

A list of things which are actually quite good

1. Smooth cast iron pans

Regular cast iron does not work. However, polished to a mirror finish before use, cast iron is magic: this is how cast iron was always made before manufacturers cheaped out. Will last decades, forty quid, [out-performs any non stick pan I have ever experienced](#), and basically impossible to screw up with. Will change how your kitchen works.

2. Military type ponchos

A few hundred grams, 20 quid, sit on it, wear it, wrap it around you, take your pick. Just leave it in your bag. Downpour-proof. Lux option, for warmth add a [Swagman poncho](#) which is made of fancy insulation and is damn warm and very multi purpose. That's a hundred quid: now you're festival ready. See below for goretex notes.

3. Tannoy Reveal speakers

Speakers which do not require a separate amplifier, you just plug them into your laptop or Alexa or whatever. Two hundred quid a pair, and up for the bigger models. [About as good](#) as you will do for sound quality without going audiophile. Not small speaker bluetooth nonsense, real sound. See below for audiophile notes.

4. Modern binoculars

Doesn't matter much what you buy, they're all spectacularly good for [whatever price point](#) you buy at. Nikon do outstanding work at a wide range of price points. Why? Because CNC machines are amazing, so quality is cheap.

5. Non-Iron [English shirts](#)

[Buy on sale](#) in white (bleach 'em) or a dark color. They last forever and are completely maintenance free - for 25 quid a shirt. When they say "non-iron" these days, **they really mean it**. These things are made of magic, and by magic, I mean advanced high tech chemical coatings on the fibers so they do not wrinkle. Works like magic.

6. Real microphones

[What everybody buys](#) is just fine. Pair with [Grado](#) headphones, available at a range of prices, for optimal listening experiences. Laptop headphone jacks often have very poor sound quality: USB audio devices are awesome now.

7. Petzl Zipka head torch

[Staggeringly bright](#), twenty five quid, and another twenty for a rechargeable lithium-ion battery which will keep it running for days. Pair with a [USB solar panel](#) - these are also quite good. For even [more light](#) adjustable both in brightness and beam width, on [eneloop AAs](#). These things are unimaginable improvements on "the flashlight".

8. Desloratadine

An antihistamine which [actually works](#) for me: non-drowsy, and more effective than that old sledgehammer, Benadryl. This drug has changed my life. Kestine aka Ebastine is a close second.

9. Stainless steel everything

Cups, glasses, mugs, plates, bowls, those funny metal trays with separate meal compartments. Easy to clean, lasts forever, costs nothing.

10. Parachute bags

Small bags for tidying odds-and-ends into. [Just superb](#). Manufactured in ripstop nylon and sold for a dollar, these would heal our cluttered, untidy world. These toy bags [open out into a five foot diameter play mat](#) and are great

for adults to store random collections of things they need to rummage through. Also available in [nylon](#).

11. **D2 steel knives**

D2 knives are [a quarter of the price](#) of S30V or VG10 steel, and [indestructible](#). Use a 400 grit ("fine") diamond stone to sharpen. Learn how from youtube. A "[choil](#)" is compulsory for safety, missing from sleek knife designs.

12. **[Byrd and Spyderco](#) knives**

They're all great (don't overspend, they don't get any sharper) and when it is dull, send it to a professional to get it sharpened. Don't sharpen it yourself (it is quite a skill to master, though they do sell their own sharpening system) A multitool instead? Swisstool or Leatherman are excellent, SOG and Gerber have more features, lesser build.

On knives. Knives cut meat. Axes chop wood. Hunting knives are sold as knives that can serve as backup axes if you lose your axe. Axes get you shelter and fire, but a knife that can axe is a hell of a knife: therefore expensive.

13. **Dyneema cord**

Looks like paracord, but 4x as strong. A [2mm line will hold 400 kg](#), for maybe 25 cents a meter. 80lb cord is sold as fishing line for 20 dollars a kilometer. Do not cut your fingers off with this stuff, it is stronger than steel cable. It has zero stretch or give, which is ideal for things like holding up poles for canopies or radio masts.

14. **Delrin rod**

Dense plastic ideal for fighting sticks. 12mm at 1m length is ideal. \$10. [Much better than a baseball bat](#). Griptape.

15. **Modern wifi routers**

I have an Archer C7. I bought it a month ago. It's been on the market for years. It was less than \$100.

My household wifi got 4x faster overnight, and the range was huge. They've been working super hard on wifi equipment for a few years, and there have been massive breakthroughs. Netgear, D-Link, TP-link all good.

