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"Family Camping Trips—The Ultimate Experience”

How to Make the Most of Your Family Camping Getaway

By Kimberly Blaker

Camping is the ultimate in outdoor family fun and is loaded with benefits for parents and kids alike. It provides families with unlimited opportunities to experience the great outdoors and learn about nature, from plants and animals to the weather and skies. It offers lessons in history through visits to historical landmarks, buildings, and different regions. It gives parents a break from daily responsibilities and an opportunity to relax and offers childhood adventures found nowhere else. Finally, it offers family vacations at an affordable price, allowing for frequent getaways. So, don't miss the utmost in family fun.

What's the best way to camp?

Your family can choose from a variety of camping options. If you love the experience of roughin' it, pitch a tent, and haul the bare necessities. Tents come in many sizes and styles, some with dividers for separate sleeping quarters.

When purchasing a tent, remember that capacity doesn't include luggage space. If you plan to keep belongings in your tent, opt for a larger capacity, and most

importantly, don't forget padding or a blow up mattress to insulate against the cold ground.

If you like the sound of roughin' it, but want some of the comforts of home, a pop-up camper is the best of both worlds. The canvas sides and pullout sections of pop-ups are surrounded with screens and give the feeling of sleeping in the fresh outdoors.

Pop-ups come in several sizes and often include an icebox or mini refrigerator, heater, air conditioning, portable toilet, shower, kitchen sink, stove, cabinets and storage space, dining table, and other necessities.

Some families prefer to do it in style. Travel trailers and motor homes offer a luxurious nighttime retreat after a day of outdoor fun. Furthermore, the ease in loading and unloading these shelters is great for moving from campsite to campsite, making cross-country travel a cinch.

In addition to the basics, motor homes and travel trailers often contain a full size kitchen, living room complete with sofa and chairs, and separate bedrooms for comfort and privacy.

Does your family like the sound of a cozy cabin in the woods? If so, look for a campground with cabin rentals or a cabin resort. Cabins range from basic single room shelters containing only beds to completely furnished three or four room units including kitchenettes.

When reserving a cabin, learn what is furnished before you go so you'll arrive prepared while avoiding unnecessary packing, and don't forget to ask about electricity, lights, and water.

Experienced campers with older children might try a hike-in shelter for a true wilderness experience. Check with state and national parks for shelters that are sometimes set up along extended trails. After a day of hiking, roll out your sleeping bags under one of these small shelters for a dry night’s sleep.

Camping costs

The cost of travel can make family vacations a rare treat. However, the affordability of camping, allows for frequent getaways. Overnight fees range from a free night’s stay at some state park rustic sites (no showers, toilets, electricity, or water) to \$50 a night at some of the top KOA and Jellystone Camp Park-Resorts. These top of the line campgrounds are loaded with amenities from built-in swimming pools to live entertainment.

State park campgrounds vary from state to state. However, these are often the best deal for families interested in experiencing all that nature has to offer. Fees for overnight accommodations in state parks typically range from \$8 to \$20.

Many state parks have modern facilities including flush toilets, showers, grassy or gravel sites, playgrounds, park stores for firewood and ice, and more. Furthermore, state parks frequently offer miles of wooded hiking or biking trails, natural wonders, historical sites, and much more that may not be found at private camp resorts.

Camping keeps other vacation expenses to a minimum as well including meal and entertainment costs. When camping, many families prefer cooking over the campfire to eating out. Furthermore, most outdoor camping activities are free or available at minimal cost.

Fun camping activities

Whatever your family’s interests, there are plenty of things to see and do when you camp, which can bring about a renewed interest and appreciation for the simple things in life.

Trails offer numerous activities from hiking excursions where your family can collect rocks, leaves, or insects, scout for wildlife, learn about plants and trees, and even survival skills to mountain biking and horse back riding.

Lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams offer fishing, swimming, canoeing or row boating, sun bathing, and more.

Viewing wildlife is one of the most intriguing camping activities. Look for animals either early in the morning or at dusk on dirt roads and trails, in open fields surrounded by woods, and near water. Be patient, walk slowly and quietly, and don’t forget your binoculars.

Other activities your family might enjoy are nature programs, nature centers and historical sites, wandering through mountains and climbing dunes, flying a kite, roller blading on paved trails, and more.

When your family is ready to wind down after a day of play, enjoy reading and telling stories, playing card or board games, watching the sun set, star gazing, and roasting marshmallows.

What to take

Be prepared before heading off on your outing. Make packing easy by purchasing a couple large plastic totes with lids to carry and store your camping supplies. The following are some of the basics you’ll want to take.

