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TRAVEL

Glamping Adds a Touch of Luxe to the National Parks

Explorer

By AMY TARA KOCH AUG. 9, 2016

The notion of nodding off under the stars to the crackle of a fire in the shadow of ancient ponderosa pines sounds dreamy. Here's the catch. Though I love communing with nature, I detest discomfort. This includes interacting with moist soil and insects as well as partaking in tiresome camp chores like tent pitching, fire making, food schlepping and foraging for makeshift, leave-no-trace toilets.

Sleeping on the cold, dank ground? Not happening. I paid my dues slogging it out in summer sleep-away camp where I felt transcendental meditation (of the pediatric variety) was required to endure itchy nights within a soggy, Saran Wrap-thin tent that doubled as a cafeteria for red ants.

Ironically, I am a sporty gal. I may not like sleeping in dirt, but intense, outdoor recreation — especially hiking — transports me to my happy place. So, when my children, ages 14 and 10, expressed interest in camping, it made me think: Would I be willing to give the great outdoors a rematch? If an upgraded sleeping scenario were involved, absolutely.

I am not alone in my predilection for a touch of luxe in the wild. “Glamping,” or glamorous camping, has spiked in popularity over the last decade. Now, a handful of savvy adventure companies and experiential campgrounds offer luxury getaways (think of cots inside state-of-the-art tents, outdoor furniture, chef-crafted meals, better-than-basic bathroom facilities) for not-so-rustic folks to unplug in comfort. With this summer commemorating the National Park Centennial (Aug. 25 marks the official date on which President Wilson signed the act that created the National Park Service), I wondered: Was it possible to glamp inside of (or, within proximity to) America’s most celebrated playgrounds? It turns out, the answer is yes. Suddenly, roughing it seemed almost appealing.

Here are four standout glamping experiences available in and around the national parks:

REI Adventures

REI is more than a retailer for outdoor enthusiasts. The company has an adventure travel arm that has been leading excursions on seven continents since 1987.

When the Signature Camping product was introduced four years ago, it became an instant hit. Small-group excursions (12 guests maximum) include hosts and multiple guides in nine national parks, concierge-style services and the seemingly magical appearance of top-of-the-line gear — REI’s spacious Kingdom 6 tents with bug-proof mesh panels, folding cots and inflatable sleeping pads, interior ceiling lights, woven rugs for added insulation, a bedside table with a pot of local flowers. The trips have been a boon for the brand’s demographic that had a passion for recreation but were apprehensive about traditional camping. One such apprehension? Outhouses. Or, often worse, having to relieve oneself under a leafy tree. Not to worry. Unless you are deep within the backcountry (for these itineraries, REI hosts construct portable showers, elevated “pit” toilets and hand washing stations) standard campground bathroom facilities are within walking distance. Other hospitable perks: in-tent delivery of coffee, tea or hot chocolate each morning and Epsom salt foot baths at the end of the day.

REI offers 13 camping itineraries in Yosemite, Rocky Mountain, Zion, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, Grand Canyon, Arches and Great Smoky Mountains. Some Signature Camp trips cover multiple park properties. Children (age 8 and older) can take part in any of the itineraries. Or choose a family-specific itinerary with shorter, less challenging hikes.

Depending upon destination, days are filled with hiking, rafting, kayaking and zip lining, all guided by local experts who often veer off the beaten track to deepen guests' perspective of the park.

Expect hearty food with regional flair: pork green chili in the Rocky Mountains, Southwestern chicken salad in Zion and Southern barbecued pulled pork and fried apple pie in the Great Smoky Mountains. Active days come to a close with s'mores and stargazing by the campfire.

Rates range from \$1,149 to \$3,999 per person. There is a youth discount (17 and younger) of \$100 to \$400 depending on the price of the trip.

Note: 10 percent of the retail price for each REI national park adventure will be donated to the National Park Foundation through 2016.

Backroads

A 37-year veteran of orchestrating multisport adventures, Backroads hosts trips in the United States, Canada, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. Their specialty? Connecting guests to nature. Minus the (organizational) headache or, when camping is concerned, backache.

Their roster of camping trips (also featuring camp hosts, a chef and activity guides) within the national parks includes the usual suspects (Yellowstone, Grand Tetons, Bryce, Zion, Grand Canyon) as well as less trafficked national parks like the San Juan Islands in Washington, Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, Glacier National Park in Montana and Redwood National Park in Northern California.

All national park itineraries feature deluxe camping. Along with a high level of service (full camp setup, chef-prepared meals, activity organization and luggage

transport) comes gear (six-foot dome tents, cots layered with air mattresses, 3-D sleeping bags and pillows and portable chairs to make campfire encounters more cozy) to elevate the overall experience. As is de rigueur for glamping, bathrooms are decent and easily accessible.

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Backroads trips average about 22 guests. Mornings kick off with a communal huddle at which team leaders provide a snapshot of the day. Then it's off to discover the parks' iconic vistas and lesser-known sights — by hike, bike and, when possible, kayak or raft.

A foodie highlight: lavish picnics and afternoon snacks produced in spectacular settings. Think of smoked trout, tabbouleh salad and angel food cake whipped out of a kayak on the glimmering shores of Yellowstone Lake; thermoses of hot cocoa (spiked with mint schnapps, optional) and homemade chocolate brownies extracted from the trip leader's backpack at the icy blue summit of Harding Icefield Trail in the Kenai Peninsula.

