

HAPPY CAMPERERS

Plan a Family **Vacation**
that Is **Affordable**
and **Fun**

By Marcia Passos Duffy



I want to make something perfectly clear: I'm not the camping "type." Please don't mistake me for someone who bicycled and camped her way through Europe after college, or hiked the Appalachian Trail. Not me: I'm a hotel kind of gal. You know: Room service, pools, hot showers, maybe a massage? I like being *pampered* while on vacation. I did go camping twice in my life—both times B.K. (before kids) when I promptly filed away whole business as too messy and complicated to manage with children in tow.

So when our friends asked if we wanted to go camping with several other families for a week in Cape Cod, I politely declined and quickly booked reservations at a "family resort." We ended up spending way too much money and having only a mediocre time, and I wondered if perhaps these campers knew something that I did not.

The following summer we decided to join these die-hard campers (who had been camping with their kids for many years). Before we left, I read articles about camping with kids, talked to these camping families, and purchased a tent, sleeping bags, a grill, and non-perishable foods. On the morning of our trip I was still wary, but felt, at the very least, well-prepared.

"You're taking too much stuff," my husband remarked, as he packed up the van. But I wanted to be ready for the worst-case scenario: Rain and boredom.

While I expected to *endure* my camping vacation, I never expected to *love* it or even learn much from it. But I am here to tell you that I did. I am a camping convert and I believe this is the type of vacation our family needs these days—away from the gadgets, our home, schedules and frenetic pace.

What surprised me was how easily I could let go of the trappings of modern life—and how little I missed any of it! I still did a lot of what I normally do at home: tidying up, cooking, and childcare. But somehow it all seemed much easier. There was less stuff to pick up, less choices about food, less stress about spilled juice (or other food); and surprisingly, boredom never factored into our days, even in the rain. I also felt healthy and so *right* to be outside all day long, even in bad weather. I had not slept so soundly since I was a child.

Most importantly, our children enjoyed themselves. They rode their bikes around the campsite, swam, hiked, and

HOW TO BE A

HAPPY CAMPER

Want to plan a happy camping trip for your family? Here are some tips:

- **Start Slow.** Especially if your kids are toddlers. "Start with one night at a campsite . . . or even in your backyard," advises Steve Young who runs the Vermont Wilderness School (www.VermontWildernessSchool.org). If you have already booked your campsite you can still do some "pre-camping" locally before your trip to get your kids used to the idea.
- **Select a Campsite That Suits Your Family.** Camping can run the gamut from complete wilderness camping to actual "camping resorts" (which come complete with activities, pools, entertainment), and everything in between. So if you want to try camping, don't feel like you are locked into jumping into bare-bones wilderness camping on your first try with the kids. When you do your research, call the campgrounds and ask if it is suitable for your children's ages. Does it have a playground? A beach? Will there be other children around?
- **Keep it Simple.** Don't pack in your days like you do when you're not on vacation! Most young children like to simply explore their surroundings, instead of a busy itinerary visiting local museums or other sites. Older kids like to meet other kids their age. A frantic level of activity does not allow your family the "down time" that lets spontaneity happen—and for you all to enjoy the full camping experience. Remember, you don't need to entertain your kids 24/7. Camping is all about learning to entertain yourselves without television or gadgets. Leave the Game Boy at home! The best way to plan is to have a loose itinerary, and then go with the flow. "The beauty of camping is that you get to know a place in a big way," said Young. "There's always magic waiting to be discovered."
- **Have a Plan B.** You may not get rain, but do plan for it. Before you leave, do some online research on the surrounding towns and what they offer. Check out the local library for its summer activities, such as story time. Check with the local wildlife or conservation organizations that often have free or nominal-fee programs for kids. Call the campgrounds you selected and ask for suggestions for rainy day activities.
- **Have Each Family Member Plan a Day.** Lay out the options for all the activities you will be doing for the entire week (and remember, keep it simple and don't pack each day with 5 activities). Have each member of the family pick one major activity they really want to do, such as kayaking or horseback

riding, shopping, or just going to the beach and having ice cream. This helps everyone participate and feel like their needs and wants will get met (for at least one day!) during the camping vacation.