- Plastic cups (labeled to save on washing)

- Silverware
- Paper plates and Styrofoam bowls
- Paper towels, food storage bags, and tinfoil
- A cooking source such as a one or two-burner stove
- An aluminum pot and skillet
- Cooking utensils and can opener
- Coffee pot
- Tablecloth
- Ice chest, food, and drinks
- Drinking water and large water container
- Dish soap and dishcloths
- Insect repellent and sunscreen
- Folding chairs
- Backpack
- Radio, flashlight, and batteries
- Lantern and matches
- Firewood (unless available near your campground)
- Knife and hatchet
- Rope and twine
- First-aid kit
- Sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows
- Air mattress or padding
- Personal hygiene items and toilet paper

- Towels and washcloths
- Bikes, roller blades, balls, fishing and other sports equipment
- Camera and binoculars
- Clothing for all types of weather, rain gear, and walking shoes or hiking boots

What *not* to take

Don't get carried away with packing, or before long, camping will become a chore rather than a treat. After making your list weed out items you don't really need. Portable televisions detract from outdoor fun, so leave yours at home.

Think it through before taking your family pet. Some campgrounds don't allow pets and even if they do, won't allow pets to be left at the campsite alone. Taking a pet can hinder many activities and outings including beaches where dogs often aren't allowed.

Easy camp foods

There are many ways to cook when you camp. Most campers contain a built-in stove, or you can purchase a small, single or double-burner gas or liquid-fuel stove. If electricity is available, a crock-pot or electric griddle is a good alternative. You can also carry a charcoal or small gas grill or cook over an open fire.

Unless cooking is your thing, keep meals simple to minimize packing, preparation, and clean up.

Easy foods when camping include: hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, steak, sandwiches, eggs, bacon, sausage, crock pot meals, sweet corn, baked potatoes, canned foods such as baked beans, tuna, chicken, spaghetti, ravioli, and soup, fresh fruit, vegetables and dip, bagels, English muffins, cereal, fruit juice, and hot cocoa.

On the other hand, if you enjoy cooking and good meals are one of the highlights for your family, then make the most of mealtime. With all the options for cooking, you can easily enjoy a gourmet feast.

Camping tips

Camping is often a learn-as-you-go experience. However, the following can alleviate hassles and keep your family safe.

Protect your food from animals and animals from your food by blocking access. Animals can find their way into nearly anything. Raccoons are known to lift lids right off coolers to snatch hot dogs and other treats. A cooler that latches is usually a safe bet. Any food that isn't tightly contained should be stored in your vehicle overnight.

Poor weather can strike at anytime and insect infestations can also make for a miserable experience. Make additional shelter such as a screen tent or tarps and rope part of your camping gear.

Arrive at your camp destination ahead of the crowd. Every campsite is unique, and early arrival can assure a site that satisfies your needs.

When selecting a site look for proximity to restrooms, the playground, electricity, and water. If you have young children, make sure the site isn't close to a river or lake. The amount of shade you'll want will depend on the weather forecast. To avoid mud, a grassy or rock site may be preferred. Also, avoid a site backed up to outhouses, which can smell in the heat and wind.

Know what animals are found in the area and teach your children animal safety. Wild animals usually want to avoid humans as much as we want to avoid them. Still, they can pose risks. In the west, mountain lions have been known to snag children and

even small women. In bear country, those accustomed to people sometimes get too close and result in injury. Even small animals that feel threatened may attack.

SIDEBAR:

Just the right campground

Try one of these sources to find the perfect campground for your family trip.

- Contact the travel or visitor's bureau in the state you plan to visit.
- If you're a AAA member, pick up one of their regional Camp Books at your local branch office.
- Visit the website for Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park Camp-Resorts at <http://www.campjellystone.com/>, or call (800) 558-2954.
- Call for your KOA Directory at (406) 248-7444, or go to <http://www.koa.com/> to make your online reservation.
- Visit <http://usparks.about.com/blstparklistings.htm> for the contact information on state park services in all 50 states.
- Purchase the National Park Service Camping Guide from Roundabout Publications by calling (800) 455-2207 or by visiting <http://usparks.about.com/msubfindpark.htm>
- For a comprehensive directory of private, state, and national campgrounds, pick up Woodall's North American Campground Directory found in most camping supply stores, or order online at <http://www.woodalls.com/>

The End

PULL QUOTE: If you like the sound of roughin' it, but want some of the comforts of home, a pop-up camper is the best of both worlds.

PULL QUOTE: Think it through before taking your family pet.

WAYS TO LOCALIZE: List of area camp supply stores, RV centers, and campgrounds close to home.

Kimberly Blaker of New Boston, Michigan writes for parenting and women's magazines across the United States and other publications.

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