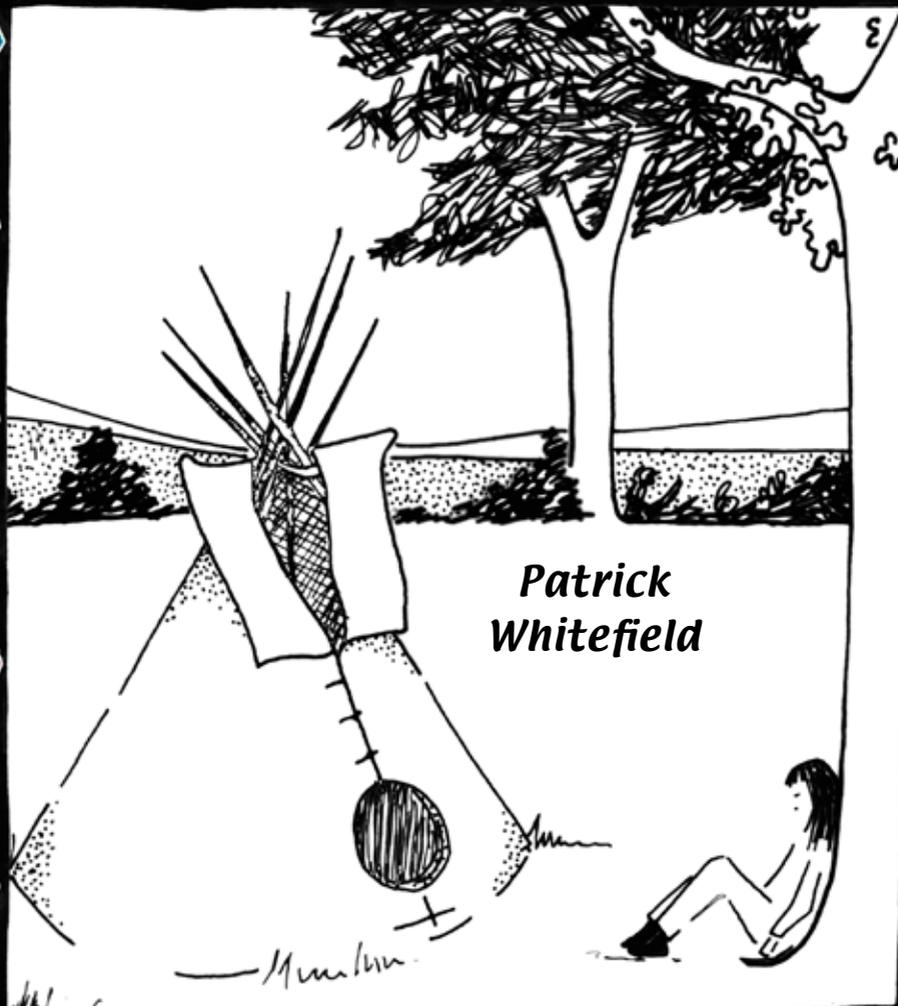


TIPI LIVING

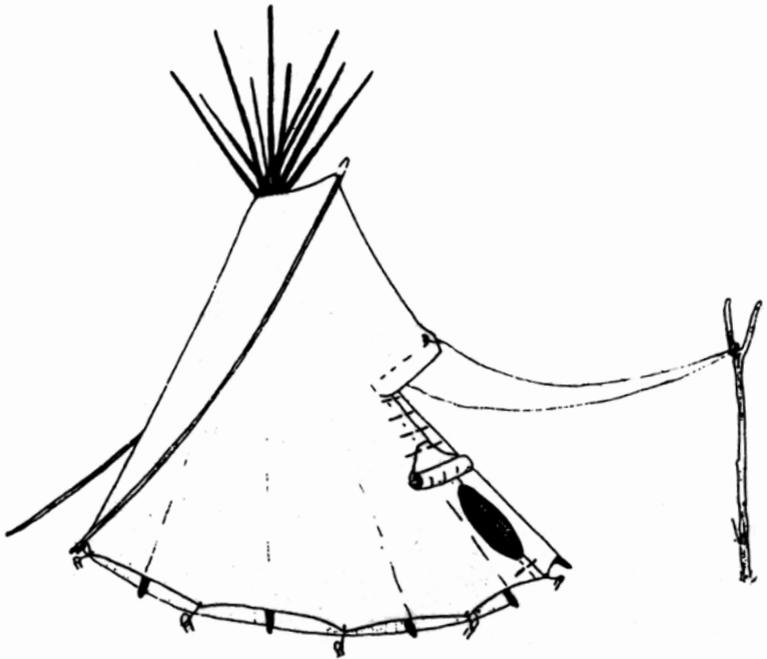


*Patrick
Whitefield*



Tipi Living

*by Patrick Whitefield
with illustrations by Anne Monger*



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The Author



Patrick Whitefield is a permaculture designer, teacher and writer. He is author of *How to Make a Forest Garden*, the mini classic *Permaculture in a Nutshell*, and a number of permaculture booklets. He is also consultant editor for *Permaculture Magazine*.

He grew up on a smallholding in rural Somerset and qualified in agriculture at Shuttleworth College, Bedfordshire. He then acquired farming experience in Britain, the Middle East and Africa.

He has expertise in many diverse areas from organic gardening and practical nature conservation to thatching and tipi making.

He bought his first tipi at the Green Gathering in 1983, and made them for a living from 1986 to 1990. He lived in a self-built tipi near Glastonbury for eight years.



Foreword

This booklet is a practical guide to living in a tipi. One thing I've learned from living in this way is that the practical and the spiritual are not two aspects of life, but one and the same thing. So it's quite spiritual too.

There is no set of rules about how a tipi should be used. This is an account of what works for me, written from my own experience and including a lot of what I've learned from other tipi people. I don't offer it as the last word on anything, but as a door opening on the possibility of a new way of life.

Patrick Whitefield 1987

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Why live in a tipi?

When I bought my first tipi, I already had an all-weather tent, a good set of bender tarps and a choice of two caravans to live in. What did I need a tipi for? None of that mattered. I fell in love with the sheer beauty of it.

