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Barteaux machete

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Long blades -



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Description :

Testing the Barteaux machete.

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Thoughts Before a Day's Work..

I've heard so much about machetes on the forums that I decided to borrow back an old one that I had given to a friend. I'd given him some fast growing plants years ago and figured that he's need the thing - so I stuck it in one of the pots. So some 26 years after I bought a machete to use on the West Coast Trail of Vancouver Island - I'm finally getting to give it a good workout.... It was carried a lot but little used when I found out that salal is tough stuff to get through even with a machete. The actual trail was well worn even back then so walking along it was a lot easier than making detours. I guess the point of this rambling is that In all the years I've spent up here I've never felt the need of a machete in the bush. Neither has my buddy. In the last quarter of a century up here - I've only seen a couple in use.

For all the advantages that a machete has as a general tool, most generally haven't even thought of them for this type of region, preferring some more specialized tool for the job at hand. I see their cutting potential, splitting potential, digging potential and even the fact that their soft steel is easily sharpened. The fact is though that they excel at cutting through soft vegetation and there isn't much of that up here. The big stuff here is often too big for anything except a saw or a really heavy axe. The smaller stuff is tough and tenacious. For heavy clearing here a brusher or Sandvik (after the manufacturer) is used. Normally this is a three foot axe handle with a D shaped head of forged steel. Replaceable blades are bolted in to form the straight part of the D. Being lighter than an axe but used with two arms these are efficient for cutting through small stuff and even dropping small trees. The form of the head and replaceable blades make cutting close to the ground realistic. When the blade blunts you pull a wrench and another blade out of your pocket. At home you resharpen with a belt grinder: pretty slick. While walking around with a long sharp knife is something to consider - kids do brushing with a Sandvik. The guides subcontract a lot of trail clearing - us old people try to avoid it and walk around the thick stuff.

It seems strange to be back to trail clearing after a quarter of a century. I like to walk the coast trail here which is surprisingly similar to that West Coast Trail. It doesn't get much upkeep these days so some tools are in order. The machete is for attacking the most hostile thing we have around here - something so nasty that few survive it without bearing the scars for many years. Devil's Club or *oplopanax horridus* was well named! Long woody stems grow so fast that you can almost watch them and every inch bristle with fine 1/2" needles. Even the huge leaves have needles. For some reason the needles always break off below skin level and never fester, so you get the delight of feeling needles for - well I had some that lasted three years before working their way out. It should be interesting to see if a razor sharp machete can last through much cutting of these woody stems. At this point I rather doubt it. Anything less than razor sharp swings the stems. The stems can be really long and they travel across the ground until they find a patch of sunlight when they begin to grow vertical up to 6' above the ground - so they have a lot of swinging potential! Swinging stems means getting stuck with a few spines eventually. Sabering a few should be fun, although walking around with a sharp sword thing on an uncertain ground might pose problems. Oh well I've got caulked boots. Let's hope that I don't panic the hikers!

I was quite surprised to find that the machete is a heavy duty 18" Barteaux - the thickest one that used to be made with an aluminium handle in the 70's - 0.10" . It weighs in at 1lb 14oz with thin sheath. Other than light rust and the leather sheath that I had made drying out, all was fine. A little oil on the sheath and some work with the belt sander and we're cruising... well ready to try. The steel in the blade seems fine - just soft, and the handle is comfortable. The tool is surprisingly heavy and the grip isn't too great - so a wrist thong is used. Two questions that occurred to me right away were to wonder why the steel was so soft - surely it could be a little harder than what I'm seeing even with the impact trauma which a machete edge lives with. Secondly I like a straight edge as I believe it allows one part of the edge to receive more support from the pieces of edge adjacent to it. Not only is the edge wavy, even the back is wavy. I wonder why I've never heard comment on this? Maybe the wavy edge will work well - but I'd suspect that a

straight polished sharp edge will work better for my needs - we'll see. Maybe I'm taking the blade away from its intended design already.

And Thoughts After..

Well that was some day! I was always sure that I'd make it back - but I got a little doubtful for a while whether or not it would be today. The good news is that I started the learning process on large blades..

I tried the machete on every kind of wood I could find. Basically it worked far better than I would ever have suspected, cutting through some pretty tough stuff: I guess most sharp knives do that, but the important part is that green wood of most any type doesn't blunten the blade anywhere close as fast as I would have thought. One is able to cut poles and stuff for shelter with great ease. That's the good part. The blade had to be pretty sharp to do this, and even then had a tendency to glance off. That's pretty dangerous with such a sharp blade, and with the angle that you cut poles. With parts of the blade deliberately bluntened the performance fell very drastically. That explains some of the information that I'd had trouble reconciling. Anyway this machete sure passes as a cutting tool for overnight survival. A file or coarse stone will keep a good edge on it, and you get a lot of mileage before resharpening is necessary. The problem with the glancing isn't easily solved: you have to cut with the top part of the blade when cutting heavy stuff because you want the weight of the tip to balance the weight of the rest of the blade to avoid shocks on the wrist. This is a wide part of the blade so any glancing applies considerable leverage in twisting the handle in the grip.

