

How to Choose a Tent



There are many different types of tents out there, and choosing the right one will ensure a better camping experience. A tent, after all, is quite literally your “home away from home.”

In this article I’ll walk you through the different constructions, sizes, weights, and features. I’ll also go into some alternatives. While each adventurer has his or her own specific needs, a double-wall, three-season, freestanding tent will work well for most situations.

Singles or Doubles?

The first (and probably easiest) question to answer is whether to purchase a single-wall or double-wall tent. When most people imagine a tent, they are thinking of a double-wall construction. The first “wall” is the tent body, while the second “wall” is the rain fly. This setup allows for greater versatility and comfort. On hot, clear nights, you can opt to pitch the tent without a fly. This will allow for greater ventilation and a cooler night’s sleep. In foul weather, erecting the rain fly will add weather protection as well as warmth. For a lightweight option, some double-wall tents allow a quick-pitch setup: a footprint, fly, and poles are combined for a lightweight setup without the tent body.



Double-wall tent without and with fly.

So, if double-wall tents are more versatile and ventilate better, why would anyone want a single-wall tent?

Single-wall tents combine the tent body and waterproof fly into one fabric. As such, they are favored by mountaineers and alpinists due to their lighter weight and smaller packed volume. The main issues with single-wall tents is that they aren't as versatile and condensation has a tendency to form on the walls inside the tent.

Three Seasons or Four?

Three-Season tents are best suited for most climates and conditions; they also tend to have double-wall construction. These tents generally have mesh paneling in the tent body to increase ventilation and keep the tent cool even with the rain fly on. More mesh leads to a lighter tent but may reduce durability. Three-season tents are generally kitted out with convenient features such as gear lofts/pockets, multiple doors, and rain fly vents. These tents can be used by car campers and backpackers alike.

Four-Season tents can be used year-round, but are really geared towards winter excursions. These tents are built to withstand low temperatures, high winds, and heavy snow, so if there's a chance you will be facing this kind of weather, this is the tent for you. Overall, these tents will be heavier than three-season tents, with heavier, more durable fabric, less mesh, and burlier poles. One of the most important differences is that a four-season tent will have a fly that reaches the ground/snowpack to seal out wind and snowdrifts. Four-season tents with an internal pole support are easier to set up in foul weather and offer more rigidity. You can find four-season tents in both single- and double-wall construction.



Four-season tents are designed for extreme environments. Shown: Black Diamond Eldorado

Living Space

Living space is one of the most important attributes of a tent, however it is the hardest to measure. Traditional tent dimensions, such as width, length, and peak height, only tell part of the story. Vestibule space will determine how much of your gear you can stash outside the tent body, and wall geometry is, in my opinion, the most important factor in determining the “living space” of a tent.

Choosing floor dimensions are relatively easy; about 25 inches of width per person and about 80 inches of length will be suitable for most people. Taller occupants, or those camping with a dog, may want to look at tents that are closer to 90 inches long. Choosing a tent by number of occupants (e.g., two-person tent) will generally be appropriate.

Peak height is the height measurement at the tallest point in the tent. The value, and more importantly the location, will dictate the living space of a tent. While a greater peak height generally yields a roomier tent (assuming similar floor dimensions), the *location* of the peak height is just as important. A large peak height in the middle of the tent means that you have to be seated in the middle of the tent to effectively “feel” the roominess, whereas a large peak height on one end of the tent means that the tent will feel roomier when you are lying or seated in your sleeping bag.



The Sierra Designs Flashlight tent has an offset peak to give it a roomier feel.

Similarly, wall geometry is, in my opinion, the biggest factor towards how roomy a tent feels. Imagine two tents, both of which have the same square-shaped footprint. Tent A is a pyramid with angled walls, while Tent B is a cube with perfectly vertical walls. Tent A’s converging walls will make it feel much more cramped than Tent B, even though technically they have the same floor dimensions. The wall geometry has a big impact on the interior volume of a tent. For a roomier feel, look for a tent with more vertical walls. Some tents have poles that start out vertical near the bottom, and only start to converge once they’re off the ground. This pole design is a great blend between roominess and weight savings.

Another influence on *interior* space is the *exterior* space of the tent. A tent with larger vestibules (covered area outside the tent) will allow you to store more gear outside the tent, thus freeing up precious interior space. Two-door tents generally excel in this area as they have two vestibules of considerable size.



