

THE BIG GEAR TEST COOL CAMPING

From tipis to tree tents, and from blow-up behemoths to ultralight racing tents, here's how to be the envy of the campsite this summer, or sneak into the wilderness unnoticed...

WORDS **SARAH STIRLING**

NOT SO LONG AGO, tents were mostly geodesic, traditional cheese-wedge or tunnel-shaped. Designers have been having a lot of fun since then. Leave the ABC of tents behind and stroll with us outside the box, or even up into the trees...





**THE
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TENTSILE

Flite +

£321.60

👉 tentsile.com

It's hard not to grab this tent and dash straight outside with a rattling kite, eyeing the world from a new perspective. Now we know what stuff dreams are actually made of. Hats off to the British architect who designed it. Imagine lying in that, flysheet off, hanging amongst the birds and stars. But, how on earth do you get those things in the trees?

The instructions required binoculars to discover that they were brief, but we recommend restraining your inner child and watching one of the many 'how tos' on Youtube. It's straightforward when you know how, but a

quick video saved us hours of trial and error.

Designed to hike with, this model is a bit smaller than others in the range in order to save weight (tall folk, this tent isn't for you) and a bit fiddlier to set up as, for example, it has one ratchet strap whereas others have three.

The tent itself needs to be evenly stretched out, so we recommend laying it flat between the chosen trees if possible, and roughly adjusting the length of the three webbing straps accordingly. Then make sure you tie the knots flat so you can adjust and undo them later. A cow-hitch (like tying a tie) works best.

Once up, we found it was a good idea to erect it low enough that you can actually climb into it (although you can buy a ladder for it). Then — bliss — it's really comfy, like a hammock that you can stretch out in. Don't forget to pack a well-insulated camping mat to keep your

exposed back warm.

Pros: You're sleeping in a tree! And it has a fun, bouncy hammock feel. And — you're sleeping in a tree. Someone take a photo. Wait, let me shake my hair down like Rapunzel. Take another.

Cons: It's great fun to erect it high off the ground, but if you need the loo in the night, this equation can result in high jinks... Also, you need to find trees in the right places before setting up camp, and getting the knots right is fiddly.

Best for: So far everyone who has seen this tent has turned six again, and wailed, "I want one!" Sub-six-footers invited only but other Tentsile models suit taller people.

Weight: 3.2kg

Pack size: 43 x 20 cm

In a tent like this, bricks and mortar suddenly seem overrated...



TENTIPI Safir 7

£1650

• tentipi.com

Call us anti-social, but we think a seven-man Tentipi is a good size for four people. There's room to walk around inside it, whereas you can only stand by the main pole in the five-man version. And, if you're going to buy an investment tent like this, you don't want to be cramped like you're in a bomb shelter, — you want to be lounging by the fire, cooking your freshly caught fish, preferably dressed in Scandi knitwear. OK, there's an elephant in the room. This is an expensive tent.

It's clear though, that this tent will outlive not just any weather, but probably also you. They've taken the perfect simplicity of the traditional

nomadic Sami teepee (known as a kati) — an easy to erect home that you can light a fire in, and which is very stable due to the wide foundations and narrow top — then added incredibly durable fabrics and construction methods, plus some clever modern ideas.

It's easy to put it up by yourself in minutes — you lay it out flat, peg it following a clever circular guide, then put the pole in — and it's reassuringly sturdy. Which is what you want in a tent that you can light a fire or log-burner in.

And my, if you've never camped and cooked in a tent, with the door open over a beautiful view, in the wonderful warm light of the fire — well, this is heaven worth paying for, we assure you.

Over night, a storm kicked up. A few times we woke, worried about the tall chimney and still hot stove — but the tipi did not stir a bit. Once the door was closed, it got very hot with the stove ticking down inside, but there's great

venting at the base of the tipi and via a complex ventilator cap, which you control from inside.

We'd suggest turning the fire down a while before you go to bed. It's hard to do when you're enjoying the orange glow bouncing off the walls though!

