

GET STARTED: TRIP PLANNING AND DAY-HIKING

Okay, it's settled. You're ready to hike! An afternoon of crisp, fresh air and incredible views awaits you. Quickly now, grab a pack, load your car, and head out the door. You're bound for the wide-open trail.

But wait a second.

You've forgotten to ask yourself a few critical questions. Where are you going? How long will you be gone? And most importantly—why are you going? I know you want to jump in your car and drive off to experience the wonders of nature. But like any new pursuit, there are a couple of details worth considering first.

Day-Hiking vs. Backpacking

Before you lace up your hiking shoes, you need to know the distinction between *day-hiking* and *backpacking*—two terms you'll see a lot in this book. Both terms refer to related, but slightly different, approaches to hiking.

A day-hike is exactly what it sounds like—a walk that you start and finish within a single day without staying overnight along the trail. Instead of sleeping in a tent, you'll spend the night in your own bed, at a motel, or at a previously established campsite. As a result, day-hikers don't need to carry a tent or a sleeping bag to set up camp. The length of a day-hike can vary widely: from 3 easy miles on a Saturday afternoon to a tough 20-mile dawn-to-dusk trek.

BACKPACKING & HIKING

Conquer the wilderness
and hit the trail with confidence

A backpacking trip lasts longer than one day and requires shouldering a larger pack and camping out overnight—or for several nights—in a tent, cabin, or lean-to shelter. Unlike day-hikers, backpackers carry tents, sleeping bags, and all the gear they need to cook meals, sleep outside, and get up the next morning to hike again. Backpacking trips can involve a single overnight or continue for many days and even weeks. The distinctive characteristic of backpacking—and what makes the activity so attractive to many participants—is that backpackers are entirely self-sufficient. They carry everything they need to survive in the outdoors.

New hikers should start with day-hikes first. These shorter adventures give you a chance to test your gear, learn from other hikers, and put some miles on your legs and gear. Just like you shouldn't take a brand-new car on a 5,000-mile road trip, you shouldn't attempt a 50-mile hike the first time you venture into the woods.

As you gain more experience on day-hikes, you can add overnight camping and backpacking to your outdoor skill set. Not everyone needs to follow this sequence, but you'll probably enjoy each trip more if you don't push yourself too fast. Overnight camping and backpacking not only require new skills, but they also require special equipment that enable you to support yourself on the trail. Day-hiking, on the other hand, requires only a sturdy pair of boots or trail shoes, a small backpack, water bottles, snacks, and some basic navigation and survival gear.

Where to Go

It's late on Thursday afternoon and the weekend is fast approaching. You want to plan a day-hike, but you don't know where to go. The main factor you'll want to consider is time. Not only should you determine how much time you have for a hike, but you also should decide how long you want to travel to reach a *trailhead* where you can begin your hike. A trailhead is a starting point for a trail and is usually located near a road, campground, or parking lot. Most trailheads have specific names

and provide informational signs and maps. Some require hikers to register or pay parking fees. Obviously, the longer you spend driving in a car, the less time you'll have to hike. That's why it's best to begin with hikes closer to home.

Hikes Near You

Chances are the nearest walking path to your front door isn't very adventurous. It might be a sidewalk or cinder track populated by dog-walkers and parents pushing strollers—not exactly an escape from civilization. But once you start looking for better trails, you'll be surprised at how many there are, even if you live in a place not known for outdoor amenities. There are literally hundreds of potential trails within a few hours' drive of any city or town in the United States. Consider these local trails your home base—the routes where you can recharge, get exercise, or break in new gear.

Most of these nearby trails are in parks and recreational areas like these locations:

- ◇ City, county, and state parks
- ◇ Rail-trails and river walks
- ◇ Wildlife refuges and conservation areas
- ◇ Lakeshores and seashores
- ◇ National forests and Bureau of Land Management areas
- ◇ National parks or national monuments

Your hometown might not have all these hiking trail hotspots within close driving distance, but there should be a few.

