

arrested in a public toilet with a sailor—"the seams are lap felled rather than bias taped and the vestibule is a little cramped."

I think because I mentioned that I had done a bit of hiking in England, he assumed some measure of competence on my part. I didn't wish to alarm or disappoint him, so when he asked me questions like "What's your view on carbon fiber stays?" I would shake my head with a rueful chuckle, in recognition of the famous variability of views on this perennially thorny issue, and say, "You know, Dave, I've never been able to make up my mind on that one—what do you think?"

Together we discussed and gravely considered the relative merits of side compression straps, spindrift collars, crampon patches, load transfer differentials, air-flow channels, webbing loops, and something called the occipital cutout ratio. We went through that with every item. Even an aluminum cookset offered considerations of weight, compactness, thermal dynamics, and general utility that could occupy a mind for hours. In between there was lots of discussion about hiking generally, mostly to do with hazards like rockfalls, bear encounters, cookstove explosions, and snakebites, which he described with a certain misty-eyed fondness before coming back to the topic at hand.

With everything, he talked a lot about weight. It seemed to me a trifle overfastidious to choose one sleeping bag over another because it weighed three ounces less, but as equipment piled up around us I began to appreciate how ounces accumulate into pounds. I hadn't expected to buy so much—I already owned hiking boots, a Swiss army knife, and a plastic map pouch that you wear around your neck on a piece of string, so I had felt I was pretty well there—but the more I talked to Dave the more I realized that I was shopping for an expedition.

The two big shocks were how expensive everything was—each time Dave dodged into the storeroom or went off to confirm a denier rating, I stole looks at price tags and was invariably appalled—and how every piece of equipment appeared to require some further piece of equipment. If you bought a sleeping bag,

then you needed a stuff sack for it. The stuff sack cost \$29. I found this an increasingly difficult concept to warm to.

When, after much solemn consideration, I settled on a backpack—a very expensive Gregory, top-of-the-range, no-point-in-stinting-here sort of thing—he said, "Now what kind of straps do you want with that?"

"I beg your pardon?" I said, and recognized at once that I was on the brink of a dangerous condition known as retail burnout. No more now would I blithely say, "Better give me half a dozen of those, Dave. Oh, and I'll take eight of these—what the heck, make it a dozen. You only live once, eh?" The mound of provisions that a minute ago had looked so pleasingly abundant and exciting—all new! all mine!—suddenly seemed burdensome and extravagant.

"Straps," Dave explained. "You know, to tie on your sleeping bag and lash things down."

"It doesn't come with straps?" I said in a new, level tone.

"Oh, no." He surveyed a wall of products and touched a finger to his nose. "You'll need a raincover too, of course."

I blinked. "A raincover? Why?"

"To keep out the rain."

"The backpack's not rainproof?"

He grimaced as if making an exceptionally delicate distinction. "Well, not a hundred percent. . . ."

This was extraordinary to me. "Really? Did it not occur to the manufacturer that people might want to take their packs outdoors from time to time? Perhaps even go camping with them. How much is this pack anyway?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars! Are you shi—," I paused and put on a new voice. "Are you saying, Dave, that I pay \$250 for a pack and it doesn't have straps and it isn't waterproof?"

He nodded.

"Does it have a bottom in it?"

Mengle smiled uneasily. It was not in his nature to grow critical or weary in the rich, promising world of camping equipment. "The straps come in a choice of six colors," he offered helpfully.