

LIGHTWEIGHT FLEECE

This classic piece of kit is ideal for beating early morning summer chills and for mid-layer wear all year round.

Words and photos: Damon Blackband

Fleece is the go-to bit of insulation most walkers usually opt for. It's inexpensive, quick-drying and great at trapping warmth – even when it gets a little wet. Fleece tops come in a wide range of thicknesses and styles, making them useful for different conditions throughout the year. For cool summer mornings and sunny summit-top picnics a lightweight fleece is the perfect option.

The fleeces were tested this month by an outdoor professional. Damon Blackband is an International Mountain Leader and director of outdoor pursuits company Imp Adventures. All of the fleeces were tested in a range of conditions as Damon led groups along the length of Hadrian's Wall as well as a couple of scrambling trips to the Lake District.

For the purpose of the test, the fleeces were picked from a range of brands and price bands to show what your money can buy. They were assessed for their warmth, wicking properties, packability (how small they fold), drying speed and their durability.



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Patagonia Araveto £85

www.patagonia.com

Rating 14/20

I'm not sure what Patagonia is aiming for with this fleece jacket. Initially I could not really find a place for it in my rucksack; it is neither a lightweight mid-layer nor a functional outer-layer in my opinion. Its unzipped handwarmer pockets are well-positioned and large enough but they lack a zipped closure, which lets them down.

The Araveto is a very well-made lightweight jacket with quality seams, a super-comfortable material and a welcome anti-piling finish, but its retro styling, with garish yellow trim, was soon showing wear after just half a day on the hill.

The jacket's non-structured relaxed fit is not really conducive to forming part of a layering system and I would probably only really wear it as a casual jacket rather than a serious item of outdoor clothing, although for short day-walks and low-level adventures in stable weather conditions it would probably win out over a heavier, better-specified fleece due to its simplicity and packability.

It loses out to the Sprayway on weight and by not having zipped handwarmer and chest pockets, and by not having a drawcord hem to tidy up the relaxed fit.

It's best at home in an English coffee shop or far wearing to and from the gym on a chilly morning, although I think this fleece may just find a market as a lightweight outer-layer for early and late-season al fresco suppers outside Mediterranean café bars.

EDZ Light Thermal Zip Neck £30

www.edzliving.com

Rating 15/20

A simple, 'no frills' design in a slightly closer cut than the other fleeces (although the tight-fitting arms did prove to be a little restrictive when trying to vest on a hot summer's trek along Hadrian's Wall). Niggles aside, a snug neck, good length in the tail and arms (which did not expose the wrists and back to the elements when clambering over the jagged outcrops of Northumberland) along with a comfortable and well-proven design, comes together to ensure this fleece is not resigned to the dog basket as other less-established offerings have in recent times.

It's warmer than the other fleeces tested and took slightly longer to dry than most despite its lightweight material. It also proved too warm on a sunny spring day and got rather damp under a rucksack, which took longer to dry than expected. As a stand-alone top in cooler weather, however, or as part of a colder weather layering system it would be good, but it loses out to the others on test on too many counts to make it a contender.

Since it's more expensive than the Keela and less-functional and specified than both the Keela and Berghaus, it's the poor cousin in this super-fleece shoot-out.



Sprayway Morph 100

£40

www.sprayway.com

Rating 17/20

I was sceptical at first, but this cardigan style fleece soon grew on me with its versatile yet simple design. Neither a mid-layer or a soft shell, the Morph initially reminded me of the Patagonia fleece which didn't really get on with, but the Sprayway's functional design and lightweight material soon won me over.

It's close fitting but not restrictive, with zip-up handwarmer pockets (although the short zipper tabs proved fiddly to operate), and I really warmed to this 'break from the norm' top. It stayed dry even below a rucksack on a warm spring day on Hadrian's Wall, and its micro-fleece material dried in no time at all after an impromptu shower.