16. **Aluminium tube camp chairs**

Helinox started the trend, now there are dozens, [down to \\$20](#). If you weigh a lot, get a Helinox.

17. **Swatch automatic watches**

Less than 200 dollars, [pretty](#) or [mechanically groundbreaking](#). Self-winding (automatic) watches are cool and sort of magical, but if you want quality that doesn't cost the price of a car, the Swatch models are excellent. You do not need a dive watch: [professional divers wear butt-ugly G-Shocks](#) or similar rubber-and-batteries contraptions.

Watch fetishism really takes off after WW2 when pilots keep their service watches after the war: don't be a sucker.

18. **Camelbak Chute insulated bottles**

Wide mouth for getting ice in, narrower opening with beautiful ergonomics for drinking - the cap only needs a half turn to open, yet is completely secure. Ok thermal performance. Zojirushi flasks with the flip top hold heat better.

19. **Tea tree oil**

Generic wound treatment. Stuff stops bleeding fast, doesn't get infected. Better than anything over the counter.

20. **Shade cloth**

An agricultural product designed for livestock and crops. It's like shredded woven space blankets, but very tough. Makes a very effective sun shade, enough air moves through for a nice breeze. A must for decks in hot climates,

string with bungee cord so it doesn't get damaged by the wind. Rain goes through, of course.

21. **Aviation snips**

Scissors with heavy cunningly designed and highly leveraged handles, think 20% bolt cutters, 80% fabric shears. They make materials like coke or soup cans easy to work with for small projects. Very safe to use compared to cutting heavy materials with a knife and ruler. There's just a lot less that can go wrong. Easy to use and powerful.

22. **New generation velcro**

Softer and fuzzier than old velcro, with a much smoother and more satisfying tear-open. The most useful form is a [roll of double sided](#), hooks one side, loops on the other. Cut bits off for ties and wraps as needed. They also do a rather lovely utility strap which wraps around boxes or other loads and [puts a convenient handle on top](#).

23. **Wood burning camp stoves**

Many outstanding designs. I love wood gasification, dislike rocket stoves. From 100 gram [Lixada](#), up to the two foot wide [Yukon](#) (one day I'll have one of these and woods to put it in!), to the specialized [mKettle](#), they're all great. You can fly with a clean stove in your luggage, and not have to hit an outdoor store to buy camping gas on the way to your adventure. Check local fire regulations! Written at a time when most of the world is still reeling from covid, this feels strange to write: flying is a memory.

24. **Cheap mechanical keyboards**

50 different varieties. My favorite was \$40. Deep rabbit hole, just read some reviews and take a risk: a tactile thing is hard to buy over the internet. Any of them will beat any keyboard you've ever used. Also, learn to touch type.

25. **Air fryers**

A mini super fan oven which cooks three times as fast as a regular oven. Makes meat - sausages, bacon, even steak - which looks like adverts for meat. 7 minutes for bacon. Zero mess, and also makes french fries. Many brands, I have [Phillips](#). Look for anything with a thousand 5 star reviews on Amazon: selective pressure is intense these days! Don't bother with the sous vide machine routine, unless you are a culinary hobbyist. It was great for exhibition cooking, like at christmas. Now? Dust magnet. Convenience is king, and sous vide is inconvenient.

26. **Food cubes**

[Single portion plastic tubs](#) which nest, and are extremely robust. Cook large, eat leftovers. Dishwasher safe. Always make sure there are three meals ready to go in the fridge, and you'll entirely stop ordering food in. Mark the date the food was prepared with a whiteboard marker or a grease pencil.

27. **Whiteboard markers**

[Pentel Maxflow](#) are filled with liquid ink, visible through the side of the pen. When the ink is gone, the pen immediately and completely stops working: none of those terrible scrubby dead pens nobody cares enough to throw out. Four colors, also available in single color "lifetime supply" boxes of 12. You'll wonder why others exist.

28. **Heavy probiotics for travel**

Take one with each meal, nothing ever goes wrong. It's amazing. On one unpleasant occasion I had to manage a giardia infection for a month without proper medical treatment. Turns out large doses of "[friendly bacteria](#)" out-compete nearly all forms of food poisoning, even holding the giardia at no symptoms. A travel essential.

29. **Double walled glasses for hot and cold drinks**

[A simple pleasure](#). Experiments with larger vessels like teapots were unsatisfactory. If you want insulation at scale, you need steel. There are a few insulated teapots and coffee presses out there, none that I've seen stand

out.

30. Silicon keyboard saver for Mac laptops

Recent mac laptops have very fragile keyboard switches. The tiniest piece of grit can kill a key. There is an ugly solution which works really well: no problems in several years of use. But it's a little [ugly](#). Quality varies.

