

Backcountry

The Gear Closet »



Oddball Tents

Four uniquely designed tents shake up the sleepy world of shelters

Sometimes I think too much. In six years of writing this column, my best pieces have always been the ones that were the least over-worked. Often, the best ideas are the simplest. This brings me to this month's test, which is the traditional July review of tents. Having covered a wide range of shelters over the years, I thought I'd try to be all clever and review a bunch of unusual tents. Having spent some time with these odd ducks, I now realize there's something to be said for tried-and-true designs. The dome shape is the most common tent design for a good reason. I have myriad shelter options available to me on any given day, and yet, I almost always reach for my dome tent. Let's take a look at this motley bunch of shelters.

Integral Designs Sil Dome

\$200, advertised weight 1 lb. 14 oz.

Not freestanding

This simple structure is a snap to put up—it took me less than a minute. The Sil Dome is supported with one very long pole, and comes with four stakes. Once I had it pitched, I climbed in and realized that there was almost zero headroom. Fortunately, it's designed so that the arc of the pole can be tightened by moving the stakes and tensioning the handy strap that runs under the tarp. Problem solved! Pitching the Sil Dome with a higher profile presents a small problem, easily solved. Pack another four stakes to set along the midpoints,

The Sil Dome from Integral Designs can be pitched less than a minute and makes a great shelter for the fast and light crowd.



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and the tarp pitches wonderfully tight. This structure *is* a tarp, and does not have a floor, so some backpackers may prefer to bring along some type of footprint. There is a bug liner available and it makes this into more of a tent. No pockets in this shelter either. This is a really nice piece, something I'd definitely use for fast and light trips.

The Sierra Designs Origami Tarp 2 weighs in at under three pounds and is very spacious. But the center pole can get in the way of things.



Sierra Designs Origami Tarp 2

\$179, advertised weight 2 lbs 8 oz.

Not freestanding

SD's cleverly-named Origami Tarp pitches very simply: one center pole, and stake out the corners, and you're done. The interior space is palatial, though the center pole is a nuisance. It's possible to raise the

MSR's Skinny Too is just that: skinny. Two people will probably feel cramped in its narrow confines, although the tent has ample head room.



roof by tying it to a tree branch above it. When below treeline, this is advisable. The pole can be replaced with a trekking pole to reduce weight, and myriad stake and guy points make the options for pitching this versatile piece practically limitless. Like the Sil Dome, this is a tarp rather than a tent, so no floor (one is available as an extra option) and no pockets. The roof has a set of vents that increase airflow nicely. One minor complaint: the tie-backs for opening up the tarp are too short. At under three pounds, this is an excellent option for fast and light travel.

MSR Skinny Too

\$249, advertised weight 4 lb. 9 oz.

Not freestanding

I liked the idea of the Skinny Too, that is, until I got it pitched. I got inside and liked the headroom, but immediately realized it was on the narrow side. This single-wall tent is constructed of siliconized nylon—

two thoughts on this. It stretches after it's been put up, and it will need to be re-tensioned before bedtime. A working knowledge of knots will help with this. The other problem is that it was crackly noisy in the wind, so much so that I could not leave the excellent rear window partially open due to the constant "flapFLAPflap."

The roof is lined in mesh to assist with airflow, and it has a big zipper running across it horizontally. I couldn't figure out what this was for—maybe it's intended to be some kind of gear loft? Funky.

I slept in the Skinny Too by myself, and it was quite roomy—for one person. I had a traveling companion who was sleeping in another tent, and asked him to come into the tent so we could check it out for size.

We did this without any sleeping bags, and we were still elbow-to-elbow and touching the walls of the

tent. Neither of us is what you might call a small person, so your mileage may vary. One other nit: MSR tents generally come with these wimpy little needle stakes, so they need to at least partially be replaced with tougher "Y" stakes, also from MSR.

My conclusion? For about the same money, and less weight, wait for the MSR Hubba Hubba to go on sale.

Nemo Morpho AR

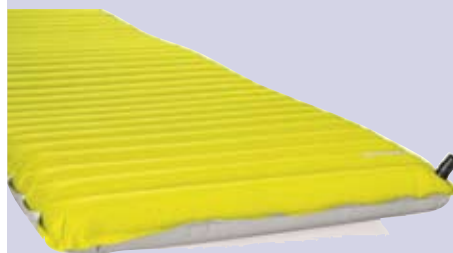
\$395, advertised weight 4 lbs 15 oz.

Not Freestanding

The Nemo Morpho is possibly the weirdest tent of the whole lot. The Morpho doesn't use traditional poles, rather it relies on what Nemo calls "airbeams," or inflatable chambers. Pretty cool idea, but is it really necessary? The airbeams filled up quickly with the included foot pump, but pitching the tent was not especially easy. The provided stakes are burly enough, but their design makes them tough on hands—a rock is definitely required. The guy points lack a tensioning system, so half the stakes had to be set twice. Once the tent was up, it seemed quite burly, and in fact it's a bit of a sauna in warmer weather. I think it would be great for snow camping since the shape's right for snow shedding, and the tent is very stable. The front entry can be configured a few different ways, with either a single front door or two smaller front doors. The small doors were kind of dinky, but when they were open, ventilation was significantly better. The Morpho is poor in the pocket department, though there are a few loops near the ceiling for hanging things. The airbeams are claimed to help make the tent less bulky, but I found it very bulky and could not get it back into its stuff sack without using the Jaws of Life. I was a little skeptical about the advertised weight of this tent, so I threw it on the scale, stuff sack, pump, tent, and all, and it comes in a closer to six pounds—a respectable weight for a winter tent, pretty heavy for a summer one. ♦



Cool Gear »



Therm-A-Rest Neo Air

\$149

The Neo Air is the first ultralight sleeping pad from Therm-A-Rest that's filled with nothing but air. By omitting the foam found in most pads, they've been able to get the weight down to an impressive 14 ounces for a full-length pad. The air chambers run horizontally, your personal preference will determine whether or not that's a plus. I found the

Neo Air most comfortable when inflated about half-way, and was pleased that the surface was grippy enough to keep me on top of the pad. The Neo Air is not self-inflating, but it's easy enough to blow up, only taking a moment. My biggest complaint? This pad was way too narrow for me. Granted, I'm somewhat of an Amazon, but it's really made for skinny folks. Cascade Designs promises a larger version that's five inches wider will be available soon. Something to think about: Air-only pads like this one are very lightweight and comfortable, but require extra care to avoid punctures. In contrast to a traditional Therm-A-Rest, the Neo Air does not have any foam fill in it, so if you get a hole in it in the backcountry, it will leave you basically sleeping on the hard cold ground.

—Allison Woods

The Nemo Morpho AR has inflatable "poles" that you fill with an included foot pump. Trying to get the tent deflated and back in the stuff sack proved difficult. The tent isn't particularly lightweight either.