



**ADVENTURES**  
IN GOOD COMPANY

# Hiker's Glossary



Whether you've been hiking for half a century or are looking to hit the trail for the first time, one of the greatest joys of hiking is that there are so many different things to discover on your own two feet.

When you read a description of a hike in a guidebook or on the AGC website, you may encounter terms you're unfamiliar with, especially if you're new to hiking or have only hiked close to home. We created this five-part Hiker's Glossary of terms paired with photos from our own trips to help introduce hikers of all levels to trail and hiking terminology.

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## Hiker's Glossary Part 1: Trail Types

**Rocky trail (small, medium, and large rocks):** When a trail is called rocky it can mean that there are rocks on the trail of different sizes, like the picture below. But it can also refer to trails where the size of the rocks is more uniform. The three main types of this kind of trail are **scree**, **talus**, and **boulders**.



**Scree (scree field, scree slope):** Small (pebble or gravel-sized), loose rocks on the side or at the base of a mountain. Because it's loose, scree is challenging to walk on. Sometimes you can see the route that other hikers have taken across a scree field. It's easier to descend a scree slope than to ascend—when descending you can dig your heels in as you go down.



**Talus (talus field, talus slope):** Medium-sized rocks; A collection of rocks larger than scree on the side or at the base of a mountain. Talus may be loose or stable depending on the size of the rocks, steepness of the slope, and other factors. The route across a talus field might be marked with cairns (piles of stones) or with painted blazes (trail markings), or you may need to find your own route across.



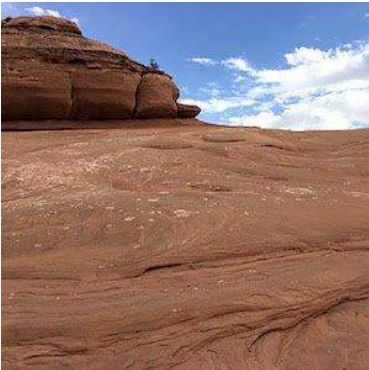
**Boulder (boulder field):** Large rocks; A boulder field is made up of large, irregularly sized rocks. You often need to use one or both hands for stability and balance when moving through a boulder field. Very slow going indeed!



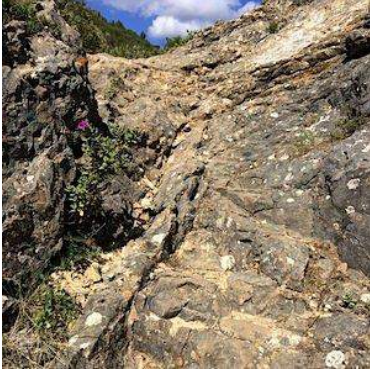
**Hard Packed Dirt Trail:** A clear path where the dirt has been packed by countless hikers, making the trail apparent.



**Sandy Trail:** A trail through a sand-based ground location.



**Slickrock:** is smooth, weathered sandstone found in the desert Southwest. When dry, the rock surface offers good grip for hiking footwear and mountain bike tires. Hiking trails in Utah often include sections of slickrock where paths are marked by cairns or painted blazes.



**"Trail" across bare rock:** A trail across bare rock is often times undefined and requires the user to follow another hiker or look for a safe path on their own.



**"Trail" across snowfield:** When hiking or snowshoeing across a snowfield, a path is often made by previous hikers and still visible in the snow. For those lucky enough to be the first feet on a snowfield, there may be no clear trail markings.

## Hiker's Glossary Part 2: Terrain

**Alpine** (adjective): The Alps are the highest mountains in Europe, and “alpine” describes anything related to a high mountain environment (such as “alpine flowers”).

**Climb** (verb): In hiking terminology, climb means “to go uphill” or “ascend” (vs. climbing a vertical rock face using a harness and safety rope). A “steep climb” is a steep uphill section of trail. A hiking trail might have sections with large rocks that you need to climb over; see “**scrambling**.”

**Drainage** (noun): A drainage is the path that water follows on the ground such as a wide river valley, a deep canyon, or a shallow creek bed. A drainage does not necessarily have water in it— many desert canyons only contain water after a rainstorm, and some creeks only run after snowmelt or a downpour.

**Drop-off** (noun): A steep and abrupt downward slope. Related terms: **edge**, **cliff**, **ledge**.

**Exposure** (noun): An "exposed" trail has a drop-off on one or both sides. The trail may be wide or narrow, and the drop-off may be sheer or a gradual slope. If the trail is narrow with a steep drop-off, there might be a protective barrier or a chain/cable to hold for security. Exposed terrain can be mentally challenging for people with a fear of heights, even when the actual risk of falling is very low.





