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Pre-Pitched Tents, High-Tech Gear Aim to Entice Internet Generation

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The idea of "roughing it" has taken on a new meaning.

The Coleman outdoors company sells air mattresses with built-in alarm clocks and night lights and tents outfitted with "integrated lighting systems" and auto-roll windows. For those who can't bear to be unplugged for any length of time, DirecTV has a portable satellite, and Kampgrounds of America offers wireless Internet at most of its campsites.

And for a small fee, employees at Montgomery County's Little Bennett Regional Park will set up a fully furnished campsite, complete with tent that sleeps four, chairs, propane stove and lantern. Marshmallows are optional.

With fewer people participating in outdoor activities, retailers and park officials are doing everything they can to coax them into the great outdoors. Hard-core campers may sniff at the level of hand-holding -- air mattresses equipped with built-in speakers for MP3 players -- but some environmentalists and outdoors advocates applaud the efforts. That's because they worry that a population more familiar with Google than the Grand Canyon ultimately could hurt conservation efforts.

"We're out of balance," said Cheryl Charles, an environmental educator. "A lot of young parents and teachers didn't grow up with nature-based experiences. We're not against technology. But when kids spend so much time hooked to [an] electronic umbilical cord -- things have to change."

In 1988, there were 282 million visits to national parks. By 2008, the number had dropped to a little less than 275 million, according to statistics from the National Park Service. Researchers Oliver R. W. Pergams and Patricia A. Zaradic found that the drop in outdoor activity coincides with the increase in time people spend on their computers. In 1987, the average person spent zero hours on the Internet. By 2003, it was 174 hours.

"We may be seeing evidence of a fundamental shift away from people's appreciation of nature to 'videophilia,' which we here define as 'the new human tendency to focus on sedentary activities involving electronic media,'" the pair said in a 2008 study that examined trends in outdoor recreation.

Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods," who with Charles co-founded the Children & Nature Network, which promotes outdoor activity for families, dubbed Copley a "Redskin Tanner Copley" disorder. "Tanner Copley is ... his brother. So why is he becoming a celebrity in his own right? Read more.

To compete, retailers and park officials are scrambling to make camping and other outdoor activities

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Charles Copley is a Redskin Tanner Copley

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easier and more comfortable.

That's why outdoor outfitter Gander Mountain offers a portable battery-operated mosquito repellent system in forest-friendly camouflage colors. For added privacy, the outdoor-gear store REI sells tents that can be divided into multiple rooms. This summer, rangers at Shenandoah National Park offered weekend seminars for camping rookies on how to pitch a tent, build a campfire and plan a proper camp-friendly menu.

Some say such plush amenities go against the true spirit of the outdoors. It's not camping, some sniff, but "glamping" -- as in a camping experience short on hardship but long on glamour.

Retailers say it's the reality of the market.

"There's an expectation of a certain level of comfort or people won't go outside," said Jeff Willard, senior vice president of global marketing and new product development for Coleman. "It needs to be comfortable. Otherwise, people are going to stay inside and do Facebook."

Mike Gast, vice president of communications for Kampgrounds of America, said today's consumers expect more than just a clean tent. They expect to be entertained.

"You have to offer the all-inclusive camping experience," he said. "Barbecues, ice cream socials. Some of our sites even have climbing walls."

Such amenities seem to work. Montgomery parks officials report brisk business for their "camper-ready" sites, which run \$25 a night plus site fee.

The promise of hassle-free camping lured Rockville's Merlyn Perez out of her comfortable air-conditioned home to Little Bennett Regional Park for a two-day camping trip during the July 4th weekend. Perez prefers hotels and spas to sleeping bags and mosquitoes. Still, she wanted her daughter Lelani to have a taste of what it was like to sleep outdoors. She said she was pleasantly surprised at how easy camping could be.

"It was awesome," she said. "They even had an ice cream social for the kids."

On one recent evening, Dzung Pham surveyed the two camper-ready sites nestled among Little Bennett's tall trees that he, with his wife, Trinh Le, and their 6-year-old, Matthew, booked for an August weekend with friends. Pham, an experienced camper from the "real-campers-rough-it school of camping," was impressed by the roomy neon green tent that sat atop a raised concrete platform rather than on the ground. The lantern and propane stove provided as part of the package also met with his approval.

But -- it all made camping seem a bit too easy, he confessed.

"If my family in Texas could see me now, they'd laugh," he said as he gathered twigs for the fire pit.

Other destinations provide far more upscale experiences. The Resort at Paws Up in Montana offers fine linens on beds in canvas tents and a camping "butler" to prepare guests' meals. In California, El Capitan Canyon also has canvas tents -- on wooden platforms. Campers sleep in hand-woven willow beds. If a feather bed is more to your liking, try the KOA campground near Santa Cruz, Calif.

Experienced campers may blanch, but others say the most important thing is to get people outside.

Charles said groups like hers will continue to push state and federal governments to spend more to upgrade parks and rethink the recreation programs they offer.

A poll released last month by Timex found that many respondents said they didn't have enough time to spend outdoors. But if the outdoors experience is fun and appealing, Charles said, folks will find time.

"I would not be critical of 'glamping,' " she said. "There's not one right way to reconnect with nature. If some people are resistant and need a cot, that's just fine."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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