

Regal views top crowned peaks Sequoia High Sierra Camp

Call of the wild awaits -- with the comfort of a bed, tent and gourmet cuisine at the campsite

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My first evening at the new Sequoia High Sierra Camp, we were seated on the edge of a hilltop lookout and absorbed a world-class view of Kings Canyon and the Monarch Wilderness. At 8,500 feet, the air has a thin, pristine taste to it, tinged by the scent of pine duff. Off to the right, a granite dome called the Obelisk crowns the group of Spanish Peaks.

We were talking about that day's adventure, an epic hike to Mitchell Peak, one of the best lookouts in the world, when I was tapped on the shoulder.

"Dinner," announced Ryan Solien, as he handed me a glass of cabernet. What? Wine? At a wilderness outpost? Just then, I sensed this would not be your average camp dinner with grilled hot dogs.

How about scallop carpaccio, which Solien perfected as the private chef to Bruce Springsteen. Lamb shanks? Roast duck? Veal chops? Caesar salad? Strawberry shortcake? And other stuff I can't spell. One night I also snagged a barbecued rib-eye. "This is not called 'food,' " noted my buddy and TV producer, Jim Schlosser, who understands these things better than I do. "This is called 'cuisine.' "

As the second year of the Sequoia High Sierra Camp opened last weekend, it hit me that there is no place else like this in America. This is not where you come for a primitive, low-cost sleep-on-the-dirt affair where cooking consists of pouring boiling water into packs of freeze-dried chili. I love primal, difficult expeditions, and have several planned this summer, but here, that is like comparing the North Pole to the South Pole.

At the High Sierra Camp, you sleep in Tuscan-inspired canvas tent bungalows with plush-top beds and heaters (there are some things I just cannot do when camping,

and sleeping in a bed with a heater is one of them; I brought my sleeping bag). And there is daily maid service. Hot showers are nearby. The food? Out of this world: Breakfast, lunch and dinner, served at the dining pavilion, an awesome open-air structure with massive wood pillars and views to die for.

All this comes at a price, and some may bark at the tag -- \$250 per person per day. The reality is if you want a wilderness-like experience, but want to sleep in a bed, get catered to, eat gourmet cuisine, drink wine, and still have stellar adventures available every day, this is the best place anywhere to get it. That's why it's spendy.

The Sequoia High Sierra Camp is in Sequoia National Monument, just outside the boundary for Sequoia National Park, edging the Jennie Lakes Wilderness and overlooking Kings Canyon. Last year at this time the place was still buried in snow, but the mild winter has not only allowed the camp to open a month early (which means reservations are wide-open), but all the best hikes are free of snow: Mitchell Peak, Seville Lakes, Rowell Meadow and the one-way glide to the bottom of Kings Canyon. In addition, you can also make easy day trips to Sequoia National Park (General Sherman Tree, Giant Forest, Grant Grove, Moro Rock, Crystal Cave) to the south and Kings Canyon to the north.

To get here, you make the circuitous drive from the San Joaquin Valley to a little-known trailhead. Your car can be parked inside a locked gate. From here, you hike a mile with a 300-foot climb through forest, past a creek and meadow to a 40-acre private parcel where this 5-acre camp was created in the past few years.

When you first arrive, you are greeted by Courtney Wilkins, the mountain hostess, who then presents you with a homemade "Welcome Cookie." The idea, you quickly discover, is for you to set up shop at a wilderness outpost, that is, a luxury trip on the edge of 2 million acres of wilderness and two world-class national parks.

After taking in the views near the dining pavilion, you pick up a bottled water and head to your bungalow. Compared with all other tent cabins, they are spacious (330 square feet), are furnished with twins or kings (yeah, there are big fluffy pillows), dresser, bedside table, screen windows with cedar shutters, area rugs and new 80,000-BTU heaters (for the uninitiated, mountain nights at 8,200 feet can be chilly, with 40-degree temperature swings from dawn to late afternoon).

Once you've established your bungalow, you're on your own. The crowning trek here is the 3-mile (one-way) hike to 10,365-foot Mitchell Peak. Your reward is top-of-the-world views of nearly 100 miles of Sierra Crest, Kings Canyon, the Monarch Divide and dozens of peaks, canyons and points of renown.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, you can make the 8-mile, one-way hike to Cedar Grove at the base of Kings Canyon, where a shuttle will pick you up for the return trip to camp. Two other great trips are fly-fishing (gear available at camp) at nearby creeks or rivers, and hiking to pristine alpine lakes in the Jennie Lake Wilderness.

If you want to go:

Price: \$250 per person per day, based on double occupancy. Reservations required at (866) 654-2877.

Maps: Sequoia National Forest or Monarch/Jennie Lake Wilderness; order with credit card at www.fs.fed.us/recreation/nationalforeststore.

Dining: Breakfast, lunch, dinner provided, including snacks and drinks. Barbecue available. Vegetarian option. Bag lunches for those on outdoor treks.

Facilities: 36 bungalows, double or king beds, new 80,000 BTU heaters, daily maid service; dining pavilion; fire pit with teak benches and chairs; hot showers; comfort stations placed near most remote bungalows.

Shuttle: Transport arrives at Cedar Grove in Kings Canyon at 2 p.m. on Tuesdays and Fridays to pick up hikers taking 3-hour, 8-mile, one-way trip downhill on Sheep Creek Trail through Zumwalt Meadows to Cedar Grove.

Fly-fishing: Loaner fly-fishing gear available for day outings.

How to get there: From Fresno, take Highway 180 east to the Big Stump Entrance Station for Kings Canyon National Park. Continue straight 1.5 miles to the Generals Highway. Turn right (toward Sequoia National Park) and go 7 miles to Forest Road 14S11 (signed Big Meadows Horse Corral). Turn left and go 10.5 miles (narrow at times) to Forest Road 13S12 (signed Marvin Pass Trailhead). Turn right and go 2.8 miles to the end of the road. A billboard and trailhead is available adjacent to parking. Gated road to formal camp parking is on the left.

Parking: Vehicles are parked on private property behind gate, not at Forest Service trailhead.

Web site: www.sequoiahhighsierracamp.com.

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