31. Boiled egg gadgets

A [red egg timer](#) sits in the boiling water and changes color at the same rate the egg cooks. An [egg cracker](#) delivers a precise shock to the top of an egg, breaking the shell in a neat ring. Quite magical. Both of these items are now generic, price and style vary a little. All inconvenience removed, except for the chickens.

Materials science and cadcam have basically produced a river of near-perfect consumer goods which perform at 10x or 100x the level these things worked at in the past, or solve super irritating real life problems perfectly, and durably. Most of the things on this list will last for decades, and it was not a hard list to make. It's just amazing how good the quality end of manufactured goods is, particularly compared to the landfill-fodder which is the norm.

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Why some not so good things remain popular

Most of the things which *just do not work* do, in fact, work great somewhere just not *where you are*.

For example, audiophile hifi gear is hugely a product of studio engineers in places like the BBC trying to get perfect sound reproduction for their jobs. They're handbuilding speakers for work in the 1970s, then going on to sell them (Spendor!). Then that kind of gear becomes a status symbol, like the Top Gear guys are with cars: if you have disposable income and want to show you love music like the professionals do, you buy a hifi. The buyers are not audio professionals, they can't really tell when they are being sold inferior products with good marketing, so the entire arena fills with expensive crap, bringing the very concept of "audiophila" into severe disrepute.

Same thing with expensive watches: military chronographs were mission critical equipment in WW2 because radio equipment was too bulky, insecure and flaky to use for synchronizing many operations. After the war, former military pilots, divers and commandos wore those watches, and they became known as a piece of equipment that serious people have. Then a lot of other people bought them, and you wind up with forty thousand dollar rolexes.

Goretex works pretty well for climbing everest. **Can you fill in the gaps here yourself?**

An enormous amount of our stupid consumption comes from taking yesterday's expert equipment, and poorly copying it for a mass market that wants to look good, but does not actually know what those experts know, or do what those experts did. The gear does not work out of context. Some people call this cargo culting.

And now, a few things which are overrated and do not work.

A. **Gore-tex, and in fact the whole “base layer, mid layer, shell” philosophy.**

Why it doesn't work: mountaineers are in incredibly cold (and therefore dry) places at high altitude where sweat evaporates almost immediately. The gear is evolved for those conditions, not bicycling through muggy drizzle in Surbiton. Nearly anything will work if you are strolling, but exercise past that, goretex usually leaves you wet from your own sweat.

About the only time I've seen base-mid-shell work properly is when I was doing stuff in Finland in winter: dry-cold. The [bleeding edge military equipment designers](#) work with four climates (hot dry, hot wet, freezing dry, cold wet), and focus on fast-drying, not staying dry: the assumption is that whatever you are wearing will soak through with sweat when you are running for your life away from incoming mortar fire, and it better dry quickly while you huddle in a crater waiting for the next chance to run, or you'll freeze.

What does keep you warm and dry?

“[Synthetic down](#)” puff jackets worn over some sort of wicking base layer, probably merino wool. They're fairly water repellent, but if you get wet, you don't get cold because they stay insulating, and your body heat will dry them out pretty quickly. A lower tech approach is big thick wooly jumpers, but you'll want that military poncho in the event of a total downpour in either case. And a hat. I learned this approach from [Wiggy's](#) who specialize in a super water repellent insulation called “Lamelite” which retains essentially zero moisture, so dries instantly. It is uncanny. It's a crying shame this technology didn't become the standard for outdoor gear.

B. **Audiophilia**

By the time you are old enough to afford it, you can't hear it.

Human hearing tails off at the high end quite quickly after 40, and often before that if you like loud music or play music. Basically a mug's game, which is why they hate A/B testing. For practically everybody, *powered studio monitors* are the speakers you want. You can still pay more than you should even inside of this category, but because it's made for audio professionals, they can't get away with telling people that gold plated screws improve audio quality. However, pretty much all battery powered bluetooth audio devices are shit, and bluetooth itself is pretty shit, and noise cancelling headphones have poor sound quality compared to the same price point without noise cancelling (unsurprisingly) so most people younger than 30 have never actually heard music. You can tell that by what they listen to (i.e. the death of classical music.)

The “goldilocks zone” for audio quality is powered studio monitors between \$200 and \$500 for almost everybody. Spend no more. Plug them into any vaguely decent audio interface (focusrite anything) and you'll be right.

