



A CAMP ON WHEELS FIELD GUIDE

First-Time Rooftop *Tent Camping*

What it's actually like up there — the honest pros and cons, the prep that matters, rainy nights, cold mornings, and everything we tell every first-timer who picks up the keys.



BEFORE YOU CLIMB UP

Hey there, first-timer.

Everyone remembers their first night in a rooftop tent — the little sway in the wind, the sounds you swear are closer than they are, and the morning view that makes all of it instantly worth it.

We're Camp on Wheels, a family-owned business based in Edmonton, and handing rooftop-tent SUVs to first-timers is most of what we do. Which means we've answered every first-timer question there is — usually in a parking lot, usually twice.

This guide is those answers, written down: what to prepare, what to expect, what to do when it rains, how to stay warm when the weather turns, and what to have ready before anything goes sideways.

None of it is complicated. But knowing it before your first night beats learning it during.

See you up there.

— *The Camp on Wheels Family*

The Route Ahead

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Five Questions Every First-Timer Asks

Will it hold me? Yes — quality tents and ladders are rated far beyond your family's weight. (p.07)

What if it rains? You'll be drier than any ground tent. There's a chapter. (p.09)

Can I drive with it up? Never. Folding down takes minutes — it's part of the routine. (p.05)

Is the mattress comfortable? It's firm. We'll show you how to fix that. (p.08)

What about the bathroom at 2am? The ladder takes 20 seconds. Headlamp in the tent pocket. (p.06)

The Honest Pros & Cons

We rent these things for a living and we'll still tell you straight: rooftop tents are wonderful, and they're not for everyone. Here's the truth of it.

The Pros

- 🔥 **Setup in minutes.** Unfold, ladder down, done — no poles, no pegs, no fighting the wind.
- 🔥 **Off the ground.** Drier, warmer, no rocks under your back, and nothing crawling in.
- 🔥 **A real mattress is built in.** No air pump, no morning deflation surprise.
- 🔥 **Camp anywhere you can park.** Gravel, rock, mud — the ground under you doesn't matter.
- 🔥 **The view.** Waking up at eye level with the sunrise never gets old.

The Cons

- 🔥 **The 2am ladder.** Midnight bathroom trips involve a climb. You get used to it fast — but it's real.
- 🔥 **The tent moves with the wind.** A gentle sway is normal and safe; light sleepers notice it the first night.
- 🔥 **Your vehicle is your bedroom.** Drive to the trailhead and the bedroom comes with you — fold-down first.
- 🔥 **The stock mattress is firm.** Fixable (see page 08), but out of the box it's a camping mattress, not a hotel bed.
- 🔥 **Fuel economy dips a little** with a tent on the roof. Plan a slightly thirstier trip.

PRO TIP #1

Renting before buying is the cheapest research there is. One weekend up there answers every question this page can't — including whether your back agrees with the mattress.

Great For

Road-trippers, families who hate setup, anyone camping on rough or wet ground, and view chasers.

Think Twice If

You base-camp for a week and drive out daily, or someone in the crew can't manage a ladder.

The Verdict

For a first taste of sleeping outside without the ground-tent grind, nothing else comes close.

Before You Go: Preparation

1 The Vehicle & Tent

- Practice the full open-and-close once in the driveway — including the ladder lock — before your first trip.
- Check the roof bars and mounting bolts by hand; nothing should wiggle.
- Never drive with the tent open, even "just to the gate." Fold-down is part of leaving camp.
- Know your ladder's footing: it wants firm, level ground, angled per the markings.

2 The Plan

- Book a serviced campground for trip one — power, water, and toilets remove half the variables.
- Arrive with at least an hour of daylight. Everything is easier when you can see it.
- Check the forecast the morning you leave, and pack for one season colder than it says.

First-Trip Packing Pillars

- ☐ Bedding beyond the mattress (see page 08)
- ☐ Headlamp per person + a camp lantern
- ☐ Cooler with food and water sorted by day
- ☐ Layers: base, warm, and rain shell each
- ☐ First aid kit and a charged power bank
- ☐ Camp chairs — the tent is for sleeping, not sitting

GEAR SPOTLIGHT



A proper hard cooler is first-trip insurance. The **Coleman Chiller** keeps ice through a weekend, doubles as a camp bench, and holds the food a rooftop tent has no room for.

