



ULTRALIGHT HANDBOOK

Half the weight Twice the Fun

If you pack less (*a lot less*) and plan smart, you can hike farther, eat well, and feel better at day's end.

I. The Hike
II. The Plan
III. The Skills
IV. The Menu
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I.
The Hike

John Muir In a Week

Got a few days off, a pair of healthy feet, and a pain threshold higher than Dean Karnazes?

You can (possibly) blaze the length of America's Most Beautiful Trail. *Story and Photos by Michael Lanza*

"UMM, HEY BUDDY, YOU OKAY?"

It's 4:30 a.m., a time of day that puts us in the questionable company of cat burglars and alpinists. Our headlamps probe the inky, moonless black of Yosemite Valley. We're taking our very first steps on the 221-mile John Muir Trail. And my friend Mark Fenton is staggering violently, like a frat boy on a weekend bender.

"No problem, just a little vertigo I get hiking in the dark. I'll be fine." He lurches near the edge of the trail—which drops off into the dark roar of the Merced River far below.

That's when we dub him Stumbles. It was funny, at the time, because everything is funny and fun and easy when you're motoring effortlessly uphill at the outset of a long hike and your pack only clocks in at about six pounds. Besides, we're in Yosemite, a place crazy with distractions: In the faint first light, we stride beneath the ghostly shimmer of 600-foot Nevada Falls. Deer bound away silently in the chill air of dawn. Stars twinkle. Mountain winds whisper. At mid-morning, from ledges at 9,000 feet, we go slack-jawed at a shark's grin of peaks: Tenaya, Cathedral, Matthes Crest. The breathtaking thing is, we're lording over just a small taste of what's to come on the JMT: almost-constant alpine vistas of snow-slathered mountains and jagged granite spires. Passes at 12,000 and even 13,000 feet. And a constellation of lakes reflecting it all upside down.

We've all dreamed of hiking this trail, but we're also out here testing a theory: that, by going ultralight, we can collapse a three-plus-week trip into seven days of vacation. We're taking what Ray Jardine preached in *The Pacific Crest Trail*

Hiker's Handbook back in the 1990's—a then-controversial gospel that called for traveling 30 miles a day with a base pack weight of less than 10 pounds—to a questionably logical extreme. Back when I used to carry 50-pound loads on a regular basis, I could barely hike 10 miles a day. When I trimmed things down to 40 pounds, then 30, then even less, hikes of 15 or 20 miles felt close to effortless.

Which, inevitably, started me thinking about long trails. I soon learned that fit hikers going überlight were sailing "America's most beautiful trail," as the JMT is often called, in just 10 days. A Muir Trail veteran told me that "30- to 40-mile days are totally doable." Unfortunately, where another hiker might think that pounding out 31 miles a day for a solid week sounds just slightly over the top, I'm like Evel Knievel contemplating the Grand Canyon: My altered brain chemistry rationalizes, "How hard could that be?"

Before long, I'd convinced myself that thru-hiking the JMT in seven days was not only feasible but would even, quite possibly, be enjoyable. Honing my sales pitch, I assembled a team of the blissfully ignorant. I told them to get in the shape of their lives. I gave them four months. Fenton took 5 a.m. speed hikes on the rocky trails of the Blue Hills Reservation outside Boston. Todd Arndt did hours-long trail runs in the Boise foothills. Heather Dorn, from eastern Pennsylvania, ground out 25-mile day hikes in blistering heat on the Appalachian Trail. I eventually built up to a one-day, 32-mile jaunt in New Hampshire's White Mountains with Fenton—10,000 feet of ups and downs.

Now, on the JMT, it's paying off. Not to sound cocky, but



TAKE THAT, JOHNNY MUIR: MARK "STUMBLES" FENTON STAYS ON HIS FEET, FLYING PAST MARGE LAKE ON THE WAY UP TO SELDEN PASS.

we're chewing up distance. We roll into Sunrise High Sierra Camp—nearly 13 miles out—by 10 a.m., as fresh as if we just walked around the block. Come afternoon, the heat is draining, but by then we're chowing on burgers, fries, and shakes at the Tuolumne Meadows café at around mile 22. Most JMT thru-hikers take two days or more to get here.

But we're far from done with this day: Picking up our camping gear and a resupply of food in Tuolumne, our full loads now weigh a skimpy 18 pounds. We hike until the dusk bleeds to dark, pitching our tarps near a windswept, alpine tarn in Lyell Canyon. We pass the ibuprofen like we're doing shots, rub sore-but-not-too-sore feet, and take stock. On our first day, we've walked 34 miles, with 7,000 feet of uphill. Mark's pedometer reports an astonishing tally: We've taken 72,376 steps. We should look like boot-camp washouts, but instead we're just kind of tired. As we take an icy dip in the lake, below a skyline littered with granite cliffs, Stumbles tells me giddily, "You know what? I can't believe how good I feel."

I smile, naively, thinking: *We're gonna make it.*

"THIS IS THE BEST I'VE FELT ON THIS ENTIRE TRIP." Todd announces this as we bask in the sun after a frosty mid-morning swim in Purple Lake, pinched within a horse-shoe of unnamed 11,000-foot peaks. Which is strange, and maybe a little bit shocking, because since leaving Yosemite Valley exactly 54 hours ago, we've walked 72 miles. How? We hit the trail by 5:30 a.m. to take advantage of the cool temps. Manic, we pass tents closed to the prehistorically

quiet forest. All morning, we hurtle past backpackers humping huge loads, sweating salty rivers. We overhear their comments—"Those guys are bookin'!"—and repeatedly explain our big-mileage game plan. No one calls us crazy. In fact, they all say, "I gotta try that, too."

