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Above the Fray

Innovation and quality abound in this collection of soft-shell roof tents.

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I still remember how -57°F felt, a cold beyond description, as if all life had escaped along with my body heat. I recall fighting against the cover of the roof tent, the vinyl becoming hard as stone in the frigid temperatures of the northern Canadian winter, and how good it felt to crawl into the tent with its thick mattress and heavy canvas protecting me from the arctic chill. Another time, I distinctly remember the sound of a lion grunting as he paced the perimeter of our camp—it's burned into my memory, along with how grateful I was to be in a roof tent, far above the South African bushveld. So many times I have praised and cursed these overlander tree forts, bemoaning their weight and complexity, or sighed in relief as I set one up in the rain, amidst a campsite swamped with mud and rocks.

As with any accessory, there are pros and cons to fitting something to our vehicles, with few items earning such compelling arguments for and against at both extremes. Despite this, rooftop tents (RTTs) are more popular than ever, now on display in REI and frequently seen mounted to the tops of Subarus. Also gone are the days when the only high-quality and expedition-grade RTTs were made in South Africa and Europe. But more importantly, we are finally seeing innovation and unique solutions for the wants of RTT buyers. The style, weight,

quality, and setup now varies significantly from the original Brownchurch rack tents of 50 years ago—all the better for buyers in the 21st century. At *Overland Journal*, we love a good test, so we took a few months and dozens of nights in the field to set up, tear down, and generally beat about six popular models from reputable brands.

SELECTING A ROOF TENT

Choosing a roof tent is no longer the easy process of deciding which canvas color you like best, as there are now over 50 different brands and hundreds of models. We are seeing soft-shell tents utilizing hard-shell covers or no covers at all. There are tents available for under \$500 on Amazon and other units costing nearly 10 times that much, with everything in between. The quality gap has also narrowed considerably, with ruggedized units now being manufactured in Asia, along with discount models currently being produced in South Africa. Despite all this, several attributes are critical for long-term use and reliability.

MORE IS NOT BETTER

Dozens of accessories are often included with the model along with greatly increased complexity and weight: massive overhanging annexes, heavy and difficult to set up awnings and walls, and a litany of nets, straps, loops, and even motors to potentially fail in the field. Certainly, a wall set or annex can be a valuable addition for large families desiring additional sleeping space, but in most cases, accessories like this are a giant pain. They also add notable weight and setup time to the RTT and are rarely needed in practice. All of the tents tested are shown without walls or annexes.

WEIGHT IS THE ENEMY

It is easy to exceed the roof load limits of most SUVs once a RTT and full-size rack are affixed. There are only a few vehicles with roof load ratings that exceed 200 pounds, yet we often see oversized tents mounted to full-length metal racks complete with fuel cans and Hi-Lift jacks. This means that smaller and lighter tents may have to be selected and often mounted to simple crossbars. And there are units that weigh in at only 100 pounds or so, which will still allow the use of a proper aluminum

As part of the testing process, we shook, vibrated, and otherwise rattled each tent over mixed terrain looking for weaknesses in the mounting hardware or tent structure. **Opening page:** Everyone loves a tree fort, and the roof tent is the overlander's equivalent.



As overlanding becomes more popular, products will increasingly be developed and marketed for travelers with limited budgets or less frequent adventures. While those products are valid for the industry, it is imperative that buyers know if they are purchasing a lighter-duty or low-cost option, or a proper piece of remote travel kit. As a publication, we have taken this distinction quite seriously, and have intentionally eliminated less robust offerings from our comprehensive tests—it wouldn't be fair to the manufacturer, and we would never recommend one to our readers. In the case of roof tents, this scenario is a reality, and there are resellers with adventurous-sounding names selling products that might last a few weekend forays in a year. And the limitations of these tents may present more than minor inconveniences, as an importer of cheap RTTs many years ago found out when an infant rolled out of a tent and to the ground via a faulty side panel.

I have seen ladders bend in half, awnings ripped free from their tethers, and floors bend and crack under "North American" loads. A roof tent is not only our home while we travel, but could also serve as an emergency shelter in many conceivable scenarios.

Long-term durability is really in the details, and it all starts with the hardware, hinges, and tent materials. Look for thick brackets with metal throughout and minimal plastic at stress points. Waterproofing can be achieved with the material itself (like the Eezi-Awn), or with coatings and sealants.

rack too. Total up the weight of the tent, rack, accessories, and any bedding to be sure the vehicle roof is not overloaded.

FAST IS FRIENDLY

Some tents can take 15-20 minutes to set up if the annex and all poles are utilized. That is often not practical for how many overlanders travel. This process can demand significant time and effort each day just preparing or closing up a tent; even more so if conditions are poor. Pay extra attention to the cover, which can be a struggle in certain models if constructed too tight to pull over the bows and fitted with undersized or difficult to operate zippers.

COMFORT IS KING

One of the best arguments for buying a roof tent is for a good night's rest, so test out the mattress at an overland event or read reviews and comments on comfort before buying. I have seen buyers need to install memory foam and even air mattresses to augment the poor support of the stock pad. Look for 60-millimeter minimum thickness and preferably dual density. Even better, some tents are now using a padded floor or underlayment to facilitate comfort. Also, thicker canvas walls reduce light ingress, allowing for the luxurious option of sleeping in well after sunrise.

QUALITY ALWAYS MATTERS

As with anything we count on in the backcountry, quality and durability are paramount, or we are better off not having it at all. Like the cheap winch that doesn't work when we need it, a roof tent that fails in the first heavy wind is a liability. In reality, an \$800 ground tent will be superior on all counts to an \$800 RTT, so avoid the bargain RTTs all together. The devil is in the details—the best things to look for are zipper size, cover thickness, tent wall stitching, and method of waterproofing.

