

How to Choose a Campsite



Established campgrounds are great for offering electrical hookups, water, restrooms, and designated space for tents, tables, and fires.

But when you're sick of the noise, the people, or the confinements of these areas, it's time to break loose and go on your own adventure. So pack up your goods and head out into the wild. Just be sure to read these tips on how to choose your home base in the wilderness.

GROUND SURFACE

Needless to say, where you choose to sleep will be the most important decision when picking a campsite. It's crucial to pick a spot with flat ground to pitch a tent. Otherwise you may find yourself waking up in the middle of the night crammed against the tent wall and entirely off your sleeping pad—and I guarantee that this is not the most fun way to wake up.



Making sure that your flat ground is even is also important. Even ground with no sharp protrusions will help you sleep soundly so you can wake up ready to charge the next morning. Flat areas covered in grass or sand are two prime choices, if available. Camping in a small depression might be nice if it's windy, but definitely not nice if it turns into a rain collector during a storm.

SHADE

After flat ground for pitching a tent, shade is the second most important factor when choosing a campsite. Having permanent shade throughout the day isn't necessarily mandatory. But shade in the morning is a must. Being awoken at 7 a.m. by a blazing hot sun broiling your tent is, in the very least, quite unpleasant. So save yourself a little morning misery after a long hike and a night of shenanigans, and choose a spot where you can get a bit of morning cover if at all possible.



In the desert, shade throughout the day is a plus. Finding a flat area with trees or bushes is ideal, but the shade problem can always be alleviated by bringing a shade shelter of your own. Just make sure you pick an open area to set it up, and be cautious of the infamous desert winds.

WHAT'S ABOVE YOU

For the sake of your own safety, always be aware of what's looming above you. Don't choose to set up beneath a dead tree branch with the reasoning that 'it's still standing, so it's probably safe.' Same goes for rockslide and avalanche paths, as well as pitching a tent beneath a loose rock ledge. Always be cautious of these sorts of hazards, because Mother Nature isn't always forgiving.

WHAT'S AROUND YOU

Not only is it important to think about what's above you, it's also smart to note what's surrounding you. You may not want to be camped right on the water's edge due to bugs, thirsty animals, and flooding risk. But if you're out there hauling your own water, it sure does help to be relatively close to a water source so you're not breaking your back lugging precious water about.

If your forecast notes high winds, consider settling down behind a windbreak such as large boulders or a stand of trees. Don't be caught on the flat open ground during a windstorm—it's not a pleasant experience.

And finally, consider the impacts of your camp. If you find yourself in a spot that looks camped-in already, your overall impact will be less than if you forge your own brand new spot. Although the wilderness may seem endless, there is a finite amount of it, and protecting what's already there will go a long way for future generations.



PRIVACY

Although neighbors can be a good thing, you don't always want another party 20 feet away from you. Finding yourself a little bit of privacy makes your camping experience all that much more enjoyable, and really highlights the excitement of getting out into the wilderness. This doesn't mean you have to backpack in 10 miles, or four-wheel in for hours just to get away from everyone else (although this kind of privacy sometimes can't be beat). It's easy enough to get off the beaten path without overexerting yourself or your vehicle. So don't settle for the first spot you see if it's surrounded by other folks or too close to the trail. Go out and find yourself a new—and better—spot!

SPACE

With ground surface, shade, and privacy settled on, it's now time to discuss ample camping space. If you're out backpacking and pitching a sole tent, there's not as much of a need for a ton of space. Alternatively, if you're with a larger party and lots of gear, you'll need to find yourself a bigger spot. Tent space and kitchen space are obviously two of the most important spatial factors. But don't cut corners if there's fun and games to be had. Be sure to choose areas which allow for any activities you may have brought along. After all, just because you're camping doesn't mean you have to sacrifice all the comforts of home.



TOE THE LINE

Before heading out camping, it's a good idea to check regulations in the area you intend to visit. National parks, national forests, BLM land, state parks, and national monuments all have different restrictions and permit requirements. You REALLY don't want to get your wake-up call from a ranger with a ticket book because you accidentally crossed a park boundary without the right permit. Same (or even more) goes for campfire permits.

When choosing your own area for a campsite, it's important to just keep in mind what exactly it is that you're looking for. The number of people, dogs or no dogs, activities, trail access, nearby water sources—all of these will play into your perfect camping spot. So go out there and find yourself in nature—just be sure to be safe, have fun, and always leave the area just as clean as you found it.