

# Picking Your Backcountry Home — Tent Buyer's Guide

By: Mark Mazour



There's no question, being outdoors and participating in some traditional fire gazing is a lot of fun. Making sure that the fun doesn't stop there will depend upon the decisions you make a long time before the match is lit.

One of the common needs that unite men and animals is the need for shelter. The outdoors is a place that many people enjoy year round, but most will agree that it is more enjoyable if you have some shelter from the elements in the form of a tent. Whether it be from wind, rain, cold, or even insects, shelter is a must to maintain happy campers.

Several different types and styles of tents are available on the market. When faced with the question of what tent to purchase, many people will be confused at the array of selections and models. We have taken the time to decipher the "ins and outs" of tent design and hopefully can help make your decision a bit easier.

## Where and When Will You Use Your Tent?

One of the first steps in your journey will be to decide when and where you will be using your tent the most. Tents are basically divided into three different usage groups shown below.

- **Summer and Screen**

These tents, such as Cabela's Universal Shelter System, are primarily a shade provider for summer outings, and the large space design is perfect for family camping. A roof protects against light summer rains, and large mesh panels are designed in almost every wall to keep the breeze flowing in and the insects out. They can come in many varieties, including several models that are all screen, providing bug proof shelter in the shade.



While good for summer months, the excessive ventilation can result in some chilly times in the spring and fall. Also, on models without a complete fly, a combination of wind and rain at the same time can result in a wet tent.

- **Three-Season**

Three-season tents are for just that - protection for you in spring, summer or fall. Usually, they will have numerous options for ventilation such as mesh ceiling panels and windows. However, they are also provided with a sturdy rain fly that can be quickly installed to protect against downpours, dampen the wind, and hold in heat on those cold spring and fall nights.

Some three-season tents are even convertible to four-season, or winter tents. These models will have a zippered nylon panel that can be used to block off all of the ventilation panels, giving you an option for all seasons. The drawback of these models is the additional weight caused by the additional panel and zipper.



- **Winter / Mountaineering**

The primary objective of winter and mountaineering tents, such as the Eureka K-2 XT Outfitter is to protect you from severe wind and weather that can occur in winter months or at high altitudes. Designed for when you need to batten down the hatches, they come with a very sturdy fly that has attachments for numerous guy lines. Also, you will find few windows and limited ventilation, as the designers figure that all ventilation will be of the cold kind. Numerous high-strength aluminum poles will also be included to secure the fortress.

Before buying a winter or severe mountaineering tent, you should evaluate whether you will really use it under conditions even near what it is designed for. If not, you will be paying for it every time you use it. If you use a winter tent in warmer weather, you will most likely always be too warm, especially if you have to don the fly in a rainstorm. Condensation within the tent will then be a problem and a lot of your stuff can get wet. Also, the heavier frames used to construct these models will result in your packing much more weight than needed.

- **Outfitter**

Outfitter tents are designed to be set up as a outback lodge or base camp for hunting and fishing activities. Most of these tents will be a stakeout design with an internal framework of poles. Since they are used as a portable cabin - more than just for sleeping - guy lines will hold out near vertical sidewalls to give the most headroom. Usually, windows are kept to a minimum, but they come with other accessories, such as a removable floor panel to put in a wood burning stove, and a stove jack for the roof. Some excellent choices range from the highly popular Outfitter Wall Tents to the new Deluxe Alaknak II and BigHorn II.



## **Size and Weight**

You also need to decide the size and weight that you wish to live with. The biggest factor in this is how far you have to carry the tent. If you are primarily a car camper, you can never have a tent too big and heavy. However, if backpacking is in your future, these factors need to be weighed carefully.

- **Size**

The size of a tent is normally quantified by how many people can sleep on the floor. You really need to check out the actual floor dimensions of each model since the "man" ratings can definitely be misleading. The "man system" is based on laying full size sleeping pads side by side that are 20" to 25" in width. I own a supposedly 3-person mountaineering tent, but the tent is pretty full with two people and really full if the dog comes too. Keep in mind that this also counts on your sleeping right next to your tent mates, and in some mountaineering tents, two-man models result in your sleeping bag touching and almost overlapping your fellow camper. If you aren't comfortable with that, you should select a larger model. Also, look at the layout of the floor plan. Some only allow room for the campers, while others have built-in nooks and crannies for storing gear and clothes.

- **Weight**

If you are car camping or have additional help to haul your tent into the backcountry, such as an ATV, horse, or an eager 12-year old, weight is not a large factor. However, if you are carrying it on your back with a week's worth of other gear, you notice every extra ounce. If this is your plan, Cabela's has an offering in their lineup that fits this bill exactly with their XPG Tent, weighing in at only 5 lbs. 4 oz. for a two-man model

This is also where you should look at all tent offerings and decide if they are worth their weight. Many 3-season models have multiple doors or convertible windows; however, with each zipper and piece of material comes additional ounces or even pounds. Also, maybe a four-man model looks like it could have some more room, but do you want to carry the extra weight?

## **Tent Styles and Designs**

Tents have evolved in the last several years, resulting in many changes. Currently, several basic types of tent designs are on the marketplace.

- **Umbrella**

The umbrella design is primarily used in family and summer tents. This allows for a large amount of headroom, and near-vertical sidewalls allow for great ventilation. The near-vertical sidewalls also take advantage of all the floor space, essentially making your tent a cabin.



