

WILD CAMPING

With spongy tussock and fantastic views, Mitre in the Taranui Ranges is a perfect bivvy location

THEY'RE NOT PERFECT AND OFTEN A TENT IS SUPERIOR BUT SLEEPING IN YOUR OWN WARM COCOON DIRECTLY BENEATH THE STARS HAS ITS ATTRACTIONS.

# THE BEAUTIFUL BIVVY

BY PETER LAURENSEN

I was on the highest point of the Tararua Range – 1571m Mitre / Pukeamoamo. The wind had eased and swirling clouds bathed in dramatic evening light silently cleared. There was spongy tussock to hunker down on and the 360-degree view was outstanding.

Mitre actually sits off to the east of the main range, so there are views north, across Table Ridge to Arete and Bannister; and south along the main range to the Three Kings, Broken Axe Pinnacles and McGregor. At night, the lights of Masterton twinkle, though they pale when compared to the Milky Way directly overhead.

Both dusk and dawn are beautiful. If conditions are right, a dawn light show unfolds as one after another peak or ridge-top catches the light.

I was alone with all this. Time and space for reflection, contemplation and wonder.

It was a beautiful bivvy.

'Bivvy' is an abbreviation of the word bivouac – an improvised campsite or temporary shelter.

In New Zealand, some permanent shelters are also called bivvies, or bivs. They are essentially small huts sleeping two people and are found in remote and high places. Amongst the most memorable that I've visited include Esquilant Biv (2260m) beneath Mt Earnslaw, Sefton Biv (1660m) beneath the Footstool, Brass Monkey Biv (1360m) on the Lewis Pass tops and Sparrowhawk Biv (1360m) on the Ruahine Range.

I've had to improvise on a few occasions. On one trip, a mate and I ended up benighted at the head of Shinn River in the Inland Kaikōura Range in August. There was a full moon, it was completely calm, but very cold. We used pack liners and packs for a semblance of shelter. I did the same in the corner of Pouakai Hut another time when all the bunks were taken. It's not the most comfortable way to sleep.

But when I refer to 'bivvy', it involves a bivvy bag – a water-resistant sleeping bag-shaped shelter. My own bright orange Vaude bivvy bag is water-resistant, mummy-shaped, 2.1m long by 75cm wide, with a 90cm zip and Velcro system, which allows me and my sleeping bag to get inside and shut out the elements; cold, wind, moisture or sandflies. It packs away into a 35cm long by 15cm wide drawstring bag which can be further squashed. It weighs about 350g. I've had mine for about a decade. Newer models have design enhancements, like mini frames at the head end that keep the fabric off your face when all zipped up, and mesh face screens which allow easier breathing, reduce condensation and you can read a book while keeping sandflies out.

There are numerous brands available, ranging in price from around \$250 to 'sky's the limit'. Of course, there is the bargain basement option of using a pack liner – better than nothing to keep the dew and mud off your sleeping bag. Whichever is chosen will depend on your budget and the various features required.



Peter Laurenson in his bivvy bag on Mitre in Fiordland; OPPOSITE: A 1500m bivvy and campsite at Gillespie Pass, Mt Aspiring National Park

## PERHAPS I'M MAKING THIS BIVVYING CAPER SOUND TOO IDYLIC – AND IT IS WHEN THE CONDITIONS ARE GOOD.

### BIVVY BENEFITS

But why would you not get a decent bivvy bag and what are the benefits of bivvy? Well, a bivvy bag is lighter than a tent. In fact, some of the flashiest bivvy bags are effectively mini tents. But, they weigh less than 900g and take up less space in your pack.

My bivvy bag is kept at the bottom of my pack and gives me peace of mind. It's a Plan B if I don't quite make it to the intended hut before nightfall. I remember being caught in heavy cloud just north of Kahiwiroa (1320m) on the Tararua Range. Rather than risk making a wrong turn descending to Anderson Memorial Hut, I laid my bivvy bag on top of the springy tussock and slept there.

