How to Choose a Camping Sleep System

The whole reason we go camping is to get away from the restraints of modernity, but just because you're leaving civilization behind doesn't mean you can't get a good night's rest.

Think about how much better the sunrise will look if it's preceded by a solid night's sleep. Since the large number sleep system options can get overwhelming, we'll break them into their basic parts and help you figure out which system is right for you. Obviously, your decision will depend heavily on whether you're carrying your bed on your back deep into the backcountry, or if you're pitching your tent near your car. Your needs will vary depending on the weather, and whether you're one of those lucky people who can sleep just about anywhere, or if you need a sleep setup that's similar to what you enjoy at home.

A basic sleep system consists of two parts: a sleep platform and a sleeping bag. The sleep platform is the outdoor version of your mattress, and it will sit between your sleeping bag and the ground to cushion your body and to insulate against the cold. Sleep platforms come in several styles: sleeping pads, air mattresses, cots, and hammocks.

SLEEPING PLATFORMS

Sleeping Pads

Inflatable sleeping pads range in thickness from less than an inch to several inches, depending on desired comfort, weight, and packability. They can often be quickly inflated even without a pump, and roll into a very compact size for easy packing. Although air-only pads may seem very desirable because they pack small and are pretty lightweight, they lack the insulating properties of bulkier foam and self-inflating pads. It's amazing how much body heat can be lost through an uninsulated air-only pad in colder climates, so they should only be used stand-alone in warmer temperatures. It's possible to use an air-only pad in conjunction with a foam pad in

colder climates if additional comfort is desired.

Self-inflating pads use open-cell foam that decompresses and fills with air when you unseal the valve and unroll the pad. When you reseal the valve, air is trapped within the foam cells where it boosts insulation and comfort. Self-inflators provide a bit more cushioning and insulation thanks to the foam, but they are bulkier than their air-only cousins when rolled up.

Foam pads are made from dense closed-cell foam, which does a great job at insulating. Usually less than an inch thick, foam pads are not as comfortable or packable as inflatable models, but are very lightweight and insulative, making them ideal for backpacking in colder climates. Foam pads are also very durable, so you can simply strap them to the outside of your pack without having to worry about punctures from sharp branches or rocks on the trail.

Car camping pads or air mattresses keep you blissfully suspended above the ground's bumps and lumps so you get a comfy sleep. They come in a range of sizes from single to king, and range in design from classic air beds to XL-sized versions of backpacking pads.

These pads can be self-inflating, but thanks to the large volume of air they hold, they usually require a pump that is powered by battery, by foot, or by hand. Note that your

body weight combined with internal air pressure can stretch your air bed's shell over the course of the night, so even if you fill it up all the way, it might start to sag halfway through the night. Punctures and slow leaks are common, so a patch kit is a must if you don't want to wake up with nothing between your bag and the ground except a layer of deflated vinyl.

When you're shopping for a sleeping pad, be sure to consider the season(s) that you will be using it in. If you're going to be camping and backpacking in colder weather, you'll want to check out the R-value of a pad; look for one with an R-value of 3.5 or higher. An inflatable pad with internal foam, or a completely foam pad will generally provide more insulation than the extremely light and packable air-only versions. In addition, many pads now include some kind of reflective material that bounces heat back to the user, adding warmth without impacting weight too much.

Hammocks

When you think of hammocks you might picture large, webbed rope hammocks for backyard lounging, but camping hammocks use thin parachute-style material that provides the necessary strength to hold your body off the ground while remaining extremely packable and lightweight.

Hammocks require minimal set up; all you need is some nylon cord and a pair of obliging trees. They provide no real insulation, so they're best in hot weather. Since it's pretty much impossible to set a hammock up inside a tent, you'll need a tarp or shelter to keep you dry if it rains. Some hammocks even include an integrated shelter that forms a personal sleepy-time pea pod. The range of hammock accessories has expanded significantly as hammock camping becomes more popular, and continues to grow.

Hammocks can take some getting used to since they don't allow you to sleep on a flat surface. They can also be hard to move in and get out of since your body weight forms a deep valley or pocket in the hammock. Putting two people in one hammock pits your ability to sleep against the forces of gravity as both people are pulled towards the bottom where they usually end up squishing each other.

Cots

Cots are easy to get in and out of thanks to their bed-like height, and they offer under-the-bed storage so it's easier to organize your gear. However, they don't provide any insulation between you and cold air circulating around you. So while they will keep you cooler in high summer, you are more likely to feel the chill in cold conditions. Some people solve this problem by adding a blanket or foam sleeping pad between their bag and the cot.

Cots fold up tightly for storage and packing, but their weight and size (even when folded) make them impractical for backpacking, so they're better suited to car camping or long-term base camps.

SLEEPING BAGS

When you're shopping for a sleeping bag, you'll have three primary considerations when sorting through your choices:

- Insulation: Down fill vs. synthetic insulation
- Warmth: Matching temperature ratings to the conditions
- Shape: Mummy bags vs. rectangular bags

Insulation

First, you'll want to decide on the type of insulation you prefer in the sleeping bag. Down has the best warmth-to-weight ratio and compresses very easily, making it great for backpacking. However, unless you have a bag filled with water-resistant down, you may run into problems in damp environments since down clumps together when it's wet and loses its insulating abilities.

Synthetic insulation, on the other hand, is going to be bulkier and heavier compared to a down bag of the same warmth, but it also retains the ability to insulate when it's wet, and a bag with synthetic fill will generally cost less than a down sleeping bag.

Warmth

First of all, you'll want to look at the temperature ratings for each bag. If you're strictly a summer camper, anything with a 30F and above rating will cover the bases. In cooler weather, you'll want to be sure to select a bag that is warm enough that you're not shivering all night.

Bag Shapes

Sleeping Bags come in two basic shapes: mummy and rectangular, although there are a number of bags out there that are sporting innovative 'hybrid' shapes. Mummy bags are ideal in winter and high altitudes because their body-contoured design maximizes warmth by keeping insulation close to your body and reducing the amount of open space your body has to heat. The narrow mummy shape also means there is less fabric

and less weight to carry, which is great when you're heading into the backcountry on foot. The downside of mummy bags is that there isn't much room to move if you're a fidgety sleeper. Women-specific mummy bags give you more room in the hips and are a bit narrower across the shoulders. Since women tend to sleep colder than men, women's bags will usually include extra insulation in the foot box, chest, and hood.

Sleeping bags come in a variety of shapes and styles, including: classic mummy, rectangular/mummy hybrid, the zipperless 'Backcountry Bed' from Sierra Designs, and doublewide made for two.

Rectangular or semi-rectangular bags offer more room to move and allow you to sleep in several positions, but because they have more space, it takes more body heat to keep them toasty. Their roomier shape means they generally weigh more and use more pack space, so they are best suited to car camping or yurt trips rather than backpacking. Rectangular bags can also be fully unzipped and used as blankets for warm-weather camping.

If you're camping with a favored cuddle buddy, look for double-wide bags or rectangular bags that can be zipped together to create one large bag. You'll be able to share body heat and sleep a lot warmer. Sleeping bags, just like people, don't have to be exact matches to get together, but they do have to be compatible in the following areas: the zippers must have the same sized teeth, the zippers must be the same length, and one bag must have a right-facing zipper while the other has a left-facing zipper.

Accessories

And finally, don’t forget the little things that make sleeping outside better. This includes camping pillows, sleeping pad covers, and sleeping bag liners. They don’t have to add much to the weight you’re carrying, but can still make a big difference in the quality of your sleep.