



A cosy night's sleep under the stars is wonderful – but in the harsh and variable Australian climate, 'cosy' can be hard to achieve without the right sleeping bag. Sleeping bags can be an expensive purchase, but if treated well can last and perform well for many years. Ensuring you purchase the right sleeping bag for all your outdoor activities is important. This blog will discuss how to choose between down and synthetics, the features to look for in a sleeping bag, and how to treat your new bag to ensure sufficient warmth for years to come.

In general, there are two types of sleeping bag fill available on the market: the traditional down and the more modern synthetics. Each type has advantages and disadvantages, and it is important to weigh up these factors before making your choice.

Down-Filled Sleeping Bags

Down is the breast feathers of birds, and the traditional filling for sleeping bags. Most quality down is from ducks and geese, collected from their nests after it falls off the bird. Or, in some cases, it's a by-product of the food processing industry.

The quality of down is measured by fill power. This is basically a measure of how much the down will 'fluff up' when in use, measured in cubic inches per ounce. Generally, a low end down sleeping bag or quilt will be approximately 400, while the top of the range can reach as high as 900. The more a bag 'fluffs up' the better the insulating properties, and hence less weight of filling is required to keep you just as warm.

There are many advantages and disadvantages of down sleeping bags. Let's take a look at them.



Advantages

The main advantages of down are the warmth per weight, and longevity. Generally, down bags can be half the weight of a comparatively warm synthetic bag, and compress much further. This means less weight on your back if you are hiking, and less to cart around camp from the car. They also have a longer lifespan.

A down bag will keep filling and stay warm for years, even with regular use. A synthetic bag will eventually lose its warmth. Some sources suggest a down bag will last two to three times as long as an equivalent synthetic bag.

Disadvantages

The overwhelming disadvantage of down is its performance when wet. A soggy down bag will only retain about 10% of its warmth, and takes a lot of drying.

Down is also generally more expensive as an initial purchase. However, the long-life of a down bag means it will generally be cheaper in the long term. Down bags are a long-term purchase that may be unwarranted for some applications such as school camps, or if they are only being used occasionally for local summer holidays. However, if you expect to use them regularly over a long period of time, they are definitely a worthwhile investment.



Synthetic-Filled Sleeping Bags

Synthetic sleeping bags are a more modern alternative to down, and always improving. The fill is a polyester microfibre that can be compressed, then 'fluffs up' to provide insulation when released.

Generally the greater the mass of synthetic measured in grams per square metre (gsm), the warmer it will be. However, it will be heavier as well. As the quality of the synthetic fill is improving all the time, synthetic sleeping bags are becoming both lighter and warmer. Synthetic fillers vary widely, with most manufacturers having their own specific type of fill. This means there is no standard for the quality of the filler. However, these manufacturers make their name on quality – so if the filling is poor, the company is probably on the way out. There are many advantages and disadvantages to synthetic sleeping bags, which we'll examine below.

Advantages

The main advantages of synthetic bags are both their performance when wet, and the initial cost. Synthetic bags will retain about 50% of their dry performance when wet, which is far better than down bags. Synthetic bags also dry out quicker. That said, always endeavour to keep your sleeping bag dry.

Synthetic bags are considerably cheaper than down bags too, at most levels of performance. They're a good starting point if you don't want to make a large long-term investment.

Disadvantages

Unfortunately, synthetic bags don't last as long as down bags, and may lose a lot of their warmth within five years if they are used regularly.

Synthetic bags are also heavier and bulkier than down bags, especially for extreme conditions. They're generally best for car camping or local holidays, where weight and bulk are of minimal concern, and where low cost is important.

Synthetic-filled bags are great for kids who either grow out of bags quickly or need something for school camps – but generally not as good as down bags for hiking, unless you expect to get very wet!

Features to Look For in a Sleeping Bag

When buying a sleeping bag, there are several qualities to look for: the quality of fabric, quality of filling, carry sack, and design.