The beauty goes far deeper than appearances. The circle is an organic, healing shape, powerful medicine for anyone who has been shut up in rectangles for half a lifetime. Contact with the Earth is not a metaphor in a tipi. When I sit down I can feel the skin of our Mother under my bum. I look up and see the circle of poles reaching up into the air to meet in the patch of sky through the smoke hole. In the centre of the circle the flames of an open fire dance their dance of life. From where I'm pitched I can hear the gurgle of a nearby stream on a quiet evening, and I love to fall asleep with that sound in my ears.

Song birds and other creatures come into the lodge sometimes to see what they can find, and much of the tipi dweller's daily round takes place outside, so that the distinction between indoors and outdoors is less absolute than it is in a house. Sun, Moon and stars, clouds, wind and rain have much more practical effect on the tipi dweller's life, and I find myself living by their rhythms rather than the clock or the calendar. Women sometimes find their menstrual cycle falls into phase with the Moon when they move from a house to a tipi. It's not so much a matter of living close to nature as being a part of the whole web of life.

A tipi is a highly practical way to live outside. In fact, with a tipi beauty and practicality are one and the same. The idea of something being useful but ugly, or beautiful but useless, is largely a product of our unbalanced industrial society. A tipi is strong, roomy, weatherproof, tough, easy to pitch and move, and above all has a fire inside. It was developed by the people of the Great Plains of North America, and it is hard to improve on a structure which enabled people to thrive in such a harsh environment.

There are many ways of using a tipi, from a weekend tent to a permanent home. Some people keep one just for fairs and festivals, and, though this can hardly be called tipi living, it's a good use for one. A tipi

adds dignity and grace to the scene, and provides a space where a circle of people can get together, drink tea, make music and dry themselves if the weather's wet.

