

Sleeping Bag Information

How to Choose a Sleeping Bag

<http://www.rei.com/expertadvice/articles/sleeping+bag.html>

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Last updated: June 1, 2008

In This Article

- Pick a Comfort Rating
- Sleeping Bag Construction
- Sleeping Bag Features
- Storage

While backpacking bags focus more on minimizing weight, sleeping bags for family and base camping (also known as car camping) are all about comfort. These bags are typically wider, softer, cushier—and less expensive—than their backpacking counterparts. Here's what to look for when shopping.

Pick a Comfort Rating

What Is a Comfort Rating?

A sleeping bag's temperature or "comfort" rating identifies the lowest temperature at which a bag will keep the average sleeper warm. When you hear a bag described as a "20-degree bag," it means that most users will remain comfortable if the air temperature drops no lower than 20°F. These ratings assume that the sleeper is wearing a layer of long underwear and using a sleeping pad with the bag.

Metabolism varies from person to person, and sleeping bag temperature ratings vary from one manufacturer to the next. Use these ratings as a guide only—not a guarantee.

What Else Affects My Overall Warmth?

Besides a sleeping bag, the following factors influence your warmth and comfort.

- **Sleeping pad:** This insulates the space beneath your bag and adds a layer of cushioning.
- **Tent:** Using a tent traps another layer of dead air around you, warming it by up to 10°F.
- **Metabolism:** Are you a "cold sleeper" who prefers extra insulation when sleeping? Or maybe you're a "warm sleeper" who kicks off the covers at home.
- **Gender:** Women generally prefer a bit warmer bags than men, up to 8°F warmer per recent EN (European Norm) testing.
- **Clothing:** What you wear inside the bag makes a difference. Long underwear and clean socks help insulate you while also keeping body oils off of your bag. A cap and neck gaiter help retain body heat. For colder-than-expected nights, a fleece jacket and pants can help.
- **Hood:** Sleeping bags with hoods can be cinched up on cold nights to help retain warmth.
- **Hydration:** Staying hydrated adds warmth. Enjoy a warm drink before bed.

Tips on Choosing Wisely

Sleeping Bag Information

Select a bag with a comfort rating a bit lower than the lowest temperature you expect to encounter. If you're headed for near-freezing temperatures, then choose a 20°F bag instead of a 35°F bag. If temperatures climb higher than expected, you can easily vent the bag to provide more circulation on warmer nights.

Here's a general rule of thumb on comfort ratings:

Bag Type	Comfort Rating (°F)
Summer Season	+35° and higher
3-Season Bag	+10° to +35°
Cold Weather	-10° to +10°
Winter/Extreme	-10° and lower

Most family and base camping bags feature a comfort rating between +15°F and +50°F

Sleeping Bag Construction

How Do Sleeping Bags Work?

Sleeping bags keep you warm by trapping and holding a layer of "dead" (non-circulating) air next to your body. Your body heat warms this dead air, and the bag forms a barrier between it and the colder ground or outside air. The less air space there is to heat, the faster you warm up and stay warm. Camping bags are roomier than backpacking bags for greater comfort, with the tradeoff being less efficient warming of this dead space.

Sleeping Bag Insulation

Most base campers choose bags with synthetic insulation (versus goose-down insulation) for its strong overall performance and friendly price tag. Typically made of a type of polyester, synthetic fill offers the following advantages:

- Quick-drying
- Insulates even if it gets wet
- Less expensive than down-filled bags
- Stands up to roughhousing kids and dogs
- Nonallergenic

Shell and Lining

The outer shell of a camping bag is typically made of a ripstop nylon or polyester for durability. Many synthetic-fill bags feature a shell fabric treated with a Durable Water Repellent (DWR) finish. DWR is the stuff that allows water to bead up rather than soak through the fabric. Linings, on the other hand, should promote the dispersal of body moisture, so DWR is not used here.

Tip: How can you tell if a shell has a Durable Water Repellent (DWR) treatment? Rub a wet cloth across the surface of a bag. If the water beads up, then it has DWR.

Sleeping Bag Information

Shape and Fit

Most family/base camping sleeping bags are designed with a rectangular shape for maximum comfort and roominess. If you choose 2 bags with compatible zippers, it's easy to mate them and create a double bed (see zipper compatibility details below). You can lay 2 bags on a queen-size air mattress for the utmost in outdoor sleeping comfort.

