

Camping For Kayak Trips

Introduction

Camping can be generally comfortable, dry, and insect free. Camping is necessary for most overnight float trips because we often go places where there are no motels or cabins. Camping also helps us save money so we can go more often.

Most overnight float trips involve "base camping" and a few involve "river camping". Base camping means you will return to the same campsite each night. So you can set up your tent and leave it set up until it is time to go home. River camping (aka; kayak camping, boat camping, etc.) means you will float down the river and camp only with the gear you can carry with you. We typically camp on sandbars or gravel bars when we river camp. River camping is something you should try in warmer weather first.

Most trips involve one or two nights camping because most of us must work for a living and weekends are our get away. If we travel Friday night after work and come home Sunday evening, that means we need a place to sleep Friday and Saturday night.

This paper is written to help new kayakers with camping. If you are an experienced backpacker, then you will far ahead of most floaters. Backpackers are people who can camp and survive with the gear they can carry on their backs. They are minimalists and will pay a premium for the very lightest equipment. Floaters can learn much from backpackers. Since we don't have to carry all our gear on our backs, we can afford a little less expense, a little more weight, and more comfort.

I look forward to learning something from my friends on every trip. Everyone has slightly different ideas, methods, and opinions. Watch and ask questions.

Safety and maintaining good health are the two most critical things when camping, floating, or hiking in remote places. Expect that your cell phone might not work and a medical helicopter won't be able to find a place to land. First Aid is no longer just calling 911. If you are boating, assume you will get wet and have a solution. If you are cooking, assume you will get burned and have a solution. If you are allergic to an insect or plant, assume you will be exposed and have a solution. If you are a diabetic, make sure your friends know how to provide you with first aid. Assume the weather forecast will be incorrect and have a solution. And the list goes on. If you are one of those people who say, "It won't happen to me" then please don't come on one of my trips. Daredevils and adrenaline junkies are not welcome.

When accumulating your camping gear keep the following in mind:

1. Base camping
2. Carpooling with others to save fuel and travel costs
3. River camping or camping with the gear you can fit in and on your boat
4. You will replace some of your gear with better gear as you learn from your friends
5. If you get wet on the float, you will need dry clothes to sleep in

The Tent

I like the smallest tent I can get by with. A small tent is easier to pack and set up and it is much easier to hang up for drying when I get home. A tent with a smaller profile will be easier to secure in high winds. A smaller tent is easier to pack in my boat if I elect to river camp.

Modern tents have waterproof bottoms and zippers for the door(s). I can keep the insects and critters out by keeping mine zipped up, and not attracting them with light.

For my personal choice, I like a two-person, three-season, backpacking tent that will stand up without stakes. That size works well for me alone, and provides me with room for storage of most of my gear. Since I don't camp when there is heavy snow, I don't need the more expensive four-season tent. I like a tent that will stand up without stakes because it is easier to set up, move a few feet if needed, and if the ground is rocky I can live with one or two stakes missing. I choose less expensive tents because I am cheap and I fear that a premium tent might be stolen or that I might forget to dry it out when I get home. In nearly 200 nights of camping neither has happened.

Most of us use some type of ground cloth or "footprint" under our tent. This is not for keeping water out but for protecting the tent from the ground and reducing the risk of puncture of our sleeping pads. Many campers prefer a porous ground cloth for better drainage. I use a cheap tarp and don't worry about putting holes in it with stakes.

Modern tents come with a rain fly. The rain fly goes on the top of the tent and sheds water. If I expect it to rain, I like to add an additional tarp on top of the rain fly. If it is cold weather, I put the silver side down to help reflect my body heat back toward me. This top tarp or second rain fly pretty much guarantees me that I won't have water in my tent from above. The sewn seams on your rain fly should get an application of "seam sealer" periodically to help prevent leaks. Find seam sealer where better tents are sold and/or where backpacking supplies are sold.

Placement of the tent can add to your comfort or make your experience miserable. Nearly every site will have a little slope. Orient your tent so you don't tend to roll sideways off your sleeping pad. Find a location that does not include a bump or indentation. Use your foot to clean the area from sticks, stones, pinecones, etc. Avoid placing your tent directly under dead limbs. Observe the terrain for drainage and avoid placing your tent in a low spot that will have flowing water should it rain. Consider that the river might rise during the night. Finally, consider a preference to wind and rising sunshine. A weather forecast and compass can help.

Just so you will know what to expect, most places we camp have cleared or mowed areas for setting up tents. Some have toilets. Some have picnic tables and grills. Some have only a cleared area. I have never tried to camp in the over-growth of a forest and I will not likely plan a trip that is quite that primitive. Ask the trip leader if you are not familiar with the site.

The Sleeping Bag and Pajamas

I suggest a 15 or 20-degree mummy type sleeping bag. There is a huge jump in physical size when you select a bag for colder temperatures and that extra bulk will bite you. I use a 15-degree bag year round. If it is hot, I lie on top or with it open. As the night chills, I cover and then zip if it gets colder. Some people like sleeping nude. Personally, I find that very cold if I have to get up in the night. So I wear enough clothing that the sleeping bag just helps me. If it is very cold, I will wear two pair of wool socks, ski bibs, ski jacket, stocking cap, and gloves. My down filled ski jacket and ski bibs compress very well so they take up little space for travel or packing my boat.

If it is summer, I will wear shorts and lay on a sheet on top of my sleeping bag. I don't like hot weather camping so I pray the night will be cool. I find it cooler if my tent is exposed to a clear sky. If you wonder why, look up terrestrial radiation.

I would rather see you be over prepared to stay warm than to spend the night freezing cold. I want you to enjoy the experience. So please bring plenty of clothing to sleep in, and learn from each experience.

