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hiking & wild camping in the UK

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Wednesday, 27 April 2011

Review - Terra Nova Solar Competition 1

17:16 | Posted by terrybnd | 



Fortress of Solitude

"All in all, it's a backpackers friend I've grown to love immensely and is a serious contender in replacing my Terra Nova Laser Competition - sure it weighs a little more, and the porch ain't so luxurious. But it's strong and easy and quick to pitch. My bivvy/tarp combo weighs more - and this tent gives you comfortable shelter along with some great wide views in fine weather when the doors are tied back."

The Terra Nova Solar Competition 1 tent - a shelter I've been very reluctant to hand back after testing.

Initially, once pitched in my garden I was a little indifferent to it. I thought the porch was an awkward shape and too small, the flysheet appeared to sit well above the ground in places and the set up seemed a little awkward with it being an inner pitch first tent.

There are significant areas of mesh panels for condensation control, but bearing in mind this is a 3-4 season shelter I thought they may contribute to some chilly nights out on the hills.

So, how did we get on?



Doing it in the woods

If there was ever a perfect example of never judging a book by it's cover for putting a product to the test out in the field - this was it.

All concerns were fortunately unfounded - by and large - though some others cropped up that I didn't anticipate originally.

What you have here is a very considerable alternative to the Terra Nova Laser Competition. It doesn't weigh much more and is a great deal stronger (and quieter) in inclement weather. The tent all in comes in at 1010g's - on my scales. That's the tent itself, poles and titanium footpocket pegs. Impressive for a semi-geodesic tent, no?

Granted, the weight was a little more in the end, because I dispensed with most of the fitty sticks as they're really only suitable for firm ground. But there is not a lot of up in the hills. On soft or real hard soils the pegs are really to be useless.

All said and done, I got rid of the pole bag (which has an in-built pocket for the pegs) and tent stuff sack for most trips - preferring to store the tent loose in my rucksack and the poles and pegs elsewhere in pockets and so on.

Light as a feather and easy to put away and forget about.

When it comes to pitching the shelter, it's quick and easy enough compared to most tents. You lay out the inner, ring out your poles, place the ends in the brass eyelets and attach the inner via some small plastic hooks. Because the tent is 'freestanding' you can then easily position your home for the night wherever you please.

Following this of course, you then attach the flysheet by means of hooking the corner end eyelets over and under the DAC Featherlite poles. Job done.

However, there are velcro attachments on the rear and front of the tent - specifically where the guy ropes are fixed. No bad thing - but it can be a pain to stick them in place as you awkwardly maneuver yourself around and under the fly - all the while the poles resisting your every pressure to position them correctly.



Naked tent found pitched in Lattkil Dale



Porch ain't so small after all



Bed for the night on MOD Land - pitch location? Classified

But as with all things, practice makes perfect - or at the very least, you just get used to such quibbles - part and parcel of various tent designs. For example, with practice you can get the flysheet attached pretty quickly if it's raining - and thus not get the inner soaked wet through.

