

HILLEBERG

THE TENTMAKER



CELEBRATING

50

YEARS

THE TENT HANDBOOK 2021 : 50TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Working responsibly



Not every trip with your tent sees difficult conditions, but we have always built our tents both to last a long time and to be capable of handling challenging situations. Photo: Ståle Johan Aklestad/staleaklestad.no.

“SUSTAINABILITY” has become an important topic these days. Clearly defining the term, however, can be elusive. At Hilleberg, we think more in terms of “responsibility,” and, more specifically, we follow our own Responsibility Code: 1) We are responsible for making the highest quality tents that do what they’re supposed to do, with no compromise. 2) We are equally responsible for using materials and practices that make as little negative impact on the world around us as possible in the process. 3) We are responsible for constantly reviewing the balance between 1 and 2, and for always working towards both greater function and less negative impact.

At its heart, our Code comes from what we have always believed about integrating nature and the outdoor life with everyday life. Years ago, Bo Hilleberg wrote, “I do know that an outdoor life’s simplicity is what is most compelling: while it is – and always has been – a revelation to me to arrive at a beautiful place and camp, it has always been at least as important to leave that spot the next day looking as though I’d never been there.” These concepts of simplicity, engagement, and leaving as little an impact as possible on one’s surroundings transfers directly to how we run our company, and they have been guiding us since Hilleberg’s inception 50 years ago.

To this end, we strive to make the most functional yet simplest to use products we can; to build them so they last a long time; to make sure that they work well for what they are designed to do; and to have the capability to repair our tents when necessary. We choose materials that will fulfill our standards without compromise, but whose production has as little harmful effect as possible. We endeavor to foster long-term relationships, built on integrity, with our suppliers, our retailers, and our customers. We ensure that all those who work for us have clean, safe working conditions, and are treated fairly and with respect. And we talk honestly about our products and how to use them.

Staying true to ourselves

Underlying our responsibility ethos is our purposeful choice to keep our company comparatively small and family-led. We are certainly not averse to growth, but we choose to manage it so that we can maintain the high quality of our products, of the work environment for our workers, and of our relationships with everyone we work with. These have always come first, and by keeping our company small, we can stay true to what we believe, work cleanly with our Responsibility Code, and be, in the truest sense of the word, sustainable.

Trees and tents: Vi-Skogen

Before Bo Hilleberg started making tents, he was a forester, involved with managing forest lands in Sweden. When he started Hilleberg, it was a forestry consulting and equipment company before it became a full-time tent making concern. So forests have always been integral to our company. This is why we feel so strongly about our partnership with Vi-Skogen, which we

support by donating one tree for every tent we sell. For more than 35 years, Vi-Skogen has been contributing to improving the living conditions of over a million impoverished people living in the Lake Victoria Basin in western Africa. By planting trees and encouraging agroforestry – the planting of trees and crops together – as well as through education, Vi-Skogen helps small farmers combat poverty, environmental destruction and climate change. Each tree planted helps control erosion, pulls CO from the air, reduces evaporation and water

use, and gives shade, shelter and protection for other crops. Both the education and the tree planting help improve living standards, foster greater equality, and improve the environment, both locally and globally. Vi Agroforestry is a part of the UN’s Billion Tree Campaign. Read more about Vi-Skogen at viskogen.se, or in English at viagroforestry.org



Building to last

When we moved our production out of Sweden over twenty years ago, we deliberately chose to stay in Europe. We wanted a long-term solution, so we created our own facility in Rapla, Estonia, and we built relationships with carefully vetted contract factories nearby. This has allowed us both to get the exact quality we want, and to quickly make any changes needed to get it. Estonia is only a short plane ride away from our Swedish headquarters, and less travel equals less impact. In addition, the proximity affords better communication, and allows us to work with remarkable efficiency. Also important is that Estonia’s laws and ethics are very similar to Sweden’s, so we can ensure that both our facility and those of our contractors have the same standards for working conditions that we have always embraced. As a result, many of our Estonian workers have been with us since we opened the factory. In fact, over his 19 years with us, one of our tent inspectors set up at least 65,000 tents!

Choosing materials wisely

For all materials, we comply with the European Union’s European Chemicals Agency regulation for “Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals,” or REACH. In all of our contracts with our suppliers, we require that they not use any chemicals restricted by the ECHA, and we strive to ensure that we do not use harmful materials anywhere in our supply chain.

