

2: Walking & Hiking Boots

For most of us the purchase of a good pair of walking boots represents a significant investment. More than that, it's something you really want to get right as anyone who's experienced the misery of a day in the wrong footwear will readily testify. If you plan to walk all year round, then it's even more important to make sure you're in the right kit - starting with your feet.

What's available?

To walk comfortably and safely in moorland, hill & fell country, you need to protect your feet in purpose designed walking shoes or boots. In an ideal world, you would have different footwear to suit all the different terrains and conditions that you might encounter year round. However, this could prove too expensive for most people. Therefore, your footwear will have to perform in a range of circumstances.

Inevitably, this involves some trade-off between the features necessary for winter, high-level walking (crampon compatibility, ankle support, shock absorption, warmth and water-proofness) and those designed for less challenging summer & low level walking (flexibility, lighter weight, breathability).

To a large extent, you will get what you pay for. That having been said, there is no point paying for features that you won't really need. So it's best to start your search for footwear by thinking about the type of terrain in which you plan to walk. You should also take into account your foot size/shape, your build/weight and whether you are likely to be carrying a heavy backpack. The classification below will be useful in identifying the type of boot you need.

What to look for when buying:

① Material of Construction

Leather is the traditional material for construction for boots. It is water-resistant and allows your feet to 'breathe'. Periodically, you may need to wax leather boots or treat with water-resistant spray to restore the water resistance - particularly on stitched areas which may start to leak over time. The thickness of the leather will affect the feel of the boot as well as its warmth. Some boots have a waterproof lining made from Gore-Tex®, Sympatex or something similar. Whilst the lining will enhance the water-proofness, it will also make your feet hotter. Boots available in fabric materials are often lighter-weight than leather alternatives.

② The Upper

Should be flexible enough to ensure comfort but provide protection for your toes and ankle if you plan to walk on rougher terrain. The sides of the boot should be high enough to support your ankle. The heel 'cup' must provide support so that heel doesn't move too much over rough terrain. Internal stiffening around the heel & toe will provide protection. Check both by pressing between finger and thumb. The stiffer the boot the more suitable it will be for more rugged walking. A good scree cuff (the padded section that surrounds the top of the ankle) and a padded tongue joined to the upper along its entire length will prevent small stones, debris and water from getting inside the boot.

1-2 Season Walking Boots:

Low Level Walking

For use in spring/summer conditions, on firm low level paths that are not particularly steep.

Footwear in this category is designed to offer relatively more flexibility and often comes in the form of low-cut boots or shoes.

3 Season Walking Boots:

Hillwalking/Trekking

For use on paths that are much rockier and steeper than those encountered in low level walking and where you will be walking all year round and in most weathers except snow & ice. These boots can be made from leather or fabric usually have a waterproof liner. The sole and ankle cuff will be designed to provide a good level of support and the boot will be water-proof and will have aggressively treaded soles to provide good grip in rough terrain. The overall support provided for feet and ankles will be enough should you be carrying a full backpack.

4 Season Walking Boots:

Winter Walking

For use when you're likely to encounter snow/ice. These boots will be stiffer (longitudinally and laterally) than Hillwalking/Trekking boots and so can take crampons for short periods of time. The overall level of support offered is enough for use when carrying a heavier pack on longer backpacking trips.

Mountain/Mountaineering Boots:

There are 2 further categories of highly technical footwear designed for use in the high mountains where snow and ice exist all the year round, on glaciers or when climbing. These categories are outside the scope of this gear guide.



"Walking boots should be like a good friend, supportive without being irritating."

③ Sole

The sole should be 'treaded' to ensure a good grip and made from a material that offers good adhesive properties - like rubber. PVC should be avoided. You should also check out the cushioning offered by the boot - generally speaking the more cushioning there is the better particularly for walking on granite (eg in the Lake District) or on tarmac. If you intend backpacking, then try the boots out wearing a fully loaded pack.

④ Flexibility

Squeeze the sides of the upper - the stiffer this is the more suitable the boot is for more challenging walking. Likewise you should consider the stiffness of the sole/midsole. You can do this by flexing the boot: firstly toe to heel (to check longitudinal flexibility) then by holding the heel still and rotating the toe (to check lateral flexibility).

The more resistance there is to bending in either case, the more suitable is the boot for walking on rocky ground, or in snow or ice with crampons.

⑤ Lacing

Lacing should be easy to fasten and adjust. Look out for features such as hooks and 'D' rings that help if you're trying to fasten/adjust a boot with cold hands. Some boots have 'locking' hooks that hold the laces tight on the lower part of the boot while you tighten the upper section.

⑥ Crampon compatibility

If you're buying a 4 season boot for winter walking then try some suitable crampons on the boot in the shop.

⑦ Fit & Comfort

It may seem obvious but the best boots in the world will be little use if they are uncomfortable. The type of last used to build the boot can determine the shape and size of the boot interior. (or boot volume.) So try boots from several manufacturers to find the one that suits you best.

It's really worthwhile spending time on this!

Fitting should be snug but not overly tight. If boots are too tight, your feet are liable to get cold. Either wear your own hiking socks or borrow some from the shop. Some ranges include women's models that are usually slightly narrower at the heel. If that's not the case, it's a good idea to check out lower volume men's boots.

As a general guide, with the laces undone move your foot in the boot so that your toes touch the front. Then check you can insert a finger at the back between your heel and the back of the boot. Also check that when laced your foot is held firmly but not squeezed. Make sure your foot will not slide forward when going downhill. Most specialist shops have a boot ramp you can stand on to test this.