



THERMAREST



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Product perfect

Great Walks heads to Wollemi National Park for this year's Gear Awards and comes back the wiser.

Welcome to the 2016 Great Walks Gear Awards, where a team of five reviewers tested 20 of the best outdoor products on the market. We learned a lot from last year's awards and applied that experience during our three-day visit to Wollemi NP in late 2015. The categories for this year's Gear Awards are trekking poles, synthetic insulated jackets, sleeping mats and sleeping bags. You'll find info on how we defined each product, how we tested them and where we went below, but we want to have a quick word on limitations. Testing any equipment has its limitations and we don't expect the Gear Awards to be the final word on any of the products reviewed here. Each product had its pros and cons and we believe our reviews are balanced and informative, but we also encourage you, when making your next gear purchase, to visit your local outdoor retailer and talk to the experts; try on the gear, have a play with it and ask questions – that way you'll be in the best position to make the right choice for you. And now for the Awards...

Trekking poles

Although considered a mandatory piece of kit in North America and Europe, where it's hard to find a single trekker using only their legs anymore, walking poles are still viewed with suspicion in Australia. Given all the purported benefits though, attitudes are slowly but surely changing. Knee and ankle support; upper body workout; stability – there are many reasons to get on the pole bandwagon and we got to test

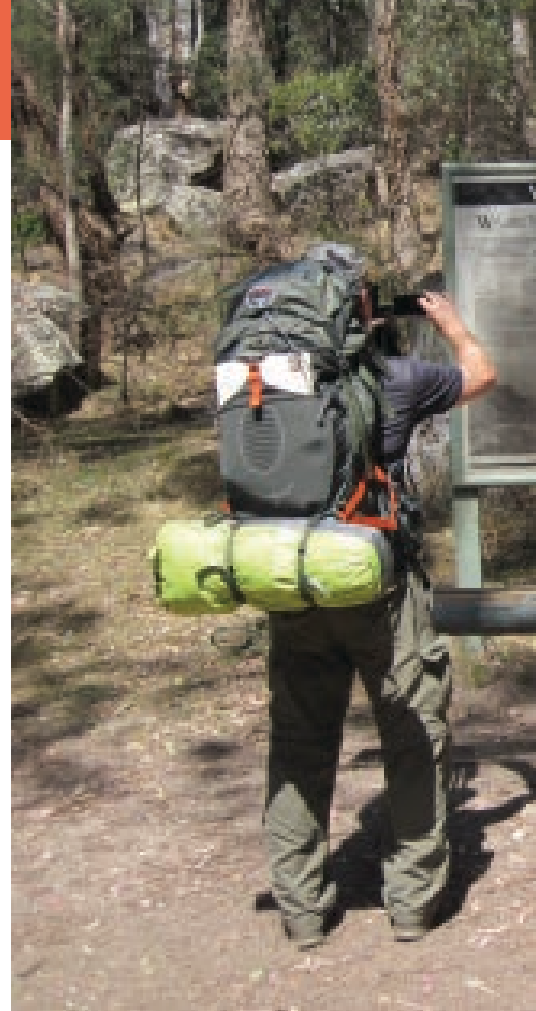
a handful of quality examples. *Although anti-shock systems are a common element of modern poles, it is worth noting that none of the models supplied for the Awards included this feature.

Synthetic Insulated Jackets

This was a hard-fought category as the definition was sweeping and the models supplied ranged from full winter warmers to lightweight, hybrid-mapped fleece and down combinations. We specified synthetic insulation (the best known being PrimaLoft) as this has the edge in durability and is more likely to keep you warm in wet conditions. There was a lot of quality on display here: each jacket did what it was supposed to very well, so we had to use our judgement based on fit and features rather than straightforward like-with-like comparisons, such as the warmth.

Sleeping Mats

The sleeping mat category was the most straightforward of all this year's awards. Mats had to be warm, comfortable and well-made. Apart from that, it was 'anything goes'. Thus our entries ran the design gamut from old-school self-inflating types to innovative new air-cell technologies. We had a range of insulation capabilities, as indicated by the mats' R-Value – a measure of relative thermal resistance. The variety of shapes and textures, plus the slew of sleeping bags being concurrently tested, made for some 'interesting' nights under the siliconised nylon.



Sleeping Bags

This was probably the most eagerly anticipated category because there's nothing quite like snuggling down into a cosy bag on a cold night. We specified three season bags for testing, broadly defined in Europe and N. America as being suitable anytime except winter. In Australia this would include winter as well, except maybe in the southeastern high country. Note that temperature ratings are subject to such a range of variables that the published limit of comfort, as determined by the Swiss EN13537 rating, can be taken with a pinch of salt. During our testing the night-time temperature was about 5°C.

The hike

For this year's gear awards the team wanted to get far away from Sydney and decided to explore Wollemi NP for a couple of nights. We parked at the tiny hamlet of Newnes, hefted our packs and crossed the Wolgan River by a shallow ford to its south side. This area was extensively mined for oil shale in the early 20th century and a refinery built on the river here, the ruins of which surrounded us after only ten minutes of walking east on a wide fire trail. It was fascinating to look over the





Planning our Wollemi walk.

old coke ovens, retaining walls and rusted machinery as we picked our way through, and an industrial mine enthusiast could easily spend a few hours here.

