

“... fills a much-needed void for folks over the age of 50
who are hitting the trail for the first time.”

—Jennifer Pharr Davis, National Geographic *Adventurer of the Year*

The HONEST BACKPACKER

A Practical Guide for the Rookie Adventurer over 50

A painting of a forest path with hikers. The scene is viewed from behind three hikers walking away on a dirt path. The trees are lush and green, with sunlight filtering through the canopy. The overall style is impressionistic and vibrant.

JAMES KLOPOVIC
& NICOLE KLOPOVIC

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INTRODUCTION

There is everything right about spending a day in the woods, on a river, or cooking weenies with a child over an open fire if you suspect you have a mind to do it. It is worth the effort.

*Plan for a good experience, and it will happen—
over and over again.*

—James Klopovic



Because flowers say it all

At 3,500 feet in the Tennessee Appalachians, with sweat on our brows and hyperventilating between glimpses of impossible beauty, my longtime hiking buddy, Crackerjack, planted the seed for a book on the outdoors for the older and inexperienced hiker. We lamented there is little information on hiking for the older adventurer and a need to explain the fundamentals, especially backpacking, for the boomer generation because there are so many of us, and more than a few who aspire to do things we have never done before and have no idea how to go about them¹.

¹ A baby boomer is anyone who remembers singing Beatles tunes when they were still together while walking to elementary school. You know who you are by those memories—and the achy joints.

The Honest Backpacker Evolves

How do you write something for the seasoned boomer that is purposeful, succinct and enjoyable to read? It would be nice if others in search of an outdoor experience found some helpful advice also. It was an obvious and rather large hole in the bookstore that needed to be filled. We boomers have age-appropriate needs, for goodness' sake! Many of us expect to be vigorous into our 90s and want to make the most of it but do it safely and with as little pain—physical and mental—as possible.

“Many of us expect to be vigorous into our 90s and want to make the most of it but do it safely and with as little pain—physical and mental—as possible.”

We boomers continue to experiment with and change how life is lived. We can make the time if we want. Many of us have the money. And we have the dreams to pretty much do what we can—*can* being the operative word. We are also very aware that we are on “the short rows” and want to make the most of what we have left. The reality is that it takes longer now to heal from injury. Let's face it: Flying a desk for 40 or more years is hard but sedentary work. Anything physical, especially something as demanding as backpacking, must be approached with great care, preparation and concern if there is to be a hike at all, let alone subsequent experiences.

Getting ready for a hike is no easy task for any would-be hiker, especially those approaching and rebelling against their “golden” years. Yet most “how to” literature seems to assume the intrepid gray-haired hiker is in a perpetual state of readiness. It is assumed (and sometimes attempted) that we can strap on a backpack full of hearth and home, including a bladder of Chianti, and knock off a 15-mile, uphill day hike (I can personally attest to the folly of this idea). The mature hiker thinks, acts, perceives and moves differently from a 20- or even a 50-something! For example, we all have six-pack abs; they just come in one container and are most times supersized.

That is but one indication that we have a lot of work ahead to prepare for any outdoor experience, let alone one of substance, length and meaning. We need to know how to get ready by preparing just enough to reasonably ensure a good, safe, fun experience in enough abundance to want to do it again.

Preparing for anything physical, especially after having grown up as the first TV generation, *must* be a whole-body, whole-person experience, well in advance of the happy event. For some, this could mean a year or two of planned, progressive preparation. We have to gradually but relentlessly work toward comfortably doing an hour of good, conscientious, hard physical conditioning at least five times per week. Conditioning must consider flexibility, core, balance, aerobic and anaerobic exercising in that order, and all done respecting the needs and capabilities of a mature person—say, beyond 50 years old. We must educate ourselves in the general knowledge and technical skills of being in the woods, or risk dining on tree bark soufflé just before the big final hike in the sky. Even more important than being physically and technically ready, we must remain excited about any endeavor out of the ordinary; part of a life worth living is dreaming and making a few of those dreams happen.

The Who, What, When, Where, and How of It

My goal with this book is to cut through the volumes of clutter and information out there, organizing the most essential advice on getting ready into one document, and then put the information into an easily understood, logical process and format. I want to make sure the mature adventurer can have a safe, enjoyable and memorable experience—and want to do it again.

