

Bonnaroo Survival Guide

A festival guide for the Bonnaroo first-timer.

What's all this then?

I came up with a little guide for the Bonnaroo first-timer. I want to thank the many people who have helped me out at festivals, many of the tips here have come from other good folks. Any questions or suggestions [rooguide\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:rooguide[at]gmail[dot]com) (replace [at] and [dot] in the email address). This page is licensed under the Creative Commons, please feel free to link to it or repost it, just let people know where you got it, click [here](#) or at the bottom of the page for full license info. Leo

Getting There

Plan on waiting a long time to get into the site. Coming from Knoxville Thursday morning I usually wait ~3-4 hrs in traffic on the interstate. Some people say the backroads in were better but who knows (I've also heard people say that they are worse). Have a decent amount of gas in your car (and have made a rest stop) before you get into traffic so that you don't run out while waiting in line. People who come later on Thursday sometimes more than 8 hrs to get in, so try to get there early. Definitely try to get off work on Thurs. I'd avoid trying to hitchhike, the state troopers have hassled people about it in years past. Try to hold off on the serious partying until you get into the site, open containers of alcohol (and of course drugs) are illegal in Tennessee and the cops aren't blind to what people do in their cars while waiting in line.

Camping

If you've never been to a fest like 'roo, it can be a little overwhelming at first. There is a place to camp in front (or behind) of where you park your car. People can get a little unkind in a mad rush to claim space, but you are entitled to the area in front of your parking space. That said, try to get along with your neighbors.

Tent

A good tent is important, really important. We've had deluges of rain and wicked winds at 'roo and **many** people had their tents wrecked. A mesh picnic shelter is not enough. They are very nice to have and make good sunshelters, but you **cannot** rely on it as your primary protection. They simply can't stand up to strong winds ([for example](#)). Ozark Trail (a WalMart brand) tents are garbage, if they don't blow down in a storm they leak like hell. I generally don't judge things on how much they cost, but I have to say a tent cheaper than about \$100 (for a 2 man) is probably not a very good tent. If you don't have a quality tent, consider investing in one. Good tents last a **long** time. I just recently retired a ~\$110 2-man Eureka Timberlite that I bought before Woodstock '94. It's been through countless festivals and lots of backpacking and held up great, it's still my backup tent. Right now I camp with [this one](#) and I'm very happy with it. [Sierra Trading Post](#), [Campmor](#), [REI](#), and local outdoors [stores](#) (where you can usually get very good advice) are some of your best bets for tents. Better tents are generally easier to set up as well.

Before going to the 'roo try setting up your tent in the backyard. This is especially important if it's a new tent. Much easier to learn how to pitch it at home than at the site, maybe in the rain or in the dark. Even if you've used the tent before, it never hurts to double check that all the hardware is there and everything is in good shape. **MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THE TENT STAKES!** More than one tent went airborne in storms in the past years. Doesn't hurt to bring a hammer to secure the stakes (although a soup can will work in a pinch).

Campsite

Folding chairs are key. The cheap ones from Wallyworld, Target, etc. seem to hold up pretty good. If you plan to spend **any** time at your site during the day, you should get some sort of sun shelter. This is a case of cheap doesn't necessarily means bad. I picked one up (a decent size, bout 8x10') for ~\$15 at the 'mart. Not the

sturdiest thing in the world, but it was great to be able to sit back in the shade and not have to retreat into the tent. Keeps light drizzles off as well. It was, however, a pain to set up, so definitely try setting it up before you go.

Water

The single most important thing at 'roo. It can get so damn hot you have to work at it to stay hydrated. In the stage and camping areas they have water stations where you can get as much water as you want for free. It's well water and sometimes has a rather displeasing sulfur taste, but it's drinkable. Bring bottles or a camelback. Just make sure you drink plenty of water. I talked with the medics working there and they said that heatstroke/dehydration was the most common reason they saw people. I've seen people hooked up to IV fluids in the med tents because of dehydration, they didn't seem to be having a real fun time. Lots and lots of water.

Food

There is plenty of food to buy there but personally I like to pack most of my food in. I bring a mini Weber charcoal grill to make hamburgers and dogs, good energy food. Also a little backpacking stove for cans of soup and morning coffee. If you want to go simple, energy bars are good. Even if you plan to buy most of your food there, it doesn't hurt to bring a little for nighttime munchies.

