

Recommending the best sleeping system

There's a widely held misconception that sleeping outdoors must be uncomfortable; that it's impossible to get a good night's sleep unless you're tucked into a Sealy Posturepedic. But the truth is that humans are capable of bunking down quite happily in the most inhospitable places, from mountain ledges in the Himalayas to igloos in the Arctic. What's the trick? Having the right equipment, of course.

Start with a decent sleeping bag

Now the key here – from a retail point of view – is to assist the customer in selecting the correct one for their needs. What constitutes a “decent sleeping bag” for summer camping in Putsonderwater is clearly a very different beast from one that's designed for Mount Everest.

Ratings: Manufacturers rate their bags to perform in certain temperatures. The problem is that there's currently no industry standard, so there's no consistency: one brand's -5°C might be (significantly!) different from another's. Also, what does a -5°C rating actually mean? Will you be snug as the proverbial bug at this temperature? Or just able to stay alive?

- Local manufacturer Capestorm has implemented a system that I believe successfully eliminates the confusion. Each sleeping bag comes with two ratings, a “comfort” range (e.g. 15°C to 0°C) and an “extreme” temperature (e.g. -5°C). The first (comfort) indicates the conditions in which the bag will keep you toasty, and is the one to pay attention to. The second tells you the absolute limit of the bag's performance: use it at this temperature and you will be cold, but alive. Push it beyond this point and there's a chance you'll die of exposure.
- The Mountain Hardwear range of sleeping bags, has adopted what's known as the EN (*European Norm*) rating, which has rapidly gained acceptance in North America and Europe, says Christo Snyman of local importer Adventure Inc. This system is similar to Capestorm, but incorporates three levels – a *comfort* limit (the temperature at which a woman will have a good night's sleep), a *lower* limit (where a man will be comfortable, since men sleep warmer than women) and finally an *extreme* rating (the lowest temperature at which the bag will keep a woman alive) - all displayed in an easy-to-read colour graphic.

Down or synthetic: The type of fill used in the sleeping bag is also an important consideration. Customers need to choose between goose down or synthetic fill, and each as its own pros and cons.

Our series to assist retailers with product knowledge

Words: MARK JOHNSTON. Photo: OUTDOOR EUROPE SHOW. Compiled with the help of Capestorm, Christo Snyman of Adventure Inc., Ryan O'Mahoney of First Ascent, Jeremy Nel of Rocky, Ryan van Niekerk and Simon Larsen of Ram Mountaineering and Geoff Ward of Outward Ventures.



This insulated comfort mat with synthetic filling was shown at OutDoor Europe 2010. The 2011 show will be held July 14-17 in Friedrichshafen.

- **Down pros:** “Down's biggest advantages,” explains First Ascent's Ryan O'Mahoney, “are that it's warmer, lighter and compresses smaller [than synthetics].” For this reason it's still the preferred choice for mountaineers and polar explorers, who need a sleeping bag that's low on bulk but big on warmth. “There are some good synthetic bags coming out now,” concedes O'Mahoney, “but we believe there's still no contest. Down is superior. When you fly into Antarctica there's a First Ascent Blue Wolf down sleeping bag and Himalayan down suit under your seat, just in case!”
- **Down cons:** But down isn't necessarily first prize for everybody. One of the biggest things counting against it are cost (down bag prices start at over R1 000, with top-of-the-range ones costing in excess of R4 500). “Your casual camper – the guy with the caravan and the Cadac skottel – simply isn't going to drop this sort of cash on a sleeping bag,” says Jeremy Nel of Rocky. “Synthetic fill bags work out consider-

ably cheaper, making them much better suited to the mainstream market.”

- Another thing counting against natural-fill bags is their poor performance when wet. Down's insulating capacity comes from its remarkable ability to ‘loft’, or expand, and in doing so create thousands of little air pockets that trap body heat. Get it soaked and the feathers clump together into a useless, wet mass, just like the fur on a Persian cat when it gets a bath. Which is not to say that synthetic fills aren't affected by wet – of course they are – but the difference is they don't bunch quite as badly as down, and they dry much faster. For this reason synthetic bags are the preferred choice for watersports such as paddling or river rafting, or any activity where there's the chance of getting wet (e.g. expeditions through the Amazon rain forest, holidays in England).

The importance of mats

You can sell somebody the best sleeping bag in the world, but if they don't use it in conjunction with some sort of mattress, or foam pad, then they're still going to have a poor night's sleep.

Why?

