

UNDER THE LITTLE TOP

It needn't be a three-ring circus.

by Nelson Packer

How to choose a summer tent.

Most shops selling backpacking and mountaineering gear are small, with little room for elaborate displays of equipment. If you can get to one of the large supply houses like REI, EMS, Ski Hut or Holubar, you're lucky. You can see several tents rigged, right next to one another, and get some idea of their relative merit. Otherwise you've got to depend on catalog photos and articles like this one for an idea of what the tent looks like, and on manufacturer's specifications—which may be misleading—for its dimensions and weight.

While photos and specs don't give you much idea of construction quality or performance, they can give you an idea of what kind of conditions the tent was made for.

What do you need?

The first thing you should do is define your needs. Where do you do most of your hiking?

Forest tents.

If you hike mostly in lowland forests and river valleys, or at below-timberline altitudes, you won't need to worry much about wind. You need something to keep out rain and bugs. Don't spend extra cash on an overly large or luxurious tent; you're only going to sleep in it, and will do most of your householding outside. Most important is to make sure there are no gaps in the mosquito netting. Ventilation should be good, since cool damp woods increase condensation.

Rain tents.

If you expect a lot of rain—if you hike in the Northwest, for instance, or in the Great Smoky Mountains or have in mind a walking tour of Britain—get the biggest, roomiest, most comfortable two-man tent you can find, consistent with the weight you want to carry. You'll want room to store your gear out of the wet. More important, you're going to live in the tent, not just sleep in it. You need room to dress, to stretch a little, even to cook now and again.

Wind tents.

If you're going above timberline, out into the desert, or along an unsheltered coast, find something you know will stand up to a gale. Don't depend on the manufacturer's claims for this; ask people who've used the same model. When your tent blows down in the night, you won't have a spare.

A-frame tents seem to stand up best in high winds; they present more surface to the wind than do semi-dome designs but they're also a lot more rigid. In addition, their simpler poles make them easier to erect in a wind.

Weight.

If you need a forest tent, there's no point in carrying more than 5 pounds, and plenty of forest tents weigh a lot less than that. Larger rain tents naturally weigh more. Several half-dome tents, ideal for rain by virtue of their good headroom, weigh in at close to 5 pounds. More conventional tents, when large enough for sweating out long rains, weigh anywhere from 5½ to 6½ pounds. Six pounds is a good weight for a wind tent. At the upper end, around 7 pounds, you're carrying all you could possibly need.

Material.

All the tents we examined were made of nylon taffeta or ripstop nylon. A few tents are made of more exotic blends of nylon and polypropylene, or nylon and dacron, lighter and more stretch resistant than plain nylon. For most backpackers, cotton fabrics are just too heavy, even though they provide better ventilation than nylon in very wet weather. In Britain, where this is an important consideration, cotton is still very popular.

The use of ripstop nylon throughout is no guarantee of a superior tent. Some of the best tents in our sample were entirely nylon taffeta. We would not recommend using the difference between ripstop and taffeta as an important consideration in choosing between tents.

Ventilation.

Ventilation should probably be your first criterion for selecting a tent. Re-

ject out of hand any plastic coated, single-wall tent that doesn't have plenty of big, mosquito netted vents. All tents, whether single or double wall, should provide cross ventilation, preferably with a vent at each end. At least one vent should be located high under the ridgeline to allow warm moist air out. Vents should be easily adjustable from inside the tent and fully protected from the weather, usually by a generous overhanging fly or eave. Single-wall tents often weigh a few ounces less than equivalent double-wall designs but are less free of condensation on inner surfaces.

Tailoring.

Especially in a wind tent, the walls and fly should hang tight and smooth. The only way to judge tailoring is to actually set up the tent. If you're lucky enough to see it erected in the showroom, pay close attention to folds and wrinkles near suspension points and tie outs. Remember that in the shop the tent is on a hard level floor. If the walls are loose and droopy there, what will they look like on uneven ground? The more the canopy sags, the less room you'll have inside, and the more it will flap in a wind. A flapping tent will weaken its own seams in time and is more likely to jerk out its stakes than a well-behaved, tightly tailored tent. Wall tightness is the key to quality. The tighter and smoother the walls, the more care went into design and construction of the tent.

Sewing.

If you can't see the tent erected, the next best way to judge its quality is to inspect the seams. A good tent will have nothing but flat fell seams, in which the two pieces of fabric to be joined are folded together so as to protect the unfinished edges, reduce seam leakage and provide four layers of fabric to hold the stitching. The stitches themselves should be small and numerous: 8 to 10 stitches per inch in the best tents, 5 to 7 in others. Avoid junk with fewer than 5 stitches per inch. Good strong seams have two rows of stitches or even more.

Reinforcement.

