

How to Build a Survival Shelter (Best Shelter Designs Explained)

The most deadly factor in any survival situation: lack of preparation. If you unexpectedly need to build a shelter in the wilderness, your experience and understanding of your environment may be the only tool you have.

Be proactive and keep reading to learn how to build a survival shelter—in any condition—no matter what your resources are. This guide will equip you with the most important tool you need: knowledge.

What is a Survival Shelter?

A survival shelter is any structure (naturally occurring or man-made) that can protect you from animals, insects, and the elements. Survival shelters can range from dugout snow tunnels to A-frame wooden structures. Shelters come in many forms and serve a variety of purposes, but one thing is certain: it's near impossible to survive without them.

Wilderness Survival Shelters

If you know the rule of 3's, you understand just how important dependable shelter is. As the saying goes, "You can't survive 3 hours without shelter in a harsh environment."

When you're caught in a snowstorm or stranded in the desert heat without shelter, the clock begins counting down to a serious situation that could ultimately cost you your life.

No matter where you are, rain and moisture are often your deadliest enemy. When you're wet, it's extremely difficult to stay warm. This is one of many reasons why it's so important to make sure that your shelter is waterproof and dry.

Of course, it might not always be possible to stay 100% dry with the limited resources you're given—and the type of shelter you're able to find or create—but there are some techniques that can help:

- **Elevating your bed:** No matter what your environment is, you should always elevate your bed off the ground if you can. Not only is it an important part of staying dry, but there are bugs to worry about as well.
- **Find coverage:** If you're lucky, you may be able to find natural coverage and protection from the rain. Large trees and caves can be a lifesaver if you don't have the natural resources or time to build your own shelter.

No matter what happens, do everything you can to stay dry. Once you're drenched to the bone, getting dry and regulating your body temperature will become extremely difficult.

Tree Branch Survival Shelters

Tree branches are fantastic building materials for a survival shelter. Whenever possible, avoid exerting energy to shape and cut them. Doing so may quickly exhaust you, so avoid expending too much effort until you have a reliable source of water and food.

- **Round Lodge:** Structurally, the round shelter is quite similar to a tipi. However, a round lodge has the potential for a solid doorway and slightly better insulation. One of the greatest benefits of a round lodge is that it can accommodate for a smoke hole at the top.

Debris Survival Shelter: Debris survival shelters come in a variety of structural designs, but the most common is an A-frame. Natural debris, such as tree foliage and dead leaves, can be utilized to insulate your shelter and protect you from the elements.

Keep in mind that your debris won't hold your shelter together nor withhold its strength against strong wind. Incorporate mud (or clay if available) into your structure to make it sturdier.

Tips for Building a Survival Shelter in the Forest: The forest is often full of incredibly useful resources to build a shelter with. Fallen tree branches, leaves, and mud/clay can be found in most forests, and make for incredible building materials.

When you're in the forest, look for materials that require little to no alterations (especially when you don't have tools) to build your structures. For a tutorial on how to build a shelter with no tools.

Tarp Survival Shelters

If you're fortunate enough to have a tarp with you in a serious survival situation, there are a handful of different shelters that you can make:

- **Tarp Wing:** A tarp wing provides partial coverage from the elements, especially rain. When combined with a fire, a partial wing can provide you with the protection and warmth needed to survive in nature for a brief period. It's best to use a tarp wing as a temporary structure while you build a larger one.
- **A-Frame Tarp:** An A-frame shelter is triangular in shape and typically utilizes tools such as sticks, rope, and a tarp. It provides protection from sun, rain, and wind, but provides little assistance in terms of insulation or warmth.

To build an A-frame shelter, tie a string between two trees and drape the tarp over the string. Make sure you weight the edges of the tarp with rocks or a heavy log so that the wind doesn't blow it away.

- **Wedge Tarp:** A wedge tarp is ideal for windy conditions and can be created with limited natural resources. By staking or tying down the corners of your tarp and propping up the center section, you can create a makeshift shelter in no time at all. Creating a wedge tarp is one of the many uses of a paracord if you have one handy in your survival gear supplies.

- **Tarp Burrito:** If all you have is a tarp and there aren't any tools or resources to help you build your ideal structure, a tarp burrito will do the trick. Simply roll yourself up in a "burrito" with your tarp and try to cover as much of your body as possible. Lay down leaves, moss, and soft branches underneath your tarp to enhance insulation.

