

Camping equipment

Where the air is good and the day is fine...you're going to find Which? out in the country (testing tents, sleeping bags and sleeping mattresses)

Huddled around a can of baked beans with the wind buffeting your tent flaps; waking up with a local Friesian whispering in your ear and your back as stiff as a tent pole – for many of us, camping is a distant and uncomfortable memory. But it's time to think again because camping has come a long way in the last 20 years or so. Modern family tents are lighter and easier to put up than the tents of yore. Inside, there are separate compartments, including bedrooms to let you hide from the kids, and plenty of space to move around.

You need a bit of help to spot the difference between a well-made tent and a big bag of air, but that's what we're here for. We've put tents designed for three or more people through a demanding battery of tests. We checked the waterproofing, protection from insects, resistance to corrosion, and the strength of the zips and attachment ropes. We tested how easy they are to pitch and pack away. And we had a play with the features – special hanging storage strips and so on – that they offer.

Then, to get a camper's perspective, we let five families of keen campers loose in each tent to eat, rest and play. Manufacturers tend to be a bit optimistic about how many people fit inside their tents; you can't go by the adverts or diagrams on the packaging, so take a look at what we found.

SLEEPING BAGS AND MATS

Of course, for a happy family holiday you need a good night's sleep. So we've tested a selection of the best-selling sleeping bags and mats, too.

There are more differences than you'd think. Some sleeping bags are unsuitable for the low temperatures they claim; others are OK at first but less warm after they've been washed a few times.

As for the sleeping mats, if you want to stay warm and comfortable, choose one of our Best Buys. You'll wake up thinking those old camping memories must have been just a bad dream.

BEST ON TEST

1 Coleman Chestnut Classic **74%**

SLEEPING BAG £40 from independents

Our top sleeping bag is a lovely, warm bag that can be zipped on to another to make a double bag. See p41.

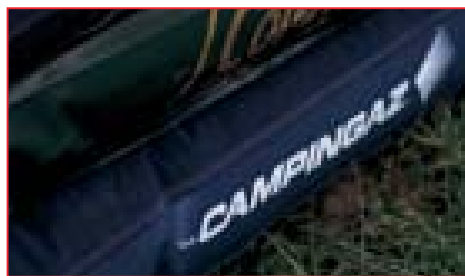


BEST
ON
TEST

1 Campingaz Quickbed Double **79%**

SLEEPING MAT £20 from independents

The best sleeping mat we've tested is this two-person inflatable airbed. You couldn't wish for a more comfortable night's sleep out in the wilds. And, once you're ready to go, it deflates in no time. See p42.



SIZE

Wild Country is spot-on about how many people fit in this tent, but other manufacturers are rather optimistic. For example, the Gelert Cadiz 5+2 (13), whatever its name implies, is too cramped for seven people.

The Peakland tent we tested (14) would be a nice, roomy tent for a couple but it's something of a squeeze for the four people it claims to fit.



BEST
ON
TEST

1 Wild Country Homestead 5 **68%**

TUNNEL TENT £300 from independents

Let five families loose in the same tent and they'll all find something different to like and dislike. So we knew we were on to a winner when everyone was impressed by the spaciousness of this five-person tent.

There are two side entrances into the living area, which has a storage strip with pockets that hangs from the ceiling. And you can turn the sloping door at the front of the tent into an awning with the poles supplied.

It's easy to erect, despite having three separate compartments. There are two bedrooms, arranged side by side, and a living area. You can fit three single airbeds into the bigger one, and a double into the other. Pockets on the walls of the bedrooms let you store your bits and bobs out of the way.

The tent has changed slightly since we carried out our tests. Luckily, it's been improved in two of the areas where our testers were less impressed. There are now windows on two doors, so you can see outside without opening them. And 'mud walls' have been added to the bottom of the flysheet, to stop the living area being draughty.

Other versions Four-person (£260); seven-person (£375); ten-person (£410).

PORCHES

An awning, such as the one on this Homestead tent, is pleasant to eat and relax under, sheltered from the rain or midday sun. All you have to do is stick the main door up on canopy poles.

