



## Attention Shoppers!

**You won't break the bank outfitting yourself with gear from America's largest retailer. The question is, how does discount equipment stand up to the rigors of the wilds?**

By [Kristin Hostetter](#), August 1999

The weather turned on us faster than a jilted lover. Just a mile from the trailhead, our blue-sky day turned into a cloud-spitting contest, with fog so thick you could hide London in the Indian Heaven Wilderness where we were headed. But such are the vagaries of hiking in the Great Northwest in autumn, where precipitation is a constant threat, temperatures are mercurial, and your gear had better be the best money can buy.

At least, that's what I thought at the time. Then came Fog Man, an apparition that floated out of the clouds and, as if by divine intervention, made me question my need for "good" backpacking gear and apparel.

Okay, so he was just a knobby-kneed, grubby hiker who looked like he'd been out on this section of the Pacific Crest Trail a day too long. Besides dirt, his trail appearance included loosely laced, brown "hiking" shoes (I'm sure that's what the box said), blue jeans, a yellow rubber slicker torn at one cuff, a faded bandanna around his neck, and a gray, wool skullcap. And one more thing: an ear-to-ear smile, despite the lousy conditions.

"Hello!" he said way too cheerfully as he eyed our high-tech, expensive equipage. "Where're you headed?" We told him, then listened as he filled the damp air with all manner of merry adjectives, almost falling over himself describing his three-day trip to the same neck of the Washington woods we intended to visit. He was so excited that I barely caught a word he said. Of course, I wasn't paying close attention. I was checking out his gear. The thin shoulder straps on his external frame pack sliced into his shoulders and there was no hipbelt to ease the burden, which appeared to be considerable. Lashed to the bottom of the frame with gray rope was a large black garbage bag containing his sleeping bag (I could see the plaid, flannel lining through a rip in the plastic). Various items hung from the pack—a cook pot, a canteen, a pair of dirty cotton tube socks.

"I'd have stayed longer, but the weather's turning ugly," he said, looking up at the dripping Douglas fir. "Hope you folks stay dry!" he said as he turned and plodded toward the trailhead, an obvious spring in his step.

We didn't. The rain intensified, as did the wind, and the temperature continued to drop. By the time we set up camp, the conditions were so bad that we could barely rig a cooking tarp. We dove into the tents, soaked to the soul, and tried to sleep our way through the storm. While lying there, I thought about who was the wiser: me with all my cutting-edge, pricey, and saturated gear or Fog Man, with his no-name equipment and the good sense to head home when things looked bad?

There was only one way to find out. I would go to Wal-Mart and outfit myself head to toe in **budget** gear.

If someone were to walk out of the Pacific and, as their first matter of business on dry land, ask, "Where can I get some reasonably priced camping gear?" chances are many answers would start with "W." In the United States, only the Golden Arches are more common than Wal-Mart.

Within each store you'll find sprawling hunting, fishing, and camping departments. Or as the Wal-Martians would probably tell you, everything for the complete outdoorsperson. In fact, according to National Sporting Goods Association statistics, a large portion of the people who don't shop at places like L.L. Bean, EMS, and REI purchase their camping gear at a local Wal-Mart.

So, like the masses, I decided to do the same, to see just what kind of gear these folks are carrying into the woods. And more important, whether it held some mysterious answer to all the smiles I've seen on so many faces.

One February morning, armed with a trusty credit card, I walked into my nearby Eugene, Oregon, Wal-Mart, determined to walk out with everything I'd need for a weekend hiking trip along the Oregon coast. Like the giddy winners of an all-expense-paid shopping spree, Northwest Editor John Harlin and I spent 3 hours and \$520 at the store. Some choices were easy, others required much debate. For example, we could have gone with a \$100 tent instead of our \$37 one. But for \$100, we could go to a specialty shop and find better shelter. And we were on an all-out bargain hunt, so we routinely chose products that fell in the middle or low end of the price spectrum.

What follows is a rundown of our Wal-Mart-equipped trip, plus all the major categories of gear purchased there. For three days and two nights we wandered through the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area. The hiking was easy and the weather a mixture of sun, rain, and wind. In short, perfect testing weather. The first night was relatively mild with a smattering of rain and a gentle ocean breeze. Our Wal-Mart gear checked out A-Okay.

Day two saw warm sunshine and gorgeous coastal views. Again, our Wal-Mart gear worked fine. There were even moments that my assignment-to concentrate on gear-slipped my mind as we played in the sand and listened to waves pound the beach. That second night, the rain rolled in, steady as the ocean tides. This is when our gear started to show its limitations.

