GoalTodo

Camping for beginners: a checklist and your first nights out

Sleep under the stars

8 weeks · Mon, Nov 30 → Sun, Jan 24

Week by week

Tick a box each time you do a session.

Nov 30–Dec 6
Week 1

Find a tent

Get ready

- [ ] Ask friends and family if you can borrow a tent, sleeping bag and mat, or look for an outdoor club or hire service near you that lends kit
- [ ] Pick a campsite for your campsite night: close to home, with toilets and drinking water, and check how to get a pitch
- [ ] Read the camping checklist in the guide and tick off what you already have

Done when: You have a tent you can use, borrowed, hired or your own, and a campsite and date for your first night

Sticking point: Don't buy a full set of new kit yet. Borrowing first shows you what you like before you spend anything.

Dec 7–13
Week 2

Pitch it at home

Get ready

- [ ] Pitch the tent in a garden, a big room or anywhere you're allowed, following its instructions, then take it down and pack it away
  the second time without the instructions
- [ ] Count every pole, peg and guy line, then lie on your mat in your sleeping bag on the floor to check it's long and wide enough
  30 min
- [ ] Test the head torch, and if you'll cook, light the stove outdoors and boil some water

Done when: You can pitch and pack the tent on your own without the instructions, and you've checked every piece of kit works

Sticking point: Missing pegs or a pole section is the classic first-night problem. Count them now, and pack a few spare pegs.

Dec 14–20
Week 3

A night in the garden

Get ready

- [ ] Sleep a night in the tent in your garden or a friend's, with the kit you'll take to the campsite
  one night
- [ ] No garden: pack your full bag and walk with it instead
  1 hour

Done when: You've slept a night in the tent at home, or carried your packed bag for an hour

Sticking point: Going back indoors at 3am is fine. You've still learned what you need to change before the campsite.

Dec 21–27
Week 4

One night at a campsite

First nights

- [ ] Check the forecast for the night, pack from the checklist in the guide, and tell someone where you'll be
- [ ] Arrive in daylight, pitch on flat ground that isn't in a dip and isn't under dead branches, and spend the night
  one night
- [ ] In the morning, pack up, leave the pitch clean, and write down what you missed, what you didn't need and what kept you awake

Done when: You've slept one night in your tent at a campsite and written your list of what to change

Sticking point: First nights feel long and noisy. You don't need a perfect night's sleep: lying warm and dry is the win. Change into dry clothes before bed, and keep your face outside the sleeping bag even when it's cold, because your breath makes the bag damp.

Dec 28–Jan 3
Week 5

Fix the kit, carry the pack

First nights

- [ ] Fix what didn't work last time: borrow a warmer layer or a second mat, and swap anything too heavy or too bulky
- [ ] Walk with everything you'll carry for a wild night, following your route on a paper map
  1 to 2 hours

Done when: Your kit list is fixed, and you've walked for an hour or more with your full pack

Sticking point: If you were cold last time, start with what's under you. A mat stops the ground drawing heat from your body, so a second mat often helps more than a warmer sleeping bag.

Jan 4–10
Week 6

One night somewhere wild

Going wild

- [ ] Choose a spot where wild camping is allowed (see the guide), plus a back-up campsite nearby, and check the local camping and fire rules
- [ ] Send your plan to someone at home: where you'll camp, how you're getting there, when you'll be back, and when to raise the alarm
- [ ] Walk in, pitch late in the day well away from buildings, roads, paths and water, spend the night, and leave no trace in the morning
  one night

Done when: You've slept one night wild, left the spot as you found it, and told your contact you're back

Sticking point: If the weather turns, the spot is busy or it doesn't feel right, go to your back-up. That's good judgement, not failing: try the wild night again the next weekend.

Jan 11–17
Week 7

Plan your three nights

Three nights

- [ ] Choose your three nights in a row: one spot or campsite for all three, or a short route between them, with a back-up for each night
- [ ] Plan food for three days and where you'll refill and treat water, instead of carrying it all
- [ ] If you can, spend one more night out, campsite or wild, to try anything you've changed
  one night

Done when: You have dates, places, a back-up for each night and a food and water plan, and your contact has the plan

Sticking point: Three nights means kit gets damp. Plan one set of dry clothes that's only for sleeping in, and a bag to keep it dry.

