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Outside

SUMMER 2011

BUYER'S GUIDE

SUMMER'S BEST GEAR

325
TORTURE
TESTED
PRODUCTS

**HOW TO BUY
SMARTER**

Waterproof
Cameras

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Watches

Barefoot
Running
Shoes

All-Terrain
Mountain
Bikes

Ultralight
Jackets

High-Def
Sunglasses

Go-Anywhere
Daypacks

Family-Friendly
Kayaks



**The Only
Survival Kit
You Need**
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BETWEEN THE LINES



Playa Vista, Colorado
Sam Moulton with
daughter Lily

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Pusher Man

For many years, I was a low-tech warrior. I wore tattered wool sweaters and paddled dented canoes. I rode a rigid-fork mountain bike long after my friends all adopted shocks. But when my old steed finally died and I went shopping for a new one, a buddy said this: "Dude, full-suspension bikes make every day like a powder day." I got one. He was right.

A decade of testing later, I'm probably the world's biggest pusher of new gear. I'm OK with that. Because if I've learned anything, it's that the folks who make outdoor gear are really good at what they do. They're users, just like us, only they wake up in the middle of the night thinking about midsoles and membranes, and you can literally feel the pas-

sion in what they create. Take 29-inch mountain bikes. I finally convinced my father-in-law that he'd have more fun on a 29er (turn to page 96 if you're on the fence, too), and now he's so reenergized about the sport that he wants me to fly to Michigan and enter a race with him this fall. Same thing with minimalist running shoes. I know we hardly know each other, but I'm pretty sure you're running in too much shoe. If you need new kicks, consider getting some with a bit less cushioning. Our favorites are on page 126. Sure, constantly upgrading your kit can be an expensive habit. But think for a moment about how much you love your most prized piece of equipment. Now ask yourself: Have you ever gotten more for your money? —SAM MOULTON

1. MOLLY LOOMIS

Women's jacket tester Loomis is a longtime international mountain guide and instructor for companies like Exum, Alpine Ascents International, and NOLS. She lives in Jackson, Wyoming.

2. AARON GULLEY

Between the *Buyer's Guide* and our May issue's bike special, road- and mountain-bike test director Gulley personally tested 58 bikes, 11 pairs of bike shoes, four helmets, 15 jerseys, 13 bibs, nine pairs of gloves, and countless other accessories. In March he took second place at the San Ysidro Dirt Century on the Specialized S-Works Epic 29er on page 98.

3. STEPHANIE PEARSON

Pearson, who tested running and yoga gear and apparel, is *Outside Online's* Gear Girl (outsideonline.com/geargirl). Her mo-

ment of enlightenment came while doing headstands: mat thickness is the single most essential element for yoga gear.

4. JASON STEVENSON

Trail shoe tester Stevenson has blister-prone heels (it's genetic). He never walks around puddles.

5. DOUG SCHNITZSPAHN

Pack tester Schnitzspahn is the editor of *Elevation Outdoors*, a magazine based in Boulder, Colorado, that covers outdoor sports in the Rocky Mountain West.

6. INGA HENDRICKSON

Just about the only thing in this issue that isn't for sale: photographer Hendrickson's daughter, Amalia, on page 28.

7. JULIA FULLERTON

Looking at gear all day inspired OBG designer Fullerton; she's running in her first half-marathon this summer in Vail, Colorado.

8. MARK ANDERS

To test this year's boards, Anders surfed off both U.S. coasts, Mexico, and China and did a yacht-based surf and SUP expedition in the British Virgin Islands.

9. KATE SIBER

Durango-based Siber spent more than a dozen 12-hour days chasing elk and turkeys while testing women's shells and hiking gear but ended up with no meat in the freezer.

10. RYAN STUART

This past fall was one of the rainiest on record on Stuart's native Vancouver Island. Perfect weather for testing this year's crop of hard and soft shells.



