

Get camping: What you need to camp in comfort

Tent? Check. Sleeping bag? Check. Big Bubba Chair? Comfy. Here's what you need for a carefree stay in the great outdoors.

BY KYLE WAGNER
Denver Post
TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press

Article Last Updated:

The car-camping fantasy that gear manufacturers and outdoor magazines sell is that you will pull up to a pristine site with a perfect balance of sun and shade, quiet but for the cheery chirping of birds.

You will unload just the right items needed for an idyllic vacation of hiking, toasting marshmallows and effortlessly whipping up delicious campfire meals. And then, after the camping elves clean it up, you will drive home refreshed, relaxed and ready to do it again.

The reality is: Car camping sometimes involves pitching your tent so far away you forgot you had a car, at a site with a single tree that looks like the scrawny one from "A Charlie Brown Christmas," next to an RV holding back a pit bull who thinks you smell like steak. Maybe it will rain the entire time, maybe it will hail so hard your tent will be shredded. Your propane tank won't attach properly to the stove, and the leaking gas will kill off the one bird that was willing to hang around your sorry site.

When you get home, Mom announces that next time, she's staying in a hotel, and Dad says he'll only go somewhere where there's a golf course.

It doesn't have to be that way. "Be prepared" isn't just the Scouts' motto, it's also the mantra for any successful excursion that involves the outdoors. Camping in particular seems to fill first-timers with dread, and some lists of required items for car camping often are so long that one wonders why anyone needs to leave home in the first place. Sometimes, the reason a camping trip goes south is not because people don't take enough stuff - it's because they take too much.

"Simplicity is definitely the key when it comes to camping," said Gerhard Holtzendorf, district outreach and events administrator for REI. "People can overgear themselves. There are a lot of basic things you can bring instead of pricey, more elaborate items. For example, instead of a full-on, pop-up shelter, bring a simple tarp, and don't drop all your dough on head-to-toe rain gear when a simple poncho will suffice."

Holtzendorf points out that first-timers would benefit from buying the basics, going camping a few times and then adding only items that seem to be necessary - or would be fun to have but won't add more time or work to the trip.

"Take a few camping trips, see what works and what doesn't, and then you'll find those little luxuries that will appeal in the long run," he says. "People get overwhelmed looking at gear lists, and they get caught up in what they should have instead of what should be making the trip a good time, which is relaxing, not obsessing."

There are, however, a few crucial items you need in order to sleep outside, such as a shelter of some sort and something to sleep on. You need pots and pans to cook food in, unless you want to live on Twinkies and beer, which is not unheard of. But then you need something in which to chill the beer, unless you are going to drink it warm - also not unheard of. And you must have water. Beyond that, some might say it's all gravy, although there is no question that successful camping trips have been accomplished on far less.

Here are our picks in the high-end, medium-priced and budget ranges for the basics you need to make a first-time camping trip happen.

Kyle Wagner, travel editor for the Denver Post, can be reached at travel@denverpost.com.

TENTS

If there's one camping item that should be considered an investment, this is it. I once made the mistake of buying a cheap tent for a multigroup trip, and it took 45 minutes to assemble, with a ridiculous set of color-coded poles and oversized, plastic-tipped stakes that broke the first day (it's now collecting dust in my garage).

Nothing connected to a tent should be plastic or complicated. Get the best one you can afford, and think about how important space is to you. Depending on the size of your family, if you have four people, remember that for maybe \$70 more, you could have about 20 to 30 more square feet of moving-around room.

Sierra Designs Moken 4 or 6 Person

Cost: \$479 (4) or \$549 (6)

Dimensions: 15 by 8 feet (4) or 20 by 8 feet (6)

Sweet: Two removable side rooms mean the kids can be messy elsewhere. Incredibly easy to assemble, especially considering the complex design, and Sierra is a committed green company, with cleanly manufactured poles.

Skunky: High-up vents but no windows for the sides.

