

# **A buyer's guide to backpacking tents**

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## Introduction

Spending a night under canvas – is there anything more fulfilling? Camping gives us the chance to get away from it all; the noise pollution, the busy streets, the house chores and the mundane everyday things that we have to put up with. There's nothing more liberating than grabbing a pack, filling it with gear and necessities and heading out on the trail for a couple of days.

When doing so, one of the most important pieces of kit you'll need to take with you is a tent, though shelter requirements differ from person to person. While some people will be happy sleeping under a tarp, there are others who like their comforts and pack much more luxurious accommodation with you. But, in this case we are going to look at the bread and butter of the camping world – the backpacking tent.

Below you should find all the information you need when looking to invest in a new backpacking tent, with key considerations and an outline of the options you have.

## Size

As you would imagine, size is a very important feature you need to take into consideration when investing a new tent. Buy one which is too small and you'll have a job getting yourself and all of your kit into it, but buy one which is too big and you'll have the penalty of carrying around a much heavier tent which could also be a handful to put up. So right at the very start you need to think about several very important points:

### **How tall are you?**

Now this might seem like an obvious thing to think about, but you'd be surprised how many people end up buying tents which are actually too short for them. The issue here is three-fold. The first is that if your feet are pressing up against the inner or the tent, there is a chance that the inner may make contact with the flysheet, and on occasions where the weather isn't playing ball, this can result in you having a rather damp night.

The second issue is that of comfort. While some people will be more than happy to be cooped up in their sleeping bag, others might find a compact sleeping position inhibitive of a good night's sleep, unless of course you opt to lie diagonally. But this brings us onto our final point. If you are sharing your tent with a hiking partner, they are probably not going to be very happy if you are splaying your legs across them to fit into the tent.

### **Are you going to be sharing the tent with someone else and if so, who?**

Another basic point, but one you definitely need to consider. If you're going to be sharing your tent with another person, it's quite clear to all involved that you won't be investing in a one-man tent. But even a two-man tent may not fit the bill once you take all of your gear into consideration. Some two-man tents can be rather cosy as it is, so once your gear has been stuffed into your tent with you, you may find yourself too close for comfort.

If you are planning to share the tent regularly on multi-day hikes where you have a lot of gear, a three-man tent may be more suitable for you. Remember, although it may weigh more than a two-

man tent, you will most probably split the load between the two of you meaning the extra weight won't be as crippling as it first appears.

### **Headroom**

Another point where the importance of which will be determined by the height of the camper is headroom. It can be a massive pain in the backside when you're trying to get changed in a tent and you end up fighting with the top of the tent. Likewise, if you find yourself cooped up inside it in adverse weather, it's no fun if you can't actually sit up. Because of this, you'll want to have a think about how tall you want your tent to be. Our ideal choice is a tent which allows campers to sit up without their head being impeded by the roof.

The one thing you need to bear in mind with this regard, is that higher tents tend to be less stable in the wind. So have a think about what conditions you are likely to be camping in, how important headroom is to you, and how much you will actually need anyway. When doing so, be sure to consider how the shape of the tent will affect your headroom. It's all well and good sitting in the middle of the tent in a shop and finding it has ample headroom, but if you are going to be sharing the tent on the hill, you'll need to make sure both parties have enough headroom when side by side, too.

## **Shape**

There are a huge range of tent styles out there to pick from and each has their advantages and disadvantages. Below, we outline four of the main styles of tent that you are likely to encounter in your hunt for a new backpacking tent.

### **Tunnel tent**

One of the most common styles of tents on the market, tunnel tents typically offer a good amount of space for a low weight, but they can be unstable in high winds. They are normally constructed from a series of hooped poles and their simplicity tends to make them very straightforward to pitch, but the guy lines will need to be pegged out well in order to offer increased stability.

### **Dome tent**

Made with flexible materials, dome tents tend to take a small bubble-like form and can offer quite good stability due to their shape, with poles crossing the middle of the tent. Dome tents are known to be quite effective at shedding water and the effects of wind due to their shape, though it's worth noting that larger dome tents can be less stable.

### **Geodesic**

Geodesic tents feature poles that criss-cross over the surface and offer probably the greatest strength and stability out of all of the tents mentioned here. These are the type of tents that you are most likely to see being used when people climb serious mountains such as Everest. This is because they distribute the stress from adverse weather across the structure of the tent, making it the most stable in extreme circumstances. However, the price you pay for this stability comes in the form of weight, which is down to the number of poles used in the tent's construction – not necessarily what you'd like to hear if you are planning to carry it on your back!

## **Semi-Geodesic**

Another option is the semi-geodesic style of tent, which offers a good compromise between strength and weight. Generally, they use fewer poles and as such are less adept in extreme conditions.