Jan 18–24
Week 8

Three nights out in a row

Three nights

- [ ] Check the forecast for all three nights, send your plan, and pack from your checklist
- [ ] A night out under the stars, at a campsite or somewhere wild
  3 nights in a row
- [ ] Check in with your contact each day you have signal, and tell them when you're home

Done when: You've spent three nights out in a row and told your contact you're home safe

Sticking point: The second morning is often the hardest: damp kit and tired legs. Air your sleeping bag in the sun if you can, eat a proper breakfast, and keep your sleeping clothes dry.

How the plan works

This plan takes you from no tent to three nights outdoors in a row, one step at a time:

1. Find a tent. Borrow or hire one before you buy anything.

2. Test your kit at home. Pitch the tent in a garden or a big room and check that everything works. The US National Park Service suggests a night in the backyard if you've never camped before.

3. One night at a campsite, with toilets, water and people nearby. This is where you find out what you forgot.

4. One night somewhere wild, where it's allowed, carrying everything you need.

5. Three nights out in a row.

Nights out are on Saturdays, with planning midweek and a check of the forecast on Friday. You can move the days to fit your life. Don't skip a step: each night builds on the one before.

Pick your season. This plan is written for spring, summer and early autumn. If it's winter where you are, set your three nights for late spring and use the weeks before for the home kit test and a campsite night on a mild weekend. Winter camping needs warmer kit and more experience.

Which level to pick

▪ I've never camped: you've never slept in a tent, or not since you were a child. 8 weeks, with a garden night before the campsite.

▪ I've camped at a campsite before: you've slept in a tent at a campsite and know how to pitch one. 6 weeks. Your campsite night is a rehearsal for the wild one, carrying everything in one bag.

If you're between levels, pick the first one. If you'll walk in to your wild spot and you don't walk far yet, the Walk every day plan is a good place to start.

Before you start

Ask a doctor first if you have questions about your fitness, a health condition, or what's sensible for you, as the US National Park Service advises. Take enough of any medicines you need, plus a spare day's worth.

Choose who you'll go with. A friend makes your first nights easier and safer. If you go alone, keep your first wild night somewhere you know, an easy walk from a road.

Choose an emergency contact who isn't coming. Before every night out, give them where you'll camp, how you're getting there, when you'll be back, and when to raise the alarm if they haven't heard from you. Then tell them when you're home.

Camping for beginners checklist

Take this list to every night out. Start with what you can borrow.

Shelter

▪ A tent, with all its poles, pegs and guy lines, plus a few spare pegs. A two-person tent sleeps two people, but leaves little room for bags.

▪ A groundsheet or footprint if your tent has one.

Sleep system

▪ A sleeping mat. It's the part beginners leave out. It cushions you and stops damp building up under your body, and the cold ground draws heat from you all night. For colder nights, put a foam mat under an inflatable one.

▪ A sleeping bag that fits you and matches the temperatures and weather where and when you'll camp.

▪ A pillow, or a stuff sack filled with spare clothes.

Clothing layers

▪ A base layer that dries quickly, not cotton.

▪ A warm layer, such as a fleece or insulated jacket, and a hat and gloves, even in summer.

▪ A waterproof jacket and trousers.

▪ One set of dry clothes and socks that you only wear to sleep in.

▪ Walking boots or shoes you've already broken in.

Water

▪ Bottles for the day. Away from campsites, a filter, purification tablets or a stove to boil water: in the wild you need to treat water before you drink it or cook with it.

Food and cooking

▪ Easy meals that keep without a fridge, such as pasta, rice, noodles and porridge, plus snacks and a little extra food.

▪ A stove, fuel, a lighter, a pot, a mug, a spoon and something to clean up with.

