

## HOW TO SELECT A TENT

*The first consideration for a backpacker should be shelter, whether your idea of an expedition is climbing Denali, or a weekend in the Catskills. Your tent is your protection from wind, rain, snow, hot sun and pesky insects.*

### Quick Tips

1. Pick a tent equipped to withstand the harshest conditions you might encounter. Example: If you're a three-season backpacker who hikes late into the fall, you might want a four-season tent or a convertible model.
2. Four-season tents are roughly 10 to 20 percent heavier than three-season models (typically due to extra poles). Convertible tents allow you to add or omit poles and adjust ventilation as conditions dictate.
3. Freestanding tents (those that can stand without the aid of stakes) are very handy. You can move them easily or lift them to shake out debris. Very lightweight tents are rarely freestanding.
4. Capacity ratings, assigned by individual manufacturers, sometimes tend to be optimistic. A two-person tent may be a tight squeeze for two large adults and their gear.
5. Use a tarp, ground cloth or footprint to extend the life of a tent's floor.

Get the right tent, and you can expect years of leakless shelter from any storm you might encounter. Smart hikers know that a tent is a capital investment, not good for just one or two seasons, but if properly treated, capable of years of service. You should buy a single tent that will work for a broad range of camping needs.

Unless you are car camping, weight and pack size are quite important. Three-season tents that accommodate two to three people usually weigh in at four to nine pounds. (The weight is given by the manufacturer on the tent's hang tag and should include tent body, rainfly, poles, and stuff sack.) Small, ultralight solo shelters weigh as little as one or two pounds. Family and expedition tents can easily weigh more than 10 or even 20 pounds.

### Weight

Lighter is better, but don't sacrifice important features for a few ounces. Manufacturers generally cut down on weight by using fewer zippers (hence fewer openings), fewer and lighter poles, and smaller rain flies and vestibules. Zip-out nylon panels over mesh inserts for add ventilation but they add both weight and cost. Single-walled tents (one layer of fabric that breathes and wicks moisture) are usually lighter than two-walled tents but also more expensive. Poles add weight to a tent but can supply sturdiness as well.

### Poles:

Aluminium alloy poles are still considered the best choice, because of their high strength-to-weight ratio, combined with the fact that they won't corrode in wet conditions. More expensive carbon/fiberglass poles can be lighter and stronger than aluminium, but also have the tendency to be so flexible that they fail under extreme winds.



### **Vestibules:**

Add comfort and convenient storage for boots and packs, but they add weight as well. Vestibules that are created by a staked-out canopy or rain fly are the lightest option, although the pole-supported variety are generally roomier and more stable.

### **Basic Styles**

Keep in mind the three basic components of a tent: the poles, the canopy, and the rain fly. Additionally, most tents come equipped with stakes and a stuff sack.

**Single-walled versus double-walled tents.** Traditional tents have a nylon body, which may be covered by a polyurethane-coated rain fly. However, modern fabric technology has resulted in single-walled tents made from waterproof/breathable material that does not require a rain fly for protection against moisture.

Generally, double-walled tents are heavier than their single cousins, but are also less expensive. The advantage of double-walled tents is that they breathe well (the canopy and fly have several inches of space between them, or the fly can be removed completely), with less condensation forming on the interior walls. Also, if you are accident-prone, a punctured rain fly can be repaired or replaced, leaving the main tent intact. Rain flies that have lost their waterproofness can also be replaced with less cost than is required to buy a new single-walled tent.

**A-frames.** Think pup tent with corner stakes. The steep pitch of the walls interferes with headroom, but these tents are nice because of their simple design. Modified A-frames incorporate a curved ridge pole for more efficient use of interior space. While most A-frames require stakes, some modified A-frames are freestanding.

**Domes.** Poles crisscross over the top, producing a hexagonal, octagonal, or similar geometrical shape. These tents are freestanding meaning they do not require stakes in order to stand up. However, they can blow away if not properly staked. The geometrical shapes provide maximum headroom, although the floor plan isn't as efficient as the standard A-frame rectangle for sleeping. Most four-season tents involve some form of rounded, geodesic-dome design. Domes avoid flat spots and shed snow more easily. They stand strong in the wind and provide generous interior headroom. You can pick up a freestanding tent (it's like a huge beach ball) and move it to a different location. You can also easily shake it out before you disassemble and pack it.

**Hoops.** These tents aren't as rugged in high winds, rain, or snow as A-frames or Domes, but their shape is highly efficient for both weight and floor space. These models use fewer poles, less fabric and often have wedge-like shapes. They generally incorporate three arched frame stays, which allow for nice roomy doors and high ceilings. Many three-season models use this narrow, linear design, typically involving a rectangular floor plan. Their rainflies, which lie flatter, can collect snow. A heavy snow load could flatten them. They are not free standing.

