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IT'S STILL A THIRD OF YOUR LIFE

Sleeping systems for overlanding

A look at the best ways to wake up refreshed and ready for a long day of exploration.

Story and photography by Jonathan Hanson



It's an old cliché, but even on the road you spend between a quarter and a third of your time in bed. Unlike home, however, the odds of having a bad night's sleep are higher, and the consequences are worse. If you've tossed and turned on an uncomfortable mattress, or shivered in an inadequate sleeping bag, your energy for the day ahead is already in deficit spending. So your quality of life in the field is directly affected by the quality of your sleeping arrangements.

Let's start by comparing the two choices in sleeping bag insulation, then look at some products guaranteed to lend adjectives like "blissful" to your night's sleep.

Down

Here's the unvarnished truth: Despite decades of research into the subject, and dozens of products claiming otherwise, no man-made material has yet come close to prime goose down for insulative effectiveness per ounce, drape, compressibility, comfort range, or durability. The chemical wizards at Dupont et al have yet to overcome millions of years of evolution. If you require the most warmth for the least weight and the smallest packed volume, down reigns supreme—and a quality down bag, properly maintained, will last for decades.

But not all down is the same.

Down refers to the soft, quill-less plumules under the quilled feathers of waterbirds such as ducks and geese. That's a vital distinction: A down plumule has no visible quill. In the U.S., a product can be labeled "down" even if it contains up to 18 percent feathers by weight. In addition, the actual down can comprise up to 10 percent broken or fragmented plumules (which have little loft) and two percent "residue." Thus a sleeping bag labeled "down" might only contain perhaps 75 percent pure down.

Down's quality is measured primarily by its lofting ability (also called fill power) which refers to how many cubic inches one ounce will fill in an industry standard test—550, 650, 700, and so on. The best, highest-lofting down comes from mature geese raised to at least five months of age. In China, geese are typically harvested for food at around 10 to 12 weeks, and the down collected from these birds typically displays lofting ability up to around 550 cubic inches—perfectly adequate for many uses. In eastern Europe (especially Hungary and Poland) and Canada, geese are harvested at up to six months of age, and the down thus produced can loft to 700, 750, even 800 cubic inches or more. This truly exquisite down is more durable, and less of it is needed to produce the same loft in a sleeping bag or parka. Incidentally, there is little difference between duck down and goose down of the same fill power; however, the best goose down lofts higher than the best duck down. (Also incidentally, if you find a product claiming to be filled with "Siberian" goose down, you're looking at marketing hype. There is no such thing.)

Almost all commercial down comes from ducks or geese killed for food. The exception is eider down, which is collected in tiny quantities from abandoned nests of the eider duck. Considered the finest down in the world, and certainly the easiest on the source bird, eider down normally lofts to around 700 cubic inches per ounce, but its physical structure purportedly gives it the insulative properties of 850 or even 900-fill-power goose down. Genuine eider down is rarely found in sleeping bags, and you'll know if it's there. One U.S. company, Nunatak, lists an eider down option on one of their bags. Standard price: \$307. In eider down: \$1,187.

There are other variables in down bags: the way the down is processed, the construction of the bag, etc. The easiest way to ensure you're getting the highest quality down bag is to stick with a reputable manufacturer. A good down bag will repay the investment many times over.

Synthetic Fill

Polarguard, Polarguard Delta, Hollofil, Hollofil II, Quallofil, Primaloft, ThermoTech—the choices are bewildering. However, virtually all synthetic sleeping bag insulations are made from one base material: polyester. The differences are in how the microscopic filaments are formed—some long, some short, some with a void down the center of the filament, some with multiple voids, some with grooves. The ultimate goal is to make the polyester act as much as possible like down in terms of loft, drape, and compression, while retaining the advantages of the synthetic material—lower initial cost, better performance if accidentally wet, resistance to mildew, and ease of cleaning.

In lightweight bags that are repeatedly compressed, such as for backpacking or dual-sport riding, the lifespan of a synthetic bag will be significantly shorter than that of a down bag, and the loft will degrade over time, often precipitously in the first few months of use. However, in larger bags designed for car camping and not compressed very much, a synthetic bag can be very durable. Either type is best stored completely uncompressed.

Don't rely too much on the "warm when wet" pitch of synthetic bag makers. True, a synthetic bag thoroughly soaked and wrung out will immediately regain about 50 percent of its loft, but you won't be happy in it. Of course, a down bag in the same situation will immediately regain about 50 percent of the loft of sheet metal until you find a commercial dryer. Either way, a simple roll-top dry bag is good insurance for transport on the trail. When I led sea kayak tours, I always used a down bag, and never had a problem. Still, for long-term use in constantly humid environments there is a good case to be made for a synthetic bag, as down can mildew if it doesn't get a chance to thoroughly dry out every so often.

