

Trekking Poles

Contributed by Alun
Monday, 18 August 2008

A Guide to Trekking Poles

I've read some rubbish about trekking poles lately, written with the sort of bile that any sane person would reserve for the likes of Pol Pot or Hitler as opposed to a defenceless inanimate object. Look, they're metal poles, a manufactured substitute for the kind of sticks country folk with flat caps would lean on to chew grass before setting off for a stroll. Yet some ill-thought-out literary garbage portrays them as a sort of evil mountain consuming virus and use the type of argument a militant celibate would use against Viagra.

'Don't use them they cause erosion' is one argument. 'If you need to use trekking poles you shouldn't be trekking in the first place' is another. These sort of comments and observations would be worth laughing at if they'd been written by people with a sense of humour or who knew what they were talking about. If taken to its full conclusion, the erosion argument would have us all as vegetables, 'don't move you'll cause erosion'.

Like it or not, in evolutionary terms, erosion is a natural act of weather caused by the wind, sun, rain, sea, sheep, horses, feet, boots or the little points on the end of trekking poles. And as for, 'if you need trekking poles you shouldn't be trekking in the first place' why stop there? Let's ban wheelchairs from all public places because if you need a wheelchair to get out then you shouldn't be out in the first place.

The strongest argument against trekking poles is that you could be mistaken for being German – the Europeans have been using them for ages. Secondly you become a target for the great wits marauding in the wilds with their snappy one liners, 'forgot your skis have you?'. Two good reasons for remaining pole-less but the advantages still outweigh being mistaken for a Kraut by a witless geek. What's more trekking poles saved my life, well not exactly my life, but close.

For 20 years my knees and ankles have taken a hammering, motorcycle accidents and rugby have made sure of that. Over the years hey have progressively gotten worse reaching a painful and scary climax whilst on the final descent of the Snowdon Horseshoe when my left knee finally gave up. Until then I was fine walking up hill or on the flat but would have a constant, but bearable, throb in my knee whilst descending.

On this occasion the pain because so intense it felt like a knife had been stuck under my kneecap and twisted every time I put weight on it. Even on the slightest downhill gradient I experienced a jab of pain so intense it would force me to sit and slide down on my backside. I booked in with physios, bought books on knees, did all the recommended exercises and learnt how to sit correctly, but still the intense, eye watering jab of pain would return when I walked downhill. It scared me, I started to think of operations (and the waiting lists) and the thought of not being able to get out and do what I loved best.

Someone then suggested using trekking poles and although initially sceptical about their effectiveness and old fogey image I gave them a try. The result, hallelujah. I can now walk downhill all day in relative comfort but I've also experienced other benefits I'd never considered. My advice is not to wait until your joints give out – buy a pair now, you'll not regret it. As for your image, don't worry. Next time you're out trekking take a look around, they're starting

to become almost a fashion accessory even with the younger crowd.

What are trekking poles?

In simple terms they're three piece adjustable telescopic ski poles made from a strong aircraft grade aluminium alloy. At one end you have a handle and wrist strap, at the other you have a metal top and basket. The poles are shortened (or elongated) by twisting the shaft which in turn loosens or expands an internal expansion bolt.

What's so good about them?

You may have already noticed I'm a big fan of trekking poles. If you've any doubts take a look at the following:-

Snow and Glaciers – Trekking poles provide greater stability and assist with forward momentum when crossing rivers and streams. Think of four points of contact instead of two.

Rivers – Trekking poles provide greater stability when crossing rivers and streams. Think of four points of contact instead of two.

Up hill – By using the arms and upper body to provide forward momentum, walking up hill is far easier with poles than without. In addition stability is improved on loose and slippery underfoot conditions.

Down hill – Your knees are under most strain when descending, even more so if you're carrying a heavy pack. By using trekking poles you can transfer weight and breaking strain onto the poles.

Traversing – If you're traversing a hill on slippery or loose footing, trekking poles will add stability.

Walking rhythm – Using trekking poles forces you into a steady rhythm and as any experienced trekker will tell you, this is the most economical way of walking. A steady pace and rhythm is not so tiring as one that is constantly changing.

Walking fast – Trekking poles will help you to walk at a faster pace as you are able to use your arms and upper body to aid forward momentum.

Walking further – Trekking poles will help you walk further as you're able to use your arm and upper body muscles so your leg muscles will not burn out so fast. Additionally your poles will be taking weight off your feet which in turn will not tire so quickly.