Drugs

I'm not espousing drug use nor am I condemning it. You will however most likely see it at Bonnaroo. You have to decide for yourself if you are OK being around it.

Alcohol

They sell beer at 'roo and it actually is pretty good. They have microbrews and the normal domestic pilsners. Not all that expensive, maybe a little above bar prices. Don't think they sell anything harder but there were informal bars set up in the tent city. One neat thing about 'roo is that you can bring your own beer. The important thing is that they forbid glass containers. The past couple of years they have really started looking for them when you drove into the site (looking into coolers, etc.). If you can stand canned beer (or live somewhere where you can get good beer in cans), I'd recommend going that route. If you get caught bringing glass containers in they will take them. If you do manage to get glass in, don't be an asshole and go breaking bottles all over the place. Those foam beer coolies keep the brew nice and cool in the TN sun. Make sure you drink PLENTY of water if you're drinking.

Sunscreen

This has to be one of the most important things. It can be very very sunny in Tennessee in the summer. I bring SPF 15 to start with and 40 for later in the weekend. Put it on as soon as you get there. I made the mistake of not putting it on until after I got my site put up and got a little red and remember to put it on your feet if you're wearing sandals (ouch). Make sure you **completely** cover you back if you are going shirtless, it's easy to spot the guys who put their own sunscreen on, big burnt patches on their back where their hands couldn't reach.

Clothes and stuff

It's probably going to be hot. Shorts and t-shirts are perfect. Bring some warmer stuff (i.e. sweats) in case it does get chilly. It may rain so a waterproof shell isn't a bad idea either. Teva sandals are good, be careful with flip-flops though, if it gets muddy (which it will if it rains) it can be easy to lose them. The mud can get [quite deep](#). Some people have no problem wearing sandals and having muddy feet, I got nasty case of foot rot after doing that at a festival once so I try to avoid it. Several folks have mentioned that bringing a pair of knee high mudder boots (along with knee high socks) would be a mighty good idea, I think they're right. A wide brimmed hat will keep the sun out of your eyes and off your neck. Remember the shades as well.

Bathrooms/Portajohns

On the subject of portajohns... well the best I can say is Bonnaroo is better than most festivals I've seen at getting them cleaned out. That said, we are talking about piles of excrement stewing in 95+ degree heat. When you can, go for the clean ones. The best ones (when you can plan it) are the ones in Centeroo in the morning. The ones in the campsites go bad quickly, but they clean the ones in Centeroo in the morning and there are a lot of them. Bring handy-wipes, you'll thank yourself. Don't forget a roll of TP or two (in ziplock bags). Those Clorox wipes are nice to wipe the seat down with (I wouldn't use them on skin though). Bringing a pee jug for late night calls of nature can save you a walk in the dark (at least if you're a guy). Please don't just go anywhere (and dispose of pee jugs appropriately), someone will probably be downhill of you.

Getting around at night

Bring a flashlight (or two), nothings worse than trying to pee in a (potentially extremely nasty) portajohn in the middle of the night when you can't see a thing. On a related note, cyalume nightsticks are great to bring, they're cheap, they give off enough light to get around, and they're **a lot** of fun. I put one or two on my tent and flagpole when I go out at night, makes it MUCH easier to find your way back home, like a much needed lighthouse (especially if you are under the influence of anything that makes it harder to find your way home). I've found that the off-brand ones from Wallyworld don't give off much light, I'd recommend the actual Cyalume brand (made by Omni-glow). If you have a problem finding them locally, you might want to try [this store](#), (great prices on one color 50 packs and if you ask they'll do mixed packs for a couple dollars more) or [flashlightsunlimited.com](#) (good prices on smaller packs), I've had excellent experience buying from both of them. On another related note, do something to make your campsite easy to find, one tent among fifty thousand can be hard to find. I've seen people float helium filled mylar balloons above their sites. If you are able to take the time, putting a flag up on a pole is one of the best ways to find your way back to your site (it really can be harder than you'd think). There's a link at the top of the page for a guide on making a flagpole from stuff you can get at Home Depot for about \$15.

Misc

Pace yourself! It's a long weekend, you don't need to drink all the beer and do all the drugs the minute you get there. Seriously though, unless you're an ironman you won't be at a stage every minute that someone is playing. Rest while you can, the nights can get late. Some of the best shows are the late night, 1-4 am ones. Try to sleep late into the morning (this can be hard if it's very hot). Bring earplugs, 'roo is noisy 'round the clock, being able to put some plugs in and go away for a few hours is a lifesaver.