- **Considering Camping with Other Families.** This is a lot of fun—and helpful with kids—if you are all on the same wavelength about what you want from your camping vacation. You could also coordinate your meals and cleanup, making this chore fun. Also organize your camping list so that you don't duplicate equipment. "It's a great idea to camp with other families," said Young. "Kids are more focused less likely to get in trouble and it keeps them from getting bored."

- **Take Precautions.** While family camping can be a lot of fun, special precautions need to be taken, particularly with young children. The usual watchfulness is required, such as never leaving your children alone in pools, lakes, streams, or any body of water. Extra care should be given around the family campfire or grill. "A simple thing like cooking a marshmallow needs to be supervised," said Ron Brown, Executive Director of the New Hampshire Campground Owners' Association (www.ucampnh.com). Marshmallows melt and have caused third degree burns just dripping onto skin, Brown noted. He also adds that parents should warn children not to feed the animals. "Teach your children that you are visitors to the animals' neighborhood . . . and animals need to be treated with respect," he added.

Other precautions include not lighting anything inside the tent (such as a propane lantern), and putting out campfires before going to sleep at night. For small children who may get lost, buy them a whistle that they carry with them at all times during the camping trip. "Tell your children that if they should get lost, find a tree, hug it, and stay there blowing the whistle," said Brown. If a child cannot be found, call 911. "Don't send out hoards of people looking for the child because most likely dogs will be sent out to sniff the child out and by many people combing the woods the chance that the scent will be trampled on increases." Camping with kids can be a lot of fun, but Brown says that the key to having a successful trip is parental supervision of their children. "Most campgrounds on busy weekends become a very large community—and every precaution needs to be taken." ☺

sang songs around the bonfire at the beach. The pace was unhurried and spontaneous. Sure, we did have some incidences of whining, crying, and some misbehavior; but it seemed to quickly dissipate, and we were on to something else.

So what made our first camping experience a success? Maybe it was beginner's luck. Or perhaps it was the company of the other families that helped share the burden of childcare, housekeeping and food preparations. Maybe because we did not truly "rough it" in deep woods; and life was made easier with our cars nearby for storage, hot shower facilities, our cell phones (to keep families in contact with each other), an ocean beach for instant entertainment, laundry facilities, and a small indoor recreation center (with pool and ping pong tables) for those rainy days. Without those amenities, camping with the kids may have been more of a struggle.

Whatever the reason for our marvelous time, we have already booked our camping site again with our friends for this summer, and plan to make it a tradition. After all, when you can have a vacation that is affordable, fun, memorable—and both kids and parents are happy—who needs room service? ☺

About the author:

Marcia Passos Duffy is a freelance writer who writes frequently on travel and parenting issues. She is also the publisher of The Heart of New England (www.TheHeartofNewEngland.com), a weekly online magazine that celebrates the unique character and culture of northern New England.

For more information on camping and campsites throughout the USA visit:

- Go Camping America at: <http://www.gocampingamerica.com>
- USA Campsites: <http://www.usacampsites.com>
- About Camping: <http://camping.about.com> (includes listing of campsites)
- Pete's Family Camping Site: <http://home.gwi.net/~spectrum/camping.html>

WHAT TO BRING

Camping doesn't have to be expensive, particularly if you camp in a tent. My advice when camping with your family is to get a tent big enough to stand up in. This will make your sleeping experience much more enjoyable and will allow you to comfortably "hang out" in the tent when it rains for board games and stories. We have a six to eight man tent for our four-person family.