PRO TIP #2

Load the vehicle so the things you need first come out last: tent bedding on top of the pile, firewood and chairs at the tailgate. Future-you unpacks in exactly that order.

Your First Night: What to Expect

- 🔥 **The tent will move a little.** Wind makes it sway gently — that's the suspension of your vehicle, not the tent failing. It's normal, and by night two you won't notice.
- 🔥 **Every sound is "right there."** You're closer to the treetops and the acoustics are different. That enormous beast outside is, statistically, a mouse.
- 🔥 **Cold mornings bring condensation.** Warm breath meets cool canvas. Crack a vent or window before sleeping and it mostly disappears.
- 🔥 **The 2am climb is fine.** Twenty seconds down, twenty up. Keep shoes at the base and a headlamp in the tent pocket, and it's a non-event.
- 🔥 **You'll give tours.** Rooftop tents attract campground neighbours like a food truck. Budget ten minutes for questions.



GEAR SPOTLIGHT



Hang one light before dark. The **Coleman Classic Recharge LED lantern** is rechargeable, hangs from the tent's internal loop, and turns the 2am climb from a fumble into a flick.

PRO TIP #3

Do your full bedtime routine — teeth, bathroom, water bottle, headlamp check — before anyone climbs the ladder. Going up should be the last thing that happens at night.

PRO TIP #4

String a set of outdoor lights from the tent to a nearby tree or the roof rack. It costs almost nothing, makes finding camp after dark effortless — and it turns your first campsite into the prettiest one in the loop.

04

CHAPTER

YOUR BEDROOM RIDES AT 100 KM/H

The Tent Itself: Why Build Quality Matters

A rooftop tent lives a harder life than any ground tent: highway wind at speed, UV all summer, rain, frost, and a family climbing through it twice a day. Build quality isn't a luxury spec — it's the whole product.

1 What Quality Looks Like

- 🔥 A stiff, honeycomb-aluminum base that doesn't flex under two adults.
- 🔥 Thick ripstop canvas with taped or welded seams — not bargain polyester.
- 🔥 A ladder that locks positively and is rated well beyond body weight.
- 🔥 Hardware you can tighten with basic tools, anywhere.
- 🔥 A rain cover included in the box, not sold as an extra.



Why We Run Thule Tents

Every tent in the Camp on Wheels fleet is a **Thule** — because after hundreds of rental nights, build quality is what survives. Reinforced bases, quality canvas, ladders that still lock like new — and the **Thule Explorer** series ships with its rain cover included, which tells you how they think about weather.

The Rental Advantage

Buying a quality rooftop tent is a real investment — which is exactly why we rent them. You get the top-shelf tent on your first trip, and if you fall in love, you'll know precisely what's worth paying for.

Zips & Hinges

Grit is the enemy. A quality tent's zips run smooth for years — if you keep them brushed clean.

Canvas

Store it bone dry, always. Even the best fabric loses to mildew if it's folded away wet.

Mounts

Hand-check the bolts at the start of every season and after any long washboard road.

Sleeping Comfortably Up There

Here's the thing nobody's ad mentions: the mattress that comes built into most rooftop tents is **firm and on the thin side**. It's engineered to fold, not to pamper. The fix isn't a better tent — it's layers.

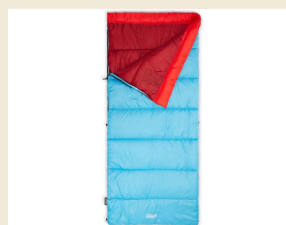
1 Build the Bed in Layers

- 🔥 **Under you:** a folding foam topper or a wool blanket over the stock mattress changes everything. This is the single best upgrade.
- 🔥 **Around you:** a proper sleeping bag per person beats loose blankets — it traps heat even when kids spin like rotisseries.
- 🔥 **Over you:** one shared duvet or blanket on top of the bags for cold nights. Layers you can shed beat one heavy cover.
- 🔥 **Pillows from home.** They take space and they're worth it. Camp pillows are for backpackers.