Finding Local Trails

The fastest and easiest way to find local places to hike is to type "trail" into your smartphone's map app. This quick approach avoids the extra steps of downloading apps or signing into the websites we'll discuss next. Because the map's initial results will likely include city parks, zoom out to scan for nonurban hiking options. Some trails will have online reviews and detailed information, while others might just be a pin on your phone's map.

Look for search results located in the green-shaded areas on the map (recreation areas), and write down the names of trails or trailheads that appeal to you. Now you have a list of potential trails to research on the web, in guidebooks, or by seeking expert advice.

You can also ask for hiking suggestions from people in your area who know this information as part of their jobs or hobbies. Often, the best local trails are discovered by word-of-mouth tips, including some little-known routes that never show up in online search results or guidebooks.

Knowing the names of local recreation areas ahead of time—either by searching online or using a local map or road atlas—will help you focus your questions about trails. For example, asking someone, “Where can I go hiking in Pisgah National Forest?” will get you better results than a general question like, “Where can I go hiking in North Carolina?” If you want in-person trail advice, seek out the following sources:

- ◇ City or county parks and recreation departments
- ◇ Park rangers and guides
- ◇ Staff at local outdoor gear and apparel shops
- ◇ Your public library
- ◇ Local hiking or outing clubs

If you want to devote more time and resources to finding local trails, check out websites and apps that list trails close to your city or zip code. The entry for each trail often includes useful information about mileage, terrain, elevation profiles, reviews, and even coordinates to download as a route to your GPS device or smartphone.



Trail Tips Modern smartphones contain GPS chips that can pinpoint your location even when you're outside cell phone coverage. This means your smartphone can mimic a GPS device—especially if you download navigation apps like Gaia GPS, AllTrails, or ViewRanger that let you track your route on detailed topo maps you download before a hike.



GPS-based apps can deliver accurate backcountry maps and trail details straight to your smartphone.

Many websites and apps employ an easy-to-use Google Maps-based search tool that enables you to zoom in on a map to locate the trail and scan the surrounding landscape. The websites in the following table offer a national database of hiking trails that is frequently updated and expanded, along with the ability to sync hikes to user-friendly smartphone apps. Note that some apps require paid subscriptions to download trail maps for offline usage—like when you're on the trail.

Find a Local Trail Online	App	Find Trails	Download Offline Maps	Trail Reviews
backpacker.com/trips (Backpacker magazine)	ViewRanger	Free	Yes	No
alltrails.com	AllTrails	Free	Subscription	Yes
hikingproject.com	Hiking Project	Free	Yes	Yes
galagps.com	Gala GPS	Free	Subscription	Yes

If you prefer a more hands-on approach to finding local hiking trails, you can purchase a local guidebook. Check your local library or bookstore for a guide focused on your area. You might find an independent work produced by a local hiker or club, or you might find a book that is part of a national series. Three of the most popular hiking series are *50 Hikes*, published by Countryman Press; *Hiking Guides*, published by Falcon Guides; and *100 Classic Hikes*, published by Mountaineers Books (see Resources). All three of these publishers hire writers who are local experts in the states and regions they cover. Most guidebooks will indicate trailheads, provide maps of the routes, and include a narrative description of the trails' highlights and challenges, giving you the chance to preview a hike before venturing out the door.

Another popular route-planning option is the *Trails Illustrated* map series from National Geographic. You can find detailed trail maps for most national parks and popular recreation areas in every state. (Utah alone has 32 maps.) But keep in mind that these maps don't provide important details such as mileage, elevation gain, or difficulty level that you can learn from a trail guide.



Safety Check If information about a trail in a guidebook or on a website is more than 3 years old, check the internet or contact the local park or agency to find out if any details have changed.

Destination Day-Hikes

Occasionally, you might want to hike a trail farther from home. You might be traveling for business, visiting friends in another state, or on vacation.

First, you'll need to find out where the trails are located. You can use the same websites and apps I mentioned previously, except you probably won't be as familiar with the area. If you're hiking in a new place, pay special attention to trail descriptions and reviews for important details on parking, water access, and weather, such as if afternoon thunderstorms are a daily occurrence during the summer.