A tipi pitched in the garden of a house can provide an extra bedroom, a refuge from the rectangular confines of bricks and mortar, or a meditation space. But if it is left up for a long time it must be well used, because if it doesn't have a fire lit in it regularly the canvas will rot, except in the driest weather.

Transport is not the problem it's sometimes believed to be: an average family car can carry a medium sized tipi quite easily. A small tipi can ride quite happily on a couple of horse-drawn carts, or a good sized wagon. In fact, there is a tribe of tipi people in Brittany who are fully nomadic and take their tipis from place to place in wagons.

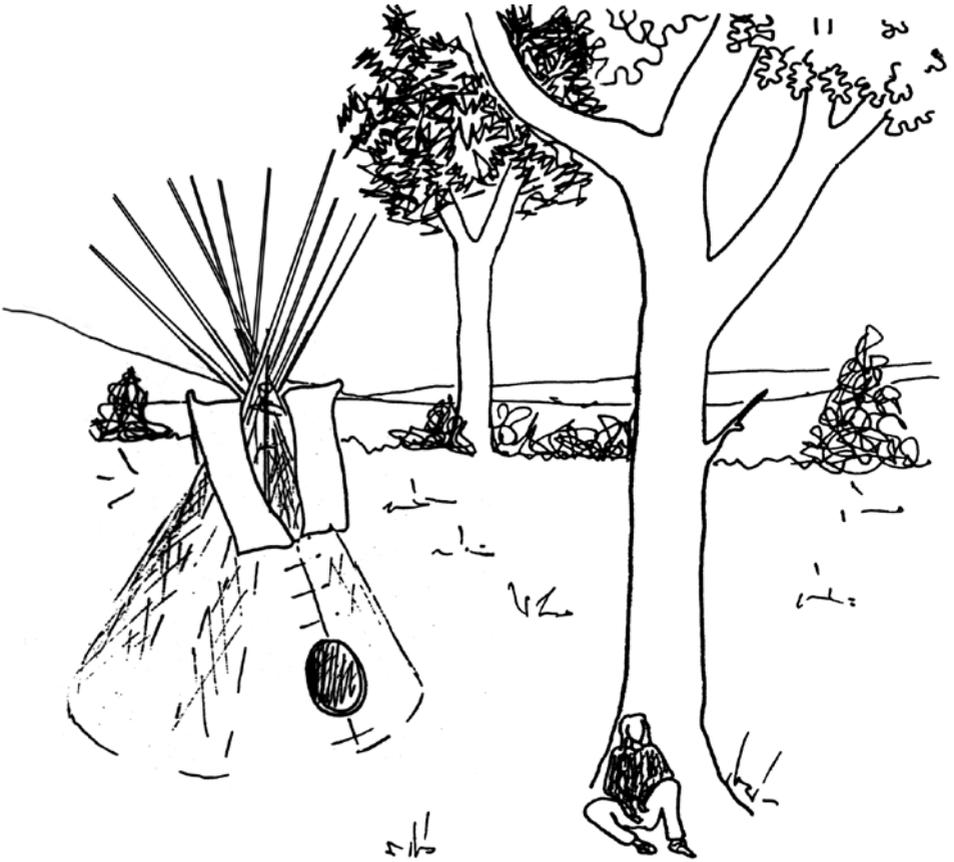
Living in a tipi year round is tough. Personally, my health isn't up to it, so I spend some eight months of the year in my lodge and four in a caravan. But there are many people who have no other homes. In Wales, there is a village of over 100 people living in tipis; and there are several such communities in France (mostly in the Pyrenees) as well as in Portugal, Germany, Italy and New Zealand. There are also individual tipi dwellers dotted around the countryside, even, I've heard, in the north of Scotland.

Being part of a tipi village, where all your neighbours are living the same lifestyle, is perhaps a more complete way of tipi living than being the only tipi dweller in the locality. The tipi village in Wales has now reached its optimum size, and there is surely a need for new villages to be started in other parts of the country.