Pros: It has a wonderful ambience, with a log-burner or fire inside. It's like having your own little portable country cabin. Indestructible, sturdy, and easy to erect.

Cons: Heavy. Expensive. That's it.

Best for: Kayaking or car journeys, as it's heavy. Those who like the warmth, ambience and cooking opportunities of a fire.

Weight: 12.3kg

Pack size: 62 x 27 x 27cm

THE BIG GEAR TEST

This one must have
been designed by
someone who wanted
an easy life!



COLEMAN Fast Pitch Air Valdes 4

£600

coleman.com

If you aren't a fan of camping, well this is the tent to convert you. By this stage of tent testing, and on a rainy day, we were not very excitedly packing our things. However, after spreading this tent out, pumping up the three main beams in seconds, pegging it out, then stepping inside the cute Hobbit-hole of a door and shutting the rain out, we discovered that this is a real home from home.

Come in, and let's run through some of the features. The front door has a patented rigid design (a pole around a circle), which makes it easy to come and go without zips. Step into the lounge, where you can roll down blinds over

cellophane windows. On one side, you can essentially throw open French doors. Bugs bothering you? Zip down the mesh bug guard. Here's a handy storage rack for shoes and other bits and bobs.

Because it has its own floor, it's easy to keep your stuff (and you) clean and dry inside. There are two bedrooms, both made from patent-pending blackout fabric, which means that rare thing — a camping lie in! Yes! This tent even has high ceilings. And, okay, it weighs 18 kilos, but it's the sort of tent that you'd only ever take car camping anyway.

Some tips: Peg it down well. If a storm kicks off, you may suddenly realise you're living under what resembles a kite-surfing wing. When inflating the tubes, don't forget to push the button valve (it needs to be in the 'popped out' position), so it doesn't instantly deflate when you unplug. They pump up impressively quickly!

You can also easily take them out to replace them if you manage to burst one, although they feel pretty heavy duty. Also, bring some good furniture, you might as well deck this one out in style! Check out the LuminAID camping lantern on p12 — perfect for this tent.

Pros: Total home from home. Clean, dry, simple, practical. Ideal for those with small kids who want to reduce faff, or those who prefer glamping.

Cons: Perhaps a step too far away from the dirt for some. Heavy to cart around. And once you've unpacked it from the ridiculously tiny bag it comes in, good luck getting it back in there again!

Weight: 18.5kg

Pack size: 58 x 46 cm

Er... it's going to be quite cosy tonight



TERRA NOVA Solar Photon 2

£480

terra-nova.co.uk

To give you some perspective, holding the lightest two-person self-supporting tent in the world is comparable to holding two tins of Heinz beans. Now for the disclaimers. Beginning with, it's quite cosy for two.

But let's start at the beginning. It's a breeze to put up — just as well because it would have blown away like a hankie if we'd let go. A simple Y of poles; fly over the top, and then we peg it out with ... Titanium toothpicks? Well, pegs are an obvious place to save weight, but we'd recommend buying some stronger ones if you're not in race mode. And putting your kit in it immediately, to pin it down further!

There are plenty of well-designed features, as you'd expect from these mainstays of Derbyshire tent-making. Firstly, it's designed to be as stable as possible in the wind — as you can see it's an aerodynamic shape. Remember to peg it with the door away from the wind.

The flysheet has front and rear hoods for venting, which it does need: The fabrics are so flimsy, we found it's impossible to peg the outer so it doesn't flap against the inner. This means they tend to stick together, with sweat from the inside not evaporating and rain from the outside not running off, so the two become a sort of soggy sandwich, which drips on your gear and sleeping bag.

In drier climes, because it's self-supporting, you can save more weight by leaving the flysheet at home, and even more by sharing one hydrophobic lightweight down sleeping blanket between two, like the one on p97.

It's an incredible thing that you can carry a two-man home on an overnight adventure and barely feel the weight of it!

Pros: incredibly light, this tent will help you fly on mountain marathons, and it's built by world-renowned British tent-makers so it's also super easy to put up and reliable.