I even got to try some digging when I got the truck stuck. The machete worked far better than expected and didn't blunt fast on the sandy clay I was cutting chunks out of - no rocks or stones. The edge I did lose was soon put back on. I finished up the job with a real shovel. So yes the machete works but you really have to ask yourself if you want to be using a sharp knife like that. The jeopardy is more to the user than the edge. For digging up roots and other small jobs the machete worked fine - but was less convenient than a digging stick. The object is to dig them up whole not dice them in the ground.

Meeting a moose on my walk, I didn't feel particularly safer having a machete with me. The moose didn't seem greatly impressed either. They are usually non threatening and it's a treat to see one - the exception being a cow with a calf when you better get clear fast.

Day Two - well evening two. I wanted to try two things today - see just how far I could go chopping through devils club without re-sharpening, and to see how well the blade can be used to split dead lower branches of spruce. Well the former didn't go too well - only about 100 yards. The blade still felt sharp - but if you don't sever the stems, they come swinging back. I think that I still have a problem with an inconsistent edge, and am gradually improving it using a garden hone and held at 30' to the line of the edge. This should straighten it! It really is fast sharpening a machete with one of these - followed by a few strokes of a diamond hone to smooth things out.

Splitting branches is vital to getting dry wood for a fast fire. Branches were laid along a log and the machete pounded to split the middle and into the log. A twist of the branch then opens the split both ways. The split always runs out if you try splitting from the ends. It works - way better than most knives - but poorly in comparison to a hatchet.

Day three is splitting day - I drove out to meet my buddy and then go up the valley to light a fire and have coffee. I'd got my buddy to pick up a cheap Coglein's machete at Canadian Tire so that I'd have something to compare to. Stuff like poplar and cottonwood chunks seem to be the best that one can split easily with a machete and baton. The really good news is that the Barteaux came through straight and unscathed. The Coglein's is starting to look like a pretzel. I

guess that if one is going to get a machete it's worth paying a few dollars more for a good one. The thin flexible blade would seem to make it less suited for general jobs such as digging as well as giving less weight for serious chopping. Yes I tried both - it's hopeless.

Day four is heavy duty chopping day. Actually I only did an hour's worth on dropped 6" alders. The Barteaux worked very well due to constant sharpening finally levelling the edge. It actually outchopped the hatchet on horizontal hanging trees since I had to be careful with the latter. Eventually though I got to making wide cuts and it twisted in the cut and I was left with a solidly stuck machete. I used the hatchet to cut it out.. Hard work with a machete (or hatchet) is trivial for the Iltis light axe - but how many poles would you need in a survival situation?

Conclusions

A few days isn't much to base any conclusions on..

I picked up a second machete because the one I have supposedly has a much thicker blade than usual. It's certainly a lot thicker than the Coglein's (0.10" - 0.06"). The latter is basically a pretty sorry thing, too flexible for digging, and with not enough weight to cut through green poles properly.

Basically I was amazed by the performance of a good heavy machete with a sharp edge, and how well it kept an edge - and indeed how easy it is to sharpen. It sure was fun to play at chopping for a while: that changes when you set down to real work. As a light tool for packing a distance to clear some trail of small stuff it's fine - it would be perfect for clearing up a campsite. More than that though and it's outclassed by heavier tools. That's just the constant trade-off of weight of transportation versus utility.

A machete fast loses its edge on hard wood - and there's always some of that in the way. That's just the way things are, and it isn't that bad because you have a lot of blade and an edge is put back on in minutes.

I keep worrying about the safety aspects - a machete glances too easily. Maybe I'm a wimp: I'm an old one though who prefers to go out alone. You know the rest - that there are no old bold ones... In normal small scale use, and with lots of practise to get a feel for the blade, no problem. With fatigue though I'd see the possibility for real problems. the issue is simple - you'll be using one part of the blade more than the rest and it'll blunt when you are getting tired and glance: the rest of the blade is sharp.

I think that I could sure get by with the heavy machete. Except for special jobs though, I don't see carrying one on a regular basis. That just tells about me and the fact that I've already found tools that I'm comfortable with. Unfortunately I only have two speeds, slow when I don't do that much cutting that a small knife can't do - and fast when a big tool like an axe or brusher is required (I guess you could add scythe too for the thistles down on the land). So maybe I'm not the person to go by...

I'm cheap - well frugal! I'm always telling how I've found some cheap knives, axes or hatchets that really impressed me. The news here is that I think that anyone who really wants to try a machete should get something a cut above the toys in camping departments. Even a good machete is cheap.

Post-scriptum :Original article at [OldJimbo's site](#).