After passing the entrance of No. 2 mine the route became more of an overgrown vehicle track that followed the course of the shallow, clear river. We chatted gear as we hiked along under the majestic sandstone cliffs that define the Wolgan Valley, glowing orange through the thin eucalypt cover. Despite a few mild undulations, the going was fairly easy all the way to the junction with Rocky Creek where, 13km from the cars, we found a few empty campsites. Close to water and reasonably flat, these sites suited us well so we made camp and settled down for intensive equipment discussions over Brent's box of wine and some interesting flavours of freeze-dri Backcountry Cuisine (www.seatosummitdistribution.com.au). We were just getting comfortable when a giant wombat scared us into our tents for an early night.

We all doubtless reviewed gear in our sleep and awoke ready to tackle a short day walk to Annie Rowan Creek. Leaving the tents erected we followed topographical and GPS maps showing the continuation of the

trail marked as crossing Rocky Creek about 100m upriver. After bush-bashing in that area for about an hour with nothing to show for our effort but wet feet and scratched limbs, we turned around and struck out directly along the Wolgan, where two minutes later we found the trail guarded by a red-bellied black snake! After a bit of terrified splashing and girly screams (and not from Ania!) we were back on track.

The trail continued to misbehave by crossing over to the north side of the river and heading towards Mt. Morgan, but we followed it anyway. Our destination was unimportant – we were there to enjoy the walk and make copious notes while avoiding the large goannas that seemed to spring from every bush. We had lunch where the recalcitrant track decided to cross back to the correct side of the river, and retraced our steps for a brief plunge in the clear waters of the Wolgan and another evening of heated debate over hood preferences, inflation techniques and hydrophobic down.

On the third day we packed up and, testing complete, quickly tramped the distance back to Newnes to decide the category winners over ice creams from the small shop. Next year's awards – Tasmania!

Contributors



Brent McKean

Heading into his ninth year as editor of *Great Walks*, Brent can safely say he knows the world of bushwalking inside out. Besides hiking, he also competes in the national Air Guitar champs under the alias 'Fingers'.



Dan Slater

Dan is the chief writer for this year's Gear Awards. He also works at Trek & Travel and recently published a memoir, *This is not a holiday*, about his travels through Africa. Dan has a tattoo of Dannii Minogue on his left butt cheek.



Matt Gunn

Matt, a keen outdoorsman, is production director at Yaffa Media. Formally a sports journalist, he has written many travel stories for *Great Walks*. Matt holds the world record for having the largest collection of Wombles memorabilia.



Paul Lane

Paul has been hiking, cycling and paddling in various parts of the world for over 30 years. He once cycled from Sydney to Perth 'for something to do'. Paul is a *Star Trek* nerd and woos women by speaking Klingon.



Ania Bokina

Ania is a Sydney-based IT marketing manager who fell in love with hiking during her childhood in Poland and has continued bushwalking in the Blue Mountains and Kosciuszko NP. No one has told her that 'drop bears' aren't real.





Trekking poles

Black Diamond Alpine Ergo Cork

\$219.95/565g/www.seatosummitdistribution.com.au

BD have established themselves as one of the premier pole companies through innovative designs and a wide range of models, with the Alpine Ergo Cork sitting near the top. The key word here is 'cork', referring to the natural cork grip that was universally praised by our testers for its absorbency in the hot conditions. Another feature that distinguished this pole from all others was the ergonomically-designed 15° angle of the handle, intended to offer a more comfortable grip position when walking with the poles angled backwards, although this went almost entirely unnoticed by the team. One is forced to wonder if this is a worthwhile feature to include.

One important trait of the Black Diamond poles that we did notice was the lack of vibration that characterised some of the other models. "The carbon fibre used in the lower and middle sections did a great job of dampening that annoying 'judder' every time I placed it," said Dan. The carbon fibre also meant that the shaft would not bend when misused; it was more likely to snap, rendering the pole useless, but only when placed under extreme force. The padded webbing strap was also one of the most comfortable we tested.

One cannot win Best in Test unless negatives are few and far between, as they were in the Alpine Ergo Cork. Paul observed that the cork grips might chip and were not replaceable, and although the FlickLock Pro locking system worked very well, it seemed over-engineered compared to the old FlickLock system, which worked just fine. In the end, the decision was an easy one. "A delight to use," said Ania, and Paul was adamant: "These are the only poles that I would consider using long-term."



Komperdell Carbon C3 Powerlock

\$179.95/420g/www.outdooragencies.com.au

Remarkably, this Austrian company has been producing trekking poles since 1922, and still being made in Austria we were expecting excellent quality. The poles immediately felt light in the hand and the compressed foam grip, although basic, was very comfortable to use. Likewise, the adjustment and locking mechanisms were simple yet effective, and Dan appreciated the length graduations being restricted to the middle section, as opposed to the fiddly dual-section measuring system used by both BD and Leki.

Even though the Komperdell was lighter than the Black Diamond, collapsed shorter and extended longer, it was the more immediately tangible features that let it down: the webbing straps were noted by one tester as being prone to slipping and difficult to adjust, and we were all disappointed to discover a split in the handle foam after only a couple of hours' use. The rubber tips (which are not included when purchasing the poles) also wore very quickly on the trail and would need replacing often.

By the end of the weekend, opinion was divided over the C3 Carbon Power Lock. "My love affair began as soon as I picked it up," raved Matt, "Superlight, super sturdy and with looks to match the personality." Were it up to Matt the C3 would have won the category, but his outlook was balanced by those of the others. "From the evidence of wear on the grip and rubber tips, this pole might not score so well after long-term use," countered Dan.