For a larger porch area, the fronts of the Royal (3) and Relum (15) tents can be unzipped and rezippered further back in the tent, so you can sit under the roof but still be out in the open.

NEED TO KNOW

There are two main things to look for in a family tent: a communal living space with enough headroom to stand up in; and separate compartments for sleeping or storage with their own groundsheet.

Good times for bargains are autumn and winter, when shops try to clear the previous season's stock.

FRAME TENTS

The advantage of frame tents is that they'll support heavy, more durable flysheet fabrics.

On the downside, the poles often obstruct doors, and the tents tend to be heavier than other similarly sized tents.

DOMESTENTS

Most dome tents have separate sleeping areas around the sides, which provide a bit of privacy.

However, the shape makes standing space limited, so it's hard to get dressed standing up in the sleeping areas.

TUNNEL TENTS

Tunnel tents have good headroom across the full width of the tent.

The main drawback is that, if you pitch them with the long side of the tent facing into the wind, they will blow over more easily.



5 Sunncamp
DOME TENT

5 Sunncamp Tourist Plus 6 XP 65%

DOMESTENT £249 from independents

This six-person tent boasts a number of compartments, so you can see as much or as little of your fellow campers as you like.

There are three sleeping areas arranged around a central living area, all of which have storage pockets. Each sleeps two people comfortably, though sloping sides make them cramped around the edges.

The living space is divided into two, which creates a dressing area so you can get your clothes on in privacy. The size is OK, but a bit small for six adults.

Then there's the porch, which adds two metres to the front of the tent (though you can't stand up in all of it). It has three windows, and a door which you can turn into an awning on warm evenings.

It's easy to pitch, even if the Velcro bits are rather fiddly. Luminous guy ropes, zips and storage pockets make it easy to work in the gloom. And, unlike most tents, you don't need to remove the sleeping areas before you pack it up again.

Other versions 12-person (£470); 20-person (£585).



2 Campus
TUNNEL TENT

2 Campus Indiana 4 66%

TUNNEL TENT

£125 from www.outdoorworld.org.uk

This four-person tunnel tent is a great choice for weekend campers who pack light but would rather not sleep cheek by jowl with their buddies. There's too little storage space for a long family holiday.

There are sleeping areas at both ends of the tent, each with storage pockets and plenty of space for two people.

The living area has two windows and two large doors. The windows are divided into two – the bottom half is see-through plastic, the top half a mesh covered by a flap. By pegging the flap open, you can let a bit of fresh air into the tent without being completely exposed to the elements. You can also turn the doors into awnings using the canopy poles supplied.

Sadly, this tent is being discontinued. But, if you're looking for a compact tent with good height, you could pick up old stock for a bargain price.

Other versions Six-person (£200); eight-person (£250). These versions are not being discontinued.

TABLE NOTES

We've tested best-selling family tents for three or more people.

Specification

Capacity Maker's claim.

Build

Quality Tent strength, insect protection and corrosion.

Accommodation

Features Usefulness of windows and air vents.

SCORE

This ignores price and is based on:

Build	35%
Accommodation	35%
Convenience	30%

KEY

★	☆	○	◐	●
Best				Worst
■ Best Buy				

Tents

TUNNEL TENTS

- 1 Wild Country Homestead 5
- 2 Campus Indiana 4
- 3 Royal Avignon 5

- 4 Eurohike Coniston

DOMESTENTS

- 5 Sunncamp Tourist Plus 6 XP
- 6 Vango Diablo 600
- 7 Khyam Ridgi-pod Classic

- 8 Aztec Lago 4

- 9 Vaude Bedawi

- 10 Coleman BiSpace 500

- 11 Wynnster Mercury 9

- 12 Lichfield Zuni 6

- 13 Gelert Cadiz 5+2

FRAME TENTS

- 14 Peakland Challenger 240

- 15 Relum Palermo

6 Vango
DOME TENT

BEST
BUY



6 Vango Diablo 600 65%

DOME TENT £300 from independents

GROUNDSHEET

This Vango tent has a groundsheet in the living area, so you're not sitting around on damp grass and your equipment stays dry.