▪ A bag for all your rubbish, and, where there are bears, the food container or storage the local rules ask for.

Light

▪ A head torch with spare batteries, or a charged power bank.

First aid and hygiene

- A small first aid kit with plasters, blister plasters and your own medicines.
- Fine-tipped tweezers or a tick remover, insect repellent and sun cream.
- A trowel, toilet paper, hand sanitiser and sealable bags.

Navigation and safety

- A paper map and compass for anywhere wild, and a charged phone.
- A whistle, and an emergency survival bag or blanket.

This is the same safety kit as the ten essentials in the Climb a mountain plan, with your shelter and sleep system added.

Borrow or hire before you buy

You don't need to own anything to start. Ask friends and family first. Some outdoor and university clubs, outdoor centres and hire services lend or hire out tents, mats and sleeping bags. If you're in Scouts or Girlguiding, or your children are, ask the group leader too.

Borrowing first shows you what you like: how much space you want, how cold you sleep, and how much you can carry. If you buy later, buy the mat and sleeping bag first, because they matter most for a warm night. Buy for the camping you'll do. A big tent that's fine next to a car is too heavy to carry to a wild spot.

Where you can camp

Campsites are the easy start: toilets, water, and someone in charge. Before you go, check whether you need to book, whether fires are allowed, and how they ask you to store food. When you pitch, find flat ground that isn't in a dip, where rain collects, and look up: don't camp under dead branches.

Wild camping means pitching away from a campsite. Whether you can do it depends on where you are:

- Scotland: the Scottish Outdoor Access Code lets you camp lightly on most land, in small numbers, for two or three nights in one place, if you act responsibly. Camp well away from buildings and roads, and keep out of fields of crops or animals. Some places have byelaws: in parts of Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park you need a campsite or a camping permit in season.
- England and Wales: wild camping is generally only legal with the landowner's permission. Dartmoor is the main exception: the Supreme Court has upheld the right to wild camp on the Dartmoor Commons. Check the Dartmoor National Park Authority's map of where camping is allowed before you go, because not all of the moor is included.
- United States: most land run by the Bureau of Land Management allows dispersed camping, away from developed campsites, unless it's signed as closed. Rules vary, so check with the local office, and camp at least 200 feet from lakes, rivers and streams. Other public land has its own rules: check with the agency that runs it.
- Everywhere else: check the national park, land agency or local council for the area. If you can't find out, use a campsite.

If you can't wild camp near you, a small, simple campsite or a camping spot on a long-distance path where the landowner has said yes is a good stand-in for your wild night.

Leave no trace, and fires

Wherever you camp, follow the Leave No Trace principles. On Dartmoor the rules ask for it. In practice:

- Take everything home, including food scraps, and leave your pitch as you found it.
- Pick a spot that won't be damaged, and don't dig, cut or move things to make it fit.
- Toilets: use one if there is one. If not, pee well away from water. Bury poo in a shallow hole at least 200 feet (about 60 metres) from water and paths, and away from buildings, about 15 to 20 cm (6 to 8 inches) deep where the land allows, or bag it and carry it out. Take your toilet paper home.

Use a stove, not a fire. Wildfires can start even in wet places. Don't light an open fire or a barbecue in dry weather, near woods, farmland or peaty ground, or anywhere a sign or local rule says no. Where fires are allowed, use the fire ring or fire pit that's there, keep it small and make sure it's completely out before you leave or go to sleep. Keep stoves and fires well away from your tent, and never cook inside it.

Staying safe

Weather and cold. Check the forecast for where you'll camp before every night, and take more warm layers than you think you'll need. Nights can be cold even after a warm day. Hypothermia is a dangerous drop in body temperature, below 35C, and it's a medical emergency. You can get it from wet clothes, or from too few layers for the cold. Signs include shivering, pale and cold skin, slurred speech, slow breathing, and tiredness or confusion. If you think someone has it, call your local emergency number (999 in the UK, 911 in the US), get them sheltered, take off wet clothes, wrap them in a sleeping bag or blanket with their head covered, and give them a warm drink without alcohol and something sugary if they're fully awake. Don't rub their arms and legs, and don't warm them with a hot water bottle.

