



Photo: Archiv Hilleberg

Snowy Sweden in August – the business trip turned into an adventure test for Hilleberg's employees.

# Business Trip à la Hilleberg



Ask any camper for the best tent and they will mostly likely answer: Hilleberg. 4-Seasons got to the bottom of a 41-year success story about Swedish perfection on a canoe trip with the tentmaker and company founder Bo Hilleberg.

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Photo: Moritz Becher

Bo Hilleberg (front) on a five-day canoe trip with his colleagues. He's still very much the driving force in the company.

**B**o Hilleberg is in his element. Surrounded by a dozen employees, the 71-year old sits with shining eyes on a stone and picks a potato out of the campfire. They do not talk about business. They tell each other stories about their latest outdoor adventure. The Swedes are not holding back with their rough jokes. The canoes are on the bank of the lake, the tents are pitched and leave a pattern of dark-green and red-orange dots on the green island. Of course, Bo has found the most even and driest spot on the ground. Decades of experience doesn't go unnoticed. The annual canoe tour in central Sweden's natural reservation Roggen, a three-hour drive from the company's headquarter in Östersund, has turned into a Hilleberg tradition. From the trainee to Bo Hilleberg, head of the administrative board, they are quasi all in the same boat. The five day business trip feels like a family holiday. One evening, the famous Köttbullar sizzle on the gas cooker while busy hands are collecting cranberries. Bullerby seems to be just around the corner.

It is also the good spirit of Bo Hilleberg that is in the air. More than 40 years ago, the same entrepreneurial spark was itching to ignite in the then-forester as in many other founding members of outdoor

companys. The passionate hiker, paddler and skier was dissatisfied with the tents sold on the market. So he simply started to play around. His vision: He wanted to pitch the inside and outside tent simultaneously. He wanted to stop the inner tent from getting wet while he tried to cover it with the loose rain fly fluttering in the wind. A man, a plan. In 1971 Bo founded the company, mainly selling forestry machines. In the same year he met Renate Neuner from Kufstein while skiing in Austria. His pearl of Tyrol soon moved to him in Sweden and their wedding marked the starting point for »Hilleberg – The Tentmaker AB«. Renate was able to realise Bo's ideas with the right touch on the sewing machine. In 1973, Hilleberg introduces the Keb, the first tent to have a connected inner and outer. It has been a success from the very first moment.

It did not take long for the real breakthrough. In 1975 Bo received a sample of a new material from a supplier. The fabric was both lighter and stronger than any other fabric. Instead of the usual polyurethane, it was coated with silicone and therefore absolutely waterproof and incredible tearproof. »That was exactly what I was looking for«, Bo says when he remembers the beginning of Hilleberg's Kerlon fabric. In comparison to the silicone-coated >



Bo Hilleberg in the Alps in 1970...



... and with his children Petra and Rolf in front of a Keron in 1979.

Photos: Archiv Hilleberg

»Of course we could create an even lighter tent. But it couldn't be a Hilleberg because it wouldn't meet our requirements for stability and durability anymore.« *Bo Hilleberg*

fabric, the Kerlon fabric is coated with three layers with pure silicone on both sides. Today, it still sets the standards in terms of the relationship of strength to weight. Meanwhile, Hilleberg uses four versions: Kerlon 1800 (tear resistance 18 kilogram) for the toughest tents, Kerlon SP (tear resistance 15 kilogram) for special models like the group tent Atlas, Kerlon 1200 for the extra light all-rounder model and Kerlon 1000 for the 3 season tent.

Hilleberg's employees swap tents every night on the canoe trip, so everybody can test different models. »In 2011, we first introduced tents that weren't meant for four seasons«, explains Bo. There is a special demand from the American and Asian markets. So they produced the dome tent Rogen which cuts a fine figure on its eponymous lake. They are happy with the stability on the rough ground and the amount of space. The 3 season tent might not have found too many friends the year before: There was snow in Rogen in August!

Hilleberg's tent city is growing bigger and bigger: meanwhile, they have 21 different models, not counting the size variables. The

product line ranges from the very light tunnel tent Anjan (1,7 kilograms, space for two people) to the Saitaris, a dome tent for the toughest situations. Also, Hilleberg regularly experiments with minimalist shelters like a tarp as a rain fly or a Mesh Tent providing protection from insects. »Tarp are a fantastic add-on«, Bo raves. »For example, you can create a living room by spanning a tarp between two tents.«

#### Constant care and improvement

The story of Hilleberg is based on two main elements: the eagerness to experiment and above all their strive for perfection. There are 15 employees in Östersund, all following the six basic principles of the Tentmaker: reliability, ease of use, versatility, durability, comfort and weight. They would never give up weight at the expense of other principles. »Of course we could create an even lighter tent«, Bo says. »But it couldn't be a Hilleberg because it wouldn't meet our requirements for stability and durability anymore.« In-



Testing the resistance of the Kerlon fabric.



Pitching each tent before delivery.



Bo: 71 years old, tentmaker for 41 years.

stead of regularly throwing new models on the market, Hilleberg focusses on continually improving the models they have already created. The tunnel tent Keron has been in the family since 1980 and it constantly gets optimised and is still in the pole position.

#### Cooling down the needles of the sewing machine

To be able to guarantee the best quality in production, Hilleberg set up its own manufacturing base in Estonia ten years ago, currently employing 35 people. The fabrics from international special manufacturers get scrupulously tested before they get released for tent production. The waterproofness is the sewers' responsibility because it is impossible to tape silicon coated fabric. The Estonian workers master the flat-felled seam like nobody else: each stitch has to go through four layers of fabric. They even cool down the needles of the sewing machine so the stitches will stay small. A bigger stitch could influence the waterproofness and the strength. Eventually, an in-house inspector pitches each tent, checks the

smoothness of the zippers, looks closely at every stitch. Only when he has approved all the items making up a tent will it be put into a bag and sent to the warehouse in Sweden or the US.

Bo's daughter Petra is responsible for the export market overseas. She works in the branch near Seattle together with 3 employees. This time, Petra is taking part in the canoe trip too while her brother Rolf is managing the company in Östersund. Maybe for not too much longer however – he would like to spend more time with his family and withdraw from the top of the company. »Nothing will change for the customer though«, promises Bo.

On the last night at Rogen, a seemingly never ending rain starts to pour down. Puddles grow bigger in front of the tents. Not in front of Bo's tent though: dry-shodded he crawls out of his tent. He did it again, the old hand: found the perfect spot at the right time! <



You can find the interview with Bo Hilleberg on 41 years of tent making online: [4-Seasons.de/Hilleberg](https://4-Seasons.de/Hilleberg).