HIKING BOOTS
What You Need to Know to Buy a Pair

What's the big deal about boots? Jeez, they're expensive, aren't they? Most look like they could take you up the north face of Everest. Do you really need such an expensive item to start out?

I would say, "Yes". Hiking boots are recommended for long distance hikes over rough terrain. Old-style heavyweight mountain boots are usually unnecessary now that good quality lightweight boots are widely available. The most important thing is that your boots fit well and are well broken-in before you hit the trail. Nothing ends a hike quicker than blistered feet, and even minor blisters can become infected and cause serious trouble.

There are a number of reasons to buy a pair of good hiking boots. Boots are built sturdy to protect your feet. They accomplish this protection in a number of different ways.

- Good boots are "solid" on the bottom. You shouldn't be able to feel rocks or stones through the soles. If you can, there's a good likelihood that after many miles on the trail, your feet are going to start hurting. If you can press in the bottom of the sole with your thumb, the soles are probably too soft to give your foot proper protection. If you can "twist" the soles of the boot, it's also probably too soft. Trails are not like the pavement in front of your home. Trails are rocky, and you need good protection to avoid bruising the bottom of your feet.

- Good boots provide good protection on the sides. They are heavy because they either have extra padding to protect your foot from stones, rocks, and branches you may step on which could gouge into the side of the boot. Some fabric boots have protective "welts" 1/2-inch or more up from the soles to give added protection.

- Good boots provide good ankle support. Grab the top of the boot and try to bend it over side-ways. If it bends easily, it's probably not going to provide the level of protection needed on the trail. The top of the boot should be stiff to hold the ankle in place and provide it with good support.

- Good boots are either waterproof, or are capable of being waterproofed with special waterproofing solutions. I would avoid fabric boots that are not waterproof. While it's possible to treat non-waterproof fabric boots with liquid silicone, it generally doesn't waterproof the boot enough to be useful. Wet feet cause blisters. Stick with waterproof fabric boots, or leather boots that can be treated with Nik-Wax, beeswax solution, or other more durable waterproofing solutions. (If the boot that ends up providing you with the "best fit" is a non-waterproof fabric boot, you can always buy a "Gore-tex" sock to put inside the boot to keep your feet dry. These socks are available from various outdoor mail-order merchants, such as REI. So there is actually a work-around if need be.)

- Good boots are heavy enough for their intended use. A "lighter" boot used for hiking may not have the necessary rigidity to provide your feet with good support under the heavier load of a backpack.

If good boots are positively out of the question due to price, athletic shoes are always an option. But keep in mind that people have severely sprained ankles in athletic shoes, or in some cases, broken ankles in athletic shoes. Athletic shoes cannot be waterproofed either. Also keep in mind that there are many different types of athletic shoes, and some may be better suited to their original design (such as running) than use as a hiking boot. Calf-high work boots are a better option, but they generally aren't as comfortable as a hiking boot, can rub the Achilles tendon, and don't provide the kind of fit desirable for hiking. I recommend that you make the boot investment. Because even if you decide backpacking is not your thing, you can always wear the boots when you hike, shovel snow in winter, or mow the lawn in the summer. Your investment ultimately won't go to waste.

"Well I have an old pair in the closet that I bought about 15 years ago, I'll just use those!" Think again. Feet change over time. All those days your feet have been wedged into your favorite pair of Florsheims, Hush Puppies, or Nikes has caused them to change shape over time. Wear old boots on a long hike before you attempt a backpacking trip. You'll probably end up buying a new pair.

"What's a good brand to buy?"
Anyone who tells you that "you should buy [insert your favorite company name here] brand boots" doesn't know what he or she is talking about. On the flip side of the coin, anyone who asks, "What boots should I buy?" is also asking the wrong question. The best boot for you, and the one you should buy, is the **one that fits YOUR foot**. It's really pretty simple. If it doesn't fit your foot, you shouldn't buy it. It may work GREAT for your friend's foot, and he may think XYZ Brand was forged by the right hand of God, but if they turn you into a cripple five miles down the trail, then what good are they?

Why doesn't your friend's boot work for you? Because, all boots are made on different "lasts". The last is the "form" the boot is built around at the factory. The size and shape of these lasts, even between identical sizes of boots, can vary greatly. For instance, some boots are built around a "European" last. This last is typically narrow in the front, which can cause some American toes to feel pinched, but may feel great to a European. Asolo brand boots are built on American-style lasts. Does that mean you should buy Asolo because you're an American? The answer is "NO". Why?

No two feet are alike. All come in different shapes. The best boot to buy is always the boot that fits YOUR foot. (Are you starting to follow me on this?).

The two questions you should really ask are:

1. "Which boot fits MY foot?"
2. "What do I need to know in order to find this boot?"

Unfortunately, the answer to the first question can only be supplied by one person - YOU. The salesman can't help you with this. No one in the backcountry can either. You have to let your feet "talk to you" on the matter.

Finding your "Golden Slipper"
When shopping for new boots, I would recommend that you stay away from boot brands made for hunters (high-top boots) or those sold through shoe stores. "Hunting" boots generally go too high on the ankle, putting unnecessary stress on the Achilles tendon. "Shoe Store" boots are usually enhanced versions of street shoes. They "look" rugged, but they're probably not going to feel very good five miles down the trail. Shop at a reputable outdoor shop that specializes in hiking and backpacking equipment. These shops generally carry well-designed outdoor footwear for the hiker/backpacker.

