

SLEEPING ON THE GROUND

By Jeff Osgood

EDDWARD ABBEY ONCE ASKED the question, “Why sleep on the ground if you don’t have to?” In true Abbey style he bluntly answered his own query: “Only an idiot sleeps on the ground from choice. Little bugs crawl in your ears.” On a recent trip to the sporting goods store I realized that manufacturers couldn’t agree more with Mr. Abbey. There are entire aisles stocked with sleeping apparatus designed to elevate, levitate, and separate the sleeper from the fact that he or she is sleeping outdoors.

My wife and I are taking our children camping this summer. In preparation, I scored an economical 6-person tent, scrounged up some diminutive sleeping bags, and borrowed some extra cookware. I was taking inventory when my wife asked me, “What are the kids going to sleep on?” I stifled one of those incredulous looks that always gets me in immediate trouble and answered, “The ground.”

Now I’m not one of those dads who’s likely to send his three-year old twin boys on some toddler Outward Bound experience. (Okay, boys, here’s your one match, your uncooked bacon, and a square of tinfoil. See you in a week.) But I do think that when you’re camping, you don’t need to bring every comfort of the home with you, and that includes your friggin’ mattress.

When I bought the sleeping bags I scanned the surrounding shelves and found them stocked with air mattresses. Air mattresses? For camping? Air mattresses are the bullshit extra beds you blow up when your less-than-hygienic second cousin breezes through town and needs a place to pass out. Now some genius has adapted them for camping. They come in a variety of sizes—single, queen, king. They vary in thickness with some staying relatively low and thin, while others blow up fatter than the gunwale on a neoprene raft. Let’s not overlook the color options; the palette includes conservative blues and grays, flashy pink and orange, and rugged camouflage. (The latter being an essential for narcoleptic elk hunters everywhere.) Don’t want to exert yourself with a foot pump? Hell, inflate your bed with a handy-dandy air compressor that conveniently plugs into your car’s cigarette lighter. Top it all off with a camp pillow.

Looking at the boxed mattresses, with pictures of smiling, somnolent men and women in various angles of repose, I was transported back to my earliest camping memories: Boy Scouts, the muggy Midwest, and a canvas tent marinated in mildew and wood smoke. The only thing separating my sleeping bag from terra firma was the tent floor and a plastic ground cloth. My pillow? A dirty arm or a balled up t-shirt.

There’s a simple, almost brainless skill in making the ground a bed, a primitive bedding-down ritual perfected by our shaggy primogenitors. Level ground works best, a spot free of protruding rocks

and roots. Always prudent to avoid anthills and animal burrows. Stay away from running water or places that might pool up in heavy rain. When sleeping outdoors, it’s never a good idea to sleep directly on the ground. Bare ground acts like a body-heat sponge and can quickly lead to hypothermia. In fact, if you’re ever stuck sleeping outside with no gear, survival experts advise a buffer layer of no less than a foot of dry grass, pine branches, or some such material between sleeper and the earth. But if you do have a sleeping bag, all you really need is a foam pad. It’s thin, boring, and can’t double as an inflatable pool toy, but, in most cases it’s enough to keep an insulating layer between sleeper and ground. Don’t believe it? Just ask any homeless person who gets by sleeping on a sheet of cardboard.



Of course someone’s bound to raise the issue of comfort. Air mattresses undoubtedly offer a cushiness not found in a wafer-thin piece of egg-crate foam. But whoever said sleeping outdoors was supposed to be comfortable? The sleeping bag and the tent are places to get a little rest and hopefully stay relatively warm and dry. Their use is meant to be brief. Catch some z’s and get out, move on, saunter forth. Some might complain that they can’t get a good night’s rest on anything but an air mattress. The nasty ground is just too darn hard. Here’s a tip

to help you sleep better on the ground: take a hike, chop some wood, or chase a butterfly. If you’ve already bothered with getting outdoors, might as well do something outdoorsy and tucker yourself out. Do fifteen miles above 10,000 feet with a forty-pound pack and you’ll fall asleep on a rock pile. If that doesn’t do you in, Nyquil is always an option—sweet, green escape.

It’s always good to keep things simple, and sleeping on the ground helps do that. Keeps a person light and mobile. Waking up and brushing off a little dirt or a couple of pine needles helps remind us where we are. Rolling out of a mildly uncomfortable nest with a few sore spots and a crick in the low back lets a body know that sleeping is not our life’s work.

But what of those bugs in the ear that Abbey griped about? “A panicked pissant,” he wrote, “scrambling over your eardrum, sounds like a horse marching through cornflakes. Horrible, undesirable, unnecessary sensation.” I counter with the night-jarring noise of someone shifting his or her weight on a bulging air mattress. Ass on inflatable sounds like a flatulent black bear after a night of dumpster-dining out back of the bowling alley. It’s loud enough to shock a snoozing camper to fumble for a pocket knife, blurrily ready to go mano to mano. Be careful, wouldn’t want to pop your bed.

Jeff Osgood lives, writes and sleeps in Longmont, Colo. This is his first story for the Gazette.

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