## **Weight and pack size**

Where backpacking tents are concerned, weight and pack size are some of the most important considerations you need to be thinking about. If it doesn't pack down to a compact size, it is going to be a real headache for you to fit it into or attach to your rucksack. It also means there will be less space for you to pack other essentials that you may need on your walk. Pack size will not be quite so important if you are going to be using the tent with another person as you can split the load, but smaller is usually better.

Weight is another vital aspect you need to be aware of. Even if you find what you think may be the perfect tent, if it is too heavy it is going to cause you real trouble in the mountains. We're always facing a battle to lighten our loads, and tents are where much of the weight can be saved. Again, if you are going to be sharing the tent on the majority of your adventures, it takes on less significance, but it's still something you need to consider. As a general rule of thumb, a tent that averages out to 1kg each when split between hiking partners is a good example to follow. If you are going solo, you don't really want to be carrying a tent weighing more than 2kg if you can manage it.

## **Ventilation**

It's not necessarily the first thing you think about when investing in a new tent, but ventilation is a feature that you should really be aware of as it will pay dividends down the line. A well ventilated tent means there is less chance of condensation building up overnight, meaning you won't wake up with damp gear or a pool of water in the tent. Air vents on the flysheet and corresponding mesh on the inner will help tackle the issue of condensation, while a double-skinned inner door will also help. Vents placed at opposite ends of the tent will also help create a cross flow of air, further reducing the risk of condensation. Of course, substantial ventilation is also a feature that you will be extremely grateful of in warmer weather, as it will keep you cooler throughout the night.

## **Fabrics**

The flysheet and groundsheet fabrics should be tough, while repelling enough water to suit your needs (read about the hydrostatic head rating below). Generally speaking, the inner tent is likely to be made of either nylon (for warmth), or mesh (for ventilation), though sometimes it can be made of a combination of the two. The flysheet and groundsheet is your main line of defence against the elements, so you want to make sure it is up to the job. Below, we outline the two main materials that are used in modern-day tents and provide information on how the material's water resistance is measured.

### **Polyester**

A common fabric used in the construction of tents, polyester delivers good tension and tear strength, isn't too heavy and offers a decent weight and pack size. It also doesn't tend to shrink or

get baggy when wet, is less affected by sunlight and is not usually that expensive. But as with nylon (below), the protection against the elements comes down to the coatings that are used on the materials.

## **Nylon**

Compared to polyester, nylon is widely acknowledged to be stronger and more resistant to abrasion, while it can also be made much lighter. As with polyester, the protection against rain and wind comes down to the coating applied by the manufacturer, which can vary greatly in quality and durability. Acrylic tends to be the cheapest coating, while silicone is more expensive as it offers better protection. It's also worth noting that when nylon gets damp, the fabric can slacken so you will need to tighten your guy lines to maintain the shape.

## **Hydrostatic head**

The hydrostatic head is the rating that is given to waterproof products that determines just how effective they are at keeping water out. The value is usually given in millimetres and it is established by pressing a column of water against the material. The height of the column is then increased until the water penetrates the fabric, at which point the rating will be taken. So, a hydrostatic head of 5,000mm means that the material could hold a column of 5,000mm.

For a material to be accepted as waterproof, it has to withstand a column of water of at least 1,500mm. A hydrostatic head rating of 3,000mm should offer adequate protection in the UK, but if you expect extreme conditions and are likely to be facing them regularly, a rating of 5,000mm and above is worth investing in. Also bear in mind that you'll want the groundsheet to have a higher hydrostatic head rating than the flysheet as it will be dealing with extra moisture from the ground.

## **Pitching**

Now this is one of the big questions facing all prospective tent shoppers. Do you go for a tent which pitches inner first, outer first, or both together?

### **Inner tent first**

The main benefit of a tent which pitches inner first is that it can be used without the flysheet in warmer conditions. This is why it's so important to make sure you know exactly what you plan to use the tent for. Generally, there aren't going to be many occasions where you'll be needing to exercise this feature in the UK, but if you plan to head abroad to hotter climes it could certainly come in handy.

Another reason some campers prefer inner-pitch first tents is that they have been known to offer more volume inside. This is due to the inner tent material being taut, rather than hanging down. It's also worth noting that inner-pitch first tents can often be very stable, as the inner tent and flysheet are tensioned together and there is less that can catch the wind on the exterior.

On the other hand, an inner-pitch first tent isn't so great when the weather is poor and the rain is lashing down. In these scenarios, you usually find yourself in a race against time to erect the tent as quickly as possible so the inner doesn't get so sodden.

## Outer pitch first

Another alternative, and one which is much better in wet weather, is a tent that pitches outer first. The benefit of this is that the inner tent typically stays dry. Plus, once the outer is erected, you can take your time pitching the inner section, as you already have a shelter in place.

## Inner and outer together

A tent which pitches inner and outer together shares the same benefits of the outer first tent, but also goes one step further. They are typically quicker to unpack, erect and take down and stop the inner tent from getting wet during construction. The only negatives of the outer pitch first and the combined pitching are that they can be slightly less stable and the inner can hang down more.