The sleeping areas in all the tents on test have groundsheets that are sewn in. They help to keep damp out and warm air in.

Despite its devilish name, we're hard pressed to find anything particularly diabolical about this six-person tent. It's better than all the other dome tents for comfort and layout – an excellent choice for taking the family on a long holiday.

It has two sleeping areas and a porch, arranged around a large, hexagonal living area – a good size for four people, but fitting in six people wouldn't be a problem either. The sleeping areas are a fair size, but sloping sides limit the standing space.

There are four windows, two of which have mesh panels as on the Campus (2)

tent – handy if you're trapped by the weather and things start smelling a bit stale. Because of good ventilation, condensation inside the tent is less of a problem than it is in other tents.

This is a fairly big tent, though, so carrying it and positioning the large flysheet are naturally a challenge – especially for short people. It takes about ten minutes longer to pitch than the average tent. That said, you don't need to take down the sleeping areas when you pack it away, which makes it a lot less involved.

Other versions Four-person (£250); nine-person (£400).

WINDOWS

Windows and skylights are a useful feature, especially in dark-coloured tents. Most windows have interior covers to ensure your privacy, but check that they can be rolled away tightly or they'll get in your face.

Condensation is a problem with skylights, so choose a tent with plenty of vents to allow water vapour to escape. This Vango Diablo tent has some windows that are half plastic and half mesh, to increase ventilation.



Specification				Build	Convenience					Accommodation					Score
Price (£)	Weight (kg)	Capacity (people)	Headroom (cm)	Quality	Pitching (min)	Striking (min)	Carrying	Putting up	Taking down	Living space	Sleeping space	Layout	Features	Comfort	(%)
300	28.5	5	214	☆	30	15	☆	○	☆	★	★	☆	○	★	68
125	15.3	4	200	☆	30	15	☆	○	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	○	66
400	25.2	5	195	○	30	20	●	○	☆	★	☆	★	★	★	62
100	12.5	4	187	●	25	10	☆	○	☆	●	☆	○	☆	●	46
249	22.2	6	195	☆	35	20	○	☆	○	☆	○	☆	☆	☆	65
300	27.8	6	220	☆	40	20	●	○	☆	☆	☆	★	☆	★	65
530+	33.6+	3+	197	☆	50	20	●	●	○	★	○	☆	☆	☆	65
120	13.6	4	190	☆	25	15	★	○	☆	○	○	☆	○	●	64
400	11.6	4	225	☆	30	15	☆	☆	☆	○	○	○	☆	●	63
200	17.6	5	204	☆	35	20	○	●	○	☆	○	★	☆	☆	59
300	28.7	9	225	○	40	20	○	○	○	☆	☆	★	☆	☆	55
100	10.1	6	190	○	15	10	★	☆	☆	●	☆	○	●	●	52
150	16.4	7	185	●	20	10	☆	☆	☆	●	☆	○	○	○	51
80	10.3	4	180	☆	10	5	★	★	★	●	☆	○	●	●	65
400	54.8	6	210	★	45	30	●	●	●	★	★	★	☆	☆	63

**BEST BUY**

7 Khyam Ridgi-pod Classic 65%

DOME TENT

£530 (with one pod) from independents

This tent is unusual because you buy the main unit and add other bits depending on what you want. You can add a groundsheet (£50) and up to three bedroom pods (£105 each), which zip on to the side of the base unit. Each of the pods sleeps three people, and has pockets and a partition down the middle. Alternatively, you can buy an inner tent (£50) that sits inside the porch area and provides a bedroom for four people.

There's ample living space for four people but we recommend that you buy the separate groundsheet. Without one, a fair bit of condensation collects on the skylights.

It takes 20 minutes or so longer to erect than the average tent – even if you have only one pod – because there are lots of guy ropes and pegging points to sort out. And, because you need to buy each bit separately, it costs around £700 for enough space to sleep six.