I didn't pull any punches in reviewing this **budget** gear; I held it up to the same standards consistent with all Backpacker field tests. However, one thing kept rattling around in my head: All the equipment, clothing, and food for two purchased at Wal-Mart cost us less than a single tent from some companies. That's a weighty thought to mull, and one that made me think I was on the road to understanding Fog Man's sunny disposition.

### **Clothing**

We began our shopping spree in the clothing department as the smell of hot, buttered popcorn wafted across the store. "Our winter selection is depleted," explained one cheerful Wal-Mart employee as she helped us search through the men's and women's departments for anything warm and synthetic. Apparently, we were a month or two late to partake of wool sweaters, pile, and blaze orange synthetic-filled hunting vests. John was lucky, though. He found a midweight acrylic sweater with a zip neck and a long, butt-warming cut. He layered it over a crewneck sweatshirt made of a polyester/cotton blend. (Note: We usually avoid all things cotton, especially when rain threatens, because it dries so slowly. But in this case, we had no choice. It was cotton or nothing.) I found a sweatsuit (pullover and pants) made of a nappy polyester material that resembled lightweight pile. The cost was \$16, and because it was women's size XL, the suit hung on me like the skin of an old elephant (I'm normally a women's medium).

Except for the annoying little pocket of manly fabric and the bulky fly seams, my men's polypro-and-wool long johns bottoms were perfect. But my long johns top was a waffle-knit, crew neck with 25 percent cotton content. It was a men's medium, but sized to fit a beanpole, with a torso that stretched below my crotch and sleeves that extended a few inches beyond my hands. At least the fuzzy interior was soft next to my skin.

Over my longies went a pair of lined nylon windpants like the type my father might wear on a rainy day on the golf course. They weren't waterproof, but they did repel light rain and cut the wind. They even almost fit! My jacket was strange—a yellow rubber slicker with a thin layer of quilted insulation. It had a hood, snaps up the front, and two patch pockets. I didn't like the stiffness of the rubber, the gapping between snaps, or the baggy cuffs that invited water up my sleeves. It generally kept rain out, but it was as breathable as a plastic shower curtain. I had to be careful not to walk too fast, otherwise I'd break out in a body-soaking sweat.

**Bottom line:** Size-wise, you'll have a decent array of choices—if you're a 180- to 200-pound man. If you stand 5'5" and have a few curves, though, be ready to sacrifice. The lesson for women and smaller people: Shop early, shop often, and hope for the best because stock varies from season to season and store to store.

### **Boots**

I'll admit to some pessimism here because at first blush, I was convinced my Gary Mt. Everest boots (\$22.76, 2 pounds 10 ounces) would be blister breeders and have me limping down the trail within the

first mile. But as it turned out, they weren't bad boots. In fact, the supple leather, padded ankle collar, fully gusseted tongue, and knobby treads worked pretty darn well for casual trail hiking with a light pack. The problem was that the pair I finally settled on was a tad too big (a men's size 7 instead of my normal women's size 7). After trying on 12 pairs of boots ranging from yellow construction footwear to women's size 5 fabric/leather jobs, they were the best fit I could find. Again, bad timing, according to another friendly Wal-Mart salesperson. Still, after a day and a half of mellow dune walking, I wound up with only a small blister on my left heel-nothing a little moleskin couldn't fix, and not half as bad as I had anticipated.

John's feet stayed warm, dry, and reasonably comfortable in his all-leather Coleman Pike Waterproof boots (\$34.76, 3 pounds 2 ounces). They seemed fairly well made, and his feet suffered no blisters despite zero break-in time. "However, the fit doesn't match my low-volume foot," he said. "The boots are long-in-the-toe, which creates an awkward crease-line over your toes. And the ankle area offers little support."

**Bottom line:** The boots did their job, and if they fit your feet better than ours, they'll probably suffice for light-duty backpacking. Personally, I'd be hesitant about taking them on a lengthy backpacking trip.

### **Cooking Gear**

When we first pulled the Century Trail Scout (\$15.96) propane stove out of its box (everything is boxed at Wal-Mart), we were astounded at its heft and girth. The burner is 6 1/2 by 6 1/2 inches wide, the plastic base is almost 8 inches in diameter, and the propane tank is 8 inches tall. Assembled, it weighs a mighty 2 pounds 7 ounces. I've seen backyard barbecues that were more diminutive than this thing. But if you don't mind the size, it does everything a pack stove is supposed to do. It fired up reliably on chilly, wet mornings, it boiled water in a snap, and it quietly simmered our "diablo sauce" without scorching.