## Poles and pegs

Where poles and pegs are concerned you get what you pay for and higher quality tents tend to come with higher quality poles. What you're looking for is for the poles to be lightweight while still being tough. In terms of functionality, if the poles are split into shorter sections it will really help with the pack size, while colour-coded poles make pitching much easier.

Glassfibre is one of the most common pole materials and is often found on cheaper tents. It offers more flexibility than other materials, allowing the tent to bend with the wind to shed gusts, while this focus on flexibility over strength also means the poles tend to be rather light. The issue with glassfibre however, is that it does lack strength and can be prone to breaking.

Aluminium is another common material used in the construction of poles, and for good reason, too. It offers a high strength to weight ratio and a substantial ridged frame which stands up to conditions, but this does come at a cost. Aluminium poles are usually found being used by tents further up the price range.

When it comes to pegs, you need to look for a combination of tough (to dig into hard ground and to hold the tent down in strong winds) and lightweight. The longer they are and the wider surface area they offer, the more anchorage they will provide in the ground.

## Porch

No matter what size or type of tent you find yourself buying, functionality should play a major part in your thinking, and porches are vital in this regard. The basic consideration most people are aware of is the size of the porch. Ideally, you'll be able to store your boots, and maybe even your rucksack, in the porch, letting you make the most of the tent space while also making sure you don't have to drag wet gear inside.

If you are sharing the tent with somebody else, the addition of an extra porch and door is a really useful one. It's certainly not fun being woken up by your hiking partner as they climb over you at 3am to go to the loo. An extra porch also makes it easier to store one another's gear, so things don't get muddled up and each person's items are close to hand when needed.

Of course, one of the biggest benefits of a decent porch is how well it performs in adverse weather. The last thing you want to do at the end of a long day of walking is sit out in the rain as you try and

prepare some food. A decent-sized porch will mean that you can do all of your cooking from the comfort of your tent, with your kitchen set up in the porch. When doing so it is absolutely vital to be smart about it. Only do it in generously-sized porches which are extremely well ventilated, as the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning or fires are all too real. Keep the stove near the door and away from the tent fabric.

The other important aspect when it comes to porches is how functional the door is. Every single one of you who has camped in poor weather will know the pain of getting in or out of a tent only to be drenched by the porch door as you squeeze through. Clever fastenings will help keep the door out of the way as you enter and exit, and it's worth testing this out when you are shopping around.

## **Additional features**

Beyond the main points listed above, there are plenty of small details that spell the difference between a good tent and a great tent. They may be simple features, but when combined with a well-designed tent, they can really provide the winning formula.

### **Internal pockets**

One such feature is the presence of internal pockets. It's strange to think that something so simple can come into play in your decision making, but it actually does. A range of internal pockets help you organise your gear and keep track of those small items that are easy to lose, but oh so important. The sort of items we are thinking of here include torches, matches, loo paper, glasses, valuables and a knife (extremely handy in the event of an emergency where you may need to cut yourself out of the tent). We actually find it hard to understand why some manufacturers overlook such a basic, but useful, detail.

### **Repair kits**

Presumably, if you're spending a large chunk of your hard-earned cash on a new tent you are going to hang on to it for a while. That's great, but no matter how much you have spent or how good the manufacturer's reputation is, poles can break and fabrics can tear. With that in mind, be sure to find out if a spare pole or a tent repair kit comes with your purchase. While it is neither that expensive or the end of the world if you need purchase this yourself in a couple of years' time, it is certainly handy to have one included.

### **A double skinned inner tent door**

This is quite commonplace these days, but it is still something you want to keep your eye out for when in the market for your new tent. A double-skinned inner tent door is incredibly useful when you want to keep the insects out without letting more in. An extra midge net is what you're looking for here, and you want one which is on the exterior of the door so you don't let insects in when opening the main flap for ventilation.

### **Guy lines**

As we all know, most tents come with guy ropes as a standard feature. They help keep the fabric taut (keeping the annoying wind-flapping noise at bay) and offer increased stability in windy conditions. But the quality of guy lines is not uniform across all brands, and you will find that some

tents will offer some useful features worth having. Chief among them is reflective points. We've all been *that guy* or *that girl*. You know, the one who goes flying headfirst to the ground after tripping over a guy line in the dark. This is why reflective detailing or brightly coloured guy lines are so useful. You'll also want them to be easily adjustable, enabling you to tighten them to just the right amount.

## Season-specific tents

The other thing you should take into consideration is whether or not you need a season-specific tent. On one end of the scale you have a four season tent, which are designed specifically for winter. As such, they are built to withstand heavy snow fall and stand up against significant winds. With this in mind, a winter tent may not be ideal for year-round use as it would potentially be too heavy or too warm.

At the other end of the scale there are one season tents, which tend to just consist of mesh, though sometimes they will have a groundsheet. These are designed for summer use only, when the conditions are going to be dry and warm, and as such they would be no good in adverse weather.