

Camping in the wintertime? Here are a few things worth covering.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

On my first night camping in Western Maryland two weeks ago, the mercury dipped into the 30s, and I had naively optimistic hopes for the 20-degree sleeping bag I'd borrowed: Inexplicably, I decided not to wear socks.

All night, I tried to warm my toes. My fingers were toasty, conveniently tucked under my arms, siphoning core heat from my body. But restricted in a narrow bag, I couldn't curl into a warmer fetal position — or any position favorable to toe survival. I tried them all. I expended an embarrassing amount of energy flopping and tossing, futilely trying to heat my distant digits and certain I would look down in the morning to find 10 little specimens of frostbite. Despite my discomfort, I imagined that getting out of the bag to find socks would be a far graver exploit.

Eventually, I donned a hat, completely buried my head in the sleeping bag and caught a few



REI ADVENTURE TRAVEL

Jeff Stivers, right, poses with REI Adventures staff members after climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

winks. As I woke up and cringed at the thought of placing ice cold contacts on my eyeballs, I realized just how much I'd forgotten about wilderness survival. Ages ago, I was fairly competent camping in the cold. But heading into a new season of the pandemic, I realized I was flunking winter camping. Before camping in even colder weather, I consulted some experts.

"If you've done your research and you're prepared, camping in the cold is an incredible experience," said Clare Arentzen, an outdoor guide for Appalachian Mountain Club in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, noting that snow and ice can transform even the most familiar destinations. "You see signs of animal activity all over the place. It's quiet. There's less crowding on the trails. It feels epic." (Bonus: no bugs.)

"Winter camping is ridiculously fun," said polar explorer Eric Larsen, who enjoys the challenges

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Winter camping takes layers of prep work, and butter too

CAMPING FROM E15

that winter camping presents. “You have to be more thoughtful about your gear, systems and attitude, but you also have the opportunity to explore new landscapes.” Larsen is planning a Greenland Ice Cap crossing and North Pole expedition for this winter and knows a thing or two about keeping warm in a sleeping bag. For frigid feet, he suggested puffy booties — essentially little sleeping bags, possibly my favorite gear that I don’t yet own.

Below are more tips and hacks from Arentzen, Larsen and other experts for staying safe and warm in the great outdoors this winter.

Understand the risks Winter camping puts you at a much higher risk for hypothermia and frostbite, serious medical conditions that can sneak up if you’re not careful about your body temperature. According to the Mayo Clinic, hypothermia occurs when your body loses heat faster than it can produce it, causing a dangerously low body temperature. It can happen quickly in any season, and, left untreated, can be deadly. Frostbite, most common on the fingers, toes, nose, ears, cheeks and chin, is caused by freezing of the skin and underlying tissues (frostnip is a milder form that doesn’t cause permanent damage). Learn about the early signs of hypothermia and frostbite, how to treat them and when it’s time to call it quits. Prevention is far easier than trying to warm up a dangerously cold body.

Winter time is a different time In winter, you have much smaller margins for safety. For example, Larsen said, if you sprain your ankle in the summer, you could rest on a rock for a while without serious repercussions. “That same sprained ankle in the winter — you have about five minutes before your body core temperature drops and you enter the first stages of hypothermia,” he said. Also keep in mind that ordinary tasks take considerably longer, and days are shorter. Assembling tent poles with cold hands can be laborious, snow-covered trails can reduce travel speed, and finding water can be tricky when streams are frozen. Arentzen said it also takes more time (and fuel) to cook with snow.

Gear up If you already have the essential systems for three-season camping and hiking (such as shelter, extra clothes, sun protection, headlamp and first-aid kit), you’re well on your way to winter camping preparedness. “You don’t necessarily need additional gear, but you do need different gear,” said Larsen, who managed in his early dog-sled expeditions without any winter-specific items. Work with what you have. For example, wear long underwear under summer hiking pants. Arentzen said winter must-haves include a warm hat, balaclava, insulated gloves, and insulated and waterproof hiking boots and gaiters to keep snow out of your boots. Kelly Sloan, founder of Alberta-based Odyssey Adventures for Women, said in all four Canadian seasons she wears neck warmers (also called neck gaiters) with flaps down the front and back to block cold air.