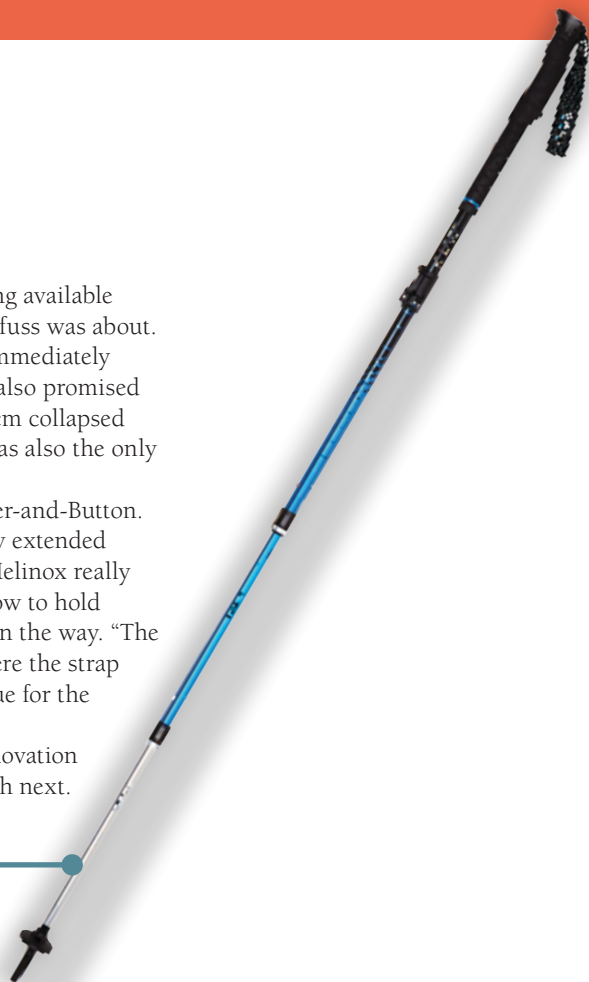
Helinox Ridgeline LBB135

\$195/470g/www.helinox.com.au

Helinox have a good but somewhat mythical reputation derived from being available only through their own website, so we were all interested to see what the fuss was about. Initially it seemed well-founded: the weight and size of the LBB135 was immediately impressive, the former thanks to the exclusive DAC TH72M alloy, which also promised unheard-of strength, and the latter due to the four-section design – at 54cm collapsed length they were about 3cm shorter than their nearest competitor. This was also the only pole set that included rubber tips and a bag.

Also notable was the extension and locking mechanism, known as Lever-and-Button. Essentially this cleverly designed apparatus allowed the pole to be quickly extended and adjusted, then collapsed in the blink of an eye. However, where the Helinox really fell down was in handling comfort – most testers found the grip too narrow to hold comfortably and the forefinger notch too high, resulting in digits getting in the way. “The handle was too slim for my liking,” summed up Brent, “and the point where the strap met the foam pinched the webbing of my thumb.” This may not be an issue for the slender-handed hiker.

From poles to lightweight camp chairs, Helinox has been designing innovation products for outdoors lovers and we’re keen to see what they come up with next.



MSR Talus TR-3

\$299.95/625g/www.spelean.com.au

The Talus TR3 from MSR was an interesting inclusion. Initially the clunky design seemed to make no concessions for comfort or weight (the handle was made of hard plastic and the pole was the heaviest on test) but over time some advantages did become apparent. For one the Talus had the strongest locking mechanism, the SureLock, easily proven by being the only one to be subjected to a sustained downward force without slipping. The sturdiness didn't stop there – the aerospace grade aluminium shaft looked like it would block a lightsabre and the aforementioned handle had a comfortable girth and would last for aeons.

According to MSR, the standout feature of the Talus is its Trigger Release mechanism – a trigger system near the grip that allows the user to collapse or extend the pole one-handed (after a bit of practice). “I liked how the adjustment mechanism clicked into place,” noted Ania, “ensuring that both poles had exactly the same length.” While this is a neat idea it did not register as very important to our testers, who were more concerned with possible blisters caused by the rigid plastic handle.

Overall, the MSR was better than first impressions hinted. Tough and solid, these may be marketed to hikers but would be better suited to the mountaineering or snowshoeing crowd.





Leki Corklite

\$229.99/528g/www.velovita.net.au

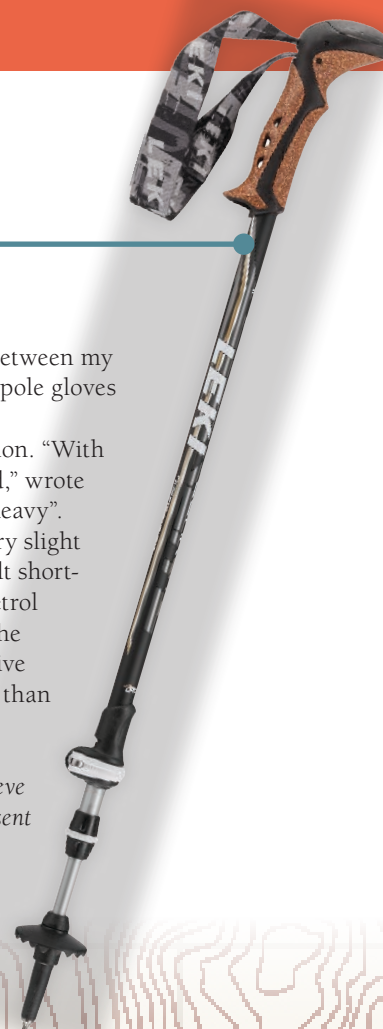
"Considering that Leki are a premium pole brand, I expected more from the Corklite." Dan's sentiment echoed the general view of our panel. Hike any trail in Germany or Switzerland and you'll see a forest worth of Leki poles, so what's wrong with this one? First things first – the Corklite is better than many cheap poles on the market. It weighs just over half a kilogram, has an easy-to-operate Speed Lock mechanism and is compatible with Leki's Photo Adaptor, which transforms the pole into a monopod. However, it was up against some stiff competition and for one of the more expensive poles on test the flaws were too large to be ignored.

