



Adidas jacket, [adidas.com](https://www.adidas.com); **FP Movement** sweater, [fpmovement.com](https://www.fpmovement.com); **Patagonia** bottom, [patagonia.com](https://www.patagonia.com); **Tabbi Socks** socks, [tabbisocks.com](https://www.tabbisocks.com); **Veja** shoes, [veja-store.com](https://www.veja-store.com); **The North Face** backpack (worn throughout), [thenorthface.com](https://www.thenorthface.com); **Columbia** sleeping bag (worn throughout), [columbia.com](https://www.columbia.com)

Alone Time

Whether you're a seasoned outdoor person or a total newbie, venturing out on your own can be incredibly intimidating...and equally rewarding. There are so many reasons you can—and should—get out in nature by yourself. Your guide, right here.

By Lauren Del Turco and Mattie Schuler
Photographed by Cathrine Wessel Fashion director: Kristen Saladino

In the week leading up to her first solo backpacking trip—a one-night adventure through California's Cottonwood Lakes wilderness—Allison Boyle came up with a million and one reasons why she shouldn't go. Work was really busy; she was tired; it just wasn't the right time. Since moving to the West Coast a few years prior, Boyle had hiked and backpacked plenty with friends, but as she prepared to go it alone, inner resistance hit her hard.

Still, she got in her car and drove to the trailhead in October 2015. Once she arrived, all of the doubts and fears melted away. Even when unexpected snow forced her to adjust course, she felt empowered and proud; this was what she had prepped for! By the time she reemerged from the trail the next day, Boyle was hooked. "Solo trips give me the chance to tap into myself, to clear my head, and to make my own decisions," she says.

Today, through her company She Dreams of Alpine, Boyle helps

women become confident, safe, and self-sufficient backpackers. And she's far from the only one who has found adventuring alone to be straight-up life-changing.

"Solo nature experiences increase women's self-confidence and agency because they allow us to prove to ourselves that we can overcome our fears, and solve problems, and let go of the notion that we have to rely on others for our safety," says psychotherapist Erica Tait, LCSW, a drug and alcohol counselor and an avid solo hiker herself. "We learn to follow our own instincts and intuition, stepping into our power and becoming more independent."

Despite all you have to gain from spending this QT with yourself and the natural world, very understandable concerns about getting lost, coming across a wild animal, or encountering a threatening stranger keep plenty of women from hiking or camping alone. There's also a sneakier obstacle that stands in your way these days. "We're so immersed in our daily lives and addicted to technology that the thought of separating from them—and really, truly being alone with our thoughts—can bring up a lot of discomfort," Tait says.

Of course, this is *why* solo nature experiences are transformative. In fact, spending a full day in the great outdoors not only improves health markers (like blood pressure) but also leads to higher ratings of mental and emotional well-being, research shows.

So, whether you've never hiked or camped a single day in your life or just haven't worked up the guts to venture out on your own, know this: You. Can. Do. It. This manual is here to support you literally every step of the way, complete with tools for a smooth trip, advice that'll help you keep your cool after realizing you made a wrong turn (like three miles ago), and real-life inspo about getting up close and personal with Mother Nature. Take on that adventure—we got you.



Adidas jacket, adidas.com; **FP Movement** sweater, fpmovement.com; **Patagonia** bottoms, patagonia.com

OPPOSITE
Tory Sport jacket, toryburch.com; **Belle You** bottoms, belleyou.com; **Echo** hat, echonewyork.com; **Tabbi Socks** socks, tabbisocks.com; **Merrell** shoes, merrell.com

XX PICK YOUR PERFECT PATH

Whether you're down for a three-day trek or an overnight trip a few miles from a trailhead, there's no wrong way to backpack solo.

To plan something that's equal parts fun and challenging, start by setting a goal for your outing, says Boyle. Are you looking to totally disconnect, get your sweat on with a new physical feat, or be blown away by the scenery and take some awesome photos? Focus on why you want to do this as you look for destinations (hiking accounts on Instagram can offer tons of ideas too).

Next, factor in the appropriate length and elevation gain for your physical abilities. For new backpackers, Boyle recommends aiming for around six miles and less than 1,000 feet in elevation gain per day (remember, you'll be hauling extra weight).

With that in mind, start perusing trail descriptions on websites like AllTrails and Hiking Project, where you can

filter for area, length, and difficulty, and read comments to see up-to-date trail conditions and how crowded the spot is. Stick to routes that don't require special climbing skill sets (like Class 1 trails) and avoid grizzly country (mountainous areas in a few Western states) when going solo. Reach out to local hiking groups, nearby gear outfitters, or search blogs for firsthand info.



Prep Like a Pro

Trail in mind? It's time to create a plan (with options for whatever you might encounter) for a smart, safe hike.