PHOTOGRAPHS: JAMES HAMILTON; 1: JAMES HAMILTON; 2: JOHN HAMILTON; 3: JOHN HAMILTON; 4: JOHN HAMILTON; 5: JOHN HAMILTON; 6: JOHN HAMILTON; 7: JOHN HAMILTON; 8: JOHN HAMILTON; 9: JOHN HAMILTON; 10: JOHN HAMILTON

FIRST KNOW THIS

The days of clumpy backpacking boots are over. But that doesn't mean supportive hikers have completely lost out to mushy, trail-runner-esque shoes. In fact, this year many manufacturers are releasing midcut shoes and boots with higher ankles, stiffer soles, and more all-around protection—necessities for tackling challenging terrain on multi-day trips. The new generation delivers the best of both worlds, providing trail-shoe comfort and burly-boot performance. Many break in instantly and have ample mesh, which breathes better than leather or synthetics, and foam footbeds, which coddle feet. What you want is a boot that hits the sweet spot: on-trail stability for heavier loads in tricky terrain and light-footed comfort.

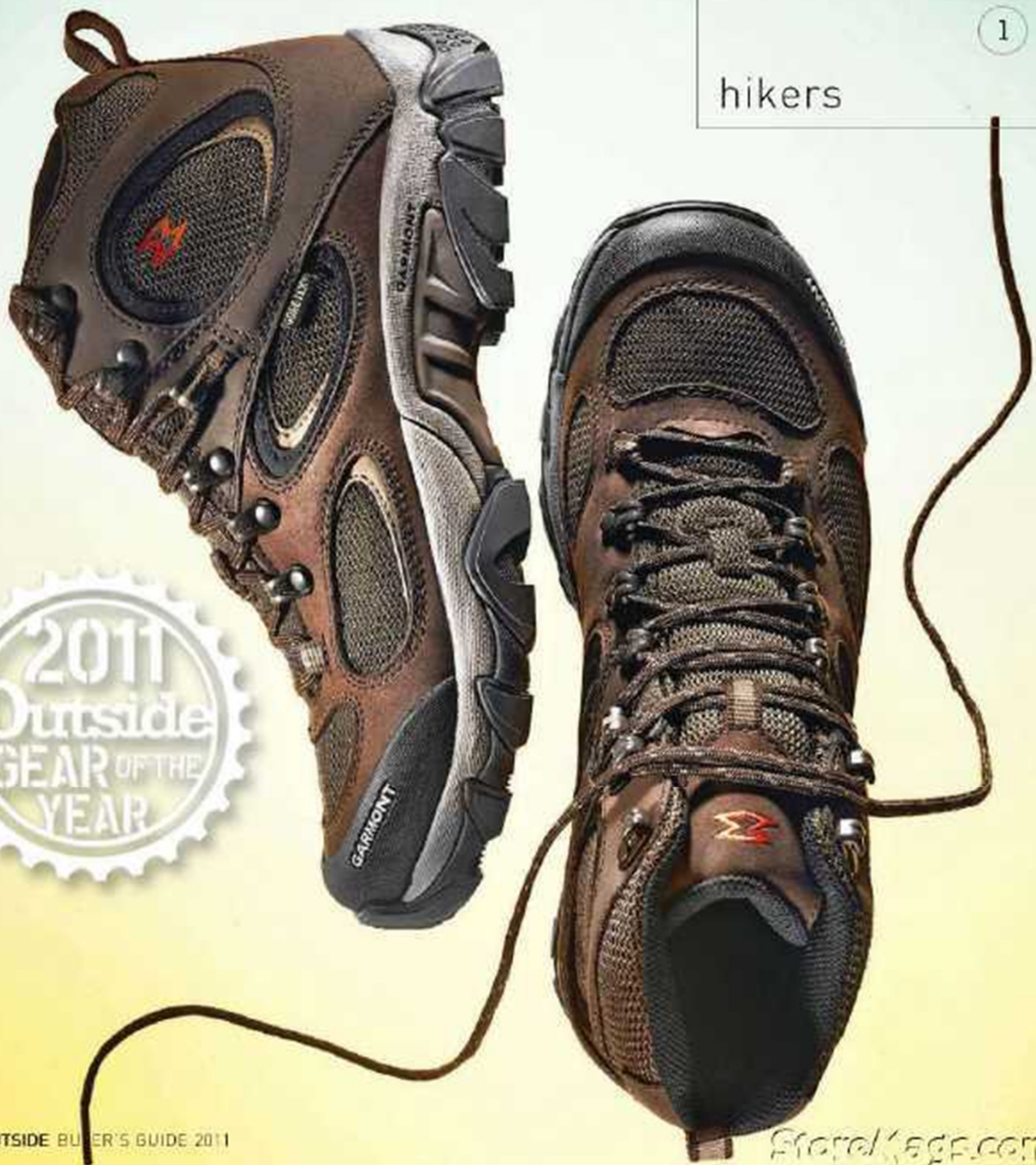
BY JASON STEVENSON

AND THE WINNER IS... Garmont Zenith Mid 5160

Can one boot be all things to all hikers? Probably not, but the Zenith comes close. The nubuck-and-mesh boot is light and flexible enough for an afternoon amble, yet sturdy enough—with a moderately stiff plastic shank—for multi-day adventures on off-camber terrain. Even with its Gore-Tex XCR layer, which kept our feet bone dry through umpteenth stream crossings on a six-mile slog in Zion National Park, it was the most breathable mid in our test, thanks to well-placed mesh panels. The fit? Love at first step. Testers raved about the shapely heel cups, which kept feet in place, and smooth liners, which prevented hot spots. And whether on Utah's sandstone ledges or the mucky trails of Virginia's Shenandoah National Park, the Vibram tread always stuck. As one tester summed it up: "I thank Jesus for these boots every day." We're still not sure he was kidding. 20.8 oz; www.garmontusa.com

SUPPORT: 4.5 (OUT OF 5)

COMFORT: 5



1

hikers

2011
Outside
GEAR OF THE
YEAR

1
low-cut comfort

The return of ankle support: three of this year's picks—Lafuma, Columbia, and Keen—unleashed midcut versions of the lows featured here, boosting stability and load-carrying capacity while retaining the comfortable midsole.

COLUMBIA MASTER OF FASTER LOW \$125