But the great advantage of this tent is that it's so flexible. If you're going away with your partner, just take the base unit and porch inner; if you're taking an army of campers, you can add enough pods to sleep up to nine.

Other versions The Ridgi-pod Excelsior has a taller base unit (£475) and its pods (£110) sleep four people.

7 Khyam
DOME TENT

14 Peakland Challenger 240 65%

FRAME TENT £80 from independents

If all you want is a no-frills place to rest your head, this is the ideal tent for you. It's light and it packs up smaller than the other tents, so you can carry it around with minimal effort.

The flip side is that cat swinging is definitely not on the agenda here – Peakland claims it will sleep four, but they'd need to be extremely good friends to live and sleep together in there. The sloping ceilings make headspace limited, too, especially at the edges.

That said, the large single sleeping compartment has convenient pockets sewn into the walls, and the living area has two windows. The main door turns into a canopy.

It's a simple design but it certainly does the job. And it takes just ten minutes to pitch and five minutes to strike – three times quicker than the average family tent we tested.

**BEST BUY**

14 Peakland
FRAME TENT

Also tested

Not all tents are the same. Here are the others we looked at – some just missed being Best Buys, but others are only OK.

Tunnel tents

The **Royal (3)** five-person tent is light, spacious and perfectly comfortable. But there's an annoying guy rope in front of the entrance.

The **Eurohike (4)** feels cramped for four people. Among other

problems, the front door is difficult to close from the inside, and water came in through the window stitching (Eurohike says it's strengthened the tent since our tests).

Dome tents

The **Aztec (8)** suffers from condensation and is more suited to couples than the family of four it claims.

The **Vaude (9)** is a lovely-looking four-

person tent that's easy to pitch and strike. But sleeping space is cramped and the groundsheet in the living area doesn't fit.

The **Coleman (10)** is a bit small to sleep five comfortably, and has too many pegs and guys. It is well ventilated, though.

The **Wynnster (11)** is a large dome tent that sleeps eight people comfortably. It has a good size and layout,

but the sleeping areas are low for tall people.

The **Lichfield (12)** is cheap, light and easy to pitch. At a squeeze, it sleeps six but there'll be one Billy No-Mates on their own at the front. The small living space has no windows or groundsheet.

The **Gelert (13)** isn't really big enough for the family of seven it claims to fit. A poorly designed doorway lets water drip in, and the guy ropes

broke during our strength tests.

Frame tents

The traditional-looking **Relum (15)** is built to last and provides ample space for five people. On the downside, pitching it is hard because there's a lot of frame to put together. The pole in the middle of the doorway is a pain, and there's no groundsheet in the living area, so things can get muddy.

SLEEPING BAGS

BEST BUYS

We tested bags that the manufacturers recommend for late spring and early autumn. Most are easily warm enough at first but lots are less cosy after a few trips to the washing machine. When you wash your bag, at first the filling can puff up and feel warmer but eventually it will collapse and stop insulating.

ADULTS' BAGS

The **Coleman (1)** has a strong, internal pocket for storing torches and the like (many bags have flimsy pockets made with a single layer of lining). There's quite a bit of space to move around inside and you can zip two together to form a double bag.

That extra space means it needs its big, chunky filling to keep you warm. But the thickness makes it a bit hard to pack into its sack; and, even when you do, it still takes up more room than the other bags. It's £40 from independents; you can buy a larger 230x110cm version for £45.

Our other three Best Buys are much lighter to carry around. The hooded **Nanok (2)** has the smallest packed size and it's the only one that has two zips, one on either side. Be wary of its name, though – it may be called 'Comfort 0°C' but you'll be comfortable only down to about 6°C. It's £60 from Ellis Brigham, and the range also includes two heavier versions of the bag rated by the manufacturer at -5°C (£70) and -10°C (£80).

Next up is the **Aztec (3)**, fantastic value at £30 from independents. It's the warmest Best Buy, and it's kitted out with a hood, a special collar to keep out draughts and an internal pocket. It loses out to

the Nanok only because it shrinks in the wash by a few centimetres. There's also a lighter Swallow 250 (£23) and a heavier Swallow 350 (£30).