If you're on your own, there may be space for your gear; otherwise a vestibule comes in handy. Photo by Tommy Chandler

Wait! Don't forget about Weight

A common phrase in the outdoor industry is “Light is right!” While lightweight products are usually the way to go, that’s not always the case. In tent design, there is a balance between lightweight materials and durability. A lighter tent will most likely be constructed of more delicate materials, whereas a heavier tent will be more durable. Generally speaking, a tent should weigh approximately 2.5 pounds per person. Remember that when backpacking with multiple people, you can split the weight by dividing the tent, rain fly, and poles.

When talking about tent weights, there are general three advertised weights. Knowing the difference between the three of them will aid you in selecting your tent.

Packaged Weight: This is the heaviest weight, and includes everything that comes with the tent: stuff sacks, guy lines, packaging, etc.

Trail Weight: Generally this is the lightest full set up. It will include the tent, fly, and poles. It usually does *not* include guy lines, stakes, or stuff sacks.

Fast Pitch: This is the weight of the fly, footprint, and poles.

Personally, I like to look at the packaged weight because I know my tent will never be heavier than that. However, in use I expect it to be closer to trail weight.

Ultralight

For those who like to stay light on their feet, ultralight tents are a great choice. While more expensive, these tents offer the best weight-to-comfort ratio. This will generally use delicate fabrics to save weight and offer a fast pitch option. These tents may also have minimal features in order to save weight, so expect one door, few zippers, and smaller interior volume. Ultralight tents tend to be three-season tents by nature, due to the delicate materials that are used.

Bivouac

A bivouac or “bivy” for short, is a cocoon for your sleeping bag. This option is one of the lightest out there, but it’s not for everyone. Bivies offer protection from the elements but at the cost of comfort. Many bivies are just narrow enough to fit in and can feel quite claustrophobic. They are best for big wall climbers, weight-conscious hikers, and mountaineers.



While simple in design, there are different features that can be offered. Bivies can have a mesh upper to protect you from bugs, or a hood pole to keep the fabric off your

face. Different waterproof/breathable fabrics and venting strategies can be used to keep the user comfortable.

Car Camping Tent

At the other end of the spectrum, you'll find tents designed primarily for car camping. Because they generally don't feature expensive lightweight materials to save weight, they will tend to be priced lower per square foot than backpacking tents. They come in all sizes, favoring larger sizes for families and groups, or simply those who like a little more elbow room.

Alternate Shelters

Aside from tents and bivvys, there are many options out there for your sleeping arrangements.

Hammocks are popular for solo sleeping as they are light, simple, and easy to set up, and they get you off the ground. Drawbacks include their reliance on trees as well as their lack of insulation in colder weather.



Hammock camping setup. Photo courtesy Eagle Nest Outfitters.

Camping in a hammock doesn't have to mean that you're roughing it, though. A variety of accessories, including sized tarps, bug netting, insulation, gear slings, and more, can make sleeping in a hammock positively deluxe.

Freestanding shelters are another lightweight option. These generally look like tents; however, they may even be as simple as a tarp. What makes them unique is that they do not have a complete pole assembly. They generally rely on stakes, guy lines, and makeshift poles (such as a trekking pole or stick) for support and rigidity. They are super light and packable; however, they're not always the easiest to set up.



It's all in the details

So you've narrowed your selection down to a few similar tents, but how do you decide on the perfect one for you? Here are some other questions to think about:

- Interior storage is always a benefit. Places to stow your headlamp, keys, lip balm, or hat can be great. Does the tent have a gear loft in the ceiling, or just pockets in the corners? Remember, though, that if a gear loft is not included, you can always purchase one separately.
- Ventilation is always important in hot weather. How much of the tent body is mesh? More mesh means more venting, but mesh is more prone to snags and tears. Does the fly have any venting options?
- How many doors does the tent have? Two doors are heavier, but it's nice when your partner doesn't have to crawl over you to exit the tent in the middle of the night.
- Footprints are very important when it comes to taking care of your tent. Not only do footprints add another waterproof layer between you and the ground, but they also protect your tent floor. Does the tent come with a footprint? If not, it might be worth investing in one.
- Does the tent come with reflective guy lines? We've all tripped over a guy line before, but that doesn't mean we have to! Reflective guy lines help you avoid the embarrassing tumble.