**Morning Campers: Advice from a full-time tent dweller!**

**30/03/2020 17:32**

Flashback to a Friday night in November of last year and you’ll find me and Joe sat in an empty car park in Scotland, arguing about whether it’d be better to go travelling in a van or in a tent. After much debate, we (I) decided that a tent was the best option, as it provided more flexibility, space and leftover budget.

So, we ended up spending 500 of our saved-up pennies on this four-berth tent, which is more professionally known as the ‘Vango 400XL’:

The next four months was spent living and travelling around New Zealand together in our new, makeshift home. So, I’ve put together some advice for other would-be travellers wondering if the tent life is for them. Read on to learn more about the ups, the downs, and the things we never considered before embarking on our new life in a tent.

**It’s cold, wet, and there are bugs**

I think most people know this one. It’s not always cold or wet, either. Sometimes, it’s glorious sunshine and a stress-free day spent swimming in the sea. However, make sure you’re always ready for the worst of the wildlife (sandflies), or weather at any moment (see ‘Invest in a good mallet’ below for more details).

Pro Tip: Pet ducks help keep the local bug population down.

**You won’t be without basic amenities**

As much as I liked to think I was going to be galivanting off to some forgotten wilderness, like the ones we see in Instagram #vanlife posts… the reality is much different. You’re never more than a ten-minute drive from a dairy or a supermarket, and campgrounds (even wild ones) are incessantly busy in the summer. This is good news, though, as it means you’re never really at risk of running out of food, and as long as you’re flexible and can change your plans if your ideal camping spot is taken, you’ll be just fine.

**Invest in a good bed**

I cannot stress this enough, and it seems like a no brainer, but even I (who values sleep more than most things in life) thought we might get away with sleeping on roll mats. I found that I could only handle this for a few nights before my hips and back started to ache. So instead, we invested in a 14-inch thick foam mattress, 2 sets of duvets and 2 pillows. I have never once regretted any of these purchases.

**Invest in a good mallet**

…or just any mallet, actually. When we first started out, we naively thought that stamping our tent pegs into the ground with the end of our flip-flop would suffice.

Then this happened…

So, all I can say is, spend an extra $10 at your local hardware store and invest in a mallet to bash your tent pegs in properly. Also, keep an eye on the weather, which can change in an instant (it was blazing sunshine 10 minutes before this particular storm hit!).

**Most places charge for WiFi (or don’t have any at all!)**

This is great if you want to disconnect from the world for a while. However, if you’re planning on working during your trip, then I would recommend buying yourself some 4G. WiFi often comes with a cost and even if you do purchase it, it’s often slow as… (that’s Kiwi for really slow).

**Camping BBQs are the best kind of BBQs…**

There’s nothing I like more than lighting up the BBQ and chowing down on some good grilled grub. I was delighted to find BBQing facilities at pretty much all the campsites we visited (including those in Australia and the UK), and I’d highly recommend taking full advantage of them!

**The best bits…**

Camping let me declutter my life for a while and taught me to live with less. Now, I am more grateful for the little things I used to take for granted, such as sleeping in a double bed, putting the heating on if I feel cold, or having a shower that lasts longer than 5 minutes.

But I also miss the tranquillity that the camping life brings. Yes, the midnight stumble to the loo is a nuisance, but I’ll miss looking up to see hundreds of twinkling stars lighting up clusters of purple and blue cloud. You can’t beat being sung to sleep by a Morepork (a cute species of New Zealand owl) or sipping coffee at sunrise whilst watching the sky glow from red, to orange, to pink. These are the things that connect us back to nature make us grateful for what we have, and I think we should all re-experience them from time to time.

**Embroidery for absolute beginners**

**31/03/2020 16:37**

Ah Embroidery. It has a certain stigma to it, doesn’t it. I wondered whilst writing this whether embarking on an embroidery project would make people think I’ve turned into a Nana.

Well, as it happens, my Nana is pretty cool, so, who cares?

I’m going to show you how to make this cute embroidery hoop, which I have used to brighten up our room. You could even give it as a gift to show your friend how cool your new hobby is. It’s incredibly easy to do, albeit a little time consuming. So, set aside a few hours, make yourself a cup of tea and have your favourite playlist at the ready.