REFLECTIONS

“Hiking Alone Helped Me Create the Career of My Dreams.”

—Nicole Snell, CEO of Girls Fight Back

Growing up in the desert of Southern California, I loved going outside to explore on my own, and I started taking on longer hikes by myself in college. People told me, “Oh, girls don’t do that. Black people don’t do that. And you definitely can’t do it by yourself.” But my stubborn and strong-spirited self did it anyway.

Now, I’m hooked on the freedom and independence that comes with hiking alone. I feel capable of handling any challenge in my life, whether it’s with work, family, relationships, you name it. The self-sufficiency and clarity about who I am that I’ve gained from hiking have spilled over into everything I do. Without it, I don’t know if I would have had the courage to buy my company—a self-defense program called Girls Fight Back—and become a CEO, which I did in the middle of the pandemic! But here I am, thriving and helping others find their strength too. —As told to Lauren Del Turco

First, you’ll need to get a paper map and a compass, as well as a GPS tracking device or app (having both is crucial in case your tech fails). National Geographic maps are waterproof, durable, and detailed; find ’em at local gear shops or order them online. Popular apps, like Gaia GPS Hiking, AllTrails Pro, and Hiking Project, allow for off-line use with downloadable maps, so you can still follow the trail with your phone’s location, for a fee.

Before you head out, mark your map with the main water sources along the trail and bail-out points in case of snow, bad weather, a lost trail, or simply being overwhelmed. Decide on

points that, if you haven’t reached them by X hour of the day or X day of your trip, mean you’ll turn around—especially if the trail only gets harder—so you don’t run out of resources.

Also, choose a designated safety contact to share your route with, including estimated daily mileage and where you’ll be camping, says Jacki Harp, an ardent backpacker and REI store manager in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Check the Forest Service website for any necessary permits, fire bans, and food storage rules to avoid animal encounters. Harp carries a copy of her ID, insurance card, and emergency contact info, too, just in case.



Navigate Like a Boss

Compass newbie? The most common mistakes people make are physically orienting their body or the compass wrong, says Harp, who also sees folks storing a compass next to metal or their phone, which can impact the accuracy of the needle. For practice on using it properly, watch YouTube videos or take an in-person or virtual class on navigation.

SKILL BUILDER
2

Manage Weather Changes

Even when you have waterproof gear—and a liner and rain cover for your backpack—sometimes clothes get wet (thanks, sweat!). Hang them up or on your backpack when the sun comes out to help them dry. Opt for merino wool or synthetic material—not cotton—for quicker drying. Way colder than expected? Boil water, fill a bottle, and pop that in your bag by your feet or core.



Rag & Bone jacket, rag-bone.com; **Bally** sweater and bottom, bally.com; **Tabbi Socks** socks, tabbi-socks.com; **Veja** shoes, veja-store.com; **Moncler** sunglasses, moncler.com

XX PACK THE ESSENTIALS

With any outing, always carry the “10 essentials”: nav system (map, compass, GPS), headlamp, sun protection, first-aid kit with a whistle and multitool, fire starter, shelter, extra food, water-purifying system (filter and tablets), extra layers, and waterproof clothing. Test gear before and load and weigh your pack (it should be no more than 30 pounds). The following four items offer extra safety and comfort on your trek too:



KAHTOOLA MICROSPIKES FOOTWEAR TRACTION

You won't always need spikes, but facing an icy trail without them can be scary. Stretch these over any shoe to feel instantly stable. \$70, kahtoola.com



KULA CLOTH

Read up on the rules around disposing of human waste where you're hiking (hey, it's part of the gig!), and limit the amount of TP you have to pack in and out with this reusable, antimicrobial pee cloth. It has a waterproof side for clean hands while wiping. From \$20, kulacloth.com



ANKER POWER-CORE SOLAR 20000

Having podcasts and books on your phone is nice when solo trekking for long periods. Charge this up in the sun to give your devices some juice. \$60, anker.com



GARMIN INREACH MINI

Communicate with two-way messaging, track and share your location, check weather, and use the emergency-location button on this satellite comm device with GPS if you become lost or injured. \$350 plus \$12/month subscription to satellite network, garmin.com



BUILD YOUR STRENGTH

To get your body ready, jump into this training plan from physical therapist Kelsey Kuehn, DPT, CSCS, founder of Empower Physiotherapy and Training in Colorado, six to eight weeks from your start date.

Cardio

Start with hikes that replicate your route in elevation gain (carrying 10 to 15 pounds in your pack each time), but don't max out on miles just yet. Plan for one longer hike a week (start at 50 percent of your planned daily mileage for your trip) and a few shorter ones as well. Each week, up your long hike by a mile, so that by two weeks out from your trip, your long days are truly replicating the mileage and elevation you'll be undertaking.