**Pass** (noun): A navigable route through mountainous terrain. A mountain pass generally makes use of the lowest spot between two peaks or along a ridge. In high mountain ranges, the lowest point on a ridge is called a "**col.**" (See also "**saddle.**")

**Ridge** (noun): A ridge is a geological feature consisting of a long line of high ground that form a continuous elevated crest for some distance. Related terms: crest, peak, summit.

**Saddle** (noun): The low point between two areas of high ground. If you are in a saddle, there will be high ground in two opposing directions and low ground in the other two directions. A saddle is typically u-shaped. The term "gap" is used in the southern U.S. and "notch" (typically v-shaped) in the northeast. (See also "**Pass.**")

**Scramble** (noun): An area of rocky terrain that requires you to use one or both hands for stability and/or to boost yourself over rocks. You can hold both poles in one hand to free up the other hand or stow your hiking poles in your pack for use of both hands. If the scramble is steep or exposed (see "**exposure**"), there may be a fixed cable or metal bars to hold on to for added security on that section of the trail.



**Summit** (noun): the highest point of a mountain. (Verb): to reach the highest point of a mountain.



**Switchback** (noun): When a trail zig-zags across a steep section of terrain instead of going straight up.

Switchbacks add distance to the route, but they're easier to hike than near-vertical trails. Also, trails with switchbacks are less prone to erosion. The *apron* is the transition area on a switchback where you change direction (go from zig to zag)

**Traverse** (verb): To move across a slope horizontally rather than vertically.

(Noun): a trail or route that goes across a slope rather than up and down.

**Tree line or timberline** (noun): The edge of the habitat where trees have enough oxygen, moisture, soil, and warmth to grow. We often refer to "above the tree line" on a mountain (i.e. an alpine tree line), but deserts and arctic environments also have tree lines beyond which conditions are too harsh to support tree growth.

## Hiker's Glossary Part 3: Common Terms

**Bushwhacking:** If you hike off-trail through vegetated areas, you're "bushwhacking"- pushing aside branches, bushes, and undergrowth. As noted above, in forested areas hiking etiquette generally means sticking to the trail. However, if a trail is unmaintained and overgrown, you may find yourself bushwhacking anyway (a good reason to find out about trail conditions before heading out!). This is typically a slow-going process.

**Creek crossing:** When a hike description refers to a creek or stream crossing this usually means there isn't a bridge. "**Wet crossing**" or "**ford**" definitely indicates there's no bridge and you'll need to walk through the water. A "**rock hop**" means you can cross the waterway by stepping from rock to rock.



Keep in mind that water levels in streams vary throughout the year according to snowmelt and rain. Wet rocks and logs are slippery—if you slip, your feet (and possibly more of you) will get wet anyway, plus you run the risk of twisting an ankle. Sometimes the safest option with the most secure footing (if there isn't a bridge) is to walk through the water. Bring a second pair of lightweight footwear (sandals or water shoes) if

you anticipate wet crossings so you can protect your feet from sharp rocks, have stable footing, and keep your primary hiking shoes/boots dry.

**Front country vs. backcountry:** These terms have both unofficial and official definitions. As a rule of thumb, "front country" is considered to be within an hour or so of roads, towns, and medical care whereas "backcountry" is more than an hour from these aspects of civilization. National parks and other public lands designate certain areas as "backcountry zones" for management purposes. These official backcountry hiking/camping zones are indicated on National Park maps, but maps and trail signs won't tell you when you're crossing the arbitrary boundary between "front country" and "backcountry."



Keep in mind that hiking trails close to roads and towns might not have cell service, which adds a level of remoteness to the “front country” even if you’re only venturing a few miles from the trailhead.

**Maintained vs. unmaintained trail:** *Also referred to as developed trail vs. primitive trail:* Many hiking trails are maintained by staff and/or volunteers from a land agency or a hiking club who clear downed trees and rockslides, repair washed-out bridges, replace missing signs, etc. Other trails are minimally maintained or unmaintained (also called “primitive” trails).

Trail work is labor-intensive and maintenance might happen just once or twice a year, so it’s always possible to encounter an unexpected obstacle even on a maintained or “developed” trail. Your best bet is to contact the agency or organization responsible for the trail to check on current conditions before starting your hike. Online hiker forums are another source of information. After your hike, report back on the conditions you found. And consider volunteering for a trail work day and/or joining the club that maintains the trail.