The JMT in August is not a place you normally go for solitude. But all those traditional backpackers—with their big loads and deluxe kitchens—don't get moving until mid-morning and quit by 5 p.m. Which means that during the day's finest hours, we have the Sierra to ourselves. Early and late, the sun casts long shadows across alpine gardens littered with granite boulders; alpenglow paints summits gold; and stillness pervades amphitheater views over Donohue Pass, Thousand Island Lake, and Silver Pass.

But then our mornings of frenzied energy bend into afternoons of withering heat. And calling the JMT dusty is like calling K2 breezy. As early as our second afternoon, inhaling swirls of chalky earth, I turn to Stumbles and say, "I hope this isn't starting to feel like a death march."

He pauses too long, then deadpans, "It has some aspects of that."

Every day, too, our feet ache a little more. Our blisters start to pulsate. On our fourth afternoon, we stop beside the South Fork San Joaquin River and peel off our shoes and socks for a therapeutic soak. I half expect our dirt-blackened, overheated soles to boil the water, cartoon-like. Instead, I get an elated jolt of frigid energy—it's never felt so damn good not to feel my feet. But then, reality: We commence The Ritual of the Tape, strategically covering

MARK GODLEY AND TODD ARNDT NEGOTIATE THE GRANITE SHARDS BELOW 13,120-FOOT FORESTER PASS ON THE JMT IN SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK.





TODD GETS REFLECTIVE AT SAPPHIRE LAKE IN KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK. BELOW RIGHT: DOING THE HIGH-WIRE ACT NEAR GARNET LAKE.

hot spots. Todd and Mark tape over wounds that look like small stratovolcanoes. Heather's feet look the worst: She's wrapping all 10 toes.

By that evening, Stumbles and I are climbing the switchbacks along Evolution Creek's fantastically endless succession of roaring waterfalls, which almost make me forget that my legs feel like wood. The sound drowns out my creeping doubt; the water, tumbling downhill, somehow keeps tugging me up. The indifferent wilderness has seen countless struggles here, but it buoys me anyway. The scenery is morphine, and I'm a lab chimp constantly pushing the button for another dose. Then Stumbles looks at me with sunken eyes. "I'm pasted," he confesses. We wait an hour for Heather and Todd to catch up; when they do, at dusk, it's clear that Heather's struggling. Still, she insists we hike until 9 p.m., because we've fallen behind schedule.

So we limp—and Stumbles weaves—in the dark up to a smooth granite slab near Evolution Lake. We lay our bags out under a sky machine-gunned with stars. Utterly prone, our legs and feet resting, the world instantly becomes a better place, the many miles a deluded memory. Comforted by the almost-silence of a wilderness night, we cling to the loitering hope that we still might pull this off.

AT SOME POINT, THE THING THAT WE WANT TO DO morphs into This Thing That We Have To Do. It may have happened way back on that second afternoon, when Stumbles and I deliberated the precise meaning of "death march." Maybe it happened this morning, our fifth, when things nearly unraveled: Our mystical sunrise hike past Evolution, Sapphire, and Wanda Lakes turned into an endorphin-charged rush up and over 12,000-foot Muir Pass ("Big rebound for me!" cried Stumbles), but then it devolved into a pathetic two-hour power nap beside a creek in LeConte Canyon. (We were waiting for terminally blistered

Heather, who dropped hours and miles behind after we left camp at first light.) Maybe it's when we finally bid farewell to her—after she limps up to us, promptly announces she's done, and decides to hobble out a side trail. Then again, it might just be because we've blitzed 135 miles in four and a half days, and we like resting in the LeConte shade, but resting costs us precious time. And we have to move. And moving is starting to suck. The prospect of another 86 miles in a little over two days seems, to say the least, daunting.

But we pick ourselves up and struggle on, like Napoleon into Russia, toward the JMT's hardest climb—a 4,000-foot ascent to 12,100-foot Mather Pass. We scale literally hundreds of switchbacks, shooting-gallery ducks ticking back and forth. Squinting into the nuclear sun, my brain insists there are turkey vultures circling overhead, waiting to peck my blisters. I've known *tired* intimately: College wrestling practices that left me unable to lift my arms. A seven-day ski traverse in Yellowstone made epic by a five-foot dump of snow. But this takes the feeling to a new level: My mind seems separated from my body, insisting on uphill



step after uphill step while my flesh moans silently. I reach the wind-chilled pass at 7:30 p.m., today's mile 27. The sunset lights up lenticular clouds that crown nearby peaks like orange toupés. The lakes below sparkle like costume jewelry. My legs are cement posts. It's absolutely spectacular. Todd is waiting in a thin down jacket; Stumbles has forged

ahead to find a campsite in the dying light. We're too gassed to wonder if this is a good idea.

Morning six. We're descending mutely from Pinchot Pass when a voice calls from below. Mark Godley, a friend who'd planned to meet us for the hike's final two days, snaps us from our walking coma; his freshness infects us. He's arrived just in time: We have 60 miles to go by tomorrow night.

Afternoon six. Again, the Sierra resuscitates us. We take a quick dip in Dollar Lake. Then, a bit later, we scramble onto enormous glacial-erratic boulders for an elevated view of pearly Rae Lakes. Flirting with heat exhaustion on the 3,500-foot, nine-mile ascent to Glen Pass, at 11,978 feet, we string out.

Alone, Stumbles pauses to grab a snack from his lid pocket and notices the sack containing his eyeglasses and contact-lens kit is gone. He's suddenly consumed by the terror that he'll be unable to clean his hard lenses for the rest of the hike, and they'll dry out and get itchy and sticky and cause him permanent corneal damage and quite possibly blindness.