Because the fill in the bag needs to expand to insulate. If it's squashed underneath you, it simply doesn't work – with no thermal barrier, your body heat is literally sucked into the earth and you soon end up with chattering teeth.

Choosing mats: Your customer's choice of mat will be determined by its intended use, says Simon Larsen of Ram Mountaineering.

For example, if your customer will be carrying all his gear on an extended trip, he'll want a sleeping mat that is as light and compact as possible, backpackers will also look at durability (in addition to weight), while the car camper is only concerned about comfort, with no regard for weight or space.

Other factors that could affect choice:

- **Ratings:** Ryan van Niekerk of Ram Mountaineering, importers of the Pacific Outdoor Equipment (POE) range of self-inflating mattresses, explains that some manufacturers use what's called an *R-Value* to rate their pads. “A product's R-Value tells us about its ability to resist the flow of heat. The higher this number, the warmer the mat.”

Typically, sleeping pads with an R-Value of between 3-5 are considered suitable for *three season* use (a good all-rounder for South African hiking and camping). Less than this might cut it for summer use, but not **To p54**

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much else, while someone who is planning to do the Machame route on Kilimanjaro (where climbers sleep in tents rather than huts) would be well-advised to buy a *four-season* mattress with an R-Value of 5 or greater.

- **Size and cut:** Other things to look at would be the length of the mat (long, regular or short – the latter favoured by those who want to carry the bare minimum) and the width. There are even some pads cut specifically for women! Larsen recommends that women look for a pad with more insulation or padding comfort in the hip area, and more insulation at the hips and feet because they tend to lose more heat in these areas than men.

Types of mats: When I first started hiking, choosing a sleeping pad was easy. The only thing available were those closed-cell foam mats (also called gaper pads or thermal rolls), and the most taxing part was deciding which colour to go for!

- **Closed cell:** The problem with these mats – as anybody who has spent a night on one can attest – is that they're not very comfortable. They're only about one centimetre thin, and therefore provide very little cushioning between you and the Drakensberg. They're also bulky, and invariably end up being stowed on the outside of your backpack where they like to

get snagged on rocks and shredded by fynbos. There's still a market for these thin closed-cell mats because they're cheap (around R100) and durable, but nowadays there's a lot more choice for customers who want something more plush.

As with sleeping bags, greater choice calls for more expertise on the part of the retailers. It's essential that salespeople are able to recommend the correct model for a customer's needs.

- **Air Core pads** are lightweight and compact, yet comfortable, and are therefore ideal for people who need to travel light. They do, however, have to be inflated manually.

- **Self-inflating pad:** It's important when selling somebody a self-inflating pad is to make sure they know how to use the thing. For starters, they should be encouraged to make use of the self-inflating feature, rather than blowing it up like a lilo. "Moisture from your breath can lead to mould growing inside the mattress," warns Geoff Ward of Outward Ventures, importers of Them-a-Rest.

However, people need to understand that it takes a while for the pad to inflate. "Ideally, when you get to camp you should lay out the mat, open the valve and then leave it. Go do something else like cook supper or brush your teeth. When it's time for bed, the mattress should be almost completely inflated. All you have to do then is give it one or two puffs to top it up."

Punctures: The other essential piece of advice is to warn people about punctures. Inflatable mattresses are much like bicycle tyres – a

flat now and then is almost inevitable – but you obviously want to avoid it at all costs, and that means employing some common sense. Keep all sharp objects (trekking pole tips, penknives, etc) well away, and if you're sleeping under the stars, be sure to use the mattress in conjunction with a thick ground sheet.

Don't forget about a liner

Whichever way you look at it, sleeping bag liners make a lot of sense. For the retailer, it's an obvious way to get somebody who is buying a sleeping bag to spend a bit more. And for the customer, there are some very real benefits to using one.

- The most obvious being improved performance. "A liner bumps up the temperature rating of your sleeping bag," explains Christo Snyman. "Our Sea 2 Summit Thermolite Reactor Extreme, for example, adds up to 14 °C." And on warmer nights, you can ditch your sleeping bag and just use the liner. What this means is that you are able to sleep comfortably in a much broader spectrum of environments."
- Finally, a liner actually increases the lifespan of your sleeping bag. How so? By absorbing all the perspiration and body oils that would otherwise have ended up soaking into the bag. These might only be small amounts, but over time it adds up and ultimately the fill becomes dirty and loses its ability to insulate. Besides, it's also much easier to throw a liner in the washing machine than trying to clean your sleeping bag!