

Quiet Sports

the perfect sole: how to buy great hiking boots



My ankles wobbled and my soles ached as I dumped my backpack near the tent and plopped down next to it. Leaning against the heavy pack, I rotated my ankles, which easily flexed in my soft hiking boots that were worn with age. Still standing after our climb of several miles and a few thousand feet in elevation gain, my husband Keith, sturdy leather boots hiding his feet, flashed me a told-you-so smile. I grimaced and continued massaging.

Like most sporting equipment, hiking boots come in many flavors—from lightweight day hikers, like the ones I had mistakenly chosen for our backpacking trip, to mountaineering boots, ready for crampons and days of climbing with a laden pack. Within these two extremes fall a variety of gradations and countless brands, offering a model or two in each type of boot. The key is to winnow your options based on the boot's intended use and your own hiking experience.

First, you should decide where and how you plan to use the boots: short day hikes, over even ground with an occasional hill, or longer trips in mountainous terrain? Will you carry a heavy backpack? And what can you expect from the weather: calm summer skies or a riotous late fall day with snow flur-

ries? Will you encounter slippery rocks and other slick obstacles?

Second, you should consider your own hiking experience. More experienced hikers can sometimes get by with a lighter, softer shoe than the less experienced, who may need the extra support of a more beefy boot.

Once you've decided how you plan to use the boots, visit a reputable sports or outdoor store. Although hiking boots are sold at a variety of department and big-box stores, you typically do not get the same advice and experience at these stores as you find at a specialized sports or outdoor store. The old adage "you get what you pay for" holds true with hiking boots, and a \$25 no-name brand may not last long or be reliable on the trails. Luckily, sales are common at most outdoor stores, and great deals are not unusual.

It is best to shop for your boots at the end of the day, when your feet are tired, hot and swollen—a similar scenario to hiking. At the store, inspect the boots carefully and think about your needs. Are the boots waterproof? Does the stitching look sturdy? Are they too light or too heavy for your purposes? Do the sole and tread look rugged enough for the types of trails you plan to hike? Is the boot's material

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too stiff or too flimsy, depending on how you plan to use them?

After you try on the boots, wearing the same type of sock you plan to use while hiking, walk around the store and, if possible, up and down stairs and any incline or decline. Some stores even offer mock trails and other apparatus to mimic trail conditions. If your toes feel scrunched, your feet slide around in the boot, or your heel lifts, then you probably have a poor fit. You should also consider whether the boots provide enough ankle support or perhaps too much.

Although it is normal for new boots to be somewhat stiff, keep in mind that any discomfort will become magnified once you are tramping around on the trails. The boots should be close-fitting yet comfortable, with room to move your toes and instep.

After you make your purchase, it is time to break in your hiking boots by wearing them around the house and then on short walks. The first time you take them on a longer jaunt, don't be surprised if you discover a few hot spots or blisters; however, this should disappear after a few outings.

But that day on the mountain, when my ankles throbbed and blisters decorated the soles of my feet, my hiking boots were beyond breaking in--they were simply broken: old, worn and flimsy. Hobbling down

the trail the next day, following the sensible boots of my husband, I decided to follow his unspoken example. No more told-you-so looks for me; I had learned my lesson. 🙏

–*Erin Fanning*