Most quality sleeping bags are baffled—that is, the insulation is encapsulated in such a way to eliminate sewn-together seams and the resulting cold spots. You'll read a lot of hype about the different types of baffling—box, slant box, offset, and so on. I've never noticed the slightest difference in performance among baffle designs in high-quality bags. One design that does make a difference is a "continuous baffle" sometimes found in down bags, in which there is no block between the insulation in the top and bottom of the bag. This allows you to shake most of the insulation to the bottom in warm weather, or to the top when it's colder.



1 Feathered Friends Swift 20° \$375

Feathered Friends has been making down sleeping bags and parkas in Seattle since 1972. The company tests every batch of down it buys to ensure the highest quality; their European goose down lofts to 800 cubic inches or more and has an extremely low feather content. This results in sleeping bags that are fantastically light for the warmth they provide. Shell fabrics are also chosen carefully; currently FF's standard shell fabric is the excellent Epic, a breathable, 1.7-ounce-per-square-yard polyester material with a water-resistant fiber encapsulation. An extra-cost option is the even more moisture-resistant eVENT, which employs a laminate similar to Gore-Tex.

The Swift shown here, a very roomy mummy bag with hood, is rated to 20 degrees Fahrenheit and weighs just two pounds, two ounces. It stuffs to the size of a coffee can and stows easily on a motorcycle. In the past, I've found Feathered Friends' temperature ratings to be right on the money; I didn't have any 20-degree weather to try this one in, but I expect it to live up to its billing. It's certainly comfortable at freezing temperatures. Yet the Swift doesn't cut features to save weight: It has a proper full-length zipper which can ventilate from either end, and a fat draft tube with heavier material next to the zipper to minimize snagging. Construction is, in a word, perfect. I simply couldn't find any flaws in this bag.

The superior nature of down for loft and compression is widely known. Not so well understood by those who haven't used a good down bag is the way down drapes gently yet weightlessly around your body and lofts up around you, minimizing open air space that your body must warm to little benefit. The Swift, as all good sleeping bags do, employs differential cut: The inside lining is smaller than the outside shell, which allows both proper drape and full loft.

Feathered Friends makes a wide assortment of down sleeping bags, from a 1 1/2-pound, 30-degree mummy that feels as though it could float away on a warm breeze, to a dead-serious, what-the-heck-are-you-doing-there-anyway model called the Snowy Owl that will keep you warm at 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Women's-specific bags employ a different profile, and extra insulation in the foot area, since research has shown women need more warmth there. The company also make beautiful down garments, from featherweight vests to expedition parkas. As befitting a small, custom shop, you can specify colors and options at additional cost. Just make sure you get what you want, because it will be with you for a long, long time. featheredfriends.com



2 Butler Bags All-Season Sleeping Bag \$379

Have you seen those idyllic paintings of perfect lakeside campsites—a kettle hanging over a tidy teepee fire, a wall tent pitched in the background with fishing poles leaning against it, and a thick rectangular sleeping bag laid out on pine needles, a little roof formed over the top with the canvas cover supported on forked sticks?

This is that sleeping bag.

The Butler All-Season bag eclipses every other heavy-duty sleeping bag I've used. The shell is 12.5-ounce, marine-grade cotton duck that will shrug off anything you do to it. At 32 by 84 inches, it swallows someone of my 150-pound size (a gargantuan 40-inch-wide model is also available). The interior, of course, is soft and instantly warm flannel. But the key to the Butler's performance and versatility lies in its multiple-layer construction: Inside the bag you'll find two separate layers of Hollofil 808 insulation, each encased in its own flannel lining, in addition to the bottom and top insulation layers in their own flannel liners. Thus you can choose the amount of insulation above you by lying under one, two, or three layers. This gives the bag an outstanding comfort range of 20 degrees below zero Fahrenheit to 65 degrees above. No matter which layer you choose, you touch nothing but flannel. Under the bottom layer of Hollofil is a full-width-and-length pocket into which you can slide your mattress, so it stays directly under you all night. The *pièce de résistance* is an included, matching flannel pillow.

Nothing about the U.S.-made Butler bag is light-duty. The zipper is a massive brass thing; you could probably melt it down and make a trumpet. The storage bag is made of the same 12.5-ounce duck as the shell. A rope that could double for retrieving a stuck vehicle ties it shut.

Of course, this versatility, toughness, and comfort does have a price. The All-Season bag weighs around 18 pounds, and its storage bag measures 11 by 34 inches. Dual-sport riders will need to look elsewhere, I'm afraid (although for mild-weather rides you might consider Butler's Horseback Bedroll). But if you have the room and the GVWR, I guarantee the Butler will be the most scrumptious sleeping bag you've ever used. If you don't agree, I'll come to your camp and sing you a lullaby (easy bet for me—once you hear me sing you'll decline to collect).