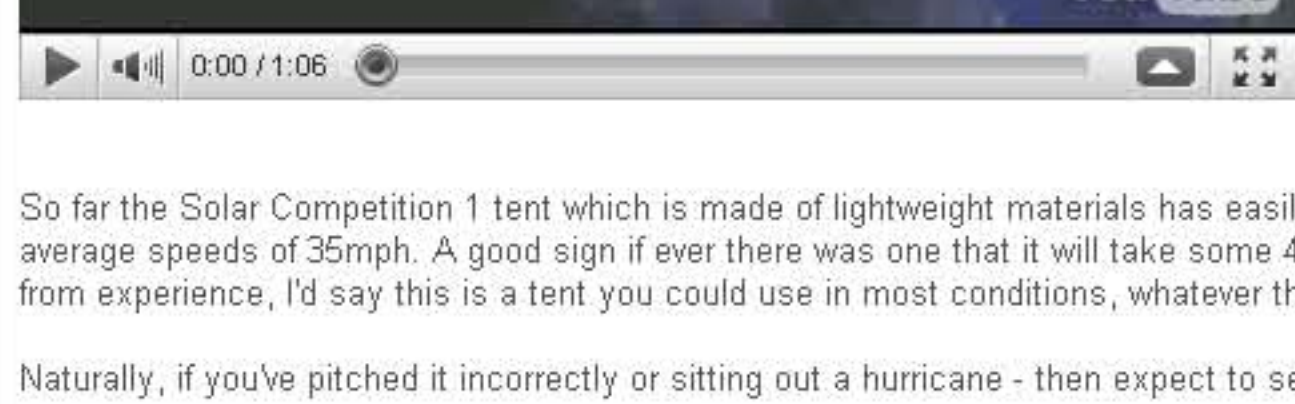
Next you peg out the guys (if needed - the tent is strong enough on it's own as it happens) and areas of the fly to air flow channels - and you're finished.

Now, here comes the nitty gritty.....

Does this tent stand up to storms? Yes, it does. Surprisingly well, in fact. I've recorded 45mph gusts (no more than that, I'll admit) which in most scenarios will affect any tent. This shelter, however, like most semi-geodesic tents (more doing than a gille jiggy when it comes).

Now, when it comes to wind speeds - folk will often say "Oooo it was 70mph up on them tops today" when in reality it was about 35mph. Would you still be standing if hit by a car at 70mph? I don't think so. Folk tend to have no idea what wind speeds are. They quote the maximum gusts they saw on the weather forecast - which is only that. A forecast. Even at 35mph it will impede your walking in exposed places - and that will mean a tent gets a good throttling.

Using gadgets like the [Kestrel 3000](#) and sharing it's information with fellow hikers - they are always surprised at how low the wind speed is when compared to how they feel standing about in it. Well, most people anyway....



So far the Solar Competition 1 tent which is made of lightweight materials has easily withstood 45mph gusts along with average speeds of 35mph. A good sign if ever there was one that it will take most conditions, whatever the weather and you'll be fine.

Naturally, if you've pitched it incorrectly or sitting out a hurricane - then expect to see some tears or bent tent poles.



Buckle up! It's annoying!

And so to the mesh paneling - well, the inner door is all mesh and you get more of that above the head end of the tent and some to the rear. To be honest, when I began testing this tent in the late dreags of winter - I hardly noticed a chill. But I reckon you would in the height of winter - make no doubt.

What doesn't help is how high the flysheet sits above the ground. Sure, the generous bathtub inner compensates for sprindrift and horizontal rain - but when there's a breeze blowing as described above? Aye - you'll feel something come through around the porch area at the very least - which ironically is where the flysheet sits highest!

Consequently, this may cause you potential problems for cooking within the shelter in inclement weather. The porch depth is not much more than a size 11 boot. But there is more than enough room within the inner tent and around it at the head end for gear etc.

But because the flysheet is at a steep angle from the ground up and wind can blow under a bit - with such a small porch, cooking isn't necessarily going to be safe. Flames may blow back at you or even hit the tent.

However, I use a [Caldera Cone cooking system](#) - and have not experienced any problems in that respect. Far from it. But I know you'd have to be mindful of all this with a popular gas stove like the [MSR Pocket Rocket](#), for example. The flames would sit higher off the ground and closer to the fly.

There is an element of flexibility with the tent door and fly - whereby you can extend it out a little to create a bit more room in the porch - but then the fly sits real high off the ground. And if you do it up all right, then you're left with little space to fling even the smallest kitten!

I'm emphasizing the sense of space in this tent because I've no doubt some folk would be if hoping to save weight along with all their heavy gear and be disappointed - but it has to be said, if you're gonna buy this tent, you're likely to be carrying lightweight gear anyway. And kind of know what to expect -



Put a peg in it, will ya?

again, it's those compromises....