At www.sierradesigns.com; REI stores, www.rei.com.

REI Base Camp 4 or 6 Person

Cost: \$339 (4) or \$399 (6)

Dimensions: 8 by 7 feet (4) or 10 by 8 feet (6)

Sweet: My all-time favorite tent. So easy to put up, a 5-foot-2 woman can accomplish it in the dark her first time, in about 15 minutes. Front poles stake out to make a little vestibule, like a mud room.

Skunky: After several years with this baby, I have yet to have a complaint.

At www.rei.com, REI stores.

Coleman Rangeview 4-Person Tent

Cost: \$60 (4)

Dimensions: 9 by 7 feet

Sweet: I just sold my first Coleman tent - now nearly 20 years old - at a yard sale, and it's still going strong. This is the closest to the one I had, with simple construction, a rain fly with a little "V" in the center over the front flap and good ventilation.

Skunky: I've had three Colemans over the years. With all of them, after a while I had to stay on top of reapplying seam-sealer to make sure they kept the water out.

At www.coleman.com, The Sports Authority, Target.

AND CAMP BEDS

The reason to spend serious money (more than \$100) on a sleeping bag is for backcountry and sub-zero-temp camping. If you've not going to be doing either of those, just get a bag that is comfy, wicks away sweat and will withstand a lot of shoving in and out of a sack and getting dirty. If you plan to camp more than once a summer and your kids are older than about 9, get them good adult bags, because they will grow out of kid-sized bags quickly.

As for camp beds, those pads you put beneath your sleeping bag, they will make your night pass much more comfortably. For backcountry camping, I like Therm-a-Rest (starting at about \$65, thermarest.com), mainly because they roll up thin and are light; but there are thicker, puffier ones out there (REI makes a nice fattie for \$89). Some retailers carry Paco Pads (\$145), which river rats know as heavier-duty, waterproof, one-man mattresses (there also is a version for \$267 that you can throw in the bed of a pickup truck). Really have a tough time on the ground? Spring for an air mattress, although purists will scoff.

Kelty Stellar Sleeping Bag

Cost: \$75

Sweet: Thick, fluffy, 35-degree synthetic bag that feels like a down one. Taffeta lining means it breathes - so when it's too warm, you aren't sticky - and it has a satiny feeling.

Skunky: The lining is so slippery that you may find yourself on the other side of the tent in the morning.

At www.kelty.com, REI stores.

L.L. Bean Camp Bag

Cost: \$59 (regular), \$69 (extra long)

Sweet: This flannel-lined, 20-degree bag is the quintessential camp sleeping bag, and L.L. Bean is made to last. These things are sooo soft inside.

Skunky: If it's warm outside, it's really warm inside these things.

At www.llbean.com.

North Face Great Smoky Kids' Bag

Cost: \$59

Sweet: Rectangular, 20-degree bag (the Blue Ridge costs the same but is a mummy version, which kids love) that's sturdy and holds up like a much more expensive one.

Skunky: As a synthetic, it's a little thinner than a down one, so not as much padding.

At www.northface.com.

CHAIRS

Gerhard Holtzendorf of REI says he thinks chairs are the most important thing. "To be honest, I'd rather have my camp chair than a tent," he said. "I like to sit more than I like to lie down. Camping is about relaxing." So what's important here is to find a sturdy chair that you feel comfortable in and that can take some wear and tear, fold up nicely for transport and clean up well if something gets spilled on it (and something always will).

Coleman Deck Chair with Table

Cost: \$55

Sweet: For those times when you're juggling a plate of food and a drink, this aluminum-frame padded-back chair folds in half and has a folding table connected on the side, complete with beverage holder.

Skunky: It's a little on the heavy side, and compared with the nifty chairs that completely collapse, it's bulky.

At www.coleman.com.

