

Buying a Tent

There are almost as many tent shapes and sizes as there are campers. Selecting the right one requires some homework.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s when our family used to go camping with our mates and rels we all had much the same tents: heavy canvas jobs with no floors, held up by heavy wooden poles that poked through leak-prone holes in the roofs; the whole assembly tensioned into uprightness by rusty iron pegs and hemp ropes that didn't half cut into your hands.

When the wind got up it blew under the flapping sides and when it rained everyone got up in the middle of the night by kerosene lamplight to clear futile little drainage trenches. The Aussie Digger heritage was still strong, so we all thought nothing of it.

It's Not Like That These Days



We can remember back two years, to a horrendous thunderstorm in western Victoria. We were lying in our OzTent, watching by lantern glow as huge hailstones puckering the roof and the frame bending at an angle in the gale, but no water squeezed in and the roof remained intact. We drifted back to sleep and in the morning the tent stood resplendent in the sunshine, surrounded by blown-down twigs, stripped bark and large puddles.

Modern tent designs, synthetic fabrics, waterproof flooring, Velcro-sealed flaps and nylon zippers have changed the integrity of the tent.

Sure, in a sufficiently bad storm or downpour you'll have some drama, but tent dwelling these days is normally quite civilised.

How Much Tent Do You Need

Tent makers work to a 'person' formula that measures tent capacity by the number of average adults who can lie down side-by-side. The assumption is that no-one needs to get up during the night and no-one needs any floor space whatsoever. As a rule of thumb you can divide the 'person' rating by at least two for realistic accommodation, so a four-person tent is really a two-person tent.

Tents can be single-roomed or multi-roomed. A 'family' tent has separate rooms for adults and kids, and usually, a dining area and a shaded annexe or two. That's fine, if you all want to stay close together and you're happy with the hour or so it takes to set the tent and annexes up.

Family tents are best for people who go to a campsite and set up for a few days at least.



The alternative to a family tent is a single-roomed one for the adults, with a family dining annexe, and a separate sleeping tent for the billy-lids. People who travel from site to site with only a night or two in one place are better off with two smaller tents rather than one large one.

Before you settle on a particular tent size, make sure you can fit it into or on top of your vehicle. Most tents fold into fairly small packages, but some do not. OzTents are among the quickest tents to erect and pack, but they fold into two-metre-long parcels that may need to fit into a roof rack tube on top of a wagon.

Rigid or Flexible Framing

It's generally the case that large, rigid-framed tents are bulkier when packed than similar-sized, flexible-framed tents. The up-sides of the rigid-frame tent are potentially more usable headroom and a more wind-resistant structure.

Rigid-framed tents often have the framing integrated into the fabric, so that both frame and fabric go up and come down together. Those that have multiple, separate poles that need to be locked together and fitted to the fabric as the tent goes up are usually slow-erection jobs.

Flexible-framed tents use short fibreglass rods that are held together by internal shock cords. The easiest to erect and fold are those that have the rods integrated into the fabric, or have several same-length, external rods – not multiple, different-length rods.

Construction Materials

All tents these days use synthetic or semi-synthetic materials, which means they're lighter than cotton-canvas tents. They resist rain and floor seepage, and they dry out quickly.

Obviously, the lighter the fabric the more fragile it is, with the exception of the expensive, exotic, lightweight fibres used in mountaineering tents.



Some tents need a separate fly-sheet for rain protection, while others have sufficient water-resistance in the tent itself. However, a fly-sheet is a good second-level protection for almost all tents.

Floors are of plastic, vinyl or rubberised fabric and vary greatly in abrasion and water resistance. A ground sheet provides extra protection from water seepage and abrasive objects, but doesn't come as part of any new tent package.

Fly mesh is an essential requirement in any tent that's to be used in Australia. Mesh is synthetic these days, but the quality of the mesh and the zippers varies widely.

What to Look For

Regardless of its size and design your new tent must have sufficient durability to withstand the rigours of being transported across kilometres of rough dirt tracks. The tent bag must be strong and offer protection from the elements.

The tent must be easy to erect and pack away, without every occasion leading to arguments.

It must be well ventilated, preferably with flow-through, mesh-protected panels on all four sides.

It's OK to put up with a low-profile dome tent when you're on a hiking trip, but standing head-room is essential in a tent that's going to be a holiday home. The more taper there is in the sides of the tent,

the less the usable head-room. Centre poles detract from usable headroom, but provide useful getting-out-of-bed support and are handy for hanging things.

When you're inside any tent, walking, lying or stumbling around, you're pressing down on the floor, which in turn may be pressing down on twigs or small stones –even through a ground sheet - so the heavier the floor material, the more puncture-resistant and waterproof it will be.

Tent peg loops, rope-stay attachment points, internal hanging loops, Velcro flaps and zippers need to be strong and well attached to the tent fabric.

Tent pegs vary in quality and size, but the ones you need are at least 250mm long and made from galvanised rod that's at least 4mm in diameter – thicker is better.

Many Australian camp sites are on very hard ground and you need to be able to drive your pegs without their bending. Blunt-ended pegs need a trip to the grinding wheel, to score a sharp taper at their points.

The material of choice for tent ropes is synthetic stuff and boat ropes offer the best combination of strength, quick-drying ability and ease of tying. You need rope with some inbuilt stretch, to let the tent flex a little in gusts.

Tenting Options

For those travellers who go to places you can't easily take a camper-trailer or a 4x4 campervan, the only camp-home options are swag, ground tent or roof-top tent.

Meshed swags are fine, but those who need to arise and leak during the night won't find swagging very convenient. Getting dressed in the morning glare, in your swag, isn't a job for the prudish. Also, the worst sound you can hear when inside a swag is the dull thud of raindrops.



Roof-top tents are ideal for those who don't like creepy-crawlies; especially the four-metre-long, sharp-toothed, scaly, reptilian variety. A roof-top tent can be left with the bedding in place, so set-up is very quick.

The downsides of a roof-topper are the need to find a perfectly flat campsite – easy in the desert, but tricky at Cape York - and the fact that when you're set up you can't drive your vehicle.

Over many years of experimentation we've settled on a ground tent. Our tent of choice is the OzTent, because it goes up and comes down very easily, has two-metre headroom and the durability is second to none.