



BORN TO BE WILD

Some of the best things in life are free – and camping wild is one of them. Ben Searle offers advice on how to go quietly about it

Wild camping has provided some of my best moments while cycle touring. In the Picos de Europa in Spain, I watched the sun burn through the morning mist while camped in beech woods. On the Gospel Pass in Wales, I woke to find myself on an ‘island’ surround by cloud lapping below me. In the high Alps, I slept in under countless twinkling stars. In Norway, I watched a great sea eagle glide by.

Experiences like these are out there, waiting to be enjoyed by anyone prepared to leave behind some (but not all) home comforts. By ‘wild camping’, here we mean ‘anywhere away from campsite facilities’. With a bit of thought about where you are going, you’ll

Right: All you need for a few days can be fitted in two rear panniers. (This bike is also carrying camera gear and spare kit for photos)



All photos: Ben Searle

be able to camp with few concerns and a sense of freedom rarely found in modern life. It generally suits at most four people in two small tents. The bigger the group the more difficult everything becomes.

PLANNING YOUR PITCH

Wild camping should be kept simple, meeting your outdoor

In mountain areas such as the Picos de Europa in Spain, good clean drinking water is one of the joys

needs with the least fuss. Lots of equipment is just going to make your bike more awkward to manoeuvre and make it take too long to set up camp.

The basic rules are to camp late, as unobtrusively as possible, and leave the site early exactly as you found it. For your first trip, go somewhere where wild camping is legal or at least tolerated without specific permission. This will vastly increase the possibilities for your pitch. Where you do need permission, make the effort to ask – most people will be polite, even if they decline. I have been invited in for coffee, breakfast and even to stay the night in a number of countries when asking to camp.

Plan ahead so that you will ride into a fairly remote area, with a view to camping about an hour before dusk. It's worth knowing when to stop and not get caught out by nightfall. Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 maps can help you scan the road ahead, for example to look for unfenced roads, tracks, or sections without buildings.

Aim to camp on unfenced grassland above farms and fields. Be mindful of wild flowers (which may be rare or protected) and anywhere where vegetation is vulnerable to damage. Avoid camping on or next to tracks. Dried up river beds or plains may be subject to flash flooding. Get to know which vegetation indicates boggy areas, such as cotton grass. Keep away from trees in very windy conditions. Consider the presence of ticks which can spread disease – see the June/July 2007 issue of *Cycle*.

Should circumstances force you to camp without permission, look for a spot about a kilometre or more from houses and out of sight. Dogs will sense something's up from some distance, or may be taken for a late night walk. Stealthily wheel your bike 50 metres or more (ideal 100 metres) from the road and out of view, such as behind a copse or hillock. As a last resort, a recently mowed field is least likely to require a farmer's attention or be used for livestock. Keep noise to a minimum. Don't shine torches across open land and beware of car headlights catching reflective materials.

HOME FROM HOME

A high quality tent makes sense as you will more likely camp in exposed surroundings, and if the

tent fails you help will be further away. The best are small and discreet in earth tones – brown or green will blend into the surroundings. Fully- or semi-geodesic designs (such as the Terra Nova Voyager, below) stand up alone and can be moved around to find the optimum spot. They are ideal where guying out is tricky because of confined space, loose, or rocky ground. Heavier duty ground

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WILD CAMPING LAWS

In Europe, the practicality and legality of camping wild tends to improve as you venture both north and into upland country. Each country has its own laws, so make sure you are aware of what's permitted. It is not just the legal situation you should consider – some areas are just too developed, intensively farmed, rocky, steep, or lack privacy or readily available water. Beware of the hunting season and military areas.

• **ENGLAND and WALES** All land is owned by someone and legally you are obliged to obtain the permission of the landowner to camp. Camping without doing so carries the risk that you may be moved on. Take heed of any signs. You can only be prosecuted if you have caused (criminal) damage, not for simply trespassing. But it's worth apologising, explaining why you're camping there, and – at all costs – staying polite.

Popular upland areas where camping without specific permission is widely practised and tolerated include Dartmoor (see www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/camping-booklet.pdf), The Lake District (above 450m), Snowdonia, The North Pennines and Northumbria. The Backpackers Club (www.backpackersclub.co.uk) produces a directory of farmers allowing rough camping.