### Seasonal Considerations





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**Convertible tents** are four-season models that can be converted into three-season tents. They have windows, vestibules, and rain flies. Extra poles, zip-down windows, and extended rain flies adjust to provide added ventilation for summer conditions, and

greater warmth and stability in winter weather. This usually involves shedding one or two poles from the tent's four-season design. Models may also offer zippered panels that can be opened during milder conditions or feature a detachable vestibule.

**Three-season tents** are the most common on the market. Basically, they are designed for use in the summer, spring, and fall. Many three-season tents have weathered cold winter storms. However, if you are planning on a great deal of winter camping, you might want to consider a four-season or mountaineering-specific model. Three-season tents generally feature a rain fly, mesh inserts for hot summer nights, and a vestibule sufficient for stashing a couple of medium-size packs. Lightweight **three-season tents** are intended for spring, summer and fall usage in temperate climates. They perform well in wind and rain, though their designs are not suited to handle significant snow loads. A three-season model won't collapse if two inches of snow fall on it, but 20 inches could be a problem.

**Summer tents** are lightweight and highly ventilated. Their special appeal is their usefulness in warmer, humid climates. They aren't very versatile when temperatures drop or rain hits. Warm-weather tents are lightweight shelters.

**Mountaineering tents** are designed to withstand the worst of winter storms. If you are planning on spending a lot of time in the mountains or doing foul-weather camping, by all means, check out mountaineering designs. However, they tend to be more expensive and slightly heavier than your three-season alternative. **four-season** tents usually integrate one or two additional poles into their designs to fortify walls and help them stand firm against severe wind or heavy snow loads. Winter tents feature some type of rounded dome design, thus eliminating flat spaces on a tent's rainfly where snow can accumulate. Of course, these winter/mountaineering tents work just fine during mild conditions. Their extra poles will make them a touch heavier than their three-season cousins.

**Family (or basecamping) tents** and shelters can accommodate large groups (between four and six usually, sometimes more). Dome-style models can be transported into the backcountry, as long as group members are willing to carry a share of the load; house-like models are intended for campgrounds and basecamps.

**Additional accessories** that can make camp living more comfortable are built-in gear pockets where you can stash glasses, watches, and other paraphernalia. Also, check the tent's ventilation system. Mesh windows allow air in, keep out bugs, and provide views, but make sure they seal up tight to prevent the seepage of chilly air on cold nights. Check the floor for durability and waterproofness.

**Always get in a tent and stretch out before you buy.** Your best bet is actually to set up a tent and crawl around inside it before making any buying decision. When setting up the tent, check to make sure the pole sleeves are easy to thread (continuous sleeves are the easiest). Some manufacturers make all their tent poles the same length, a real boon when you are setting up in the dark. Clip-type tents are faster than sleeved poles to set up but sacrifice strength in bad weather.





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**Consider the gear you'll need to store in the tent at night.** Assemble your own, or if you are buying in a shop, make use of their other camping accessories. If you are planning on sleeping two or three campers in a single structure, grab the appropriately sized sleeping bags and foam pads and lay them out inside the tent. Bring along packs (stuffed full, of course), and check to ensure that they fit in the vestibule. If you plan on using a hanging lantern, also check the suitability of the overhead pole configuration.

**Check the stitching and reinforced patches on the corners, stake-out loops, and other stress points.** Plastic buckles are easier for stay lines than metal sliders, but if they are awkwardly positioned, they could break underfoot. In order to shed water, a single-walled tent or a rain fly needs to be seam-taped and sealed. Fully taped seams are more waterproof than those that are partially taped. Find out if you need to add a liquid sealant after you buy the tent, and how often it needs to be applied. If you mail order, check to make sure there is a foolproof return policy if the tent does not meet your requirements when it arrives.

**Stuff the tent and poles in the supplied sack, and see how it fits into your pack.**

Remember: Unless you have already set a tent up, it's not a good idea to bring it on a camping trip. Even if you can read the directions by headlamp, there's always a chance that you got the package with a missing pole.

**Avoid well-meaning advice to buy an "ecologically unobtrusive" tent.** Sure, browns, grays, and greens blend into the landscape, but they can be awfully difficult to find after a long day on the trail. If you get lost, a red tent is much easier to spot. Also, dark interiors make for gloomy stormbound days; stick with bright, light colors.

Backpacking tents fall into two general categories: three-season (general backpacking) and four-season (winter/mountaineering) models. Here's a look at how tents differ:

Super-sturdy

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