**Off-trail/cross-country hiking:** Off-trail hiking is often prohibited or discouraged because it contributes to erosion and negatively impacts vegetation. Unofficial



hiker-created trails can also lead to navigational confusion. However, there are hiking areas that allow, or even require, off-trail hiking. For example, in Denali National Park there are no established trails in the backcountry. Rocky terrain with sparse vegetation (such as desert slickrock or high alpine zones) may be open to cross-country hiking. Check with the land management agency to find out

regulations regarding off-trail hiking, and always follow Leave No Trace practices both on and off trail.

*Note: you’ll need excellent map and compass skills if you plan to hike cross-country.*

**Wilderness:** This term has both a general and a legal definition. People often use the term “[wilderness](#)” as a synonym for “backcountry,” meaning a large expanse of undeveloped land, far from what we call civilization. In the United States, public lands officially designated as wilderness areas are managed according to [The Wilderness Act of 1964](#) which created the National Wilderness Preservation System. Wilderness areas are managed by the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or the Bureau of Land Management.



## Hiker's Glossary Part 4: Different Types of Hiking

**Backpacking:** Hiking and then camping along the trail, having carried your tent, sleeping bag, stove, food, etc. in your backpack. A backpacking trip can be an overnight, a week, or a month or more. (“Car camping” refers to sleeping in a tent in a campground that you drive to.) There are multiple ways to backpack, including through-hiking, section hiking, and hut-to-hut hiking)

Example of an AGC backpacking trip: [Intro to Lightweight Backpacking on the Appalachian Trail](#)

- **Section hiking:** Hiking or backpacking a long-distance trail in sections, perhaps for a week or two each year, instead of from start to finish in a single trip. Completing a trail by section works well for people who want the experience and sense of accomplishment of hiking the entire length of a trail, but who aren’t able to, or don’t want to, hike for months at a time.
  - Example of an AGC section hiking trip: [Appalachian Trail Section Hike](#)
- **Slackpacking:** An alternative to backpacking; hiking a long-distance trail, or a section of a trail, carrying just a daypack. Each morning you get dropped off where you finished hiking the previous day, and your gear is transported by shuttle service to the next place you’ll spend the night (B&B, campground, hostel, etc.). Often it works to stay in the same lodging for several days while slackpacking a trail section and on AGC slackpacking trips we always stay in the same lodging for the entire trip.
  - Examples of AGC slackpacking trips: [Slackpacking Maryland](#) and [Slackpacking Harpers Ferry](#)
- **Through-hiking:** Hiking a long-distance trail end-to-end. If you’re day hiking on a long-distance trail (for example, the Appalachian Trail or the Superior Hiking Trail) you might encounter backpackers who are “through-hiking” the entire trail. Through-hikers re-supply by hiking or hitchhiking into towns near the trail to go grocery shopping or to pick up a food package they mailed to themselves. Some more remote trails offer re-supply services by pack animal.

**Day hiking:** Hiking for part or all of the day, then going back to your home/lodging/campground for the night (vs. backpacking, see above). Most AGC hiking trips fall into this category.

Examples of AGC day hiking trips: [Day Hiking the Swiss Alps](#) and [Death Valley Delights](#).

**Lodge-to-Lodge or Hut-to-Hut hiking:** Some hiking trails are served by staffed huts or lodges. Remote mountain huts tend to be rustic (bunks beds, bring your own sleeping bag), but some lodging facilities on or near trails are more luxurious. Examples of AGC lodge-to-lodge trips: [Hiking Hut to Hut in British Columbia](#) and [Hiking Lodge to Lodge on the Appalachian Trail](#)



**Trekking:** “To trek” means to make a long journey. Although a through-hike certainly qualifies as a trek, “trekking” usually refers to multi-day hiking trips between villages, lodges, or camping areas in places outside North America such as Nepal, Bolivia, etc. “Trekking” often carry just a daypack and their overnight gear is transported by pack animals, porters, or even by vehicle.

Example of AGC trekking trips: [Trekking to Everest Base Camp](#)

## Hiker's Glossary Part 5: Navigational Terms

**Altitude & Elevation:** Vertical distance. Technically “altitude” is used to describe the height of an object (e.g. an airplane) above the ground, and “elevation” is used to describe the height of a geographic feature (e.g. a mountain) above sea level. Anytime you hike uphill you’re gaining elevation.

At elevations above 5,000 feet, most people will start to feel the “effects of altitude”: decreased atmospheric pressure leads to less oxygen reaching the bloodstream, so a person gets out of breath more easily (the various effects of altitude on human physiology is beyond the scope of this post). 5,000-8,000 feet above sea level is considered “moderately high altitude” and 8,000-14,000 feet is “high altitude.”