• **SCOTLAND** Since 2005 you have the right to wild camp on hill land providing you are at least 100 metres away from a public road. Refer to www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/access/ApprovedCode050604.pdf and www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk/leaflets/wildcamp.html

• IRELAND and NORTHERN IRELAND

You are expected to seek permission. Farmers are often very friendly, so obtaining it is usually quite easy.

• **NORWAY, FINLAND, SWEDEN, ICELAND** You can camp a night or two if more than 150m from habitation, under the long-standing Right of Common Access (*Allemansretten*), excepting cultivated fields and some protected areas. Fires are prohibited from mid April to mid September in forests and fields.

• **FRANCE** It is best to ask as camping *sauvage* is generally forbidden, especially in départements bordering the Mediterranean (such as Provence) where the fire risk can be acute. Otherwise a single night in uncultivated areas is generally tolerated if more than 500m from roads and habitation.

• **SPAIN** You can camp wild except in urban, military and tourist areas, beaches, Parques Naturales, and within 1km of a campsite – although a lot of land is fenced. It is still courteous to ask if you can.

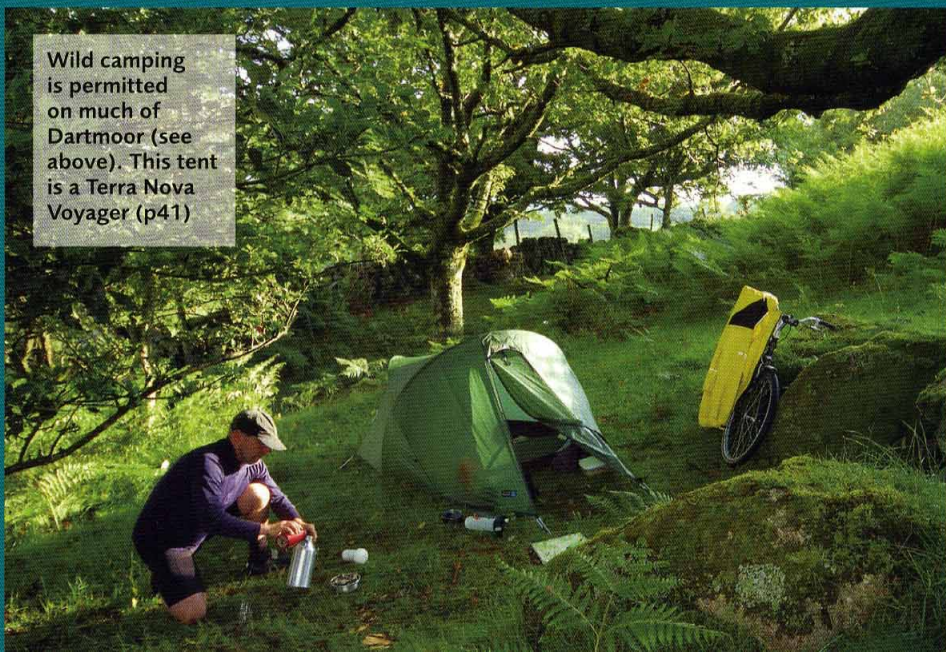
• **GERMANY** Wild camping is illegal without the permission of the landowner.

• INTERNATIONAL CAMPING CARNET

When asking to camp this will help: it shows that you have third-party insurance. It can be obtained by members of the Caravan and Camping Club, RAC or AA for a nominal fee. Further details available from CTC.

• **OTHER COUNTRIES** Many Rough Guides and CTC country information sheets give an indication of what is possible.

Wild camping is permitted on much of Dartmoor (see above). This tent is a Terra Nova Voyager (p41)



sheets and possibly a protector are desirable to guard against boggy, thirstily or rocky ground.

A bivvy bag is little bigger than a sleeping bag. High-tech models keep you cosy and dry, weigh little (the Mountain Equipment Ion Bivi, £80, weighs 280g), and allow you to hide away almost anywhere. A shelter such as a tarp (www.tarpaflex.co.uk sell a cheap camouflage range) strung between two trees or against a wall costs less than a tenner and is an alternative in-touch-with-nature option. Poor weather can make things miserable, though, as can biting insects.

