

[Close](#)

How to Choose a Tent

Tent Basics

Wind. Rain. Cold. Bugs. Dust. Creepy crawlers. If someone asks you why you feel the need to carry a tent into the backcountry, those are 6 good reasons.



Tents also provide a place of privacy in the middle of wide open spaces, plus an intangible feeling of security once you're zipped inside for the night. It's impressive how much comfort and reassurance we humans find between a few well-stitched panels of nylon. Which model is right for you? Here are some guidelines:

QUICK READ

1. Pick a tent equipped to withstand the harshest conditions you might encounter. Example: If you're a three-season backpacker who hikes late into the fall, you might want a four-season tent or a convertible model.
2. Four-season tents are roughly 10 to 20 percent heavier than three-season models (typically due to extra poles). Convertible tents allow you to add or omit poles and adjust ventilation as conditions dictate.
3. Freestanding tents (those that can stand without the aid of stakes) are very handy. You can move them easily or lift them to shake out debris. Very lightweight tents are rarely freestanding.
4. Capacity ratings, assigned by individual manufacturers, sometimes tend to be optimistic. A two-person tent may be a tight squeeze for two large adults and their gear.
5. Use a tarp, ground cloth or footprint to

extend the life of a tent's floor.

Types of Tents

Backpacking tents fall into two general categories: three-season (general backpacking) and four-season (winter/mountaineering) models. Here's a look at how tents differ:



Lightweight **three-season tents** are intended for spring, summer and fall usage in temperate climates. They perform well in wind and rain, though their designs are not suited to handle significant snow loads. A three-season model won't collapse if two inches of snow fall on it, but 20 inches could be a problem.

Super-sturdy **four-season tents** usually integrate one or two additional poles into their designs to fortify walls and help them stand firm against severe wind or heavy snow loads. Winter tents feature some type of rounded dome design, thus eliminating flat spaces on a tent's rainfly where snow can accumulate. Of course, these winter/mountaineering tents work just fine during mild conditions. Their extra poles will make them a touch heavier than their three-season cousins.

Convertible tents are four-season models that can be converted into three-season tents. This usually involves shedding one or two poles from the tent's four-season design. Models may also offer zippered panels that can be opened during milder conditions or feature a detachable vestibule.

Warm-weather tents are lightweight shelters, usually designed for one or two people, that feature large mesh walls for superb ventilation. They can be used in three-season settings, but their special appeal is their usefulness in warmer, humid climates.

Single-wall tents are designed with the minimalist in mind. Essentially, they are rainflies equipped with a few vents you can zip open during warmer conditions.

Bivy sacks are minimalist solo shelters that offer little space for anything but you and your sleeping bag. (If you're a climber and plan to spend nights on steep rock faces where tents would be impractical, a bivy is definitely the way to go.) If saving weight is your chief priority, a bivy is worth considering. If you like room to move inside your shelter, look elsewhere. Is a bivy right for you? We offer a [separate clinic](#) on bivy shelters for your consideration.

Sleep screens and tarp tents are ultralight shelter options. Sleep screens, including screen houses, are useful in warm conditions and offer mesh coverings, some fully enclosed, some not, to keep occupants shielded from bugs, but not rain. Tarp tents offer minimalist shelter, at a minimal weight, for three-season usage.

Family (or basecamping) tents and shelters can accommodate large groups (between four and six usually, sometimes more). Dome-style models can be transported into the backcountry, as long as group members are willing to carry a share of the load; house-like models are intended for campgrounds and basecamps.

A Few Terms Explained

- **Dome Tents:** Most four-season tents involve some form of rounded, geodesic-dome design. Domes avoid flat spots and shed snow more easily. They stand strong in the wind and provide generous interior headroom.
- **Tunnel Tents:** Many three-season models use this narrow, linear design, typically involving a rectangular floor plan. Also called hoop tents, these models use fewer poles, less fabric and often have wedge-like shapes. Their rainflies, which lie flatter, can collect snow. A heavy snow load could flatten them.
- **Freestanding Tents:** Domes are freestanding, meaning they do not require stakes in order to stand up. You can pick up a freestanding tent (it's like a huge beach ball) and move it to a different location. You can also easily shake it out before you disassemble and pack it.

Which Type is Right for You?

Questions worth asking:

Q: What times of year will you use your tent?

- Winter campers need a four-season tent, period. If you have an Arctic expedition in mind, consult with people who have already made such trips and get their advice.
- If you're a three-season hiker who heads out in March or tries to squeeze in late trips in October and November, give yourself an extra buffer of security—get a four-season tent or at least a convertible.
- If you're a recreational traveler and do the bulk of your camping between May and September, choose a three-season model.

Q: How many people usually travel with you?

