

Mobile Guide: Camping in Comfort

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2 September 1997

This article originally appeared in the Wall Street Journal
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Seattle -- My Eagle Scout husband always seems to have the itch to go camping, and when we moved to the majestic Pacific Northwest that itch became even more pronounced. I, on the other hand, have always entertained the idea but somehow managed to skirt the issue. The whole project seems like a bit of an ordeal for a few weekend breaths of fresh air. The gear needs to be wrestled out of the garage, tents and poles have to be accounted for and matched, and coolers need to be packed with an array of provisions. It wasn't until I heard about some recent innovations throughout the Washington State Park system that I seriously considered packing the car and hitting the road.

Although a dirt patch with a number on it is still the typical lodging spot in any state park, Washington State Park officials have been finding some creative ways to expand the choices. "We realize people are looking for unique experiences and overnight accommodations and are trying to open up such opportunities," explained Cleve Pinnix, director of the state Parks and Recreation Commission in Olympia. By using private sector loans and park revenue to construct yurts, hemlock cabins, and wall tents (canvas-sided structures historically used by miners and loggers), officials have been able to appeal to a wider group of campers, and to extend the camping season year-round.

Although each accommodation differs slightly, the goal is the same. Equipped with beds, leakproof ceilings, electricity and heat, they offer campers added comfort and convenience. Tents can now be left at home, and precious weekend hours can be spent fishing, hiking and lounging rather than setting up and breaking down a campsite.

Inspired by the Oregon State Park system, which has more than 80 yurts, Washington State Parks recently installed three at Fort Canby. Available year-round for \$35 a night, the circular domed structures equipped with wooden floors, a futon, bunk beds, electricity and heat are proving to be a hot commodity in the Northwest. Traditionally used by Mongolian nomads in Siberia, the yurt's convenience accounts for a large part of its popularity.

Aging baby boomers who no longer want to sleep on the ground book their reservations in advance, as do families carting kids. Ann and Terry Light of Vancouver, Wash., are lifelong campers, and when they started a family three years ago wondered how they would manage camping with tots in tow. Mrs. Light explains, "I read about yurts in Oregon Outside magazine and thought, 'What a great way not to have to bring everything with you.' With kids, it's just really kind of hard to take all the gear."

Hemlock cabins, also available at Fort Canby, rent year-round for \$35 a night and offer a similarly convenient though less rustic accommodation than the yurts.

Realizing they were on to a good thing and wanting to appeal to an even broader audience, the resourceful officials racked their brains even harder and decided to renovate many of the charming historic structures located throughout the parks. Twenty are now available for rent per diem. Updated and fully equipped with everything from sharp knives and corkscrews to coffeemakers and toasters, the houses are the perfect solution for those travelers who want to be close to the great outdoors, but would rather rent a home than pitch a tent any day.

When I called the park's reservation line in May, I was feeling rather progressive and intended to reserve a yurt for one weekend in August. Informed that the yurts and cabins were booked through September, I inquired about other options aside from the usual campsite. After a little digging, I was told about the Lighthouse Keeper's House at Fort Canby, which has three bedrooms, one bath, and sleeps eight comfortably. The house rents for \$200 a night and is available year-round. Without hesitation, I quickly changed gears and booked it.

Other renovated structures throughout the state park system include the Steward's House at Fort Columbia and the Victorian-style Officer's Row houses at Fort Worden in Port Townsend. They are all available year-round, and rates vary.

About 3 1/2 hours southwest of Seattle on Washington's Long Beach Peninsula, Fort Canby attracts more than 600,000 visitors year-round and is well known for its sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean and Columbia River. Home to two 19th-century lighthouses and the spot where the Lewis and Clark expedition first hit the Pacific Ocean in 1805, the 1,800-acre park is historically significant as well.

When we arrived one weekend last month, we checked in and headed down the road past campers, RVs, tents and cabins to the inviting turn-of-the-century house. Built in 1898, the stucco house was home to the lighthouse keepers and their families until the 1950s. Since then, it housed Coast Guard employees or park rangers and over the years fell into disrepair. Thanks to the initiative of Evan Roberts, one of the park's rangers, the house has been brought back to life. After writing proposals and convincing retired local craftsmen to donate their time, the 29-year-old ranger and his corps of volunteers went to work in March. By June, more than \$15,000 had been shelled out (mainly on supplies and furnishings) and the house was ready to rake in a pile of clams a night.

After admiring the house's fabulous views and original details, we quickly set out to explore the top-notch playground at our doorstep. A short trail by the house led us to the North Head Lighthouse and a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean and Columbia River. A stroll through the Lewis and Clark Interpretative Center renewed our appreciation for the expedition's extraordinary efforts, and a relaxing dinner at the acclaimed Shoalwater Restaurant in nearby Seaview enabled us to savor regional favorites, such as Pacific oysters and Manila clams, from the pristine waters of Willapa Bay. When we returned to the house, we opened the large windows, let the ocean breeze roll in, and clamored up the oak staircase to bed.

By the following morning, the park was working its magic and our agenda was low-key at best. Chinook salmon, lingcod and sea bass were running, and my husband went fishing off the park's jetty. Our two-year-old daughter and I headed for the park's Benson Beach, a three-mile stretch of sandy shore. There, we flew a kite, explored driftwood forts, and admired the lighthouse high on a cliff above. To wrap up the day, we cooked a simple dinner of steamed Manila clams from nearby Oysterville (a historic village known for its superb mollusks), grabbed our sweatshirts, and headed out the front door for a view of the sunset. As we sat on a cliff by the lighthouse and watched the waves roll in, we quietly applauded park officials and their willingness to open so many doors.

Upon our reluctant departure the next morning, we concluded that our weekend getaway was far too short and vowed to return to Canby for one of its most spectacular attractions -- winter storm watching. Only then, we just may be staying in a yurt.

For additional information on alternative lodging options throughout Washington State Parks, call 1-800-233-0321 Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Pacific Time. To reserve the Lighthouse Keeper's House, call 1-360-642-3078. To reserve a yurt or a cabin, call 1-800-452-5687 Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Pacific Time.

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