Make the Bed Before Dark

Set up the whole sleep system — topper, bags, pillows — while it's light and you're not tired. Climbing into a made bed at 10pm is luxury; making one by headlamp is not.

GEAR SPOTLIGHT



The Coleman Flatlands sleeping bag is our go-to layer: roomy rectangular cut, warm on mountain summer nights, and it unzips flat into a duvet when the night turns mild.

Sleep-Cold People, Read This

Insulation under you matters more than over you — the mattress steals heat all night. If you always sleep cold, put the extra layer beneath, not on top.

Rainy Nights, Done Right

- 🔥 **Fit the rain cover at setup, every time** — not when the sky turns. Most quality tents include one (the Thule Explorer does), and a dry cover going on is a two-minute job; a wet one in the dark is not.
- 🔥 **Keep a vent cracked anyway.** Sealed up tight, four sleepers make their own indoor rain by morning. Airflow beats condensation.
- 🔥 **Stage the entry.** A small towel just inside the door, wet shoes under the vehicle (out of the rain), rain shells hung at the entrance — the sleeping area stays dry if the doorway does the work.
- 🔥 **Rain on canvas is the best sleep sound there is.** First-timers expect misery and report the best night of the trip.
- 🔥 **Dry out within a day.** If you pack up wet, open the tent at home within 24 hours. Canvas forgives rain; it doesn't forgive being stored wet.

PRO TIP #5

Park with the ladder side away from the wind-driven rain if you can. The doorway stays drier, and so does everyone using it.



The Morning After

Wipe the cover down, fold the wet side in on itself, and get moving — then unfold everything in the sun at lunch or at home. Ten minutes of drying saves a season of mildew.

Staying Warm on a Cold, Wet Day

1 Through the Day

- 🔥 **Layers, never cotton.** Base layer, warm mid-layer, rain shell. Wet cotton pulls heat out of you; wool and synthetics keep working damp.
- 🔥 **Stay busy, stay warm.** Gathering wood beats sitting still. Cold days are for the walk, not the chair.
- 🔥 **Keep warm drinks rolling** all afternoon — heat from the inside is the cheapest heat there is.
- 🔥 **Eat bigger than usual.** A fat-and-protein dinner is fuel for your body's furnace overnight.

2 Heading Into the Night

- 🔥 **Boil a hot water bottle** and send it into the sleeping bag ten minutes before you climb up. Expert move, zero cost.
- 🔥 **Dry socks and a toque are sleepwear.** Keep one pair of socks sacred — they never leave the tent.
- 🔥 **Swap damp layers before bed.** Even slightly damp clothes turn your bag into a refrigerator.

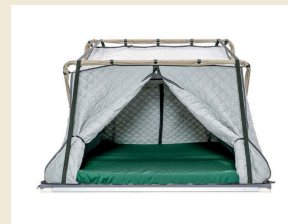


THE FIRE STILL WORKS IN THE RAIN

The 2am Cold Fix

Woke up cold? Eat something small, add the spare layer *under* you if you have one, and cinch the bag's hood. Shivering with an empty stomach is a losing game — a granola bar is legitimate midnight medicine.

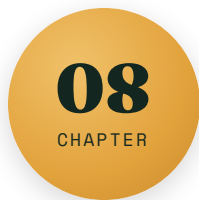
RENTAL ADD-ON



The single biggest difference-maker we've found: the Thule Kukenam 3 Insulator — a quilted liner that clips inside the tent and holds your body heat all night. **Available as an add-on** on every Camp on Wheels rental.

PRO TIP #6

Warm the cab, not the tent: run the vehicle's heater for ten minutes while everyone does teeth and stories inside, then send warm bodies straight up the ladder into their bags. The head start lasts all night.



HOPE FOR S'MORES, PLAN FOR STORMS

Emergency Preparation

1 Before You Leave

- 🔥 Tell someone your route, campground, and return day — cell coverage past the park gate is a rumour.
- 🔥 Save the campground address, park office number, and nearest hospital offline in your phone.
- 🔥 Download offline maps for the whole route, not just the destination.