Although I tried not to duplicate what you can quickly learn from other sources, references and face-to-face conversations with other backpacking enthusiasts, when researching your own hike, I encourage you to explore as far and wide as your need and curiosity take you.

A good goal is to prepare your own body of knowledge by reading this book, augmenting it with internet searches and organizing a

personal binder that takes you through the whole process. Speaking of processes, I suggest following the book's chapters in order because it follows an organized method, whether you're getting ready for a weekend of car camping with children a few yards from your back door or a wilderness backpacking expedition.

Who can benefit from *The Honest Backpacker*? While it is written from the blissfully ignorant perspective of an eager and unaware baby boomer who needs complete preparation, anyone who wishes to hike, even for a day, can find useful information in these pages. This book will take a wanderer through preparation of their body, mind and soul; get them outfitted and provisioned for a good experience; and get them back with a reasonable assurance that the experience will be done well and memorably. Likewise, a family with young children who wishes to "hike" 100 yards from the car and pitch a tent will also be prepared. In fact, one of my hopes is that if the youngest of adventurers returns from the hike with a good, even giddy experience, they will do it for a lifetime. They will also learn life lessons, as they may be invited to help get ready for an outing. Even toting their own backpack filled with some necessities and a favorite blanket will resonate for years.

The book is laid out in a logical progression of preparing to hit the trail, a little of what to expect on the trail, and returning wanting more. By avoiding discouragement and career-ending mistakes on the first hiking attempt, we hope you will leap at a chance for a second hike.

We boomers appreciate easy reading; hence, where I could, I put things into a checklist or bulleted format, organized by the logical sequence of getting ready for a venture into the woods. The lame attempts at humor are my fault; the humor that works is to the credit of others. I also added a little flavor and seasoning via anecdotes and vignettes from the trail; every adventure needs to be retold.

Also, to add a little spice and enticement to the book, I have included several sections, commonly called stages, from the journal I kept when hiking across northern England on the England Coast-to-Coast (C2C) hike. It is one of the most popular, and to me most

spectacular, hikes on the planet. Every turn created a lifetime memory for me. I hope that getting a little taste of the trail will motivate you to give it a try. You can do a few day hikes, take a sponsored trip or tackle the whole thing. But do refer to *The Honest Backpacker*.

I want to realistically prepare you while encouraging you to get your feet and soul surrounded by earth, wind and nature. I am aware that many prospective hikers, whether they want to day hike with a grandchild or backpack for any length of time, don't know where to begin. For that reason, *The Honest Backpacker* is written from the perspective of the first-time mature hiker. However, it's not limited to that group. This book will address the needs of anyone who wishes to get on the trail and into nature. Even for a one-day hike at a local park, the reader will find it useful to cruise through the whole book and then return to it when needed.

With this basic and complete volume, you'll be ready to hit the trail at the literal drop of a hat. My equipment is lined up on hangers in a closet, ready to hike the Milford Track in New Zealand, the number-one hike in the world, or head to the local park. You will be prepared to go anywhere reasonable—*reasonable* being the operative word. Let me be clear: This book will not prepare you to climb Mount Everest, but it will get you ready for experiences that will tell you if you are ready for more challenging treks. And you will gain the basic knowledge and confidence to step out in various ways. Organizing and preparing for a hike has also made me quite competent to prepare for trout fishing and grouse hunting in Wyoming, bone-fishing in Belize, and going for a walkabout in Australia. So, get a great pair of ankle-height, lightweight hiking boots; a broad-brimmed hat; and a set of hiking poles, and break them in.

ROI: There Is Much More for You Than a Hike

Getting out and about is indeed the road less traveled and the means to many other ends. Throughout these pages there are chances to reflect on where such a path leads; the opportunities are just about limitless. If it is better health you seek, you shall have it. If you want a daily diet of natural beauty, it's there. If you want to experience

the honest camaraderie born of sweat, pain and companionship, it only takes a few days buried in God's woods or along His river with a hiking buddy. If you need a little therapy, there is nothing like the silent sounds of a primitive forest. You *will* understand yourself and others better. Even your media-tainted and life-tattered opinion of your fellow man will be greatly improved by the actualization of personal achievement and the subsequent desire to reach out to others, but more so by the very large amounts of humanity, friendliness, cheerfulness and neighborliness that come by way of a simple footpath. Folks on the trail are just interesting, friendly and giving.