Moments later, Godley trots up to find Stumbles' pack contents strewn over the ground. The man is sweating like Chauncey Billups, swearing like Samuel L. Jackson. "You gotta be kidding me! So stupid! I can't keep going! It's over!"

Speaking slowly and calmly, as one might to heavily armed hostage-takers, Godley reassures poor Stumbles that he'll be fine, talks him out of his delusional plan to backtrack, and persuades him to continue on.

"MY FEET HURT TOO MUCH TO STOP anymore. I'm going to just keep moving. I'll see you at Whitney Portal."

Todd tells me this, with madman eyes. I try to comprehend, but the throb in my soles is sending tremors to my ear canals, or something. He'll be fine. It's day seven. We've just dragged ourselves over the stunningly stark granite moonscape of 13,120-foot Forester Pass, and it never occurs to me that Todd, a competitive distance runner, might actually run half the 30 sun-baked miles left on this megaschlep (which, in fact, he does).

Hours later, in the warm, slanting rays of evening, Stumbles and I lumber up to Trail Crest junction, a wide ledge chiseled from Whitney's cliffs at 13,620 feet. Godley labors somewhere behind us. The trail continues to the 14,495-foot summit, an out-and-back hike of four miles. Todd's pack sits here; he's gone for the top. But it's not for me—my legs are too cooked. There's a red stain blossoming on my sock, Curt Schilling-style, but I can't summon his strength, not after days of this. Hobbled by his own blisters, Stumbles dreads the approaching nightfall.

All that remains is the Mt. Whitney Trail's 8.5-mile, 5,000-foot descent. It's a big day by any normal measure, but we've taken 500,000 strides this week, so it doesn't sound so dismaying. Our trek will culminate at 10:00 tonight with its longest day: 35 miles and 18.5 hours. We'll feel elated over what we've done, because there's something redeeming in reaching the brink of self-destruction without plummeting over the edge. Something rewarding, in that twisted, unhealthy way

that makes mothers worry and gives masochists a reason to live. And, if nothing else, we answered this trip's motivating question: The ultralight movement isn't all hot air and hype, sawed-off toothbrushes and tissue-thin sleeping bags. Our gear was tops. Our training was solid. Otherwise, we never would have made it at all.

In fact, the only piece of equipment that has yet to be engineered for these kinds of daily miles is the human body. Or maybe the human foot. Sure, we trimmed down our loads—but what we really did was trade the throb of sore shoulders for the bark of badly blistered toes. Maybe there are a few people out there with some combination of superhuman endurance and heavily cushioned insoles who can make these miles in a modestly pleasurable fashion. The rest of us will want to take the ultralight movement and adapt it to something more realistic: say, a 10-day assault of the JMT, about 22 miles a day, with a pack that comes in a hair under 25 pounds (see "The Plan," page 78). A hike that still doesn't take away all your vacation days, but doesn't turn your feet into mincemeat. A hike that's faster and lighter and humane, so that you can still experience all that is great about John Muir's wilderness without it being obscured by a fog of pain.

Or by lack of sleep. Or, for the unlucky few, by a case of vertigo. As Whitney's granite spires fade into darkness, it's time for our mascot to perform. Sure enough, from behind me comes the sound of something large crashing through brush, and I spin around—though I'm perfectly, wearily calm. I know it's not a bear.

My headlamp beam falls on a pair of legs sticking out, upside-down, from a bush. Stumbles is kicking like an overturned turtle. "Go ahead, I'll be fine," he says, his voice muffled by what sounds like leaves in his mouth. I extend a hand to him, thinking it's been a very, very long week.

Northwest editor Michael Lanza's next trip is an AT thru-hike with no shoes.

II. The Plan

Doing Ultralight Right

Pulling off a one-week or 10-day John Muir Trail thru-hike is all about carrying as little weight as possible—and hiking smart.

Fastpacking the JMT isn't just for the lunatic fringe: Summer conditions make it a perfect place for any hiker to go light. That said, our group found seven days pretty brutal. More reasonable? Take 10. Fit backpackers who avoid the worst afternoon heat and keep their packs under 25 pounds can average 22 miles a day without killing themselves. Here's how.

Itinerary

- Hike north to south to adjust gradually to the highest elevations.
- Start early every day. Hike in the cool morning and evening hours, and rest during the afternoon heat.
- Plan fewer miles on days when your pack is heaviest, and more miles when you're traveling light.
- Hiking southbound, the hardest climbs are to Mather Pass, Glen Pass, Forester Pass, and Trail Crest/Mt. Whitney. If possible, avoid these in the afternoon.

Resupply Logistics

- From Yosemite Valley, carry only hydration packs for the 22 miles to Tuolumne. Have your backpacking gear and food waiting. Eat a big meal in the Tuolumne café.
- At Red's Meadow (800-292-7758 or 760-934-2345, redsmeadow.com/the-resort), resupply for the next 50 miles by mailing or delivering packages in advance (for a fee). Or have a buddy meet you. Eat at the Mule House Café.
- Resupply a final time at Muir Trail Ranch (209-966-3195, muirtrail-ranch.com/resupply), about a mile off the JMT near the path's midpoint. Ship non-perishable food in advance; a fee is charged.

Eating and Drinking

- Go liquid light. Water is plentiful along the JMT, so carry only 1 to 1.5 liters (2–3 lbs.). Bring energy drinks to keep your body primed with electrolytes.
- Don't overpack food. You won't eat more than 4,000 calories a day. Weigh your food and keep it to 2 lbs./day—or less.
- Really slash weight. Ditch the stove and fuel in favor of dry foods: peanut butter, tortillas, cheese, pepperoni, dried fruits, nuts, sesame sticks, and peanut M&Ms. You'll appreciate the convenience when you're tired.