- A wet or torn sleeping bag performs badly, so look for fabrics that are waterproof or at least water-resistant.
- You don't necessarily need to go looking for waterproof breathable membranes or fabrics waterproof to 10000mm, unless you expect to sleep in a river (it happens, believe me). That said, a bit of water resistance will go a long way towards improving the performance of the bag.



- Most fabrics used in sleeping bags are very light and strong – but look for any obvious signs of wear and tear each time you use the bag, and fix them as soon as you can.
- The quality of filling is a big factor. The higher the quality, the better the warmth per weight in both synthetic and down filling. Generally, go as high as you can afford – but ensure you know what you are looking at. Some of the numbers quoted can be deceiving.

Design

Finally, design is an important feature. Unless you are going for weight savings over comfort, a full-length zipped bag is a good idea.

- A zip can make a sleeping bag much more versatile. Unzipping the bag will prevent sweltering on a warm night, while zipping it up will keep you warmer when it's cold.
- A hood will keep your head warm and improve heat retention, and 'Mummy' contoured or tapered designs can help prevent the heat escaping from around your body.
- Some bags have zips across the feet, to allow for versatility. Others have this as a solid section, which is warmer.
- Make sure to choose the design that suits your requirements best.

By considering these points, your sleeping bag will keep you warm and give you a good night's sleep, year after year.



Sleeping Bag Maintenance

Sleeping bags are generally a simple piece of gear, however they require some basic care to keep them in top shape.

When you don't need your bag compressed, leave it loose. Most bags come with a large bag for storage and a small bag for compression. If you don't have one of these larger bags, hang your sleeping bag in a closet, store it in a pillow case, or at least leave the compression straps as loose as you can.

Keep it Dry!

Down loses 90% of its warmth when wet, and synthetics lose 50%. So make sure you leave your bag out to dry before storing it. As well as degrading the performance, a wet sleeping bag is a warm, moist environment – perfect for bacteria!

The place a sleeping bag is most likely to get wet when not in use is in your pack, or just out in the open. If you can find a waterproof sack, this can help to keep the sleeping bag dry out – if not, I highly recommend keeping your sleeping bag inside a dry sack if you are expecting any rain.



Keep it Clean Wherever Possible

Using a liner or wearing clothes in a sleeping bag will avoid the need to wash the bag. Using a liner can also add warmth; a simple cotton or a silk liner can add a few degrees to most sleeping bags, while some technical liners can add up to (an albeit ambitious) 15 degrees. Cleaning a sleeping bag can be a daunting task (especially for down bags), and should be avoided where possible. It is possible to have down sleeping bags professionally washed; contact either a local manufacturer or an outdoor store for advice on who to contact in your area.

Synthetic sleeping bags can be machine washed at low temperatures, on a delicate setting using a mild soap and a lot of rinsing. Generally, it's recommended to follow the washing instructions on the bag, as they can vary – however, don't use bleaches. Never iron or dry-clean the bag either, and always allow plenty of time to dry.

Washing a Down Bag

They must be hand-washed, so you will probably need to use a bath. Fill it with warm water and add a mild soap. Submerge the bag, jostle it around, and squeeze it to move the soap through. Leave to soak for 30-40 minutes, then move it around in the water again to further move the soap through.

Let the water out of the bath and, without lifting out of the bath, squeeze the water from the bag (if you lift the bag, the weight of the soaked down can cause the internal baffles to tear). Refill the bath with warm water, and move the bag about to rinse out any excess soap. You will likely need to repeat this step several times to ensure you've ridged the bag of all soap. Once rinsed, squeeze the bag out into the bath and allow to dry. This may take several days, however it is vital that the bag is totally dry before used or stored.

Caring for Your Bag

Caring for a sleeping bag is a simple and quick process. With correct care, your sleeping bag will keep you warm for a long time.

Sleeping bags can be a major purchase, however they are vital for a good night's sleep. Choosing between down and synthetic bags can be difficult if you are on a budget – so just make sure you look into where and how you intend to use it. As mentioned, they can often be worth a large initial investment for both long-term performance and the joy of a good night's sleep!

For more ideas, check out the range of sleeping bags at Snowys - and let us know if you have any extra thoughts on what makes a great sleeping bag!