Self-inflating mats such as those by Thermarest are much better than foam models, especially given that the ground you will be sleeping on will generally be rougher or harder than at a campsite.

WATER

Don't pass up a perfect spot through lack of water. Fill up an hour or two before you plan to camp – for example, at a public toilet, garage, or water fountain. Or just ask someone. Three 1L bottles per person is about the minimum you'll need, roughly one each for drinking, washing and cooking. In upland areas you can use fast running water in preference to still water, taken upstream of any livestock or buildings. Check any health risks when planning your trip. If in any doubt, sterilise it by either bringing it to a rolling boil for several minutes, using an iodine treatment (best avoided by pregnant women, those with thyroid problems and young children), or using a chlorine treatment (which takes longer, tastes worse, and can be less effective).

COOKING

A camp fire may complete the Ray Mears idyll, but don't even think about it unless you are certain that: no one will mind; it is legal where you are; you pose no fire risk. Stoves that need priming need great care in dry conditions. Stand it on large stable rock if possible. Many stoves produce a reassuring roar, but draw attention and drown out the sounds of nature.

In some ways a simple, silent butane or meths stove (Trangia, or a popular home made alternative – Google 'can stove') is preferable. The mini Kelly Kettle (£37.00, www.kellykettle.com) is a quick,



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satisfying, and easy way to boil water using just a handful of anything combustible – perfect for a remote trip. Keep matches or lighters dry and have at least one spare. It may be a long trek to get more. I use a plastic pot with a screw-on lid.

BATHROOM

A refreshing splash wash taken by a stream or lake conserves your drinking water. Otherwise just 1/2 litre of water can be used to clean and refresh yourself. Warm the





Left: Wild camping in Iceland is legal if you're more than 150 metres from habitation

water and put it back in a bottle. River or lake water will do, but take care not to mix it or its containers with drinking water without subsequent sterilising. Wipe your body over with a flannel using small squirts of water and use a minimum of soap.

The following toilet hygiene is based on the Scottish Access Code:

- Always find a spot at least 30 metres (100ft) from fresh/running water when going to the toilet.
- Bury excrement in a small hole (not under stones). Use a trowel to lift a flap of turf and bury – along with any paper burned, assuming there's no fire risk – a under a few inches of soil.
- Do not bury tampons and sanitary

towels as animals dig them up. Carry them out and dispose of properly.

- A disinfectant gel, kept with your trowel, is the best way to clean your hands and conserve water.

PERFECT THE ART

Like cycling, wild camping is an art you can fine tune. If you feel inspired, try a weekend away and see what you can learn. Then hopefully you'll be longing for more! There are many websites aimed at backpackers that are useful – try <http://v-g.me.uk/index.htm>.

This article was suggested by CTC member and Councillor Arthur Spurr. If there's an article you want to see, write or email the editor (p80).

TRIED AND TESTED

This isn't an exhaustive list – just some of my favourite equipment.

Terra Nova Voyager tent (£300, www.terra-nova.co.uk). Light (2.27kg) bombproof semi-geodesic design for two – easy to pitch and hide away, perfect for just about anywhere.

Platypus Platy 1L bottle (£6.99, www.firstascent.co.uk). Very durable, weighs just 23g and folds to almost nothing.

Thermarest ProLite 3 Regular sleeping mat (£72.99, www.firstascent.co.uk). Does very decent job of smoothing rough ground and providing a comfortable night. Weighs 570g, rolls up to 28 x 10cm.

Petzl Tikka XP head torch (£40.00, www.lyon.co.uk). Diminutive, versatile, hands-free illumination, convenient for pitching, cooking, etc. Filter options for greater discretion.

Mosi-guard insect repellent (Various products around £5, www.mosi-guard.com). Eucalyptus and citrus based, effective safe alternative to Deet. Also deters ticks.

Pocket Travel Well (£20.43 www.pre-mac.com). Provides instant safe water in emergencies. Iodine based, 50L capacity, weighs 65g.

Just the Jobby! (£12.99, www.backpackinglight.co.uk). Lightweight toilet kit for the wilds – trowel, disinfectant gel and a bag.