THE SELL: A featherweight with punch. **THE TEST:** It might look like a runner, but the Master easily outperformed squishier low-cuts while descending steep Shenandoah switchbacks. Credit the snug fit, foot-stabilizing upper, and stiff heel cup that minimized roll, pitch, and yaw. The waterproof liner handled slashes during fast-paced Appalachian Trail hikes, but we'd have liked a bit more toe bumper in a shoe that's clearly built to charge. **THE VERDICT:** Best for fast-and-light days with less than 20 pounds on pretty much any terrain. 12.8 oz; columbia.com
SUPPORT: 3
COMFORT: 4

LAFUMA XMOTION LEATHER LOW \$110

THE SELL: A day-hiking shoe with workday style. **THE TEST:** The casual look gives the XMotion an obvious edge over other hikers when it comes to urban adventures—and they certainly performed on the cobblestones outside several Philadelphia bars. But the shoes also felt perfectly appropriate on mellow trails, with supple (not protectively stiff) leather, no-skid Vibram soles, plush foam padding, and mattress-soft midsoles. Call them what you will—urban explorers, dog walkers, or “the ideal travel shoe,” as one frequent-flying tester did. Just check the forecast before you head outside; the upper's resistance to rain, slush, and snow is casual, too.

THE VERDICT: An extremely comfortable fair-weather day hiker that can go a long way provided the terrain isn't tricky and the load is light. 15.2 oz; lafumausa.com
SUPPORT: 3
COMFORT: 4.5

TEVA FORGE PRO EVENT \$125

THE SELL: The ultimate multisport hiking shoe. **THE TEST:** Don't be fooled by the trail-runner-like appearance—the Forge Pro has boot in its blood. The thick, stable outsole (with a stiff nylon shank) was a welcome ally during a tricky late-fall ridge scramble in Pennsylvania, and the sawtooth tread held solid on icy ledges when

ALL WEIGHTS AND SIZES SHOWN UNLESS NOTED



BEHIND THE TEST: Our hiking-shoe maven, Jason Stevenson, called in 63 models (108 pairs) and had seven testers log hundreds of miles from Utah to North Carolina. His tracking spreadsheet made our head hurt.

other boots whimpered for mini-crampons. Even on longer jaunts, the Forge was impressively comfortable, with dependable (if a little steamy) eVent waterproofing and a shock-absorbing EVA foam midsole that, after a 14-mile hike with 25 pounds, had one lonely tester waxing romantic. "I could have kissed them," he said. **THE VERDICT:** A solid low-cut that's game for whatever mission you decide to take on. 15.2 oz.; teva.com
SUPPORT: 4
COMFORT: 4

