

Backcountry

The Gear Closet »

Pitch These Tents

When gear designers excel, you sleep well

They say that innovation is often incremental. This spring, I was pleased to discover a number of lighter tents on the market that sounded suspiciously comfortable. How did they do that? By pointing a critical eye to these three-season, two-person, less-than-4-pound tents, I found the answer. The magic lies in small details: lighter denier fabrics where possible, welded seams and innovative hardware.



Mountain Hardwear's Lightpath 2 serves up excellent value, though in a compact package.

Mountain Hardwear Lightpath 2
\$175; 3 pounds, 13 ounces

Lightening up your gear usually comes at a high price, but at just \$175, this tent allows budget-conscious hikers to get in on the game. Though not freestanding, the Lightpath does set up pretty easily, with a pair of parallel precurved poles providing support. This style is best pitched with



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two sets of hands in order to stake out evenly. The cleverly designed rain fly door can be opened via a pair of zippers running up the sides, allowing the entire front to be open. In foul weather, the fly door window is a nice touch. Welded seams save weight and give a touch of “wow.”

As the door in the tent body is a little skimpy, and the interior space tapers down considerably at the feet, I'd call this one a good tent for sleeping, one I'd rather not be in while waiting out a storm. Very large mesh pockets are a welcome consideration. The tent is advertised at 80 inches, but I measured the sample to be 84 inches, so it should accommodate hikers up to around 5 foot, 10 inches.

Sierra Designs Vapor Light 2 XL
\$320; 3 pounds, 14 ounces

Sierra Designs' long-standing partnership with tent pole manufacturer DAC has brought forward some outstanding innovations in how poles and fabric come together. Here we see “Jake's Foot,” a weight-saving refinement to bring tent, fly and pole together. I struggled with it at first, but with a little practice the system is simple and effective. Do play with this tent at home—the pole setup is not intuitive and I had to look at the directions a time or two. I also had trouble getting this one put together in the wind, but the resulting sturdy tent was worth the wait. DAC's aluminum “V” stakes are not only quite strong, but also lighter than the “Y” stakes I typically recommend. Unfortunately, the Vapor Light only comes with six of them, just enough for a basic setup. For a bad weather scenario, you'll need two more.

For a freestanding tent under 4 pounds, this one has monstrous interior space. A 93-inch length will accommodate even the tallest hikers. Palatial interior and a fully mesh body to mitigate condensation? Sounds like a tent that's custom made for wet Washington high-country trips. The vestibule is only decent, but with so much interior space, who's complaining?

Gear Tip

Stake without stakes

Are you ever tempted to go without stakes when pitching your freestanding tent? No need for stakes if it's not convenient, right?

Sorry! Wrong! Freestanding tents are designed to be staked and they are much less likely to blow away when they are. If your campsite is a slab of rock, try “staking” the corners with large stones. What about snow? Simple. Fill stuff sacks or plastic grocery bags with snow, attach these to the corners of the tent and bury the bags in snow. When your tent is pitched tight, it will perform better in both wet and windy weather.

—A.W.

The innovative “Jake's Foot” corner design is lightweight and simple to assemble—once you get the hang of it.



For tall people who want ultralight tents, Sierra Designs' new Vapor Light 2 XL really delivers.

MontBell Thunder Dome 2

\$299; 3 pounds, 7 ounces

At a shade under 3.5 pounds, the Thunder Dome is the lightest of the three tents reviewed in this issue. Its classic dome design is dead simple to pitch. Four poles come together at a hub and can be simply dropped in with no finding which way makes a rectangle. This tent goes up easily in the wind, with the fly attaching securely with Fastex buckles. The vestibule is serviceable, though the vestibule door has a one-way zipper. A single side door makes for easy access, but some may object to this layout, as it requires the “inside” hiker to crawl over the “outside” hiker to get in or out of the tent.

Initially, I thought that MontBell should upgrade the Thunder Dome with lighter findings, but on second thought, these somewhat larger and burlier findings will be much easier to manage in wind or after dark. The interior space of the tent is quite roomy, and the side walls are steep. The Thunder Dome is plenty wide, but at a mere 85 inches long, it is best suited to hikers less than 6 feet tall. ♦

The Thunder Dome's classic design makes it a no-brainer to set up in the dark.



Gear Debate

Are you a stuffer or a folder?

Here's an age-old campground debate: is it better to stuff your tent into its stuff sack, or fold and roll? Most experts agree on the stuffing method, as repeated folding can create weaknesses in the fabric's waterproof coating.

If you're really adventurous, try packing your tent into your backpack with no stuff sack at all. It can conform to fit all of the empty spots between your other pieces of gear if it's packed that way. Just be careful not to pack it near sharp objects that could damage your tent's fragile fabrics.

—A.W.

How to Do It » Pack Confidently

Backpacking is fun, or at least it should be, but an improperly loaded pack that doesn't carry well can wash the fun out of your trip faster than a mountain thunderstorm. Follow these packing tips to properly load your pack, keep your gear organized and help lighten your load.

Most how-to-pack a backpack advice starts at the same point: put your sleeping bag on the bottom, load your heavier items in the middle and finish with the lighter items on the top. That's good advice. Do that.

Avoid carrying a bunch of loose clutter. Get organized with ditty bags. My favorite is the 9-by-13 inch (2-liter) size. It's a good size for a pillow, and I find it easier to locate items when they are in this bag than when I have things jam-packed into a smaller size. The food and shelter bags are heaviest and go in the middle of the pack on top of the sleeping bag. Clothing is the lightest and goes on top.

As you pack, list every item on a piece of paper. When you're done packing, fold the list so it will fit into a sandwich bag and store it in the top of your pack. Out on the trail, list the items you wish you had brought along and, more importantly, draw a line through the items that you don't use. After about three trips, you'll have your own perfect packing list. I cut my pack weight from 40 pounds to under 25 pounds using this approach, yet I'm 100 percent confident that everything I need to enjoy my hike is in my pack.

Finally, no matter how tempting it may be, do not keep jamming stuff into your pack until it is completely full. Just because you have a little extra space does not automatically mean you should fill it. Use your list, pack what you need and leave behind what you don't. Keep items you want easy access to in the top compartment (map, energy bars) or lash them to the outside (raingear, mosquito head net).

—Dave Kilhefner