

Coffee!

Coffee in the backcountry involves compromises



How do you get your caffeine fix in the wilderness? WTA members share their backcountry coffee secrets.

BY ANDREW ENGELSON

Coffee in the wilderness involves compromise.

We live in the Northwest. Therefore: we know and love coffee.

We're home to Starbucks' world headquarters. We added the word "latte" to the lexicon. Washington is home to a company that manufactures camping espresso makers. People in the Northwest are serious about their coffee. And they're serious about backpacking.

So, how to reconcile the two?

It's a camping caffeine conundrum: Do you go for quality coffee and pack in more weight and stuff to clean up? Or do you go lightweight and simple—but sacrifice taste?

It's not easily resolved, but our members are up to the task. I informally polled *Washington Trails* writers and photographers about their ideas for a good cuppa-joe in the woods. Here's the highly un-scientific, non-peer-reviewed results of that research. Try 'em out and see what works for you. Have other coffee suggestions? E-mail me at andrew@wta.org

Instant

For those of us who know instant coffee in the form of Folger's or Taster's Choice, "taste" is generally not high on the list of attributes we'd assign to these brown crystallized substances. Succinctly put: instant sucks. But it's lightweight and requires only boiling water. Cleanup is a snap. For those who need a quick hit of caffeine in the morning or a cup of something warm and vaguely reminiscent of the coffee found in civilization, it'll do.

For more discerning tastes, there are a few additional options. *WT* gear editor Allison Woods swears by Nescafe all-in-one instant packets. For some reason, these aren't readily available at ordinary grocery stores or gear shops. Asian markets (including Uwajimaya in Seattle) tend to stock these packets, which include the triumvirate of coffee, milk and sugar. They're a snap to make and the taste more like the real thing than stand-alone instant. Since the packets don't pack much caffeine, I usually upgrade it with a teaspoon of Medaglia D'Oro instant espresso (found in most grocery stores).

Another option is "Java Juice," a concentrated liquid you add to boiling water. Reports, however, were less than favorable from our members.

Drip

WTA members must be a bunch of coffee snobs, because many report bringing drip coffee equipment along on backpacking trips. The drawbacks are extra weight and clean-up. If you're truly practicing Leave No Trace ethics, you'll *need* to pack out those used coffee grounds. On the plus side, you'll be drinking fresh coffee as you savor the early morning light over Lake Vivianne in the Enchantments. If that's not heaven, I'm not sure what is.

There are several methods for achieving drip in the backcountry. Most popular and perhaps with the best taste results is to use a small French press. Several companies make plastic press pots (glass would be too risky in a backpack).

One handy backpacking item for those who like fresh-brewed coffee is the Brewmug (www.brewmug.com). This little gadget combines an insulated mug

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and a French press. All the parts store neatly inside the mug.

For those who drink their café “au lait,” you’re faced with some choices. Milk is available in vacuum-packed boxes. Powdered milk is serviceable, but often has an off flavor. I do *not* recommend stirring dehydrated milk powder directly into hot coffee. The result is in a mess of goeey, sour white blobs. Enough said. Some hikers pack in CoffeeMate or similar “whiteners.” But “whitener” comes from a factory in New Jersey, not jersey cows. Again: enough said.

Other drip systems include small, one-cup filters. These are actually a bit easier to clean than French presses, but the coffee isn’t generally as strong. They have mesh filters built-in so you don’t have to mess with paper filters.

Speaking of paper, another solution is “coffee in a bag.” These are similar to tea bags, only filled with ground coffee. The trouble with these is that the resulting beverage is about as strong as that brown creek water at Cape Alava. Former WTA president Jan Klippert suggests improving its flavor by adding instant hot cocoa or, in the evening, a judicious shot of Bailey’s.

Backpacking Espresso Makers

I will confess I have never used one of those little stovetop gadgets that apparently can make a shot of espresso deep in the wilderness (and in theory also steam milk). Photographer and WTA member Geoffrey Sandine reports that his wife is a coffee fanatic, and that she brings one of these mini espresso makers on backpacking trips. Apparently the units are finicky—the espresso sometimes doesn’t shoot out the nozzle quite right. Says Geoffrey, “it’s bit of a crapshoot keeping the stream of coffee into the cup and off the burner—you’re in for major clogging if it hits the stove.”

Rather than try to steam with the device, this backpacking barista brings along a battery-powered whisk, which foams the milk quite nicely. I’m pretty sure Henry David Thoreau had one of those gizmos in his cabin at Walden pond for his morning cappuccinos.



DAVE SCHIEBELDEN

A cup of Java in the woods can take many forms (clockwise from top): the French press, instant crystals, concentrated liquid and one-cup filters

Keepin’ It Hot

Keeping coffee hot is critical in the backcountry. Most of us carry simple insulated mugs. The cheap ones from convenience store work nicely—especially the ones *not* designed to fit in a car’s cupholder. Those cupholder varieties tend to be too unstable when perched on a campsite rock. To look really stylish, buy a WTA logo insulated mug, available at www.wta.org for 8 bucks each.

Cowboy Coffee

No article on camping coffee would be complete without mention of that mysterious and mythical substance known as cowboy coffee. The origins are obscure, but mostly likely traced back to the chuckwagons and campfires of the open range. Cowboy coffee is essentially a philosophical quandary. How do you make palatable coffee with just three things: ground coffee, water, and a pot. No filters, no demitasses, no Italian-made widgets.

The trouble with cowboy coffee is that unless you like chewing coffee grounds, you’re going to be disappointed. Cowboy coffee is also known as “mud.”

There are many time-honored and completely ineffective methods for get-

ting the grounds out of cowboy coffee. We’ve heard reports that an egg shell dropped in the pot is supposed to work, with the theory that the grounds will adhere to the egg shell. I haven’t tested this in the field and frankly, it sounds too gross to try.

Others, including WTA’s former director of trail maintenance, Chris Bell, swear by the centrifuge method. This requires a pot with a hoop handle and a good deal of courage. The idea is that after your coffee is brewed, simply swing the coffee pot above your head a few times, and the grounds will settle to the bottom.

Simple, hey? Just make sure you have a first aid kit and a cell phone handy.

Yet another suggestion was submitted by Jan Klippert:

“Just boil the water and put the coffee in the water. Jab in a flaming stick, which will settle the grounds. This works with varying success. Much of the flavor depends on the flavor of the flaming stick.”

Hmm...I can see a whole new trend developing at your neighborhood Starbucks: “Would you like flaming red alder or Douglas fir with your half-caf one percent caramel macchiato, sir?”

Tea might not be a bad choice. ♦