Optionally, barrel-shaped bags can be used for both family/base camping and backpacking. Sporting a tapered design, they offer greater warmth and efficiency than rectangular bags, but are still plenty roomy for a comfortable night's sleep. They are especially popular with larger-frame backpackers or restless sleepers who don't like the tight fit of a mummy bag.

Women's Sleeping Bags

These bags are specifically designed and engineered to match a woman's contours. When compared to standard bags, women-specific bags are distinguished by the following characteristics:

- Shorter and narrower at the shoulders
- Wider at the hips
- Extra insulation in the upper body
- Extra insulation in the footbox.

Kids' Sleeping Bags

When the kids get a good night's sleep, so do you. Consider these kid-friendly features when shopping for kids' bags:

- Some models feature a built-in sleeve on the bottom of the bag. This holds the sleeping pad so that your child, the bag and the pad stay together all night.
- Other bags accomplish the same thing with pad loops that attach the pad and the bag.
- Pillow pockets allow you to stuff a jacket or a backcountry pillow inside to create a cozy place for kids to lay their heads.
- Exterior pockets on the bag keep young explorers' headlamps, MP3 players and campsite keepsakes in easy reach.

Sleeping Bag Features

Once you've landed on a comfort rating and style, consider these points.

Zipper compatibility: Some bags can be zipped together to create a double bed. You can mate any 2 sleeping bags IF:

- One bag has a "right-hand" zipper and the other a "left-hand" zipper. Note: A right-hand zip means the bag opens and closes to your right when you are lying in the bag on your back.
- The zippers are the same size, style and roughly the same length.

Sleeping Bag Information

Double-wide bags: Designed to comfortably sleep 2 people, roomy double-wide bags can be combined with an air mattress (or foam sleeping pad) for a cozy night's sleep. Most models zip apart to create 2 individual bags.

Hood: Camping in cooler temperatures? You'll lose a lot of heat through your head. Consider a barrel-shaped bag with a built-in hood. When cinched with a drawcord, the hood prevents heat from radiating away. Some hoods offer a pillow pocket that you can stuff with clothing to create a pillow.

Stash pockets: These are handy for keeping small items such as an MP3 player, watch or glasses close at hand. Pocket locations can vary by model, so check it out to see if it works for your needs.

Sleeping pad sleeve: In some models, the bag's underside insulation has been eliminated and replaced with a sleeve to fit a sleeping pad. The result: no more rolling off the sleep pad in the middle of the night!

Pillow: Most of us need a pillow for comfortable sleep. Some bags include a "pillow pocket" which allows you to stuff your clothes inside to create a pillow. You can also purchase a camp-specific pillow or, if you have room, simply bring your own pillow from home.

Sleeping bag liner: Slip a silky-soft liner (sold separately) into your bag to minimize wear and keep the bag clean. Layering in a liner adds a surprising 8° to 15°F of warmth, allowing a single bag to serve you in a wider variety of temperatures. Camping in very warm weather? Forego the bag and just sleep in the liner on its own.

Storage

You can prolong the life of any sleeping bag by hanging it in your garage or storing it loosely in a cotton storage sack—and not rolled up tight in a stuff sack. This prevents the insulation from getting permanently compressed, which reduces its insulating properties.

Sleeping Bag Information

GEAR

Degrees of Comfort

Sleeping Bag Temperature

Ratings Demystified

<http://gorp.away.com/index.html>

http://gorp.away.com/gorp/gear/knowhow/bag_temp.htm#inset

By Ted Stedman

The label on the sleeping bag said it was good to "20 below," so why were you shivering through the night when the air temperature only dipped to 15°F?

Welcome to the esoteric, arcane, and downright confusing world of sleeping bag temperature ratings. No other topic is guaranteed to generate as much cynical laughter among outdoors people, unless it's Smoky the Bear's role in forest fire policy.

You would expect that when purchasing a bag that claims to be rated to 30°F it will keep you warm down to 30°F, right? After all, you expect as much from a 40,000-mile tire purchased for your car, and that tire costs a lot less — and arguably performs a more vital function — than a nylon cocoon stuffed with spun fiber or goose down.

Yet, in the field — or forest, or atop a glacier — that 30-degree bag can leave you cold well shy of its stated performance rating. Why are sleeping-bag temperature ratings so unreliable and what do you need to know about them to select a sleeping bag that can get you through the night comfortably?