National parks are often a major attraction if you're visiting from out of town. If you think that national park trails are only reserved for burly backpackers, you're wrong. Park staff and planners create recreational opportunities to appeal to all types of visitors—including day-hikers. You can find detailed information on all 419 national park properties using the search map at the National Park Service's website, [nps.gov/findapark](https://www.nps.gov/findapark). All national park websites have suggested trails and itineraries for day-hikers under the "Things to Do" menu.

Second, you'll need to figure out how to reach the trailhead. This is easy if you have access to a car, but if you're dependent on public transportation, don't give up! Lots of major cities—including New York, Boston, and San Francisco—have many trails that you can access by bus, shuttle, train, or tram. You'll need to check a guidebook or call the rangers at the specific park to find out if and how you can get to a trailhead by public transport—but it's definitely doable.

Here are eight major cities that feature easy access to nearby trails—and where those trails are located:

- ◆ **Boston, MA** Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, Cape Cod National Seashore
- ◆ **Washington, D.C.** Creek Park, C&O Canal National Historical Park
- ◆ **Denver, CO** Red Rocks, White Ranch Park
- ◆ **Phoenix, AZ** Phoenix Mountains Preserve

- ◇ **Las Vegas, NV** Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Zion National Park (UT)
- ◇ **Seattle, WA** Olympic National Park
- ◇ **Salt Lake City, UT** City Creek Canyon, Big Cottonwood Canyon, Little Cottonwood Canyon
- ◇ **San Francisco/Oakland, CA** Lands End, Marin Headlands, Redwood Regional Park, San Francisco Bay Trail

Despite the extra preparation involved, you should take advantage of any opportunity to hike in a new place—especially if the terrain, wildlife, and climate are completely different from what you normally experience.

Types of Trails

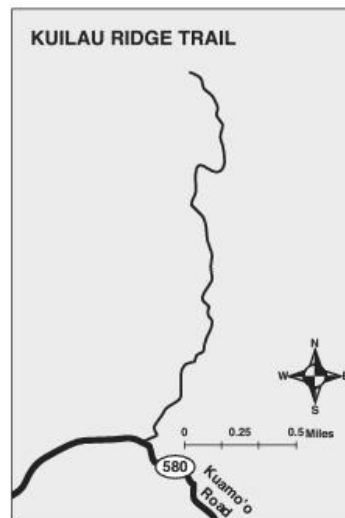
Most parks and recreation areas contain networks of trails that intersect and overlap with each other. While these trail systems can make maps confusing, they also give hikers more flexibility when planning hikes. For instance, you can combine several short trails into a longer route. Trails often are distinguished by periodic *blazes*, which are paint stripes or buttons placed on tree trunks or posts several hundred feet apart. These blazes can help you tell the trails apart and alert you when you've started hiking on a new trail. Each trail is identified by a unique blaze to help hikers stay on the correct route.

Out-and-Backs vs. Loop Trails

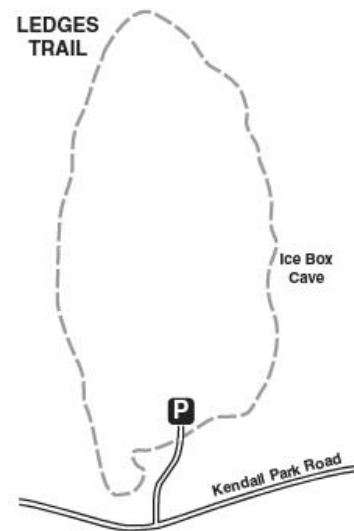
There are two main types of trails: out-and-backs and loops. Loop trails circle back to their original starting point, while out-and-back trails require hikers to walk the same ground twice. This repetition is why out-and-back routes are considered to be less-attractive options than loop hikes. However, out-and-back trails are occasionally the only way to reach a scenic view, a waterfall, or a mountain summit. Sometimes, you can link several out-and-back trails to create a loop and return by a different trail to your starting point. When calculating the distance of an out-and-back trail, remember to double the mileage because you'll need to hike the return leg, too.



