

August 2005 | Feature

Not Your Father's Campground

Luxury camping entices city slickers to sleep out in the woods

By **Maryann Hammers**

When I was kid, our family vacations consisted of camping. I remember laughing out loud at squirrels cavorting on our picnic table, inhaling the clean smell of open space and staring in awe at the night sky. I had never seen such stars! But I also recall struggling to pitch the tent, tossing and turning in lumpy sleeping bags, swatting at mosquitoes and “holding it in” to avoid the long trek to the outhouse.

During the day, we could swim in the muddy-bottomed lake. Or we could, um, go jump in the lake, as my dad helpfully pointed out. Those were pretty much our choices.

Over the ensuing decades, I've been fairly vocal about my distaste for that kind of roughing it. So it came as a surprise to many when I cheerfully loaded up my car with ice chest, paper plates and hiking boots and announced that I was taking my boyfriend camping.

And, in fact, Damon and I were headed to a campground, so I suppose I'd pass a lie-detector test. But we spent the night in a king-sized bed, snuggled under a snow-white duvet. I had cracked our cabin window open to hear the pleasant pit-pat of a light drizzle and the song of the rushing creek. Next morning, we plugged in the coffeemaker and sat on our front porch under an oak-and sycamore canopy. An aggressive scrub jay, two woodpeckers with festive crimson-colored yarmulkes, several sparrows and a shy squirrel pretended to befriend us, but I cynically believe they were really after our bagel crumbs.

We were at El Capitan Canyon, a 3,500-acre campground in the Las Padres National Forest north of Santa Barbara. The place is perfect for folks who love solitude and scenery but are less enthusiastic about sleeping bags and outhouses. A hundred or so cabins feature bathrooms with niceties such as shampoo, mint conditioner and thick towels (ours had a Jacuzzi); kitchenettes (but no dishes or utensils); stovepipe fireplace and microwave, in case the firepit turns out to be a hassle. The homey structures are angled to face the creek, so from our porch or picnic bench, nature was all we could see and hear.

In addition, canvas-walled “safari tents” are scattered about the grounds. And they are almost as nice as the cabins, with throw rugs, chairs, big beds, towels and bath amenities. Tent-dwellers have to use the public bath facilities, but the showers have doors, toilets flush and everything is immaculate.

The Canyon Market carries the expected camping gear, firewood and bug repellent—as well as fancy \$40 walking sticks and a good wine selection. For those who want to cook on the firepit, there are complete BBQ kits with all the fixin's, from baked beans and garlic bread to fire starter, wood, utensils and ingredients for s'mores. The deli section is stocked with readymade salads and sandwiches, or campers can order a pizza, hot breakfast or latté. There are plenty of vegetarian options, such as veggie scrambles with no-meat sausage, veggie burgers and sourdough rolls stuffed with avocado, tomatoes and roasted red peppers.

The place offers free WiFi, a big swimming pool, 17 miles of trails, in-cabin massages and dozens of shiny beach cruisers. Damon and I hopped on two of the bikes and spent an afternoon pedaling



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(Photo: Steven Lam)



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along El Capitan State Beach, breathing in the heady scents of salt water, wild fennel, sage and campfires while listening to the crash of waves hitting the rocky shore.

That evening, we nuked some spuds, sipped some Zin we'd picked up at the Canyon Market and sat on our front porch so we could hear the creek and see the stars. We proclaimed this was possibly the best dinner we had ever eaten and debated which was louder—the croaking frogs or chirping crickets. And we decided that really, camping isn't half-bad.

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MaryAnn Hammers is a freelance writer who usually prefers high-end hotels.

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