The Texsport Cookset (\$9.96) is one of the best bargains we found. There's a 1.9-liter pot with a bail handle, and a 6 1/2-inch fry pan with plastic-coated swing handles. Both have copper bottoms for even heat distribution and rounded edges for easy cleaning. The set weighs only 1 pound and comes with a storage sack. Our meals cooked well, cleanup was relatively easy, and our single gripe was that a piece of the plastic coating on one of the swing handles chipped almost immediately.

**Bottom line:** If you don't mind the size, the stove is a good buy. The light inexpensive cookset is a great buy. Period.

### **Tents**

At about 2 a.m. on our third and final morning, something woke me up. Maybe it was thirst. Maybe it was a shiver. Maybe it was a sixth sense that told me rain had been falling for 5 straight hours and our tent had sprung a leak. I sat up and grabbed the foot of my sleeping bag. Sopping wet. I looked around for something to remedy the situation, like a Maytag dryer, then dropped the sodden foot section. It made a little splashing noise when it hit the floor.

By 3:30 a.m. a mote encircled our bags. I watched in amazement as water literally flowed through the untaped floor seams and recalled the description on the Ozark Trail Backpacking Dome tent (\$36.96, 7 pounds) box: The "revolutionary" UV-Tex 5 tent fabric is a "nonstretch, treated fabric that ensures maximum water protection and provides dryness superior to ordinary nylon tents." The box also claimed that "taped seams help against rain leakage." There wasn't a taped seam in sight. After a few hours of rain, everything inside was soaked-books, map, spare clothes, sleeping pads, most of our bags. I spent the remainder of the night sitting upright in the center of my pad, with the damp (as opposed to sopping wet) part of my bag clutched around me.

Besides the leaking, the side walls are made from a nonbreathable material that promotes condensation buildup (read: more water to cope with). The fiberglass poles are loosely shock-corded, which makes pitching the tent a two-person affair-one to push, one to pull-because the pole sections come apart and catch on the sleeves. Like all fiberglass poles, these aren't meant for high wind or heavy snow.

On the plus side, the tent is roomy enough for two people, two dogs, and gear. And who knows, maybe if we had seam-sealed the whole thing meticulously-the instructions don't recommend it-the tent might not have leaked so badly.

**Bottom line:** The Ozark Trail Backpacking Dome will do if you camp only where it sprinkles. Otherwise, spring for a mini weatherband radio, too, so you can find out when big rain is coming and hightail it outta there.

### **Sleeping Bags**

When shopping, we quickly passed over the rectangular bags (too bulky) and those that had any cotton content (too cold when wet), and zeroed in on the Ozark Trail Glacier Bay 25°F bags. Filled with Hollofil, these mummy bags each weighed 4 pounds and cost \$39.96, making them the single most expensive items we bought. The nylon taffeta shells and linings are similar to those on a \$200 bag-durable and water-repellent. But the best testimonial came from John: "In the wee hours of the morning, the puddle in the tent rose high enough to soak through the foot of my bag. I merely lifted the dripping section onto a pile of wet raingear and went back to sleep. The Hollofil polyester insulation kept me warm even when soaked."

Me, I'm more of a wimp than John. My bag seemed like a giant sponge that rainy night, and although I did everything possible to convince myself that a wet synthetic bag is nothing more than a slight inconvenience, I was a cold, unhappy camper. I cannot, however, blame the sleeping bag. I'm a perpetually cold sleeper, and I most likely would have felt the same in a \$250 bag. The culprit was the tent.

**Bottom line:** Our bags weren't bad performers for the price, and will probably do fine overall if the temps don't go too low and you can keep the bags dry.

### **Packs**

During our shopping spree, I asked a salesperson to direct us to the backpacks. She led us to a small display of children's book bags adorned with Barney and Luke Skywalker.

"No, I mean big backpacks. Like the kind you use for backpacking."

"Oh, we don't get those in stock till summertime," she replied.

We were disappointed, to say the least. Luckily, we found some cheap internal frame packs at an army surplus store next door. As of press time (late April), my local Wal-Mart still had no backpacks in stock-plenty of the book bags, a few children's external frames, but nothing for an adult.

**Bottom line:** Again, shop early and remember that seasons affect what's on the shelves.