"Let off some steam, Bennett"

Saying all that, I thought there was plenty of room for me, a 45 litre pack and all my camera gear. Something that surprised even me! I didn't expect it to be so.

Sat up in the tent upon a 6cm mattress, my head didn't touch the top of the inner tent either (I'm 5'11") which I thought was odd as the inner is stated as 90cm - not complaining of course.

So, given my first impressions of the tent - all transpired rather well. Where I had concerns they just never really materialised. The opposite in fact occurred. I was pleased to be proven wrong and consequently grew to really like the tent.

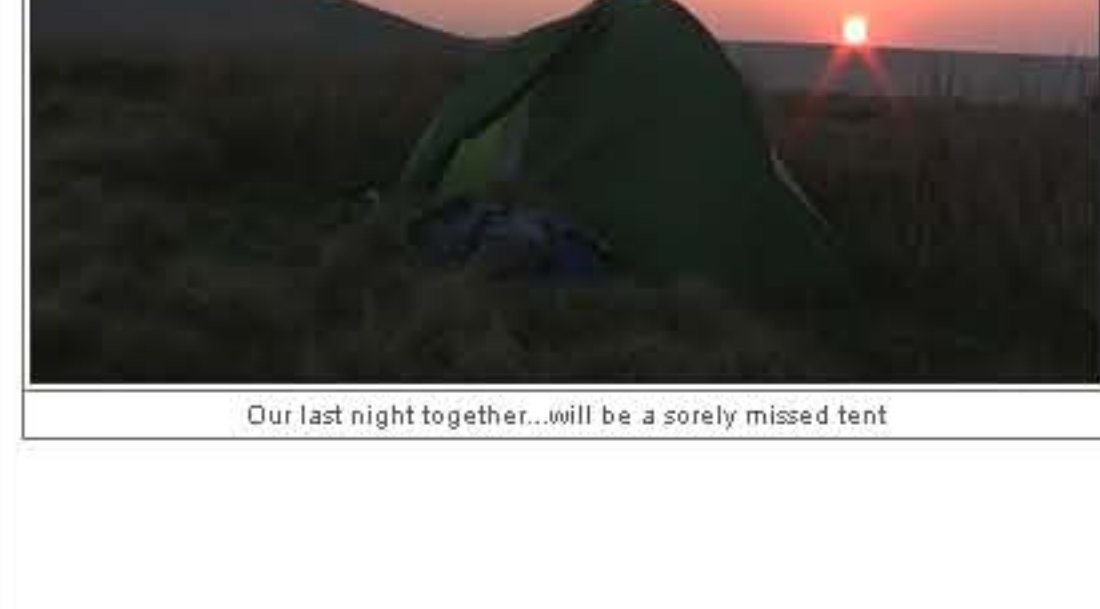
One gripe I do have though, is with the height and position of the outer door. Granted, it opens high and wide giving the user a great wide view out onto the landscape around - but if you take advantage of the 2 way zip and make a vent at the top, rain can sprinkle straight down upon you inside. The very top of the door overlooks you, you see. Also, the buckle clip to tighten the door shut can be fiddly to use - be it clipping together or otherwise. Could be a problem in cold weather - I'll leave that one with you.

Oh! And one other minor gripe - situated in the porch is some groundsheet fabric protruding out as part of extending the porch area and acting as an anchor for one of the tent poles. There's no need for this. It gets in the way as it raises itself from the ground - causing bits of gear to slide about and disappear underneath.

All Terra Nova needs do is replace this with an integrated strap with brass eyelet on the end for the tent pole.

The overall conclusion?