It is astonishing how human and humane people on the trail are. Few places are safer than in your tent at 4,500 feet. You will meet extraordinary and, occasionally, wonderfully goofy people and make instant friends with whom to share a shelter. In any other circumstance, you wouldn't dare raise an eyelid to such people; here, all that is needed is a chance meeting on common ground. The trail is a great leveler of life's playing field. Your Christmas card list will grow exponentially if you want it to. Every hike, no matter how modest, produces a trail legend or two, and that is a good thing. You may even be one of them. The people you meet are the stuff of life.

The pursuit of this type of adventure is not only a lifestyle change, but it is lifestyle betterment, which involves body, mind and soul. Even a short hike of a few days is motivation enough to actually lose a few pounds and drive past instead of through the Golden Starches. Imagine the day you can look down and happily see your toes and other appendages after a hiatus of about 20 years and an advanced case of "Abdominal Diaspora." This book is a guide to prepare you for a hike, to do the hike, and want to do it again. While *The Honest Backpacker* is a complete guide, it is also an introduction to spark your interest in investigating further; there is so much to read, see and do before, during and after a hike (or any life experience that will grow from a hike). The study of the trail is fascinating; there is something primal about it. After all, we as *Homo sapiens* were built and programmed to walk. If we weren't, we'd be worms.

Throughout the book, we may merely refer to a source, which you may pursue for a better and more thorough elaboration of the point in question. The reference list is purposely brief. If you want padded and useless bibliographies, please take a graduate course in anything. Besides, backpacking is not that difficult, though “prepared must you be” (I think Yoda said that).

Record things! Build a modest library of your own making. And be sure you have an album of actual photos going, not just those on an iPhone that could be lost to the family on some kind of cloud thingy. Also, note that you can put other things in an album besides pictures; how about that piece of duct tape you had on your heel for 10 days, the one with shreds of meat still stuck to it? (OK, maybe not.)

Write in a journal, every day, even moment by moment as the mood and muse strike. Benjamin Franklin said it best, “Either write things worth reading or do things worth the writing.” Even the smallest written observation or sketch can bring back floods of memories. Just be sure to chronicle your trip, be it through a journal, memorabilia, quotes from trail sages, scraps of things from the trail, a preserved flower, pictures or all these things. Once started, it is happily never-ending. Someone, sometime will be interested in knowing who you are, what you did, and how you did it. What a glorious thing if it is a grandchild who is inspired to ask you to take them camping!

Benjamin Franklin said it best,
 ““Either write things worth reading or do
 things worth the writing.””

At the risk of being trite, if ever you make an excursion off the couch—*just do it*. But do so in an organized, cautious and resolute way. The side benefits are nothing short of enormous: enjoying better health, meeting wonderful people, finding exotic places and interesting things. Perhaps you will discover a little more self-awareness and faith in your neighbor, or maybe even dream a few more dreams to make happen. Go ahead: Plan a hike across England or

a trek in Nepal with Sherpas and yaks; do the Milford Track in New Zealand; backpack to a remote river in Alaska for the salmon run and have a glorious dinner of the day's catch by the river (away from the bears); hike through Sicily to help with the grape harvest, pay a visit to a newly made trail friend, and bring your journal.

Take a moment, right now, to dream your own dream. And get with it before you really do get too old. If you want to hike a remote trout stream, do it—just bring a fry pan, some Cajun spices and a little canola oil. It's amazing how useless a TV remote really is and how divine peanut butter in a tortilla can be. Is it too corny to say again that it is, after all, the little things, the things *anyone* can have, that make all the difference?

Whatever adventures you may have or are planning, please heat up some ramen with me at the next shelter, and let me hear all about it.

CHAPTER 10

Correcting Errata

I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees.

