

Into the Woods: Tentless "Camping" Options



Love the wilderness but don't necessarily love tents? There's more than one way to bunk in the great outdoors.

Lookouts

Here's your chance to live out that recurring fantasy of life as a Forest Service ranger, circa 1935. Turn back the clock with a stay at one of these restored guard stations or lookout cabins in Northern California's Shasta-Trinity National Forest. If you're seeking a truly unmitigated escape, this is the way to go—no RVs, no neighbors.

Forest Glen Guard Station (Hayfork area)

Located by the South Fork of the Trinity River, this lookout, which dates back to 1916, affords excellent access to swimming and hiking. Though there is room for eight—two twins, a double and lots of sleeping-bag space—as well as electricity and a flush toilet, there is no running water, refrigerator or stove. Open year-round.

recreation.gov, located off Route 3 near Hayfork, in Trinity National Forest

Girard Ridge Lookout (McCloud area)

Situated 4,809 feet above sea level, this raised fire lookout has vistas of Mount Shasta, Castle Crags and Lassen Peak. At final approach, be prepared for a drive up a steep and narrow dirt road. Girard Ridge closes for the season in mid-October.

recreation.gov, located off Interstate 5 toward Dunsmuir, north of Redding

Hirz Mountain Lookout (Shasta Lake area)

Because this lookout is raised 20 feet above the ground, you'll be rewarded with unbeatable 360-degree views of Mount Shasta and Shasta Lake. Drive 10 miles over rough roads, and complete the journey with a quarter-mile hike to the cabin. It closes for the season in mid-October.

recreation.gov, located off Interstate 5, Gilman Road exit

Eco Resorts

For the city slicker who wants to get away but lacks the gear or survival skills, there's a happy medium. Meet the "eco resort." The torch runner of this genre is Big Sur's much-hyped **Treebones Resort**, but for those who don't plan way ahead, a few alternatives.

Costanoa (near Half Moon Bay)

Campers who'd rather not part with wi-fi and wine bed down here. Accommodations take the form of rustic cabins, tent bungalows and campsites for those tent-equipped and ready to "rough" it. Unnecessary luxuries include a spa, restaurant and indoor shower areas.

2001 Rossi Rd. (at Hwy. 1), Pescadero, 650-879-1100, costanoa.com

Sequoia High Sierra Camp (Sequoia National Park)

To get here, you have the option of either a 12- or one-mile hike in. When making your choice, keep in mind that you won't need to lug much—the camp's canvas bungalows are well provisioned. Cell phone reception there is not, but you do get wine and craft beer service, plus three meals a day cooked by a chef. The camp closes in early October.

65745 Big Meadow Rd., Giant Sequoia National Monument, 866-654-2877, sequoiahighsierracamp.com

Big Sur Campground and Cabins (Big Sur)

This family-oriented setup along the Big Sur River offers amenities like a playground and inner-tube rentals, in addition to nearby hiking trails. Stay in a tent (the old-fashioned kind—pitch it yourself), a tent-cabin or a cabin-cabin.

47000 Hwy. 1, Big Sur, 831-667-2322, bigsurcamp.com

Van Camping

If a tent's too high-maintenance and an RV's too big, head to Lost Campers USA in Dogpatch, where you can rent a camper-van equipped with a full-size bed, awning and dining kit (table, chairs, camping stove, cooler, etc.) Co-founder Emma Thomson recommends these lesser-known campgrounds, all within 100 miles of the city, so you can take advantage of Lost Campers' 100 free miles per day.

2955 Third St., 415-386-2693, lostcampersusa.com

Ocean Cove Campground (Sonoma County)

Situated on the rocky ocean bluffs of the Sonoma coastline, this breathtaking 100-space site is only a two-hour drive away. Hop on Hwy. 1 and hug the Pacific the entire way there. Reservations are taken for large groups only.

707-847-3422, oceancove.org

Del Valle (near Livermore)

Just 10 miles South of Livermore, this is some of the best camping you'll find before resorting to the tried-and-true Marin County circuit. The oak-forested valley encapsulates a five-mile lake with two swimming beaches, plus a 28-mile backcountry hiking trail.

Make campsite reservations at reserveamerica.com.

Big Basin (Santa Cruz)

If you want to camp in the shadow of our majestic state tree, Big Basin—which has the longest continuous stand of coastal redwoods south of San Francisco—is your best bet. Stay here and attempt to conquer the 80-mile web of trails winding and weaving through the redwood forest to the sea.

Book a campsite at reserveamerica.com.