

Safer Camping

by J. Camphill

Finding a safe place to pitch a tent or park a trailer is a challenge. There are many options for camping, with different problems. Campgrounds with showers, flush toilets, and electrical hookups are comfortable but also tend to cost more and attract more people.

The principal problems when camping in a campground is smoke from campfires and BBQs, and inaccessible bathrooms. Other problems may include scented candles, bug sprays, and fragrances that drift in from a neighbor. For some, the generators and air-conditioners on RVs can also pose a problem.

Tent campers are fully at the mercy of their neighbors, while RV campers usually have the option of closing up tightly when needed.

I try to arrive at a campground late in the afternoon, with a few hours of daylight left. That way most campers have already arrived, so I can eyeball them and choose a site accordingly or go somewhere else. It is quite frustrating to get all set up and then have a big problem show up right next door. In some cases, I wait until sunset before actually starting to set up the tent.

When I first arrive, I drive around the entire campground once or twice, and pay close attention to every camper there, using profiling to pick out potentially troublesome people. This mostly means guessing who is likely to have a campfire. A campfire can be a problem hundreds of yards downwind, or less than a hundred yards if there is no wind. Of course, being able to guess the night's wind pattern can be difficult.

A stack of firewood at the site is a giveaway. Other warning signs are groups, young couples, or people with children. Tent campers have more campfires than those with RVs. The people the least likely to have a campfire are retired folks in their RV; the ambiance of a campfire can no longer compete with their TV. Weekend campers are more likely to light up than folks on longer trips. Cool nights also invite campfires, especially when camping at higher elevations during the summer.

It is best to choose a campsite with lots of ventilation, like the side or top of a hill, while canyons and beside cliffs may result in smoke just hanging there.

I keep a distance to any bathhouse and restroom. Many campers prefer to stay near a restroom, and the fumes from scented shampoos, deodorizer, and harsh cleaners may drift out from them. There can also be problems with noise at night.

Check the cleaning schedule, and stay clear during those times. They are usually cleaned around noon, but it can be any time of the day. The schedule is usually posted on the entrance door.

The bathhouses are usually empty most of the time, with a busy period shortly after sunrise and around sunset. To avoid being exposed to other people's fragranced products, I tend to go at other times. In a pinch, I have showered wearing a respirator, only briefly removing it and holding my breath while rinsing my head.

Some public parks have multiple campgrounds and sometimes even overflow campgrounds, which only have campers in the busiest season. If you arrive late, it may even be possible to camp at a group site, which is usually located away from the rest of the campers. Ask the staff and inspect the park map closely.

I generally avoid camping in national parks, as their campgrounds are often crowded. The same goes for state parks in touristy areas or near major cities.

The US Army Corps of Engineers operate hundreds of campgrounds around the country, but they are rarely listed on the maps. They can be a real bargain and completely deserted during the week. To receive a map, call one of their regional district offices (their Texas office is 1-817-886-1566, www.swf.usace.army.mil). Holders of Golden Access Passports can stay at half price. These cards are free to anybody who is disabled and also provide free access to any national park, though not to state parks. Most national parks and monuments can issue them on the spot.

Private campgrounds, such as KOA, cater mostly to the RV crowd, and often do not have any space for tents at all. These places pack their visitors much closer than public campgrounds, so I only use them as a last resort. In some cases, they may allow camping on a back lot or public land next door, while allowing use of their restrooms. People can be quite helpful and agreeable if our needs are explained in a calm and reasonable manner.

Most public campgrounds allow campers to choose their site before registering, but some insist on issuing the sites. It can be helpful to ask for a "quiet area", rather than dishing out a long explanation. Or simply say that wood smoke is a health problem—it is for many asthmatics. If the site is not doable, go back and ask for another one.

Some campgrounds in the West and the Southwest have bans on burning for most of the summer due to the danger of forest fires.

Some campgrounds use lawn chemicals and pesticides, and so far I have only encountered one that put up warning signs when these were used. In the dry states, there is often not enough grass to warrant lawn chemicals, but in the East they are used in some places. It is best to call ahead and talk to someone who actually knows. The people in the office usually have no idea when it is done and can become quite defensive when pressed.

To camp away from other people, another method is simply to drive down any small dirt road in a national forest and camp just off the road. People do it all the time and it is fully legal on public land in most states. This includes BLM lands, but not state and national park lands. Contact any ranger station or visitor center in the state for details. They may also have suggestions.

In state and national parks, camping is usually restricted to organized campgrounds, though many have “backcountry sites” available. These require hiking for a mile or more and are only recommended for experienced backpackers. Some state parks have “hike in” sites that are no more than a hundred yards from the parking lot. These can be great or not so great if they are close together.

The nicest setup I have seen is in Big Bend National Park in Texas, which offers drive-in backcountry sites, some of which are accessible by ordinary cars—meaning those without four-wheel drive. I spent two nights there, with a square mile all to myself, and despite the expansive view, there were no artificial lights to be seen in any direction.

The drawback to primitive camping is the lack of facilities of any kind, and some people may not be comfortable being completely alone. The restroom problem can be overcome in a variety of ways. First of all, learning to use “the big bathroom” is really a handy skill, at least for peeing. There is a small book called “How to shit in the woods,” which may be helpful. Other options are to drive to the nearest visitor center, campground, ranger station, gas station, or other public restroom. Finally, camping stores sell various types of portable commodes, including a simple chair with a hefty plastic bag hanging underneath which can later be disposed of. No chemicals. Tiny “outhouse tents” are also available for more privacy.

It is usually fine to go without a shower for a few days. Then I either stay at a full-service campground or visit one during the day to take a shower. Very few people use the restroom in a park during the day, so it is more likely to be free of other people’s fragranced products.

Sometimes truck stops have acceptable showers as well. Camp stores sell portable solar showers, though the water coming out of those tends to smell strongly of plastic, as most of these are made from vinyl or PVC. Some glass bottles left in the sun might provide enough warm water for a basic sponge bath, just be careful to leave enough air in them so they do not explode.

Between the completely primitive camping and the full-service campgrounds are the basic campgrounds that are often operated by the US Forest Service, which has 4,600 of these across the country. These are not advertised, but most of them are listed in the “National Forest Campground & Recreation Directory,” published by the Coleman Company and available in larger bookstores. A local ranger or visitor center can be helpful in locating them as well.

These small campgrounds typically have from 5 to 30 campsites, usually in a pristine area. They generally have pit toilets, no running water, no electricity, and no on-site staff. They tend to be less crowded than the full-service campgrounds, though the campers often are the more rugged types who tend to like wood fires. On the other hand, there is unlikely to be much else there that could be a problem such as spraying. The pit toilets may be cleaned weekly, or even less frequently, but some will have strong disinfectants inside the latrine pit. Some may have a fragrance dispenser hanging, which you could ask a friend to dispose of, or do it yourself by wrapping something around it first. At these remote campgrounds, it is usually possible to walk away and pee in the woods.

These places can be deserted on weekdays outside of the busy season. Many of these campgrounds do not have room for RVs, though the Forest Service is working on upgrading a lot of them.

I have many times found unofficial campsites added later on near these campgrounds. They are well worth looking for.

Most places have a 14-day limit but that can be circumvented by going away for a day or two and then coming back.

The author has pitched his tent in all kinds of places throughout 45 states.