All national park glamping itineraries have family-specific departures designed for a group of families or a single-family multigenerational trip. The only difference is the addition of child-oriented activities (scavenger hunts, tie dye, canyon rim mule rides and evening talent shows) along with shorter, less intense hikes. Of course, the above scenario would not play well to families with teenagers or college-age

children. For them, the company has developed “family breakaway” programming, active recreation combined with plenty of peer-to-peer socializing (families with similarly aged children are paired) and age-appropriate night life (sporting events, live music) when possible.

Prices range from \$1,998 to \$2,298 per person, depending on the trip. There are youth discounts, which also depend upon the trip.

Under Canvas

It’s the ultimate “glampsite”: Airy wood and canvas tents curated with boutique hotel precision: king-size beds, plush linens, animal hide area rugs, well-worn leather chairs, a wood-burning potbelly stove. There is even daily maid service, an amenity that lives up to the company’s tagline: “camping as it should be.”

The Under Canvas founders Jacob and Sarah Dusek translated time spent on Africa safaris into seasonally permanent camps within 10 miles of some of America’s most revered sites: Yellowstone, Moab, Glacier and, new this year, the Grand Canyon.

Tents range in category from basic (sleeps four, no bathroom) to deluxe (sleeps four with en suite bathroom) and even suites (sleeps five, with en suite bathroom) that boast a bedroom “wing” and separate lounge area. For families, the basic tent with adjacent tepee is an ideal setup. Parents get the fluffy bed, children get to sleep in the tepee. The shared bathhouse (an adventure for kids) is surprisingly modern with hot running water, showers, a flushing toilet (versus pump) and ceramic sinks.

National parks generally have well-marked trails. But for anything more complicated like guided hikes, zip lining, horseback riding or river rafting, assistance is available through a concierge.

At dusk, staff members light up the fire pit, a communal hub. There are nightly activities (volleyball, horseshoes, live music) as well as talks by National Park Service staff and astronomer-led stargazing.

Food is not included in the overnight rate. Choices are to drive into town and eat at a restaurant, bring your own groceries (except Yellowstone, which is a bear zone so no food is allowed at camp) and DIY grilling in one of the camp's fire rings (don't forget to bring your own cooler) or order "fireside provisions" of breakfast, lunch and dinner from the staff. All locations offer a cowboy cookout, a Western-style barbecue with live bluegrass music (not included in the price) on alternating days of the week. Only Yellowstone has a restaurant, **Bar-N-Ranch**, on site.

Depending upon tent type, rates range from \$175 to \$425 per night. Rates are based on double occupancy per tent. There is a \$25 surcharge per night when adding more than two people to any tent.

Note: A car is necessary to travel to and from the location, as well as to enter the park.

Sequoia High Sierra Camp

When driving through Northern California's Southern Sierra Nevada, a mythical landscape begins to emerge at 5,000 feet, namely massive sequoias, some towering as high as a 27-story building. Drive higher still, through a white fir and ponderosa pine forest, to find the Sequoia High Sierra Camp perched at 8,200 feet within Giant Sequoia National Monument in the Sequoia National Forest.

If seclusion is your aim, this property delivers privacy and then some. The closest grocery store is 2.5 hours away. A mile-long hike is required — with luggage — to reach the property from the parking lot. Cell service? Not a chance. At this elevation, even electricity is generator-powered. And therein lies the charm of this wilderness retreat, which borders both Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

There are 32 bungalow-style tents (14 feet by 24 feet) with California cool appeal: rustic American décor (wrought-iron chairs, Pendleton wool blankets), vintage area rugs (to warm up concrete floors) and oversize shutters (built into the sturdy canvas walls), which bathe the interior with golden alpine light. Most tents have twin beds. But there are a few king-size ones. For families, the tent's seating area can be configured to accommodate additional beds.

Again, no grungy outhouses to contend with. A modern bathhouse with single-sex restrooms (flush toilets) and outdoor showers (with hot water) is walking distance from cabins.

High altitude encourages appetite, which is a good thing when three mountain-size meals are included in your nightly rate. You'll tuck into a full breakfast buffet and five-course farm-to-table dinner (wine is available but not included in the rate) served on an open air dining pavilion. A pack-your-own picnic lunch smorgasbord is set out at breakfast.

Though the owners Burr and Suzanne Hughes will help you plot out your daily hikes, recreation is more of a DIY operation. From the camp, there are many trails, which lead to wildflower-filled meadows, glacial lakes and craggy peaks with splendid vistas; many lead right into the national parks.

Essential sightseeing: Sequoia National Park's **Giant Forest**, where you will find the largest (by volume) living tree in the world, the **General Sherman Tree**, clocking in at nearly 275 feet tall. Equally sublime is Kings Canyon National Park, a lush oasis that the naturalist John Muir deemed "a rival to Yosemite."

If you want a guided hike or to sign up for a formal tour of sights such as Boyden Cavern (although this site is temporarily closed because of a fire) or Crystal Cave, research and book in advance as there is no phone service at the camp. The nearby Horse Corral Pack Station offers guided horseback riding for all levels of rider, even beginners.

Nightly rates are per person, not per tent. \$250 adults, \$150 for children 11 and younger.

Note: You must have a car to access the property.

A version of this article appears in print on August 14, 2016, on page TR5 of the New York edition with the headline: Four Ways to 'Glamp' in the National Parks.