- ✓ Fantastic low weight, pack size and strength for a solo semi-geodesic tent - ideal for adventure racers and lightweight enthusiasts.
- ✓ Should stand up to all but the very worst weather conditions (shedding snow more than carrying the load)
- ✓ Relatively quick and easy to pitch
- ✓ The inner mesh door could do with some nylon fabric around 10 inches high along the bottom to repel chilly breezes in the winter
- ✓ A flying V to the rear flysheet fabric would help with air flow through the tent. Currently it's regular cut sits too close to the inner tent mesh panel.
- ✓ Porch is bigger in use than you'd think after initial practice pitching in your garden
- ✓ Generous bathtub inner groundsheet.
- ✓ Peculiarly you only get the guylines for holding out the sides of the flysheet and rear. Not the two guy points found on the front head of the tent. No drama - just a bit odd.



Our last night together...will be a sorely missed tent

All in all, it's a backpackers friend I've grown to love immensely and is a serious contender in replacing my Terra Nova Laser Competition - sure it weighs a little more, and the porch ain't so luxurious. But it's strong and easy and quick to pitch. My bivvy/tarp combo weighs more - and this tent gives you some great wide views in fine weather with the doors tied back.

I love it - and am really quite sad to see it go back to Terra Nova towers....

17 comments:

- [Helen Fisher](#) said...
Terry, I'm so glad you've posted this after seeing you use it so much recently. This is a good meaty review, lots of food for thought! I am torn between a Laser Comp and this now. I do like Geodesic designs for their stability and snow shedding ability (depending on design). Damn! Even more kit I want to try out now lol!
[27 April 2011 17:36](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
Thanks and your welcome. Personally, I love the Laser Comp with a passion. But this tent on many levels has made me almost forget about it in recent weeks. It's that good.
I'm surprised not more folk have gone on about it. Sure it has it's quirks - all tents do. But it's mostly positives with this shelter. To be frank, I wasn't initially very impressed.
But after weeks and weeks of heavy use - bloody love it, now! LOL
[27 April 2011 17:42](#)
- [markswalknblog](#) said...
Terry, thanks for a well presented review. I think this ticks most boxes for a 3 season tent. I am much more positive about the geodesic design rather than the single hoop tent. I love my Sou'wester but it is a bit overkill in the summer, so maybe this would be a good choice given the weight for spring/summer.
Food for thought!
[27 April 2011 22:24](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
Your welcome Mark. It's a bloody good tent overall. I honestly meant it all. I had my doubts (won't say some of the rude words I privately said to myself) but it's come out trumps.
Knowing what I know now - I'd buy this over a Laser Comp, to be honest. Like you said - it ticks lots of boxes.
[27 April 2011 22:36](#)
- [Thomas W. Gauperaa](#) said...
Nice review! I would definitely consider the Solar if I didn't already own an Akto and TT Moment. My friend Glenn owns the Laser Comp and I'm impressed with it. Terra Nova stuff seems to be high quality.
[27 April 2011 23:10](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
Hi Thomas and thanks. This tent is definitely one for serious consideration. It's not perfect by any means - but no tent is :) There's always compromises. I've used many shelters over the years and this is one of my faves already.
I do like the Akto, too. Great pedigree and all round tent. Porch is bigger though than in the Solar Comp.
But like I said, with my 45 litre pack, gear and video camera equipment I got by perfectly fine. So, adventure racers and lightweight enthusiasts will be right at home in this shelter.
I know for certain that Terra Nova value feedback on all their products - they are indeed a fine company. So, all my my good and bad points I have with this shelter have been duly noted by them. Thanks for the comment, and nice blog you have by the way!
[28 April 2011 08:01](#)
- [Paul aka Themuss](#) said...
Terry my next purchase is a wind machine for the cash is yours the best for accuracy as I have read reviews and seem are not so accurate. I think nobody would be standing after a ton of metal or more hit you at 70mph, as for winds I follow the forecasts which I know are maximum wind speeds and my kidsty pike wildcamp was forecast 60mph the day before I went it was forecast max gust of 70mph I would have said they were 80mph but as you say it always seems alot less than that of the forecast, yet I would have loved to see by your kestrel what it would have recorded as it never let up average wind speed was enough to fatten my 3 season waning to our camp spot and when it gusted, well lets just say the whole tent went flat to the floor, when outside seeking to our camp site we were actually getting blown up the hill dave being a bigger bloke than me and with 23kgs on his back still found it hard to actually stand up still. I think the 60mph max gusts were actually wrong for this day would have loved to have a kestrel or similar to find out what it was
[29 April 2011 00:44](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
Hi Paul
I know what you mean, mate. Personally, from that camp you're on about - sounds like winds were average 50mph and gusts to 70mph. I've only once encountered winds stronger than that (in the Lakes) and it required me to crawl at times. Trees were ripping up, debris was flying around in the air - bloody awful.
At least you lived to tell the tale, eh? :) LOL
You can find various incarnations of the Beaufort Scale online with detailed descriptions of what to observe at certain wind speeds. They can be handy - some are very detailed. Here's another metaphor for you - dive along in a car at 70mph, wind the window down and stick your head out :) LOL
Regarding your camp, mate - best place for you was to stay in ya tent. Safer in there than packing up in the head and heading out into the storm eh?
[29 April 2011 08:22](#)
- [Paul aka Themuss](#) said...
Terry when I first started wild camping, I remember a bit of advice you gave me about being in strong winds and bad weather, something like if it real bad out there and it takes ya early hours best place for ya is to sit it out in ya tent even if it collapses around you least you will be warm and dry, I have kept to that even sometimes when I think god I can't take any more tent in the face lol, but as you say at least I was warm and dry :)
Yea blows ya back when you stick your head out lol, same as when riding a motorbike especially a Suzuki Bandit no fairings when you get up to 100mph its telling on your head if you try and sit up lol
[29 April 2011 09:16](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
@Paul LOL Well, I still stand by that advice mate. Common sense.
[29 April 2011 09:47](#)
- [Davies Wild Camping](#) said...
Nice review mate, laughing at you and Paul, nowt like an argument about wind me and my lass have done that many times under covers.
I will stick with my trusted akto :)
[29 April 2011 14:35](#)
- [Mac E](#) said...
Good review Terry, it didn't strike me as a great design when it first came out but then stuff that looked good didn't work for me so you never know.
Agree with you on the windspeed thing, I saw 20-25mph on a windspeed meter and it was almost impossible to walk against and waterfalls were going up rather than down, I think people are prone to over estimate.
[29 April 2011 19:50](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
Thanks MacE - Agree on both counts, most definitely.
[1 May 2011 14:27](#)
- [Martin Eye](#) said...
I think I don't agree. On wind speed. Holding a small area up to measure wind might seem accurate but is it? I use to work on building sites. Tower cranes had to stop working at 45mph. Oddly we still laid bricks and walked across the site. At half that speed we did not notice it was hard to walk. I would say some over estimate yet the met office don't.
In January I was wild camping out in very bad weather and James Boulter said the worse he has been out in wild camping. Tents took the wind. Forecast on the tops was up to gusts of 90mph on the tops. We stayed down and walked out. So in the valley was it 25mph? I doubt it. Much more. We got blown around and a severe weather alert was put out for the fells.
Nice review on the tent. Read a good review on it way back but it had no hill time. Kit needs to test for days on the hills for a review. First look posts are good to read but a review needs miles on the clock to tell us the story of how good it is.
[1 May 2011 19:04](#)
- [GeoffC](#) said...
Seems to me like the high-cut flysheet is another measure to save a tiny amount of weight at the expense of practicality - a UK tent should have a low-cut fly. Even low-cut ones can suffer an ingress of sprindrift (I know because we found our Voyager porch literally full to the top a few years back).
The flame problem in the narrow porch is a bit worrying, I wouldn't like my LaserComp porch any narrower with a stove going.
[2 May 2011 19:52](#)
- [Andy B.](#) said...
Terrific review, Terry. I know how much you rate the LaserComp so it means a lot to read your opinion. The Solar Elite would also be an interesting one to watch. Sizes seem the same as for the standard Solar so the groundsheet and fly are likely to be much lighter (and less waterproof). But the weight is Laser Photon territory. Tempting. Mmm.
The thing which is bugging me is the door. That mesh is likely to cause some grief on a windy night. Can't understand why they didn't do as you say and have a 10' panel. Maybe the next version...
[2 May 2011 20:52](#)
- [terrybnd](#) said...
@GeoffC - I got by fine cooking in the porch, but as mentioned - with a Caldera Cone. With a gas stove like a pocket rocket? Bad idea. Low level stove like a Whisperlite, that would be OK.
@AndyB - Thanks, you're very kind. No need. I agree about the 'burns' and 'ahhs'. All feedback (including comments on here) are duly noted by the design team at Terra Nova towers.
[2 May 2011 21:21](#)