Training

The JMT has 40,000-plus feet of uphill and 36,000 feet of down. You can't do it off the couch.

- Establish a program. At least three months prior, begin a four-week cycle, building up from a "rest" week of 3–4 light workouts to a "peak" week of 5–7 hard workouts. Plan a rest week to fall right before your hike.
- Wear a pack. Carry 10–20 lbs. on training hikes, stairs, or machines, or 5–6 lbs. for running.
- Cross-train. Do 2–3 hours per week of core exercises, yoga/stretching, and weight training.
- Hit the trail. Schedule two or more steep dayhikes a month; push your pace. Build up to a shakedown overnight hike with consecutive 25-mile days carrying your thru-hiking gear and food.
- Train your mind. Break down big-mileage days into pieces that seem less daunting—how far you'll go by mid-morning, by your afternoon rest, by dinner, by camp.

Planning

Logistics Transportation between the endpoint trailheads is a challenge. The nearest airport is Reno, Nevada, 3.5 hours from Yosemite Valley and 4.5 hours from the Mt. Whitney trailhead. It's a 3.5- to 4-hour drive from the Mt. Whitney Trailhead to the Valley. Unless you hire a shuttle service (below), the easiest plan for a north-south hike is to leave one vehicle at the Mt. Whitney Trailhead (crowded on weekends), leave another in Lee Vining near Yosemite's east entrance, and take the YARTS bus (877-989-2787, yarts.com) to the Valley. For an early start on day one, spend the night before in the Valley: Curry Village can be noisy, but it's just a 20-minute walk from the trailhead. Otherwise, stay in either the Yosemite Lodge or

Ahwahnee Lodge (559-253-5636, yosemitepark.com/accommodations.aspx); make reservations a year in advance. Valley campgrounds book up quickly; reserve a site four months in advance (800-436-7275, reservations.nps.gov/). See nps.gov/archive/yose/trip/camping.htm#campgrounds for more info. The Valley's free buses run frequently but don't start until 7 a.m. **Hiker shuttles** High Sierra Transportation serves the Sierra and regional airports (760-258-6060, highsierratransportation.com). Check other shuttle services at climber.org/data/shuttles.html.

Season The only logical time for an ultralight thru-hike is mid-August to mid-September, when—usually—the mosquitoes have abated, rain is rare (allowing you to use a tarp instead of a tent), and the passes are snow-free.

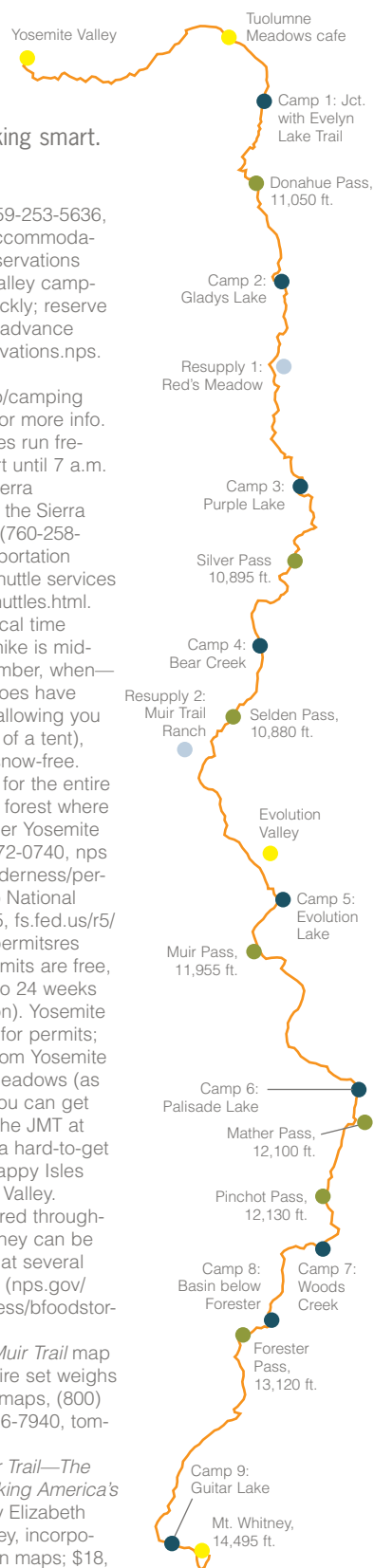
Permits Get a permit for the entire JMT from the park or forest where you plan to start, either Yosemite National Park (209-372-0740, nps.gov/archive/yose/wilderness/permits.htm), or the Inyo National Forest (760-873-2485, fs.fed.us/r5/inyo/recreation/wild/permitsres.shtml). Yosemite permits are free, but reserve one (up to 24 weeks in advance, \$5/person). Yosemite has trailhead quotas for permits; if you're day hiking from Yosemite Valley to Tuolumne Meadows (as suggested above), you can get a permit for starting the JMT at Tuolumne instead of a hard-to-get permit for the JMT/Happy Isles trailhead in Yosemite Valley.

Bear canisters Required throughout the High Sierra, they can be rented or purchased at several locations in Yosemite (nps.gov/archive/yose/wilderness/bfoodstorage.htm).

Maps Get the *John Muir Trail* map pack for \$19 (the entire set weighs 3 oz.). Tom Harrison maps, (800) 265-9090 or (415) 456-7940, tomharrisonmaps.com.

Guidebook *John Muir Trail—The Essential Guide to Hiking America's Most Famous Trail*, by Elizabeth Wenk with Kathy Morey, incorporates the Tom Harrison maps; \$18, Wilderness Press; (800) 443-7227,

The John Muir Trail



III. The Skills

Ultralight or Bust

A 10-step plan for getting your base pack weight under 15 pounds

Going light is a bit like marriage: It's a multifaceted contract that requires your constant commitment. Cheat just a little bit, and your hike—and especially your shoulders—will suffer. But stick to these rules, and you'll quickly find a new comfort level with 15-mile days.