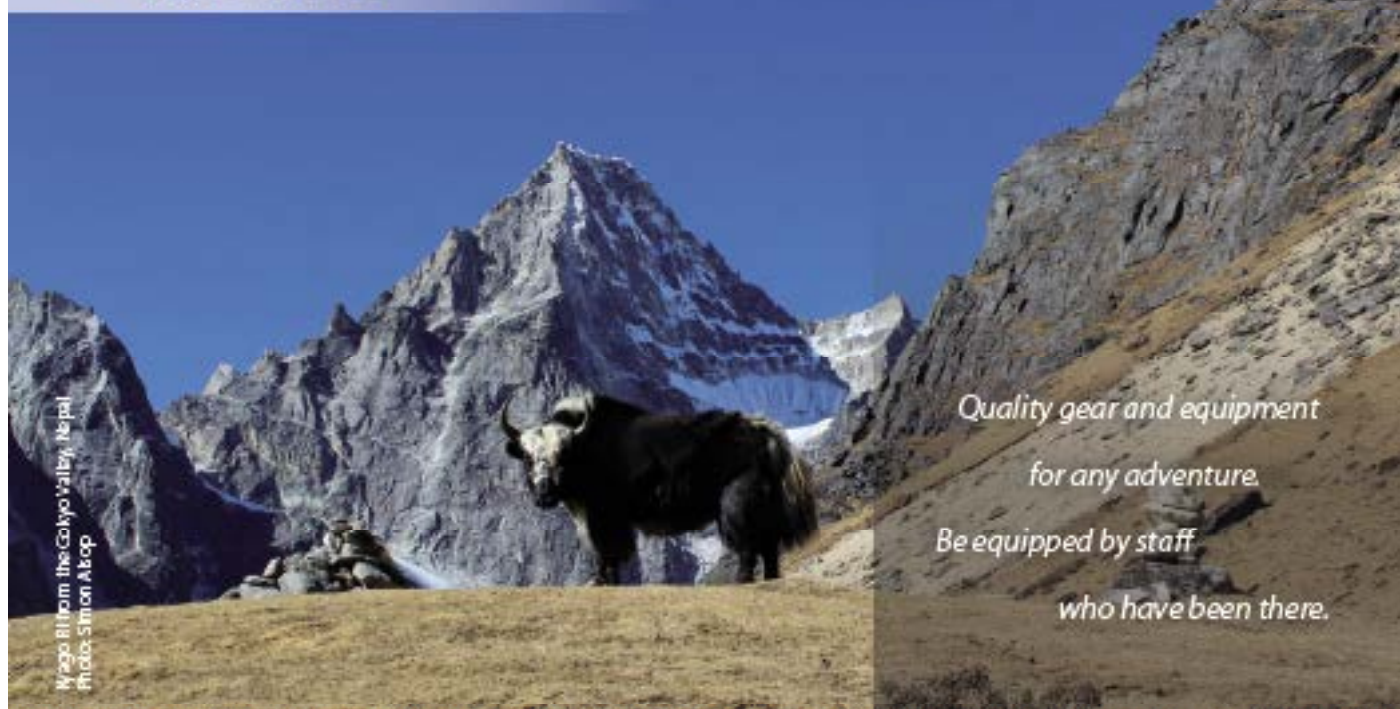

Firstly, the faux cork handle – made from Cortec (described as a 'natural cork composite') – got the unanimous thumbs down from our testers with comments like "handle seemed slippery after a while," and "hands felt clammy." Paul also complained that the

Skin Strap "tended to pinch the webbing between my thumb and forefinger." A pair of specialist pole gloves would probably fix these problems.

The handling was also a bone of contention. "With every placement the lower section juddered," wrote Dan, "and the whole pole seemed bottom heavy". "Disappointingly, this section suffered a very slight bend at some point over the weekend. "I felt short-changed," summed up Matt, obviously a petrol head, "like I got the cloth seats instead of the leather." Leki have a huge range of impressive poles and there are certainly better models than the Corklite.

"We spoke to Leki about the bend and they believe the most likely reason was 'abuse' but we have sent it back to them to examine anyway. – Ed





Wagyo Bll from the Gokyo Valley, Nepal
Photo: Simon Atkop

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1. Leki's Corklite handle divided the group.
2. Adjusting the poles before the big walk.
3. The MSR's locking system was adjusted through the handle.
4. Helinox's locking system was sooo easy to use.
5. The Black Diamond's excellent FlickLock Pro locking system.





