

SLEEPING mats might seem fairly basic items that are functional but of little interest. However as a mat is your bed in the wilds it's worth careful consideration. And after many years of little change recently there have been big developments in mats in both comfort and weight. When I last reviewed mats in 2008 inflatable mats filled with synthetic insulation or down were new on the market and proving more comfortable than most open cell foam filled mats. Since then airbeds have made a return in a modern form that is lighter, tougher, smaller packing and warmer than traditional ones. Indeed airbeds are the lightest mats that are really comfortable. Closed cell foam mats can weigh less but do not provide much in the way of softness. Airbeds are still not as warm as other mats though, and on snow and frozen ground another mat is needed as well.

Which mat to choose depends on where and when you'll camp and the degree of comfort required. For car camping and base camps in the hills a big, thick, comfortable mat is fine as it won't be carried often if at all. For backpacking lighter, smaller mats are better and some can provide almost as much comfort. Any inflatable mat is liable to puncture if mistreated (carrying a repair kit is always wise). If you want a mat you can just throw down on the ground anywhere then closed cell foam is the only option if you don't want to risk a hard landing during the night. A closed cell foam mat combined with an airbed is a good combination in winter, providing comfort and insulation.

TEST NOTES: Weight is for the mat alone, without stuffsacks or repair kits. R-Value is a measure of thermal resistance. The higher the R-Value the better the insulation.



THERM-A-REST

Prolite Plus Short
£85

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: self-inflating foam
Materials: polyester shell, diagonal-cut foam inner
Dimensions: 119 x 51cm
Thickness: 3.8cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: R3.8
Weight: 490g
Likes: lightweight, compact, good insulation
Dislikes: nothing

This is the mat to choose if you want maximum insulation for the weight. As well as being lightweight it also rolls up small. The thick foam makes it comfortable too. I used this mat last winter for snow camping and it kept out the ground cold well. The design is good, with a textured base that grips slippery groundsheet and a diamond ripstop upper with a matt finish that your sleeping bag doesn't slide around on. The Prolite Plus is slightly tapered to save weight, but not so much that it's too narrow at the foot. As a mat for year round backpacking this can't be bettered. There is also a 183cm Regular version that weighs 680 grams and a Large that's 196cm long and 63cm wide. And if you don't need this much insulation the standard Prolite weighs just 230 grams in the very short 91cm XS size, 310 grams in the 119cm S size, 460 grams in the 183cm R size and 630 grams in the 196cm L size.

First Ascent
01629 580 484
www.firstascent.co.uk



SNUGPAK

Travelite Midi
£50

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: self-inflating foam
Materials: synthetic shell, cored foam inner
Dimensions: 122 x 51cm
Thickness: 2.5cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: not given
Weight: 402g
Likes: light, compact, non-slip base, price
Dislikes: nothing

Snugpak's Travelite Midi is a good ¾-length self-inflating mat that rolls up small and is suitable for three-season use backpacking. The weight and price are both quite low and it's good value for money. I found it comfortable though it's not that thick. On cold, wet ground with an air temperature of zero it insulated well. As the foam is cored it probably isn't suitable for snow camping without extra insulation. The base of the mat is a soft, suede-like fabric that grips really well even on silnylon. This material is also quite thick, which may add to the insulation. Usually you can see the holes in cored foam by holding it up to the light. With this mat I had to shine a bright torch through it to see the holes. The Travelite is shaped at the head and foot and has an offset push-pull valve that is efficient so it can be inflated and deflated quickly. Snugpak also makes a full-length version that weighs 548 grams.

Snugpak
01535 654479
www.snugpak.co.uk



ALPKIT

Airo 120
£35

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: self-inflating foam
Materials: ripstop nylon shell, cored foam inner
Dimensions: 120 x 51cm
Thickness: 2.5cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: R2.5 (estimate)
Weight: 399g
Likes: light, compact, low cost
Dislikes: slightly slippery base

Alpkit's new Airo 120 is a great mat for three-season backpacking. The weight is low for a self-inflating mat and it packs pretty small too. The very low cost makes the mat good value for money. To keep the weight down the foam has large diamond-shaped holes in it except round the edges where the foam is solid. As it only arrived in May I haven't been able to test this mat in really cold conditions but I wouldn't expect it to be adequate for snow camping. (Alpkit's R-Value rating is only an estimate as the mat is so new they haven't completed testing this.) The valve is efficient and the mat can be inflated and deflated quickly. Comfort is fine. My only minor criticism is that the base slides around a bit on silnylon groundsheet. The Airo is slightly tapered with rounded ends. There is a longer version, the Airo 180, which weighs 582 grams and costs £40.