Bivvy bags also offer more flexibility when picking a sleeping spot. I've been on several trips where my companions have anguished about where best to park their tent while I've quickly found a spot suited to one body. Setting up my bivvy bag is easy when compared to a tent: simply roll it out and put the sleeping bag inside.

Then there's the night sky. When unzipped to expose your face, a bivvy bag offers an unimpeded view from the comfort of your sleeping bag. I've gazed at the Milky Way from the top of many mountains and ridges all over the country. You never get tired of this. If you're in a tent or hut, how often do you overcome pit-suction to go outside into the cold to take a look?

### DOWNSIDERS

Perhaps I'm making this bivvy caper sound too idyllic – and it is when the conditions are good. Add extreme cold or bad weather and I'd only recommend bivvy as a last resort, which means you can't pitch a tent, reach a hut or find shelter under a huge rock or the forest.

On one trip, I bivvied behind a large boulder in a saddle between Mt Tongariro and North Crater. It was August, a spectacularly clear night and the coldest bivvy I'd ever done. My bag doesn't have a face screen to allow easy breathing while still keeping out the breeze and cold. So when I fully zipped up, enclosing my head and face, I experienced a form of claustrophobia. While I wasn't fearful, I hyperventilated. Condensation inside the bag soon became a discomfort. The only way to stop these afflictions is to unzip. The next morning when I tried to pick up the foam mattress I'd laid my bivvy bag on, it was frozen to the snow. That trusty mat had survived kea attacks on Bevan Col, but was now torn up pieces of foam.

Unlike a tent that has a fly and vestibule, a bivvy bag offers nowhere to shelter your pack, boots and other gear from the elements.

It isn't just moisture or the cold that you need to keep at bay either. Bivvy on the saddle just west of Footstool on the route up Mitre Peak, above Milford Sound one January, was a torment due to the sandflies. The same thing happened at the base of Gillespie Pass in Otago. I'd learnt from the Mitre Peak experience to bring a fine silk sleeping bag liner, which I used

to cover my face without restricting my breathing. Modern bivvy bag models have solved this problem by introducing mini-frames and mesh face screens.

### LOCATION SUITABILITY

The ideal situation to use a bivvy bag is during good weather and when reducing pack weight is important, such as on multi-day camping trips. If you invest in a more sophisticated model you'll be able to use it comfortably beside tarns and rivers where sandflies gather; and be able to stay warmer and drier in less settled conditions.

As for rain, I've never put my Vaude to the test in really wet conditions. Even after a night with heavy dew, my sleeping bag starts to take in moisture. Newer, more sophisticated models claim to be fully waterproof and breathable. Many weigh less than 500g.

Bivvy bags are made from durable, hard-wearing materials but, as with pitching tents, care should be taken to avoid sharp stones, sticks or Spaniard grass that could puncture the bag and compromise its water resistance and your sleeping comfort. Using a sleeping mattress that fits inside or outside the bag can help prevent punctures by placing a cushioning layer between sharp objects and the bonier bits of you.

Well then, to bivvy or not to bivvy? For me, when the weather forecast is good and keeping pack weight down is important, bivvy is a great option, especially on the tops on a clear night when I can peek at a few billion stars. 🌌



## 4 GREAT BIVVY SPOTS

Peter Laurenson picks his four best bivvy sleeps (to date). All offer flat ground and stunning panoramic views for enjoying sunsets and sunrises.

### 1

#### **SOUTH OF TE ATUAOPARAPARA, Ruahine Forest Park**

"On one of the highest sections of the Ruahine Ranges, epic views of the Central Plateau volcanoes and there's tarn water close by."

### 2

#### **MITRE / PUKEAMOAMO, Tararua Ranges**

"The highest spot in the Tararua Ranges. There's spongy tussock to sleep on and it offers relatively easy access."

### 3

#### **BALL PASS, Aoraki / Mt Cook National Park**

"An iconic route and location facing Aoraki's Caroline Face. There are small rock pools or snow melt for water."

### 4

#### **GILLESPIE PASS, Mt Aspiring NP**

"A classic route through magnificent country. Snow melt for water."