Cold Weather Survival Shelters

Exposure to the elements can have deadly consequences. Staying warm is incredibly difficult when you have little more than the clothes on your back, but regulating your body temperature is one of the most important elements of survival.

- **Using nearby materials for insulation:** If your environment provides them, use resources like mud, leaves, tree branches, and moss to insulate your structure. You need to trap as much heat as possible while protecting yourself from the elements.
- **Insulating the ground:** Laying directly on the ground will cause you to lose massive amounts of body heat. Insulating the surface you plan to sleep on is essential to your survival. Consider using straight branches and pieces of wood to elevate your bed.

If you don't have tools to create a bed, simply lay branches, grass, leaves, and other debris to hold in warm air and prevent the ground from absorbing all of your warmth.

- **Building a fire in the wilderness:** If you use an existing cave shelter, think twice before starting a fire inside of it. This can smoke you out and the heat can cause rocks to move and collapse on you.

For man-made structures, building a fire inside is fine as long as you create an opening at the top for the smoke to leave.

How do you build a fire in the wilderness? Starting a fire when you don't have matches or a lighter is no small feat. With the right knowledge and even just a few common objects, starting a fire from scratch is possible.

Regardless of the method you use, a tinder nest is essential. A typical tinder nest is comprised of dry shrubbery and other light, flammable materials. If you have a plastic bag filled with water or eyeglasses, you can use them to focus sunlight and ignite your tinder nest.

Another strategy is to create a small bow using string or vine and looping a stick in it. Place the stick between two pieces of wood or bark and use the bow to spin the vertical stick back and forth; if you create enough friction, you can make embers.

Make sure your tinder nest is handy and you have a larger pile of materials to burn after it's ignited.

Tips for Building Survival Shelter in Cold Weather Climates: Cold weather climates and environments are often wetter than warmer ones. Starting a fire when there is too much

moisture in the air creates an added challenge. If you need to start a fire inside of a cave, just make sure that you have a safe way to carry your fire outside.

Snow Shelters

Certain snowy environments, such as high elevation mountains, call for structures that are almost entirely comprised of ice and snow. If you've been dropped into a snowstorm, you may only have a few hours to create a structure before it's too late.

- **Quinzhee:** Essentially, a quinzhee is a large pile of snow that has been hollowed out for living quarters. While sleeping inside a big pile of snow might seem crazy, it's often the best way to protect yourself from the harsh elements in a snowy environment.

Pile up snow to about 7 or 8 feet tall and hollow out the inside. If possible, include straight branches in the roof of your quinzhee for added strength.

Make sure your quinzhee maintains a rounded shape to prevent collapsing (especially when there is heavy snowfall).

- **Snow Cave:** If done correctly, a snow cave is a great shelter for cold weather climates. However, if done improperly, a snow cave may put you at serious risk.

Never build a snow cave from soft snow or powder. Find snow that is hard and ice-like, then dig a tunnel to a space that you can hollow out.

Igloo: Unlike a snow cave or a quinzhee, the igloo is primarily comprised of ice rather than snow. To build an igloo, you will need some sort of tool to break apart and create makeshift ice blocks.

To get started, check the density of the frozen blocks of snow or ice that you plan on using. Outline your igloo with a stick so that it maintains its shape as you build upwards.

Cut one layer of blocks at a time so that you can easily taper and shape them inward as you build upwards.

Tips for Building Survival Shelter in Snowy Conditions: The most important aspect of your shelter is its ability to block out the elements and keep you warm, but making sure your cold weather shelter has proper ventilation is important, as well. CO2 poisoning is a serious threat in any enclosed shelter.

Desert Shelters

Building a shelter in the desert requires a great deal of creativity and/or supplies. Whenever desert camping or hiking, it's best to come prepared with supplies because it can be one of the most difficult environments to survive in.

- **Ramada:** A Ramada is a simple structure which typically consists of a roof with no walls. The Ramada's primary purpose is to supply sun protection.

Tips for Building Survival Shelter in the Desert: Depending on the desert, you may be limited by your available resources. Look for any dry shrubbery that can be used to build any kind of primitive structure and provide shade. If you have a tarp, use the same strategies you would to build a shelter in the forest.

Packing a Survival Tent

The best way to create a survival shelter is to be prepared with the right materials.

The SEVENTY2 Survival bag includes a Mylar tent that reflects infrared heat, helping to retain warmth. Its waterproof characteristics keep you protected from moisture and precipitation.

In any survival situation the best thing to be is prepared. If you don't have an emergency survival bag for all of your backpacking, camping, and Cessna flights, it's time to get one.