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Tent Buying Tips

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompas

If you're in the market for a three-season tent intended for car, motorcycle or bicycle camping, your options have probably never been better.

High-tech materials and innovative features have flooded into tent manufacturing, resulting in dozens of sturdy tent models that are well suited for family and individual camping adventures.

To help you navigate through the tent-buying choices, we've put together a guide with key factors to keep in mind. The suggestions combine information from these sources: comments by a representative of The Base Camp, an outdoor specialty store in Billings, Montana (phone 406/248-4555) and two online tent-buying guides, [Outdoor Places.com](http://OutdoorPlaces.com) and Gorp.com.

Some tips:

Cost – Think of your tent as an investment in quality travel equipment and be prepared to spend \$200-\$500 for a tent that, with good care, will last for years. Go for a name-brand tent with a lifetime warranty; when an economy tent breaks down, you may be unable to get it repaired.

Weight – While backpackers go for tents that can weigh three pounds or less, a good family tent will run from 10 to 20 pounds.

Room – When deciding on floor space, allow at least 16 square feet per person. More room could be welcome if your group includes a tall person, or if you're bringing along a pet that will have sleeping quarters inside the tent.

Color – While environmental considerations would lead you to pick green or brown material that blends into your surroundings, a yellow or red tent has the advantage of being easier to spot if a search-and-rescue operation were ever needed to find you. Also, a light-colored tent will allow in more light, and reflect heat, while a dark-color tent will allow in less light and retain heat.

Poles – Whatever the material, they should be collapsible, strong, flexible and lightweight. Aluminum poles connected with shock cords have superior strength and get the nod over fiberglass poles. Aluminum poles can be as light as fiberglass and more durable in cold temperatures, but aluminum poles have the disadvantage of being more difficult to repair if they break. For still more strength under heavy use, but at increased cost, consider reinforced aluminum poles. It's unlikely you'd need to consider carbon-fiber poles, which are tops in demanding conditions but even pricier. There's even a company available who makes an air inflatable tent that holds its own: HYPERLINK
["http://www.airzonerecreation.com/"](http://www.airzonerecreation.com/) <http://www.airzonerecreation.com/>

Seams – Look for taped seams.

Mesh and ventilation – Especially if you expect to mostly camp in mild weather, look for lots of mesh to keep the tent breathable when it gets crowded inside. Having two doors, for entry and exit, will make camping more delightful. That feature adds a bit of weight, but car campers won't have to mind.

Rainfly – This waterproof second roof can be just big enough to cover the tent, or more

expansive to provide better protection from wind-driven rain.

Vestibule – You'll appreciate a separate entrance compartment as a place to take off dirty clothes and help keep the tent interior cleaner. A vestibule also comes in handy for storing equipment that you want close at hand and out of the elements.

Shape – An A-frame offers a simple, functional design; it might have a ridgepole to increase space inside. Domes use crisscross poles that result in a variety of shapes. They offer ample headroom, but domes' freestanding quality make them disposed to blow away in windy conditions if they're not staked. Hoop-style tents, which have arched frame stays, don't hold up in rough weather as well as other designs, but their shape creates an efficient mix of weight and floor space.

Built-in pockets – Pockets on the interior tent walls are handy for keeping small personal items close at hand.

Stay tuned next month for tips on maintaining your tent.

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