

Note to Jack Frost: Time to chill-out!

Even Old Man Winter loves a little summer leisure

The legend of Jack Frost does not include any mention of a hammock. For that matter, the history of the hammock doesn't have Jack in it, either.

And why would it? Where Jack's frosty fingers knit frigid winter days, the hammock is enticingly interwoven with warm weather. Snow in a hammock is as wrong as a Zamboni in Zimbabwe.

Though the hammock is sometimes said to have been "discovered" by Christopher Columbus, its history is in fact tightly tied to the steamy Western tropics. Hammocks were being used as beds by native peoples across the Caribbean and the Americas for about 500 years before Columbus carried a few of the curious things back to Spain.

Hammock materials ranged widely back then, from used fishing nets to bark from the hamak (thus, hammock) tree, palm fronds, sisal rope and various indigenous fabrics. In the wilds of the New World, the hammock offered a bed

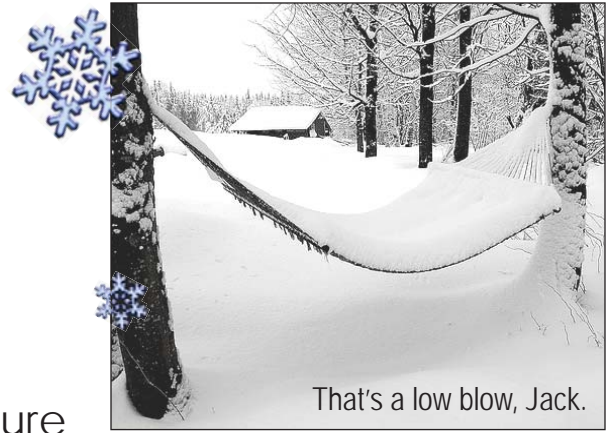
safe from snakes and scorpions; the conquistadors who followed Columbus quickly embraced it, which hardly went unnoticed back in Europe. In the 1600s, the British Navy introduced a canvas hammock as its new ship's bed; the cocooning design kept sailors from being tossed about during heavy seas. By the time of the American Civil War, the canvas hammock was also standard equipment for U.S. Navy seamen, who often continued using it upon returning to shore.

Jump to the late 19th century, when low-country South Carolina riverboat captain Joshua Ward had tired of bedding down atop hot, grass-filled mattresses as he ferried cargo from the inland plantations to just north of his home, the resort town of Pawleys Island. Ward had ruled out canvas hammocks as no better, cramped and sticky-hot, and while rope hammocks allowed air to circulate around the sleeper, those of Ward's day were knotty and unstable, the hemp or manila rope scratchy and uncomfortable.

Ward's quest for cool sleeping finally led him to experiment with hammock design. He started with thicker rope – cotton rope – and a lattice-like weave, which eliminated the need for knots within the hammock bed.

But his true legacy is the invention of the spreader bar for holding a hammock open even when in use. Ward bored a row of holes in two sawed-down staves (that is, slats) from old oak storage barrels. He threaded the holes with lengths of rope, which he then tied to the closing loops on both short sides of the hammock body. Next he tied each set of remaining rope-ends to metal rings for hanging his new bed from post hooks on his boat. And with that, the classic American hammock was born, becoming in the century since the very paragon of leisure.

As for the legend of Jack Frost? He comes from Norway, by way of England. But the far better question is where Jack goes, once winter has wound down. To the North Pole, perhaps? Or Greenland? Not a chance! Think sand, warm and sugar-white. Antigua, maybe, and a to-die-for sunset, a seaside hammock stretched between palm trees. And ol' Jack, lying back, stirring the ice in one of those tiny-umbrella drinks, his glass the only frosty thing for miles.



That's a low blow, Jack.