—Henry David Thoreau



A blaze that marks the Appalachian Trail

Since we have the older hiker very much in mind, there is another aspect of how we view what we do. For many of us, we are aware that we have more birthdays behind us than ahead, while still wanting to continue to make a bit of a difference and have a little fun along the way. Perhaps it is about giving back, leaving a place a little better for our having passed, even if it is only in the ready smile you may have put on the face of a child. We have the resources and, most important, the frame of mind to justify our consumption of those resources and generally how we pass through this life. Even the contemplation of experiencing things in their natural state, by breathing air at 6,000 feet or higher, makes us pause to consider what can be done to make sure others can have the same opportunity, if they want. We were pleasantly surprised when entering this interesting lifestyle that many folks, usually the boomers, were actively involved in good works to do with the community and

the trail, if only to practice leave no trace. But there can be much more; there is much more.

You don't even have to look for it. It is there when preparing for a hike, it is on the trail, and it is certainly there after the hike, even though much more will be contemplated by being close to nature, undistracted, with the opportunity to think and breathe deeply. It must be that experiencing some sublime moments in the company of close, close friends, where the best foot forward is to achieve something, gives pause and motivation to be a good steward of our little part at the top of the food chain. And it just plain feels good to do good stuff with good people. Now, don't get this point wrong: We are *not* talking about leading revolutions and preventing mass extinctions; we are talking about simple actions that can be worked into busy, demanding, vital lives.

What is neat is that once you are into a hike or two, opportunities for good stewardship stream by whether you are on the trail or not. There is always an opportunity to clear the leaves and branches off the local nature trail. The major trails, like the AT, always need a hand, as the woods are at work 24 hours a day reclaiming the trail.

It is a great privilege and opportunity (dosed with some luck) to be on the short rows of life. We can leave the world in a little better shape, even if it is only by reading to a senior citizen once a week; who can't do that? Friends, family, fun; we as boomers are poised to push the boundaries of aging as we have done with so many other limits we have encountered.

My boomer friends ask, "Is that all there is?" after a career or two. The answer is "No!" I have made it a point to ask members of the Greatest Generation—mostly women, as the men are gone—"What is your advice for living a life worth living?" These are women who have seen and done it all, and most of it was brutal, marked by depression (personal and national), serious diseases, rotten health, war, the death of children, endless work, disappointments galore and the betrayal of false friends. And yet those I chatted with were cheerful, fun-loving and encouraging. A family friend of more than 60 years, Ma Kren, now passed on, simply said when asked that

question, “Have *fun!*” What she meant is that we have probably been responsible people by getting an education, obeying the laws, slog-ging through careers, keeping a marriage together, raising children and the like, so we had to say “no” to so much that makes life a little more interesting, fun, accomplished and worthy, if not significant.

I personally said no to nearly all true vacations during two careers over 45 years. I am not saying that being responsible is not an accomplishment; giving the world the gift of a capable child is a remarkable achievement. I am saying that we boomers can expect to be vital, some of us to 100. We can make retirement a full-time career. We can experiment with life all over again. So, say “yes!” Learn to fly fish and teach a grandchild how to tie a small bug, then take her to the local bluegill pond. Make an apple pie together. Take up quilting and have that grandchild help. Help a good citizen get on the town council. Go on safari with the love of your life. Stand on a mountaintop and watch the eagles soar below you. Teach the next generation how to do this thing called life. Be an interesting person who gathers other interesting people around them. Having a friend and being a friend takes work. Get inspiration; be inspiration.

I personally enjoy—love, really—reading about the greats. How did they do it all, many of them in relatively brief lives? Ben Franklin is a fascinating character to wonder about and learn from, aside from the fact that he is one of the most significant people in all human history, probably one of the 100 that matter the most. As he reminisced how his life was entering the short rows, while he was still helping to win the Revolution, he pondered that he needed time to “correct errata.” Here is a man who invented or reinvented the post office, public education, universities, fire departments and banking; who was an inventor, politician, author, diplomat and orator. He was a genius and *the* man for the times. It can be successfully argued that his work on electricity accelerated the advent of the Information Age; even this laptop on which I am working traces back to that kite and key on a stormy, lightning-filled night. Yet he was concerned he did not get *it*, this thing called life.

