

TRAVEL | AUGUST 13, 2011

## Attention, Campers (and Their Kids)

*Grab the bug spray, flashlights and hip flask—family summer camps are packed with pleasures, and many still have open tents*

By [ELIZABETH GARONE](#)

At age 10, I bawled the morning I was to leave for sleepaway camp. Thirty-plus years later, it wasn't much different.

I wasn't worried about missing my family—I'd be spending the week with my husband and two young daughters. I was having second thoughts about dropping \$2,200 for a week of bug juice and dirt.

Family camp is pretty much what it sounds like: An outdoors-oriented summer retreat that welcomes everyone from newborns to grandparents. It's far from a new concept—the one my husband chose, University of California, Berkeley's Lair of the Golden Bear, dates back to 1948—and there are family camps around the country, each with its own traditions and assets. Some are rustic properties with shared bathrooms and basic activities; others offer private villas and laser tag. What they all have in common is the promise of a wholesome vacation for every age group.

Many camps fill up early, but families looking for last-minute escapes can often find openings at the end of summer. The Lair, for instance, has room in its final week (Aug. 20-27).

Our trip, meant to be a compromise between my husband's love of camping and my love of hotels, was on the rugged (and collegiate) side. The Lair is an 80-acre spread in the Sierra Nevada foothills run by UC Berkeley's alumni association. Non-alums are welcome as long as someone in the group joins the organization, but the Cal mania was obvious as soon as we were welcomed to camp by a handful of enthusiastic students in full school attire.

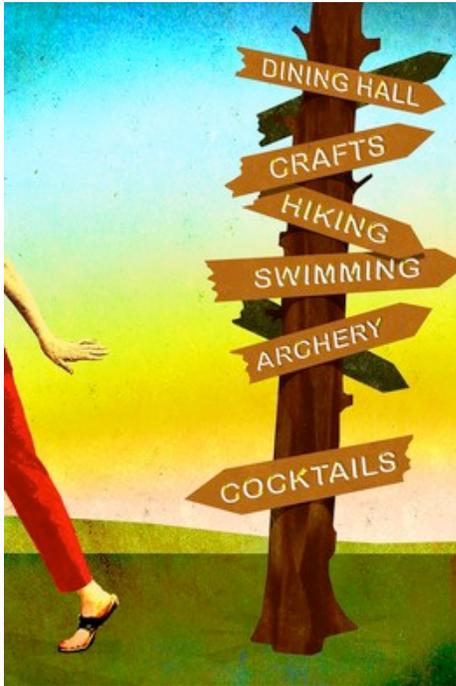


Illustration by Brian Stauffer for The Wall Street Journal

They gave us yellow wristbands to mark us as guests of Gold Camp (one of three at the Lair), and distinguish us from visitors to a nearby public campground. We got the week's schedule, packed with activities: lanyard making and tie-dying, disco bingo, a hootenanny, a wine-and-cheese hike.

I was tempted to ask if we could just have wine and cheese, sans hiking. Instead, we drove around until we found tent-cabin #61A. My stomach dropped when I pulled back our canvas "door" and saw a raised platform topped by a canvas shelter, vinyl mattresses on metal cots, a single overhead light. It didn't take us long to notice that veteran campers had come with folding chairs, coolers, mattress pads, holiday lights and alcohol.

But to my surprise, our two young daughters didn't seem to mind. They jumped from bed to bed and collected pinecones to decorate the entry. There wasn't much time to ponder our lack of amenities anyway—at 5:45 p.m., a bell clanged in the distance, the 15-minutes-until-hot-food alarm. We walked the quarter mile to the dining hall, found seats at a long picnic table covered in a checkered tablecloth and wolfed down our breaded tofu cutlet (the vegetarian alternative to turkey) and veggies.

I wanted to get back to our tent and the bathrooms while I could still find them, but my husband reminded me that the Welcome Campfire was about to start. Three-year-old Zoe, who had skipped her nap, clearly wasn't going to make it. Fine with me. All the togetherness—meals, bathrooms, sleeping arrangements, campfires—already had me feeling cramped. My husband and Gabby, 7, trotted off with bug spray. I put my youngest to sleep, and read a book by flashlight as the sounds of Cal's fight song and "Go Bears!" echoed through the woods.