The Sleeping Pad / Mattress and Pillow

When selecting something to lie on, three things are important. 1. Without proper insulation, the ground can suck your body heat making you very cold, 2) you will likely want something that closely matches the firmness of your bed at home, and 3) don't forget the Ibuprofen.

I started with a Coleman twin size air mattress to save money. The twin-sized mattress fit very nicely in my larger 6 x 9 tent but won't fit in my smaller two-person backpacking tent. In warm weather, a simple air mattress can be very comfortable. The firmness can be adjusted with air pressure. In colder weather the simple air mattress provides very little insulation from the cold ground so an additional layer of insulating foam is needed. The simple air mattress contains no foam to prevent air circulation. Air mattresses are only about \$20 at the discount stores. They usually last several trips before they begin to leak. Most of us have to start with the simple air mattress because it is too expensive to start out with all the best camping gear.

Today, I sleep on two self-inflating camping pads layered and tied together with straps. I started with one pad that was advertised to be 2 or 2 1/4 inches thick and that was not quite soft enough for me. After several trips, I purchased a second one and now I can sleep with the same firmness of my Select Comfort Air Bed that I have at home and if one pad should leak, I have the second pad for a backup.

Another reason for a ground cloth / tarp under the tent is to help prevent punctures in your mattress or sleeping pads. I have been careful and have never experienced a puncture.

I usually find a place to stuff my heavy feather pillow. Stores that cater to backpackers will have several options for small and lightweight pillows. Sometimes it works to place a bag with extra clothing under head or stuff leaves in a dry bag.

Insect Free

Beware that some insect sprays will damage your tent and other items. I have actually melted my Neoprene paddle booties with Deet. I prefer to paddle and camp when insects are not a problem but I have been known to spray the grass near my tent and spray the cheap tarp I place over my tent as a second rain fly. I have great luck keeping bugs out of my tent by keeping my entry zipped up and turning my headlamp off before entering.

Ticks are an issue in Missouri and Arkansas during hot weather. They seem to like private areas and places where clothing fits very snug such as the waist. Most of my friends wear shorts in hot weather. I like to put bug spray around my ankles, waist, neck and other places. Then I usually cover my legs with a Gortex hiking shell and seal the ankles with Velcro or rubber bands. I avoid walking in the weeds or hunting firewood in the forest. I will be hot but I rarely get a tick.

Food & Water

Water is essential to staying hydrated. Staying hydrated is essential to avoiding muscle cramps and headaches. Drink water before you are thirsty. Pay attention to how much water you consume and how often you need to urinate. When the river and/or weather are cold, I dress very warm and I perspire much. I.e. you will need to consume more water than you think in colder weather. In hot weather, you will need much water to avoid heat exhaustion. When you perspire you will need to replace your electrolytes. Research this topic on the Internet.

Personally, I usually stop at Walmart on the way and buy gallon jugs of drinking water. This way I don't have to wonder if there will be water at the campsite or what it will taste like. I estimate a gallon per person per day plus a little extra.

I enjoy cooking on camping trips but I always go prepared with packaged food I can eat if it should be rainy or inconvenient to cook. I suggest Cliff Bars, Quaker Chewy Bars, chips, cookies, bread or tortillas, packaged or canned meat, etc. I take cash to purchase food if the group elects to drive to a restaurant. Restaurants are not always an option and often my friends would rather stay in camp. When I first started kayaking, I did not have a stove or a pot to cook in. I would pick up a Subway sandwich and place it in a soft cooler with a bottle of ice. This was my supper and my lunch on the river the next day. I then drank the water when the ice melted. Later, I purchased a stove and learned to cook things that were an easy clean up. I think I am on my third or fourth stove because I find smaller or more desirable stoves.

There are thousands of ideas for camp cooking. Learn about them from your friends, magazines, and the Internet. Consider the tools needed, difficulty, and the cleanup. Chicken and rice is one of my favorites because I can eat and cook in the same pan, and I have learned to cook it without sticking so it is easy to clean up with a very small amount of water.

Light

Almost everyone uses a battery powered LED headlamp. And LED headlamp provides all the light I ever need for camping. We set around the light of the campfire until it is time to go to bed and then sleep until daylight. I usually don't take a lantern.

The Shower

If we stay at a commercial campsite it will likely include a shower and it might not be hot. Showers are not usually the case. Occasionally, there is a coin-operated shower nearby. In the absence of a real shower, a plastic can/tube of anti-bacterial wipes will permit you to clean in the tent. Bathing in the river is not a good option because water that looks good enough for bathing is usually protected (no soap or human waste) and it is nearly always too cold. Our local Arkansas River and Kansas River are not clean enough for bathing.

Clothes Line

At the end of a float, often we will hang wet paddle clothes on a line stretched between two trees. It is a good plan to bring small diameter rope for this purpose. If you leave your things on the line overnight, they will usually be wetter in the morning than they were when you hung them up.

The Camping List

Develop a camping checklist that includes everything you want to consider. Edit the checklist after each trip as you learn what is really essential. I never take everything on my checklist but it helps me to remember the things I do want to take.

Firewood / Charcoal

If you learn there will be a grill at the campsite, consider bringing some firewood or a bag of charcoal to contribute to the campfire. If we are river camping, we will pick a site with plenty of driftwood. Popular camping sites are usually picked clean of firewood and often prohibit cutting of trees. Avoid burning anything that looks like a vine. It could be poison ivy. Burn only wood that you are sure is from a tree.

Personal Items

Don't forget medicine, toothbrush, first aid, etc. It is nice to have a container that stays packed with these items.

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