Synthetic insulated jackets

Carinthia G-Loft Ultra Jacket

\$299.95/380g/www.premierdefence.com

This relatively little-known Austrian brand deserves to be more famous, as its well-designed and constructed cold-weather apparel is among the best on the market. This jacket is filled with 60g/m² of G-Loft Ultra, Carinthia's proprietary synthetic insulation, which claims to be ultra light, breathable and compressible due to the 'memory' of the spiral formed microfibres. Key areas at the sides and shoulders eschewed G-Loft for stretch fleece panels, and these came in especially useful for achieving the perfect fit with or without layers worn underneath. Fleece also replaced G-Loft at the elbows, designed to contribute to ease of movement when bending the joints but unintentionally making the wearer resemble a member of the Lego man SWAT team. "It's a stylish, modern look," approved Matt. "It's Darth Vader meets Elton John," disagreed Dan.

Moving away from fashion, the jacket's myriad clever design features were universally lauded, including the chin guard, large hand warmer pockets,

integrated stuff sack and fluorescent strips for discrete yet safe night-time activities. In fact it was hard to find fault with this jacket, from the fit to the construction. At least one internal pocket would have been nice, as would some fleece on the inside of the collar, and Ania would have preferred a hood, but these are small niggles:

In terms of warmth, the G-Loft was one of best in the selection. "As soon as I put on the jacket it felt like it 'turned on,'" said Brent, "and started slowly warming my body, although I was never too hot in it." He goes on to say: "It was my favourite jacket on test, and at \$299 it's good bang for your buck." The rest of us agreed and were happy to award the G-Loft Ultra Best in Test!



Black Diamond Hot Forge Hoody

\$369.95/410g/www.seatosummitdistribution.com.au

Black Diamond has only entered the clothing business in the last couple of years, having successfully made climbing equipment since the 1950s, and judging from this jacket they are aiming high. Strictly speaking, the category was for synthetic jackets only but BD's use of PrimaLoft Gold Insulation Down Blend intrigued us. The mixture of 70% goose down and 30% PrimaLoft in the torso, with 100% PrimaLoft in the arms, shoulders and hood, is designed to provide the best of both worlds – the weather resistance of synthetic with the warmth and packability of down. We didn't have the chance to test the jacket in all weather conditions but it certainly looked and felt like it could handle itself.

While not as toasty as the Carinthia jacket, the Hot Forge certainly gave good warmth for its weight and was very well designed. The helmet-compatible hood worked perfectly when properly adjusted, the cuffs were nice and tight, and Paul and Dan's stylish goatee beards appreciated the fleece chin guard. It also worked as a pillow when folded into a stuff sack, an important consideration for the ultra-light crowd. There were some cons: we would have preferred the internal pockets to be zipped and we noticed more down leakage than we would have liked, even in a new jacket, but they were few.

"This is a really nice jacket," summed up Dan, "but at \$370 costs more than a lot of sleeping bags. Black Diamond are really aiming for the top end of the market here, price wise."



Outdoor Research Acetylene Jacket

\$239.95/416g/www.intertrek.com.au

"I'm a big fan of OR so I had high expectations for the Acetylene," enthused Brent, and indeed the jacket looked well constructed and durable, but at first glance seemed a little light on warmth. This was due to its unusual insulation pattern: PrimaLoft is used in the front of the torso for core warmth while the rest of the jacket is polyester fleece, including the back panel. This hybrid mapping pretty much limits its use, as OR describes it, to 'highly aerobic activity in ultra cold conditions'. The closest we got was hiking with a full pack on a cold-ish morning and Dan was able to walk for a full hour, including some uphill, before warming up sufficiently to need to remove it, so we felt pretty confident it would work as advertised.

Other features were thin on the ground with only the hidden thumb loops standing out, and although this category was primarily for standalone jackets it's worth mentioning that the Acetylene would work nicely as a mid-layer in colder conditions. Even so, its appeal would be limited; think winter hiking with a daypack for optimum performance. "The lack of rear insulation makes this a niche product," concluded Paul.



Macpac Pulsar Hoody

\$299/450g/www.macpac.com.au

The Pulsar was probably the warmest jacket on test (and the heaviest) but although it did what it was supposed to do, it was otherwise unremarkable in this competitively innovative field. Using PrimaLoft Gold (100g/m² in the torso, 60g/m² in the arms) inside a Pertex Quantum shell, the jacket seemed well-designed and constructed, but was let down by one key element – the hood. Marketed as helmet compatible, Macpac seem to have forgotten about those of us not wearing helmets. Unless you have a gigantic Martian brain case (which none of us did, by the way), this hood will be annoyingly floppy and unresponsive until cinched down so far over the eyes as to limit visibility. A simple rear volume adjustment toggle would have fixed this.

Aside from this oversight, the jacket performed well. It was toasty warm, there were plenty of pockets (six) including a stuff pocket, YKK zips and good hem adjustment, although Ania found the cuffs a little loose. It passed the pillow test with flying colours, too, being just soft and fluffy enough to mould perfectly inside a dry bag. Overall, these four words best describe the Pulsar: "Shame about the hood."





The North Face Thermoball Hybrid Hoodie

\$280/315g/www.truealliance.com.au

“My first impression of the Thermoball was of a very nice jacket with lots of promise,” noted Paul. Like the OR Acetylene, this lightweight piece only has PrimaLoft insulation in the torso (both front and rear this time). The arms, hood and side stretch panels are TNF’s Apex soft shell, designed for unrestricted movement and breathability. Again, it would certainly make a useful mid-layer and as Matt pointed out: “It’s like wearing a hoody with a puffer vest over the top. This is all-in-one.”