A boot that fits well will not slip in the heel area, and provides your toes with plenty of room in the front when you're going downhill with a full pack load. For this reason, hiking boots are generally sized a little longer than your standard street shoe. Before you head to your local outdoor shop, grab the socks that you intend to wear in the boots. For beginners, I recommend that two pair be worn - a thin or lightweight pair on the inside, and a thicker pair on the outside. Two socks rub against each other, whereas one sock generally rubs against your foot, potentially raising blisters. Ideally, the socks should be synthetic or wool. Cotton socks get damp and soggy, and will raise blisters on your feet. Synthetic and wool socks do a much better job of wicking moisture away from your feet, thereby keeping them relatively dry.

In the Store
Choosing a well-designed boot with the right fit is the greatest challenge in reviewing your boot choices. Don't let the rugged appearance of the boot, the salesman's recommendation, or even the brand name steer you to a boot that won't work for you foot. After you have reviewed your choices and "tested" each boot design for sole and ankle rigidity (see the points outlined above), ask the salesman to bring you a pair.

The Finger Test
This is where you'll perform your first "test". With the boot fully unlaced, move your foot as far forward in the boot as possible. If the boot is the proper size for your feet, you should be able to slip your index finger down inside the boot at the back of the ankle. Your finger is just about the right size for determining if that all-important extra space is available in the front. Backpackers can expect their feet to swell. The extra space is also needed when backpacking downhill, when your foot has a tendency to slide forward in the boot under load.

The Sensory Test
Next, take off your thick socks (leave the thin liner sock on) and slip your foot into the boot. Using all your sensory powers, try to determine if any part of the boot feels tight. This is especially important in the area where the small toes are located. Some boots may be designed in such a way that your small toes will feel "pinched" or "jammed". This can be very difficult to feel through two pairs of socks. This test will bring all this to light. Does the boot feel too narrow on the sides in the area just behind your toes (the "ball" of the foot)? Is it too tight in the middle part of your foot on either side of the arch? If so, look for another boot. This test will quickly eliminate any boots that are clearly not designed for your foot.

Now perform the same sensory tests with your thick socks on. Make sure your socks are stretched smoothly over your foot, not loose, which can cause the sock to fold over when you slide your foot into the boot. The boot should not feel tight in any area. Inversely, it shouldn't feet loose in any area either. It should fit comfortably "snug". If any part of your foot feels "jammed", try a lighter, medium-weight sock on the outside. (Using different thicknesses of socks can always be used as an option for making size/fit adjustments.) If the foot still feels jammed (or inversely, loose), look for another boot.

The Stride Test
Walk around in the boots. Do they feel good? Does the boot "break" (or crease) across the top of the toes comfortably when you stride forward? If the top of the boot feels like it's jamming the back of your toes when you stride forward, then look for another pair. What about the heel? If you feel your heel sliding noticeably in the heel area, you probably have a boot that's a little too large, or one that's not going to work for you. New, rigid boots will always cause your heel to slide a little (and I emphasize, a little) when they're new, due to the newness and stiffness of the sole. If you think the sliding is due to a boot that's too large, go 1/2-size smaller, ensuring that the smaller size passes the "finger test".

The Slant Board Test
If everything still feels okay, ask the salesman if they have a "slant board" where you can test how they feel on an incline. Walk down the incline. If your foot jams into the front of the boot and your toes feels pinched, look for another pair. If your toes touch the end of the boot, ask the salesman for the next half-size larger.

If you've managed to locate a pair that meets all the criteria above, there's a good chance that you've found a reasonably good fit for your foot. If you haven't, keep trying on different brands until you find a pair that "makes the grade" so to speak. If none of the boots available meet the criteria, visit another outdoor shop. Boots can be expensive. Take the time to choose wisely. Your bank account and feet depend on it.

At Home
The "Paper Doll" Test – Once you have your boots home, slip on the socks you intend to wear while you're hiking. Then, place a blank sheet of paper under your foot, and carefully trace an outline of your foot with a pencil. Using scissors cut the foot outline from the paper. Then, very gently, slide your "foot cut-out" into the boot. Press the paper flat onto the bottom of the boot, working the paper into all corners of the boot, just as you would press pizza dough into the corner of a cookie sheet. Then, remove the cutout. Any spot where the paper is folded up (i.e. not flat) is a spot where the boot is tight. Now remember, some snugness is okay, but if you have spots where the paper is folded up 1/2", you may well have some problems later on down the trail.

The Long Walk Test – Next, wear them around and see how they feel. I would recommend that you perform a "long walk" inside your home, or even better, inside a local shopping mall to see how they feel after a little distance. Wearing them while lounging at home will not give them the proper test. Put a little "indoor distance" on the boot. If they still feel good, you've found a reasonably good boot for your foot. If they don't feel good, resist the temptation to keep them - take them back and keep looking.

On the Trail

Break-in – Assuming that you've found your "golden slipper", the final step is breaking in your boots before you take them out on the trail. With the evolution of fabric Gore-tex boots, this is not as great a factor as it used to be, but should still be performed. All-leather boots will definitely require some break-in time prior to backpacking. Wear your boots on progressively longer hikes until you're certain you can do some comfortable distance with the added weight of a backpack.

Being Prepared for Problems – Finally, even the best fitting boots can still cause you problems. Small spots may rub, or tender feet may require some toughening. Be sure to take along some "moleskin" on your hikes and backpacking trips. Moleskin, and other similarly designed abrasion padding with adhesive on one side, and a felt-like padding on the other, will minimize the possibility that blisters are raised. (It will minimize, not eliminate the possibility.) Medical adhesive tape, with a smooth, slick covering (or duct tape) on the outside can also be used. Spenco "second skin" is also an outstanding option for providing relief for boot "hot spots". And finally, remember that sometimes it's your foot that needs conditioning, not the boot. Regular hiking and backpacking will help toughen your feet until they are prepared for the abuse you'll give them on the trail.