FIELD GUIDE FOR BUYING A TENT

A practical guide for travellers,
riders, hikers and families

GARY WOOD

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INTRODUCTION



The night that teaches you everything

Most people don't think about tents until they fail. It usually happens at 2:00 am. The wind changes direction. Rain drives sideways. A pole flexes harder than it should. Water begins pooling under your sleeping mat. You lie there wondering whether the problem is the weather — or the tent you chose.

Why knowledge trumps technology

I was tramping in New Zealand's North Island with a group from my mountaineering club. We had reached the alpine level, where the bush flora changes from beech trees to alpine grass. It was about 2100 metres above sea level. I was in a group of four; we were mates and had tramped and climbed in many of the national parks and state forests together. On this trip, we were with two other groups, a party of 12 altogether, on a three-day trip through the Urawera State Forest. It was the middle of winter, and we had been tramping through the most spectacular beech forest with snow on the ground. It was like walking through a fairy tale, with deep greens, fluorescent yellows, and bright white snow amongst the tree roots.

Our small group camped with the others for the night, with groups scurrying around to find the flattest campsite. As we set up our accommodation for the night, it started to snow. At first, it was gentle, fluffy powder; later, it became a blizzard. My group of four was very experienced in mountaineering, having camped in snow conditions and built snow caves. We carried a nylon tent fly, each of us had a wax-japara sleeping bag cover (bivy), and a down sleeping

bag that ranged from minus 20 to 35 degrees Celsius.

We found a slight rise above a flat area of tussock and set the fly from the top of the rise to the feet of our sleeping area, then secured it tight with strong guidelines. Once we had set up our sleeping bags in the bivies, we placed the packs at the open end on the windward side to keep snow out of the camp area. The blizzard continued all night, but in the morning it was clear with a bright blue sky. We woke tucked up warmly in our cocoons, refreshed after having a great sleep. All around us, people were getting up, their camp areas covered in snow with clear



impressions where their sleeping bags had been. On the windward side of our tent was a snow drift that went up to the edge of our fly, creating a wall from the prevailing wind. Someone who woke up repeatedly during the night mentioned it had dropped to minus 15 degrees Celsius. I wouldn't know; I was fast asleep like a bug in a rug.

Morale of the story

Know how to pitch your tent, where to pitch it, and the weather you might encounter. Have the right gear and build knowledge of what works and what doesn't. Buy the good equipment, not necessarily the "best equipment". If our tent had been a lightweight hiker's tent, it would have been a very uncomfortable, but probably survivable, situation, providing everything else was equal. If we were going into more open alpine country, then we might have traded our fly for a couple of expedition tents. Gear selection is part of the trip planning process. I have made snow caves and slept perfectly well in them. We knew we might be doing that, so we brought a snow shovel and snow foam with us and left ourselves plenty of time to build one.

Why use a tent?

A tent is not essential camping equipment if you are an experienced mountaineer or adventurer. However, it is one of the few pieces of equipment that separates comfort from misery in the outdoors. I would not sleep under a fly in the Australian bush; there are too many snakes and other annoying critters that like to cohabitate with you. Likewise, expedition tents in the tropics are a bad choice because they are very hot, which makes camping uncomfortable, especially in more humid conditions. This is also an argument against swags in summer.



▲ *Tents provide protection from the weather and anything that might crawl around at night*

A tent provides shelter from the elements and security for your comfort. It is a small boundary between you and other campers and/or wild animals such as snakes and spiders. There are tent designs for all sorts of situations, yet many people buy tents based on:

- Price
- Colour
- A sale sticker
- Or the biggest waterproof number on the tag

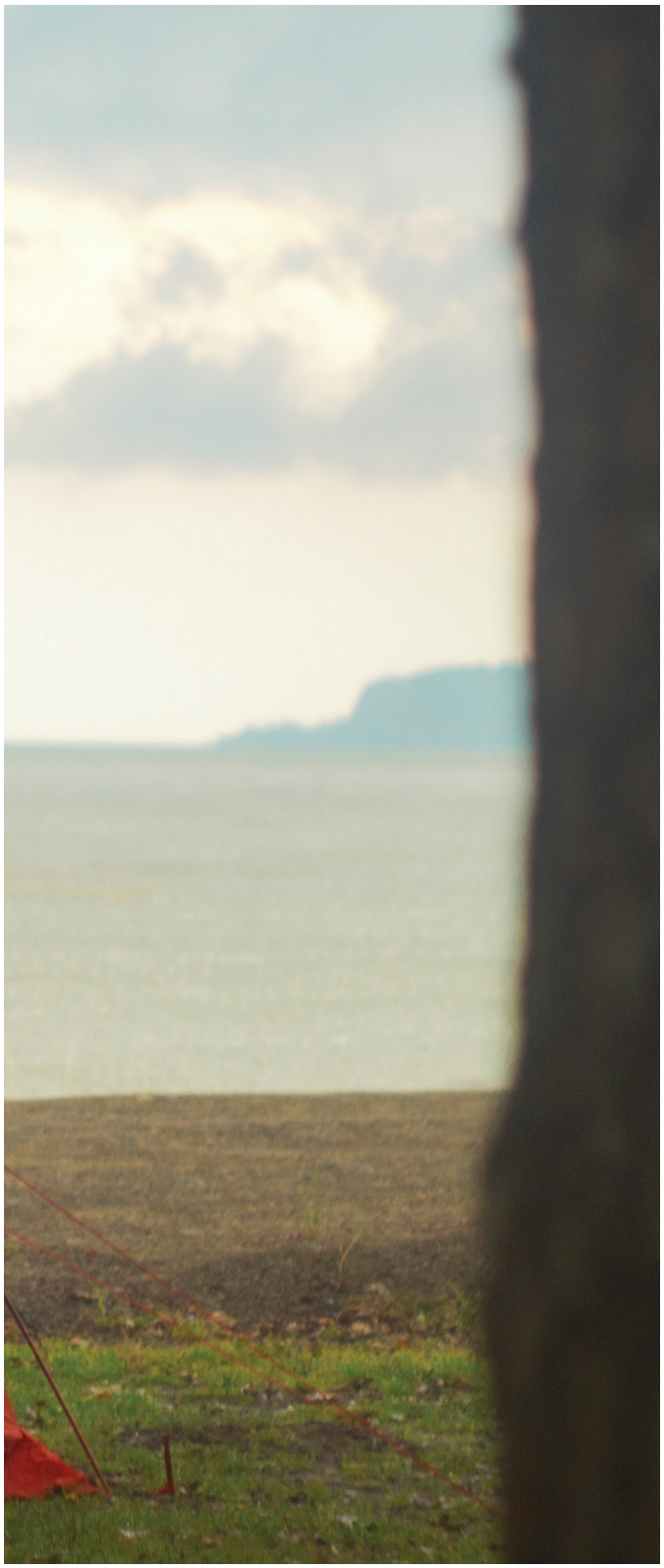
Over many years hiking through New Zealand bush, motorcycle touring through Queensland, car camping around Australia with holidays with my family, sleeping in swags, domes, expedition shelters and ultralight tents, I've learned one consistent truth:

There is no perfect tent; only the right tent for a specific purpose.

This guide will assist your understanding of the features of tents that make them suitable for different camping situations. Its purpose is to help you make an informed decision.



PART 1
UNDERSTANDING DESIGN



TENT DESIGN

When I think about a design team, it's usually a group of highly experienced mountaineers, pushing their equipment to the limit and making notes on what worked and what didn't. This is partly why many manufacturers prefer to sponsor known adventurers. In my mind, they are out in the wilderness, sleeping in adverse conditions, monitoring every creak, flap or draft point to produce the perfect tent for a given situation. For example, we can picture the team returning from a life and death trip like Mawson's expedition to Antarctica and brainstorming what worked and what didn't before creating the most practical, robust and artistic product.

In reality, that team is a group of marketing specialists and a few product engineers sitting around a table, reviewing customer surveys and complaints. Then, moving into a brainstorming session on how to address these issues. This doesn't mean they aren't adventurers in their own right; however, it's just too expensive to put a team in the field for six months to design a tent. It's also a little counter to the primary focus of the product design team. They try to give the customer what they want, not what they need. They leave the need for discussion to the in-store salesperson or to the blurb online in the specifications. This is where this guide becomes a valuable resource for you. It explains the blurb in the specifications, and it helps you define your adventure.

The functionality of the tent is often secondary to the marketing hype. For example, many tents are marketed as capable of 10,000 PU; as you will learn, this refers to the water resistance level of a particular material. Ten thousand PU is very high; it's 10,000 millimetres



▲ *Adventure motorcyclists use hiking and/or adventure tents*

of water pressing down on the fabric. The 10,000 millimetres figure comes from the hydrostatic testing, which is where the fabric starts to seep water. But consider this – how many people actually need that level of water resistance in a tent? If you experience that much water pressure on your tent, you should probably stay in a motel or buy a boat.

Let's Put This Into Perspective

A few years ago, my oldest brother was attempting a winter crossing of Mount Aspiring in the very south of New Zealand. Mount Aspiring National Park is "Wilderness Country", no tracks, no huts, just walking through the bush before mountain climbing over the peak. They were a group of eight experienced mountain climbers with ice axes, crampons, ropes and all the other gear you need for a two-week mountain climbing expedition. As part of their preparations, they organised food drops from deer cullers flying helicopters into these remote areas. They took flies instead of tents to keep the weight down.

Unfortunately, bad weather and the sound of continuous avalanches persuaded them to abandon their ascent. They returned to a gorge to wait for the water to drop so they could tramp out. The rain continued for 16 days, the water came up, and they became stuck between two flooded rivers. They were sixteen days overdue before the weather cleared enough for a helicopter to find them and take them to safety.