I’ve thought that if ol’ Ben was concerned with getting things

right, perhaps I should be also. It is desperately tough to live without regrets; those who say they have stretch things a bit. It is just about impossible to get through life without real troubles. I maintain that we boomers who have been pushing development in this great country since we were conceived have yet to write our greatest accomplishments, individually, and especially collectively. Even the most modest of us can do philanthropy. How will you be remembered? Consider the next generation.

There is nothing like taking a child on the trail. Make sure they have their own pack and hiking stick and watch the magic, even if the hike is only a hundred yards from the parking lot to a stream. Heaven forbid if there is a marshmallow or two to be had for the fire! It is difficult enough to find things to do as a family with the demands of career, children, preparing for retirement and all else this life entails. Getting into nature with friends, family and especially young children is magical. Children especially soak up the experience. There will be many an opportunity to say or do something that will change the life of that child for the better. How will you correct your errata?

*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember,
show me and I learn.*

— Confucian philosopher Xunzi

With Warmest Regards,
The Honest Backpacker



More hikin' buddies—sheep are everywhere

STAGE 13: GROSMONT TO ROBIN HOOD'S BAY

It was a glorious hiking day through the moors. Soon we were in sight of the North Sea and lost sight of the trail. Even with Chris' excellent step-by-step navigation, we got miserably lost and had to ask where we were. Naturally, the locals knew all about the Coast-to-Coast trail and pointed us in the general direction. We deciphered the landmark that was supposed to be a camper trailer park, but there were two of them, so which one? This wouldn't usually be a problem, but when you are on foot, you are conscious of every extra step to get there from here.

We ended up going down rows of winter wheat, trying not to crush any stalks. There was absolutely no trail, so we plunged into a swale cut by a small stream. There was stinging nettle everywhere. The barbed wire was taut and high. The day was getting long. At least we had arrived at the correct camper park and were nearing the end. The Stedman guidebook demanded we follow along the water's edge. We asked a young lad if the abandoned rail bed, now a public footpath, was a bit better for our purposes; in other words, was it shorter? By now, my feet had had it. The boots, especially the left one, had done a thorough assault on my feet, which were nearly fatal to the hike. I pushed on, but if the

trip were any longer, I would not have made it without a day or two of healing.

Still, it was bearable: The trip was ending, and the views of a picturesque town with hundreds of years of history and the English coast dipping into the North Sea were awe-inspiring. The day was bright and cool, and we were in England with just about everything going right.

The hike ended as it began: most pleasantly, with more hospitality and feasts for the belly and eyes. At the B&B, there was a card for all of us from our friend Caroline, congratulating us on finishing. My sore feet, victims of ill-fitting boots, took all motivation out of the ceremony of finding and putting a stone from the Irish Sea onto the cairn of stones in the North Sea, signifying yet another completed trek. We settled for dipping our boots in the North Sea. I still keep stones from each end of the trip on my bookshelf, another "trophy" of the philosophy of living a life worth living.

About the Authors

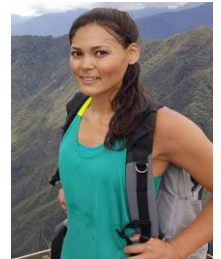
About Jim Klopovic



When **Jim Klopovic** retired after two careers and 45 years of “flying a desk,” he resolved to spend his golden years making memories. He decided to try backpacking and immediately fell in love with it. His many backpacking adventures have included hiking both the England Coast-to-Coast Walk and portions of the Appalachian Trail. Jim’s motivation for writing *The Honest Backpacker* is to inspire his fellow Baby Boomers (and others) to stay active, take the road less travelled, and experience the wonders of the trail. He lives in Morrisville, North Carolina.

About Nicole Klopovic

Nicole Klopovic discovered her passion for outdoor activities as a child, when her father Jim would take her and her sister on nature excursions around their home in North Carolina. She is an avid backpacker whose experiences include hiking up over 15,000 feet to Laguna 69 in Peru’s Cordillera Blanca mountain range. Her plans for future trips include hiking the Appalachian Trail and her ancestral homelands, Croatia and Australia, with her father. She lives and works as a certified physician assistant in Sacramento, California.



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