I would also highly recommend an air mattress. Wimpy as this may seem, it guarantees a good night's sleep. Get the best tent and sleeping bags you can afford. The key is staying dry when it rains. Sometimes even the best tents leak in day after day of pouring rain. So make sure you string a tarp above your tent. Awful as it may look, you'll feel more secure in a downpour. Along with your sleeping bags, be sure to include pillows for each family member and air mattresses (or a sleep pad). Evenings can get colder, so it may be wise to even bring a blanket or two. Here's a suggested check list:

- Tent
- Spare tent stakes
- Sleeping Bags
- Ground pad or air mattress
- Propane stove and fuel
- Lantern and fuel
- Grill
- Flashlight and spare bulb and batteries
- Cookset
- Griddle or frying pans
- Toaster
- Pot holder
- Can opener
- Cooking utensils: spatula, large spoon, fork
- Mixing bowls
- Dishpan
- Dish cloth and towels
- Dish detergent
- Plates, cups, knives, forks, spoons
- Repair kit
- Rope for clothesline and securing tarp
- First Aid Kit
- Matches
- Pocket knife
- Saw
- Small axe
- Dish detergent

- Bottled water
- Moisture proof bags
- Aluminum foil
- Laundry detergent
- Food supplies
- Cooler

INDIVIDUAL GEAR

- Water bottle
- Toiletries
- Soap
- Towel
- Insect Repellent
- Hat
- Rain gear: jacket and pants or poncho
- Socks
- Shirts: Cotton and wool
- Sturdy shoes or boots for hiking, lighter shoes for camp
- Underclothing
- Long pants: cotton and wool
- Sun screen lotion
- Camera
- Binoculars
- Medications etc.
- Citronella candles
- Buckets

Camping With Children— WHAT TO BRING

Ages 9 and up

Camping is ideal with kids this age since they can help with a lot of the camping chores, such as setting up the tent, unloading the car, even cooking on the barbeque. They can also hang their own wet clothing. They usually can be trusted to remain close by without constant supervision. Activities they will enjoy include hiking, bicycling, exploring, soccer, or badminton.

What to Bring:

Their own disposable camera, board games, cards, musical instruments (if they play), wildlife handbook, magnifying glasses, containers and nets to capture and examine insects or small fish (make sure they return them to the wild when finished examining them), bicycle, books and magazines, and walkmans.

Ages 6 through 8

This is also a good age for camping. As in the over-nine set, these kids can help set up camp and care for their personal belongings (at least in theory!) The worst thing about this age group can be a fear of the DARK; i.e., going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. For this, make sure you have enough flashlights and batteries. Glow sticks also help for keeping the tent lit but not enough so that the adults can't sleep.

What to Bring:

Disposable camera, cards, Frisbees, soccer balls, badminton sets, blow up beach balls, glow sticks, walkie-talkies, wildlife handbook, magnifying glasses, containers, and nets to capture and examine insects or small fish, bicycle, books and magazines, percussion instruments (drums, shakers, etc.), board games appropriate for age group, and a camp journal.

Pre-Schoolers

While the pre-school years is a great time to introduce your kids to camping, you need to be more watchful and

careful around a campsite than with an older child, such as taking precautions with the campfire and making sure your child does not wander off. But your pre-schooler will probably be happy with very little. A campsite near a beach or a stream will provide hours of entertainment for your little one. Make sure you have enough room in your bed for an extra body who may be frightened of the sounds outside the tent (you can zip two sleeping bags together). You may also want to make arrangements for a campsite that's close to a rest room for middle-of-the-night runs. Or bring along a port-a-potty.

What to Bring: See precautions under "Happy Camper" sidebar.

A whistle, books, age-appropriate games, beach balls, shovels, color pens, pencils, books, scratch pads, pipe cleaners (for them to play with in the car), and toys they may enjoy at home that are "camp proof," and wouldn't miss terribly if lost.

Infants and Toddlers

Bringing along a toddler or infant on a camping trip (especially a toddler) is more difficult than older children. So if you don't feel like you're ready for it, don't attempt it. This age group is high maintenance wherever you are. It can be extra work for you if you don't have running water, or if it rains and you're stuck inside your tent for an entire day. You may want to consider sleeping with your infant or toddler instead of having a separate crib or bed. They will feel more secure with you in these very different surroundings. Be prepared for night waking and getting up at sunrise.

What to Bring:

Enough diapers and wipes to last you the entire trip. Enough warm clothing and baby food (in jars). A baby backpack so you can take hikes. For toddlers, favorite toys, beach toys.