

MEALS

20 lightweight camp dinners were tested for us by the coordinators of The Great Outdoors Challenge, Sue Oxley and Ali Ogden

Ask us for our perfect night out and we'd generally answer: "A wild camp high on a midge-free Scottish hill". There is something indescribably special about the rhythm and ritual of walking and wild camping that elevates it above a simple day walk – and food is an integral part of that experience. Far more than simply fuel, a good meal can add the finishing touch to an excellent day or raise morale after a tough one.

As regular participants in the TGO Challenge, and with many other long-distance walks under our belts, trail food is something we have given much thought to over the years. Ali was put off freeze-dried meals on her 1990 walk from Land's End to John o'Groats, so turned to dehydrating her own food. During her LeJog and since, Sue has tended to rely largely on pasta with various accoutrements. But in our role as TGO Challenge coordinators, we have been in touch with several firms providing backpacking meals, and have been tempted to dip our Sporks back into the pot.

On the last wild camp of this year's TGO Challenge, one of Ali's walking companions, Sue Foss, suggested a "hot buffet" to share the different foods being used by a group of Challengers. We thought it would be interesting to try a similar experiment, for the magazine, but preferably without the midges!

For this test, we sampled two meals from each of 10 brands, at least one of which was suitable for vegetarians. To assess ease of preparation we used only equipment we would use in our tents – stove, pan, penknife and spoon. While cost and calorific content are relevant, our most significant criterion was taste. And because taste is so subjective, we assembled a small group – five omnivores and one vegetarian – to get a variety of views, before averaging out each person's score to achieve the star ratings.

Food on the Move mountaintrails.org.uk

Preparation Notes: Excess of packaging – wrapped in cellophane. Pouches narrow and tall, making pouring, stirring and eating tricky. However, we felt the extra faffing was negated by the excellent taste. Mountaintrails tell us the packaging will be redesigned next year.

Moroccan Cous Cous with Chicken

489/684kcal, 142/187g £5.99/£7.99
Highest taste score by a significant margin, with two testers making it their overall favourite. It was packed with chicken (highest meat content of any brand) and beautifully flavoured couscous.

Creamy Mushroom & Tomato Pasta

467/657kcal, 142/187g £4.99/£6.99
Though it didn't score quite as highly as the meat dish, it was liked by all, with a pleasant flavour and texture.

Photo: Marek CECH/Shutterstock



★ Thanks go to James from www.basecampfood.com for providing most of the samples

Be Well Expedition Foods

Preparation Notes: Instructions were slightly confusing but clear fill line so no need to estimate water volume. Good shaped pouch for eating. basecampfood.com, bewellexpeditionfoods.com

Chicken Pesto Pasta

★★★★

702kcal, 194g £5.99

Looked pale and uninteresting but tasted good. Texture reasonable at stated 8 mins but deteriorated when left longer.



Vegetarian Thai Rice

★★★★

716kcal, 194g £5.99

Looked appealing, quite tasty with good textures.

Blå Band

Preparation Notes: Difficult to tear the top off one packet – needed to use penknife – but instructions clear and packet has a fill line. Excellent wide mouthed pouch. basecampfood.com

Indian Chicken Stew

★★★★

650kcal, 146g £6.50

Looked and smelt appealing, pleasantly spiced and fruity, texture slightly glutinous.



Pasta with Tomato & Garlic

★★★★

650kcal, 168g £6.50

Some testers really enjoyed the flavour, while others found it a little bland.

Expedition Foods

Preparation Notes: Instructions were impractical in a tent. "Stirring whilst pouring water" is difficult and possibly not safe on some stoves. However, the food rehydrated well when stirred after adding water. It advised adding 430mls (not easy to estimate) or to add to a non-existent fill line! basecampfood.com, expeditionfoods.com

Sweet & Sour Chicken with Rice

★★★

808kcal, 197g £6.89

Palatable but slight aftertaste and rather glutinous texture.



Macaroni & Cheese

★★★★

804kcal, 205g £6.89

Simple and tasty. But widest range of scores from all the testers. Most loved the simplicity; others marked it down for the same reason!

Extreme Adventure Food

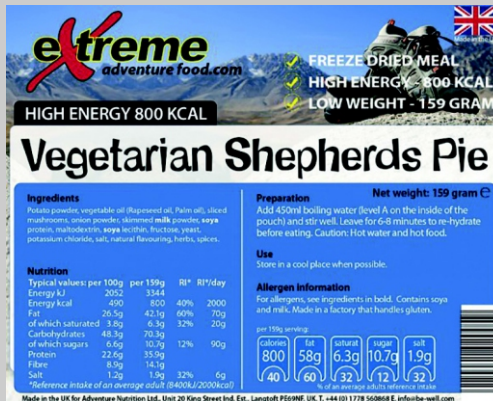


Preparation Notes: Clear instructions, easy to follow with clear fill line and pack was easy to eat from. basecampfood.com, extremeadventurefood.com

Mexican Chilli Con Carne

★ ★ ★
800kcal, 173g £6.29

Somewhat bland but highly calorific and the best ratio of calories for packaged weight and price. A good choice if your priority is simply replacing spent calories.