During their long wait, they pitched the two flies, set up their camp to minimise water ingress and waited. Eating half rations, they ripped out a page from a book and shared it around the group to keep themselves entertained. I'm pretty sure they had more than 10,000 PU of rain hit them over the 16 days they were trapped, and I'm fairly confident the fly didn't have a waterproof rating.

So the question is: why do we promote 10,000 PU as an important feature of tents when the two examples I've provided show it's not entirely relevant? Simple, it plays to people's insecurities. It helps tent manufacturers sell premium tents, so if you're the type of person who wants the best, then maybe these tents are for you.

Let's break it down

The basic requirements of a tent are to provide some degree of security from the weather and protect you from creepy crawlies and other nasties that might want to cosy up to you at night.



The key features of tent design are space, weight, material choice, strength and price. Once you understand these five aspects, you can consider additional features such as awnings, vestibules, internal pockets, pole material, season and waterproof ratings. These are secondary but important considerations.

These features align with designers who take into account other market-specific factors when developing their designs, such as durability, number of pockets, privacy, extra living space, gear storage capacity, and visual appeal.



▲ *Small adventure tents are perfect for motorcycle meets*

Every tent is a compromise

Before looking at materials or specifications, you must understand this:

Every tent is a trade-off between:

- Weight
- Strength
- Space
- Durability
- Cost

Improving one of the above specifications almost always reduces another, or, if it doesn't, it will add costs to the production process.

A lightweight hiking tent will never feel like a canvas touring tent. A fast-deploy family tent will never weigh two kilograms. An alpine expedition tent will feel excessive at the beach.

Manufacturers design tents for specific users:

- The ultralight hiker
- The touring family
- The motorcycle adventurer
- The alpine climber

Once you understand who a tent was designed for – the particular consumer – most of the manufacturer's marketing pitch becomes transparent.

Define your adventure first

When you start looking to buy a tent, consider what adventure or exploration you will be undertaking with it. For example, three people tramping through the New Zealand bush might want a sturdy but lightweight hiking tent with a good waterproof rating; they may also decide they don't want to sleep in the same tent. Those same people climbing through the mountains may want a more robust expedition tent, especially if camping in the alpine areas. Likewise, a family of three on a road trip might trade weight for convenience and durability and buy a large family tent. Context is everything when buying a tent.

Before stepping into a camping store or browsing online, answer these questions:

1. How will I travel? (Hiking? Car? Motorcycle?)
2. Where will I camp?
3. In what weather?
4. How many people?
5. How much gear must fit inside or under the cover?

▼ *Camp set-up when kyak camping*



Without clarity here, you are guessing and at the mercy of a good salesperson who probably talks non-stop about his latest Everest or K2 Climb to impress you. He has thereby made himself the top expert whose experience and knowledge is unquestionable. Which is why you need this $4,500 expedition tent with 20,000 PU, which only weighs 20kg. Perfect for hiking on Everest and on your next beach holiday!

Having defined your adventure, the next step is to consider how much space you will need. What the internal structure might look like? For example, how many pockets do you need? What is the right size?

How much space do you need?

Tents are rated using several categories, one of which is size. A tent size rating is based on an average-sized person, which is someone between 1.6 m (5’ 3”)and 1.75m tall (5’ 9”) and between 77.5 (170.8 lb) and 90.6 kilograms (199.8 lb). Therefore, a motorcycle club with four burly bikers weighing 120 kg and over 1.88 metres tall may find a four-person tent a bit of a squeeze. In the bikers’ case, using size calculations alone, you would need to consider at least a six-person tent, which is not taking into account any gear you might want to store in the tent. Being a biker, I prefer to have my own tent; I find sleeping difficult while others snore next to me.

When you buy a tent, you should buy one bigger than your immediate needs. If you are prepared to trade size for weight, you might have to put up with being a little cramped. In my experience and from the comments of my blog audience, a three-person tent is suitable for two larger adults and a little gear. Likewise, when I ride solo, I always take a two-person tent to fit my riding gear next to me, but if I’m on a walking adventure, I’ll take a single-person tent or a hammock/bivy to save weight and bulk.

Tent capacity ratings are optimistic.

A “two-person” tent often means:

- Two sleeping mats
- No gear
- Shoulder-to-shoulder space

As a rule of thumb:

- Solo travel → 2-person tent
- Two adults → 3-person tent
- Family of four → 5–6 person tent

Extra space increases comfort, airflow and liveability — especially in bad weather, but also adds weight and pack size. As previously stated, every tent is a compromise. I’ve also mentioned you can camp with minimal coverage if you’re prepared to sacrifice features, like fly screens and doors. You can choose a minimalist approach to camping when you are prepared to accept the conditions and consequences.