

Everyday carry

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As the bipedal tool-toting species, we are what we carry. And we're proud of it. Thousands of Instagram users post photos with the hashtag #edc, for 'everyday carry'. They display the tools, weapons, ornaments, and accessories that they haul around regularly, day in and day out. Men show off their pocket contents through #pocketdump (currently 13,100 Instagram photos), whereas women show off everything in their handbags with #whatsinmybag (22,800 photos so far). Typical EDC for both sexes includes keychains, wallets, smartphones, pocketknives, contraceptives, medicines, and, in America, concealed-carry guns.

These EDC consumer goods constitute our modern 'extended phenotype' – the artefacts for survival, reproduction, and social interaction that we regularly buy, own, and use. Our full extended phenotypes reach far beyond our bodies, and include our cars, houses, credit histories, and online dating profiles.

But the possessions we carry around on a daily basis, in pockets and purses, have a special intimacy. EDC goods usually combine the highly practical and the highly symbolic, as in the iPhone 5S, the BMW car keys, the "magnum-sized" Durex condoms, the Glock 19 pistol, the Clinique lipstick, or the Pampers baby wipes. These things make us conspicuously branded cyborgs, half-technological and half-organic, and that's a confusing thing to be.

To understand our modern consumer selves, it might help to compare our EDC to that of our prehistoric ancestors, to look for functional universals behind the technological differences. What kind of extended phenotypes were common for our male and female ancestors?

Sadly, we don't have any prehistoric #pocketdump or #whatsinmybag images, but we do have some useful clues from 'Ötzi', a man who lived about 5,300 years ago, and whose ice-preserved body was found in the Italian Alps in 1991. Since then, scientists have learned a lot about him, from his genome and brain proteome to his gut microbiome and his lethal arrow wound. His possessions were also well-preserved: a diverse set of clothes, tools, weapons, fire-makers, supplies, and foul-weather gear suitable for his mixed roles of soldier, hunter, camper, and explorer.

Much of his gear looks primitive, even pathetic, to modern eyes. But Ötzi was not a distant ancestor: he had an anatomically modern brain in an anatomically modern body. In chronological distance, we are no further from Socrates than Socrates was from Ötzi. So, we should be able to find some functional similarities between his EDC and ours.

Many of those analogies are fairly obvious. Ötzi's belt pouch contained tinder fungus and flint for making fires, analogous to a Zippo lighter. His lumps of birch polypore fungus had antibiotic, antiparasitic, and styptic properties, like modern Amoxicillin, deworming tablets, and band-aids. His 2-meter-long ball of tree-bast string is like a Paracord survival bracelet. His flint dagger with ash-wood handle is like a Spyderco folding tactical knife. He carried four stag antler-tips of different sizes and shapes tied together with bast-strips, like a Swiss Army knife.

Likewise, Ötzi's clothing and luggage makes sense to us. His well-worn, often-repaired goat-hide leggings are like a pair of favourite Levi's 501 blue jeans. His deerskin shoes with bearskin soles are like Timberland leather hiking boots with Vibram soles. His long goat-leather loin-cloth would have protected his groin from flint-chips during tool-making, like a welder's apron. His leather backpack with external hazel-wood frame is like modern mountaineering gear. His woven swamp-grass mat, worn over his bearskin cap, would have kept rain off like an umbrella.

Most of Ötzi's possessions look purely practical, but he carried two items with a bit more pizzazz: his stripy coat and his copper axe. The coat was made of goat hide strips, alternating dark and light, and would have presented a striking pattern even from a distance. It was worn a long time, and much dirt and sweat was on the inside. Today's urban hipster might wear a vintage Swedish bomber jacket, in distressed leather, like Bane's coat from *Batman Rises* – also wholly practical yet pretentiously stylish.

Ötzi's prize possession was probably the axe, with a blade of almost pure copper. It could chop down trees, split fire-wood, and defend against humans and predatory animals. The copper was finely shaped, and had been mined on the Austrian side of the Alps, far from Ötzi's Italian home. Less than 20% of Ötzi's clan-mates were buried with copper axes.

Reliable, refined, imported, and rare, Ötzi's axe is analogous to another state-of-the-art Austrian export: the Glock semi-automatic pistol. It suggests that the 46-year-old Ötzi had attained fairly high status in his tribe. And the blood of four other individuals found on his possessions suggests his weapons were not just for show. Conspicuous formidability remains a distinctively masculine form of conspicuous consumption, as in many modern guys' #pocketdumps.

An even more formidable weapon would have been Ötzi's longbow, if he'd lived long enough to finish making it. A powerful distance weapon, it could have killed wild animals or humans up to 40 metres away. Analogously, some modern preppers might keep an AR-15 rifle in the pick-up truck in case of a zombie/EMP/SHTF apocalypse.

Yet most of us no longer need distance weapons to acquire food and defend ourselves. Given modern supermarkets, hospitals, police, and armies, the true analogues of Ötzi's longbow are the debit card, the health-insurance card, the driver's license, and the passport. As physical objects, they are just shards of paper and plastic, hardly enough to swat a fly. But as identity technologies, they tap into all the threats and promised offered by vast systems of finance, medicine, security, and governance.

Ötzi may have had an axe and a longbow, but a high-status New Yorker's EDC represents a small yet potent claim on the combined resources of Citibank, the Mount Sinai Medical Center, the New York Police Department, and the U.S. Navy.

And our most advanced EDC technology – the smartphone – has no real analogue in Ötzi's tool kit. With it, we can access any human knowledge, buy any good or service, and summon any form of help. We can talk with any of the 5 billion people carrying a mobile phone. We can find our location through GPS, find food through Yelp, find shelter through Airbnb, and find a mate through Match.com. If the copper axe was the most distinctive EDC status symbol of Ötzi's era, the smartphone is ours.

Clearly, at the physical level, our EDC technologies are better, lighter, and more robust than Ötzi's. Timberland boots are more robust and comfortable than Ötzi's leaky shoes. Amoxicillin kills bacteria better than triterpenes from birch polypore fungus. The VG-10 steel in a Spyderco knife is much sharper than the flint edge of Ötzi's knife. An AR-15 can kill at

20 times the range of Ötzi's longbow. We carry a lot of cool tech that Ötzi would have easily understood and instantly coveted.

Yet the real power of today's EDC items come from the physical, social, and informational ecosystems that they can access. Car keys, house keys, debit cards, passports, and smartphones are not just hardware; they are the input-output devices that let our brains and bodies plug into modern civilization. One car key can access three hundred horsepower. One Oyster card can access all 250 track-miles of the London Underground. One iPhone can access trillions of dollars of telecoms, internet, and GPS satellite infrastructure. One Levi's label can access 160 years of brand equity and global familiarity.

Yet, if the networks fail, most of our EDC fails. If Apple suffers a public-relations crisis that nukes its brand equity, the iPhone becomes too embarrassing to use in public. The debit card becomes useless if your account is overdrawn, or the banking system collapses, or an EMP takes out the power grid.

The key advantage of our EDC over Ötzi's is not that we as individuals carry more powerful tools, weapons, and survival gear. Rather, it is that we can tap into vast networks of human cooperation, mutual accountability, and symbolic status, on civilizational scales unimaginable to our Copper Age ancestors.

So, next time you gather your EDC while running out the door to a job or a date, spare a thought for what you are loading in your pocket or purse – all the power, knowledge, and vanity of a whole species compressed into a few pounds of gear.