Tents

Dome

Tube/Bivy

A- Frame

Frog without rainfly)

What tent should you use? This is a very important decision because the tent is your front line of defense against moisture and, along with your sleeping bag, where you spend about a third of your time. Many troops have tents that scouts can borrow, but eventually you may want your own or parents may need to invest in one in order to share the camping experience. As with other equipment, the mistake that is often made is buying the $50 special at the local department store. These tents are generally too heavy and unreliable for backpacking and tend to be difficult to set up.

Tents generally are some variation of one of the four basic designs shown at the top of this page. As with other equipment, a wide range of tents are serviceable as long as they meet some basic criteria and the limitations of some designs are considered. For example, although tube/bivy tents are a favorite of light through-packers for summer because they tend to be light and easy to set up, they are not such a good choice for winter camping because the absence of a free-standing frame allows them to sag under snow weight. Geodesic dome expedition tents are great in winter, but hardly the choice for summer backpacking because their extra frame structure and heavier cloth cause them to weigh twice the desirable backpacking weight and often have marginal circulation.

Basic criteria for choosing a tent are:

- **Total pack weight less than 6 pounds for a two-person tent.** You should be able to find a comparable single-person tent that is less that 4 lbs. Be cautious to look at the "packing weight" because it is likely 1/2 to 1 pound more than the "tent weight" because tent weight only includes the tent body, fly and poles while packing weight also includes the rope/cords, stakes, stake bag, pole bag and tent bag.

- **Double-wall construction and a full coverage water repellant (coated) fly with taped or sealed seams.** Other designs risk wicking water when items lean against the side.

- **Nylon (not polypropylene) floor with taped or sealed seams.** There is a reason that cheap tents use poly flooring but more expensive ones don't -- they use coated nylon. Poly is inexpensive but tends to leak around the stitching, is non-forgiving if even slight separation of the "strands" occurs and small holes tend to expand into large ones. The solution for poly floor problems is duct tape -- sewing just creates more holes. For nylon floors use adhesive nylon patches (available at most outdoor stores), which can also be sewn and seam sealed. For larger holes, like a 1" burn hole in a troop tent floor, use a patch on each side -- they seal to each other in the whole area.

- **Two (cross) ventilation ports.** Often this is screening in the door and a rear window. Many tents have small vents in the top to let vapor escape and have "breathable fabric for walls above the rainfly area. Ventilation can be a problem during summer for full-coverage tents with vestibules unless the vestibule flap is open and fastened back. Also make sure that the sleeping compartment (body) is fully enclosed from insects, reptiles and rodents.

- **Heat-treated aluminum poles/hoops a plus.** Fiberglass poles work OK but tend to split after repeated use and are somewhat heavier. Setup may also be a little more difficult with fiberglass poles because of the

external joining collars may hang up on long fabric tent body sleeves or catch attachment clips. Because aluminum poles usually have internal connecting collars, they slid easier through fabric and don't have raised portions to catch the clips when stretching out the fabric. Very few tents under $100 use aluminum because of the cost. Replacement fiberglass poles can be cut from generic repair parts available at most department stores that carry tents. Although, they are durable, aluminum replacements often require a visit to specialty (outfitter) shops or catalogs (like REI). As long as weight is acceptable, don't fret about an otherwise serviceable tent having fiberglass poles.

- **Freestanding a plus.** Some A-frame and almost all tube/bivy style tents are not freestanding. That means the tent will not hold up under its own weight without stakes driven into the ground to "stretch" it out. Even freestanding tents require staking in wind and to "stretch" out the tent (rain) fly. A non-stretched fly often leaks because moisture doesn't bead off or runs against the tent body fabric (which may not be waterproof or may allow "wicking"). As mentioned earlier, absence of a full frame structure may also allow sagging during heavy rain or snow. Free standing tents are a plus if you also use your tent in congested campgrounds because their stakes tend to be placed very near the main tent and, therefore, are less susceptible to "tripping" passersby. Because framing weighs, non-free standing tents often weigh less and are good choices when conditions aren't extreme.

- **Adequate headroom.** To sit up in a tent you need at least 36 inches of height. Most tents have 42 inches. Many tube and bivy tents don't have this. Part of the rationale for the "frog" tent was to add a freestanding frame and headroom to the bivy design -- which often has 24 or less inches of headroom. This is important if you want to do something in your tent, other than sleep, during inclement weather. Some people refer to bivies as "coffins".

- **Short pole sleeves and clip fastening of fabric to frame.** Until recently, fabric sleeves that hold the poles or hoops to the tent body tended to run from the bottom of one side, over the top and down the other side with only a short intermission at the top. This required that poles be "feed" through the sleeves, made them hard to setup, and sometimes resulted in broken poles. Raised collars joining fiberglass poles compounded the problem. Now, some tents use only clips. The trend seems to be to have short sleeves (for support) at the top combined with clips down the sides. Besides ease of setup, non-full sleeves allow for better air circulation. Full-sleeve tents were quite stable in wind because of the structural support offered by the full sleeves and the fly was fastened just at the bottom. Part sleeve and clip-only tents are not so stable and their frame poles tend to "move around" in wind (leading to collapse and breakage) unless they are fastened to the fly. Most of these flies have Velcro fasteners about half way up the wall to wrap around the tent poles to make the frame more rigid. Short sleeves and clips are an important feature for ease of setup, but make sure that the tent has these mechanisms for fastening the fly to the poles for rigidity. If it doesn't, reject it. Further, if you aren't going to religiously fasten these stabilizers, stay away from this style of tent.

- **Consider investing in a ground cloth.** It both provides a moisture barrier and protects the floor from sharp rocks and sticks. Both nylon and polypropylene ones are available. A poly tarp provides protection and comfort in smoothening out the sleeping place. Ground clothes can also be cut from construction plastic.

Tents must be air dried before storing to avoid musty smell and fungus from weakening the fabric and eating away the water repellant coating.

If you are packing your tent in an interior pack compartment, keep it in a separate bag to avoid contamination from food or other smellables and NEVER use your tent bag as a bear canister. The food smell gets transferred from the stuff sack to the tent -- your sleeping compartment. Do you want to be a bear lollipop?