

So, you're going to sleep on the ground?

By: Nina Surr

Autumn is upon us, and with it comes the cold camping season. In my years in Markland I've discovered a few things about camping and frat wars which I will delight in passing on to you. After all, I have to put up with the lot of you whining, bleary-eyed, aching, sorry souls in the mornings.

I can't do much about your drinking habits, except maybe bring out some good liquor. I have one thing to say about hangovers. Drink water.

But there is something about your camping experience that you can control, usually, and that's the comfort of the place you'll be sleeping. I have a load of unsolicited advice for you about sleeping.

I will pause here for the expected wisecracks about sleeping around in Markland. There, got it out of your system yet?

The cheapest, oldest and most portable bed is on the ground. Humans slept that way for hundreds of generations, with nary a blanket between them and the earth. Civilization means that we do not have to sleep on the ground.

If you want to get in touch with your caveman ancestors, go right ahead.

You won't have to pack anything. You will also discover every rock, twig and root that you couldn't feel when you lay down. If the ground slopes in any direction, you'll wake up at the bottom of that hill. And the ground sucks all the body heat right out of you. But hey, it's authentic.

One method to sleep on the ground without sleeping on the ground is to get a hay bale and take it apart under where you will be sleeping before you set up your tent. This is a good, inexpensive way to get some padding between you and the cold. It is also authentic - and if hay bales are available at your camping site you don't have to pack the bedding in or out.

The hay bale method is not perfect, however. Hope you're not allergic to hay, or to any of the bugs that live in the hay. If it rains, hope your entrenching system is good. Else you will be sleeping on wet hay; soon to be wet, moldy hay. Yum. Water compacts the hay down, and often negates the insulating properties, so you end up colder and in more pain than you wanted to be. Site owners are often not very fond of piles of flattened hay lying where your tent used to be. Often it is hard to gather up all that flattened straw. Although hay is biodegradable, so some site owners can be convinced to just leave it there, especially if you're camped in the woods.

Hay can be used, to a minor extent, to flatten out sloped ground, but it is not very useful in steeper territory.

Sleeping up off the ground is a worthy goal. The methods I've seen for building beds include cots, rope beds, hammocks, air mattresses, foam pads and bringing actual mattresses and beds.

Cots, hammocks and rope beds have similar advantages and disadvantages.

They lift you up off the ground, so you don't have first-name acquaintance with every rock in the neighborhood. Rope beds can be lumpy, and often take a great deal of time to set up if you're not careful with the design. On steep ground you can set a block under one or more of the legs of your bed and sleep on the flat. You should do this, unless you want to revert to method one of camping out (sleeping on the ground). The true joy of having a raised bed comes when it rains, and your friends are grumping about their wet beds while you are sleeping high and dry.

The main disadvantage of cot/rope bed/hammock technology (without any additional padding) is their retention of heat. When you sleep on the ground or on a mattress, your body heat will eventually warm up the area underneath you. When you sleep on thin air, your body heat will warm up the air underneath you. Warm air rises - the air underneath you will rise to the top of the tent and probably leave, to be replaced by arctic air from outside. So if you're sleeping on a cot, bring some foam or sheepskins or something to put under you, as well as your blankets for on top.

Another disadvantage is that multiple people sleeping on a single cot/rope bed/hammock will gravitate towards the center. This may sound sweet and romantic, until you wake up at four in the morning with an elbow in your chest and no way to escape. Every shift will wake up everyone in the bed, often everyone in the tent and the campsite. But hey, it's warmer.

Foam pads are good, foam pads are cheap and most foam pads pack down very compact. They will keep you warm and relatively dry, unless you have a poor entrenching system. Foam pads do little or nothing to help you on a slope, so find a flat camping spot if you're sleeping on one. Foam pads, unfortunately, are prone to cannibalization when your buddy realizes that his new great sword won't pass inspection. Hopefully your buddy will tell you this before you lie down and discover a gaping hole right where your butt belongs. You're good friends, he'll tell you. Right? Uh huh.

Piles of sheepskins are stylish and authentic, insulate well, and have many of the advantages of foam pads. On a chilly night you can use your sheepskins for outer garb. They are bulky to pack, in quantity, and smell like wet sheep when they're wet. And they can be expensive. But if you can afford them, they're great.

Air mattresses are the invention of Satan. Oh, sure, they feel well enough, and they pack down small. And now there are devices that hook into a car's cigarette lighter, which can

fill up your mattress in minutes without you having to burst a vein blowing through the intake valve.

An air mattress will suck all the heat out of you, unless you pad it up (see my comment about sleeping on thin air, above). An air mattress is no help on a slope. An air mattress will develop a slow leak at two in the morning that has you exhausted and flat on the ground by morning. Most air mattresses were designed to handle pool parties and apartment floors, not frat fighters in cleats. Make no mistake about it, the only thing inevitable about your air mattress is that it will develop a leak, eventually.

And an air mattress will go flat, and will make squeaky-squeaky noises on the tent floor alerting all your friends to any hanky-panky you might be involved in. At least, it will if you're doing it right. Er, so I've heard.

If your transportation can fit an actual bed, you're doing swell. A real bed is warm, it's stylish, and you can kick your dirty clothes under the bed until time to pack up. A mattress insulates you from the cold. You can prop the legs up on other people's armor if the ground slopes under your tent. And you'll be the envy of the ground-dwellers. On the minus side, home-built beds can be rickety and prone to humorous collapses. Especially if you've been bragging about how comfortable it is and your friends own saws.

At many events nowadays you have the option of hotel camping. Hotel camping has the wonderful feature of not having to find your shoes in order to go to the bathroom in the morning. It has the not-so-wonderful feature of being away from the site, away from the bonfires and beer and singing and craziness that is the true joy of a good frat war. Try singing 'Bend Over Greek Sailor' in a hotel and see how soon your neighbor calls the management. I won't laugh, I promise. If you camp at a hotel you should not drink too much on site before you drive away. Some people consider this a Bad Thing.

Of course, the most comfortable bed to sleep in is your own bed, at home, with Mommy to bring you bacon and eggs in the morning. But until I can convince my mother to buy a house big enough to have frat wars in the backyard, I'll have to camp.

Just remember, you don't have to sleep uncomfortably just because you're sleeping in a tent.