

## Backpacking: Before You Leave Home

- Make sure you have all of the equipment, clothing and food you'll need for your trip. Use a checklist (check out our list of Expert Advice checklists) to make sure you haven't forgotten anything.
- Make sure you have all the paperwork you'll need—maps, campsite reservations, parking permits and wilderness permits.
- Carry enough cash for emergencies, [phone](#) calls or unexpected fees.

### Leave an Itinerary

Before you head out the door, give someone you trust a written copy of your trip plans. This written plan should include:

- Your estimated time of departure
- The names, addresses and phone numbers of all group members
- Any relevant medical conditions that may affect group members
- Your vehicle's make, model and license plate number
- Your expected route of travel (including trailhead information)
- Your expected camping sites along the way
- Your final destination and expected time of return

Make plans to contact the person holding your trip plan when your trip is over (or at specific intervals during longer trips). Agree on a procedure for contacting the authorities if you do not report in by a certain time.

Leave a photocopy of your itinerary in your vehicle and under your seat. If a search and rescue team undertakes a mission on your behalf, every second counts. It's possible team members will attempt to enter your vehicle in hopes of finding any scrap of information that may help them find you. If you change your plans, call your contact before you start and give them the update.

### Road Check

Know the conditions of the route to your chosen trailhead. Inquire locally to verify that your vehicle can handle the roads (or ruts) that lead to it. If the route is isolated, unpaved or only seasonally maintained, contact a ranger, park manager or a local before you leave to make sure the route is passable all the way to the trailhead.

### What If?

Plan for the unexpected "what ifs." Those would include: What if I get delayed? Lost? Injured? Am I prepared to cope with that? Make sure that you are.

If you don't already own a [compass](#), at least pick up an inexpensive beginner's model (reliable models start around \$10) before you leave town. You need to understand basic map-and-compass navigational skills. How do you learn? Two starting points:

- Take a navigation class. Check at your nearest REI store to see if it has any scheduled. Community colleges or high schools with adult extension programs often offer such [classes](#) on weekends or at night.
- Find a friend who really understands topographic maps and compass usage; ask that person to [join](#) you on a day hike and learn all you can.

Take out your map at home, when you're under no pressure, and study your intended route in advance. This gives you time to become more familiar and comfortable with the distinctive markings of a topographic map.

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