

First time camping? Don't make rookie mistakes

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Special to USA TODAY

Chances are pretty good you'll get roped into camping this summer. But along with a sleeping bag, tent and bug repellent, you might want to pack a few pro tips for your trip.

New research suggests the pandemic has pushed camping into the mainstream. Kampgrounds of America (KOA) says 48.2 million households camped at least once in 2020, including 10.1 million households that camped for the first time.

"On the ground, it feels like we are in for a very busy summer season," says Tiffany Soukup, a Vermont park ranger.

If you're camping in 2021, there's a lot at stake. But with a little planning and common sense, you can navigate the crowds and avoid rookie mistakes. Take it from this former Boy Scout.

Taking a summer camping trip? Here's what's new

Besides ridiculously high demand, there are two new camping trends this summer, experts say.

First, many national and state parks are starting to offer camper cabins. They're rustic wooden shelters with essentials such as a table, benches, and wooden bunk beds with mattresses but no indoor plumbing. Camper cabins allow you to experience the outdoors comfortably, even during cool or rainy weather. And second, the increased demand has led to many private landowners opening their property to campers.

"That can be a great option because you have more space and privacy," says Paul Johnson, founder of North Outdoors, a camping site.

The second: New apps and sites have fueled the camping revolution of 2021. Hipcamp and Tentrr can help you find a campsite, or you can make a reservation on the KOA site.

Arvie also launched a new site a few weeks ago, promising "one click" booking of live campsite inventory. Dyrt shows reviews of popular campsites. If roughing it isn't your thing, you can always check into Glamping Hub, which lists everything from luxury treehouses to tricked-out Airstreams.

Avoid the crowds



When it comes to family camping trips, hope for the best but plan for the worst. By "best," Christopher Elliott means genuinely connecting with nature and your family. Hiking, swimming, fishing. Sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories, of course. And by "worst," he means bugs, rain and more bugs. GETTY IMAGES

Here's a tip for your summer camping trip: Avoid the crowds. Most first-time campers head to the most popular destinations on their summer camping trips. That means making a beeline for crowded-to-capacity national park.

But wait. You're trying to get away from the crowds, aren't you?

"If you want to avoid the crowds while camping this summer, avoid the national parks," says Jessica Averett, publisher of the site Kids Camping Tips. "While they are absolutely amazing, they are the first places that out-of-town tourists add to their itineraries and can become packed."

For more solitude, look into state and regional parks, which often have great amenities and attractions but without the throngs of campers. Or try a private campground.

Test your gear before you hit the road

If you've never pitched your new tent,

try it before you arrive at the campsite. Otherwise, you might not have a place to sleep. Same thing goes for your other gear.

"It's amazing to me how many campers buy a tent or a stove and just show up at a campsite having never opened the package," says Alison Watta, who writes about her camping adventures on her site, Exploration Solo. "Struggling with gear when you're already tired and your family is sitting there staring at you is a good way to start your vacation off on a bad note."

Hope for the best, prepare for the worst

Did I mention that I spent almost every summer growing up in a tent somewhere in Europe? I did. And I still like camping.

My favorite recent experience was glamping in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve before the pandemic. That was an adventure with every crea-

ture comfort you could imagine. It's a great way to be outdoors without being too outdoorsy, if you know what I mean.

But if I had to camp out of a car in the States, this would be my summer camping tip: Hope for the best but plan for the worst. By "best," I mean genuinely connecting with nature and your family. Hiking, swimming, fishing. Sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories, of course.

And by "worst," I mean, bugs, rain and more bugs. Don't forget your bug repellent and rain gear, please.

So if you're thinking of joining the camping craze, remember to plan ahead, and heed these pro camping tips. You'll have a much better vacation if you do. See you out there, fellow campers.

Avoid these summer camping trip mistakes

Failing to check the campground amenities. "Note what you'll have access to," says Catherine Ryan Gregory, author of the book "Road Trip Games & Activities for Kids." "That includes potable water, toilets, and showers." That will determine what you need to pack to have a comfortable camping trip. You may need to bring water, or remove your garbage, or even bring a trowel to dig a cat hole when nature calls.