Alpkit
0115 932 5050
www.alpkit.com



ALPKIT

Base 120
£25

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: self-inflating foam
Materials: ripstop polyester shell, foam inner
Dimensions: 120 x 51cm
Thickness: 2.5cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: R4 (estimate)
Weight: 541g
Likes: very low cost, good insulation for the weight
Dislikes: nothing at this price

At the amazingly low price of £25 this self-inflating mat costs less than some closed cell foam pads. It's reasonably light too and suitable for year-round backpacking as it's filled with solid foam and so should insulate well on frozen ground and snow. As it only arrived in mid-May I haven't been able to test it in winter conditions but I have found comparable mats warm in sub-zero temperatures. Alpkit's R-Value of 4 also suggests it'll be warm in winter though this is only an estimate as the mat is so new Alpkit hasn't finished testing this. In design the Base 120 is a conventional rectangular self-inflating mat. It inflates and deflates quickly and is quite compact when packed. Comfort is good. The polyester shell fabric is a little slippery on silnylon groundsheets but this is a very minor complaint. If the length isn't enough there is the full-length Base 180 which weighs 870 grams and costs £30.

Alpkit
0115 932 5050
www.alpkit.com



THERM-A-REST

NeoAir Regular
£110

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: airbed
Materials: nylon with reflective inner coating
Dimensions: 183 x 51cm
Thickness: 6.3cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: R2.5
Weight: 390g
Likes: lightweight, very compact, very comfortable
Dislikes: expensive

Launched two years ago, the NeoAir brought back the airbed as a viable choice for backpacking, providing amazing comfort at low weight and a tiny packed size. To reduce heat loss to the ground, the big problem with traditional airbeds, the NeoAir is packed with airtight cells to stop the air inside moving and also has a reflective internal barrier to reflect heat back to your body. While it's not designed for snow camping I have been warm on it on cold, wet ground at -2°C. It's certainly as warm as a standard Prolite though not as warm as a Prolite Plus. As there's no foam inside, if you put pressure on a specific spot, with your elbow say, it will touch the ground. Otherwise though the thickness makes the NeoAir a pleasure to sleep on. With no foam to suck in the air the NeoAir has to be blown up, which takes around a minute. The NeoAir comes in four lengths. The cost is high but then this is an innovative product.

First Ascent
01629 580 484
www.firstascent.co.uk



PACIFIC OUTDOOR EQUIPMENT

Ether Elite 6 Regular £66

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: airbed with insulation
Materials: ripstop nylon shell, synthetic insulation under torso
Dimensions: 183 x 51cm
Thickness: 6cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: R2-4, 3 season
Weight: 393g
Likes: light weight, very compact
Dislikes: base slightly slippery

The Ether Elite is a tapered airbed with synthetic insulation in the central area, which is why it has a variable R-Value. I found it insulated well on cold, wet ground at +2°C but I expect on snow extra insulation would be needed under the legs. The mat is thick and comfort excellent. The outer tubes are wider than the others, which helps keep you centred on the mat. I also found the longitudinal tubes made it feel less bouncy than mats with lateral tubes. The weight is low as is the cost when compared to the NeoAir. Indeed, I think this is the most comfortable mat available at this weight and price. The ripstop shell fabric feels quite tough. It's quite smooth though and I found it slid around a little on a silnylon groundsheet. The tapered shape was fine for me but large people might prefer a more rectangular mat.

Burton McCall
0116 234 4646
www.pacoutdoor.com



EXPED

Synmat Basic 7.5
£60

★★★★★

TECHNICAL SPEC

Type: airbed with synthetic insulation
Materials: synthetic shell with 150 g/sq.m microfibre insulation
Dimensions: 182 x 48cm
Thickness: 7.5cm
R-Value/Temp. rating: R4/-11°C
Weight: 650g
Likes: very comfortable, good insulation, compact
Dislikes: slightly hard to inflate

By laminating synthetic insulation to the upper and lower sides Exped has produced an airbed that is warm enough for winter camping while still being very comfortable and compact when packed – though not as small as airbeds with no insulation. The weight is high compared with the NeoAir and Ether Elite airbeds too but they are only suitable for three-season use. The Synmat Basic has a textured matt base that grips well on slippery groundsheets. Inside the mat there are I-beam baffles that help keep it stable and prevent cold spots. There are separate valves for inflation and deflation. These lie flat against the mat and have large openings, which does make blowing the mat up a little awkward, though as the valves are one-way you can pause without letting air out. The mat can be deflated very quickly. I wouldn't choose the Synmat for summer backpacking but for winter and for base camp use it's excellent.

Lyon Equipment
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www.exped.com