It's very important that all sus-

PITCHING YOUR TENT

pension points and points of strain be properly reinforced, either with nylon webbing or double thicknesses of nylon fabric. Especially along the edges of the reinforcement, stitching should be even and strain distributed across the entire length of the seam; otherwise a short section of stitches, bearing all the tension, may pop out.

Grommets.

Ideally, grommets should be provided to hold the lower as well as the upper ends of the poles, to keep the poles from sinking into the ground. Grommets should be of brass or aluminum alloy, not of rust-prone steel.

Coated fabrics.

The coated parts of a tent should be generously cut. The fly should extend far enough beyond the ends of the tent to protect open vents and any equipment left outside. The floor should extend between 4 and 15 inches up the sides, including the end panels and door. If the door has a waterproof sill it will prevent ground water seeping through the zippers.

Poles and pegs.

Take a look at the metal items the manufacturer supplies. Are they well finished? Poles and pegs should have no burrs to snag material when the tent is packed or to cut guy lines. Especially where pole sections fit together, the metal must be smoothly finished to prevent jamming and binding. The best tents have shock-loaded poles of light aluminum tubing. Lots of decent tents offer cheaper telescoping poles; the sections, when disassembled, nest one within another. They pack more compactly than do shock-loaded poles but are more likely to jam, and they take longer to assemble. Aluminum skewers are lighter than steel and don't rust; because they're extruded they're usually more smoothly finished than stamped stakes.

Reputation.

Finally, and perhaps most important, ask around. Find out from people you know or meet on the trail which tents they've found to be good, which bad. Then consider the reputation of the company that makes the tent. What do you hear about it? Talk to people about it. Often a manufacturer's catalog will list the expeditions the firm has outfitted. But find out which specific tent was used on each trip. There may be a marked difference between that tent and the one you are buying. 🐾

There are several factors to consider in selecting a campsite and pitching your tent. Wherever possible use designated campsites. That means checking local regulations before heading into the wilderness. Where you can't use a designated campsite, make your camp at least 100 feet from a trail or from the shores of lakes and streams. National Forest and Park regulations now specifically prohibit camping within 100 feet of lakes and streams. This will protect the perishable plant life growing in the marshy areas along shorelines. Select a fairly level spot. If you must clear it of rocks, sticks or anything else likely to puncture the tent or its occupants, be sure to replace them after breaking camp. Avoid soft, vegetated turf in favor of hard, bare or sandy ground where you'll be less likely to kill things or leave traces.

If you can't find a level spot, remember that you'll want to sleep with your head uphill. Avoid crests or depressions which place the two ends of the tent on different slopes; that will make the tent hang badly. Common sense dictates avoiding gullies and depressions which carry or receive runoff, but you'd be surprised how often we've made this error. And, of course, ditching—the practice of digging a runoff drain around the tent—is no longer acceptable backcountry behavior.

In choosing your campsite remem-

ber that halfway up the hill is warmer than at the bottom (where cold dense air settles during the night) or the top (where you'll be exposed to wind). An eastern slope exposed to morning sun will warm up and dry out faster at dawn; it's also likely to be sheltered from prevailing westerly winds.

Pick a spot sheltered from the wind if you can but not at the base of a steep slope, where you might be hit by falling rocks. Don't pitch your tent too close to tree branches which might strike the canopy. If you're at a fire site, and have a fire permit, and build a fire, keep the tent out of spark range. In bad weather pitch your tent to take the wind end on or quartering, not broadside. In high winds, stake the windward end of the tent, then carefully roll it out flat and firmly stake all corners before attempting to force it up against the gale.

In good weather some people seek exposure to the wind rather than shelter from it. A good breeze helps in very buggy or very hot weather. Some people like to point the open door into the wind, which is not only cool and comfortable but billows out the walls for more room. Others prefer to have the door face east, toward the rising sun.

Obviously, no one site or orientation can satisfy all these conditions, but a compromise position that includes many of them is usually possible.

Pegs, skewers and stakes

The pegs sold with the tent may have to be supplemented, depending on where you're traveling. For most purposes aluminum or duraluminum wire skewers are ideal. They're light, strong, easy to put in and easy to remove in average or moderately rocky soil. In very rocky soil steel skewers may be necessary. In very loose ground (sand, for instance), high-impact plastic stakes with I-beam sections will provide more area and therefore better holding power. For snow use 1/2-inch V-section aluminum

pegs, or anchors buried in the snow.

An alternative to the aluminum skewer is the aluminum staple, a U-shaped device which holds better than the single-point skewer. A staple leaves no chance of the guy line slipping off.

On bare rock you'll have to tie the guy lines directly to boulders or to rocks collected from the surrounding area. Even better, tie each line to the middle of its skewer, lay the skewer flat, and then anchor it with a few rocks.