In the following days, I guiltily checked email while my husband joined a 7-mile hike and the girls went off to activities (Capture the Flag and creek walks for Gabby's age group, Kub Korral for the 5-and-under set). The early-morning yoga, inner-tube water polo, tile painting—I skipped them all.

Each day brought a new tournament or game that pitted campers against staffers or camp against camp (Gold being the most jock-laden) in golf, volleyball, basketball, softball or tennis. I hid in our tent, longing to relocate to the Lair's Camp Oski, with its emphasis on art and a few motel-style rooms that could be had for a mere \$200 extra.



Yet as the week progressed, I found myself appreciating family camp more and more. Our daughters loved that they could roam the premises unattended. All those organized activities meant time alone for my husband and me—one morning, we sipped coffee and played a full game of Scrabble. And in the evenings, when Gabby attended kid campfires and Zoe watched cartoons in the dining hall, we could attend lectures by a staffer at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Pixar Animation Studios's art director or Cal's head of athletics.

At the final night's campfire, the staff performed a spoof of "Toy Story 3," complete with elaborate costumes and set changes. At the end I found myself joining the standing ovation—even Cal's fight song, even though I had to hum most of it.

A week later, as I scrubbed the last of the dirt from my heels with a pumice stone. Gabby asked if we would be going to camp next year. I asked if she wanted to and she shouted an enthusiastic "Yes!" Zoe did the same. I thought for a moment and then said, "Probably." In other words, as long as there's room in Camp Oski.

—The Lair of the Golden Bear: From \$315 to \$715 per person per week, depending on age, [alumni.berkeley.edu](http://alumni.berkeley.edu)

### *Ace Camps: Five More Family-Friendly Retreats*



Silver Bay YMCA

Silver Bay YMCA

#### *Silver Bay YMCA of the Adirondacks*

##### **Silver Bay, N.Y.**

The big draws at Silver Bay (above) are the scenery and the activities—everything from archery to music to boating. The digs aren't luxurious, but there are plenty of options, from dorm-like rooms with shared bathrooms to lake cottages. Bookings are still available but be forewarned—this camp is dry. From \$263 per night for a family of four, including meals, [silverbay.org](http://silverbay.org)

#### *The Tyler Place Family Resort*

##### **Highgate Spring, Vt.**

Tyler Place earns raves for its food, facilities (spa, driving range, pool...) and activities (from zip-lining to landscape painting). But the adults-only cocktails and dinner policy is especially beloved. Choose from suites, studios and cottages. There is still availability for Labor Day week. From \$114 per day for adults, \$61 per day for children, meals included, [tylerplace.com](http://tylerplace.com)

#### *Callaway Gardens*

##### **Pine Mountain, Ga.**

The 13,000-acre Callaway Gardens hosts a Summer Family Adventure program packed with activities like Zumba classes, laser tag and trapeze lessons. An hour from Atlanta, Callaway has cottages and villas with full kitchens, plus there are several restaurants on the property. From \$2,900 per week for a two-bedroom cottage, [callawaygardens.com](http://callawaygardens.com)



Rockywold Deephaven Camps

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#### *Rockywold-Deephaven Camps*

##### **Holderness, N.H.**

For more than a century, this resort on Squam Lake has done summer the traditional way—the shingled cottages happily lack phones, air conditioners or televisions, and meals are served buffet-style in the dining hall. Activities are old school too, like tennis and sailing. Openings available this season. Cottages from \$2,960 per week, rooms from \$157 per night, meals included, [rdsquam.com](http://rdsquam.com)

#### *Concordia Language Villages*

##### **Bemidji, Minn.**

Overachieving clans can spend a week in one of nine "culturally authentic" villages, where outdoor activities are mixed with language instruction. (Options include French, Chinese and Finnish.) Bathrooms are shared, and guests bring their own bedding and towels. From \$475 per person per week, meals included, [concordialanguagevillages.org](http://concordialanguagevillages.org)

—Sara Clemence