Safety Check Wrong turns are the number one cause of lost hikers. Because faster and slower hikers in groups tend to separate along the trail, always stop and wait at a trail junction for the entire group to arrive before continuing.



An out-and-back trail requires you to cover the same ground twice.



A loop trail returns you to your starting point.

Flat Terrain vs. Elevation Gain

Besides the number of miles, a trail's difficulty is determined by how much it goes up and down in elevation. Some trails can be flat, while others can climb and descend hundreds of vertical feet over the course of several miles. The steepest trail sections often require hikers to use their hands and feet to scramble up ledges or over boulders.

Because it takes longer to hike uphill, add an extra hour to your total hike time for each 1,000-foot gain in elevation on a trail. And while going downhill is less tiring than going up, it can be just as time-consuming for many hikers because of uncertain footing.

Trails that climb hills and mountains are designed with *switchbacks* to reduce the overall gradient. Switchbacks are zigzagging paths that reduce the slope of steep trails to make them easier to climb. Never cut across switchbacks to save time. Ignoring switchbacks accelerates slope erosion and encourages other hikers to do the same, causing more damage to the trail. You should always check to see how much elevation a trail gains and loses. It's also much harder to climb at higher elevations—especially above 6,000 feet—where the oxygen content of the air is noticeably lower. Despite the challenge, gaining elevation on a steep trail brings rewards like scenic views, exotic wildlife, and mountain summits. Most trails gain and lose a couple hundred feet, but the elevation gain over the 2,178-mile Appalachian Trail, which goes from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Katahdin in Maine, is 510,000 vertical feet—the equivalent of climbing the stairs of the Empire State Building every day for 16 months!

Pick a Goal

Escaping the civilized world is as good as an excuse as any to go hiking. You won't find annoying coworkers, sky-high utility bills, or shrill infomercials on the trail. However, you should also consider what you want to discover, not just what you want to avoid. Focusing on specific goals will guide your planning and give you the motivation to embark on an afternoon of hiking. Here are hints on where and how to experience nature's major attractions.

If you just want to get some fresh air ...

- ◇ Go just about anywhere you won't find cars, trucks, or lawn mowers.
- ◇ Find a ridgeline trail to catch cooling breezes.
- ◇ Hike just after a rainstorm.

If you want to watch the wildlife ...

- ◇ Linger near lakes and rivers where animals seek water, and go at dawn or dusk when they are most active.

- ◇ Stake out the edges of meadows and clearings where animals become visible.
- ◇ Hike in the fall to see animals competing for mates and in the spring to spot newborns.

If your primary goal is fitness ...

- ◇ Seek out trails with significant elevation changes.
- ◇ Pack a pedometer or download a fitness app to record your speed in miles per hour.
- ◇ Load your pack with extra weight to burn more calories.
- ◇ Use trekking poles to exercise your arms.

If you want to take photos ...

- ◇ Shoot at dusk and dawn when low-angled light enhances colors and contrast.
- ◇ Look for unique shots like reflections on lakes and tree silhouettes.
- ◇ Move around—don't just stand there—to get a different perspective.

If you want to be near the water ...

- ◇ Plan a fall or winter hike to a hot spring.
- ◇ Finish a summer hike at a lake, waterfall, or swimming hole.
- ◇ Find a trail that follows the bank of a river or stream.

If you want to enjoy a scenic view ...

- ◇ Seek out bald peaks with fire towers and other prominent lookout points.
- ◇ Hike exposed ridgelines and check out the summits of hills and mountains.
- ◇ Plan fall foliage hikes when the colors are most brilliant.
- ◇ Hike in the late fall or early spring when bare trees allow expansive views.

Hiking for All Seasons

Unlike tennis or baseball, day-hiking is an outdoor activity you can enjoy throughout the year. The trails are always there, even during the winter when snow covers the ground. Plus, hiking the same trail in different seasons can make it seem like a completely new place. While the summer months are most popular for hiking, you should remember that hiking can be enjoyed all 12 months of the year. Here are some of the advantages to every season.