Wildlife and food. Never feed animals, and keep food sealed and packed away at night, never in your tent. In bear country, follow the park's rules exactly: cook and store food at least 200 feet from where you sleep, use the bear box or container they ask for, and don't sleep in the clothes you cooked in. Ask a ranger for the latest bear advice when you arrive.

Ticks. Ticks live in long grass and woods. In the UK they can spread Lyme disease, and they're common in southern England and the Scottish Highlands. Wear long trousers tucked into your socks, use insect repellent, and check your skin and clothes every evening and morning. To remove one, grip it close to the skin with fine-tipped tweezers and pull slowly upwards without squeezing it. See a doctor if you get a round or oval rash, or flu-like symptoms, in the weeks after a bite. Outside the UK, follow your own country's health advice on ticks.

Tell someone your plan, every time, and tell them when you're home. Phone signal is patchy in wild places.

In an emergency, call the local emergency number, and save it in your phone before you go. Put on your warm layers and get into your tent or survival bag while you wait.

Seeing the stars

- Go dark. The further you are from towns, the more stars you'll see. National parks and dark sky parks and reserves are some of the darkest places to camp.
- Time it with the moon. A bright moon hides fainter stars. The darkest nights are the week or so around the new moon. Check a moon calendar when you pick your dates.
- Give your eyes time. After you switch off your torch, your eyes take a while to adjust. Use a red light, or a torch with a red mode, so you don't lose your night vision.
- Watch for a meteor shower. The bigger ones, like the Perseids in mid-August and the Geminids in mid-December, are worth planning a night around.
- Stay warm while you look. Sit on your mat in your warm layers, or lie in your sleeping bag with the door open.

Common mistakes

- Leaving out the mat. Most cold nights come from the ground, not the air.
- Pitching for the first time in the dark or the rain. Practise at home, and arrive in daylight.
- Cotton clothes. They stay wet and cold. Keep dry clothes for sleeping.
- Too much kit. Write down what you didn't use after each night, and leave it at home next time.
- Assuming wild camping is allowed. Check first, every time.
- Lighting a fire you don't need. A stove is quicker, safer and leaves no mark.
- Going anyway. A bad forecast or a spot that feels wrong is a good reason to use your back-up.

Your three nights

▪ Keep it simple. One good spot or campsite for all three nights is fine. You don't need to move every day.

▪ Two days before, check the forecast for each night and change the plan if it looks bad. Send your contact the details.

▪ Each evening, pitch in daylight, put your food away, and change into your sleeping clothes.

▪ Each morning, air your sleeping bag if it's dry, check for ticks, and leave no trace if you're moving on.

▪ Afterwards, dry your tent fully before you pack it away, or it will go mouldy, and tell your contact you're home.

Then keep it going: a night out once a month is enough to keep your kit ready and your skills fresh. A Weekend offline and Spend time outdoors are good next goals.

If you fall behind

Missed 1 week: Carry on from the step you missed, not the one after it: do the night out you missed next weekend and move the rest of the plan back a week. Never go wild before you've done a campsite night.

Missed 2 weeks: Pitch the tent at home again before your next night out, then carry on. If that runs past your date, leave out the garden night or the pack walk week, never a night out or the last two weeks.

Missed 3 weeks: Go back one step: if you'd done the campsite night, do another before the wild night. Enter a new date on the plan page to see how many weeks you need.

Missed 6 or more weeks: Start again from the home kit test. If the season has turned cold, set your three nights for late spring and do the campsite steps on mild weekends until then.

Sources

Scottish Outdoor Access Code (NatureScot)
`https://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/practical-guide-all/camping`
“In Scotland, you can enjoy the outdoors on most land if you act responsibly. This includes lightweight camping in a tent, in small numbers and for no more than two or three nights in one place.”

Scottish Outdoor Access Code (NatureScot)
`https://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/practical-guide-all/camping`
“Seasonal byelaws are in effect in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park, which means that camping in certain areas of the National Park is only permitted within campsites or with a camping permit.”

