

## TIPI LORE

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You may become or are the owner of a Plains Indian tipi, perhaps a Cheyenne or Sioux-style one. This is a brief look at this unique structure with emphasis on what it means more than how it works.

The word tipi is really two Lakota (Sioux) words put together. It means "used for living in." In the Plains Indian cultures, tipis were owned by the women. They were the ones responsible for what happened in them and to them. They allowed the men and boys to live in their tipis, but the males had to behave appropriately. If males acted in ways that dishonored the women or the tipi, the women had the right to throw their belongings out and the men had to live alone, outside in the cold, heat or rain.

The women were not just housekeepers. The future of the people was in their hands. Their job was to nurture all those who came into their homes, especially the little ones. In your tipi, always make sure that your guests are comfortable.

The tipi floor pattern is in the shape of an oval. It represents the universe. It is considered holy. There is a place for everything, and the floor plan is essentially the same in all tipis regardless of tribal style. Such floor plans are available in many source books and articles.

Tipis that are correctly set up face East or sometimes South. The front poles are more slanted and brace the tipi into the wind which most often comes out of the West or North. The rear poles stand more nearly straight up and down. Most of the living is done to the sides and rear of the lodge.

Facing East, the first sunlight in the morning comes in the smoke opening and doorway and warms the tipi. The light from the East is believed to bring understanding just as every day brings new experiences which help us to understand life itself. The representative color of the East is red, although in modern times it is shown as yellow.

The South side is for the women. Cooking things, wood, and the necessities of caring for children are found there. Only women have the power to grow new life and so the South represents the power to grow. Its old-time color was yellow, but today you may see it as red. (The East and South colors have gotten switched.)

The power of the West is the power to make life and destroy life. This is men's power. Men make new life within women, and since they are generally bigger and physically stronger than females they can take life more easily.

Men don't think much about the consequences of making new life. They aren't the ones who have to carry that baby inside of them or be the main care-givers as the child grows to be an adult.

Women understand this great responsibility and it is up to them to make sure the men respect this power to grow new life. Teenage girls and young women in the old-time cultures of the Plains often wore a short knife strapped to their leg under the skirt where it was ready for use in case they had to defend themselves from an attempted attack.

The color of the West is black or dark blue.

North is the power of cleansing and healing, and of wisdom. Elders were always given seats on the north side as a mark of honor and respect. When older adults come into your tipi, offer them seats on the north side and make them comfortable. Older adults looked after you when you were little; now it is your turn to look after their safety and comfort. Of course, the color of the North is white.

When women enter a tipi, they step to the left--south-- and go around to their personal place. Men step to the right--north. This always reminds us that it is women who have a natural and very special connection to the power of the world. Men do not. Because women are the ones who have this natural connection to the way the earth works, they move in a sun-wise direction. Because men must search for their connection, they move anti-sun.

Once inside, anyone may move around quite freely. Only one rule exists: never step over the fire (often a citronella bucket or a lantern) or the altar (often a decorated board about a foot long). The vertical plane from the fire/altar upwards towards the smoke hole is considered the special highway over which travel the thoughts of the occupants to the One Above. It is never disrupted.

Always set a center stake and tie the center rope (which is used to tie the poles together) to it. In a high wind, it is this center rope, the many exterior stakes, and the tipi's conical shape that will provide your security. Tipis that are properly set up and staked down can withstand very strong winds.

Smoke flaps work like the collar of your coat and are controlled by the two poles on the outside of the lodge. In hard rains, the smoke flaps are crossed so as to close off the smoke opening. The only drops that can come in will enter where all the poles come together at the apex. However, the poles will block most of the rain from coming directly into the tipi.

Still, in a heavy downpour the rain will begin to run down the insides of the poles (gravity at work) into the interior. When the

stream of water reaches the liner ties, they will get wet and start to drip. So, you need drip sticks at those spots.

