

STEPPING OUT

WITH MARK ROBICHAUD

HARDWARE OR CARPET CRUISERS

While tree planting near Bear Lake in British Columbia a young rookie asked Dan The Man where he lived. He laughed in her face and said:

"Right here."

Now Dan has a beautiful home he built himself on a lake close to Nanaimo. Me? I still live in a tent for four months of the year. In my formative years as a planter I would supplement low tree prices by hiking deep into the foothills of the Northern Coastal Mountain Range and picking pine mushrooms, or I would find work as a swacker. I lived and worked outside for six months of the year, mostly in the unpredictable weather of Northwestern British Columbia. September and October were spent in the rain and snow of the Nass Valley or the Peace River region; in these areas it is not uncommon to endure forty five days of rain - straight. Non stop. Every day it would rain. Get the picture?

Making a living as a tree planter can be arduously difficult on all facets of the body, mind and spirit. It's even harder on your stuff. I've seen tents blown apart by wind gusts, not just pushed over or maybe a tattered fly - blown apart - poles splintered, tie down points ripped out (pegs still in the ground), walls reduced to strips of frayed nylon, leaving the owners few possessions lying in the mud.

A flash flood carried away a tree planting camp. The crews belongings floated down the Fraser River, a Toyota pick up was completely submerged and the cooking trailer had to be salvaged with a Rolagon (a huge six tire all terrain vehicle, it weighs about eight tons). Mighty miserable folks waited for the river to drop so they could salvage some of their water logged stuff. Tree production was somewhat low the following couple of days.

Black bears have very little regard for personal

space. Some bears will snatch your backpack, carry it to an alder grove and sample what's inside. Others have ripped tents apart looking for some easy treats. I still have a cake of soap with teeth marks. Bears will enter a tent any damn way they fancy; they may leave it standing but they'll probably leave it flat, after using it for an afternoon nap. A friend of mine got up in the morning with two muddy bear paw tracks on the door of his tent. He didn't hear a thing.

The point of telling these tales is to illustrate my point: nature can deliver unexpected forces. Anyone can have the latest of the good - a super pricey conductive whatchamacallit, but once you loan it to your good buddy nature, it stands a good chance of coming back as a pile of punched-out plastic. What nature often returns is something that has been torqued, trashed and traumatised into the category of paper weight. Nature never takes good care of your stuff. Actually, nature has been downright careless with some of my stuff.

So that's what I want to tell you about - what I think works and what I've found to be inferior. When combining the seasons I've enjoyed as a planter and tripping into the backcountry I can recall destroying sleeping bags, tents, boots, stoves, shells, gloves, flashlights, knives, backpacks, bikes, snowboards, not to mention the bumps and bruises I've been served along the way. So I'm going to give you a brief run down on the stuff I've used, do use and would like to try. Remember this not an end all, know everything gear test. I just want to share a few of the things I've learned. Tents and boots will be commented on this week; packs, bags and other basics will be covered in future articles. The following paragraphs contain nothing more



Stuff

than my *personal* notations. Please keep a grain of salt in mind while reading.

Tents: Since my planting career has begun I've used four different tents; the first was involved in a very traumatic and unfortunate fire, one lasted three years and the final two I still have.

The first tent was a Canadian Tire luxury model. It sucked. The zippers fell apart, the stitching frayed and the poles broke more often than my shoe laces. My solution was to burn it. The second one, built by Mountain Tech, managed to last three years then the zippers went to pot. It was abandoned in the McGregor valley. The last two are a North Face Tadpole and a Sears special. The Sears special won't survive the up coming season.

For backpacking trips I use my North Face Tadpole, it's a great three season tent: the big bonuses are two people fit with gear and it only weighs a little more than four pounds. The downsides are few but noticeable: condensation and a minuscule vestibule.

Dan The Man has a MEC Snowfield, he and his lovely wife Molly lived in it after she burned down their first home. Verdict: lots of room, stable and an unbeatable deal for the exceptional quality.

When buying a tent for backpacking look at the zippers and make sure they are beefy and run smoothly. The next feature I take into consideration is the size and weight. Will it fit you, your companion and all your gear? If you are going on multi-day trips you may want to consider spending extra cash for a high quality and light weight tent. The final items I look at are the materials. Chintzy stitching (crooked or single strand), uneven stretch in the tent fabric (or fly) and cheap grommets are all clear indicators to move on and look at another tent. Be careful when buying Outbound tents, they are notorious for ridiculous designs.

Boots: I'll apologise now for anything I say from here on in, when it comes to hiking boots I am very critical and demanding. An example of this is the relationship between Merrell and I. We are not on speaking terms, due to a pair of Merrells that lasted me less than a year. Less than one year for a hundred and fifty dollar pair of boots? I was ripped off.

On the other hand, my friend Doug has a pair of boots his dad passed on. Now here's an example

of true craftsmanship: two generations - one pair of Dexter's.

My Nike day hikers were light and very comfortable, but they were duct taped after six months. I have to admit that one of them got stuck in a dirt bike chain, so what can you expect? Still they are definitely not designed to last the long haul, I associate most Nike products with Sony Sport Walkmans - if they live past one year they deserve to be stamped "antique".

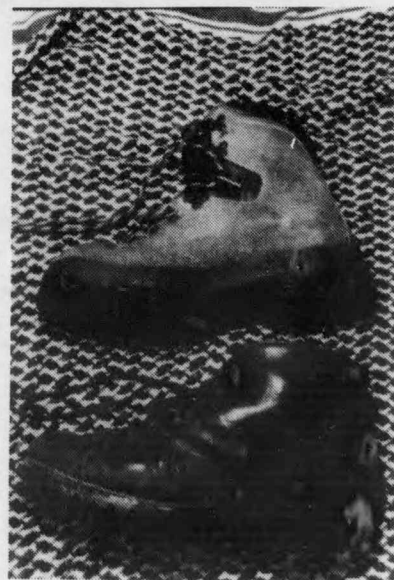
Three associates of mine have purchased Zamberlans with unfortunate results. The boots were bought from Mountain Equipment Co-op, so a variety of refunds and deals were worked out. A pair of hiking boots should have a life span of at least two years. If you pay more than two hundred dollars they should last at least five years and if you spend over two-hundred the boots should be on the road to hand me downs.

Two companies I respect are Vasque and Sportiva. I bought my Vasques second hand and they've carried me many a mile. They are well constructed with top quality materials and I found their peak performance to be carrying loads in the light to medium range. The drawbacks are low ankle support and the tongue floats all over the place. My friend Terry also owns a pair and only has great things to say about his Vasque Sundowners. Bought fresh off the shelf these boots are in the two hundred dollar plus ball park.

Sportiva heavy weight hiking boots are the good. Stiff, zero flex (especially torsion), fiberglass shank and the extended seal for the sole has grooves for crampon bindings. The drag of these boots is the long breaking-in process, this is due to the thick leather and unforgiving stiffness; but they are designed to replace hardshell mountaineering boots so this is understandable. I hope to use and abuse these boots for the next ten years. The price tag is pretty steep, about two seventy-five to three fifty, depending on the model.

That's all for now, sometime in the future I'll make some egotistical comments on backpacks, stoves and my favourite bitch - sleeping bags.

If you're in the market for new gear, please support local business. If you can't find what you want, please try to buy Canadian products. Support us, not the U.S.



Top: Sportiva. Bottom: Vasque.



Free shelter from the wind. Renous, N.B.

Chestnut

THE STUDENT'S NIGHT CLUB

THE HALLOWEEN BASH

SATURDAY NIGHT, OCT. 28, 1995



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