



They may not look very appetizing in their foil packages, but freeze-dried backpacking foods are lightweight and won't spoil.



A specially-designed backpacker's tent is lightweight and stable, enough so it can't be blown over.

Backpacking: It's often a summertime karma

Story and photos: ED BAS

There aren't many sensations that can beat climbing a hill miles from civilization or sleeping under a wilderness night sky. If you aren't the type to stay inside a motor home complete with kitchen and color television when you're camping, backpacking can be your summertime karma.

But there are a few obstacles on the way. To make the most of your excursion into the Great Beyond, you have to know how to prepare yourself.

When you walk into a backpack supplier like the Benchmark, on Rochester Road, you are immediately both enticed and overwhelmed.

Sandy Graham, manager of the Rochester Benchmark, also is a mountain climber and camper who knows the products he sells.

"We're a specialty shop in the true sense of the term," Graham said. "The only place you can buy equipment like ours is in a few other specialty shops or else through catalogues."

One whole wall is taken up by backpacks hanging on pegs, packs that are meant to take you from city slicker to north woodsman. But how do you know which pack to buy?

PACKS ARE, without exception, made of nylon with aluminum tube frames. Usually, the nylon is ur-

coated, Graham said, so that rain must be kept out with a pack cover.

Coating the pack weakens the material by 25 per cent," Graham said. While the packs have no moving parts and don't wear out like the family car tends to, buying a pack is no simple matter.

The pack should be made of a good aluminum," Graham said. "The cheap ones are made of magnesium, which is brittle and will break."

"You should also count the number of cross members on the frame. Five is better than four, and four is better than three. That's one place where you really don't have to worry about the weight."

"A pack slammed down over and over with 30 pounds of supplies in it has to take a beating. And the cross members should be heliarc welded, not soldered or fitted with pins."

There is competition and some contradiction among shop owners, particularly since most backpacking shops are small and the owners themselves backpackers with opinions and favorites. At the Benchmark, Graham swears by the Kelly pack, while at another Rochester shop, the owner preferred the Jansport.

Graham said men should have to carry no more than 30-35 pounds, and women no more than 25. He also said a person should be sized for a pack



much like one should be fitted for a pair of shoes.

EVEN ZIPPERS are important on a pack when you're walking in the woods with your home tucked inside a bunch of nylon compartments on your back. Nickel zippers are 50 per cent stronger than nylon, Graham said. Pockets up near the top of the pack are essential for easy access to water, compass, maps and other frequently needed gear. Padded hip belts are recommended to help take the weight off your shoulders and lift it onto your hips where it belongs.

A bottom-line pack costs about \$42. A better pack suited for most backpackers with padded hip belt, quick release bindings and reinforced stitching costs about \$80.

Benchmark opened its Rochester store Thanksgiving and employs three persons, including Graham. Another Benchmark is in Farmington.

The Down Loft, also in Rochester, bills itself as "specialists in down apparel" but also sells \$60-70 down sleeping bags in a year. The store was started 2½ years ago and is owned by John Lassaline, with outlets in Traverse City and Petoskey.

Down is a natural material from ducks and geese. According to Lassaline, the boom in consumption of down products has made it difficult to obtain the material, 80 per cent of which comes from Europe. A jacket with only 12 ounces of down insulation can keep a person warm to 20 degrees below zero, which also makes it an ideal material for insulation in sleeping bags.

WHILE CLOTH sleeping bags can look like a living room rug when rolled up, a down bag is literally "stuffed" handful by handful into a nylon pouch the size of a small pillow. A down sleeping bag, according to Lassaline, weighing a total of 3½ pounds can protect a body to zero degrees.

Fred Lassaline runs the Rochester store for his brother John, who lives near the straits of Mackinac. John has six teenagers of his own, "all of them backpackers."

Down has become an "old-fashioned modern wonder" because it's become something of a fad among youth.

"But a kid who's groped and struggled to save \$100 for a sleeping bag," John said, "comes through that door pretty much knowing what he wants. He can go out of here knowing that he's got a good piece of equipment, something he can be proud of."

The Lassalines share the advantage that Graham has in that they know their product. They can give information on the type of stitching to the best way to clean nylon. Most down products are light so they require only lightweight shells of "ripstop" nylon, but can become fragile when the bag is wet and weighs up to 60 pounds.

"THERE ARE manufacturers who claim they have something as good as down," Lassaline said, "materials that will dry faster than down. Well, a good camper will take care to keep his equipment dry. It's the big companies with lots of advertising power that are touting these new materials. But there just is nothing warmer or more comfortable than down."

Rochester Ski and Tennis Shop does 25 per cent of its business with backpackers, despite its name. Tom Hudson, who has been working at the store for two of its five years in Rochester, said interest in backpacking has soared.

Hudson swears by Jansport packs and sleeping bags, which are 50 per cent down and 50 per cent marmade material.

"Jansport packs are the best because they can use a lighter tubing since they're not welded," Hudson said. "We also sell almost exclusively Raichle (pronounced ry-clay) boots. They have Vibram soles, Norwegian welts and full grain."

That means the boot is made from a full piece of leather rather than two or more stitched together. Vibram is a brand name for the rubber lugged sole, and the welt is a method of double stitching. The boots cost \$65 per pair, but Hudson said they sell well, even to 10-12-year-old youngsters.

Besides the major decisions of which backpack, sleeping bag and shoes to buy, there are a thousand minor decisions on other packing accessories. There are tents, freeze-dried foods, clothes, rain gear and odds and ends with a cross section of names, materials and qualities that just might drive a person's wilderness lure right out of him or her. Somewhere between the simplicity of walking and the confusion of backpacking, there exists a happy medium that ends on a grassy plain in the deep woods.



Fred Lassaline of the Down Loft shows how the shape and close fit of a down sleeping bag keeps packers warm.



Tom Hudson of the Rochester Ski and Tennis Shop models a pair of eggs for historical Raichle hiking boots.



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