C. **All manner of “won't damage your wall” sticky stuff**

Blue tac, white tac, removable sticky dots, post-it note whiteboards, you name it: if it promises not to damage your walls when you take it off, it lies like a rug. 3M “command” stuff? Stick it on glass, be left with a mess that solvents can't shift. The answer is nails/thumbtacks, and carefully applied filler after the fact. I am convinced of this.

Don't pay retail

Some completely amazing things you should not pay full price for, unless you are rich.

Some of the designer stuff is completely amazing, but unfeasibly expensive. Watch office clearances, most of this stuff is work equipment intended to be bought on corporate budgets, with its costs amortized over years of marginally increased worker productivity.

If you're buying it out of a "quality of life" budget, it's a lot harder to justify, but maybe now with the long term "work from home" it all makes more sense. Tricky.

01. **Chadwick Chairs**

The Chadwick chair is a successor to the Aeron, by the same designer. Same materials, same niche as the Aeron, but a different "ergonomic philosophy." The Aeron sort of clamps around the body, and provides massive support. The Chadwick is open and moves with the body. I love it. They're hard to find used, but [Bruce Sterling's sermon on quality of life](#) applies here. Do it.

02. **Humanscale**

They make all kinds of things. Watch eBay like a hawk. I have a couple of their monitor arms and lamps. The monitor arms are just great, with elegant cable management, and many degrees of freedom - you can even flip from portrait to landscape just by turning the monitor. You'll need a very strong desk to mount them. Apple sells a VESA mount adapter for iMacs. The lamps produce a beautiful, clear light which is strangely like daylight. I think they don't flicker at 50hz as the AC current flows through them, so appear static. Things of beauty, really precious.

I love light.

03. **Terminal hifi**

I did succumb to audiophilia. I was in Dublin a couple of hours early for a ferry and walked into a mall, and in the mall there was a B&O store. Now I know the audiophiles are already wincing, but hear me out. I'd auditioned the Spondor 1/2e's a decade before, and knew what could be achieved with two speakers the size of refrigerators and a power amp that dimmed the lights for four city blocks. I knew. But the Beolab 3's were bookshelf-sized, and came with their own amp, and that was it: I listened, I heard, and it was better sound quality per unit of volume than I believed to be possible. Then I asked the price, and realized why they sounded Pretty Good.

A few years later I brokered a deal to get a hundred thousand solar lights into Pakistani refugee camps, and took my winnings to a barn on the far side of Gatwick airport that specialized in used B&O gear, and bought the most beat up version they had in store. I've never regretted it, but I might have done it differently if I'd put six weeks into auditioning loudspeakers and amps!

The key, however, is you can't really upgrade that system: audiophilia is committed, and there's no tinkering. It's not like you can switch out the amp and the pre amp and the speaker cable and so on on that endless "one more tweak" cycle: it comes in the box, and that's the end of it. But, not ever new. If you're going to spend that much money on new hifi gear, you can do better. Used, it's an open question: depends on who's selling what when you are buying.

I also love sound.

Vintage

Your parents were probably a lot richer, relative to the rest of the world, than you are. This means things from 30 years ago - or longer - are often of staggeringly high quality, and incredibly worth having if you like that sort of thing. A few good buys.

I. **Leather**

Leather has fallen completely out of fashion. Old-old vintage leather, and we're talking 1970s, is *heavy*. It's thick, the surfaces rich and creamy. As manufacturing technology "improved" they started cutting leather much thinner, more clothes from a hide, but durability and quality really suffered. The good stuff is still available, for \$1700 new, or \$35 old. You'd need a specialist to tell you how to shop for leather jackets on eBay: I hit flea markets. In Europe, [Hidesign bags](#) are incredibly cheap on eBay, and just beautiful. Crumpler laptop bags, not leather, but super durable and great designs, are also typically ten or twenty pounds. Whole hides are less than \$100, brilliantly dyed Italian leather as would be used for car upholstery, and I've chucked one over my couch to protect it, which will make my landlord very happy if I ever move.

II. **Smooth or polished cast iron pans**

See above for why they are great. They show up on eBay in America pretty regularly for a few dollars. Make sure it's the smooth surface, not the modern "Lodge-style" rougher surface.

III. **Cotton**

Cotton outerwear, old, names like gaberdine and ventile. Ventile is still made, and is almost completely waterproof under most conditions. Surprisingly practical, this is what people did before gore-tex. Style questions are up to you. Military ripstop cotton is pretty amazingly comfy.

IV. **Military surplus**

It goes in waves as armies sell things off. For six months there will be tons of Oakley goggles around, then it'll be cooking gear. Clothing tends to be more perennial. Many good dealers.