

Portable stoves

What's cooking?

Photo: Courtesy Mark Johnston



What type of portable stove works best at high altitude, or in extreme cold? What kind of stove should your customer take on a hiking trip, or a cross-border trek? MARK JOHNSTON takes stock of the different options available

How many different portable stoves do you reckon there are currently on the market? Ten? Twenty?

At last count I clocked 34 (though granted this included a number of niche items like Esbit cookers). Even just taking the ranges from the big-name brands – Campingaz, MSR, Jetboil and Edelrid – yields a total of 21, an unwieldy amount of product to shoehorn onto your store's shelves, I'm sure you'll agree. But does that mean retailers should just ignore all this choice and stick with the bread-'n-butter sellers?

Simon Larsen of RAM Mountaineering, importers of the Jetboil range, believes this is a short-sighted approach. "Stove technology has evolved significantly in the past few years; not having this new technology on offer is short changing the customer."

I have to say I agree.

I've been one of those short-changed customers myself! When I was a Boy Scout we cooked all our meals on Bleuets stoves, since that's all that was available in the shops. True, they were perfectly adequate for most of expeditions we did back then: hikes in the Cederberg or overnights in the hut on top of Table Mountain. But then we visited the Drakensberg one winter and I discovered that my trusty little cooker didn't enjoy sub-zero tem-

peratures. In that thin, cold air the normally perky blue flame coughed and spluttered like an emphysemic smoker, and it took what felt like a geological age to prepare our Toppers and Smash.

Clearly, if I planned to do other *big mountain* adventures in the future I'd need something more potent to cook on. That's where the specialist stoves come in, and why it's important to have them on offer for the punter who plans to do more than just hike the Otter.

"Yes, it can be challenging to get people to spend more," says Larsen. "But it's worth it. The customer gets a product that suits them better, and you get more money in your till."

So, what are the other options then?

Naturally there's a fair bit of overlap between brands, so for economy I've broken it down into broader categories rather than specific models.

Basic canister stoves

Examples: Campingaz Twister, Edelrid Kiro, MSR Pocket Rocket

These are the bread-'n-butter stoves I mentioned earlier. Compact, easy to use and – importantly – priced under the R500 mark, they're an easy sell. However, as I've already explained in my own tale of woe, they don't perform very well on big mountains.

This is because the fuel doesn't vaporize

as easily when it's freezing cold; strong winds also affect the strength of the flame. Another potential limitation is the availability of gas canisters.

Not a problem here in SA, but for folk travelling over the border – or overseas (remember, you can't fly with gas) – it can be a different story. You try finding replacement canisters in rural Peru or downtown Ouagadougou.

Finally, the cost of the gas needs to be taken into account. I priced the self-sealing 220g canisters at between R60 and R80 a pop. Given that one of these burns for around two hours, this soon adds up with frequent use.

Bottom line: these cookers are fine for local hiking and car camping, but beyond that you'd be wise to offer your customer something else.

Cooking systems

Examples: Jetboil Flash, MSR Reactor

These also use gas canisters, but are more complex units that have been engineered for greater efficiency and performance, hence the term *cooking system* to distinguish them from regular canister stoves. At R1 300 for the Flash and close on R2 000 for the Reactor they're definitely a much harder sell, but most buyers don't add the cost of the pot unit to the stoves to get a system. Larsen notes that retailers should help customers do the maths

in order to get the customer to compare apples with apples. Most descent pot sets sell for anywhere between R500-R1 000.

These units also come with a number of key advantages that the customer should be informed about.

Like economy.

Those distinctive fins on the base of the Jetboil pot (called the "FluxRing") promote more effective heat transfer while simultaneously shielding the flame from the wind, which means you use less fuel. According to Larsen a 100g Jetboil canister should last two people for four days' cooking and tea stops, definitely more economical than a regular gas cooker.

Another bonus is the speed.

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The Reactor is currently the fastest stove on the market, bringing one litre of water to the boil in just three minutes. If you're somebody who drinks a lot of coffee or lives on freeze-dried meals, then this will put a smile on your dial.

Then there's the portability. With both systems the cartridge and burner pack away inside the pot, so they're super compact and easy to pack. Who should buy them?

"A minimalist," says Matt Tibenham of Drifters Extreme Sport. "Somebody who is prepared to pay more to keep packed size and weight down: fast 'n light hikers, adventure racers and mountain bikers doing multi-day events."

Disadvantages?

Yes, a few. As with regular gas stoves the availability of canisters can be an issue. Cold-weather performance is also a problem, particularly with some of the Jetboil systems (the Reactor will apparently work down to minus 7°C). To be fair, Jetboil have addressed this issue by introducing two models, the Helios (which uses an upside down canister, essentially providing a liquid fuel supply with the benefits you'll soon read about) and the Sol (which has a regulator that allows it to operate at temperatures down to minus 10°C).

Still, if I was going on holiday to Antarctica I'd opt for something that's more resilient to the cold...

Liquid fuel stoves

Examples: MSR WhisperLite, MSR DragonFly, MSR SimmerLite, MSR XGK

The key feature here over the other systems is the vaporizing tube, which routes the fuel supply through the flame so that it's preheated before it reaches the burner. This creates a potent feedback loop and jet-engine performance, even in those freeze-the-snot-in-your-

nose temperatures encountered on Everest or at the North Pole.

The other major bonus is that they run off everyday stuff like benzene, paraffin and unleaded petrol, which means that no matter where in the world you are you should be able to find fuel (if you're travelling by 4x4 or motorbike there's no need to even carry extra – you can just siphon it off from the tank!).

There's a pay-off: user friendliness. Or lack thereof. Compared with canister stoves, liquid-fuel cookers are a lot more PT. You have to prime the burner to initiate the feedback loop, which sometimes results in singed eyebrows (see picture), and they require more regular maintenance to keep the jets and vaporizing tube free of carbon build-up. Another caveat is the much bigger price tag (around R1 400 for the WhisperLite and over R2 400 for the XGK).

However, Geoff Ward of Outward Ventures, importer of MSR, points out that it's important to counter this with the overall economy of these models: "While the initial cost is high, your unit cost of fuel goes right down".

And if you're a backpacker who plans to use your cooker every day for six months, this can add up to a big saving.

How big? Tibenham has actually done the maths on this one. "My MSR WhisperLite burns for six hours off R20 worth of benzene. Compare this with a regular gas cooker that uses up an R80 canister in around two hours." That's a cost of R40 per hour versus the R3,30 per hour for the liquid-fuel stove!

Hybrid stoves

Examples: Edelrid Hexon

Finally, for those customers who can't decide whether to go the liquid-fuel or canister route, offer them the Hexon (currently the only stove in SA that runs on both gas and liquid). Says Tristan Firman of Vertigo Industries: "It fills the role of travel stove and serious mountaineering stove."

Given that its performance is comparable with the MSR DragonFly, and suggested retail is around R1 350 for the full kit – cooker, pump, maintenance kit and fuel bottle – it's also a sweet deal.

Concerns?

I wondered about Edelrid's stove-making pedigree compared with stalwarts like MSR, but Firman points out that the company actually took over Markill, which has been manufacturing cookers since the 1860s. The other consideration would be the staying power of the product.

Although Karrimor, Optimus and Primus have all offered hybrid stoves in the past, these are no longer available here. This means that people who bought them can't get backup service or spares.

Compare this with an MSR customer who can get a replacement part for a stove that she bought 15 years ago. For now, though, the Hexon seems to be a solid player, and is selling like the proverbial hotcake.



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