

Sleeping around

Since we humans lost our all over hair covering, we have needed protection from the elements. This is never truer than when we are rolling out the zeds. A good sleeping system, whatever the format, will keep you warm and dry in the absence of this natural fur.

Several sleeping systems come to mind. When I say 'system', I mean a combination of a cover and mats - analogous to your duvet and mattress at home. The most common cover is a sleeping bag which is often used in combination with either a foam or inflatable mattress. The Australians swear by the 'SwagBag'. The SwagBag is basically a bedroll, comprising a mattress, and a waterproof base. Some also have a bivvy (tent cover). You roll them up complete with a sleeping bag or duvet. They are very comfortable, warm and ultra quick to set up, but suffer from a very large pack size.

Like the multiple layers of your clothing, a sleeping bag needs to trap air around your body. Your body heats the air and the insulation keeps the heat from leaking away into the surroundings. The better it can do this, the warmer it can keep you. There are essentially two types of construction for sleeping bags - synthetic and down insulated. Both types can be loaded with different amounts of filling to achieve the desired level of insulation. Down insulated bags carry a premium price tag, but are more efficient than their synthetic counterparts for a given fill weight.

Manufacturers describe their bags as '3' or '4' season or give them two temperature ratings 'comfort' and 'extreme'. In theory a '3 season' should be warm enough for all seasons except winter, but not bake you in summer. '4 season' is a bit of a misnomer because any bag warm enough for winter is likely to be too warm for summer. Comfort and extreme temperature ratings indicate at what temperature a bag is comfortable down to, then down to what temperature it would keep you alive. In my experience, one should ignore the extreme rating. Sure, you would be alive at the lower temperature - but you would be a bit miserable! Some manufacturers are a bit 'enthusiastic' when describing their products. If you see a bag that claims comfort to minus 15 for £90 - then its a fair bet that you would not be a happy camper at anything like that temperature. Also, somewhere deep in the small print, you will find that temperature ratings apply to a fit, 25 year old male. As we get older, we feel the cold more. Women, because of their physiology, should allow an extra 5 degrees compared with their male counterparts.

When shopping for a sleeping bag, you will pay a premium for bags that have a high insulation capability, but a small pack size. These bags are meant for backpacking. As you have a large 4x4 to put your stuff in, you do not need to pay this premium. If I am asked for a recommendation for a sleeping bag, I will suggest my main squeeze which is the Warmth Unlimited Tundra 'Pure and Dry' bag. These can be bought at different temperature ratings and are priced at around £220 for a zero degree rated bag down to £320 for a -40 degree variant. I have used my -30 degree bag in temperatures from perhaps +5 degrees down to -30 or so and found it very comfortable. At the lower temperatures I have kept my basewear on as a practical matter (to make it easier to get out of bed in the morning!). At minus 10, I tried this and had to remove it as I was too warm in the night.

As a side issue, for warmer nights, I bought a Haglofs branded bag. Whilst a well respected brand, I found this synthetic filled bag less comfortable as it feels 'sweaty' after an hour.

It is worth mentioning a sleeping system that was developed by Tennier Industries for the American Armed forces. Now, generally I am not impressed by some of the kit that gets handed out to the boys, but Tennier make a three part sleeping bag. It has a goretex outer bag and two internal bags. I have been using one successfully for about a year now and many of my customers have bought them for moderately cold trips. We tested one in the Arctic this January and I would say that they perform really well down to about minus 10 to minus 15. I am often found sleeping outside or round a camp fire in one of these. The other bonus is that they are relatively cheap. You can generally pick a new one up for about £100-£140 depending on how eagle eyed you are.

So, you are warm - now how about comfortable? There are two main construction ideas for a sleeping mat - air inflatable and foam. There is technically a third type which is the 'self-inflating' foam mattress where the padding is augmented by introducing a little air into the mat when it unrolls. There is a huge amount of variation between a professional or expedition quality ground mat and a generic type that you might find in Argos. For example, a Swiss company 'Exped' make some very impressive down insulated inflatable mattresses. They are coated to make them 'slip' resistant. They have an internal baffling system which further insulates in a similar manner to a sleeping bag. Expeds are available in varying thicknesses, but carry a price tag of up to £130 for the top of the range. They are designed to effectively insulate down to -38 degrees in the 9cm deep top of the range format. Even this largest item rolls up to pack down to 28 long x 18 cm diameter. You may have guessed that I am a big fan having used these mats across Norway and Sweden for the last few years.

Therm-a-rest, a company formed in the 1970's by two former Boeing engineers, pioneered the 'self-inflating' type of mat. These are foam mats, with a hollow inside which sucks in air like bellows when unrolled. They are quicker to setup than the Exped as they are self-inflating, but do not insulate as efficiently. Having said that, for moderately cold climates, they are a good bet because they are set up in the time it takes to unroll them, whilst the Exped takes several minutes to inflate. Therm-a-rest have their fair share of imitators, but they are widely held to still be at the top of their game.

It is worth mentioning a cot or stretcher. The two most popular brands in this country are by Oztent and Gelert. The Oztent 'Goanna' is another Australian import which is made of steel and is more robust and heavier than the cheaper aluminium Gelert. I have both and like them. They are quick to set up, but I do not find them as comfortable as an inflatable mat, and oddly do not seem to insulate as well, even though the stretcher is a foot off the ground. I suspect this is because cold air can continually circulate beneath.

If you have a roof tent, your mattress has already been chosen for you. My Hannibal has a mattress which, whilst fine for most of the year, does not insulate enough in the winter. I have found that it is worth putting something between your sleeping bag and the mattress and my favourite insulator is a reindeer skin. These are great multi-use items when in the great outdoors. I often throw them on a camping chair when sitting round the campfire, or on top of my stretcher if using one instead of a mat.

A few tips:

- 1) Most sleeping bags have a baffle system round the neck. It is well worth tightening this correctly. It prevents air from your breath circulating down into the bag and introducing moisture which will eventually condense or even freeze.
- 2) Most sleeping bags have a hood - whilst not the most fun, they really do keep you warmer by avoiding heat loss through the head. If you are losing heat through your head, the body will compensate by slowing blood flow down to other areas. There is an old Inuit saying "If your feet are cold - put something on your head!"
- 3) It is worth putting fresh socks and underwear on to sleep in. Sweat from the day will reduce the insulating properties of any clothing. It could be worth keeping a set of underwear aside to sleep in for the whole trip.
- 4) Sleeping bags need to 'loft' before they become efficient. Try to set your bed up at least half an hour before you expect to use it.
- 5) Sleeping bags or duvets are compromised if their insulation gets wet. Some bags, like the Warmth Unlimited mentioned above have a waterproof coating. If yours doesn't, take extra care.

I hope the above provides food for thought. It is by no means an exhaustive list of options. I plan to add to this article over time, so please send me any information that you think should be added for future groups.