Even more importantly, we choose material suppliers whom we know can work within our requirements and that fit into our Responsibility Code. Our pole supplier, DAC, is a good example. The most environmentally harmful part of aluminum tent pole production is the anodizing process, which historically has used highly toxic nitric and phosphoric acids. DAC spent many years perfecting their Green Anodizing process, which eliminates both chemicals. They have de-

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– Bo Hilleberg

signed and built their own equipment to keep their process as clean as possible, and they pride themselves on far exceeding any governmental requirements. They have also incorporated a “Green Atmosphere” into their facilities, complete with dedicated green space and water features, built to inspire people to think more about the natural world and their place in it.

Cultivating partnerships

Essential to our responsibility ethos are the long term relationships we build in all parts of our business. We have worked with DAC poles for 20 years, and we are close friends with Jake Lah, the founder and owner. We have also worked with our main fabric supplier for at least as long, and with whom we have a similarly close relationship. With all our suppliers, we are in constant communication, and we push each other to be better in both function and processes. The resulting relationships, built over time on both loyalty and trust, allow each side to achieve more, to do so in a positive way, and with less negative impact on the world around us.

We firmly believe that our customers are our greatest asset. While many of our customers are true professionals, who do expeditions and exploring for their livelihood, most are simply people who love to be outdoors. All have purposefully chosen our tents, so all are a part of “Hilleberg.” We prioritize customer service, which, for us, means having customer relationships, preferably long term ones. A big piece of that is our repair capability. From full repairs to fixing minor damage, we have both in-house repair craftsmen as well as a network of Hilleberg-trained repair contractors. We often hear from long-term customers who simply want their vintage but still fully functional Hilleberg tent (some are 30 years old) revitalized. This service not only reduces impact on the environment, but it also fosters the climate of mutual trust, respect, and loyalty that we strive for in all our relationships.

VOICES FROM FRIENDS: Jake Lah

TWENTY YEARS AGO, I received a fax message from Sweden. It said, “We tested your poles thoroughly including wind testing. Your poles showed excellent performance. So, we’d like to use your poles.”

It was the first message I got from Bo. Bo Hilleberg. It was he who found me and contacted me. He has always had his eyes open, looking for the best resources he could find.

I usually get involved with tent design when I work with tent brands – pole architecture, strength balance, patterns and accessories. Hilleberg tents were the exception since there is nothing I can add to the perfectly balanced masterpieces of Bo Hilleberg.

“Hilleberg the Tentmaker” must be a very challenging name as most brands do not limit themselves to tents only. Bo Hilleberg does. For half a century, he has dedicated his life to tents. He has made it clear that masterpieces can be built, and he has shown them to the world through his single-mindedness.

There are many “secrets” hidden in Hilleberg tents. Most people do not know about these secrets. Through many conversations with Bo, I have learned that these secrets are the results of endless questions he has raised. Bo has found the optimum solutions to solve problems that he has encountered through his long experience.

It is truly a blessing for tent users that there are Hilleberg tents for them. Bo Hilleberg is the creator of the best tents. He has definitively proved that “practice makes perfect.” I do not know anybody else among tent designers who spends more time on tents than Bo. He has raised questions about every tiny detail, and he has committed himself to finding solutions based on his own experience.

Conversations with Bo are always fun. I have learned about his journey of optimizing his methods, and I share my own optimization process with him, as well. He is tall and I am short. But we have many things in common. One of them is that we never stop until we find the best solutions. I am sure he still has in his mind many more questions he wants to solve, even after 50 years of work.

Jake Lah, a native of Korea, has a long history with both Hilleberg and the outdoor industry. He earned his MBA at the University of Michigan, and is president and founder of DAC, which he started in 1988. DAC has long been the acknowledged leader in tent pole manufacturing and Jake is well known for his meticulous manufacturing methods. Determined to clean up the toxic process of anodizing aluminum, Jake began working on a way to eliminate chemical polishing from



the process in 1995, resulting in DAC’s Green Anodizing process, introduced in 2003. He also started Helinox, which makes compact, lightweight furniture for lifestyle and outdoor use, and is now run by Jake’s son, Young. Jake is also President of the Korea Association for Volunteer Effort and the Chairman of the Kakdang Welfare Foundation.