

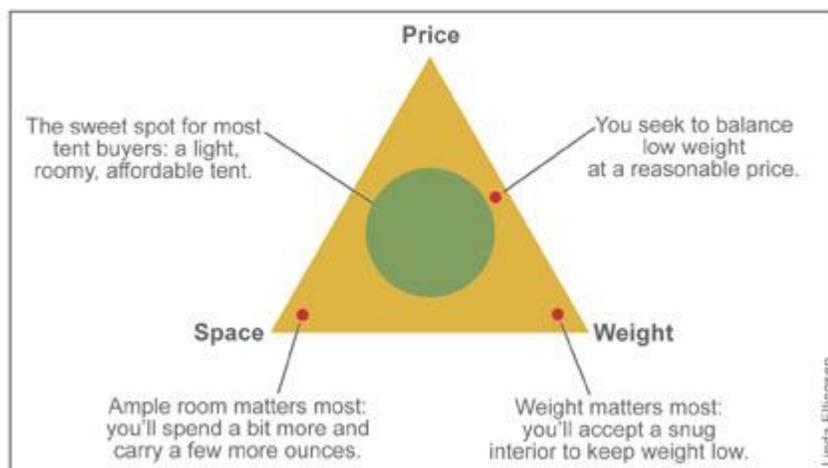
How to Choose a Backpacking Tent

A backpacking tent offers so much—a cozy dry zone when raindrops fall, a patch of privacy in wide-open spaces, a fabric fortress that buffers you from ill-mannered insects.

Lots of good backpacking tents are available. Choosing the right one for you involves:

- Evaluating your personal preferences and the conditions you commonly experience.
- Finding the right balance among a trio of factors:
 - Space, Weight, Price

Imagine those factors mapped out as a triangle. Where would you fit inside its parameters?



Secondary factors can also play a role in your decision:

- Weather expectations, Design features, Ease of setup

Once you size up your preferences and gauge how they compare to these factors, you can narrow your choices.

A Quick Guide to Backpacking Tents

SPACE: How many people will usually sleep in the tent?

A: Backpacking tents are categorized by their per-person capacity: 1-person (solo), 2-person, 3-person and 4-person. Tent names often include a number that indicate their maximum capacity.

To keep weight low, tents are usually designed to fit snugly. The resulting space is often a little more compact than many people prefer. A snug space often suits cozy couples just

fine, though we find that 2 larger people typically wake up friendlier if they spent the night in a 3-person tent or a roomy 2-person model.

If possible, visit a store and examine tents in person. Often stores have several tents already set up so you hop inside and judge how well they match your size, your companions and your sleeping style. Evaluating tents in person is a superb way to shop for a backpacking tent.

WEIGHT: What is a desirable weight for a backpacking tent?

A: Solo tents range between 2 and 3 pounds. Two-person tents commonly range from 3 to 5 pounds, but may reach up to 6 or drop almost to 2. Aim for a per-person weight of less than 3 pounds. Getting close to 2, or even less, is excellent. Realize, though, that a low per-person weight usually results in a snug interior.

PRICE: What can I expect to pay for a quality backpacking tent?

A: Two-person tents range from \$100 to \$500; the majority are priced near the middle of that range. A higher price tag usually buys you extra refinements and lower weight. If you backpack infrequently, aim for the lower end of that range.

WEATHER: What are the conditions I expect to encounter?

A: Most summertime backpackers choose a 3-season tent, meaning it's suitable for the moderate weather of spring, summer and fall. If you often camp in warm or humid conditions, search out tents with ample ventilation—lots of mesh panels. Several tents have canopies (upper sections) that use 100% mesh. Mesh panels are nice for stargazing on mild nights when a rainfly is not needed. Three-season tents are by far the most popular backpacking tents.

Often face chilly, windy nights? You might be a candidate for an extended-season tent. Expecting to face sustained winds or planning to venture out in winter months? You'll need an expedition/mountaineering tent, also known as a 4-season tent

Overall, the wise move is to carry a tent equipped to handle the worst conditions you expect to encounter. Naturally, the feathery weights of summer-oriented tents are very appealing. But if you are planning a late-autumn trip at high elevation where snow and high winds are possibilities, you're better off equipping yourself with a more substantial tent engineered to withstand harsher conditions.

It is not unusual for serious backpackers to own 2 or more tents so they can adjust their gear assortment to suit the weather they expect to face.

FEATURES: What "little things" matter most on a tent?

A: Two stand out:

- Doors. Very light tents often include a single door at the head end. That's fine, but many tents offer 2 doors in 2-person tents, giving each sleeper a separate entry

and exit point so each individual can come and go as they please. Two doors are nice, for example, if your companion wants to turn in early while you want to make a late entrance after enjoying some stargazing.

- Vestibules. These are extendable sections of a tent's rainfly (requiring stakes and a maybe a few guylines) that create a sheltered dry zone outside your tent for stashing footwear and other gear. Nearly all tents offer at least 1, though they vary in size by tent model. If vestibules are important to you, look for high square foot numbers in tent specifications.

SETUP: How easy is it to pitch?

A: Most tents offer freestanding design, meaning a tent can stand without the use of stakes. This generally results in a fast setup. If the need arises, freestanding tents are simple to relocate—just lift them by their poles and carry them to a new spot.

In general, the more pole sections a tent includes, the more complex its setup might appear. After a couple of setups, though, the steps of erecting a backpacking tent become an automated, almost instinctive process.

Tip: Practice setup at home before your first trip. Any tent setup can appear challenging on the first try. It's easier to grasp not-immediately-obvious setup techniques when you're not pressured by a setting sun or approaching storm.