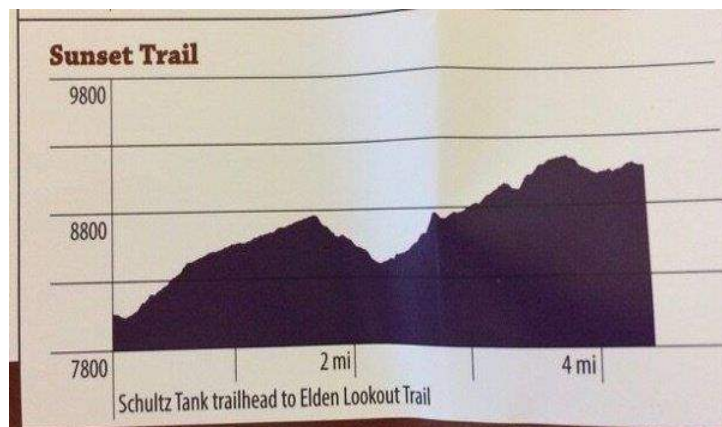
**Cumulative elevation gain:** The sum of all elevation gained over the course of a hike. Each time the trail goes downhill, then back uphill, it adds to the cumulative elevation gain. [Cumulative gain](#) is useful for determining the difficulty of the hike (it’s more useful than simply calculating the difference between the highest and lowest points). Cumulative elevation loss is the sum of all elevation lost. On a loop hike or an out-and-back, cumulative gain and loss are equal.

**Elevation profile:** Shows the elevation gains and losses of a hike in “profile” view.

Some maps include elevation profiles of specific hikes featured on the map.

The scale of the elevation profile will affect how steep a slope appears—are you gaining 500’ of elevation

(vertical distance) over a mile or a quarter-mile (horizontal distance)? The shorter the distance in which you gain elevation, the steeper the slope.



**Legend:** Also known as a key, the map legend is a visual explanation of the symbols used on a map. The legend is a graphical representation of information, with design principles similar to a map or any other graphic.



**Navigation:** Finding your way from point A to point B. Hikers often navigate by using trail signs (if they exist), topographic map & compass, GPS, known landmarks, and prominent terrain features. Outdoor stores and local hiking groups offer classes on land navigation skills; check your local library or gear shop for books or consider our introduction to hiking trip, [The Art of Mountain Hiking](#).

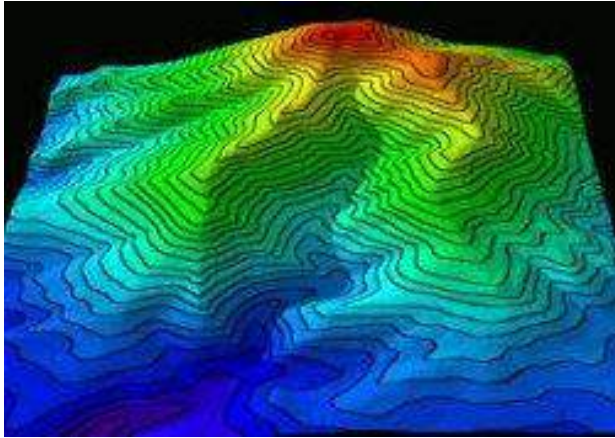
**Orient:** To “orient” yourself means to establish your location in relation to your surroundings. To “orient” a map means using a compass to position the map so that north on the map points to geographic north. (For further explanation on orienting maps, see our [E-Guide to Hiking](#)).



**Orienteering:** An outdoor sport that involves navigating to a set of “controls” (3-sided orange & white flags) by reading a topographic map. An orienteering map is more detailed than a regular topographic map. Courses are set at different

levels of difficulty, so it’s a great way to develop map-reading skills. Orienteering is especially popular in Europe among people of all ages, but there are also [clubs](#) across North America.

**Route finding:** Determining the best way to get to a chosen destination without a clearly marked trail. It is most relevant to off-trail hiking. For example, you might be looking for the safest place to cross a boulder field, or the least-steep way to climb or descend a slope with no defined trail. If you can't actually see all the terrain you'll be covering off-trail, you'll want to use your topographic map to plan the best route (safest, most efficient, not crossing a swamp, not climbing in and out of drainages unnecessarily).



**Topography/topographic:** Topography focuses on the natural and artificial physical features of the land: hills and valleys, rivers and lakes. A topographic (“topo”) map is one that shows the natural features of a landscape, including contour lines representing elevation change. Topographic maps often include a key or legend, and at the very least will indicate the scale

(e.g. 1 inch=1 mile) and the contour interval (e.g. 40 vertical feet between contour lines).