** – Small twigs or dry material used to start a fire. Not always easy to find in wet conditions.
 - **Kelty** – A trusted outdoor gear brand offering budget-friendly tents and packs. Known for durability and value.
 - **Kula Cloth** – A reusable antimicrobial pee cloth for women. Promotes hygiene and reduces toilet paper waste in the backcountry.
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L

- **Laminated Map** – A waterproof, tear-resistant map. Ideal for wet weather or long trips where durability is critical.
 - **Lantern** – A small light source for camp use. Some headlamps convert into lanterns with diffusers or clips.
 - **Layering System** – The strategy of wearing base, insulating, and outer (shell) layers to manage temperature and moisture.
 - **Leave No Trace (LNT)** – A set of principles guiding responsible outdoor behavior. Includes packing out trash, staying on trail, and minimizing impact.
 - **Lifestraw** – A personal water filter straw used to drink directly from streams or lakes. Useful as an emergency or ultralight option.
 - **Lightweight Backpacking** – A gear philosophy focused on reducing pack weight (usually <20 lbs base weight) while retaining safety and comfort.
 - **Liquid Fuel Stove** – A stove that runs on white gas or other liquid fuels. Performs well in cold weather and at high altitudes.
 - **Long Spoon** – A utensil with an extended handle, great for reaching into freeze-dried meal pouches without getting your hand dirty.
 - **Loom Bands / Hair Ties** – Multi-use elastic bands that can serve as gear ties, strap keepers, or even emergency fixes.
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M

- **Map** – A topographic representation of the terrain showing trails, elevation, water sources, and landmarks. Essential for navigation and trip planning.
 - **Microspikes** – Lightweight traction devices with small metal spikes, used over boots in icy conditions. Ideal for shoulder seasons and mountain passes.
 - **Mileage (Daily)** – The number of miles hiked per day. Important for planning energy needs, campsites, and overall trip duration.
 - **Minimalist Backpacking** – A style of hiking with an emphasis on only carrying essential items. Similar to ultralight but may go even further in simplicity.
 - **Mirror** – A small signal mirror for emergencies or for hygiene purposes. Can be used to flash sunlight toward rescuers.
 - **Moisture Wicking** – A fabric's ability to pull sweat away from the skin to keep you dry. Critical for preventing hypothermia and chafing.
 - **Moleskin** – A soft bandage material used to protect and treat hot spots and blisters. Staple in any first-aid kit.
 - **Multiday Trip** – Any backpacking trip that spans more than one night. Requires planning for food, water, and weather.
 - **Multitool** – A compact tool with blades, scissors, pliers, and screwdrivers. Useful for gear repair and general trail fixes.
 - **Mylar Blanket** – Also called a space blanket. Lightweight emergency gear that reflects body heat to prevent hypothermia.
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N

- **Navigation** – The process of finding your way using maps, compass, GPS, and natural signs. A core backcountry skill.
 - **Nalgene Bottle** – Durable, wide-mouth plastic water bottle popular among backpackers. Can handle boiling water and freezing temps.
 - **Neck Gaiter (Buff)** – A tubular fabric piece used as a scarf, headband, face cover, or sun protection. Versatile and ultralight.
 - **NoBo (Northbound)** – A hiker traveling north on a long-distance trail (e.g., from Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail).
 - **Nutrition (Backpacking)** – Refers to the balance of calories, carbs, fat, and protein in trail meals. Critical for endurance and energy.
 - **Night Hiking** – Hiking after sunset using a headlamp. Sometimes done to beat heat, meet mileage goals, or enjoy the night sky.
 - **Nesting Cook System** – A compact cooking set where pot, stove, and cup fit into one another for efficient packing.
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P

- **Pack Cover** – A waterproof cover that slips over your backpack to protect it during rain. Some packs come with one integrated.
- **Pack Liner** – A waterproof bag (or trash compactor bag) that lines the inside of your pack to keep contents dry.
- **Pack Weight** – The total weight of your loaded backpack, including food, fuel, and water. Key consideration for comfort and safety.
- **Pace** – The rate at which you hike. Affects daily mileage, energy expenditure, and rest planning.
- **Paracord** – Lightweight nylon cord with high tensile strength. Used for bear hangs, tarp setup, repairs, and emergency gear.

