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WEEKEND ESCAPE

Sierra bliss, without roughing it

The forest setting is rugged, but the digs are not. Plump beds, clean linen, cozy tents and an on-site gourmet chef beckon hike-in guests to this luxury camp.

By Susan Spano, Times Staff Writer
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NO pain, no gain. That's what people always say to get you to do something hard, like carry 30 pounds of gear on your back, sleep on the ground, eat freeze-dried food and go without a bath. But if you had the chance to get into the wilderness without such hassle — be honest now — wouldn't you take it?

Some die-hard lovers of the great outdoors claim to appreciate the hardships of backpacking. But I felt plenty appreciative when I heard I could sleep on clean sheets and eat gourmet meals at a new luxury tent camp in Giant Sequoia National Monument.

Sequoia High Sierra Camp sits on 40 of the 49,000 acres of private land that was grandfathered into the monument.

The last part of my drive in was along beautiful California 180, which passed through Central Valley orange groves on its way toward the 200-foot-tall

sequoias on the western side of the Sierra Nevada.



As the foothills yielded to the mountains, I turned south on Generals Highway (California 198) for about eight more miles.

After that, I had my choice of ways to reach the camp. The hard way: hiking 11 miles on the Twin Lakes Trail, starting from Lodgepole Campground in adjacent Sequoia National Park. The easy way: 1 1/2 miles on the Marvin Pass Trail, which begins 10 miles down Big Meadows Horse Corral Road. I took the easy way.

The walk up a boulder-strewn ridge though thick pine and fir was a good way to stretch my legs and get acclimated. The camp is pitched on a steep hill at 8,200 feet above sea level. Halfway up the mountainside is the massive open-air wood dining pavilion and below it the bathhouse with flush toilets and hot showers.

The 36 tents, each outfitted with two plump twin beds covered in double-sheeted duvets and Pendleton blankets, are in clusters. Graded gravel paths connect everything.

Camping doesn't get much cushier, but giving wimps a way to enjoy the outdoors without getting dirt under their fingernails wasn't the motivation.

About 10 years ago, Burr Hughes, a Memphis, Tenn., businessman, launched himself into a second career by getting a master's degree in sustainable architecture at Cambridge University in England. There, he learned how to build structures that do as little damage as possible to the environment by grading to minimize erosion, building away from streams and burying septic tanks deep underground. Then Hughes decided to put the knowledge to use by creating a wilderness resort.

While planning, Hughes was drawn to the tent-camp phenomenon of the early 20th century, when Americans vacationed in temporary enclaves in scenic places such as Coronado Island near San Diego.

"Tents don't tear up the ground, and people like to stay in them," said Hughes, a tall, courtly man with a thick Southern accent.

He found further inspiration at the High Sierra camps in Yosemite National Park. There was a wonderful camaraderie among the guests, mostly educated, older couples who returned to the camps season after season. "They hike during the day and get to know each

other over dinner," Hughes said.



Impressive views, menus

I spent two nights at Sequoia High Sierra Camp a few weeks after it opened Aug. 1, when management company Delaware North was still working out the kinks. The reservation clerk who booked my stay couldn't tell me how to get here from Los Angeles. Topographical maps on the website were unreadable. A park ranger at Grant Grove Visitor Center in nearby Kings Canyon National Park had never heard of the new camp, and there were few signs for it on the road. Consequently, many guests arrived miffed, but Burr and Suzanne Hughes were on hand to help them off with their packs and offer a welcome snack: mint tea and orange-spice cookies.

The heart of the camp is the dining pavilion, which has big timber columns, round tables, a few space heaters, books, maps and a sitting area. But people pull patio chairs to the edge of the hill, where there's a fire ring and view of Kings Canyon, and the Monarch

Wilderness beyond.

Big breakfast buffets are laid out in the morning. During the meal, a staff member comes by to find out what kind of sandwich you want in your sack lunch, because it's presumed most guests will head off on day hikes after breakfast.

Dinners, a far cry from ramen noodles, are multi-course affairs created by Ryan Solien, who trained at the California Culinary Institute and was a private chef to Bruce Springsteen and Faith Hill. The menu on my first night started with scallop carpaccio, followed by slow-cooked lamb shanks on goat cheese risotto and crème brûlée for dessert. The next night, it was brie samosas, Caesar salad that Solien prepared at the table, roast duck and strawberry shortcake.