Step 1 Question everything

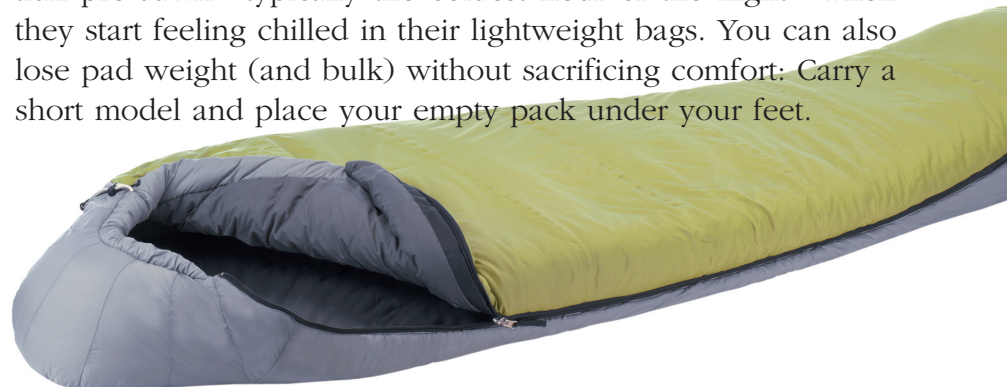
? The only way to make ultralight work is to ditch your standard gear list and your gotta-have-my-coffee-press 'tude. A checklist tricks you into bringing gear you don't need—like a tent in the Sierra—and the attitude distorts the hard choices you'll have to make to trim the last five pounds. For your next trip, start from scratch and select only the gear that's absolutely critical for the conditions you'll face. If in doubt, leave it out.

Step 2 Weigh it all

W It'll open your eyes to the surprisingly heavy items—like a filter or first aid kit—and to the little things that individually weigh next to nothing but together add up to something real. Allow yourself a luxury item (recommendation: a comfortable sleeping pad), but otherwise eliminate or substitute with a ruthless eye for fat and duplication. Example: Swap your knife for a razor blade, which is just as effective in most medical situations.

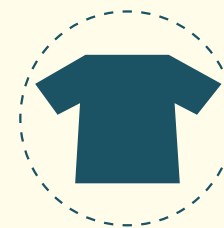
STEP 4 Change your bedding

Old thinking: Choose a sleeping bag for the lowest temps you might encounter. New thinking: Aim for the middle, and wear more clothes if a cold snap hits. Hard-core fastpackers hit the trail pre-dawn—typically the coldest hour of the night—when they start feeling chilled in their lightweight bags. You can also lose pad weight (and bulk) without sacrificing comfort: Carry a short model and place your empty pack under your feet.



Step 3 Rethink shelter

▲ This is the place to make a major dent: Most serious ULers carry tarps that weigh less than a pound without stakes and guylines. (See page 86 for our testers' favorite.) If you need a three-season tent for bugs or heavy rain, try the super-light Big Agnes Seedhouse SL2 (2 lbs. 14 oz.; \$319). Or split the difference with a tent that pitches with just rainfly, poles, and footprint. On the AT and Long Trail, plan to sleep in the shelters that appear almost every 8 miles, unless it's a busy weekend.



Step 5 Layer down

Another tired maxim: Carry extra clothing. Sure, you want to be cozy and safe, but thick down in July is overkill. Choose layers based on the forecast, and don't double up (no wind jacket *and* rain shell). For 3-season trips, your shell should weigh under a pound; the lightest are a mere 8 ounces. Pack a mid-weight long-sleeve top, one synthetic T, light-weight shorts and pants, a light down jacket (10–12 oz.), two pairs of socks and underwear, two hats (for sun and warmth), and (maybe) light gloves and rain pants.



Step 8 Downsize your pack

Your streamlined load should fit in a pack with about 3,000 cubic inches of capacity (see the review on page 86). And you no longer need an elaborate (read: heavy) suspension. Ultralight packs typically consist of a simple, lightly padded harness and a minimalist frame. They weigh six ounces to two pounds, and comfortably carry up to 25 pounds.

Step 6 Improve your diet

This is a hard sell for caffeine junkies, but do you really need a hot drink (or meal) in summer? Even the lightest stoves add ounces, especially when you tally fuel and cooking-gear ballast. Leave it home in favor of peanut butter, tortillas, cheese, jerky, pepperoni, dried fruits, nuts, sesame sticks, and peanut M&Ms—all of which are satisfying, nutritious, and packed with calories. And that extra food you always carry? Skip it. Even remote trails are usually within a day's hike of a road, and hunger would take weeks to kill you. Besides, when's the last time you ran out of chow on a trip?



Step 7 Ditch the map

Hiking without a topo (and guidebook) isn't sane everywhere, but many trails are so well-marked that no seasoned hiker could get lost. If you must carry a map, trim the superfluous parts. If you're thru-hiking, carry only the section you need between resupplies—and find the lightest version available. The set of 13 waterproof maps from Tom Harrison covers the entire JMT and weighs just three ounces, about the same weight as the Trails Illustrated map of Yosemite, which covers just a fraction.

Step 9 Take less medicine

Your kit should weigh no more than eight ounces: All you really need is antibiotic ointment, duct tape, a few gauze pads and bandages, a bit of blister treatment, and your WFA training (you got that, right?). In the field, sub what's available: sticks for SAM splints, a cold stream for an ice pack, a T-shirt for a dressing.