Big Bubba Chair with Footrest

Cost: \$40

Sweet: After a friend and I got lost in a canyon for six hours but finally found the car at midnight, we popped open a bottle of champagne and slept in these - that's how comfy they are.

Skunky: Eventually, the footrests give out, but it does take a couple of years.

At www.rei.com, www.amazon.com, Target.

GCI Outdoor Everywhere Chair

Cost: \$40

Sweet: The straps on this chair, which sits low to the ground and has adjustable legs to make it work on uneven terrain, are adjustable, so you can change your back position - very cool. The back and seat are nicely padded, too.

Skunky: If you've been on a long hike, your legs will be cranky about having to lower you so close to the ground.

At www.gcioutdoor.com, www.backcountry.com, www.sitincomfort.com.

WATER CONTAINERS

This one's easy: Just get enough big containers to hold water equal to 1 gallon per person per day, plus whatever you think you'll use to boil for pasta and wash dishes, if there is no potable water at the campground. The 7-gallon containers cost about \$13 each at such places as Target, REI stores and Army/Navy surplus stores.

COOLER

Another easy one, because you'll know what you need once you have done this a couple of times. Coleman has a newer one called the Extreme (\$30) that might throw you off because the inside is slimmer than usual (it holds 36 quarts), but that's because the insulated part is thicker. What you lose in space, however, you gain in cooling: Filled with ice, the Extreme keeps food and beverages properly chilled for five days. The 50-quart wheeled version (\$56) is extra-sweet, and there's a 100-quart too (\$87). Find it at www.coleman.com, Target, REI stores, www.rei.com.

LANTERNS

The mantles - those cloth, sock-like things hanging down that you burn to a chemical ash so they will glow when heated - are the most annoying things about lanterns, and one wonders why they have to be so temperamental. The best innovations to come along are decent solar lanterns and mesh globes for regular ones, which means no broken glass.

Also, Century came up with a post (\$35, www.rei.com or REI stores) that you clip onto the propane tank, screwing your lantern on top and shining the light over what you're doing, right where you need it most.

SunWize Outdoor Solar Lantern

Cost: \$69

Sweet: Let it sit out all day while you hike or swim, and then at night, it's ready to go. Also, not a bad idea to have as an emergency backup at home.

Skunky: Not quite as bright as a regular lantern.

At www.sunwize.com.

Coleman 229 Dual-Fuel Lantern

Cost: \$50

Sweet: Hate having to worry about tracking down propane? This one can run on unleaded or white gas. Burns very brightly compared with most lanterns.

Skunky: Need to carry funnel, and you never can get it into that little hole without spilling.

At www.coleman.com.

Century Double-Mantle Lantern with Mesh Globe

Cost: \$32

Sweet: The mesh globe makes this lantern shine, giving the light a soft, refracted glow and making it less hazardous with kids running around. Plastic base with four fairly stable feet (it screws right into the propane canister).

Skunky: Nothing yet.

At www.centurycamping.com, REI stores, www.rei.com.

TABLES

Not essential, but it can be rough to cook and eat on the same picnic table. Low-cost options include card tables and those little TV dinner tray tables, but they take up more space.

GSI Camp Gourmet Kitchen

Cost: \$160

Sweet: This is the deluxe model, for when you get very serious about camping. It has little sinks you can hook up to hoses and a foot pump, cutting boards and drying racks and several places where you can set up your stove and other cooking areas.

Skunky: Your purist camping friends will make fun of you for having this.

At www.gsioutdoors.com.

Roll-a-Table

Cost: \$54

Sweet: The top rolls up and aligns with the legs for easy storage. The plastic lining cleans up easily.

Skunky: You can't set pots on it straight from the stove; the plastic melts.

At REI stores, www.rei.com, Target, www.camptime.net.

GCI Outdoor Top Shelf Roll-Top Table

Cost: \$35

Sweet: Rolls up and has a built-in trash-bag holder, and you can put hot pots on it.