MERRELL COVERT \$170

THE SELL: A bike shoe that's ready to hop off and go for a hike. **THE TEST:** Our first

impression—stiff! A rigid X-shaped plate extends from the midfoot to the base of the toes, giving these shoes impressive pedal-pumping efficiency. It also made them feel a little brickish on trails and prolonged break-in time, but the added stability came in handy while slaloming down leaf-covered trails in West Virginia. As one tester remarked, "The more I wore them, the more I came to appreciate them." **THE VERDICT:** For bikers who do some casual hiking, it's a good hybrid. For hikers who sometimes bike, it's a little heavy and stiff. 16.8 oz.; merrell.com
SUPPORT: 4
COMFORT: 3.5

KEEN RED ROCK LOW \$110

THE SELL: Premium all-weather performance at a discount. **THE TEST:** For a low-top, the Keen still drives like an SUV—wide, stable, and with reliable protection (a nubuck-and-fabric upper and a rubber toe bumper that could punt a bowling ball). The waterproof liner kept slush at bay, and the shark-tooth-shaped lugs bit nicely on a few mossy log crossings. Nitpick: several complained about bothersome midfoot pressure points. **THE VERDICT:** A versatile and durable hiker that excels on rugged, wet trails. Check fit carefully. 16 oz.; keenfootwear.com
SUPPORT: 3
COMFORT: 4

1

ankle savers



Leather will dry and crack over time unless it's cared for. Revisit it once a year with a treatment like McNair's RenewX Leather Detergent. For more information, visit www.mcnairst.com.

SCARPA TERRA GTX \$170

THE SELL: Old-school aesthetics, new-school comfort. **THE TEST:** This tough guy has a soft side. Even though the Terra GTX is built for multi-day backpacking (with up to 40 pounds of freight), the suede upper is stretchy, not stiff, so testers easily broke them in after a week of light wear and suffered few hot spots. **Breathability?** The Gore-Tex-lined upper outperformed the other all-leather boots we saw, according to our team's funk expert (code name: Stinkfood). **THE VERDICT:** Given up on all-leather boots? This one will win you back. 19.2 oz.; scarpa.com
SUPPORT: 4
COMFORT: 4

MONTRAIL MOUNTAIN MASOCHIST MID GTX \$135

THE SELL: Top-performing trail runner plus ankle support. **THE TEST:** The low-cut version of the Masochist was our trail-running Gear of the Year winner in 2009. Meet its bigger brother. Montrail kept the sippy weight, meshy (i.e., very breathable) upper, and super-snug lacing system but boosted the ankle height and armored it all with a sloo-sealing Gore-Tex liner. The neoprene collar helped keep a 25-pound load well balanced, while the strategically placed heel pads blocked blisters without adding ounces. **THE VERDICT:** Comfort? Take it for granted. And though it's not a big-daddy leather boot, the Masochist is unexpectedly supportive and protective. 13.6 oz.; montrail.com
SUPPORT: 4
COMFORT: 4.5

VASQUE TAKU GTX \$165

THE SELL: Big-boot durability, day-hiking comfort. **THE TEST:** "Since when are leather boots so easy to wear?" asked one tester after pounding out eight miles without a single new-shoe blister. Answer: since they paired a form-fitting last with extra interior padding and a well-oiled nubuck upper that takes all of two nanoseconds to break in. And yet these boots needn't play gentle. The rigid midsole, bulldozing toe bumper, sticky tread, and supportive above-the-ankle cuffs clamored for steep trails. Though the Gore-Tex-lined upper wasn't as breathable as we'd have liked. **THE VERDICT:** Don't let the Taku see itself in the mirror. It's a real man's boot, but it's absolutely convinced it's a comfy sneaker. 20 oz.; vasque.com
SUPPORT: 4.5
COMFORT: 4.5

BEAT THOSE BLISTERS

STEP 1: Get fitted at a specialty store (or buy from an online retailer that offers no-questions-asked returns). Wearing a loaded pack while tramping up ramps and stairs will help you discover a sloshy fit early on. **STEP 2:** Be realistic about waterproofing—in hot, dry climates, it reduces breathability and can lead to blister-prone feet. **STEP 3:** If your boot still rubs, slip on some slick synthetic liners like **Bridgedale's Cool-Max socks** to wick away moisture and nix friction (\$20 for two pairs; bridgedale.com). Or try an aftermarket footbed from **Sole** (yoursole.com). **STEP 4:** Anticipate blisters by taping problem areas with duct tape.