

## CHAPTER 10

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# *Sleeping Bags*



## 1. DO YOU REALLY NEED IT?

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Sleeping bags are an absolute must when hitting the trail. Having a warm container to sleep in at night is a non-negotiable creature comfort and even more importantly, a quality sleeping bag provides safety. The risk of hypothermia isn't just a danger in harsh environments, but can also be a threat in relatively warm weather too. Staying warm is one of the most critical aspects of being safe in the backcountry.

## 2. THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A SLEEPING BAG

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### TEMPERATURE

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Arguably the most important consideration for a sleeping bag is its temperature rating. Understanding the rating system, and how it should be applied, is an important step in choosing the right bag for the environment you'll be sleeping in.

#### *Temperature Ratings*

When deciding on the right bag, it's always best to err on the side of caution and choose a lower temperature rating than you think you need. The lower the rating, the warmer the bag will be. In the event that you end up being too warm, it's an easy adjustment to unzip the bag and cool off. It is much harder to warm up than it is to cool down.

In order to make the most informed decision, make sure that the sleeping bag you choose is rated using one of the standardized

systems: ISO (International Standards Organization) or EN (European Norm). By doing this, you'll be able to accurately compare the temperature ratings between two bags (even if one uses EN and the other uses ISO).

### *What Type of Sleeper Are You – Warm or Cold?*

It's also important to understand that there are two temperature ratings for each bag that you should keep an eye on: Comfort Rating and Lower Limit Rating.

The Comfort Rating is the lowest allowable air temperature for cold sleepers (often thought of as women) while the Lower Limit Rating is the lowest allowable air temperature for warm sleepers (traditionally men). Because of data that shows the physiological differences in core sleeping temperature between the two binary genders, women's sleeping bags reference the Comfort Rating while men's bags rely on the Lower Limit Rating.

### *Temperature Rating Guidelines*

BAG TYPE	TEMPERATURE RATING (°F)
Summer Season	+ 30° and higher
3-Season	+ 15° to + 30°
Winter Season	+ 15° and lower

## INSULATION

Sleeping bags are made with two different insulation types: *down* and *synthetic*. Each type has its pros and cons.

### *Down*

"Down" is the fluffy layer of plumage found under the exterior layer

of feathers in waterfowl like geese and ducks. By far the more popular of the two, down insulation is extremely lightweight and very compressible, meaning its packed dimensions save precious room in your backpack. Although more expensive than synthetic bags, sleeping bags insulated with down are more durable and last longer, making them a great investment over the years.

An important spec to keep your eye on when choosing a down bag is how much “Fill Power” it has. The higher the number, the better the warmth to weight ratio. As you’ll learn in the next section, overall sleeping bag weight is an important consideration.

Fill power is a great way to compare seemingly identical bags with the same temperature rating. For example, two 15° bags can differ by \$100 depending on the fill power, but higher fill powers are more efficient.

If you can afford the price difference, a 15° bag with 850-fill power can provide as much as 10 ounces of weight savings over a 15° bag with 650-fill power! However, the benefit of choosing a bag with a lower fill power is that it allows you to get a 15° bag at an entry-level price point.

In recent years, most manufacturers have started treating down feathers with a water-resistant coating. This helps mitigate the loss of insulation efficiency if your bag gets wet. However, a soaking wet down bag will not be able to provide the amount of warmth that a wet synthetic bag will.

### *Synthetic*

Synthetic sleeping bags offer a few advantages over down and are definitely worthy of consideration. More affordable than their down counterparts, synthetic bags will continue to keep you insulated even when wet, and will dry out much faster than a down

bag. This can be a crucial difference if you'll be camping in damp or rainy climates.

Synthetic bags are also non-allergenic, meaning these are the choice for those who have sensitive allergies to bird feathers and plumage.

## WEIGHT

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The weight of your bag is an important feature to consider, as a heavy-weight bag will take up more space and make your backpack heavier overall. While not everyone needs to be an ultralight enthusiast, weight is a crucial consideration for every piece of gear you buy. It all adds up! Sleeping bags offer some of the greatest potential weight savings.

When trimming down on weight, make sure you're comparing bags with the same temperature rating as lower degree bags require more insulation to keep you warmer. Also, keep an eye out for more efficient types of insulation that provide the same amount of desired warmth at a lower weight.

## SHAPE

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When it comes to bag weight vs. roominess, there are three general shapes of sleeping bags that you can choose from: mummy, semi-rectangular, and rectangular. You may also consider opting for a double sleeping bag if you and your partner prefer to stay close while you sleep.

### *Mummy*

Best suited for backpacking trips due to their lighter weight and thoughtfully engineered design, mummy bags offer the best warmth to weight ratio of any shape. They hug you closely and come with a hood to keep your head warm.

### *Semi-Rectangular*

These bags offer more room than mummy bags for a small tradeoff in warmth and come in a “barrel” shape.

### *Rectangular*

Better suited for those camping for several days, rectangular bags are heavy but provide much more room to stretch out. They also do not insulate nearly as well as mummy bags, but offer the most entry-level friendly price point.

### *Double*

An ideal choice for couples who want to share a bag, double bags offer room for two. Another choice is to pair a right-zip and left-zip bag together, giving you the option to join individual bags together to make one big bag. Rectangular bags offer this option as well.

## LENGTH

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Traditional sleeping bags are divided into two different categories, based on the gender binary: men’s and women’s. All you really need to know is your height and body shape to decide which length of sleeping bag is right for you.