- **A-frame**

One of the originals is the A-frame design. This arrangement was created due to the fact that it was lightweight, simple to build and erect and fairly inexpensive. Basically, there is a rectangular floor with sloping sides and a ridgepole, based on a pup tent design. However, the disadvantage to this type was the low headroom and little elbowroom, due to

the sloping sides. Therefore, the next evolution was the modified A-frame, such as the Cabela's Boundary Waters. This improved upon the original A-frame by adding a center hoop pole or diagonal center poles. This caused the sidewalls to be curved outward and increased the space within. This also increased the lateral stability, giving the tent the ability to better hold its own against the wind.

- **Dome**

Then, came the evolution of the dome tent. While starting out as true domes, the tents in this category now are offered in numerous shapes that slightly resemble a curved dome. They are constructed with 2 to even 8 flexible tent poles that cross the tent to support the fabric. The result is much larger room inside the tent with up to 50% more room than the A-frame design. The curved sidewalls also shed rain and snow easier, causing it to run off before it can collect. The number and strength of the poles determine the amount of structural stability. Some lightweight 3-season tents have only two poles that go together in a crisscross fashion, while others add a third or fourth pole, such as the Cabela's Quad Pole, to increase stability and internal space. Some heavy-duty mountaineering tents have up to 8 poles that set up in a geodesic dome form to fully support the fabric.

Dome tents are also freestanding. This means you can put the tent together without first staking it down. Then you can position it on the desired location and

secure it with stakes. In mild weather, staking merely keeps the floor taut; however, if you expect windy conditions, good staking and guying is recommended. These tents can catch wind and blow away, especially if left unattended. I find one of the nicest advantages of a freestanding tent to be the clean up. Before packing the tent up, pull the stakes, pick up the tent and just shake all of the dirt, sand, and other goodies you and your tent mates have tracked in - right out the door.

- **Vestibules**

Vestibules are the front or back porches of camp life. They are usually created by an extension of the rain fly, and therefore, they have no floor. What they do have is some extra room, providing an extended dry area to store packs, boots and other camp items, especially when they are wet or muddy. Some of these are more elaborate and roomy with additional support poles for the vestibule, actually creating a small second room. Cabela's even has the granddaddy of them all with their Deluxe Alaskan Guide Vestibule available with their Alaskan Guide Model Tents. The extra-large vestibule provides another wing to the tent for cooking, eating, storing gear, or just lounging while others are sleeping. A vestibule is also handy to allow thorough ventilation, even when it is raining. They provide enough coverage at the door, that you can leave your tent door unzipped without getting wet.



Although the vestibule may seem like an excellent place to cook, eat, and store your pack, if you are in bear country, I do not recommend this. You need to keep all food-related items, and that includes the backpack the food was stored in, away from the tent, preferably hung over ten feet in the air. Also, in bear country, do not eat in the tent. You should consume and prepare all food at a designated site away from the tent.

Cooking in the vestibule can be a dangerous option. It is possible, but you must be attentive to the task at hand and provide adequate ventilation. Remember that you are cooking with fire, and your tent, as sturdy as it may be, could be well ventilated with new skylights and doors should the stove spill or flare up. The main thing you should do is prime and light your stove outside of the tent.

If you are committed to cooking in a vestibule, remember that fried foods create small particles that will rise and attach themselves to the vestibule fabric. Not only will this create a cleaning problem, but it could affect the waterproof qualities of the fabric and create a fire hazard as well.

- **Poles**

Poles are very important in a tent design; they are the foundation and framing that holds up your backcountry home. Most tents currently use shock-corded poles that allow them to be taken down easily for storage and easy assembly. Tubular fiberglass poles are the choice for most campers as they are less expensive and perform well. The only drawback is that they can become brittle and possibly splinter, especially under severe cold.

Steel poles are also used in family and cabin tents. They are strong and provide sturdy support, but this comes with an additional weight factor, making them suitable for mainly "car camping" operations.

Aluminum poles are the other option in modern tent selection. Aluminum poles are more expensive, but they are also substantially lighter in weight and offer greater strength. This is definitely a factor for consideration if you plan to pack in to the backcountry, where every ounce saved is appreciated. You also should know that all aluminum poles are not created equal. They come in various alloys that have different strength-to-weight ratios. A 6000 series alloy is definitely sufficient for most camping needs, but if you are looking for performance under severe conditions, such as four-season or mountaineering models, a 7000 series alloy provides a bit more strength.

- **Tent Fabrics and Coatings**

One confusing number you may see in tent specifications is related to the waterproof coating on the tent fabric. It will say something like "1000mm P.U. coated fly, 400mm coated floor, etc." Other than probably guessing that the bigger number is better, what does this mean? Some people think this is the thickness of the coating. Well, they are partially right. It is not the actual thickness, obviously, since 1000mm is the same as one meter, or slightly more than three feet.

These numbers are actually the result of water column test performed on the polyurethane-coated fabric. In a lab, testers take a section of fabric and develop pressure against it with a stack of a column of water. The fabric is rated at the height of the water column where three water droplets form on the surface of the fabric. A decent value for waterproofness is 1000mm; however, if you plan to use your tent often in wet conditions and severe weather, you should look for a value closer to 1500mm. Some floors are even rated higher, like the Alaskan Guide with its 3000mm floor. Don't look for values any higher than that, as the material actually breaks down if it has to be run through the coating machine several times to achieve a value greater than 3000mm.

Hopefully, the above information will be able to make sense of the crazy world of tent selection.