In the spring ...

- ◇ The landscape turns vibrantly green.
- ◇ You may spot newborn animals.
- ◇ The days are warm, and the nights lack humidity.
- ◇ There are fewer bugs.
- ◇ There is abundant drinking water. (See Chapter 14 for techniques for making water sources safe to drink.)

In the summer ...

- ◇ Wildlife is at its most active.
- ◇ The nights are warmest.
- ◇ The days are the longest of the year.
- ◇ Wildflowers bloom.

In the fall ...

- ◇ There are fewer bugs.
- ◇ The days and nights are cooler.
- ◇ You can enjoy changing fall foliage.
- ◇ There is increased animal activity because of migrations and mating.
- ◇ The trails are less crowded.

In the winter ...

- ◇ There are no bugs.
- ◇ The days and nights are chilly (less sweating!).

- ◇ There are fewer crowds.
- ◇ It's easier to spot animal tracks in snow.
- ◇ There is increased visibility.
- ◇ You can travel by ski or snowshoe.

Preparing for Bad Weather and Other Challenges

Because no one can control the weather, the best we can do is prepare ourselves for whatever nature flings at us. For hikers, that means checking the weather forecast and bringing the right clothes and equipment. One advantage of day-hikes is that you can easily reschedule your trip around bad weather. But if you can't dodge rain or cold temperatures, keep these tips in mind to stay dry and warm in all conditions:

- ◇ Pack a waterproof jacket—not an umbrella—if there's even a slight chance of rain (see Chapter 10 for more clothing tips on how to stay dry).
- ◇ Add clothing layers before you feel chilled, and remove extra layers as soon as you begin to sweat.
- ◇ Automatically put on more layers to stay warm when you stop for rest breaks.
- ◇ Wear a hat with a brim to keep rain out of your face.
- ◇ Protect electronic gear like cell phones, GPS devices, and car keys from getting wet by placing them in plastic bags.



Trail Tips If bad weather or some other unforeseen disaster threatens to ruin your trip, look on the bright side—at least it will be a memorable hike!

Avoiding Crowds

Besides the weather, the most significant change between the seasons is the number of people you are likely to see on the trail. The most popular months to go hiking are June, July, and August. The least popular months are January and February. Crowding can become a problem, especially if solitude is one of your goals. On Fourth of July weekend, some popular trails can

resemble a Los Angeles freeway at rush hour. Here are some tips on how to avoid the crowds:

- ◇ Hike in the middle of the week and during the fall, winter, or spring.
- ◇ Find trailheads that are located away from main roads or parking lots.
- ◇ Hike backward by starting at the traditional ending of a trail.
- ◇ Ask park rangers which trails receive the least traffic.

Avoiding Bugs

The most unpopular companion on any hike is a swarm of vicious mosquitoes or black flies. Unfortunately, these biters prefer the same isolated backcountry areas frequented by hikers—especially those near water. Black flies lay eggs in cold running water, while mosquitoes do the same in warm, stagnant ponds. Water, in fact, is crucial to their survival. While the best defense against biting bugs is a DEET-based repellent (see Chapter 7), here are several tips to help you plan hikes when bugs are less active:

- ◇ Bug populations generally peak from late May to June but can vary by species and region.
- ◇ Black flies are most active in the morning, while mosquitoes swarm at dusk.
- ◇ Most bugs prefer shade and avoid direct sunlight.
- ◇ When winds exceed 5 mph, most small bugs can't maintain controlled flight.
- ◇ Mosquitoes are attracted to fragrances, so use unscented deodorant and hair products or forget them altogether.
- ◇ Mosquitoes become less active when temperatures drop below 60°F.



SUMMARY

By now, you've learned that day-hiking is the first step to more outdoor adventure, including backpacking. Start hiking on local trails, which you can find using apps on your smartphone, or via guidebooks, maps, and advice from local experts. No matter where you live or play, there are always hiking trails nearby, and good reasons to go hiking in every season of the year.