Scottish Outdoor Access Code (NatureScot)
`https://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/practical-guide-all/camping`
“Do not light an open fire, including in fire bowls or BBQs, during times of high fire risk (prolonged periods of dry weather) or near forests, farmland, peaty ground, or close to buildings, or historic sites.”

British Mountaineering Council
`https://www.thebmc.co.uk/en/dartmoor-wild-camping-timeline`
“In Scotland this is permitted under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, but in England and Wales it is not considered legal unless the permission of the landowner is obtained.”

British Mountaineering Council
`https://www.thebmc.co.uk/en/dartmoor-wild-camping-timeline`
“The legal right to wild camp on the Dartmoor Commons has been upheld by the Supreme Court, marking a significant victory for public access to nature.”

British Mountaineering Council
`https://www.thebmc.co.uk/en/dartmoor-wild-camping-timeline`
“Anyone planning to wild camp now or in the future must refer to the interactive map and follow all ‘leave no trace’ principles.”

U.S. Bureau of Land Management
`https://www.blm.gov/programs/recreation/camping`
“Most BLM lands allow dispersed camping unless an area is posted “Closed to Camping” or has specific restrictions for land use or conservation.”

U.S. Bureau of Land Management
`https://www.blm.gov/programs/recreation/camping`
“Stay at least 200 feet from lakes, rivers, and streams to protect water quality.”

U.S. Bureau of Land Management
`https://www.blm.gov/programs/recreation/camping`
“In some locations bury waste 6–8 inches deep, at least 200 feet from water and trails.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/articles/camp-safety-before-the-trip.htm`
“If you’ve never camped before, try backyard camping to give you and your family members a test run.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/articles/camp-safety-before-the-trip.htm`
“Ask a friend or family member not going on the trip to be an emergency contact and leave your travel itinerary with him/her.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/articles/camp-safety-before-the-trip.htm`
“Be sure to ask your doctor if you have questions about your fitness level, health conditions, or appropriate activities.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/subjects/camping/finding-and-setting-up-a-campsite.htm`
“Setting up a tent is easier than you think. Practice at home so you are a pro when you visit a park.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/subjects/camping/finding-and-setting-up-a-campsite.htm`
“Look up; if you see dead branches overhead, you should not camp under them.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/subjects/camping/finding-and-setting-up-a-campsite.htm`
“Always store food at least 200 feet from your sleeping space.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/subjects/camping/what-to-bring.htm`
“Before you unroll your sleeping bag, you'll want to lay down a ground pad to provide some cushion under your body, but, more importantly, to keep moisture from accumulating beneath your body.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/subjects/camping/what-to-bring.htm`
“Use a sleeping bag that fits your personal comfort needs, size, and that matches the temperature and weather conditions for your location and time of year.”

U.S. National Park Service
`https://www.nps.gov/subjects/camping/what-to-bring.htm`
“If you are in the backcountry, you will need to filter or purify the water you drink and prepare food with.”

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypothermia/
“Hypothermia is a dangerous drop in body temperature below 35C (normal body temperature is around 37C). It's a medical emergency that needs to be treated in hospital.”

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypothermia/
“Hypothermia happens when you get too cold and your body temperature drops below 35C.”

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lyme-disease/
“Ticks that may cause Lyme disease are found all over the UK, but high-risk places include grassy and wooded areas in southern England and the Scottish Highlands.”

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lyme-disease/
“Regularly check for ticks on your clothes and skin, and on children and pets after being outdoors.”

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lyme-disease/
“Slowly pull upwards, taking care not to squeeze or crush the tick.”

This plan online	https://goaltodo.com/sleep-under-the-stars
Reach it with others on Welang	https://welang.com/goals/sleep-under-the-stars
Reach it on your own in HourLife	https://www.hourlife.com

This plan is a guide, not medical advice. See a doctor before starting if you have a health condition, are pregnant, or haven't exercised in a long time.