

Have a better time, heighten your awareness, and avoid the beast-of-burden syndrome by cutting your pack weight in half.

Less Is More

By Mark Jenkins

Smile

STILL GREEN from the two days spent crashing around inside the hull of the ship, we swayed down the grated gangplank under a dry sun and stepped onto Africa. We were beneath large packs, carrying everything we thought we might need to cross the mountains and deserts and fields and forests: frying pan, tent, stove, clothes, camera, stuff. Originally we had even more. We left our prairie hometown on the other side of the world with ropes and ice axes and carabiners, intending to climb mountains, but after walking the width of rain-black Belgium, we ditched them. That was the first cut.

We were in North Africa for more than a month. Along the way, we relieved ourselves of yet more baggage—a series of cuts. It took us a week to cross Algeria. Eventually we made passage on a small boat that carried us across the Sicilian Channel to that rocky island. We camped in the mountains above the city of Palermo. One morning we hid our tent and packs and sleeping bags in the bushes and walked into the city. We wore our down jackets because it was still winter and a bit cool.

Returning to camp in the night, we began to sense something, an anxious and uncomfortable strangeness in our bellies. Wild and scared, we suddenly raced through the forest, then saw the signs: a tent pole here, pot lid over there, other bright remnants of our camping gear strewn in the bushes in the moonlight. It was all gone. Thieves.

When at last we believed what we saw, we stood above the Gulfo di Palermo, watching the lights of ships in a sea of black, and we raged and blasphemed the culprits. At dawn, we strolled over the pine needles through the pillars of warm light, silently assessing. When I looked over at Mike, he was grinning.

"Well, that was the last cut," he said.

"We don't have a thing left," I reminded him.

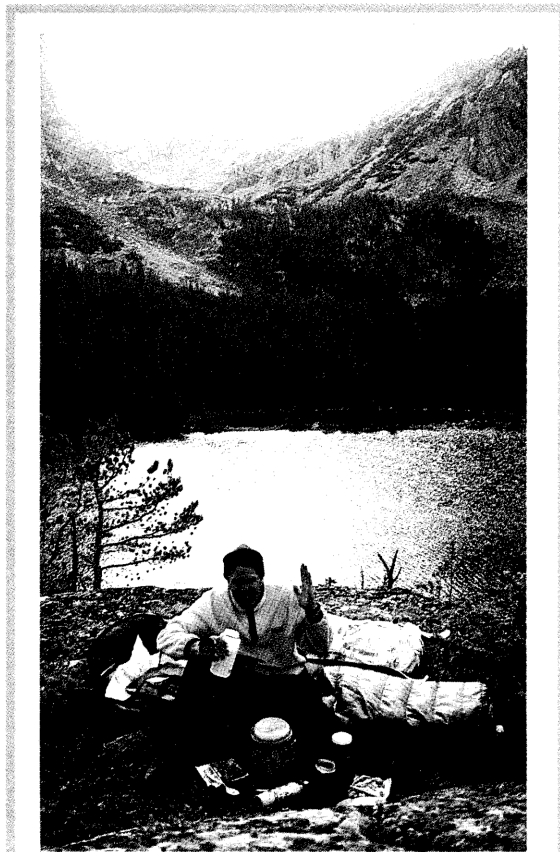
"Not true. Not true at all. We have boots on our feet. Clothes on our backs." He suddenly leaped in the air and clicked his heels.

"And our down coats," I said gaily, surprising myself.

"Exactly. And our jackknives."

Then, not knowing why, we laughed hard, rolling like puppies in the soft duff in the yellow morning light in Sicily. By noon we had expanded our personal kits by a plastic cafeteria cup and metal soup spoon apiece.

Thus equipped, we spent the next half year with little more. We went as far north as the Arctic Circle and as far east as Russia. We slept in our down coats at night and tied them around our waists during the day. During bad weather we slept under rocks or trees or cliffs or bushes, then moved fast in the morning to get warm. We drank water when we found it and ate cold food when we had it. Living this way, we hiked the Austrian Alps, climbed



A minimalist but comfortable campsite overlooking one of the many high-country lakes in the Beartooth Range. Because of the dearth of gear, the author was able to pack in about four minutes.

along the fjords of Norway, explored the North Sea above Holland, roamed the Black Forest of Germany, and traversed the perfumed valleys of France.

That was almost two decades ago, when I was young enough to be brave. What I didn't know then but came to realize in hindsight was the incalculably rich fortune of our melodramatic misfortune. In the following years, "the cut" metamorphized from a simple event into words with special meaning into a backcountry creed, a doctrine based upon this beautiful thought: Less is more.

There are only two principles of parsimony to wilderness travel. First, rigorously evaluate the true necessity of every item you intend to take, then pitch any that don't have unequivocal functionality. Second, once the select group of essentials is identified, search for each piece's lightest and most versatile incarnation. In both respects you must be ruthless.

To steer through this process, think of your equipment as tools that help you explore the wilderness. And any carpenter knows the right tools are everything. You don't need a sledgehammer to pound in a tack. You don't need a Bowie knife to part a bagel, and you don't need four T-shirts for one body. Try a little discipline. Test your frugality. Only if a tool is used every day is it worth carrying. Question the status quo. Clean your pot with sand and leave the scrubber at home. Do you really need camp slippers? Utter decadence! A book? Aren't the soon-vanished moments in the wilds entertainment enough?

Last fall, I went on a four-day trip into the Beartooth Wilderness of southwestern Montana. It was an indulgence in weightlessness—this time by choice, and with all the right, light gear. I hiked only several hours each day, but covered eight to 10 miles in a stretch. The trip was luxurious. I scampered up to 10,000 feet, then scampered back down. I circumnavigated lakes, watched mountain goats, listened to pikas, smelled wildflowers, forded rivers, and watched the sky move itself from one side of the mountains to the other.

I moved quickly and quietly because my pack was so light—16 pounds. A lean, clean pack makes for a clear clean mind. When you carry a light pack you recall what skipping is. It's actually possible to skip along a trail if your pack is light, even at high altitude. Remember bounding from boulder to boulder to cross a stream as a youngster, ignorant of your youth but certain of your agility and ability, and certain that you would not fall in? And you didn't. With a light pack, you can do it again. And you won't, again.

Remember dancing across talus and rocks and not losing your balance as they slipped out from under your feet? Simply scampering on as graceful and as surefooted as a mountain goat. With a light pack, you can do that.

With a light pack, you glide rather than drag through the landscape. Indeed, a light pack means you can once again regain the primeval, swift-smooth gait of the animals you came to see—wolves, deer, elk—forgetting and forsaking the dreadful, doltish domesticated animals of your weighted-down world back home.