Unfortunately, unlike the fleece in the Acetylene, the soft shell translated to cold arms when sitting around at night with only a t-shirt underneath. The soft shell hood also invited negative reviews; while it might work under a helmet, you’d be disappointed using it on its own. Lastly, the sizing seemed way out: too large overall and very long and baggy in the arms, clearly modelled on an orang-utan. In the end, like the OR, the Thermoball was a bit too niche – not thick enough to keep you warm but too thick to hike in, even on a cloudy day. “It didn’t live up to expectations,” lamented Paul.



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1. The Hot Forge hoody offered of warmth and packability.
2. I hope Macpac doesn't want their jacket back!
3. Nothing gives you 'jacket rage' like a snagged zipper!
4. The Acetylene's polyester fleece arms offered plenty of movement.
5. We loved the G-Loft's stretch fleece side panels.

4





Sleeping mats

Sea to Summit Comfort Plus Rectangular

\$219.95/685g/R-Value 2.5/www.seatosummitdistribution.com.au

When Sea to Summit turn their talents to a new product they go all out to create the best possible design in that category, and when they turned their eyes to sleeping mats they didn't disappoint. They set out to bring us the most comfortable, yet still relatively lightweight, night's sleep on the market, and they may have succeeded.

Eschewing all previous inflation designs, STS have managed to mimic the pocket-spring design made famous by that ad where a bowling ball is dropped on a bed next to a glass of wine without spilling any. STS achieve this effect with hundreds of Air Sprung Cells – tiny pockets of air that act independently from each other so that putting pressure on one side of the mattress doesn't make another part bounce up. Genius. But that's not all – the Comfort Plus has a dual chamber system so that if a puncture occurs in

one, the other will stay inflated for the night. You may not even wake up!

That's enough science – over to our testers: “Just about the first sleeping mat that I didn't slip off,” remarked Ania, referring to the generous rectangular cut (a tapered version is also available, as is an insulated version). “At no point in the night did my hip touch the ground,” said Dan, “usually a problem for the side sleeper.” Paul was “very impressed in the comfort and durability,” which is saying something coming from him, and Brent didn't hold back either: “The dual inflation/deflation valve is a stand-out feature,” he enthused.

The Best in Test decision was almost unanimous. “I used the ultralight version of this mat for over a month cycling around New Zealand,” added Dan, “and I got a good sleep almost every night!”



Exped Synmat Winterlite

\$169.95/532g/R-Value 4.9/www.expeditionequipment.com.au

This is one deceptive mattress. Touted by Exped as being ‘the lightest 4-season sleeping mat on the planet’, the Synmat Winterlite looked lumpy and uncomfortable at first – too narrow yet too thick – but it soon became clear that these were clever design features, if somewhat flawed.

The extreme tapering ensured that two of these would fit into the smallest two-person tent, but at the expense of being able to stretch out, especially important for the side sleeper. Although not as narrow as it seemed at first, the head area was a little too tapered to keep a pillow situated. Also, although the raised side baffles helped prevent the user rolling off in the night, the 9cm thickness made it

awkward to drape overhanging limbs on the floor. On the plus side, inflating the mat was easy with the Schnozzle Pumpbag – a cunning inflation device that cuts the work down to two or three breaths – and deflation through the single valve was aided by the pin-like attachment.

Getting back to basics, the weight was unbeatable for an R-Value of 4.9. On lying down one could immediately feel heat radiating up from the insulation inside. “It was undeniably warm,” continued Dan, “but I felt restricted by the coffin shape. It is light enough that they could have left the corners on.” Paul agreed: “The quest for weight saving has gone too far.” There's no pleasing some people!