Skunky: The aluminum top takes a beating; it shows scratches pretty quickly.

Many gear stores carry this one.

COOKWARE

This is an area where it's easy to make do with what you have at home. Be aware, though, that your stuff may come back greasier, somewhat blackened on the bottom and a little more banged up. When I first started out, I simply went to a thrift store and bought aluminum pots and pans and enamelware, and I still have many of those pieces, some of which I use only for campfire cooking so I don't blacken my newer, nicer set.

That said, there are some fancier pieces to be had, especially the nesting sets that take up less space. Necessary: one or two skillets for frying things like bacon and eggs, a couple of small and medium pots for sauces and boiling water, and a big pot with a lid for pasta and batches of chili, along with the utensils for making it all happen.

Evernew Slick Nonstick Titanium Cookset

Cost: \$100

Sweet: The best material out there for outdoor cooking, lightweight titanium with a noncorrosive nonstick finish. The lids on the 1.9-liter and 1.3-liter pots double as skillets, and the insulated wire handles fold down after use.

Skunky: The place where the wire handles connect gets gunked up quickly.

At www.rei.com.

MSR Alpine Guide Cookset

Cost: \$70

Sweet: The lids on the 1-, 2- and 3-liter pots can double as plates, and the cutie tongs-like gripper makes a potholder unnecessary.

Skunky: The manual says you can lift up to 10 pounds with the gripper, but don't push it.

At www.backcountry.com, REI stores.

GSI Hard Anodized Extreme Cook Set (Small)

Cost: \$50

Sweet: The lids on the 1-quart and 1.5-quart pots double as skillets, and the set comes with two grabbers and two little cutting boards.

Skunky: You will need a bigger pot to supplement this set.

At www.campmor.com.

TABLEWARE

You can pilfer from your kitchen or buy at a thrift store, but eventually you will want something dedicated to camping. If you camp with others, use a Sharpie to write your initials on reusable hard plasticware so you can easily identify it in a dish bin and it doesn't get thrown away (plastic utensils in particular).

GSI Outdoors Pioneerware Dinnerware Set

Cost: \$50

Sweet: Just holding the enamelware pieces (four plates, bowls, cups) makes you feel like you're camping. The forest-green mug looks like it always holds cowboy coffee and the plate, some fried trout and cast-iron potatoes.

Skunky: Enamelware is metal underneath, which means it conducts heat easily. Don't burn yourself.

At Bass Pro Shops, www.basspro.com.

GSI Lexan Modular X2 Tableware Set

Cost: \$40

Sweet: Setting for four includes bowls, plates and cups, and it all fits inside a squared-off mixing bowl; made of pretty durable plastic-like material.

Skunky: The material hangs onto grease and doesn't let go.

At www.gsioutdoors.com, www.campmor.com, www.rei.com.

Orikaso Fold-Flat Tableware 3-Piece Set

Cost: \$16 a set (bowl, cup, plate)

Sweet: The name says it all - the pieces fold flat when you're done, making cleanup a breeze, because basically you're washing slips of polypropylene. They assemble in seconds. For a family of four, they take up as much space unfolded as a thick package of printer paper. Really fun is the After-dinner Set, which has espresso cups and plates you can fold the other way to reveal a printed board for playing chess or checkers.

Skunky: So far, polypropylene has not been proven to leach chemicals into food, but you have to trust the research.

At www.orkaso.com, REI stores, www.rei.com.

STOVES

The bottom line for a stove is that it should be light, be easy to clean and burn a fuel you can live with. For fuel, the options are propane, white gas (also known as Coleman fuel or naphtha, it burns clean and hot but quickly) and unleaded gasoline. If propane is what you need for your lantern and your stove, it's not a bad idea to spring for a bulk cylinder, such as a 4.25-pound bottle (\$45-\$55). That way, you'll always have plenty to boil water for dishwashing and heat water for tea and coffee and whatever else comes up, and you will be able to run the lantern from it (buy a hose to connect the lantern and stove for about \$20-\$25).