Strength Training

Perform the following exercises two or three times a week, doing two or three sets of each. The lower body exercises will make elevation changes easier, while the upper body moves will assist in carrying extra weight. "Upper back strength is really helpful for carrying the pack and lifting it on and off your back," says Kuehn.

- ▶ 12 calf raises on a step
- ▶ 12 squats of any variety
- ▶ 12 split squats or lunges per side
- ▶ 12 rows or overhead presses

REFLECTIONS

"Being Alone in Nature Helped Me Learn To Live With Depression."

—Caitlin Dunklee, social justice strategic advisor

I've lived with major depressive disorder since I was 11. While studying abroad in college, I volunteered at a women's prison in Ecuador amid a political uprising, and the inhumanity and terror I witnessed there left me with PTSD on top of my lifelong depression. I started drinking more and at times felt such heaviness that I could barely roll over in bed. It was like I was tethered to the ground.

When I moved to Oakland, California, in my early 30s for a fresh start, I began trauma therapy and substance use recovery, and started hiking through the Bay Area's redwood forests by myself. At first, I hiked just to delay having that first drink in the evening. Though I got freaked out being

alone out there—especially after dusk—I was struggling so much to get by that being by myself was all I could handle. I had to move slowly and take lots of breaks, but the redwood trees gave me confidence that I had a shot at healing.

I became my best self in the forest. With each hike, I was overcoming the immobility of depression, and I felt like I had agency over my life. I've never been a spiritual person, but hiking helped ground me and connect me to something bigger than myself—specifically, the redwoods. During my five years in Oakland, hiking alone (along with continued therapy and support from my recovery program) helped me learn to live with depression and stop drinking one day at a time.

Earlier this year, I moved to Asheville, North Carolina, where my adventures have continued—though now I do a lot more hikes with friends (and my dog!). Depression is still a part of my life, but I have debilitating days much less often. I no longer feel stuck to the ground: These days, you can find me exploring the ridgelines and grassy balds of the Blue Ridge Mountains. —As told to Lauren Del Turco



Solo Studies

Backpacking alone can be a mental game. Master it, here.

Let's be real: The world of outdoor excursions has long had a pretty bro-y vibe (have you seen *Man vs. Wild*?). "When people think of hiking, they imagine this strong white guy with thousands of dollars of expensive gear," says Andrea Romesser, an instructor with Outward Bound, a nonprofit that provides educational outdoor experiences for people of all walks of life. "When you don't see representation of people doing it differently, you think you have to be white, male, and wealthy to hike—and that's a huge barrier." Though more people are working to change the norm, women still face some mental and emotional hurdles when forging their own way. Don't worry, though; there's a fix for whatever's holding you back.

How to Put Risk Into Context

One thing that keeps tons of women from even dreaming about hiking, backpacking, or camping alone? The idea that being solo in the wilderness is just too dangerous. Reality: "Making it to the trailhead is the hardest part," says Boyle. "It can be overwhelming, and perhaps there's even negative feedback from others to overcome." It's true that adventuring outdoors alone isn't completely risk-free, but consider this: "There's a lot of risk involved in things we do that we've convinced ourselves are safe because they're familiar," Boyle points out. Since the concept of spending time alone in nature isn't as normalized, it's easier to create what Boyle calls "mind drama" around it.

The solution: Give yourself a chance to gradually get more comfortable with the idea of being out there on your own—and do your homework so you feel prepared and safe when the call of the wild comes knocking. "Start slow and small—even if it's eating your lunch in a park alone at first," Romesser says. "From there, maybe you look for a nearby trail that has cell service." Building up your comfort in the outdoors is like strengthening a muscle.



Once you're ready to try backpacking solo, it's a matter of planning. "Read up on your route as much as you can—or choose a route you've already done with a group so you know what to expect," says record-holding long-distance hiker Liz Thomas, author of *Long Trails: Mastering the Art of the Thru-Hike*. "I also recommend people take wilderness first-aid classes so they have tools in their back pocket to handle the unlikely." Chances are, you'll never face worst-case scenarios, but knowing you have knowledge and skills to handle them makes venturing out feel less scary.

How to Prevent Panic

Anyone who's hiked, backpacked, or camped has experienced the anxiety of taking a wrong turn, hearing a twig snap outside their tent in the middle of the night, or feeling a rumble of thunder in the distance. Before you freak out, press pause, as long as you can safely do so (e.g., there's not a moose in your face). "When we get panicky, we act on impulse and emotion instead of logic," says Tait. Instead, "close your eyes and breathe slowly, inhaling for a count of seven and exhaling for a count of five. As you do this, notice your thoughts and ask yourself what is based in evidence and fact and what is a story you're telling yourself." More often than not, you'll find there's no real reason to worry. "Our imagination comes up with these crazy scenarios, but when we come back to the present moment, we realize we're okay," says Boyle.