Thanks to innovative and advanced synthetic materials, we can stop turning to fur and feathers for our winter gear. We don’t need beaver mittens and fur hoods, said Carl Dixon, an owner of Within the Wild, which offers Alaska overnights with a dog-sled team. “We think fur looks better on the animal.” Some pros swear by down coats and sleeping bags because of their warmth, but if they get wet, they’re useless; there are synthetic alternatives that are excellent insulators and dry faster.

If you’re in a remote spot without cell service, you may want a satellite communication device with GPS navigation, like



CHHERING DORJEE SHERPA

ABOVE: “Winter camping is ridiculously fun,” says polar explorer Eric Larsen, shown here crossing a large crevice en route to Camp 2 on Mount Everest in the fall of 2010.

BELOW: Exploring the outdoors during the colder months takes plenty of preparation and practice, as even setting up a tent can prove to be a difficult task.

Garmin’s inReach, which allows text messaging and can track your location for family and friends. I borrowed a friend’s Jetboil when I camped and loved the little stove for its compactness and efficiency. Of course there’s no end to the gear you can buy: I recently camped next to a guy with a propane heater for his tent. “A game-changer,” he said.

Layer, layer, layer A big newbie mistake is overdressing. “The giant Michelin Man suits don’t work because you’ll be sweating soon,” Dixon said. “And then you’re in trouble.” Remember, cold and wet can quickly lead to hypothermia, so regulating your body’s temperature and moisture is critical. To reach that sweet spot, you will want to remove layers when you’re exerting yourself (warming up) and add layers when you’re stationary (cooling down). A good rule of thumb is three layers: base/wicking layer (long underwear), insulating layer (fleece, sweater or vest) and a shell layer to keep out wind and moisture (parka, puffy or ski jacket). Avoid cotton, which takes a long time to dry when it gets wet; synthetics and wool dry faster.

National Geographic explorer

and ecologist Isla Myers-Smith, who studies plants on Herschel Island on the north coast of the Yukon (where Arctic summers are as cold as Vancouver winters), sometimes wears 10 layers on top when she’s working, including multiple hoodies, sweaters and jackets. “You just have to accept you’re going to be taking things off and on,” she said. Arentzen said preventing overheating from the start is the way to go. Her mantra is, “Be bold, start out cold.” In other words, wear just enough to be a little chilly before you start moving; your body will soon generate heat as you hike or snowshoe.

Mind the extremities Fingers and toes are often the first to get cold — and among the biggest risks for frostbite. Jeff Stivers, who designed and leads a Mount Kilimanjaro climbing and deluxe camping trip for REI Adventures, said it’s important to wear non-cotton socks that keep your feet warm but are not so thick that your boots are tight — you want room to wiggle your toes. Always have gloves — a lightweight fleece pair under a waterproof shell, for example. Bring extra socks and gloves to swap out for wet ones.

Don’t scoff at the single-use toe- and hand-warmer packets — even the experts use them. “They’re pretty doggone good,” Dixon said. “But they do go bad, so check the expiration date.” You can also buy battery-powered heated gloves and mittens, particularly handy when you’re riding your fat-tire bike in the snow.

Hydrate Staying hydrated, even if you’re not feeling thirsty, will keep you warmer. “The water in your body is what transports heat around and out to your extremities,” Arentzen said. Carry more water than you think you’ll need, drink it often, and keep it from freezing with water bottle insulators (a wool sock will do, too). Hydration reservoirs will freeze faster; drink from the tube regularly so it doesn’t turn to ice. The temptation to stop hydrating before bedtime is hard to resist. But trust the pros on this one: Drink up, and you’ll warm up.