TESTING

While much of evaluating a roof tent is subjective, many elements can be reviewed objectively, and the goal was to incorporate both sets of criteria. Even 10 years ago, the landscape of roof tents was vastly different to today, with nearly everything following the South African design model of a

traditional clamshell and supporting ladder. The abundance of model choices now available is a huge win for consumer selection, but does muddy the water and make it challenging to determine real quality and innovation above the marketing rhetoric. As a result, we selected six models from known and proven manufacturers, while also allowing for representation from newer companies that have demonstrated genuine innovation. Our lineup includes everything from the wood and canvas Eezi-Awn to the innovative iKamper and many options in between.

For our objective review, we compared the weights of the units along with mattress thickness and deflection. We timed the quick setup, which is the minimum setup required to sleep, and also

the full setup, which included every pole and vent. The third timed effort was stowing the tent properly, in ready-to-drive-down-the-trail mode. The evaluation biased heavily toward setup convenience, as I have witnessed far too much frustration in the field from owners of cumbersome models as they fought fragile zippers and complicated wall sets. The final objective review included inspection of the hardware, stitching, and weatherproofing.

Subjective considerations are important to any test, but I worked to avoid those that might be heavily influenced by my own bias and eccentricities. I included notes on aesthetic and design, but they factor minimally in the final scoring. Of a particularly subjective nature is evaluating mattress comfort, which is heavily influenced by the sleeper's preferred position, body weight, and preferences. As a result, I provide specifics along with my impressions. Despite all this, clear leaders arose early. Roof tents continue to grow in popularity and diversity, but the fundamentals remain: quality, durability, comfort, and setup rule the results.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

The best things to look for when selecting a rooftop tent are zipper size, cover thickness, tent wall stitching, and method of waterproofing.

CONCLUSIONS



Given that a roof tent is essentially our foldable home, nearly everyone will choose a different size, shape, color, and brand, but tests like this really do reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each model.

For the Value Award, my selection was narrowed down to the Simpson III, the Adventure M55, and the Feather-Lite. The ARB has acres of interior space when combined with the included annex. The front door window is blocked by the awning, which obscures the view of the outback and reduces ventilation. For the Feather-Lite, I have long appreciated its light weight and low profile, but it falls behind the Adventure M55 in mattress comfort and set-up speed. In the end, I chose the Adventure M55 for the Value Award because of the refreshing ease of setup and sublimely comfortable mattress. It also survived days of torrential rain and wind at the 2018 Overland Expo East—not a drop inside after the deluge subsided.

The Editor's Choice Award is always given to the best product overall, despite the price. The Kukenam, Eezi-Awn Series III, X-Cover, and Adventure M55 were all in the running. I have used (and loved) Eezi-Awns for over a decade. The Series III

is easy to set up and is the timeless elder statesman in both style and durability, but I've also always had to fit a memory foam topper to prevent backaches in the morning. The Tepui Ruggedized Kukenam is worthy of the title from a quality and durability standpoint, but even without crossbars or a rack it simply exceeds the roof load ratings of most SUVs. It would be best used on a trailer or at bed height on a pickup.

The Freespirit Adventure 55 is the easiest to set up and the most comfortable for sleeping (based on my subjective assessment). The Adventure 55 is lightweight, but also well-made, with my only notable reservation being the lack of rainfly coverage of the side and rear windows, which would limit ventilation during hot-weather rainstorms (think desert monsoons and jungle downpours). The X-Cover presents a wonder of new solutions to old RTT problems. Fully featured, it weighs only 116 pounds with the ladder and clamps to crossbars with the most user-friendly quick mounting system I have ever used. The tent sets up quickly, though I am leery of cover zippers, having had so many failures in the field. I appreciate the rack option for the top, which could be used for light bikes, surfboards, and SUPs all day long. I genuinely believe that a proper overland roof tent must be foul-weather and high-wind capable, easy to set up (watch those zippers), and lighter weight (i.e., under 150 pounds with the mounting solution). This brought me to some prolonged vacillation between the Eezi-Awn and the X-Cover. Roof tents have truly evolved though, and there are now lighter materials and more efficient ways to set them up. If I were to mount any of these roof tents to my vehicle, it would be either the Adventure 55 or the X-Cover, and they win our Value Award and Editor's Choice Award respectively. Who knew tree forts could come so far. ☺

SPECIAL THANKS

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MANUFACTURER	ARB	EEZI-AWN	FREESPIRIT	FRONT RUNNER	IKAMPER	TEPUI
Model	Simpson III	Series 3 1400	Adventure M55	Feather-Lite	X-Cover	Ruggedized Kukenam 3
Price	\$1,499	\$2,540	\$1,695	\$1,319	\$2,900	\$2,100
Weight (lbs)	164	128	118	94	116	180
Dimensions closed (l/w/h, in)	55/48/14.5	55/48.5/12	85/60/9	53/49.5/12.5	75/45/10	56/48/14.4
Interior height (in)	50	51	47	53	44	52
Mattress size (l/w, in)	94/54	95/54.5	80/55	82/52	90/74	95/55
Mattress thickness (in)	2.5, high-density chip foam	2.5, high-density foam	2.5, high-density foam/2 EPE foam pad	2, high-density foam	2.5, memory foam	2.5 high-density foam/.5 (mat)
TESTING						
Set-up time (quick)	0:03:54	0:03:07	0:02:52	0:03:18	0:02:56	0:03:48
Set-up time (full)	0:06:42	0:05:21	0:02:52	0:05:28	0:05:02	0:06:37
Stow time	0:09:04	0:05:56	0:04:19	0:06:11	0:05:51	0:09:23