

Backpack Trip Rating SYSTEM

Whether you are considering a council-sponsored backpack trip, or planning one of your own, it's important to understand how we determine the difficulty of each trip. This chart below allows us to analyze our trips and determine their level of difficulty.

A trip's difficulty comes down to averaging together just a handful of variables:

1. Distance from home: a local trip requires less emotional maturity than a long-distance trip like the Appalachian Trail on the east coast.
2. Altitude: low elevation trips are far less taxing on the body than a trip above 10,000 feet.
3. Elevation gain/loss: a hike that gains over 500' of elevation over one mile is a workout; if it gains 1000' feet per mile, it is very strenuous. Also to be considered is the pounding that takes place on the body when you're descending steep terrain.
4. Mileage: pretty straightforward—the farther you go, the longer it takes!
5. Length of trip: an overnighter is pretty easy, but a 10-day trip requires more emotional maturity and the ability to deal with others long-term and in close quarters.

Extra challenges: don't forget to average in some of the other factors that can up the ante on your trip. No water, snow traverses, cross-country navigation, stream crossings and day hike mileage and elevation gain all require more advanced skills and maturity. The "X-Factor" is that certain "indefinable something" a trip leader recognizes and acknowledges—call it a gut hunch—that might tweak your trip rating up or down a bit.

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
Variables					
Distance from San Diego	Anza, Laguna	S. California	Sierras	West Coast (out of state)	East Coast
Altitude	Desert, Laguna < 6,000 feet	Backpacking 8,000 feet; day hiking to higher elevations	Backpacking 8-10,000 feet	Backpacking 10-12,000 feet	Backpacking 10-15,000 feet
Elevation gain/loss	Level		Gaining 500 feet/mile		Gaining 1,000 feet/mile; gaining/losing more than 1,500 feet in a day
Mileage	< 3 miles/day	< 5 miles/day	< 8 miles/day	<10 miles/day	> 10 miles/day
Length of trip	1-2 days	2-4 days	5 days	6-7 days	8 or more days
ADD extra challenges:	The following challenges might increase a trip's difficulty rating.				
No water	A dry camp requires a water cache nearby, or may involve carrying water or hiking a distance to waters.				
Snow	Navigating over snow can be easy & straightforward, or require hours of difficult travel.				
Cross-country	Navigating off-trail w/map & compass can require extra agility and stamina.				
Stream crossing	Crossing large streams can require agility, stamina and excellent judgment.				
Day hike mileage, elevation gain/loss	A strenuous day hike from a base camp to bag a peak might elevate a trip to higher rating.				
X-Factor	Trip leader's gut sense of what the trip offers and demands, based on personal experience.				

To simply say a trip is easy, moderate, difficult or strenuous leaves a lot to the imagination. Using the chart gives us a way to rate a trip with concrete information.

Here's how it works:

1. Consider the trip you care to take, and give it a number rating for each listed variable.
2. Add ratings for any "extra challenges," such as cross country travel or peak bagging.
3. Average your numbers: add all the rating numbers and divide by the number of variables. That will give your trip it's final rating.

An example: San Jacinto Backpack Training Trip via the Palm Springs tram. Rated 2.2

Variable	Information	Rating	Very Easy Math	
1. Distance from San Diego	San Jacinto is in S. California	2	Rating total	16
2. Altitude	8,600-9,000' Backpacking	3	# of variables	7
3. Elevation gain/loss	400' over 2.5 miles	2	Average the numbers: 16 divided by 7	2.2
4. Mileage	2.5 miles to Round Valley	1	Trip rating	2.2
5. Length of trip	3 days	2		
Extra challenges:	Day hike to San Jacinto Peak	3		
6. Day hike mileage	is 7 miles round trip	3		
7. Day hike elevation gains	1800' over 3.5 miles	3		
Add ratings together		Total: 16		

Trip Assessment—Leader Tips

Taking the time to numerically rate your backpack trip allows you to honestly assess the various obstacles you may encounter. This kind of reflection makes you a better trip leader. By analyzing the terrain and conditions well in advance of your trip, you can:

- Set prerequisites, if necessary, to ensure girl/adult readiness and progressions.
- Identify areas of risk. You can monitor snow conditions, stream levels or other variables well in advance of your trip, allowing less surprises and giving you adequate time to upscale your gear or change your route, if necessary.
- Identify areas of concern. If you have a participant who doesn't appear to be sufficiently physically fit for cross-country travel, you can address this in advance of your trip.
- Communicate clearly with your group members so they can honestly assess their own readiness, the quality or inclusion of certain gear. This kind of advanced preparation develops the kind of self-sufficiency and independence we are trying to instill in our girls.