So there you have it; the basics of tent shopping. If you're an experienced backpacker who may be looking to upgrade, read on as we take an in-depth look at the finer details of tent design and construction. Often the factors that distinguish 1 tent from another lie in the subtle details explained here.

Tent Size and "Livability"

Ideally, the interior of a backpacking tent should deliver "Goldilocks dimensions"—not too snug, not too roomy (since lots of room usually results in higher weight). The perfect tent should feel just right.

Sleeper Capacity

Here is a truism worth remembering: Not all tents are created equal. No industry standard exists that defines per-person tent dimensions. So it's possible, even likely, that Brand X's interpretation of a 2-person tent may vary noticeably from Brand Z's.

Of course, if you and a friend have ever hopped inside a 2-person tent and remarked, "Y'know, this seems a little tight," you are not alone. To keep weight low, backpacking tents use space-efficient designs that many times cause walls to slope steeply toward the crown of a tent. The weight-savings achieved are terrific, but sloping walls reduce sit-up space and can make a tent's interior feel cramped.

Yet most time people spend inside a tent is spent lying down. Does sit-up space really matter? It can if a storm confines you to your tent for a day or longer. During the time you're not snoozing, some extra room is a nice thing.

When evaluating tent capacity ratings, our general advice is this: Assume a close fit. If you seek more room, consider upsizing your tent capacity by 1 person, particularly if you or your usual tent companion(s):

- are large people
- are claustrophobic
- toss and turn at night
- sleep better with more than average elbow room

Gauging Interior Volume

Typically, 3 specifications are provided by manufacturers to help shoppers mentally size up a tent's interior:

- Floor dimensions
- Floor area (square feet)
- Peak height

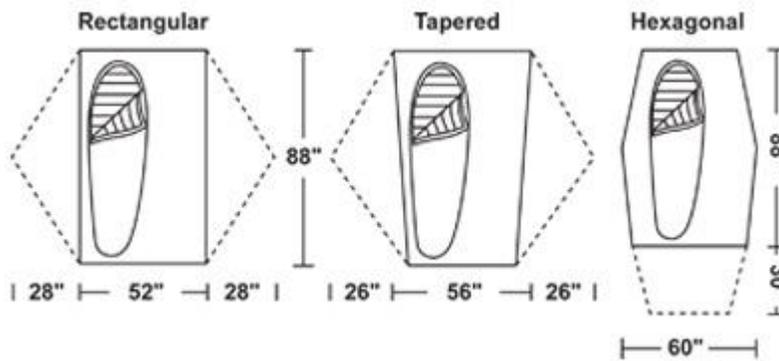
These specs, though, cannot help you gauge how a tent's walls are angled. The more vertical the walls, more "livable" space can be found inside a tent. The pitch of walls in each tent is different. Some tents are rounded and dome-like, offering more overall headroom; others are wedge-shaped, with minimal space at the foot end, where sit-up space is reduced but weight savings are gained.

How can you assess a tent's interior volume? Here are 3 options:

- Visit a store, ask to set up a tent and hop inside. That's always the best plan.
- If shopping online, eyeball a tent's photo and study the pitch of its walls. If the walls angle steeply toward the tent's ceiling, you're probably looking at a weight-efficient tent (great!) that offers only modest interior volume (the tradeoff).
- Use the 3 traditional tent specs above to mentally size up a tent. Here are some details for doing so:

Floor dimensions: Tent floor plans show length and width measurements, usually in inches. Keep in mind that floor plans usually list only a tent's widest measurement—at the shoulder end of the tent.

Many tent floors are not rectangular. Some taper and become narrower at the foot end (a weight-saving technique). Some 3- or 4-pole designs create a floor that is hexagonal (wider in the hip area). The extra poles make hexagonal shapes (common in extended-season and 4-season tents) more stable but add weight.



Generally, 2-person tents measure somewhere in the mid-80s to upper-80s for length and mid-50s for width. Since standard sleeping pads are 20" wide, that gives 2 people about 14" to 15" inches of hip-to-hip wiggle room—not spacious, but adequate.

As for length, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, as of 2002, the average American male stands 5'9½" (or 69.3 inches); the average female is 5'4" (63.8 inches). Most backpacking tents easily accommodate people of such heights.

Yet tall people—6' (72 inches) and taller—may feel a little cramped inside tents that offer a fairly common length of 84 inches. Why? Because tent walls slope in at the foot and head of most tents.

Advice for taller backpackers: Look for tents with floor lengths measuring at least in the high 80s or preferably 90 and beyond.

Taller backpackers should also take note of an encouraging trend: "Plus" versions of some of popular tents, adding a few inches in width and length to accommodate people with larger profiles. Admittedly, weights will rise a few ounces, but a few inches of "plus" space can feel luxurious.

Floor area (square feet): Two tents may offer identical floor dimensions but claim different square footage. How can that be? The tent with the smaller floor area number most likely tapers more narrowly at the foot end.

A higher floor area number indicates it offers more floor-level space. (The same goes for the square footage shown for vestibule areas.) This number, however, does not account for the slope of the walls. So floor area is a useful number to know, but a less-than-perfect gauge of a tent's overall livability.

Peak height: Generally, the higher the peak height, the roomier the interior. Just realize that peak height is measured at a single spot inside a tent and does not depict the entire interior of a tent and its sloping walls.

Peak height in tents is determined by positioning a ball or sphere, 8" in diameter, at the highest point within the tent. (The technique, used industry-wide) The ball serves a stand-in for a camper's head, and peak height is measured from the top of the ball. Tents with pointy crowns may technically offer a higher absolute height, but the ball measurement offers a more realistic "functional" peak height.