What are known as “men’s” sleeping bags are made in Regular and Long lengths. A regular bag is usually 6' long and can fit people up to six feet tall.

A long bag measures 6' 8" and is designed for people who are taller than six feet (up to 6' 6"). The extra 8" of length in a long bag is designed to give you a little room to move about as your spine will decompress and add an inch or two to your height when you lay flat.

Some companies also include a "Short" or "Small" length of men's bag, which fits people who are shorter than 5' 6". Traditionally designed women's bags are also made for shorter individuals and they typically come in Regular and Long sizes as well.

A regular women's bag fits people up to 5' 6" and a long women's bag is good for people up to 5' 10". You can also opt for a gender-neutral bag, which will provide you with a wider selection of styles and length options. Just make sure to check the length specifications against your body height before choosing which length of bag is right for you.

## ADDITIONAL FEATURES

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### *Hood*

Typically found on mummy and semi-rectangular bags, a sleeping bag hood helps your head trap warmth and keep your body warmer overall. When backpacking in colder climates, this is a must-have feature.

### *Left or Right-Zip*

This is important only if you plan to join two sleeping bags together. Men's bags typically come in a left-zip while women's bags come with a right-zip. It's important to have one of each in order to properly join the two. Most brands will make matching bags for

men and women (same temperature rating, insulation, etc.) that will easily pair together.

### *Stash Pocket*

Many bags offer a convenient pocket near the chest to stash items you may need overnight such as lip balm or a headlamp.

### *Pillow Pocket*

Some sleeping bags offer a pocket that can be stuffed with clothing to create a makeshift pillow. This is a great way to use what you already have to create comfort rather than buying an extra camping pillow.

## OPTIONAL ACCESSORIES

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### *Stuff Sack*

Many sleeping bags come with a stuff sack that allows you to pack down the bag into a nice and tidy compartment. This is helpful when packing your multi-day pack and keeps things organized.

### *Compression Sack*

Similar to a stuff sack, a compression sack takes things one step further by employing tension straps to compress the sleeping bag. Depending on how large the bag is, a compression sack can reduce the size of a sleeping bag into roughly the size of a gallon of milk.

Another option some compression sacks offer is waterproofing. For just a little more money, you can ensure that your sleeping bag stays 100% dry if caught in a downpour or making a water crossing on the trail.

### *Sleeping Bag Liner*

Sleeping bag liners can be a handy addition to protecting your sleeping bag. By slipping it inside before you lay down to rest, you can prevent wear and tear on your expensive bag and keep your actual sleeping bag clean. Liners are much more durable and easier to wash than sleeping bags, so they're definitely a good option to include if you won't have access to a shower for a few days.

The best benefit of sleeping bag liners is that they can add an extra 10° – 15° degrees of insulation to your bag. Liners can extend the versatility of a 3-season bag without so you don't have to carry the extra weight of a winter bag to stay warm at night in cooler temperatures. In theory, a sleeping bag with a 30° F rating could improve to be comfortable in temperatures down to 15°F with the addition of a liner.

## 3. TECHIE LANGUAGE EXPLAINED

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**Baffle:** A baffle is a horizontal stripe that is sewn across a sleeping bag to hold down or synthetic material in place. A boxed baffle is the preferable style as it retains heat better. Sewn-through baffles allow heat to escape and thus do not insulate as well.

**Footbox:** The bottom of the bag where your feet rest. It is referred to as a footbox because sleeping bag zippers typically only go down to the ankle or mid-calf, isolating your feet into a cozy little box at the bottom of your bag.

**Hook-and-loop Tab:** A velcro flap that secures the zippers on the side of your sleeping bag. It's designed to prevent your bag from unzipping during the night due to movement.

***Hood Drawstring:*** Mummy style sleeping bags often include a drawstring at the hood, allowing you to cinch the opening around your face. In extremely cold climates, the hood can be drawn almost completely around the face, allowing you to breathe easy and still remain warm.

***Yoke:*** For sleeping bags, a yoke is a neck collar inside the bag that helps prevent warm air from escaping through the collar of the bag.

## 4. PRODUCT RECOMMENDATIONS

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3-season backpackers needing to stay warm during early spring and late fall backpacking trips will find the [Kelty Cosmic 20](#) to be a trusty, go-to bag. It hits the sweet spot on all the specs making it a quality bag at a reasonable price.

Ultralight enthusiasts looking to shave down every ounce possible will love the [Therm-a-Rest Hyperion 32](#). At just 16 oz. in total weight, you'll nimbly navigate your hike feeling as light as a feather and will sleep comfortably down to freezing temps.

Backpacking women looking for a fitted shape sleeping bag might consider [REI's Joule 21](#). Its 700-fill-power duck down provides a temperature rating down to 21° F and an overall weight just over 2 lbs. It also comes in a Regular-Wide size to accommodate a roomier fit.

For the couple who just can't bear to be apart whilst slumbering, the [Big Agnes King Solomon 15 Double](#) will let you stay cozy together in temperatures down to 15° F. This bag simplifies backpacking by eliminating the need to zip together two separate bags.

Winter backpackers looking to push their limits to the extreme should consider the [REI Downtime 0](#). With a lower-limit rating of 0° F, you'll be ready to take on sub-freezing temps in comfort and style.

To get the most up-to-date information, please visit our web article [Best Backpacking Sleeping Bags](#) where you'll find the latest sleeping bag recommendations. This list is updated every year.