Not so tired – Walking a set distance with a trekking pole will result in you arriving far less tired than if you'd walked without them. You're able to transfer work between upper and lower body muscles groups, preventing the lower ones becoming over worked and tired out.

Weight distribution – By using trekking poles you can transfer a percentage of body weight onto the poles. This means your leg muscles will last longer and leg joints will not be under so much strain. The weight transfer also means less stress on the lower back and an improvement in posture, making breathing more efficient.

General stability – If you're carrying a heavy pack your stability can be compromised by an uneven load or unstable sack. Trekking poles will help keep you on your feet as opposed to your backside.

Walking with an injury – Out in the wilds a badly sprained ankle can have serious consequences. Trekking poles can help by taking weight off the injury, transferring it to the upper body and providing stability.

Checking water and snow depth – If you're crossing a stream, snowfield or glacier a trekking pole can save your next step, resulting in a waist deep soaking or worse.

Mad Dogs! - If you're trekking in a rabies-infested country, trekking poles provide a good defence against frothing canines.

Washing lines and ten poles! - A trekking pole has other uses, emergency tent poles and for setting up washing lines for drying clothes.

Upper body workout - here's something that's generally overlooked. One of the benefits of trekking is that it keeps you fit and by using trekking poles not only are you giving your legs and cardiovascular a good work out, your arms and shoulders and chest benefit as well. The arm movement mainly hits the triceps (back of the upper arm) but also benefits the wrists, forearm, biceps and pectorals (chest) to a lesser degree.

What's not so good?

So what's the downside?

Expensive

They're expensive for a piece of kit you might not considered essential.

Tips breaking

My biggest concern is durability of the tips. Over the past 12 months I've extensively tested six pairs of poles and had problems with the tips snapping. Unfortunately I've been unable to pin-point exactly where and why the tips snapped as they did so in use, only to be noticed later. This makes the availability and price of spare parts important, but more importantly if the tip snaps when you're 50ks into a trek there's a good chance you'll wear down the plastic fitment into which the tips fit, which mean more expense or even pole replacement. Interestingly, all the snapped tips have been the supposedly harder wearing and longer lasting tungsten – they're supposed to wear out less quickly than steel tips. When replaced with the thicker and less durable steel tips I've not had any breaks, which makes me think the narrower tungsten tips might be a false economy.

Although I have to point out that at 17 stone, when fully loaded with an 80lb pack, that's a hell of a lot of weight on a very thin piece of tungsten and maybe lighter trekker with smaller packs would not experience such a high degree of tip breakage. Having questioned manufacturers on the point of weight and pole strength, it seems that whilst they have made poles telescopic for different heights no consideration has been mad for different weights.

Scrambling

Trekking poles become a pain when ascending or descending steep rocky terrain that requires scrambling in parts. You've got to close the poles down and pack them away to use your hands safely. Recently whilst descending off via ferratas in the Dolomites, this was a real pain where steep scree slopes were regularly broken with rocky sections where hands were needed for balance.

Strong cross winds

In very strong cross winds I keep stabbing myself in the leg on the windward side. There's no answer other than to pack it away.

Telescopic mechanism

Although I've not experienced serious problems with any of the telescopic lacking mechanisms, I do have a gripe. On some poles the sliding action is not as smooth as it should be and over time this wears off the telescopic length markers. Although I don't class this as a critical problem it's still worth checking for a smooth action particularly as you'll be adjusting the length of the poles regularly. It's well worth cleaning the poles before you close them down as any grit or dirt that gets inside will contribute to the above.

Features

Trekking poles have many feature options, but do you need them all? In short the answer is no. If you're using poles for trekking aboard then pack size is important, weight is not so critical (although it is an important factor) as you'll be carrying them in your hands and not on your back. Important features are: a comfortable wrist strap that stays firmly in place when pulled tight, a reliable locking mechanism and a ready supply of replacement parts.

Weight

My advice, as always, is once you've decided which features you want, established what product is up to the job and set a budget – buy the lightest available.

Pack size (length)

Judging by the length of some poles when fully closed, I don't think some manufacturers have caught on to the fact that you just might need to pack them in a rucksack (as opposed to strapping them on the back or sides) when trekking abroad, i.e. for flights. It helps if they close down small enough to fit inside your rucksack.