- **Permits** – Required in many parks and wilderness areas for overnight use, entry quotas, or fire regulations. Planning ahead is essential.
 - **Personal Locator Beacon (PLB)** – A device that can send an SOS signal to rescue authorities from remote locations. Satellite-based and used for emergencies.
 - **PCT (Pacific Crest Trail)** – A 2,650-mile trail running from Mexico to Canada through California, Oregon, and Washington. One of the U.S. "Triple Crown" trails.
 - **PCT Bear Hang** – A specific bear hang technique using a carabiner and stick toggle. Considered more effective and less damaging to trees.
 - **Puffy Jacket** – A down or synthetic insulated jacket. Lightweight, compressible, and warm — a core part of a backpacker's layering system.
 - **Purification Tablets** – Chemical tablets (typically chlorine dioxide) used to kill pathogens in untreated water. Lightweight and reliable backup.
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Q

- **Quilt (Backpacking Quilt)** – An alternative to sleeping bags, backpacking quilts are open on the bottom to reduce weight and bulk. They rely on sleeping pads for insulation and are favored by ultralight hikers.
 - **Quick-Dry Towel** – A lightweight, compact towel that dries fast. Useful for bathing, cleaning, or drying off gear in damp environments.
 - **Quinoa** – A high-protein grain used in homemade dehydrated meals. Lightweight and calorie-dense, great for vegetarian backpacking diets.
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R

- **Rainfly** – The waterproof outer layer of a tent. Protects against rain and wind while allowing ventilation to reduce condensation.
 - **Rain Gear** – Waterproof clothing (jacket and pants) that keeps you dry in wet weather. Essential in any environment where storms are possible.
 - **Ration Planning** – Estimating how much food you need per day on the trail. Helps ensure you have enough calories without overpacking.
 - **Rawlogy Ball** – A cork massage ball used by hikers to relieve sore muscles and tight fascia. Lightweight and multipurpose.
 - **Resupply Point** – A location where you can pick up food and gear mid-hike. Often post offices, trail towns, or hiker boxes.
 - **Ridgeline** – A piece of cord used to hang a tarp or shelter. Also refers to a trail or route that follows a mountain ridge.
 - **Rock Bag (Throw Bag)** – A small bag used to throw over a tree branch to hang food. Part of a bear hang system.
 - **R-Value** – A measurement of a sleeping pad's insulation. The higher the R-value, the warmer it is. Crucial for preventing heat loss to the ground.
 - **Route Finding** – The skill of identifying and following a safe path, especially off-trail or in snow-covered areas.
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S

- **Section Hiking** – Completing a long-distance trail in sections over time, rather than in one continuous thru-hike.
- **Self-Arrest** – A mountaineering technique using an ice axe to stop a fall on snow or ice. Important for snowfield crossings.

- **Shell Layer** – Your outermost weatherproof layer, typically a rain jacket or wind shell. Protects from wind and precipitation.
- **Shelter** – Your sleeping structure, such as a tent, tarp, hammock, or bivy. Chosen based on terrain, weight, and conditions.
- **Shakedown Hike** – A test hike to evaluate your gear setup before a longer trip. Useful for trimming weight and identifying missing items.
- **Sit Pad** – A small foam or inflatable pad used for sitting comfortably on rough or wet terrain. Adds luxury without much weight.
- **Slackpacking** – Hiking without your full backpack (e.g., having someone shuttle your gear). Often done on thru-hikes to enjoy a "light and fast" day.
- **Sleeping Bag** – Insulated bedding used for warmth at night. Rated by temperature and available in down or synthetic fill.
- **Sleeping Pad** – A pad placed under your sleeping bag to provide insulation and comfort. Comes in foam or inflatable styles.
- **Slug (Trail Slang)** – A hiker who prefers a slower pace. Often used humorously or with self-deprecation.
- **Snacks** – Trail-friendly food like bars, jerky, and dried fruit. Essential for steady energy throughout the day.
- **Solar Charger** – A small panel used to charge electronics using sunlight. Useful for longer trips or remote areas.
- **SPF (Sun Protection Factor)** – A rating on sunscreens indicating how well they block UV rays. High-SPF sunscreen is important for skin protection at elevation.
- **Sponge/Wipe** – Used for dish cleaning or personal hygiene. Biodegradable options preferred for environmental friendliness.
- **Spork** – A combination spoon and fork. A backpacking staple for lightweight, minimalist eating.
- **Stuff Sack** – A basic sack used to organize gear inside your pack. Compression versions can reduce the volume of bulky items.
- **Summit** – The highest point of a mountain or ridge. Often a destination or side trip for backpackers.
- **Suspension System** – In hammocks, this refers to the straps and hardware used to hang the hammock from trees. For backpacks, it refers to the frame, hip belt, and harness system.
- **Synthetic Insulation** – A man-made material that mimics down but performs better when wet. Used in jackets, sleeping bags, and pads.