I would definitely carry this lightweight, super-packable top during the summer months for when the sun goes down and the winds take hold, and I would probably find room for it in my Alpine pack for pulling on in the evening whilst admiring the sun setting on surrounding peaks.

Its versatility, ability to vent and traditional good looks, along with minimal weight and pack size make the Sprayway jacket, in my opinion, a very good contender for this year's most versatile offering, and a welcome addition to the burgeoning market of super-lightweight fleece products.



Outdoor Research Radiant LT Zip Top

£65

www.patagonia.com

Rating 17/20

This is a fantastic fleece, which almost rivals the Berghaus for top spot, although it's aiming at a slightly different market. The Radiant is a more technical material and cut than the rest of the fleeces tested, with a closer fit, long back, thumb loops and a longer length chest zip making this ideal both for adrenalin-packed sports in the colder months and for summer alpinism thanks to its ability to vent.

Although the hard-wearing nylon-rich material proved to be slower at wicking away moisture than some, and subsequently soon became damp after only a short time under a rucksack, its new 'grid fleece' inner proved to be very comfortable when worn next to the skin, as well as under a rucksack, and the Radiant top does offer slightly better water-resistance and durability than most.

I would most definitely wear this fleece on a cold Scottish winter's day or for a high-level Alpine peak-bagging trip under my soft shell outer, or equally as a mid-layer when ice-climbing in Norway where its warmth, versatility and technical fit would layer nicely once the mercury starts to plummet.

It loses out to the Berghaus on comfort and the absence of a chest pocket, but it's in a class of its own for pure performance and presumed longevity. One for the cooler months for sure, and bound to garner a loyal following with the extreme sports brigade.



Keela Pulse Micro Fleece

£25

www.keela.co.uk

Rating 18/20

I continue to be impressed by Keela's no-nonsense approach to designing practical and affordable outdoor clothing. The Pulse Micro Fleece is a great value-for-money base, or mid-layer fleece that is practical, functional and comfortable. With a slightly relaxed fit the Pulse is definitely a 'next to the skin' comfort layer that could equally form part of an affordable layering system.

After wearing the Pulse on a blustery day out in the Yorkshire Dales I was impressed by its comfort, its longer arm and back length and its flat-lock seams, which ensured I stayed warm and comfortable throughout the day. The micro-fleece also handled moisture management well, wicking perspiration away from the skin and drying rapidly once my rucksack was removed.

Whilst relaxing in the bar at Austwick afterwards the fleece was equally at home as a smart casual top that did not shout 'Rambler' from the rooftops. It's best for everyday low-level fellwalks, but would equally act as a great mid-layer taking it into four-season use, as well as for spring and autumn, or for chillier evenings in summer.

Overall, it's not dissimilar to the winning Berghaus, but lacks that chest pocket and elasticated hem and cuffs. At £15 cheaper, though, I am sure it will find favour in many thrifty hillwalker's wardrobes this year. A great value fleece at a very affordable price.



Berghaus Spectrum Micro Half-zip

£40

www.berghaus.com

Rating 19/20

Berghaus' latest uber-lightweight fleece is style, function and performance personified. I was most impressed with the attention to detail in the Spectrum Micro Fleece, with its elasticated cuffs and hem, a handy zipped chest pocket, a technical but comfortable fit (with flat-lock seams) and just the right length in the sleeves and tail, not to mention its ultra-soft and comfortable anti-pilling performance fleece fabric which rapidly wicked away perspiration and dried in no time at all.

I would use this high-end technical fleece for a number of outdoor pursuits as it fits the bill on many counts. Not only is it a damn good lightweight base or mid-layer (it seemed the lightest on test), but it is also a good-looking item of casual gear that is equally at home doing the shopping or battling the elements on a blustery winter's day, not to mention the whole host of other activities that this fleece will be getting used for throughout this year.

The Spectrum Micro sets a new benchmark for lightweight insulating tops and will be my first choice for general hillwalking and other fast-moving outdoor pastimes for the foreseeable future. If only all companies paid as much attention to detail as Berghaus has with this five-star offering.



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