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Meal Planning for Alpine Mountaineering

To perform at your best during the extended effort demanded by alpine climbing your body needs high energy, nutritious food. Identifying foods that are nutritionally sound and appealing to your taste will require some personal experimentation. To get you started in the right direction we'll offer some insights into meal planning strategies that work well for us at Peak Mountain Guides.

Over the years, we have experimented with a variety of lightweight and packable foods for alpine climbing. During this process we have discovered how many calories we need for a given day of activity, and which foods are most satisfying while still providing adequate nutrition. In order to provide some perspective to the meal planning process, listed below are some of our favorite combinations. Please keep in mind we may eat more or less than others, and may have different tastes.

Breakfast (600 calories, heavy on complex carbohydrates)

1 cup high calorie swiss Muesli with powdered milk (reconstituted with water). We like the "La Familia" brand and the "Bob's Red Mill" brand of muesli. Granola is good too, but it is higher in fat than muesli. Some of our guides like bagels with cream cheese or oatmeal for breakfast.

Lunch Foods (1500 calories, 50% carbs, 30% protein, 20% fat)

We are fans of energy bars and will often eat five or six of them during a big day. Our favorites are ProBar, Hammer Bar, and Powerbar although we tend to eat a variety of the popular brands such as Balance Bar, Organic Food Bar, and Clif Bar. We also like dried almonds, rice cracker mixes, dried fruit, and bagels with peanut butter or cream cheese. Some of our guides like bagel sandwiches made with sliced cheese and non-perishable meat such as salami.

Occasionally we find energy gel packets such as GU to be tasty and digestible when we're otherwise not interested in eating (like climbing at high altitude).

Sometimes we bring "front country food" for the first day of a trip. This might be pizza, a sandwich, or a burrito in a light plastic bag.



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Dinner (1000-1500 calories, heavy on protein and fat)

After arriving in camp in the evening we often begin by consuming a high calorie “recovery drink” that is loaded with complex carbs and protein. It is during the first 45 minutes after exercising that your body is most able to utilize nutrients for muscle repair and refueling, so a 300 calorie recovery drink taken immediately after finishing the day is a good way to get this process started. Our favorite recovery drinks are Recoverite and Endurox. For dinner we often eat pre-packaged dehydrated dinners such as the Mountain House Pro Pak or Natural Pantry meals. These typically provide 500-700 calories with a good balance of carbs, protein, and fat.

Although we use prepackaged meals for many of our dinners, on long expeditions (multiple weeks) we tend to cook food from scratch to get more variety. The NOLS Cookery is a good reference for cooking from scratch in the backcountry.

For dessert we like chocolate bars, licorice, popcorn (popped in the pot with some oil), or hard candies.

Other tasty complements to dinner are Ramen instant soups, wheat crackers, and soft cheese.

The Bottom Line

You will need to experiment to find foods that are appealing to you while climbing. Be sure to choose from foods that offer a spectrum of vitamins and minerals. To ensure you bring enough calories for each day, tally up the total calories as listed on the packaging of the food and compare to the amounts we listed above. Experimentation is the best tool for discovering your preferences so try any new foods at home before venturing into the backcountry.