

Boot Purchasing and Care

Purchasing boots - what type to buy: For backpacking you generally want an all-leather hiking boot that can be waterproofed and/or one with a Gore-tex liner. Some hikers, including myself, have backpacked with trail-runner tennis shoes or low-top light-weight hiking shoes. Some AT thru-hikers complete their 2000+ mile journey in sandals! However, most people find they need the support of a sturdy medium-weight hiking boot. Boots with fabric portions, including in the tongue area, cannot be waterproofed and your feet will get wet. Make sure they're relatively light-weight, you don't need heavy mountaineering boots. One pound on the foot is equivalent to about five pounds in your backpack. Tread-type isn't that important but fit is...

Fitting boots: First put on the socks you are going to wear with your boots. I recommend a lightweight wicking liner sock made of polypropylene or Coolmax, followed by a mid to heavy polyester or wool blend sock. The liner sock will wick moisture away from your foot and provide a slippery rubbing surface to help prevent blisters. With the boots unlaced, push your toes forward until they are right up against the front of the boot, slide your index finger behind your heel. It should easily fit, if it is difficult or you can't do this the boots are too short. If there is much more room than this they are most likely too large.

Next tap your heel back into the heel cup and lace the boots snugly going from bottom to top. Your heel should not be able to lift much more than 1/4 inch. Excessive heel lift means the boot is too long or too wide. The boots should feel snug in the ball and the ankle, as these areas are where the boot will break-in. Lastly check the toes by kicking on them or by walking down a 45 degree incline. Your toes should not jam against the front of the boot. You should feel slight pressure on impact but not a sharp stab. If your toes do jam on the front of the boot then try lacing your boots tighter over the instep. If this does not work, the boots are too short or too wide. The boots should feel comfortable, if not try other sizes/widths or try a different brand. No amount of break-in will make an uncomfortable boot comfortable. Wear your boots indoors on carpeted areas only, until you are sure about the fit.

Break your boots in before going on a long hike. Wear them around the house, go for hikes in the neighborhood or on local trails - any opportunity where you can soften up the leather and get it to stretch a little to the shape of your foot.

Caring for your boots: It is important to treat leather boots with waterproofing. Treat them when they are new and after every trip. I've used Sno-Seal, basically beeswax, for years and have had good success with it. However, waxes waterproof the leather and doesn't allow it to breath. Nikwax is a better product but more expensive. Whatever you use apply it liberally to the toe box. If you use a wax you need to warm the leather up by putting them in the sun or a really warm place for a few hours so the leather can absorb the wax (note high heat warnings below). Silicone sprays penetrate the leather well but they don't repel dirt as well as waxes. Some types of oils, such as mink oil, can soften the leather, which may then allow it to stretch and provide less support. There are many products on the market, ask for recommendations at the store when you purchase the boots.

There are three cardinal rules of boot care:

1) Keep your boots clean and dry. Dirt and water are leather's worst enemies. Wiping them down often with a damp cloth can prevent dirt and dust particles from cutting away at the microscopic fibers that make leather strong and durable. Keep your boots dry by waterproofing them frequently. The less water absorbed by leather, the longer it will last and the more comfortable you'll be. Wet leather will stretch and weaken, and then shrink and become brittle when it dries. After each trip, scrape and brush off all dirt and then wipe your boots clean with a cloth and luke warm water (try not to get them too wet). Boots with leather linings can also be washed inside if salt accumulations develop. Allow boots to dry at room temperature - loosen the laces, pull the tongue back, and remove any insoles to speed drying. **When thoroughly dry, apply the waterproofing prior to storage.** This will condition the leather, preventing it from drying out and growing mold.

2) Be very careful when exposing boots to heat (ovens, hair dryers, heaters, campfires) as this can damage the leather and glues used in the seams and soles. If your skin can tolerate the heat your boot leather can. Also, try not to let your boots freeze when they are wet as this can also damage them.

3) Store your boots out of direct sunlight in a cool dry place. Boots stored wet or in humid places will grow mold, which will quickly ruin leather. Air should be able to circulate inside the boots.

If your boot sole starts to delaminate, or peel away from the boot, repair it immediately with Shoo-Goo or a similar product. A cobbler can fix broken stitching and even replace worn out soles.

Treat the leather on Gore-tex boots as described above - the leather still needs cleaning, drying and waterproofing to keep it in good shape.