Step 10 Empty your bottles

🚫 Tradition holds that you need to carry two to three liters of water at all times. But at 2 lbs. 2 oz. per liter, water is among the heaviest things you're schlepping. Instead, drink opportunistically. Along many mountain trails, you rarely need to carry more than a liter—if any. Elsewhere, check distances between sources and tank up just enough that you're nearly empty as you reach each one. Then guzzle away as you refill. Finally, forego a filter in favor of lightweight water treatment like Aqua Mira.

IV. The Menu

Be An Ultralight Gourmet

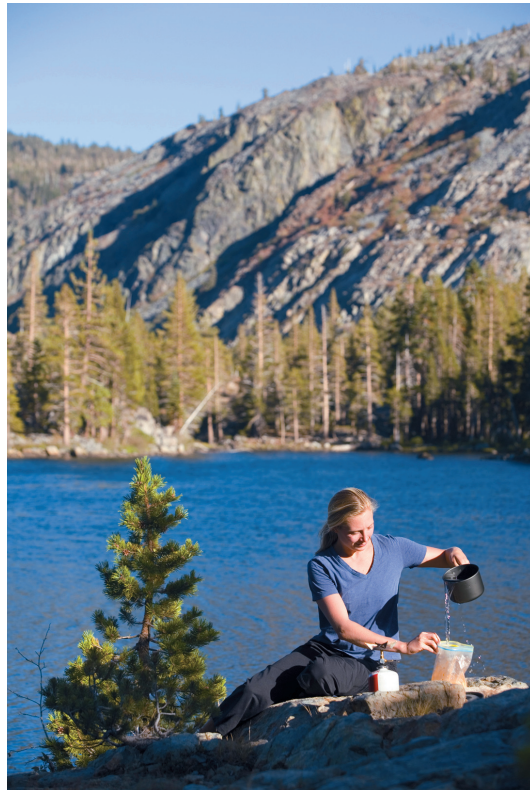
No, it's not an oxymoron. You, too, can say *buh-bye* to endless energy bars and instant rice glop—and eat like royalty for less than two pounds a day. *By Kristin Hostetter*

It's a question that vexes many a backpacker: How can you make a decent trail dinner without carrying the kitchen sink? And the freezer? And the Cuisinart? If you're anything like us, your primal desire for good eats doesn't evaporate when you head off on a backpacking trip—but there's no way you're hauling in filet mignon and molten chocolate cake. And, like us, you already know the guiding principles and procedures for ultralight cooking: Minimize fuel. Eliminate superfluous kitchen gear. Dehydrate. Add boiling water. Stir. Let sit. Eat. Unfortunately, you usually end up with a woeful variation on gloppy carbs.

So how can you follow the rules and still make a gourmet meal that doesn't weigh you down like too much foie gras? We've found the Holy Grail, and it comes in the form of a freezer bag—or, rather, on freezerbagcooking.com. The website, and its companion cookbook, *Freezer Bag Cooking: Trail Food Made Simple*, is the brainchild of Sarah Kirkconnel, an avid backpacker, cook, ultralighter, and frequent contributor to our online chat rooms (forums.backpacker.com). Her premise is simple: Pack single portions of dehydrated meals into quart size freezer bags. In camp, add boiling water, stir (with a spoon, to avoid fork punctures), insulate your baggie, let sit, then chow down.

Since you “cook” and eat right out of the bag, there's no dish duty (just add the baggies to your garbage) and no need to pack anything other than one boiling vessel. There's no simmering. No watched pots. Kirkconnel's technique, combined with the right gear and your favorite trail-adapted recipes, could slash your food weight by about

half (depending on how you originally pack). All you need to know is how to dehydrate your grub (see The Method, right), what meals to put on your menu (see The Recipes, p. 84), and which ounces to count (see Number Crunching, p. 84). In fact, in the following pages, we've laid out everything you need to know to do ultralight cooking right. Once you bag it, you'll never turn back.



The Gear

This five-piece kitchen weighs only 13.3 ounces and cranks out gourmet eats.

Antigravity Gear Caldera Kitchen

This alcohol stove system has it all: utter simplicity. Wispy weight. An ingenious packing system. It's a tiny burner, made from a V-8 can nestled inside a Pepsi can, that burns denatured alcohol. But what makes the Caldera unique is the way the system is integrated: The aluminum windscreen forms a rigid cone, which holds the 3-cup non-stick aluminum pot perfectly suspended over the burner—and efficiently captures the alcohol's BTUs. (We used less than 16 ounces of fuel on a five-day trip for two.) Boil times averaged about 8 minutes, and the whole system packs away into an insulated 1-quart, lidded plastic container, which doubles as a bowl, coffee cup, and cooking cozy. As tested, it weighs a scant 10 ounces. \$73; (910) 794-3308; antigravitygear.com. *Reader service #131*

FBC Fabric Cozies

These pouches, made from Mylar and polyester, weigh just 1.5 ounces, are sized perfectly for a quart-sized zipperlock bag, and act like a portable oven. Just add hot water to the bag and snuggle it into the cozy, which cooks a dehydrated meal in under 10 minutes. \$14, freezerbagcooking.com. *Reader service #133*

Jetboil Jetset Spoon

There are lots of spoons and sporks out there, but this 0.4-ouncer is in a league of its own. The handle is long enough for eating out of a zip-top bag without getting gunked up, but it collapses into a neat 5 inches. \$20 for the set of three, which includes fork and spatula. (888) 611-9905; jetboil.com. *Reader service #132*

Fozzil Thinkflat Bowl

This clever item—it packs flat, but morphs into a bowl with four corner snaps—pulled triple duty on a recent trip in Colorado's Holy Cross Wilderness. First, it provided a handy receptacle for our soft-sided bag cozies. Second, it made a great cutting board for slicing cheddar at lunchtime. And third, it became a functional butt pad on wet, cold logs. Just rinse before you eat (or sit). 1.3 oz. \$5. fozzils.com. *Reader service #134*

32-ounce Gatorade bottle

Skip the Nalgene bottle and reach into your recycle bin for one of these. One bottle weighs only 0.11 ounces empty—that's 2 ounces less than a regular Lexan Nalgene. Gatorade bottles are impressively strong: You'll get at least three months of use out of them, and then you can recycle them.