The **Mountain Equipment (4)** is the lightest Best Buy and features include a hood and draught collar. It also has extra space sewn into the bottom of the bag so your feet can relax without being restricted. Watervapour doesn't escape as well as from the other Best Buys, but that's not a problem in most conditions. It's £60 from independents. There are other bags in the range, which the manufacturer rates for 0°C (£50), -10°C (£70) and -20°C (£80).

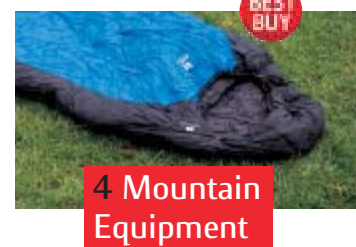
CHILDREN'S BAGS

The two-tone **Coleman (11)** is a slightly tapered bag which has a pocket and a hood to keep your kids snug. It's a good, warm bag for temperatures down to 11°C – roughly equivalent to a summer duvet. You can buy it for £20 from independent retailers.

DON'T BUYS

We decided to test one down (feather-filled) bag to see whether it's worth the extra money. In fact, the Blacks (10) is so poorly stuffed that you can easily feel the inner and outer layers with nary a feather between them. It does feel warm at first but the filling is free to move about, which creates cold patches. We recommend against it.

Similarly, we've made the Outwell (14) a Don't Buy. The insulation changed dramatically when we washed it, and it's a pain to pack away in its sack.



Sleeping bags

ADULTS' BAGS

	Specification			Performance			Score (%)
	Price (£)	Lxw (cm)	Weight (kg)	Warmth new	Washing effect	Water escape	
1 Coleman Chestnut Classic	40	188x94	3	☆	★	☆	74
2 Nanok Comfort 0°C	60	220x78	1.5	☆	☆	☆	73
3 Aztec Swallow 300	30	221x79	1.9	★	★	☆	72
4 Mountain Equipment Firewalker I	60	220x71	1.3	☆	☆	○	71
5 Gelert X-treme Lite 800	35	210x73	1	☆	☆	☆	67
6 Ajungilak Kompakt Summer	80	225x76	0.9	●	○	★	65
7 Blacks Quad 2	30	225x70	1.5	☆	○	☆	59
8 Snugpak Softie Kilo	65	215x72	1.1	☆	●	★	53
9 Campus Night Star 300	15	192x78	1.5	☆	○	☆	51
10 Blacks Quantum 500	80	225x74	1.4	☆	●	★	33

CHILDREN'S BAGS

11 Coleman Poplar Junior	20	159x64	1.1	☆	☆	☆	70
12 Vango Nitestar 300 midi	20	162x60	1.3	☆	☆	○	68
13 Gelert Freedom 300 Junior	15	167x66	1	○	○	★	63
14 Outwell Camper Junior	25	160x65	1.4	○	●	○	26

KEY

★	☆	○	●	●
Best				Worst
Red box	Best Buy			
Black box	Don't Buy			

SCORE

This ignores price and is based on:	
Performance	70%
Ease of use	30%

TABLE NOTES

We tested best-selling sleeping bags.

Performance

Washing effect How much washing affects bag's warmth.

Water escape How well the bag lets water vapour escape.

SLEEPING MATS

BEST BUYS

There are three basic choices of sleeping mat, each of which has distinct advantages and disadvantages.

INFLATABLE AIRBEDS

These are your best bet for a comfortable night's sleep. They offer excellent insulation from the cold ground, and are impermeable to damp.

That said, they're a bit short for anyone over six foot. They're heavy and – unless you use a battery-operated pump – they take 20 minutes or so to pump up, a pain if you arrive at your pitch late.

There's little difference between the airbeds we tested, and they're all Best Buys. The two-person **Campingaz (1)** has a large air valve, which makes it quick and easy to deflate because the air can escape quickly. It's £20 from independent retailers.

The **Coleman (2)** is another double bed. It has two separate air compartments, which you can inflate to different levels if one of you likes the bed a bit harder. Like the Campingaz, it offers a good night's sleep – the only problem is that it's tricky to stuff back in its bag. It costs £27 from independents.

