

Pick a Trail and Go

The key to a great hiking trip isn't about the brand of boots you buy, the temperature of the air, or what you've packed in your picnic. To experience a really great outdoor trek, you need to know how to pick a trail. The safety of the trail you choose can be compromised by nature, and by fellow hikers.

In order to pick a great trail, you need to understand that hiking trails vary greatly depending on where you're planning to trek. There's a big difference between a serene vineyard stroll and a rugged backcountry hike through rainforests and over rocky cliffs. These differences can be extreme, and they are what draw backpackers to trails around the world. For all the fun, adventure and excitement that hiking offers, the trails can lead to dangerous situations. In fact, the majority of outdoor survival situations that occur each year are due to the hiker's lack of foresight and preparation for potential dangers. Being an experienced hiker doesn't mean that you're immune to the hazards of hiking. Beginners and seasoned trekkies alike face struggles that can quickly develop into dangerous predicaments. Natural hazards are only a small part of the problem. When hiking unknown terrain, or traveling far from home, the dangers you confront can come from the people you encounter.

The following tips can help you to realize, avoid or overcome the safety risks that you can encounter as you pick a trail:

Hike with a Buddy

The dangers of hiking are greatly increased when you travel alone. On the flipside, hiking with at least one partner can help you to avoid potentially disastrous situations, and enable you to overcome them. Hiking alone can certainly get your adrenaline rushing and bring an extreme element to your trek. With a friend, however, you're guaranteed help if you need it, and you've got backup should you run into harassing individuals on the trail. Just because you feel you're in a natural solitude, you still have the potential of running into unsavory individuals. Having a friend in tow is a great idea, whether you run into the good, the bad, or the ugly.

File an Itinerary

It's essential that you leave some information with your friends and family if you plan to pick a trail that's not familiar. Tell your friends where you will be hiking, and include the particular trail if possible. If you're registering with a park or camp office to use a trail, be sure to leave emergency contact information. You should also have the phone numbers for local law enforcement, park rangers and land managers.

Keep it Quiet

Make your itinerary, but don't broadcast it. Don't discuss your trip plans with suspicious strangers, the bloke at the bar or even the good-looking young thing you met at the outdoors store. Even though you're traveling an uncharted course, you shouldn't follow along with the travel plans of unknown fellow hikers. If you're hiking alone, pretend that you're leading a group of hikers that have trailed behind. Again, tell your friends where you'll be, and report your itinerary when you register. These are precautionary measures that must be taken in the event that you run into trouble on the trail.

Dress Conservatively

You never know who you'll meet on the trail, so don't bring yourself any unwelcome attention. This is no place for your Rolex watch or a roll of cash. When hiking an unknown trail, you need to assume that you're leaving yourself vulnerable to the ill attentions of anyone you meet.

Be Sociable

Of course, not every stranger equals danger. You just need to use common sense and exercise caution when you meet a stranger or group of strangers. Avoid anyone acting strangely, openly hostile, provocative or drunk. Pay attention to details about their appearance, behaviour and your location. Still, even though you shouldn't broadcast your itinerary to strangers, you don't necessarily need to be anti-social. You can make some solid and lasting relationships with fellow hikers.

Any of life's roads can lead to danger. Whether hiking in a remote wilderness or considering a career move, choose the right path and pick a trail wisely.