2 Know When to Bail

- 🔥 **Lightning or violent wind:** fold the tent and sleep in the vehicle. That's not failure — that's the whole advantage of a bedroom with an engine.
- 🔥 **Anyone genuinely cold and not warming up:** vehicle, heater, warm drink, reassess.
- 🔥 The trip can always continue tomorrow. The vehicle is your storm shelter, escape pod, and backup bedroom in one.

PRO TIP #7

Do a two-minute "camp sweep" before bed: fire fully out, food locked in the vehicle, tent ladder clear, keys in the same pocket of the tent every night. Boring routine is what emergencies bounce off.

The Emergency Kit That Lives in the Vehicle

- ☐ First aid kit — checked, not just packed
- ☐ Booster cables and a tire repair kit
- ☐ Headlamps + spare batteries, power bank charged
- ☐ Paper map of the region
- ☐ Water (4L minimum) and a day of backup snacks
- ☐ Emergency blanket and a lighter
- ☐ Small shovel or multi-tool

Wildlife, Briefly

All food, garbage, and anything scented sleeps in the vehicle — never in the tent. Being off the ground doesn't make you off the menu for curiosity.

The First-Trip Countdown

Three short lists. Do them in order and nothing surprises you.

PIN
THIS
UP

1 The Week Before

- ☐ Practice tent open & close in the driveway
- ☐ Check roof mounts and ladder lock by hand
- ☐ Book the campsite; save details offline
- ☐ Tell someone the route and return day
- ☐ Test headlamps, lantern, and power bank

2 The Day Before

- ☐ Check the mountain forecast, pack one season colder
- ☐ Bedding layers packed: topper, bags, pillows
- ☐ Cooler packed, frozen meals doubling as ice
- ☐ Emergency kit back in the vehicle
- ☐ Fuel up tonight, not on the way out

3 At the Campsite

- ☐ Arrive with an hour of daylight
- ☐ Park level, brake on, ladder side out of the wind
- ☐ Tent open, rain cover fitted — every time
- ☐ Make the bed while it's light
- ☐ Hang the lantern, headlamps in the tent pocket
- ☐ Food and scented items locked in the vehicle
- ☐ Camp sweep before the ladder: fire, food, keys

The Only Rule That Matters

Everything hard happens in daylight; everything after dark should already be done. That single habit is 90% of a smooth first trip.

ONE LAST THING

Where This Guide Came From.

Every tip in these pages comes from handing rooftop-tent SUVs to first-timers and hearing how their weekend actually went — the wins, the 2am stories, and the one thing they wished they'd known.

Camp on Wheels is an Edmonton-based, family-owned rooftop-tent SUV rental business. We run Thule tents, we camp with our own kids, and we've made every mistake in this guide so you don't have to.

Want your first rooftop night without buying the gear first? Find us at **camponwheels.ca**.



Need a first destination?

Scan for family-tested routes and trip ideas, or visit **blog.camponwheels.ca/tag/trip-suggestions**



THANKS FOR READING

The first climb down at 2am *is the initiation.*

After that, you're not a first-timer anymore. Welcome to the club — meetings are held at sunrise, in a sleeping bag, with a view.

One last tip: print the countdown page and stick it on the fridge — it's the only page you need the night before.

The Whole Guide in Five Lines

- 🔥 Practice the tent at home; arrive with daylight.
- 🔥 Layer the bed — the stock mattress needs help.
- 🔥 Rain cover on at setup, vent cracked, towel at the door.
- 🔥 Warm from the inside: drinks, dinner, hot water bottle.
- 🔥 The vehicle is your backup plan — never be afraid to use it.

WHO WE ARE



We are an Edmonton-based small family business built around a simple idea: the best camping experiences should feel easy to start and hard to forget.

After exploring Alberta and the BC Rockies with a rooftop tent, we wanted other families, couples, and first-time campers to feel the same freedom we felt: drive a comfortable SUV, keep the gear organized, sleep above the campsite, and wake up close to the mountains.

"Go outside and start collecting memories."

— THE CAMP ON WHEELS FAMILY

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