Beer is available, as is wine, a red and a white by Charles Shaw, a.k.a. Two-Buck Chuck. The second night, Brian Muldoon, one of my tablemates, passed around a bottle of finer red wine he carried to the camp in his knapsack.

It's all just as Hughes hoped — a civilized, convivial air prevails. Guests talk about the hikes they took during the day, their bad knees and bear encounters (though none had been spotted in the camp).

There were couples from Texas, Sacramento and Los

Angeles, including Muldoon, of Tarzana, and his wife, Susan Hall. We hiked together for about three miles up 10,365-foot Mitchell Peak, snapped pictures on the summit and got so involved in conversation on the way down that we took the wrong trail and didn't notice for a mile.

Other nearby trails lead to Rowell Meadow, Kanawyer Gap, Mt. Maddox and Agnew Grove. For the ambitious, there's a 13-mile round trip south to Seville Lake.

Built to be eco-friendly

Of course, you could spend the day reading in your canvas tent. They have screen doors and see-through mesh panels on all four sides, providing mountain views but limited privacy. They are roomy and comfortable, with concrete floors, a table and chairs, lanterns and sealed canisters for stashing items that might attract field mice or bears. Organic toiletries, fresh towels and a basket for carrying them to the bathhouse are also provided.

The beds present an open invitation to loll around, swaddled in good linen. Even in summer, it gets cold after sunset at 8,200 feet, but I stayed toasty at night, thanks to the thick bedding.

After my visit, Hughes told me he planned to install propane

heaters and shades for privacy. Because many of the tents are a stiff hike to the bathhouse, discouraging visits there in the middle of the night, he also intends to add portable toilets in more remote parts of the camp next summer.

Hughes acknowledges that the camp is a work in progress, unlike 72-year-old Bearpaw High Sierra Camp, a smaller tent enclave in Sequoia National Park to the south.

The season for both camps is June through September, weather permitting, and services are similar. But an 11 1/2 -mile hike is the only way to get to Bearpaw, and such touches as the bed linens and gourmet cuisine give the Hughes place a more hedonistic air.

I quickly got over feeling like a wimp. I did, however, wonder what environmentalists thought about its construction, which required building a road between the camp and Marvin Pass trailhead.

Eric Antebi, a spokesman for the Sierra Club, told me the organization hadn't taken a position on the camp because it is on private land; the Forest Service has remained neutral, said Hume Lake District Ranger John D. Exline.

Hughes has no problem justifying the camp to environmentalists. He said that given his eco-friendly

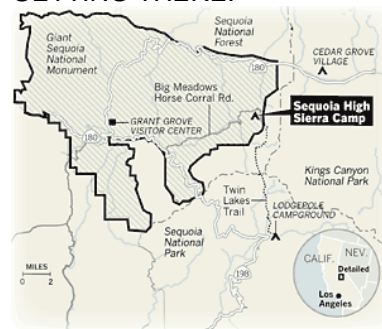
precautions, it has less effect on the land than the campers and backpackers who scatter throughout the wilderness, often leaving traces of their presence.

"The impact here is in one place, where it can be managed and mitigated," he said. "The Swiss figured that out long ago with their hut-to-hut hiking system. People don't pitch tents in the Alps."

Makes sense to me. Anyway, I didn't feel like dwelling on the point after hiking up Mitchell Peak with only a day pack, taking a hot shower and dining on slow-cooked lamb shanks. By then, I was nodding off in a nest of clean sheets and blankets.

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GETTING THERE:



From Los Angeles, it's about 250 miles to the part of Giant Sequoia National Monument, where the Sequoia High Sierra Camp is, by way of winding, mountainous California 198. It's

longer but faster to drive north on Interstate 5 to California 99. In Fresno, go east on California 180, to 198. Driving and parking directions are on the camp's website.

WHERE TO STAY:

Sequoia High Sierra Camp, (866) 654-2877, <http://www.sequoiahighsierracamp.com>, has 36 tents, which cost \$500 a night for two people, including three meals a day. Extra adult is \$250 per day. Next year, (2007) the camp is scheduled to be open from June 15 to Oct. 7, weather permitting. Reservations for 2007 are available now. There is a 60-day cancellation policy; full fees must be paid in advance.

TO LEARN MORE:

Giant Sequoia National Monument is administered by Sequoia National Forest, 1839 S. Newcomb St., Porterville, CA 93257; (559) 784-1500, <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/sequoia>