Buy the Warmth You Need

Pegging temperature ratings may be an inexact science, but a few general guidelines apply when shopping for a sleep sack.

- **Set your temperature limit.** Figure out what's the absolute minimum temperature at which you'll likely use the bag. Take into account cooler temperatures at night at higher altitudes and latitudes.
- **Err on the warm side.** When did you last hear someone complain about being too warm at night? Can't decide between a 20-degree or a 25-degree bag? Go for the 20.
- **Exceed your budget.** When people finally break open their wallets and buy a decent bag, it is usually after a succession of unsatisfactory purchases. Spare yourself the buyer's remorse and the uncomfortable nights, and make your first bag a quality bag.

GEAR

Degrees of Comfort

The Rating Game

By Ted Stedman

Sleeping Bag Information

It turns out that the process of testing sleeping bags for their warmth rating is not as easy or precise as you might think. The makers of sleeping bags and the outdoor industry group that represent them recently failed to regulate the amount of guesswork out of buying a sleeping bag.

The upshot? Savvy sleeping bag buyers should treat temperature ratings not as immutable absolutes that can assist them in finding the ideal sleeping bag.

Think of a 30-degree rating, for instance, as applying to the typical camper using the bag under typical conditions, not anything but typical (which you knew already!). Combine your knowledge of how you are different from the typical (more or less optimistic) camper, and you can make a satisfactory sleeping bag choice. Here's how:

The Correction Factor

You've already figured out the minimum overnight temperature you'll likely encounter. Now check yourself against the following 10 factors that can influence how warmly or coldly you sleep, and adjust the minimum temperature appropriately.

Don't get overzealous and add up a massive correction factor, especially if you camp in warm climates (above 32°F) anyway.

- **Sleep style.** Adjust upward or downward by 5 to 15 degrees depending on whether you "sleep warm" or "sleep cold."
- **Acclimatization.** If you're slow to adjust from a cushy room temperature of 68 degrees to life in the cold outdoors, then correct downward 5 to 10 degrees (for example, instead of a 30-degree bag, get a 25- or 20-degree bag).
- **Food intake.** Do you eat enough when you recreate outdoors (no adjustment necessary) or do you use your trips as opportunities to diet (correct downward 5 to 10 degrees)?
- **Hydration.** Adjust downward by 10 degrees if you are not a faithful guzzler of water and sports drinks. The enormous volume of water lost through sweat and the mere act of breathing can mess with your body's heating and cooling system.
- **Tiredness.** The occasion you are really tired will be the time you most need a good sleep, so make a generous correction for this—as much as 5 to 10 degrees downward—if you take long trips where cumulative sleep deprivation would be dangerous.
- **Bag fit.** Can you use a close-fitting bag without feeling constrained? If not, correct downward by 5 to 10 degrees. Can you sleep with the hood cinched down to a small peep hole around your nose and mouth? If not, correct downward by 10 to 20 degrees in really cold climates.
- **Dampness.** Do you camp in damp conditions, such as wet coastal climates, or go on river trips where despite your best efforts bags get damp? If so, correct downward by 5 to 10 degrees if you'll be using a synthetic bag, and 10 to 20 degrees downward for down.
- **Body movement.** Tossing and turning in a bag acts as a bellows to blow warm air out. If you're moving a lot, correct downward 10 to 20 degrees.
- **Wind protection.** Sleep in a four-season tent (adjust upward 5 degrees), a three-season tent (downward by 10 to 15 degrees). Wind has much less effect if the bag shell is a very tightly woven material like a Loft or Stormlight.
- **Storage.** A bag that's been used often for years (correct downward 5 to 10 degrees) and stored in a way that loses loft (correct downward more degrees) loses loft and therefore performance. Sleeping bags should be removed from their storage and stored unrolled and loose.

You should now have a good idea of how much of a correction factor to apply to the minimum expected temperature of the bag you're looking for. If this puts you into a ridiculously low-rated

Sleeping Bag Information

bag, like 30 below, and a correspondingly low remaining bank balance, consider buying a slightly higher temperature rated bag and supplementing its performance by wearing clothes and booties to bed, using a bivy sack to eek out an additional 5 degrees of warmth (more in drafty environments), or using a vapor barrier (definitely an acquired taste!).