The Method

Sucking all the moisture out of your food is the key to eating well and eating light.

Because most food weight is water weight, it's impossible to really go ultralight gourmet without investing in a basic food dehydrator, which won't set you back more than 50 bucks. With these tips, you can transform your favorite at-home meals into featherweight, just-add-water trail delicacies.

- **Precook and dry your pasta.** You'll save substantial cooking time in camp, not to mention fuel and weight. Simply cook your pasta al dente at home, then spread it on dehydrator trays and let it go for a couple of hours until brittle. In camp, add boiling water, then cover and let sit for a few minutes.
- **Feed your inner carnivore.** Start with lean ground beef, turkey or chicken. Brown it along with any seasoning you like. Suggestions: Asian (curry, cumin, coriander) or Italian (oregano, basil, thyme). When the mixture is browned, rinse it under hot water to remove residual fat, then dehydrate until the nuggets are very hard (about five hours). Break the meat up into fine particles for easier rehydrating.
- **Get saucy.** Maybe it's your famous red pepper and Vidalia onion sauce. Or grandma's Bolognese. Whatever the condiment, you can probably dehydrate it. All you need are plastic tray liners and a dehydrator. Spread the sauce in a very thin layer and let it rip for 8–10 hours, until it becomes a featherweight leather. Add hot water, and eat.

The Recipes

The Recipes

Three tasty dinners the freezer bag way.

Beef Stroganoff

Serves one: 5.5 oz.



Combine in a quart-size zipperlock:
 1 package beef flavored Ramen (including seasoning packet)
 ¼ cup dehydrated ground beef
 ¼ cup mixed dehydrated veggies
 1 teaspoon paprika
 Dash of cayenne pepper
 Individual packet of cream cheese (equal to about a tablespoon;
 grab one at your favorite bagel shop)
 Salt and pepper to taste

In camp Add about 1 ½ cups boiling water to baggie. Squish it around and let it rest in a cozy for 10 minutes or so, until the burger is tender. Stir in cream cheese.

Spicy Curry Noodle Bowl

Serves one: 6 oz.

Combine in a quart size zipperlock:

1 serving of Asian cellophane noodles (They typically come in large bricks. Break off a 3- by 6-inch chunk.)	mixed veggies
¼ cup dehydrated meat of your choice (burger or chicken)	1 tablespoon curry
¼ cup dehydrated	1 tablespoon cumin
	1 tablespoon coriander
	1 tablespoon garam masala
	½ teaspoon ground ginger
	2 tablespoons coconut cream powder
	2 tablespoons dry milk



Dash of cayenne
 Salt and pepper
 to taste
 Handful of cashews

In camp Add about 1 ½ cups boiling water to baggie. Squish it around and let it rest in a cozy for 10 minutes, or until everything is tender. Top with cashews.

American Chop Suey

Serves one: 4.5 oz.

Make a double batch of this at home. Have it for dinner with your family then dehydrate half for your next few backpacking trips.

1 tablespoon olive oil
 1 lb. lean ground beef
 1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
 1 6-ounce can tomato paste
 1 chopped onion
 1 chopped bell pepper (any color)
 2 tablespoons dried oregano
 2 tablespoons dried basil
 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
 ¾ pound elbow noodles
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Optional: cubed cheese, any kind



At home Heat oil and gently sauté the onion and pepper until onion is translucent. Add the meat and brown thoroughly, breaking it up as you go with a wooden spoon. Drain off accumulated fat. Add the spices, then tomatoes, and simmer for about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, cook the pasta till al dente and drain. Let the sauce cool, then spread it on the dehydrator trays. (If you don't have tray liners, cut wax paper to fit the shape of your trays.) Spread the cooled macaroni on separate trays, making sure it doesn't stick together (rinsing with cool water first helps). Dehydrate both components until they're brittle (about 6 hours or overnight). When done, combine 1 cup macaroni and 1 cup sauce in a 1-quart zipperlock.

In camp Add about 2 cups boiling water to the bag, squish it around and let it rest in a cozy for about 10 minutes, or until everything is tender. Top with cubed cheese.

READER RECIPE CONTEST

And the winner is...

Our online call for entries yielded some yummy results. The true champion? Karla Coreil of Port Allen, Louisiana, who came up with a lunch idea that has all the right ingredients: it's easy, fast, light—and big on flavor and nutrition.

Mom's Carlsbad Spread

16-oz. canned diced tomatoes, with juice
 2 cups garbanzo beans, drained and rinsed (1 can)
 ½ cup lemon juice (about 2 to 3 large lemons)
 5 garlic cloves
 4 tablespoons chopped fresh basil (or use 1 tablespoon dried)
 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
 2 roasted sweet peppers

At home Combine all ingredients in a food processor and puree until smooth. Spread the mixture on dehydrator trays and dry for about 8 hours or until crumbly. Divide mixture into four zipperlocks and break down the pieces as much as you can by squeez-



ing the bag (this will speed along the rehydrating process).
In camp Add equal parts water (cold is fine) to each bag, stir, and let sit for 5 to 10 minutes. Serve on pita, tortillas, or bagels. Makes 4 servings.