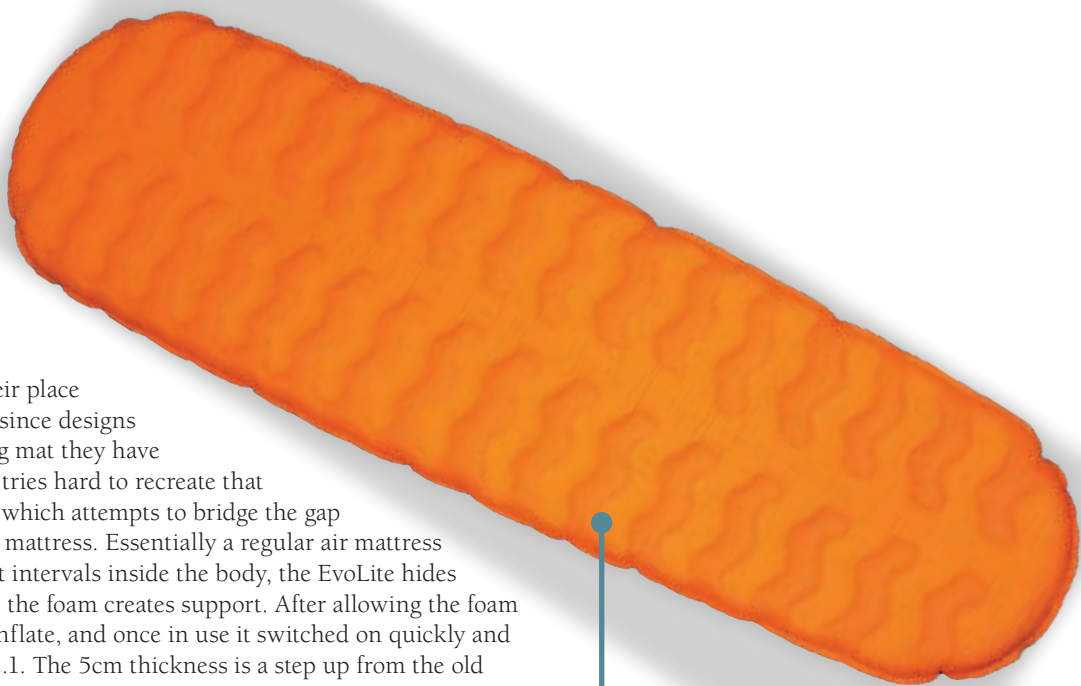
Therm-a-Rest EvoLite

\$254.95/520g/R-Value

2.1/www.spelean.com.au

Therm-a-Rest keep trying to regain their place at the top of the sleeping mat tree, but since designs evolved past their original self-inflating mat they have struggled to hit the mark. The EvoLite tries hard to recreate that magic with its AirFrame construction, which attempts to bridge the gap between air mattress and self-inflating mattress. Essentially a regular air mattress with foam beams installed crosswise at intervals inside the body, the EvoLite hides lumpy ground in its air chamber while the foam creates support. After allowing the foam to expand it only took five breaths to inflate, and once in use it switched on quickly and felt warmer than its stated R-Value of 2.1. The 5cm thickness is a step up from the old ProLite Plus range in terms of comfort but side sleepers still found it a little thin.

While a solid effort, the EvoLite didn't stand out enough from the crowd to win hearts, except for Ania's. "Very impressive back-compatibility!" she raved upon discovering that it fitted perfectly into her 20-year-old Therm-a-Rest Chair Kit. With the rest of us perched on logs, she had by far the most comfortable evening.



Klymit Static V

\$149/556g/R-Value 4.4/www.klymit.com.au

Klymit made quite a splash a few years ago when they introduced their Inertia X-Frame which with its gaping holes (marketed as 'loft pockets') looked like the skeleton of a Therm-a-Rest and packed to the size of a soda can. They now have a solid range of mats, but our testers still initially viewed the Static V with suspicion.

The holy trinity of specs are impressive for an entry-level mat: it packs small, has a high R-Value and is reasonably well priced. It doesn't 'cut any corners' in its coverage either, being nearly 60cm wide from top to toe. For practical comfort the Static V utilises Klymit's V-Chamber design – body-contouring v-shaped baffles backed up by raised side chambers to prevent you rolling off – and the consensus was that this provided a decent but not outstanding sleep. "It'd be interesting to try it in a hammock," mused Paul. "At 6.5cm this is about the thinnest it could be before allowing my hip to touch the ground," remarked Dan, but he's 63kg in his pyjamas; heavier bodies might not fare so well. Some felt that when fully inflated the mat could feel a tad lumpy, but overall – an impressive performance.





Mountain Designs Pro 3.8

\$109.95/680g/R-Value 3.2/www.mountaindesigns.com

There's no getting around the fact that the MD Pro 3.8 is just your standard cheap copy of Therm-a-Rest's self-inflating ProLite Plus. The original design is over 40 years old and I think even T-a-R would admit that there are far superior designs on the market now, not least their EvoLite. "This is a throwback to the 80s!" joked Paul. Then again, this basic model will probably suffice for many users.

While every one of our testers once possessed a self-inflating mat in our youth, nowadays saving ourselves ten breaths of inflation comes a poor second to having eight hours of comfortable sleep, and at 3.8cm this is by far the thinnest mat on test. The packed size was not particularly impressive and Paul felt that the valve lacked durability, but having said that, the Pro 3.8 gives quite firm support when fully inflated and is still better than an old-school closed cell foam pad. Also, unsurprisingly, it fits perfectly into the T-a-R chair kit. That's even more impressive cross-back-compatibility, Ania! Dan summed it up best: "There may be nothing original about this design," he said, "But hey – it still works!"



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1. We couldn't have a mat comparison without a Therm-a-Rest.
2. The Exped mat came with its own inflater.
3. The Klymit's baffle configuration was interesting.
4. We liked the Comfort Plus' clever valve system.
5. The Comfort Plus' Air Sprung Cells offered plenty of comfort.





Sleeping bags

Sierra Designs Backcountry Bed 600 2S

\$449.95/1.1Kg/Limit of Comfort: 3°C/www.frontierequipment.com.au

'Thinking outside the box' is a much overused phrase nowadays but occasionally a product will come along that has genuinely been completely re-thought and re-designed from the ground up. The Sea to Summit mattress was one, and Sierra Designs Backcountry Bed is another.

The name is accurate – the BB, designed to work for side, back or front sleepers, is more of a soft bed than a bag. As such there are no annoying zips or toggles but a comforter sewn into the front of the bag which acts a bit like the tongue of a shoe: it can be pulled over the body and tucked in for maximum warmth or thrown back for ventilation. At the other end, a simple overlapping baffle allows the feet to be poked out on hot nights and withdrawn later when the ambient temperature has fallen. The next feature should be standard in any sleeping bag – a mattress sleeve on the underside. This makes it impossible to roll off the mat and also keeps the bag top-side up when

you turn over in the night. The last major innovation (and how often do I get to say that?) is the hand pockets built into the comforter, which allow the sleeper to easily reposition the quilt, tuck it in or keep the arms warm when they are outside the bag. All in all – genius.

