How to Wash Outdoor Gear Without Ruining It

Why Careful Washing Matters for Durable Outdoor Clothing

Outdoor clothing works because of its fabric technology. Waterproof membranes, durable water repellent (DWR) coatings, and insulating layers all rely on the fabric being clean and intact. Washing them wrong can strip those treatments, damage the fibres, or shorten the garment's life. The good news is that with the right approach, you can keep your durable outdoor clothing performing well for years. This guide walks through each step, from reading the care label to storing the garment properly.

Step 1: Read the Care Label

The care label is the manufacturer's own instructions for that specific piece of clothing. It tells you the maximum water temperature, the recommended drying method, and whether you can use bleach or fabric softener. Some outdoor fabrics, especially those with waterproof membranes, need a cool wash and a low-heat or no-heat tumble cycle. Others, like fleece or down, require gentle handling. Ignoring the label is the fastest way to ruin a jacket or pair of trousers. So start there, and treat it as the primary guide for the next steps. OverlandSA Bloemfontein

Step 2: Prepare the Garment

Before putting anything in the washing machine, close all zips, fasten any Velcro patches, and turn the garment inside out. This protects the outer fabric and prevents zips from snagging on other items. Check pockets for small objects like pebbles or receipts that could leave marks or damage the drum. For heavily soiled items, give them a quick shake or brush off any loose dirt outside. This preparation step saves you from having to repeat the wash or deal with unexpected stains.

Step 3: Choose the Right Detergent

Not all detergents are suitable for outdoor clothing. Standard laundry powders and liquids often contain enzymes, brighteners, and fabric softeners that can degrade waterproof coatings and leave residues that block breathable membranes. Instead, use a mild detergent specifically designed for outdoor or technical fabrics. These detergents clean effectively without harming the DWR or the fabric structure. They also rinse out more completely, which helps maintain breathability. Avoid fabric softener entirely: it coats the fibres, reduces absorbency in base layers, and interferes with water repellency.

View the location on Google Maps

Step 4: Select the Correct Wash Cycle

Use a gentle or delicates cycle with cold or warm water (around 30°C to 40°C is usually safe, but check the care label). Hot water can shrink synthetic fabrics and damage membranes. A cold wash is generally best for preserving the garment's colour and technical properties. Set the machine to a low spin speed to reduce stress on the fabric. If your machine has a pre-soak option, it can help loosen dirt before the main wash. But avoid extra-long cycles that might agitate the fabric too much.

Step 5: Treat Stains Before Washing

Stubborn stains like mud, oil, or tree resin need a bit of extra attention. Apply a small amount of mild detergent directly to the stain and gently rub the fabric together. Let it sit for a few minutes before putting the garment in the wash. For oil-based stains, a dedicated stain remover made for outdoor gear is safer than household bleach or stain sprays. Never scrub aggressively: outdoor fabrics are tough but their coatings can abrade. A soft brush or your fingers work well. After treating, wash the garment as usual.

Step 6: Rinse Thoroughly

Detergent residues can attract dirt and reduce breathability. So it is important to rinse the garment well. If your washing machine has an extra rinse option, use it. Otherwise, run a second rinse cycle. This is especially important for waterproof jackets and trousers, where leftover soap can block the membrane and reduce the garment's ability to breathe. A good rinse also helps the DWR coating perform better after washing.

Step 7: Restore Water Repellency

After several washes, the DWR coating on the outer fabric may start to wear off. You can tell this is happening when water no longer beads up on the surface but instead soaks into the fabric. To restore water repellency, apply a DWR treatment product according to its instructions. Some treatments go on in the washing machine, others are spray-on. Choose a product that matches your garment's fabric type (e.g., for Gore-Tex or similar membranes). This step keeps your outerwear performing in rain and snow, which is essential for durable outdoor clothing used in the field.

Step 8: Air Dry Properly

Heat can damage outdoor fabrics, so air drying is usually the safest method. Hang the garment on a line or lay it flat on a drying rack, away from direct sunlight and heat sources. Do not wring it out: that can distort the fabric and damage the seams. For down jackets, you can use a

tumble dryer on a low-heat setting with a few clean tennis balls to help fluff the down, but check the care label first. For synthetic insulation, air drying is fine. Drying takes patience, but it prolongs the life of the garment significantly.

Step 9: Pay Attention to Seams and Zips

Seams are the weakest point in any waterproof garment. Over time, the seam tape can peel or crack. To prevent this, avoid folding or creasing the garment sharply at the seams during storage. When drying, do not hang a heavy wet jacket by a single seam or zip. Also, keep zips clean and lubricated with a zip lubricant (not oil) to stop them from jamming. A broken zip can end a jacket's life before the fabric wears out. Simple seam care like this keeps the whole garment functional longer.

Step 10: Store It Correctly

How you store outdoor clothing between uses matters as much as how you wash it. Store clean, dry garments in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight. Do not compress down jackets or sleeping bags in stuff sacks for long periods; hang them or store them loosely in a large cotton bag. For synthetic jackets, avoid folding them in the same creases repeatedly. Proper storage prevents mould, odours, and fabric degradation. It also means your gear is ready to go when you are.

Additional Tips for Keeping Your Gear in Top Shape

- Wash outdoor clothing only when it is actually dirty. Overwashing wears out the fabric and coatings faster. Spot clean when possible.
- For heavily soiled items, a short pre-wash with cold water can lift dirt without a full cycle. Then run the main wash with detergent.
- If you use a washing machine, load it loosely. Overloading prevents proper cleaning and can cause excessive friction between garments.
- Never use bleach, hydrogen peroxide, or any chlorine-based product on technical fabrics. They can break down the fibres and destroy waterproofness.
- Consider using a mesh laundry bag for small items like gloves or gaiters to keep them from tangling or getting lost in the drum.

Keeping your outdoor clothing in good condition does not require special skills, just attention to a few key details. By following these steps, you can maintain the performance of your durable outdoor clothing and extend its life. If you need further advice or a wide selection of outdoor gear, you can visit OverlandSA Bloemfontein at Shop 2A, Mega Park, 30 Curie Ave, Hospitaalpark, Bloemfontein, 9301, South Africa, or call +27 51 492 5824. OverlandSA

Bloemfontein is a Bloemfontein outdoor clothing store offering international and local outdoor apparel, footwear and related clothing ranges.

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