The **Gelert (3)** is the widest one-person mat that we looked at. It boasts a built-in foot pump, but it's tricky to get the knack of using it; you're better off sticking with a battery-powered pump. Still, it provides a warm and comfortable night's sleep. You can pick it up from independents for £15.

SELF-INFLATING MATTRESSES

The self-inflating mattress is a halfway house between an airbed and foam mat. It's basically a layer of compressed foam which fills with air when you open the valve in the mat. Those we've tested are aimed at campers who value comfort more than

Our Best Buys (top to bottom):
Artiach (5), Therm-a-Rest (4),
Multimat (9), Gelert (3),
Coleman (2), Campingaz (1)



portability – you can buy lighter versions that are more suitable for people who carry their camping kit around. The best offer warmth and comfort without the bulk or fuss of blowing up an airbed.

The main disadvantage is that they take a couple of minutes to deflate, because you have to roll them carefully to get all of the air back out of the foam. They tend to be narrower than airbeds, too.

The **Therm-a-Rest (4)** is the best of the self-inflating mattresses. Its fleece cover is soft and non-slip, so your sleeping bag stays put. It's easy to inflate – you just open the valve – and you can top it up by blowing through the open valve. It's £110 from independents.

The **Artiach (5)** provides a similarly soft, warm surface. You hear the air rushing in when you first open the valve so you'll know when it's fully inflated. The self-inflation works well but we found a little top-up made it more comfortable. It takes a slow and steady technique to roll all the air out of it, though, so it's not as easy to pack up as the Therm-a-Rest. It's £75 from independents.

FOAM MATS

Foam mats are good for taking the edge off the cold and hardness of the ground. They're light and easy to carry, and take just seconds to unroll and pack. But they provide only limited cushioning and most of them are too short and narrow for adults.

The 300g **Multimat (9)** is the best we found. It's warmer and more comfortable than the others – and its tying straps are sewn on to it so you won't lose them in your tent. It's £18 from independents.

FURTHER

INFORMATION

www.visitbritain.com
Information about camp sites throughout the UK.

www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk
Join a club for people who love camping.

www.loo.co.uk The Loo of the year – apparently 'the nation's favourite competition' – includes entries from camp sites.

TABLE NOTES

Specification

Price Typical high-street price if you shop around.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ●
Best Worst
■ Best Buy

SCORE

This ignores price and is based on:

Comfort 50%
Warmth 25%
Ease of use 25%

Sleeping mats

INFLATABLE AIRBEDS

	Price (£)	l x w (cm)	Weight (kg)	Comfort	Warmth	Preparation	Packing up	Score (%)
1 Campingaz Quickbed Double	20	178x132	3.0	★	★	★	★	79
2 Coleman Comfort Bed Double	27	185x134	3.9	★	★	★	●	77
3 Gelert Standard single flock airbed	15	183x74	1.8	★	★	○	○	74

SELF-INFLATING MATTRESSES

	Price (£)	l x w (cm)	Weight (kg)	Comfort	Warmth	Preparation	Packing up	Score (%)
4 Therm-a-Rest Luxury Camp Large	110	193x62	2.0	★	★	★	★	76
5 Artiach Confort-Mat	75	191x65	2.3	★	★	★	○	72
6 Hi Gear Thermal Mat	27	186x60	1.8	○	★	★	★	62
7 Therm-a-Rest Lite 3 Regular	45	184x51	0.8	○	○	★	★	57
8 Multimat Trial Survive CMS01	36	183x52	0.9	○	○	★	○	55

FOAM MATS

	Price (£)	l x w (cm)	Weight (kg)	Comfort	Warmth	Preparation	Packing up	Score (%)
9 Multimat The Pro Edge CM028	18	178x49	0.3	○	○	★	★	57
10 Blacks Trek Mat 3 Season	7	182x51	0.3	●	●	★	★	54
11 Multimat Tribe Survive CM003FB	6	182x51	0.2	●	●	★	○	45