

the luxury of reconnecting with nature

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had little way of knowing what lay ahead when they left St. Louis in 1804. Over the next two years and four months, they and their Corps of Discovery would trek across some 7,000 miles of uncharted wilderness. Along the way, they would experience hardships that tested their limits of endurance: frostbite, heat stroke, chronic fatigue, malnutrition, debilitating intestinal ailments, plagues of insects, loneliness, isolation, and the constant stress of dealing with the unknown.

Some of their gear was the best that money could buy — fifteen of the newest rifles from the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and a \$250 chronometer for calculating longitude — but most of it was standard early 19th century stuff that was heavy and hard to carry. Their tools and implements were made of metal, wood, or leather. Their clothes were made

The want of provisions, together with the difficulty of passing those emence mountains has dampened the Spirits of the party.

William Clark
September 17, 1805

from fabrics that retained moisture, which meant that hypothermia was an ever-present danger and skin irritations were a common affliction. Tents made of oiled cloth were hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and not always impervious to the elements.

Think about it! Today, we wouldn't let kids sleep out in the backyard with equipment like that.

Which got us to thinking: What if Lewis and Clark had been able to order their supplies from a 21st century "outdoor adventure" catalog?

Every page of those catalogs offers up a minor technological marvel: raingear that's waterproof *and* breathable; sleeping bags rated to 40 degrees below zero; high-performance fabrics that help prevent hypother-

mia by wicking moisture away from the body. There are even items that would have amazed people in the 1960s, let alone the 19th century — things like a \$100 wristwatch that's also an altimeter, a barometer, a thermometer, a digital compass, and a chronograph; or the \$200 GPS device with an integrated, waterproof, two-way radio.

And if the variety of products is astounding, so too is the range of choices. Take sleeping bags, for example. You can buy one insulated with goose down or Thermolite® or Polarguard® or Hollofil® or Quallofil® or . . . well you get the idea. If one bag doesn't have the features you want at a price you can afford, there are at least a dozen others to choose from.

But here's the truly remarkable thing: Almost all the stuff in the pages of those catalogs is for recreational use. We've reached the point where a sizable number of people have the time and money for frills.

So, the next time you see catalogs spilling out of your mailbox, don't think of them as junk mail. Think of them as tools for measuring changes in the material standard of living.