T

- **Tarp Shelter** – A minimalist shelter setup using a tarp, cord, and trekking poles. Lightweight, but requires skill to pitch effectively.
- **Technical Terrain** – Trail sections involving scrambling, climbing, or navigation hazards. Often requires advanced skills or gear.
- **Ten Essentials** – A list of critical items for safe backcountry travel: navigation, headlamp, sun protection, first aid, knife, fire, shelter, extra food, water, and clothes.
- **Tent Stakes** – Pegs used to secure tents or tarps to the ground. Come in various materials (aluminum, titanium) and shapes.
- **Thru-Hike** – A continuous hike of an entire long-distance trail within a single season (e.g., Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail).
- **Trekking Poles** – Adjustable poles used for balance and joint support. Especially helpful during steep climbs and descents.

- **Trail Angel** – A person who supports hikers with kindness, food, or rides. Common on long-distance trails.
 - **Trail Magic** – Unexpected gifts or kindnesses on the trail — like a cooler of cold drinks left by a trail angel.
 - **Trail Name** – A nickname adopted or given during a long-distance hike. Becomes a part of hiker identity.
 - **Trailhead** – The starting point of a trail, often with parking, signs, or registration boxes.
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U

- **Ultralight Backpacking** – A philosophy focused on minimizing base weight (typically under 10–12 lbs) while maintaining safety and comfort.
 - **Underquilt** – An insulated layer hung underneath a hammock for warmth. Essential for hammock camping in cooler temperatures.
 - **Ursack** – A bear-resistant fabric bag used to protect food. Lighter and more packable than hard canisters but not accepted everywhere.
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V

- **Ventilation (Tent or Clothing)** – The design feature allowing airflow to reduce condensation. Key for comfort and staying dry.
 - **Vestibule** – The covered area outside a tent door, useful for storing gear while keeping it protected from rain.
 - **Vitamin I** – Trail slang for ibuprofen, commonly used to manage inflammation, soreness, and minor injuries.
 - **Voluntary Permit** – A non-required permit used for tracking trail usage or practicing Leave No Trace ethics (common on some trails).
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W

- **Wag Bag** – A pack-out toilet system used in areas where catholes aren't allowed (e.g., alpine zones, deserts). Contains gelling agents and odor control.
 - **Water Filter** – A device used to physically remove bacteria and protozoa from water. Comes in pump, squeeze, and gravity formats.
 - **Water Purifier** – Treats viruses in addition to bacteria and protozoa. Often needed in international or tropical areas.
 - **Waypoint** – A GPS marker or location used in route planning or navigation.
 - **Weather Window** – A forecasted period of stable weather suitable for high-elevation or exposed hikes.
 - **Windbreak** – Natural or artificial barriers (e.g., rocks, tarp) that block wind around camp or cooking areas.
 - **Wilderness Permit** – Required access document for entering protected wilderness areas. Helps manage impact and preserve the environment.
 - **Wicking Layer** – See **Base Layer**. Helps transport sweat away from skin and prevent chilling.
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X

- **X-frame Pad** – A skeletal-shaped inflatable sleeping pad with minimal material to save weight. Often used by ultralight backpackers.
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Y

- **Yaktrax** – Lightweight traction devices for icy trails. Less aggressive than microspikes, used mostly for mild winter hiking.
 - **Yosemite Decimal System (YDS)** – A scale for rating hike/scramble/climb difficulty. Class 1 is walking, Class 5 involves technical climbing.
 - **Youth Pack** – A backpack sized and designed for children or small-framed adults, with appropriate load support and fit.
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Z

- **Z-lite Pad** – A popular closed-cell foam pad made by Therm-a-Rest. Durable, lightweight, and accordion-folding.
 - **Zero Day** – A rest day during a long-distance hike where zero miles are hiked. Used for recovery, laundry, resupply, and rest.
 - **Zipper Pull** – A small attachment on zippers that makes them easier to open with gloves or in the dark.
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