**You will need:**

* Embroidery Hoop (5 inch diameter)
* AIDA Cloth
* Sewing Needle (I used a size 7 embroidery needle, but any needle with a sharp edge should do the trick)
* Stranded Cotton Thread in an assortment of colours (I used Anchor <https://anchorcrafts.com/en/hand-embroidery/anchor-stranded-cotton>)
* Scissors
* Pencil & Eraser
* … & most importantly, patience

Step 1. Cut out a piece of AIDA cloth a bit larger than your embroidery hoop. Make sure you don’t cut it too small. It’s better to have more so you can pull it taught, and you can always trim it down afterwards.

Step 2. Unscrew your embroidery hoop using the silver mechanism at the top, until the smaller centre hoop pops out.

Step 3. Position your AIDA cloth over the larger part of the hoop. Insert the centre hoop inside so that it traps the AIDA cloth. Make sure that the AIDA grid lines up parallel with the top of the hoop, like this:

Use the screw at the top to tighten the outer part of the hoop. Pull the AIDA cloth taught if you need to, to straighten out any wrinkles.

Step 4. You can draw your design straight onto the AIDA cloth if you wish. I decided to draw mine in my sketchbook first. Here is the pattern I came up with, which you are more than welcome to use it:

I then copied the design onto my embroidery hoop using a pencil (it’s surprisingly easy to draw on AIDA cloth, and you can erase your mistakes too!)

Step 5. For the embroidering, it is easier to do the larger sections of your design first. Cut a length of thread approx. 50cm in length. Notice that the thread is made up of 6 individual strands. Separate the thread into 2 lengths, each containing 3 strands.

Step 6. Put one of your lengths aside for now. Take the other one and thread one end through your needle. Pull it through so that both ends are equal and tie a knot at the end.

Step 7. Start at one of the edges from the back of the hoop and make your first stitch. Make sure your stitches are in straight, vertical lines that line up roughly with the AIDA grid. I also found that I had to go in between the AIDA grid squares to ensure I covered the entire area with thread.

Step 8. Continue threading until you have completed all the colours. For the plants, I decided to change the angle of my threading to make them stand out. I also did this for the window frames to make the ‘wood’ look more realistic.

Step 9. Lastly, to make the leaves of the plants stand out, I added a black outline over the top of my coloured thread. Make sure you use only one strand of black thread for this, otherwise it could look too heavy.

Voila!

Note that you don’t have to use AIDA cloth, you can use just about any kind of fabric you want. However, as it was my first time, I found it quite handy having the grid lines to follow.

I also didn’t have the exact colour I wanted for the window frame, and since I was on COVID-19 lockdown, I couldn’t go and get any new colours, so I got creative by soaking some plain white thread in coffee grounds!

I hope you enjoyed this tutorial and I hope to see lots of freshly embroidered decorations hanging in windows everywhere.

**No bake easy-to-make mini Malteser cheesecakes.**

Have you ever read a title that rhymed so elegantly? Cream cheese and Maltesers are two top tier foodstuffs that I have combined to create (drumroll) the easiest and most hassle-free no-bake cheesecake recipe... Ever!

I am usually camping so I never have any baking equipment. I don't even have an oven most of the time. So, I have tried to make this recipe work using just the basics: no fancy equipment, hand-whisked, and everything can be bought from your local supermarket for under $20.

Enough of my rambling. Let's get into it...

**To make 12 mini cheesecakes you will need:**

* 1 cup of Philadelphia Cream Cheese (room temperature, use the light version if you want to keep the calories down)
* 1 cup of Vanilla Flavoured Greek Yoghurt (room temperature)
* ½ cup of Icing Sugar
* 6 tbsp Unsalted Butter
* 1 cup Digestive Biscuits (crushed)
* Cupcake Cases
* Bowl and spatula/spoon for stirring

Step 1. Combine the cream cheese, Greek yoghurt and icing sugar in a bowl and mix until smooth.

Step 2. Melt the unsalted butter (the microwave works just fine) and mix well with the biscuit crumbs. Note: make sure the crumbs stick together well, if not add another tbsp butter.

Step 3. Set out your cupcake cases and divide your biscuit crumbs evenly between them. Press down to compact them using a spoon.

Step 4. Divide the cheesecake topping between your cake cases to top your biscuit base.

Step 5. Put your cheesecakes in the fridge for 2-3 hours until set.

Step 6. Crush up your Maltesers and add them to the top of your cheesecakes before serving.

That’s it! Super easy right? If they’ve set properly, they should just slide straight out of the cake cases (I was sceptical, too!).

Each cake contains about 200 calories, which means you can definitely afford to eat 2… Enjoy!