Number Crunching

Want to be a diehard ultralighter? You better get OCD about counting ounces—especially when it comes to food.

• **Know your appetite.** Keep notes on how exactly how much, say, pasta you pack per meal, and whether or not it left you satisfied, hungry, or toting out leftovers. A common mistake is to cook too much food—and nobody wants to deal with a sodden garbage bag full of uneaten rice and beans.

• **Read the labels.** Backpackers can't afford to haul around empty calories that don't pack a nutritional punch. Look for high protein, carb, fat, and vitamin contents; steer clear of overwhelming sodium and lengthy lists of mysterious chemicals and additives.

• **Invest in a scale.** How can you possibly lighten your load without being able to compare the weights of individual items? Don't trust manufacturer weights; they are often overly optimistic.

V. The Gear

Cut the Fluff

Shave pounds from your whole packing list (and add a few things to your Christmas list).

Sample JMT gear list	Weight (per person)	Savings*
Pack: 3,000 cubic inches	1 lb. 6 oz.	2.5 lbs.
Pack cover	3 oz.	None
Sleeping bag: 32°F down	1 lb. 4 oz.	1 lb.
Sleeping pad: 60" long	1 lb. 7 oz.	8 oz.
Tarp: 2-person (11 oz. total, including stakes and guylines)	5.5 oz.	1 lb. 10 oz.
Clothing (see Step 5 above)	3 lbs. 14 oz.	2 lbs.
Headlamp (small LED)	4 oz.	4 oz.
Personal (toiletries, sunblock, TP, etc.)	1 lb. 8 oz.	8 oz.
Trekking poles	1 lb. 2 oz.	None
Water bladder	8 oz.	None
Assorted team gear (water treatment, first aid, compass, etc.)	7 oz.	8 oz.
Bear canister Optional in many places	1 lb. 4 oz.	None
Total	13 lbs. 9 oz.	8 lbs. 14 oz.



GoLite Jam2

Carry any pack for 30 miles and 18 hours a day and you would expect some hip and shoulder soreness—but not with the Jam2. Our JMT testers hauled the men's and women's versions with up to 22 pounds, and called it impressively comfortable, thanks to a simple back pad and a wide, unpadded hipbelt that effectively distributes small loads. The roll-top main compartment has a big front pocket and side mesh pockets. A distinctive feature is the PackCompactor bottom—two clips and loops that let you compress the pack to 1,300 cubes, which stabilizes the contents

when the pack is underfilled. We had no trouble fitting four days' food and gear inside the 3,000-cubic-inch interior. We just wish it had hipbelt pockets. **\$100; 1 lb. 6 oz.** (medium); **two men's and two women's sizes.** (888) 546-5483, golite.com. *Reader service #125*



ULA Conduit

This frameless rucksack satisfies the ultralight philosophy that gear should serve multiple functions. You slide your folded foam sleeping pad into an internal sleeve to create the pack frame. Two of our JMT hikers praised the minimalist design—the packbag has a roll-top closure with no lid—yet were also impressed that the Conduit has external mesh pockets, big hipbelt pockets, and one internal valuables pocket for easy access. The lightly padded shoulder straps and hipbelt can handle 25 to 30 pounds, and at 3,200 cubic inches, the pack is big enough for an AT or JMT thru-hike. **\$125; 1 lb. 4 oz.; two men's sizes.** (435) 753-5191, ula-equipment.com. *Reader service #126*



Gossamer Gear SpinnTwinn Tarp

Do this math: Including its stuff sack and recommended six titanium stakes, this waterproof, siliconized-nylon tarp weighs a scant 11 ounces, yet it easily protects two people plus gear from rain—and could fit a third in a pinch. Properly staked out, it didn't even ripple in steady wind

above treeline, and 10 tie-down loops let you pitch it in various configurations, depending on whether you want ventilation or complete wind protection on one side. **\$135; 12x6.5 ft.; 8 oz.** (877) 858-7258, gossamergear.com. *Reader service #127*

Mountain Hardware Phantom 32

Ultralight mummies are often a, uh, mixed bag—good weight savings at the cost of warmth. But not this one. Both male and female testers both found this 800-fill down sack toasty on most late-August nights; Heather needed extra layers when the mercury neared freezing. It stuffs down barely bigger than a cantaloupe, yet lofts quickly and dries rapidly in the sun after a dewy night under the stars. The hood clamps down to a little breathing hole on chilly eves.

\$245; 1 lb. 5 oz. (regular). (800) 953-8375, mountainhardware.com. *Reader service #128*



Big Agnes Insulated Air Core Pad

Hard-core ultralighters would scoff at this luxurious mattress, insisting on something more Spartan. But we believe that you don't gain any extra energy if you can't sleep at night because you're carrying a too-thin pad. This short air mat delivers the Z's you'll need, insulates against cold ground, rolls up to liter-bottle volume, and is several ounces lighter than full-length models. Our testers have logged many nights on Air Core pads and reported just one leak.

\$65; 1 lb. 7 oz. (20x60x2.5-inch mummy); **7 sizes, rectangular and mummy.** (877) 554-8975, big-agnes.com. *Reader service #129*



Bear Vault BV400

We know from experience that the only thing more inconvenient than carrying a bear canister is losing all your food to a bear. When we need one—and they are required in the High Sierra—we pack this former Editors' Choice Award winner (April 2004), which is also approved by major bear-management agencies. The larger of Bear Vault's two models, it holds 7 days' food, has clear sides for viewing contents, and is lighter and more spacious than the competition. **\$80; 2 lbs. 9 oz.; two sizes.** 866-301-3442, bearvault.com. *Reader service #130*