"The in-built doona takes a bit of getting used to but works well once you wrap it around you properly," said Brent. "I loved not having a face full of Velcro," added Dan, "and stashing my pillow in the top of the mat sleeve worked perfectly." "This is my Four Weddings and a Funeral bag," noted Matt, cryptically, "Loved no zipper restrictions; loved the doona; loved the foot flap; loved the freedom to sleep in any position; disliked the size and weight." And that's the downside: The 600 2S is quite heavy and bulky, although there are lighter weight options in the range.



Sea to Summit Comfort Spark II

Regular – \$449.95, Long – \$479.95/464g/Limit of Comfort: 2°C/www.seatosummitdistribution.com.au

Let's face it – weight is always an issue and sleeping bags are usually one of the heaviest single items we carry. Not anymore! Sea to Summit has gone all out to make the lightest bag in its class in the world. Originally aimed at adventure racers, the Spark has been enthusiastically embraced by the ultra-light hiking, cycle touring and paddling communities.

To achieve the minimalist weight STS have used the highest loft goose down available (850+), a YKK#3 zip and a 10D Pertex Quantum shell so thin it resembles tissue paper. You can actually use your smart phone through it! Although the bag looks well constructed and appears down-proof, there were worries that careless use might cause damage, especially when scrambling in and out past the 1/3 length zip. The polar opposite of the Backcountry Bed, the Spark is a contoured mummy that will hug you like a body stocking, turning when you turn. If you like a roomy bag, this isn't for you. The short zip also limits ventilation, reducing the bag to a narrow usable temperature range. Other benefits include a bright yellow interior, which doubles as a signalling device, and the ability to use it as a booster bag to extend a normal 3-season capability into winter temperatures.

However, you just can't argue with a sub 500g, 2°C bag that compresses to the size of a butternut squash. "I would definitely consider this bag if the temperature was appropriate and weight was at a premium," said Paul.



Carinthia G-180 G-Air

\$439.95/910g/Limit of Comfort: 0°C/www.premierdefence.com

Compared to the last two, getting into a regular sleeping bag is a bit of a let down, even a fine one such as the G-180 G-Air. The only fully synthetic bag on test, the G-180 is filled with a similar insulation to the G-Loft Ultra Jacket and feels really nice and soft inside thanks to the Shelltex Superlight lining. It's a little on the large side when packed, but that's synthetic bags for you.

Whilst not hosting any huge design innovations, this is a good example of a solidly constructed sleeping bag that keeps you warm and comfortable. All the usual features are present: anti-snap tape and draught tube along the zip; adjustable hood; face-scratching Velcro tab at the shoulder. Surprisingly, the G-180 is the only model to include a small inside pocket, although maybe because whatever is kept there has a tendency to sit on one's chest during the night. Ania liked the $\frac{3}{4}$ zip because her feet stayed toasty in the generous foot box but she could keep the top unzipped.

This would be perfect for an Australian winter and the cut was probably the best of all the bags – neither too roomy nor too restrictive.



Macpac Epic 400

\$749.99/850g/Limit of Comfort: – 4°C/www.macpac.com.au

Brent summed up our panel's first impression of the Macpac Epic: "\$749! It'd better be bloody good!" It certainly looked good on paper: Pertex Quantum shell, 800 loft water resistant goose down, traditional mummy shape. In practice though, it held more 'buts' than a pocket ashtray. The bag was roomy enough to turn around in comfortably but the extra space inside meant it took a little longer to heat up. The top of the zip closed neater than most with a press studded garage, but the hood adjustment cord still got in the way. The waterproof stuff sack was a nice touch but compression straps would have been more useful.

The – 4°C limit of comfort betrays the fact that this is a bag designed for colder temperatures, and while it might be okay for cold sleepers in Australian conditions, hot bods might be struggling to find uses for this at the weekend. Also, I would have expected a bag of this rating to have a shoulder baffle – a necessary addition in colder temperatures to prevent heat escaping out of the top. "I had a great sleep," conceded Brent the next morning, "but would I spend \$749 on this bag? I doubt it."





Mont Brindabella Hydronaute

\$749.95/1160g/Limit of Comfort: – 11°C/www.mont.com.au

And so to our warmest bag. Slightly outside the parameters of the test, the Brindabella is definitely more suited to alpine expeditions or high altitude hikes such as Everest Base Camp or Kilimanjaro, and although it costs the same as the Macpac, the price more fairly reflects the quality and warmth of the product. Despite being rated so low, this bag's tapered rectangular shape and full zip allow it to be opened out into a doona on warmer nights, a versatility that none of the other bags displayed. And for when – 11°C still isn't warm enough, a little Toaster pocket near the feet is designed to accommodate air-activated heat packs – a nice touch.

In practical use, feelings were mixed. "The cut was tighter than the Macpac so the bag turned with me, making the zip hard to find in the night," complained Dan, "and did the shoulder baffle really need its own draw cord?" he continued. "The toggle always seemed to end up beneath me, sticking into my ribs." Paul disagreed: "I thought the inner material felt luxurious and the construction was excellent," he said. "I would seriously consider this bag if I needed the temperature."



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1. You can see all the R&D that has gone into the spark II.
2. Laying out the bags for inspection.
3. At Newnes, sorting through the sleeping bags.
4. The testers were all fans of Sierra Designs' Backcountry Bed.
5. The Macpac Epic 400 was well made but heavy on the hip pocket.

