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Camp deluxe

Some vacationers seek the great outdoors - without the dirt, the critters, or the wilderness

By Linda Matchan
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At Normandy Farms in Foxborough, Gary Follette, of Taunton, watched a flat screen TV with his grandchildren. (Suzanne Kreiter/Globe Staff)

FOXBOROUGH - Jennifer McKeon of West Bridgewater loves the idea of taking her family camping. Except for one thing: She hates camping. She hates the bugs. The dirt. Sleeping in a tent. Waking up in a tent.

Roasting marshmallows? Now that she can appreciate. So McKeon found a way to enjoy the experience of camping without actually camping. She spent last week with her husband and two kids in a luxury yurt at an upscale campground here called Normandy Farms, where amenities include a concierge, a fitness center, four swimming pools, and a stocked fishing pond. The yurt - a round tentlike structure akin to those used by Mongolian nomads - is equipped with a flat-screen TV and air conditioning. It also has a kitchen, bathroom, deck, and a firepit for those marshmallows. A weekly rental costs \$1,450.

"It's kind of a compromise," says McKeon, who owns a home improvement business with her husband, Joe. "You can go out side and have a fire at night, and it does feel like camping."

There was a time when camping was synonymous with getting away from it all, and there are still purists who believe this - survivalists, wilderness hikers, canoers who paddle to deserted islands, craving quiet, solitude, and no BlackBerry service. But at a time when eco-escapes are big and gas prices are restricting travel, a lot of New Englanders are getting creative about their vacations, and some are thinking seriously for the first time about camping. With certain reservations.

"They want a sense of maybe being in the outdoors but not necessarily laying on the ground and dealing with all the critters and cooking over an open fire," says Linda Profaizer, president of the National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds.

Luckily, a new sub-industry - call it Camping Lite - has emerged over the past five years to accommodate them, becoming more and more luxe each year. Normandy Farms opened in 1971 as a regular campsite but has been adding a new convenience each year. This summer, it was the gated one-acre dog park with a dog water fountain, dog-washing station, and dog agility equipment. Last year, it was the concierge and the portable log cabin playhouses. The year before that, they installed a big, spurting fountain in the fishing pond. Next year: two more yurts.

Nature may abhor a vacuum, but it does seem to allow for luxury treehouses, private camping butlers, and s'more delivery services. Somewhere along the line, a lot of Americans lost touch with the outdoors, and the definition of camping was downgraded from "roughing it" to "having a camp fire and smelling pine needles."

"You don't have to be a camper to experience camping," says Rick Abare, executive director of the Maine Campground Owners Association. "There is no need anymore to own a tent or sleep in a sleeping bag."

Not when you can go "glamping" - glamorous camping - a trend popular on the West Coast and in Montana. Think five-star tents with artwork on the walls, massage tents, Persian rugs, sleeping bags lined with silk sheets, and camping butlers.

One glamer on the East Coast is veteran outdoor guide Joe Hackett who runs Tahawus Ltd., a "catered camping" service in upstate New York. For 30 years, he's been taking campers to wilderness regions near Lake Placid: He arranges fly-fishing and paddling expeditions, and lets his staff take care of the rest.

"We do all the set-up and tear-down and provide a guide," he says. "All the camp chores are taken care of by the chef."

He charges \$1,200 to \$1,500 a day per person, yet his service is so popular he books trips a year in advance and turns down four out of five requests. "It affords people the maximum amount of time to enjoy the outdoors," he says. "They don't want to have to buy food and pack it all up and setting up the tents and drying the tents down when they get home. You can go back home and your hands aren't dirty and your back isn't sore."

At Searsport Shores Oceanfront Campground in Searsport, Maine, campers pitch their tents near the ocean, just a short walk from the campground computer station, which

offers free Wi-Fi. It costs \$38 to \$54 per night to pitch a tent, and Saturday night there's a \$42 lobster bake served with fresh flowers, homemade breads, freshly picked roasted corn, organically grown vegetables, and - lest anyone's hands get dirty - packets of moist towelettes.

Co-owner Astrig Tanguay plans to add a small subdivision with treehouses in the fall. They'll have crows'-nest-style balconies, she says, "so you can sit up there and drink cocktails." Tanguay says her campsite attracts a sizeable population of "luxury campers" who have come to associate camping with comfort and convenience. "Yesterday someone called from Boston and asked if we deliver meals to the sites," she said. "If I'd said yes, she was ready to sign up for the meal plan."

Lori Karger of Weston may be the ultimate luxury camper. In April she and her husband, Stewart, spent a night in a two-story air-conditioned, beautifully appointed treehouse at the year-old Winvian resort in Litchfield Hills, Conn. Winvian sits on a private 113-acre estate with a French-trained chef and 18 themed cottages designed by different architects. Several of the cottages evoke the fantasy of being on a wilderness camping trip.

These include a \$1,700-per-night "camping cottage" with trees painted on the walls and a ceiling painted like a night sky, and the \$1,950-per-night "charter oak cottage," with an actual charter oak poking up in the living room. All cottages, including the treehouse, have fireplaces, jacuzzi bathtubs, Italian linens, espresso coffee systems, radiant floor heating, and pop-up plasma TVs.

The camping cottage also has two wood-burning fireplaces, one indoors and one outdoors, so "campers" can toast s'mores. The fixings are delivered by Mercedes station wagon. "It is not camping, but it's basically saying you can kind of experience the idea of camping but not get dirty at all," says Heather Smith, Winvian's managing director.

Karger's treehouse experience gave her as big a dose of the great outdoors as she'll ever need. "I don't like bugs, so it's perfect, because if you want to be outside you can be: It's kind of rustic in a nonrustic kind of way, without having to cook your own meals," she says. "Even when you go for your massage, there is that outdoor kind of feeling to it. There are a lot of windows in the spa."■

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