Rain sticks work like this: they are inserted on the inside of each pole so that the liner ties that go around the pole are held away from the pole surface by these rain sticks. These two willow sticks thus form a channel through which the water can travel on down the pole when it rains hard. It works, and the tipi stays dry inside.

Some people also build a small fire inside when it rains hard. The heat collects in the conical top of the tipi and evaporates the rain as it starts down the poles. This is enough to stop most drips.

Tipis really have three doors; an outer door flap and two inside liner doors which cross. When they are not in use, tuck the liner doors behind the door poles. You can make a screen door using netting purchased at a fabrics shop as a bug protector. Such netting was used by the men on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804--1806 so it is quite acceptable for pre-1840 events.

Crossed sticks on the outside means that the door is locked and nobody is home. It is considered improper to ever enter a tipi which has been so "locked".

When approaching a tipi, always knock on the door pole or call out "Hello in the tipi". Then, wait to be invited in. Do not simply barge in to a lodge even if it is your own (unless, of course, you are the only one camping in it). Even your family members deserve your respect for their privacy. This seems like an awkward rule, but after you get used to it you will appreciate this small bit of etiquette.

A wooden board, decorated with brass tacks, can be your altar. Place things of importance to the members of your tipi on this altar, especially gifts before they are given. Some people do not use a board and, instead, clear a small square of earth behind the fire as their altar. Either way is appropriate.

Arrange your beds in the proper manner around the perimeter of the tipi. In good weather you can sleep around the outside quite comfortably. In bad weather, everyone can move under the storm hood which is called an ozan.

Not all tipi makers offer an ozan. Spring Valley Lodges of Brodhead, WI does, and it fits perfectly. Ozans, smooth poles, and rain sticks will work together to give you a dry interior even in the hardest of rains.

If the weather gets real hot, raise the cover and liner and prop them up like a big shade umbrella. Even the slightest breeze will

blow through the tipi. That's probably because the wind recognizes places that are holy. Tipis are such places.

Originally the tipi fires were fueled by buffalo chips. These burn with almost no smoke because they are essentially methane gas. Since you must burn wood, try to select dry, barkless hardwood. Soft wood tends to throw sparks. Also, bark will have a tendency to smoke. By keeping a flame going on a small fire, and by setting the flaps correctly, you will enjoy a smoke-free interior.

If you can't find a firepit, a 22" steel plow disc set up on three rocks or chunks of wood works great. It is moveable and doesn't leave fire remains on the grass.

The book which is considered "the tipi Bible" is The Indian Tipi, by Reginald and Gladys Laubin. They have a newer, second edition which is much more expanded than their first edition. It sells for about \$16. There are also two wonderful articles about tipis to be found in the Books of Buckskinning. They both offer good information, but the book to get is still the Laubin one.

You might be interested in this little tidbit of information: two Girl Scouts set up a 14' tipi as part of a contest. They were timed for speed and did it in 2 minutes, 9 seconds. (That's poles, one rope wrap, and cover with one stake and one lacing pin.) That was a contest set and so the tipi wasn't ready for living in when they were done. But, it gives you a good idea of how quick they go up.

Generally speaking, two people who know what they are doing, can set up completely (poles, cover, liner, osan with drip sticks) in about 30 minutes. Then, you'll expend another 30 minutes bringing in your floor coverings (usually plastic tarps covered with canvas tarps) and other gear. Naturally, the more stuff you have, the longer it will take. Bigger tipis take a bit longer because there are often more poles and stakes.

The best light for inside a tipi comes from candles. Kerosene is also fine, but more dangerous. Never use a Coleman gas lantern or stove inside a tipi.

Cooking can be done inside over the open fire, or on a little stove powered by LP gas.

That is a quick look at the Indian tipi. They provide the finest camping you'll ever do and are worth the extra work to move the poles. They are also 100% American.

Finally, there are 7 directions: East, South, West, North, Earth (down), Sky (up) and Within oneself. Each one is evident in a tipi. It is truly a special kind of camping experience. Hetchetu alohi! It is indeed so!