So far I'm having only one issue with the Butler bag: My wife has totally claimed the review sample, and now snarls if I get anywhere close to it. butlerbags.com

3 LuxuryLite UltraLite Cot \$219

After 20 years of testing outdoor equipment, I'm not very often blown away by a piece of gear. The LuxuryLite cot blew me away.

An absurdly gossamer two pounds, two ounces in weight, the UltraLite cot employs aluminum tent pole technology, three-layer laminated ripstop fabric, and clip-on plastic tensioner feet to produce a cot capable of supporting 200 pounds. Add two extra (included) support units and the weight goes up to three pounds—and the rating to a “big-and-tall” 325 pounds.

But that's not the amazing thing. The amazing thing is that this cot is as comfortable as any full-size cot I've ever used, and more so than many. The tensioning feet are adjustable, so you can increase support under your shoulders while reducing it under your hips, or any combination you like. The ideal is to adjust it so when you are on your side your hips and shoulders just clear the ground. So tuned, the UltraLite cot feels more like an orthopedic mattress than a camp bed.

First-time assembly is an instructions-dependent, 15-minute puzzle involving pick-up-sticks with aluminum rods, pondering on plastic feet, and wince-inducing bending of tensioning units. You'll get the hang of it, although my best time after practice was still two minutes slower than the three minutes the maker claims a “kid” can achieve. The slowest procedure for me is inserting the two side rods into the fabric hammock—you need to guide the rods past all the openings where the feet will clip. Round tips on those two rods would dramatically ease the process.

I found the standard, four-support configuration to be perfectly comfortable for me, but I added a fifth at the end under my head for extra support there. Perfect.

To be fair, this is not a piece of equipment you can abuse. It will be perfectly durable, but the maker warns against putting excessive fore-and-aft stress on it, which could conceivably snap a foot. In my use it seemed apparent that unless you carelessly fling yourself down on the thing, you're very unlikely to have trouble. Tossing and turning on it produces little but sideways stress, which affects it not at all. And it's unlikely you'll be doing much tossing and turning. Snoring won't hurt it a bit. *luxurylite.com*

4 Thermarest Mattresses Luxury Camp XL \$150; Prolite 3 \$85

Put these three items together—a Roll-A-Cot, a Thermarest Luxury Camp XL mattress, and a Butler sleeping bag—and you'll never want to sleep at home again. For that matter, combine a LuxuryLite UltraLite cot, a Thermarest Prolite 3 mattress, and a Feathered Friends Swift, and your dual-sport trip might develop impromptu extensions and detours.

The original Thermarest mattress, which combined open-cell foam with an air mattress to provide better support and insulation than either alone, has improved and propagated over the years to include models for everyone from ultralight backpackers to the most hedonistic vehicle-dependent campers. The Luxury Camp XL is a full 2.5 inches thick and 30 inches wide, and weighs a hefty five pounds. The Prolite 3, even in full-length trim, is an inch thick but weighs just 20 ounces, and rolls up to just 4 by 11 inches. Either is warm and comfortable on its own or can be combined with a cot for a night that's—what was that adjective I mentioned? Right: blissful. *thermarest.com*

5 Camp Time Roll-A-Cot \$100

It's easy to assume a full-size cot will waste a bunch of space in your family tent, but if you buy a proper one that sits high enough off the ground, you actually gain storage space you wouldn't have with mattresses on the floor. The U.S.-made Roll-A-Cot stands 15 inches high when assembled, which leaves plenty of room underneath for luggage and odds and ends, and provides a comfortable place to sit while dressing. What surprised me the first time I tried a tall cot was the psychological effect: Suddenly the tent felt like a *bedroom*, not just a tent.

The standard Roll-A-Cot is 28 inches wide and 74 inches long, which is plenty big for me. Wider and longer models are available. The trick to the Roll-A-Cot's comfort is its adjustable tension via four wing nuts, which allows the user to dial in just the right firmness—no sagging at all. It's utterly comfortable by itself in moderate weather; for colder temperatures you'll want an insulation layer underneath you (see Thermarests, above).

The construction is sturdy, large-diameter, 5086 aluminum tubing and 1,000-denier polyester mesh, which results in a 250-pound weight rating. My only faint criticism of the Roll-A-Cot is purely aesthetic: Its shiny aluminum and bright blue construction leaves me cold compared to a wood and canvas cot. But traditional cots weigh twice this one's 10 pounds, and don't fold up as compactly. And once I'm lying on it, all I see are stars anyway.

camptime.net