

Sequoia High Sierra Camp: Luxury living in rustic setting

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THE FRESNO BEE

The Tennessee-style sweet iced tea and the oatmeal cookie with orange zest (no raisins) gave it away: This would be no ordinary camping trip.

I'm sitting in a padded armchair inside a magnificent dining pavilion when hostess Laura

Squilla welcomes me to the Sequoia High Sierra Camp in Sequoia National Park. On a nearby coffee table next to my tea and cookies are the latest issues of Time, Newsweek and National Geographic Explorer, along with assorted crossword puzzle books, hiking guides and topographic maps.

Never mind that the nearest paved road is more than three miles away.

Still a little stunned by my surroundings, I'm chewing my cookie when Squilla asks which dinner "seating" I would prefer to attend, 6:30 or 7 p.m. I can't give her a quick answer because it's not polite to talk with your mouth full.

Opened in August at an elevation of 8,500 feet, the Sequoia High Sierra Camp purports to combine "the best of backcountry camping with pampered hospitality and distinctive cuisine." While some rugged souls hike in 11 miles from Lodgepole, most of the guests drive to the Marvin Pass Trailhead and walk about a mile to the camp.

In 2002, Memphis, Tenn., businessman Burr Hughes purchased 40 acres of land from the Sequoia National Forest to fulfill his dream of building an "upscale" High Sierra camp. Four years of detailed planning and construction later, the dining pavilion, bathhouse with hot

showers and flushing toilets, and 32 tent cabins are spread across a 5-acre hillside covered with red fir and ponderosa pine trees.

"We visited the other High Sierra camps (in Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks) and found a lot of pent-up demand," said Lloyd, who hired DNC Parks & Resorts to manage the camp.

The open-air dining pavilion -- don't you dare call it a chow hall -- is the camp's commons area and centerpiece.

Built from Oregon-grown fir trees, the structure is supported by 32 columns attached to enormous cross beams more than 12 feet off the ground. Its design, Hughes said, is an homage to the Roman architect and author Vitruvius.

This is camping in name only. Guests stay in 330-square foot "Tuscan-inspired bungalows" built on concrete slabs. Each tent contains two twin beds outfitted with plush-top mattresses, linen sheets, feather pillows, down comforters and Pendleton wool blankets. There are large screen doors and windows, padded chairs, propane lanterns and a basket filled with assorted towels and toiletries.

What really sets the Sequoia High Sierra Camp apart, however, is its food. Or, to use the proper term, "cuisine."

Dinner during my one-night stay began with a first course of lump crab cakes soaked in red pepper curry sauce. The second course was insalada caprese: sliced Roma tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, basil pesto and balsamic vinegar. For the main course, executive chef Ryan Solien prepared 10-ounce veal chops coated with espresso and served with steamed string beans and pasta. For desert, we had bananas Foster with homemade caramel and vanilla-bean ice cream.

And, yes, the meal included beer and wine.

"I want people to leave here saying, 'I'm at 8,000 feet elevation, in the middle of nowhere, and that was one of the best meals I've ever had,'" said Solien, a graduate of the California Culinary Academy who has worked in restaurants across the United States and in Bermuda and Rome. He also has served as a traveling personal chef to Bruce Springsteen, Tim McGraw and Faith Hill.

"We just want people to come up, eat good food, drink good wine and enjoy the outdoors," Solien added.

Guests can work off the calories they've consumed by taking advantage of numerous hiking opportunities in the vicinity.

So far, the reviews have been mostly positive.

Richard and Nancy Ripken, vineyard owners from Lodi, stayed two nights at the Sequoia High Sierra Camp last week and left shaking their heads in amazement.

"It's so peaceful here," Richard Ripken said. "Smell the trees, listen to the stream, look at the sky and feel the fresh air in your face."

Said Ginnie Friedland, a retired schoolteacher from Los Angeles, "This is more like a fancy retreat than a typical High Sierra camp."

Hughes, the camp's hands-on owner, understands that luxury camping isn't for everyone. His target audience is "baby boomers whose knees have given out and can't go backpacking anymore."

"I'd say 95 percent of the people that come up here are blown away," Solien said. "The other 5 percent are upset because they had to hike a mile up the hill and there isn't a plasma TV in their tent."

No plasma TVs? How rustic.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Drive to the Big Meadows area and hike in one mile, or hike 11 miles on the Twin Lakes trail from the Lodgepole campground in

Sequoia National Park (see Web site for specifics).

Rates: \$175 per person per day, including lodging and three meals. Rates are increasing to \$225 in 2007. There is no charge for children 6 and under.

Season: The camp closes for the year Sept. 30; reservations for next year are being taken now. Projected opening date is July 20; check Web site for updates.

Information: (866) 654-2877 or www.sequoiahighsierracamp.com.