Brunton Wind River Range

Cost: \$400

Sweet: The camp stove that will last a lifetime, the one river guides and other pros swear by. No flimsy side panels or little canisters you need to prime - hook this bad boy up to some serious propane and let all 30,000 BTUs rip (most camp stoves send out about 8,500 to 10,000 BTUs). You can really cook on this thing, and at the end it cleans up beautifully and then packs like a suitcase - it comes with a cutting board and storage for utensils.

Skunky: Well, the price is bit up there.

At www.backcountry.com.

Coleman Eventemp 3-Burner Stove

Cost: \$100

Sweet: Coleman does a good job with its stoves, and three burners is a bonus - maybe to put the tea kettle on while the pasta and sauce are cooking, or to warm up some tortillas while the fajitas and green chili are cooking. At 26 by 18 inches, this is only slightly bigger than the usual campground stove, but you can wedge a small pot in the center. Dual fuel too, Coleman's own or unleaded gas, and little trays on the side to set stuff on.

Skunky: I've never liked the windscreens on Coleman's stoves; they're flimsy and they never stay in right. And the fuel canisters can be temperamental to prime.

At www.rei.com. (\$50 cheaper than at www.coleman.com).

Century Matchless Grill and Stove

Cost: \$72

Sweet: One burner and one grill big enough to put out burgers or steaks for a family of four. I love that Century's propane-fueled stoves don't require matches; just push a button, and they fire up.

Skunky: Things are going to get a little messier with the grill option; there is a removable tray, but be prepared to use some elbow grease.

At www.centurycamping.com, www.rei.com.

OTHER ESSENTIALS

Some of these items are crucial for camping and some are negotiable, and you can use this as a starting point for your own list (for instance, margarita mix is a crucial item for some folks).

- Maps, guides for area
- Sunscreen
- Bug spray
- Water bottles
- First aid kit
- Pillows
- Flashlights
- Spare batteries
- Dish detergent
- Dish towels
- Sponge/pot scrubber
- Grill brush
- Cooking utensils
- Can/bottle opener
- Corkscrew
- Plastic bin for dishwashing
- Paper towels
- Tablecloth
- Trash bags
- Duct tape
- Hammer/mallet (for tent stakes)
- Small broom
- Towels, washcloths
- Soap
- Toilet paper
- Bag for dirty clothes
- Matches, fire starter, wood as allowed, charcoal
- Seasonings, cooking oil
- Solar shower: not necessary but a blessing for more than a weekend trip when everyone starts to get stinky. The warm water also is nice for rinsing dishes.
- Headlamps

TIPS FROM THE PROS

"I can't say this enough: Camping is about relaxing. The more you bring, the more you got to set up, the more you have to take down, the less relaxation time you have."

"Don't forget the toys. Bring your bike, boat, a big kite, your Frisbees."

"I keep all of my gear, my food, everything I use on camping trips in giant Rubbermaids. My sleeping gear is in a giant duffel. Organize your stuff so you can pull it out easily when you get to the campsite and have it contained in something that keeps it clean and dry. Then, clean it before you put it away at the site, so you can unpack it, put it in a corner, and it takes 15 minutes to put it together for the next trip."

"Stretch a tarp off the side of your car and make a porch, and then use your car as a place for folks to get away from their tent. It really comes in handy when it rains. This gives you a way to have another shelter or shade,"

"Think about each thing that you pack, which works for backpacking or car camping. Like a bandanna, which can be just a bandanna, or it can work as a coffee filter, you can use it to wash dishes, it can be part of a first-aid kit."

"Stuff sacks, those things your sleeping bag comes in, can be used to hold wet or dirty clothes, you can hang food in it off a tree for a bear bag. And you can stuff it with soft clothes and use it as a pillow."

Close Window

Send To Printer