Here's a tip on ice to keep your coolers cold. Instead of bringing bags and bags of ice (or paying high prices there) buy a case or two of bottled water (~\$0.15 a bottle at the warehouse store), throw it in the freezer and use that instead of ice. Doesn't turn into a mushy mess and you can drink it when it thaws out. The 5-day coolers are very nice, will keep ice all weekend if you don't open it up every 5 minutes. Joe from the 'roo listserv suggests *"Another tip for keeping things chilly. Pick up a pound or so of dry ice, wrap it in an old towel and throw it in the bottom of your cooler. Then throw your frozen bottles in on top of that, (add another towel) then whatever you want to keep cold on top of that. The dry ice will keep the water frozen which will keep the rest of the stuff cold. And it will last all weekend even if you do open the cooler every 5 minutes. Just don't stick your head inside the cooler right after you open it. . . ."* If you are having problems finding dry ice (and don't work at a place where you can "borrow" it) try your local welding or gas supply company (like Praxaire or Airgas) or click [here](#). Be careful, dry ice is very cold and can freeze your beer solid (which really, really sucks) or give you frost burns on your fingers (which also sucks).

Get to know people!!! 'roo is one big party, go mingle. Wander up to people and introduce yourself, they won't mind... really! Help people out. Something that surprised me was that more than half of the folks I met at 'roo had never been to a festival before. A lot of them didn't really know what they were doing. Give them a hand. It's amazing how much easier it is to set up a tent when you have a new friend or two to help. This is one of the greatest things about 'roo, it's a little society (albeit a brief one) and you can decide what kind of society it's going to be. And if nothing else, the person you loan a can opener to on Thursday might be the person who runs over and keeps your tent from blowing away when there's a storm on Saturday.

Bring a large garbage bag or two for trash, it's amazing how many people just left crap all over the place when they left. Body powder (Goldbond, etc.) will help keep the funkiness to a manageable level. If you are planning on smoking anything, bring lighters. A multitool (like a Leatherman) is nice to have for all those things that seem to crop up. If you are bringing bottled beer, bring an openener (or two), bottled wine of course needs a corkscrew.

There are ATM's at 'roo but there can be hellacious lines and they might run out of money, so it's a good idea to bring any that you need. How much to bring is up to you. I usually don't spend more than ~\$120, but I bring most of my own food and beer. The beer and food prices aren't awful, but they're not cheap either. There is plenty of official and unofficial stuff to buy there as well.

Although almost all of the people at 'roo are good folks, don't leave valuables out in plain sight when you aren't at your camp. If you're camped right by your car, just throw anything important in the trunk. It's a little tougher if you are in the tent only area. I bring an [ActionPacker](#) and a bike lock (the metal cord kind), lock the ActionPacker and lock it to a cooler. It would be easy for someone to grab either one alone, but a lot more difficult if they are locked together.

Music

Go see some of the smaller acts. If nothing else it will get you out of the sun (the arena size stages are out in the open, the club size stages are under tents). Plus you get much closer to the acts. And you never know who you might meet, I bumped into Chris Robinson from the Crowes by one of the small stages after he performed one year.

Leaving Bonnaroo

Alot of people leave Sunday evening/night. It can get kinda hairy with 1000's of people getting out (and getting cars stuck in the mud) in the dark, I stay until Monday morning (which I know isn't an option for everyone). Monday morning it's much easier to get out, I've also been able to pull my truck right up to my campsite in the tent only area then (ask the traffic people nicely). The cars and tents are packed in pretty tight, it would be **EXTREMELY** difficult to try to drive out before Sunday night. It could probably be done in an emergency, but don't plan on easily leaving early. **DON'T** try to drive home if you are still messed up from drugs or booze. A few years ago some girl still tripping ran into and almost killed a state trooper who was on foot. I don't imagine things went well for her after that.

Don'ts

Don't bring a dog. It is much too hot. Really, don't bring the dog, please. Don't get so fubared that you can't enjoy the shows. The funniest (or saddest depending on how you look at it) thing was overhearing someone saying "dude, we shouldn't have eaten that many mushrooms" at 9:30 am on Friday. Don't judge people. Don't worry about that damn cell phone.



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