However, if you need to make some sort of actual move, meet your basic needs first. "Eat or drink something; take off layers if you're hot; put layers on if you're cold; put on your rain jacket if you need to," Thomas suggests. This way, low blood sugar or wonky body temperature won't mess with your ability to think clearly. Once your immediate needs are taken care of, you may decide you need to bail. (Thomas made that call on her second solo backpacking trip. No sweat!) Or maybe you tweak your plans in order to stay within your comfort zone, whether that means shaving a few miles off your planned mileage, asking other hikers if you can stick with them for a while, or waiting out a storm at lower elevation. Giving yourself permission to pivot is a must on any outing—and is actually a sign of a smart, seasoned hiker.

How to Actually Enjoy Being Alone

Animals, wrong turns, and other safety concerns aside, the thought of being stuck with your thoughts and few dis-

tractions (ahem, cell service) might also leave you pretty hesitant to explore. But this is a good thing, trust. "When we're alone, we have the ability to let our minds wander, explore our feelings, and ask ourselves meaningful questions," Tait says.

In fact, that's the very reason a lot of people decide to go on long solo thru-hikes after a major life event or when they're feeling a little lost. "It's a space in which you can figure out what you want and who you want to be. But you don't have to go on a monthlong trip; you can have some pretty wonderful realizations on an hour-long hike," says Romesser.

So give yourself a chance to be present with your thoughts, and be patient with yourself. Sometimes it takes time to ease into a comfortable place while you're alone. But you never know what you might discover.

Of course, it goes without saying that boredom is very real (and understandable) out there. As long as you're not disturbing your surroundings or fellow hikers, go ahead and put on that audiobook, podcast, or playlist, says Thomas. Otherwise, you can also bring an actual book (or an e-reader), a journal, or even a small watercolor set, Boyle says. Remember: You're on your own time, so if you feel like jumping in that lake, stopping to have a snack, reading for a while in the afternoon sun, or whatever it may be, you can! The beauty of it is that you call the shots. "It's not a race; no one cares how fast you get to the top of the mountain," Romesser says. "Take your time." It's not often you have that luxury!



×× 135%

more people enjoyed the outdoors through hiking in 2020 than in 2019.

Source: AllTrails and RunRepeat.com

REFLECTIONS

"I Hike to Show Marginalized People They Belong in the Outdoors."

—Shanice (a.k.a. Sol) Snyder, *Unlikely Hikers* ambassador

In my 20s, I started hiking around the Seattle area with friends—but I was always too nervous to go by myself. Then, one weekend, a friend and I were supposed to check out a popular trail a few hours away, and she bailed last minute. I'd been so excited for the trip that I worked up the nerve to go alone; I'd done my homework on the trail and knew there'd be other people out there to keep me from feeling too isolated.

When I got to the summit of that mountain (the highest elevation I'd ever been!), I couldn't believe the miles and miles of mountains in front



Get Through an Animal Encounter

Most large wild animals are a problem only if you surprise them. Wearing bear bells or singing can help. If you encounter one, don't run. Talk in a loud, calm voice and get big—spread out your trekking poles and back away facing the animal. Research whether you should have bear spray and bear canisters in your area (and how to use them).



of me—and I was hooked. From that day forward, I started hiking alone all the time. I liked that I could fully experience everything around me, sit at the summit for as long as I wanted, and take my sweet time coming back down. At first, I hated being alone with my thoughts, but as time went on, I realized I could think (or say) anything I felt out in the wilderness and that the trees and the plants were there to just receive it all.

From then on, my alone time led to breakthrough after breakthrough. With every summit, I shed some of my self-doubt and realized how capable I

was. I started taking road trips and car camping to explore the Pacific Northwest, went backpacking this summer, and I'm planning a solo trip through Utah and to the Grand Canyon. Of course, it hasn't been all summit selfies and sunshine. My backpacking trip this summer was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. I grunted and swore my entire hike back to my car. I broke down crying the moment I finished, but I had done it—and I was damn proud of myself.

For me, exploring nature on my own has given me confidence that my younger self would never think possi-

ble. She'd be in tears to see how strong and adventurous I am now.

Still, I think we have a lot of work to do in helping other marginalized people (like me, a mixed-race person) feel they belong in the outdoors. If we want to be good stewards of this land—which isn't even ours to begin with—we have to provide everyone with the opportunities and education for them to experience and appreciate it too. That's why I share my routes, advice, and encouragement on Instagram. I can do this, solo, and I want other people to see they can too.

—As told to Lauren Del Turco