



HISTORY

HAMMOCKS

In the Swing of Things

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A refreshing way to enjoy our area's coastal breezes, especially as the weather warms from spring to summer, is from the comfort of a hammock. Wrapped up in our cozy cocoon, we may delight in reading a book, taking a nap or simply relaxing while light winds gently sway us back and forth.

As the calm rocking eases your mind, perhaps you will wonder about the origins of these soothing slings. Although the exact year cannot be pinpointed with complete certainty, the general consensus amongst anthropologists and historians is that the hammock dates back about a millennium ago when the Mayans and other indigenous peoples of Central America crafted them from plant fibers or tree bark. These suspended beds served a highly practical purpose: by elevating the body, the hammock prevented contact with the ground below and also afforded protection from pesky or dangerous creatures such as rodents and snakes. According to the writings of several 16th-century explorers, hot coals or a small fire were often set below their berths to provide warmth or ward off insects so they could enjoy a restful night's sleep.

Among experts, it is believed that Christopher Columbus and his men were the first Europeans to observe—and possibly try out—the hammock during the explorers' visit to the Bahamas where they encountered the Taino people, an Arawakan tribe of the Caribbean islands. As he wrote, "A great many Indians in canoes came to the ship today (sic) for the purpose of bartering their cotton, and *hamacas*, or nets, in which they sleep." When Columbus returned to Spain, he brought several of these woven sleeping nets with him.

Throughout the Colonial Era, Spaniards and other Europeans introduced the peoples of the New World to cotten, canvas and other types of cloth for use in hammock making. In part because of their soothing motion and hygiene benefits, hammocks became more popular than the stationary beds of the colonists' native lands in many parts of present-day Latin America. In 1570, the Portuguese-born chronicler of colonial Brazilian history, Pero de Magalhaes



Gandavo wrote, "Most of the beds in Brazil are hammocks, hung in the house from two cords. This custom they took from the Indians of the land."

By the mid-16th century, these sleeping slings made their way from the mainland to use below-deck on boats traveling around the world. The advantages were considerable. To begin, because of the constant motion of the ship, beds on the floor were unstable and could shift, resulting in numerous injuries. Additionally, given the limited interior space within a ship, hammocks became the most common type of bed for many years to come. For these reasons, the English and Spanish navies adopted hammocks in this way. Although, the European versions usually were constructed from heavier canvas that provided less ventilation than its Latin American counterparts. For the next three centuries, including during World War I and World War II, these portable places for sleep were the typical arrangement for sailors. From the Civil War to the Vietnam War, the U.S. Navy also issued its members hammocks to be utilized for sleeping on the go. To save space and trim back costs, these elevated beds replaced cots in the late 19th-century British prison system for a time; however, when inmates realized that the large brass hooks and rings could serve as weapons, the slings were soon removed.

Near the turn of the 20th century, hammocks caught on with two very diverse groups. While frontier farmers found these to be an inexpensive, practical means for sleeping, wealthier families began to use them as a leisure item, much as scores of people do today. Historically, the suspended slings played an integral role during the construction of the Panama Canal when, in the early 1900s, army physician William Gorgas saw their potential in eradicating yellow fever and malaria amongst workers on that project. Since hammocks could easily

be enclosed in mosquito netting and their elevated placement ensured minimal contact with ground-dwelling insects, hammocks provided sleepers with important protection.

Looking back at the history, it's clear that these suspended slings have woven themselves into our lives in many ways. In addition to the many practical benefits, hammocks have also become a popular means of resting for psychological and physiological reasons. If you've ever been curious to know why hammocks are so effective at inducing a relaxed mental state, you may appreciate knowing that a recent study by a team of Swiss researchers offers a scientific explanation for this phenomenon. According to the team's findings, the swinging motion synchronizes brain waves, allowing individuals to both doze off faster and reach a deeper state of sleep.

If you want to enjoy all the advantages that hammocks offer, you may be delighted to know that the endless options available nowadays make it possible to enjoy this form of rest in nearly any environment. For those who engage in outdoor pursuits such as hiking or camping, lightweight models designed specifically for backpacking can be outfitted with a canvas cover for protection from the sun or rain, mosquito netting and even zipped storage compartments. Since it can be a challenge to find an ideal location for securing both ends of a traditional hammock, some include a self-standing metal or wooden frame for supporting the portable bed. Given their versatility, hammocks will continue to be a staple for rest, relaxation and leisure for many more years to come.

This season, be sure to set aside some time to climb into a hammock, get comfortable and rest, enjoying the simplicity of being in the swing of things!