Cons: Very cosy for two — mandatory spooning. Toothpick tent pegs combined with incredibly light fabrics mean it may blow away before you've finished pegging it.

Best for: Mountain marathons and other overnight races and adventures where weight is a premium.

Weight: 0.975kg
Pack size: 40 x 15cm

**THE
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A really well thought out cycle touring tent

MSR
Hubba Tour 2
£510
msrgear.com

We'd been so impressed by all the tents so far that we really didn't think it could get any better, but we were in genuine silent awe while erecting this masterpiece.

MSR's original Hubba Hubba tent was legendary among cycle tourers. Durable yet light, easy to set up, spacious for bike stuff and easy to adjust for all climates — there were tears when it was replaced with a more backpacking-specific version (much lighter so cater for those hiking a long way, so less durable, and red, which isn't great for stealth cycle touring). There were then tears of joy

when MSR introduced their new, cycle touring specific range this year.

At first sight the mass of red and green fabric was a bit tricky to work out, due to the massive porch and the pitch-in-one design. However, if you simply tightly peg out the four corners of the sleeping area, with the brilliant MSR Groundhog pegs supplied, then it all begins to make sense. This main tent bit has an exo-skeleton, that is, poles go on the outside — and a cleverly designed one at that.

Now you simply peg the porch and sides out, until it's all firm, then unzip the main door and gaze inside in admiration. The porch is the perfect height and size for two bikes and a selection of panniers, and there's a strip of fabric across the floor for anything that you want to keep dry.

It's spacious for two, with plenty of room to

sit up. The front door is large, so you can still get a view from your bedroom, and there's also a smaller (but still a good size) back door. Both doors have two options — you can zip them fully closed, or zip them open with a mesh bug guard in place, so you can see outside and get more venting.

Plus, it's a great colour for stealth camping!

Pros: A cycle touring version of a tent with a cult following. What's not to like? Loads of room for you and your bike. Comfort features. Easy to pitch.

Cons: Actually cannot think of any. Maybe just: we're now itching to go away on a long bike trip.

Weight: 2.74kg
Pack size: 53 x 17cmA

ACCESSORIES

Transform an empty shell into a home from home



VANGO

Inflatable relaxer chair set and carpet

£70 per pair of chairs / carpet from £45

☛ vango.co.uk

Inflatable sofas have moved on apace from when you might have had a slippery, squeaky one in your bedroom! These have a flocked, comfy surface and comfortable back support. Vango also make a range of carpets for small to big spaces. They are easy to wipe clean and comfy to sit and play on.

ANEVAY

Frontier Plus log burner stove

£350

☛ anevastoves.com

The tipi was a soulless shell until we lit this log burner. Then the glow began bouncing off the fabric, turning the atmosphere a cosy orange and immediately making it warm.

Tentipi make their own tipi stove, the beautiful Eldfell Pro, which is £795. At half the price, this rustic little stove, designed in Cornwall, is a less slick but very characterful option, with its simple, steel design and European oak handles. It was easy to put together by stacking flue sections. You'll also need a 'tipi kit' to protect your fabric chimney.



CACOON

Hanging seat

Single Cocoon £225 (Bonsai £150; Double £325)

☛ cacoonworld.com

Husband and wife team Sarah and Nick came across weaver birds building hanging nests in the jungle and were inspired to create these lovely canvas hanging portable bolt holes. Perfect for kids to play in and grown ups to read books in. You can also buy a door, which we'd recommend, as it's disappointing when it's wet. We untied the grab handle loop at the top and retied it as a series of knots — safer for kids.



THERMAREST

Dorado Duo sleeping bag

£235

☛ thermarest.com

One of the best sleeping bags we have seen for warmer weather (rated to 7°C). It's filled with hydrophobic down (that means it repels water) and is semi-rectangular, which means you can move your feet around. Plus, you can open it entirely out and use it as a blanket over two people, or wrap it round your shoulders for sitting by the fire. And, finally, it has a clever system for attaching it to a camping mat so you don't roll off.