



TRAVEL

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travel



Banner image above: A fiery orange sunset during dinner caused everyone to stop eating and take notice

"Glamping" In The High Sierras

"Tonight's dinner will start with firecracker shrimp in a golden tomato vinaigrette accompanied by couscous plaf seasoned with curry. Then I'll prepare your Caesar salad tableside, and that will be followed by fresh asparagus risotto. The main course is halibut topped with corn and avocado relish. For dessert, we're serving warm chocolate molten cake with fresh strawberry coulis."

As chef Ryan Solen spoke, I could feel my mood shifting. My husband and I had arrived at Sequoia High Sierra Camp (SHSC) mid-afternoon via the designated forest trail. We probably had too much gear, but it was the muck created by melting snow that really made me cranky.

"If this is glamping, I'm not impressed," I growled repeatedly.

"Glamping" — glamorous camping — is a new concept that has rapidly gained popularity among people who love the outdoors, but have no interest in roughing it. A poster child for this trend, SHSC is located in Sequoia National Forest between Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks. Here on a steep hillside, 36 furnished tents, a spacious dining pavilion, and a bathroom with hot showers and flushing loos are connected by gravel paths. The 14 x 24-foot tents have concrete floors and receive daily service including fresh towels and bottled water.

In spite of our muddy arrival, freshly-baked oatmeal cookies gave me hope that our uphill slog was not in vain — and this exquisite evening meal was welcome confirmation. In addition to the five courses, I savored the scenery. At an elevation of 8,282 feet, the camp provides a view over the tops of red fir, lodgepole, and ponderosa pine. A fiery orange sunset on a distant ridge caused everyone to stop eating and take notice.

Our fellow campers included families with school-age kids and couples of all ages sans children — some with dogs. SHSC owners Burr and Suzanne Hughes are from Memphis and exude Southern hospitality, as well as a love for the Sierras. They purchased 40 acres of land in 2000 and designed and built the camp, which opened in 2006. He has a master's degree in architecture (with an emphasis in sustainable design) from the University of Cambridge.

At this altitude, the air is thin and nights are cold, but we slept very comfortably in our plush-top king bed with a down comforter and Pendleton wool blankets. When I awoke in the wee hours, a full moon washed the camp in an ethereal white light.

It was still chilly at breakfast, where Solen served asparagus frittata, crisp bacon, sausage, and a cold buffet that included squeeze-your-own orange juice and fresh muffins. Our new friends from Orange County were off to Seville Lake (12 miles roundtrip) for a swim and some fishing, but Richard and I set our sights on 10,365-foot Mitchell Peak (seven miles roundtrip).

By the time we packed our lunch and set out, the temperature was about 70 degrees and perfect for walking. Since I can get lost in a shopping mall (see "directionally challenged" comment on this month's Back Page), Richard led the way. It was early in the season for wildflowers, but we did see lots of meadow lupine and bright red snow plants, which owe their survival to melting snowbanks. The forest was remarkably quiet, and we stopped several times and listened to the wind whistling through the trees.

The trail was steep, and I never would have made it without my borrowed hiking stick. At the top of Mitchell Peak, we scrambled over boulders and were rewarded with a 360-degree panorama of both Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks. In addition to the view, I also felt the psychic reward of doing something that was, for me, quite physically challenging.

That night at dinner (which included cauliflower and brie soup, lamb shanks in Chianti, and bananas flambé), we swapped stories with our fellow campers. Our O.C. friends had an up-close-and-personal encounter with a black bear, which luckily didn't find them very interesting. Other guests had walked to Lookout Peak just a few miles from camp and spent the afternoon engaged in a hot Monopoly game. A few people had walked back to their cars and explored the national parks by road.

I was glad we'd had a wilderness experience. I was even glad the camp didn't have cell service or Internet access. On our first day at SHSC, I heard our host say that "the woods and wilderness clear your head and open up your heart," and now I understood what he meant. There is something refreshing about being isolated and immersed in nature. In fact, I was so relaxed that the next day I abandoned my human-doing habits and sat on the deck outside the dining pavilion and alternately stared at the view and read a good book.