Bring on the calories “Calorie replenishment is critical for cold-weather camping,” Stivers said, because your body needs more calories to stay warm. Pack high-cal snacks like gorp, chocolate and protein bars; gel shots with caffeine are quick boosters if your energy is waning. (Keep snacks from freezing by storing them in pockets close to your body.) Dehydrated meals have radically improved over the decades. Larsen recommended adding butter to everything — just for the extra calories. And Arentzen, who advised eating and drinking “constantly,” suggested something fatty — like a chunk of cheese or spoonful of peanut butter — right before bed for some added warmth in your bag.

Sleep like a pro Two words: mummy bag. In extreme cold, layer sleeping bags just as you would jackets. Do the same with foam and inflatable sleeping pads (an old wool blanket is also a good layer), because the insulation between you and frozen ground can be just as important as the layers around you. Pay attention to sleeping bag ratings. “If it says 50 degrees, that’s car camping,” Dixon said. “If it says minus-20, now you’re talking.” Myers-Smith, who at one point spent five straight months living in a tent in the Arctic, said if it’s minus-20, you need a minus-40 bag. She uses two bags together and the thickest mat she can carry.

Regular winter campers know that layering clothes applies overnight, too — cozy socks, long underwear, maybe a fleece layer on top and bottom, a neck gaiter and a hat. (Unzip your bag and remove layers to prevent sweating.) Pack enough that you have dry clothes for nighttime; if you get in a bag wearing something damp, your body will have a hard time warming up. If your extremities are still uncomfortable, put on slippers and mittens. Some campers put hot water in Nalgene bottles and toss those in their bags, but a proper rubber hot water bottle is less likely to leak. Throw any damp layers from the day into the bottom of your bag — your body heat will help dry them. And if there’s still room, add tomorrow’s shirt and boot liners to avoid donning cold layers in the morning.

Take care of business If you’re an occasional camper like me, you have been awake many wee hours of the night trying to wish away a full bladder to avoid leaving your warm bag. Do yourself a favor: Get it over with, and go back to sleep. Of course, urinating in a bottle in the tent is always an option for guys, and there are contraptions for women that allow us to do the same. (A reminder that bears repeating: Clearly mark the contents of that bottle.) If you’re in the wilderness, remember that using the “facilities” changes when the ground is frozen, Arentzen said. “You can’t really dig a cat-hole to bury your poop, and pooping into the snow carries health and environmental risks once everything thaws.” She suggests carrying a small kit that includes an odor-neutralizing waste bag (such as the Cleanwaste Go Anywhere Toilet Kit). If you’re car camping and weight is not an issue, you can set up a pop-up privacy tent with a portable toilet.

Keep devices toasty Cold weather is the enemy of batteries, so be sure to start your adventure with electronics — including headlamps and GPS devices — fully charged. When Stivers is hiking Kilimanjaro, he’ll take batteries out of his camera and tuck them in an inner pocket to make sure his camera works at the summit. If you’ve brought a phone, keep it in airplane mode or turn it off unless there’s an emergency. At night, stow batteries or devices in the bottom of your sleeping bag.

Consider your dog When a sled dog camps, he sometimes curls up on a straw bed in the snow, furry tail covering his muzzle. Some dogs (not naming any names, Hammy) aren’t quite as hardy. Determine whether your canine friend has the right constitution for camping in the cold. Arentzen said dogs need more food, water and layers just like we do. Consider protecting paws with booties to prevent freezing feet, cracked pads or ice balls between toes. Unless you have a sled dog — or an equally robust pup — make accommodations for your dog in the tent, such as an indoor sweater and extra foam pad. Check that paws are free of snow before entering the tent.

Practice Before Larsen goes on any expedition, he tests his gear in the backyard and does countless shorter training trips. You will want to practice using your stove, setting up your tent and sleeping pads and wrangling booties onto paws. Go for a day hike with a full overnight backpack as a trial run, and bring your dog. If you’re a newbie, schedule your first night with a friend who has winter camping experience, or practice overnight at a state park. “I’m a huge advocate of starting small,” Larsen said. “Then train hard and travel easy.”

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