- Do you consistently travel with a partner? You need at least a two-person tent. Are the two of you large people? You might need to bump up to a 2-to-3-person model or even a three-person tent.
- Does your group size vary? You'll probably need more than one tent to fulfill your needs. If your budget is tight, buy the size that fits most of your trips; when your group size changes, rent a tent.
- If you're sharing a tent at the end of the day, share the load as you hike. Someone can carry the poles, another person the rainfly, and so on.
- Do you travel solo? If you demand lots of space, look for a compact two-person model. If you count every ounce, select either a bivy or a very light one-person tent.

Q: Won't a cheap tent from a discount store work just as well as a brand-name model?

- Department-store tents are typically mass-produced items that supply less attention to details. Example: Examine the stitches of a quality tent. You'll find a greater number of stitches per inch in that tent than you'll find in the discount tent, and you'll often find seam sealing. This means a stronger tent is at work for you when the weather turns nasty. Quality tents use high-grade aluminum poles. Bargain tents often rely on fiberglass poles, which are less shatter-resistant. Top-brand tents often give you more ventilation options as well.
- Inexpensive tents use large panels of coated nylon on their canopy (side walls). That material is not breathable, so if it's a balmy night, you might swelter inside.

Understanding Tent Specifications

When surveying REI's online selection of tents, you'll find a general description and a list of specifications that accompany each model. These "specs" look technical, but the information is really quite helpful. [Click here](#) to learn the details behind each entry.

Tent Capacity

Manufacturers classify their tents according to sleeping capacity: solo tents, two-person tents, three-person tents and so on. You'll also find references to items such as 1-to-2-person tents or a 2-to-3-person model. To better understand what all this means, [click here](#) and we'll "go inside the numbers" to explain some terms in detail.

Getting a Good Fit

How do you know if a tent is a good fit—physically—for you?

Here's one technique—not perfect, but certainly useful—to help you envision how you might fit into a tent: Measure your backcountry sleeping pad and use its dimensions as a general guide when you consider a tent's measurements.

- **Example:** The popular Therm-a-Rest standard model from Cascade Designs is 72" long and 20" wide. Width is the crucial measurement. To fit two people inside a tent, you will thus need at least 40 inches of width to feel even marginally comfortable—if you don't mind sleeping close. If you need a few inches of separation, then add a couple of inches to your measurement. If you thrash around a lot at night, you might need to add several inches.

Compare your numbers with the **floor dimensions** provided with each tent. That gives you some idea of how snug, or spacious, a tent might feel. Floor dimensions, of course, indicate only the maximum width a tent offers, typically the spot where your shoulders lie. Tents often taper in the foot sections, and walls angle in toward the ceiling. All of this impacts the amount of space found inside a tent's walls. Roomy tents are nice, but tend to weigh more.

Tip:—Looking at two-person tents? Consider one that could adapt well to some of your other travel plans. Maybe you're anticipating future solo hikes, or a long-distance bike trip. If

so, a 1-to-2-person model might be a good choice. If you're a couple and you sometimes invite along a friend or relative, consider a 2-to-3-person, or even a three-person model. You'll like the flexibility, plus the extra bit of space, these models give you.

Additional Considerations

Do you camp often in rainy climates? Take a look at roomier tents, and consider adding a gear loft. That's basically a piece of interior netting that stretches out, hammock-like, near the ceiling of your tent. Overnight you can dangle damp items from a loft and hasten their drying process.

A tarp, ground cloth or footprint can help protect the floor of a tent and extend its life. Plus, it gives you a clean place to fold your tent in the morning.

For some thoughts on ventilation and a list of other helpful tips and reminders, [click here](#).

Does Everybody Need a Tent?

Some hardy souls will argue that a tent is a burdensome luxury. Ultralight advocates point out that a tarp, a little cord and some ingenuity are all people need to create sufficient shelter in the wilderness.

In many situations, that's a valid point. But then an unexpected overnight weather front blows through, or skeeters arrive by the thousands, or you're not really sure if a nearby ant hill is inactive after all. A night or two like this is usually all it takes to convince most recreational hikers that the full enclosure a backpacking tent provides is worth a little extra bulk and weight in their packs.

Chosen wisely, a tent will add only a modest amount of weight to your load. In return, it will give you the confidence to know you are equipped to take shelter from just about any rude surprise nature may dish out during your trip.

Quick Review

- Tents serve both a physical and psychological function; they protect you from the elements and surround you with a sense of security.
- Anticipate what awaits you in the backcountry—the weather, number of people in your party—and seek

out a tent equipped to accommodate your most demanding ambitions.

- General backpacking (three-season) tents are excellent, lightweight performers; winter/mountaineering (four-season) tents are good year-round and give you extra stability during harsh conditions.

[Close](#)