The truth is, as much as I love the outdoors, I've never even considered going camping. Only the promise of high-thread count linens and gourmet meals lured me into the forest. I had no idea that the amenities would include a new view of the world. (www.sequoiahighsierracamp.com) — Elizabeth Hansen, photos by Adams/Hansen Stock Photos



Sequoia High Sierra Camp beds include down comforters and Pendleton wool blankets



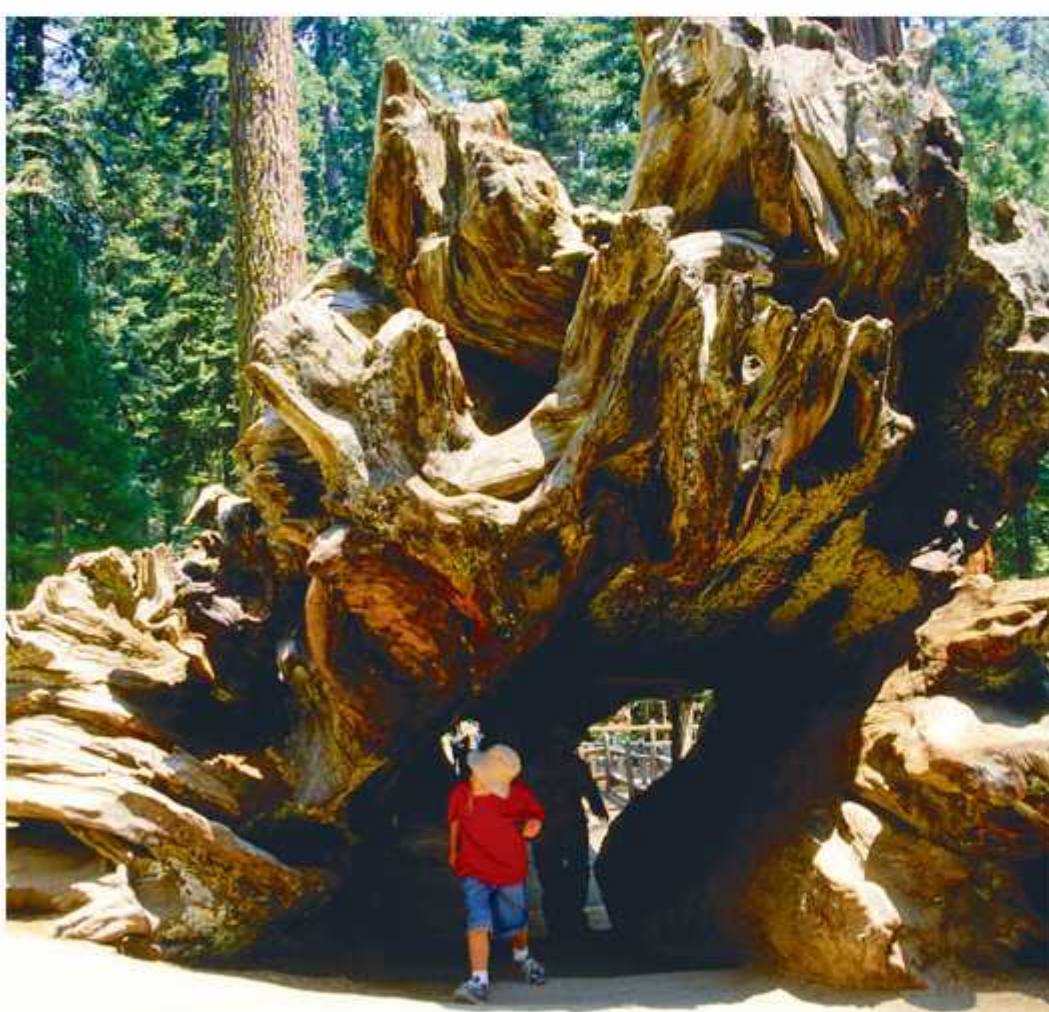
Kings River rapids, Kings Canyon National Park



Deer graze on wildflowers in front of Wuksachi Lodge in Sequoia National Park.



At Sequoia High Sierra Camp, the view includes the tops of red fir, lodgepole, and ponderosa



The Fallen Monarch Tree in Kings Canyon National Park makes a great tunnel for kids

A Forest of Giants

Sequoia National Park is home to the Giant Sequoia — the biggest trees in the world. Some of these are as tall as a 26-story building and as wide as three freeway lanes. Before heading up to Sequoia High Sierra Camp, we spent a couple of days poking around the Giant Forest Museum and the Lodgepole Visitor Center. We also did several easy walks to some of the scenic highlights, including the General Sherman Tree (the largest living tree on earth) and Crescent Meadow (great wildflowers). Wuksachi Lodge, which is well-located and offers comfortable rooms in various sizes, is a good place to stay. (www.visitsequoia.com)