



Mountain Sense: Hiking Solo

Those who enjoy hiking solo go alone for several reasons. Hiking solo simplifies planning and coordination—you decide on a route, gather together what you need, and go. On the trail, you move at your own pace—you push when you're feeling strong; stop, rest and eat when you're tired and hungry. The solitude of hiking solo is at once peaceful and powerful—it heightens your awareness of your surroundings, magnifies your thoughts, and adds challenge to an activity that already has some risk, particularly to the older hiker. Getting stuck on a ledge, lost or injured is more serious if you're alone, even if you are connected by technology. Thoughtful planning before and good decisions during a hike, however, can reduce your chances of error and lead to an unusually rich experience and safe return. The following tips for the solo hiker are intended to be added to basic guidelines for hiking safety.

- Know where you are going—the type of trail, its grade or elevation gain, length, stream crossings and amount of use, and the wildlife you might encounter. Assess whether your level of fitness, knowledge, and mental stamina match the route before setting out. Some solo hikers hike only well-traveled trails and trails they know.

- Tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return, and then stick to your plan. Provide info on the trailhead, the route, emergency numbers to contact. If you envision an alternative route under specific circumstances, spell those out beforehand. Contact that person when you return.
- Pack a compass and map and know how to use them to identify where you are and where you need to go. The same holds true for a GPS or GPS app on your phone. Pack a cellphone, but don't expect it to work in remote areas. (Some solo hikers entering the backcountry pack a satellite-based personal locator beacon. It's a matter of choice. To one hiker, a PLB defeats the purpose of going into the backcountry in the first place. To another, it brings peace of mind, if only for family members.)
- Use your intuition, particularly with people you meet. If they arouse suspicion, avoid engagement and move on. Be prepared to say your hiking party/partner is coming behind you.
- Stay calm under stress, whether from an unexpected thunderstorm, injury, or negative encounter. If you experience panic, control your breathing and call upon your stored knowledge before you act.

Alpine azalea. (Photo: Mike Jones)