Having said that I have strapped poles to the outside of my rucksack for a number of flights this year without any problems – but I have the feeling it's only a matter of time before I do. Before buying, check the poles are long enough for effective use. On level ground the correct length is – the tips should just touch the floor when the elbow is bent at 90 degrees. You may find it more comfortable to shorten one or both when traversing or ascending a slope.

One or Two?

One's better than none, but I recommend buying a pair.

Wrist Strap

Adjustable wrist straps are a must. When using a pole on level ground or ascents, I channel most of my weight onto the pole through the straps as opposed to the hand grips. It's therefore important that once tightened the wrist straps stay tight in use, otherwise you lose the benefit of having straps. There are a number of simple locking devices ranging from a simple strap and buckle to more complex handle tighteners. Whilst there's an argument for not having buckles – I tend to prefer their simplicity and have not experienced discomfort.

Handle

Your body comes into contact with the poles via the handles and the wrist straps. If used correctly, your grip around the handles will be light when walking over flat ground firming up on ascents. I find that depending on the degree of slope I change my hand and strap positioning on descent. On modest descents the positioning remains as with normal use, however on steep descents I place my palm over the top of the pole and press down. Handles can be; preshaped to fit finger grip; vertically in line with the pole or bent forward at an angle; made of rubber, plastic or cork. In use I've found there to be no great difference other than plastic handles tend to make the hands sweat more than rubber and cork. The different grips and handle angles are more apparent in the shop than in use. Unless you're using your poles on the flat a forward tilting or off-set handle becomes almost irrelevant as the angle of pole position is constantly changing over rough ground.

Anti shock or not?

The theory behind an anti-shock system (think car suspension) is that it relieves jarring on the arms and wrists. Every time you place the pole on the ground the anti-shock will dampen the impact usually via an internal spring. The amount of travel, or suspension, differs between poles with some having far greater (or softer) suspension than others. Having extensively (I don't go anywhere without a pair) used poles over the past few years, with anti-shock and without anti-shock, my view is that anti-shock is unnecessary and an overrated feature. I found no noticeable difference when used for a couple of weeks carrying heavy loads or on simple day trips.

Manufacturers will point to lab tests, stress charts and graphs stating that the anti-shock feature will reduce the amount of wrist, shoulder and elbow stress and ache that a pole user may experience. As with any exercise, if you're a first time or infrequent user and if you over-do-it your forearms and shoulders will ache no matter what until the muscles get used to performing the task. It's my view that by including an anti-shock system manufacturers have added a potential weakness in long term serviceability together with an added cost to the manufacturing process.

Shaft grip

If you're trekking over very rough ground you may find your poles more useful when gripped by the shaft. Some manufacturers have therefore included a rubber or cork grip on the shaft. In theory it's meant to provide a firmer and warmer grip. In practice it's not very often you'll use your poles in such a way, which to me makes them of little importance – adding only to weight and cost.

Shaft – Locking mechanism

The locking mechanisms are an internal feature, the quality and effectiveness of which is difficult to evaluate other than through extensive use.

Basket

The basket is there to stop the pole sinking into mud and snow. It also tends to jam in rocks and if you're not careful. Some poles have interchangeable baskets allowing you to use wider one in winter conditions.

Tips

It's definitely worth asking about the availability and cost of spare tips (and if the poles will have to be returned to the manufacturers for fitting new tips) together with the possibility of exchanging the tungsten tips for steel tips if you're experiencing problems.

Replacement Parts

Trekking poles are not cheap so it's worth making sure that parts such as tips, wrist straps, expansion bolts, baskets and maybe even handles are readily available and can be changed.

Maintenance

After use make sure the poles are free of grit or sand. If needs be, disassemble the pole and clean the individual parts with a clean rag. If water has entered the shaft, disassemble and let them air dry. Failure to do so could cause the metals to oxidise and jam. Some manufacturers recommend changing the expanders every 12 months. Store your poles with the expansion bolt open i.e. The shafts can move freely.

Lashing out the Lira

It's my opinion that anti-shock systems are unnecessary on trekking poles. I'm sure that many will disagree and point to graphs, charts and lab tests providing otherwise. In addition, sales in the outdoor shops indicate that buyers want anti-shock features on their poles. But having used poles extensively I find there to be no practical benefit or noticeable difference in use, but I accept some buyers will want the feature just the same. For me, two rigid poles with comfortable handles and wrist straps, that pack down small, weigh as little as possible and have inexpensive replacement parts will do fine.