No one use of a tipi is "better" than any other, and there must be as many reasons for living in one as there are tipi people; but there is a very definite theme to tipi living which is universal.

We live in a society which is out of balance. The intellect is glorified over the emotions and intuition; material wealth is emphasised to the point where it becomes the main aim in life; humans are cut off from all the living beings of Earth - which are patronisingly lumped together under the heading "nature".

Living outside can redress this balance, without rejecting what is good in our culture, and there's no better way of living outside than in a tipi.



Choosing a tipi

It's a good feeling to live in a home you've made with your own hands, and there's also a lot to be said for buying your first tipi and getting to know what tipis are all about before embarking on making one. It's a personal choice.

The first thing to decide on is the size. This is always spoken of in feet, and refers to the distance from top to bottom of the cover at the front. (As the tipi is a tilted cone this is longer than the measurement down the back). The diameter of the floor space is a foot or two less than this.

The smallest size for a living-in tipi, as opposed to a toy, is 13 feet. This is just about big enough for one person to live in with comfort,

but gets a bit tight if you have visitors. Fourteen to sixteen feet is a good general-purpose size, and eighteen or nineteen feet makes a home for a family of four or five people. Bigger than that, up to 25 or even 30 feet, is what is usually called a “big lodge”, normally only used as a communal space in a tipi village. It’s important to remember that the increase in floor area is not directly proportional to the increase in size rating. It’s much greater. An 18 foot tipi has about twice the floor area of a 14 footer.

Larger tipis have quite a different feel to them than smaller ones. Below about 16 feet, the feeling is cosy and womb-like. Above that size they feel increasingly airy and expansive. One great advantage of a smaller lodge is that it takes less wood to heat it, and in winter this can be pretty important. On the other hand it can get smoky in a smaller tipi at times, while in a larger one there’s more space to escape to if the fire’s misbehaving.

Most tipis are made of pure cotton canvas, treated with a rot and waterproofing compound. There’s also a material called Regentex, part cotton and part artificial fibres, which is much longer lasting; but I’d never live in a Regentex lodge myself. The weave is made up of thousands of little squares about a quarter of an inch in size, and from the inside these are really quite visible. Squares and artificial fibres are just the sort of things that I live in a tipi to get away from.

The canvas is usually white, which is a good idea because it lets in more light than any other colour. And it’s hard to improve on the dramatic beauty of a white lodge against the natural shades of the countryside - although bright colours can look good at a festival, and there are even a few rainbow tipis around.

If the tipi is going to be pitched in the winter, it is advisable to have a hat to keep the drips out (*see page 14*). This is more important in a smaller lodge, where there’s less space to get away from the drips.

When buying a second-hand lodge, you need to have a good look for rot. It’s not much help to ask how old it is. If it’s been up year in year out in a wet part of the country, a tipi may only last five years. If it’s been taken down and stored for the winter, and pitched in a drier climate, it may be as good as new after this time. And one that’s used only for festivals could easily last a lifetime.

Pitching

Pitching a tipi is easy. The whole job can be done by one person, except for the larger sizes, where some help may be needed in erecting the tripod.

The first step is to choose a pitching spot. This needs to be as level as possible, otherwise the shape will be somewhat distorted - and it's not much fun living on a slope.

The door must face away from the prevailing wind, as the smoke flaps work best with the wind behind them. In fact, when the wind blows straight towards the door it's hard to get the smoke out at all. In most parts of Britain, as on the Great Plains (the original home of the tipi), this places the door in the East, the direction of the rising Sun. A symbol of inspiration and renewal.

For the sake of clarity, it's best to refer to the various parts of the tipi in terms of North, South, East and West, rather than left and right, because the latter begs the question of which direction you're looking at it from. So let's assume that the door is in the East.

Lay out the cover, outside up, near to the pitching spot but not on it. (The outside is the side the peg loops are attached to). If the tipi has a hat, there will be one pole noticeably longer than the others. Put this on one side, and select the three heaviest poles from those remaining. Lay these on top of the cover, like this:

