FOOTWEAR

Boots are the most crucial item of equipment that you will buy. If your feet are comfortable then you are more likely to enjoy your walk than if you dread putting one foot in front of the other.

Trainers no matter how fancy are no use, and should be discouraged on hikes. Boots have a wider and thicker sole which allows better distribution of weight and protection from sharp stones. The high collar of the boot offers protection from water, mud and thorns as you transverse the countryside and support to the ankle thus preventing injury.

Before buying a pair of boots you have to consider the use you will put them to:

> Will you be walking all year round in all conditions, or just on dry summer days, or some point in-between?
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> Will you be walking over Britain's roughest terrain, sticking to canal tow-paths, or some point in-between?

Generally speaking, cheaper boots are made of thinner, PU-coated leather. [A layer of polyurethane is 'painted' onto the leather to keep out the water. Unfortunately leather treatment compounds are also kept at bay! When eventually the PU cracks, water will seep in, and the leather cannot be treated satisfactorily.]

Three principal types of boot material exist for the outdoor market:

> fabric
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> leather
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> plastic.

Almost all plastic boots are designed for mountaineering and ice climbing. Plastic boots are 'double' boots consisting of a plastic shell that is virtually maintenance-free and an insulated inner boot that should be removed after use to allow it to dry out.

By contrast, a boot made from fabric or leather needs to be cared for in order to prolong its useful life. Manufacturers of bootcare treatments produce dedicated cleaners, restorers, and waterproofing agents to match most types of leather and fabric.

As the price of boots increases, the quality and thickness of the leather gradually improves. Also boots are made from one piece of leather. Quality boots these days

tend to be treated with silicone at the tanning stage thereby making them as waterproof as leather can be. However such boots still need 'feeding'.

Cheaper boots are also very flexible. The sole unit consists of the outer rubber/PU sole and an internal bed. Whilst this appears to be a comfortable arrangement, the converse is true. Every sharp stone underfoot is felt and your feet quickly become tired. The manufacturers' answer is to insert a mid-sole. This is usually a thin piece of contoured nylon. Whilst this is laterally stiff, the longitudinal stiffness is determined by the projected boot use. The overall effect of this mid-sole is that the foot is supported sideways and not all the foot's muscles are used when walking, the result being a less tired foot.

Boot Care

Whatever type of boot you own, in order to both keep your feet dry for a longer period (remember, no leather boot can be guaranteed waterproof) and also maximise your boots' life-span, the principles of care remain the same. Some of these are also suitable for treating boots that have a built-in waterproof/breathable membrane. However, take care not to treat leather boots too often or you may end up softening the leather so much that it fails to deliver the support and protection you originally purchased it for:

Remove all dirt and mud with a brush and cold water.

Remove insoles and leave to dry in a cool, well-ventilated place out of direct sunlight and away from direct heat (such as a radiator). Stuffing the boot with newspaper will speed drying time.

Apply the appropriate treatment. [It has been said that Dubbin rotted the stitching used in boot construction. This was true when the thread was cotton, but in these days of nylon thread the acid in the soil is far more detrimental. Neatsfoot Oil is an excellent leather food. Unfortunately, like other oils, it tends to attack the resin used in gluing the rubber sole to the uppers. Nikwax and G-wax are good all-round treatments.]

Many boots can be re-soled when the tread wears thin. The cost for this is approximately one-third to one-half the cost of a new pair of boots. But this is likely to be money well spent as many potentially dangerous slips are caused by worn soles. Before handing your boots in for repair, they must be cleaned of mud, grit etc but should not be treated as this may reduce the effectiveness of adhesives used in the repair.

Buying boots

When buying boots, go to a specialist camping and climbing shop so that you can get expert advice and ensure a good fit. Bring two pairs of heavy socks (the socks you intend wearing with your boots normally) and put them on before fitting. Normally you will be looking for a fit one size up from your normal shoe size.

Put on the boots of your choice and push your toes right up to the front of the boot. If they are the right size you should just be able to put your finger down the back of the boot. This space allowance is necessary as your toes will tend to be jammed up to the front of the boot as you descend a slope. This extra space will prevent your toes from banging into the top of the boot which ultimately will lead to blisters. You should also lace up the boots firmly but not too tightly and allow some space for you foot to move.

Your boots are new and will need some time to 'break them in' this extra space will allow the leather to mould itself to your foot as they go through the process of 'breaking in'. There should be no feeling of constriction over the broad part of the foot, and the toes should have room to move independently. Your heel should rise no more than 3 mm as you walk up and down the shop in your boots. If you feel the rise in the boot is more than this get a smaller pair of boots as a movement greater than this will lead to blisters and hardship.

Finally, when you buy a pair of boots, make sure the shop will allow you to wear them around the house for a few hours. If they do not feel right take them back and ask if you can exchange them for a different size or model (obviously so long as they have not been waxed nor worn outside).

Although, a leader may have the resources to buy a more expensive pair of boots, young people should be encouraged to buy less expensive boots perhaps of the ex - army kind. These boots are quite serviceable and by the time they wear them out they will know exactly what to look for in a better or more expensive boot which will last well in to their adult life. You should however discourage boots which are made of cheap canvas or suede they are only designed for light low level walking and will not stand up to the battering they will get in bogs, water, and rough mountain terrain.

Breaking them in

There is no quick way of breaking in boots. You just have to put them on and walk around in them for a number of days until the leather forms its shape and develops fold lines. You can do this initially by walking in the boots around the house. When you are quite sure that they are the boots for you, go on short walks around you locality over a period of days before embarking on a longer hike. Once broken in, protect your boots regularly with waterproofing polish or spray.

Socks

Two pairs of heavy socks help to reduce the risk of blisters because the surfaces of the socks move on each other and prevent chafing. Choose woollen socks or a wool/fibre mixture for comfort and warmth.

Footcare

It is advisable to keep toenails cut and feet dry to prevent damage. At the end of a day's walking you should bathe your feet and dry them carefully. While walking take note of any sore spots and treat immediately. Your local chemist sells a number of pads and moleskins which can be applied to the sore parts to prevent them from getting worse.

Top Boot Tip

If your leather boots are wet but you need to wear them the next day, it is OK to apply a coating of treatment when the leather is damp. Any resulting white residue can be ignored or wiped away the next morning with a soft cloth.