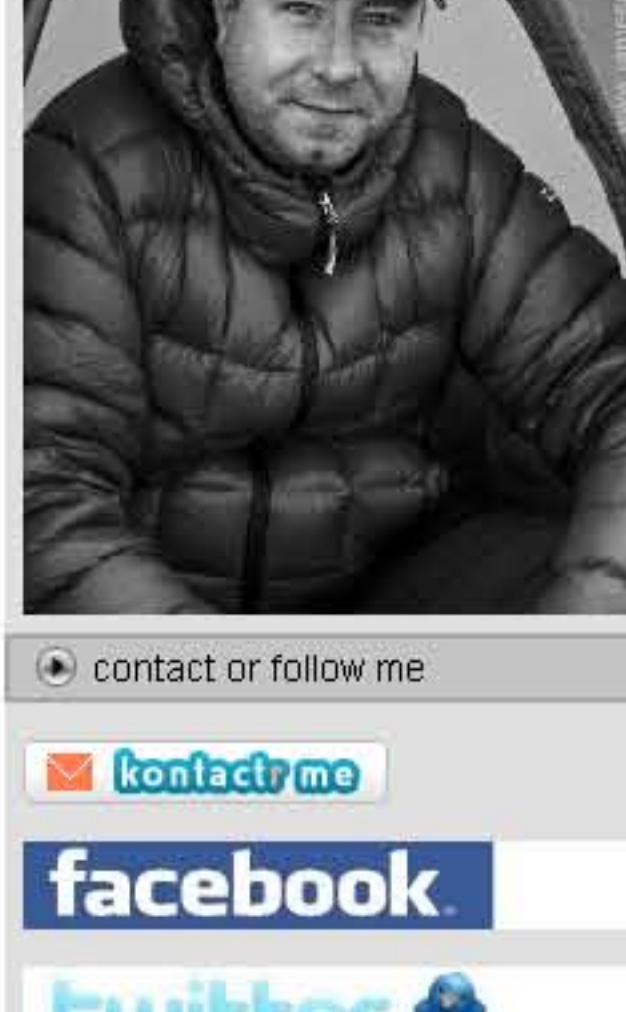
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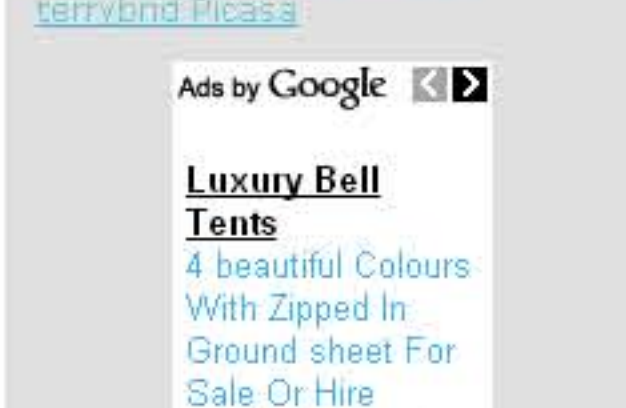
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