



tipis



Looking up through the smoke flaps that allow the smoke from the fire to escape.

what are they?

Tipis are the traditional Native American nomadic dwellings. Originally made from buffalo hide, they were quick and easy to pitch/take down and easily transportable, allowing the tribe to follow their main source of food and skins – the buffalo.

A tipi consists of between 11 and 20 poles, depending on size, tied at the top to form the famous conical shape – but with an oval rather than circular base. It has an outer cover, now mainly canvas, which covers the outside of the frame, but with a gap of a few cm at the bottom. On the inside is a canvas liner that goes from the ground to about 2m up the inside walls. The gap allows an upward airflow, which means there can be an open fire in the middle of the tipi, and the smoke is carried out of the smoke flaps at the top. There are many different kinds of tipi, all with minor variations according to tribe. Most are 3-pole tipis (Sioux, Cheyenne); this refers to the no. of poles initially used to get the ground plan right, then more poles are added later. There are also 4-pole tipis (Blackfoot, Crow). Other variations are primarily to do with the smoke flaps – being longer/shorter or narrower/wider. The most commonly-produced tipi today is the Sioux, but often with the modification of an extended smoke flap similar to that of the Cheyenne.

A tipi is not the same as a wigwam by the way – a wigwam is more like a bender.

what are the benefits?

- cheap form of shelter if you're tough enough (heating and cooking via an open fire, collecting wood, creepy crawlies, rain and mud). A good-quality, well-looked-after tipi could easily be in constant use for 10 years before the canvas

needs to be replaced (and maybe some of the poles). As you're looking at £1500-2500 for a basic 5½m tipi (average size), that's very cheap accommodation – even cheaper if you make your own.

- can be part of a very simple, back-to-nature lifestyle, with a very small eco-footprint.
- natural, biodegradable materials.
- mobility: tipis are easily transportable and can be put up or taken down in less than an hour.
- easily repairable.
- no mortgage.

what can I do?

Only the hard-core will attempt to live in a tipi full-time, and if so, the canvas has to be good quality and treated to be waterproof; plus the canvas could need re-proofing every few years. Most people will choose to live in them temporarily, and probably in the summer, or use them for holidays. You can buy a tipi or you can have a go at -

Building your own

You can cut your poles, from softwood such as spruce. The poles taper – from c. 10cm at the bottom, to almost nothing at the top. The most common tipi size is 5½m – the distance from front to back at ground level, and also roughly the height the canvas reaches from the ground. The poles for a 5½m tipi will be 7-8m though – 14-17 of them. You will have to take the bark off with a draw-knife, otherwise any water that touches the poles will drip into the tipi; plus it looks nicer.



The famous tipi (not a wigwam): note the pegs around the bottom, the smoke flaps at the top and the door with lacing pins on the right.

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You can also cut / stitch the canvas. The book *the Indian Tipi* explains how to make different types of tipi, inc. patterns for cutting canvas. Or you could make your own poles and buy the canvas.

Other considerations

Rain hat: stops rain from entering the tipi. It consists of a large square of canvas with a pocket in one corner, and loops to attach ropes to. It is fixed to the rain hat pole in one corner, and pegged down on the other 3. You have to cut the poles down so that they are only sticking out c. 50cm over the top of the canvas; it takes away some of the beauty, but it stops you getting wet.

Smoke flaps: flaps of canvas at the top of the tipi; they can open and close, and with a rain hat, you can have the smoke flaps wide open to let the smoke out, without allowing rain in.

Door: a piece of canvas held on by lacing pins.

Floor: some people prefer the natural grass/earth, or you can use wooden decking, ground sheets, sheepskins or other skins (be careful of the fire)

Lining: mentioned in 'what are they?' above – essential for insulation, and to create an updraught to take away the smoke from the fire.

Ropes & pegs: the tipi is pegged down all the way round, and the rope is for tying the poles together at the top, and can be used in conjunction with poles for opening and closing the smoke flaps.

Ozan: partial internal ceiling, over the back part of the tipi, to stop any rain falling on the sleeping area; with a good rain hat, this is unnecessary.

Appliances: if you want them, you'll need an extension cable from the mains, or if you're out in



Interior of a tipi: bedding / seating around the outside, with the lining canvas behind, and the fire in the middle. The fire in this case is in a brazier, but it could also be on the ground.

the wilds, a diesel generator (noisy, polluting) or pv panels/wind turbine (better).

Toilet: compost loo or tree bog?

Planning permission: you do need planning permission for a tipi; talk to your local planning officer or don't get caught. Of course tipis are temporary dwellings - but they are tall, and visual impact is high, and likely to annoy neighbours. However, the kind of person wanting to live in a tipi is unlikely to want to do it in an urban area. If it's on your land or you have the permission of the owner, it's fine for 28 days in any one year, and if you manage to live in a tipi for 10 years, and apply for permission retrospectively, you're likely to get it. As you won't be receiving mail though, you'd have to prove it via aerial photographs or Google Earth, maybe?

Finally, as mentioned before, tipi living is tough – think washing yourself and your clothes – stream? heating water over the fire? launderette? But hey, life is short – and what an incredible thing to do.

resources

- lowimpact.org/tipis for more info, courses, tipis, links & books, including:
- Reginald & Gladys Laubin, *the Indian Tipi*
- Patrick Whitefield, *Tipi living*
- Adolf Hungrywolf, *the Tipi* – historical photographs and how to build your own
- tipis.org – history, photographs, instructions, plus list of tipi makers / suppliers worldwide



It's possible to take holidays in tipis at venues around the UK.

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