Vegetarian Shepherd's Pie

★ ★ ★
800kcal, 174g £6.29

A rather uninviting brown mush which tasted little better than it looked. The only texture was from some unpleasantly crunchy onions.

Real Turmat

Preparation Notes: Small print and vacuum packing made instructions difficult to read. One pack gave inconsistent advice regarding fill lines. The packets were styled differently, with one much clearer than the other. basecampfood.com, drytech.no/en/



Lapskaus: Beef & Potato Casserole

★ ★ ★
556kcal, 127g £10.99

This looked unappetizing and had a mushy consistency. Most of us found it far too salty. Our tasters, who were unaware of prices, were surprised to find it is significantly more expensive than other brands.



Cous Cous Lentils and Spinach

★ ★ ★
506kcal, 137g £9.99

We found this bland and far too salty but the texture was better than the beef casserole.

Firepot

Preparation Notes: The top of one pouch would not tear and needed to be cut. No fluid volume stated but fill lines were present. However the chilli was too sloppy when filled to the correct line and the risotto may have been better with more fluid. Confusing instructions: front says "ready in 10 minutes" but back states "if cooked in pouch, takes 15 minutes". basecampfood.com, outdoorfood.com



Chilli Con Carne & Rice

★ ★ ★
625kcal, 154g £6.50

We looked forward to testing this new British brand, which, like Food on the Move and Tent Meals products, is dehydrated rather than freeze dried. Unfortunately, we found this meal flavourless, with virtually no taste of chilli.



Porcini Mushroom Risotto

★ ★ ★
540kcal, 154g £6.50

Some testers enjoyed the porcini mushroom taste but the texture was very stodgy.

Summit to Eat

Preparation Notes: The instructions were tiny and difficult to read but were then easy to follow with a clear fill line. basecampfood.com, summittoeat.com



Chicken Fajita with Rice

★ ★ ★
639kcal, 153g £5.50

Another meal that divided opinions, with some enjoying the spiciness and others disliking it. Looks appealing and a pleasant texture.



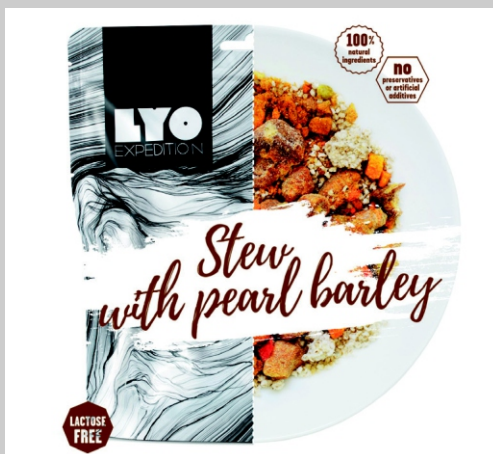
Vegetable Chipotle Chilli with Rice

★ ★ ★
698kcal, 159g £5.50

This nearly scored three stars but most found it just too spicy and felt it would need some plain rice or couscous to be able to eat the whole portion.

LYO

Preparation Notes: Instructions were written in many languages necessitating tiny text that was difficult to read. There were no fill lines and the volumes given were infeasibly precise, eg 388mls! basecampfood.com, lyofood.com



Pork Stew with Pearl Barley

★ ★ ★
451kcal, 134g £6.99

Disappointing taste and a somewhat unpleasant texture. It also has a relatively low calorie count.



Barley-Lentils Risotto with Avocado Mousse

★ ★ ★
433kcal, 129g £7.99

It's hard to be kind about this! On first tasting it wasn't too bad but after 30 seconds, most of us were hit by a deeply unpleasant aftertaste which stopped us eating more than a mouthful. Lowest calorie count of the meals tested.

TentMeals

Preparation Notes: Least amount of packaging of all tested. Clear instructions but cannot be prepared in the pouch, only in a pan. However we would be happy to deal with the washing up in view of the excellent taste! tentmeals.co.uk



Moroccan Spiced Couscous

★ ★ ★ ★
500kcal/800kcal, 128g/204g £4.50/£5.50

Something completely different. Looks appetizing. Lovely textures with crunchy nuts and soft fruits – surprisingly good depth of flavour. The highest rated vegetarian meal across the judging panel, but you don't have to be vegan to enjoy it!



Almond Jalfrezi

★ ★ ★ ★
500kcal/800kcal, 111g/178g £4.50/£5.50

Not quite as highly rated by the judges but still excellent flavours and textures. Excellent calorie count and very good value. Available in two portion sizes.