A tent that's too small. "Don't believe what tent manufacturers say about how many people will fit in a tent," says Chris Emery, editor of the outdoor site Ordealist.com. "Especially if you are camping with your family." He says tent-makers' ratings are for backpackers who will have to carry the tent on their backs for long distances. Most people who are car camping for the first time will find a three-person tent pretty uncomfortable for three people.

Not following campground rules. Every campground has them. Quiet times are some of the most important, says Diane Vukovic, an outdoor writer with Mom Goes Camping. "You also need to make sure you don't leave trash around your campsite, and definitely don't try to burn trash," she says. Some campground rules are unwritten. For example, you should avoid taking shortcuts through other people's sites when walking around the campground. And don't approach someone else's campfire unless you're invited.

BLUE ZONES PROJECT - SOUTHWEST FLORIDA



BLUE ZONES PROJECT

Blue Zones Project SWFL's Food Policy Council finds solutions to child food insecurity during COVID-19

by Megan Greer

For all the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presented, it paved the way for new solutions to answer some of society's most persistent challenges.

As one example, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) response to child food insecurity during COVID-19 has enabled schools across the country to institute free universal feeding programs for all children 18 and under, regardless of enrollment status, and opened a leadership opportunity for schools to play a more expansive role in closing the nutrition gap for students and their families.

In April, the USDA announced it would extend its Pandemic Flexibilities for schools through June of 2022. This special allowance will help districts continue to serve free meals to all children throughout the 2021-2022 school year via the Seamless Summer Option program model, which is generally only offered during the summer months.

In Southwest Florida, this newly afforded flexibility is empowering the Collier County School District (CCPS) to take a lead role in addressing child food insecurity in tandem with local partners, including Blue Zones Project by Sharecare. Blue Zones Project - Southwest Florida (BZP), which has a strong influence on the design of local healthy school lunch programs, strategically built a partnership with CCPS that encouraged the directors of the district's nutrition program to let in more outside partners to collaborate.

Now, not only can CCPS feed every child inside its boundaries, but it can also bring more organizations to the table to holistically support child nutrition and education while addressing food security needs of the whole household.

This collaboration has been facilitated by the outside groups' participation on the SWFL Food Policy Council (Council) launched by BZP in May 2020. The Council focuses on instituting regional policy, systems, and environmental changes that improve healthy food access. With members that range from food banks and pantries to funders, educational institutions and policy makers, matching problems with the solutions happens, sometimes, within a single meeting.

Such is the case with CCPS' Summer Food Service Program, where free breakfast and lunch will be home-delivered to children along regular school bus routes, with the option of pickup also available. Food delivery has proven essential for many children who remain home alone while their parents are at work. Were it not for the drop-off locations in the neighborhoods, many children would go hungry.

Before the pandemic, the USDA's National School Lunch Program was feeding 29.4 million children per day, costing taxpayers \$14.2 billion per year. Its onerous regulations and requirements that often force schools to work with larger, cheaper distributors restrict opportunities for school districts to engage partners, students, and parents in creating a holistic nutrition program.

"Traditionally, 'cooking' lunch in schools has become more about opening packages and heating food up than creating dishes with fresh, whole foods," said Joe Stoner, Blue Zones Project SWFL Schools Lead. "This is why we have to work within the community to bring fresh produce and healthier eating strategies back to individual schools and districts."

Removing these barriers by sticking with a universal meal program far beyond 2022 would allow more flexibility for schools to create solutions, such as using produce from their school gardens or local farms.

To take advantage of the region's productive growing season, BZP hopes to create a model system for bringing fresh, whole foods to every child's table, universally improving child health outcomes. As districts gain the autonomy to create food systems that best fit the needs of their community, they can design more efficient meal services that are higher in nutrient density, more cost effective, and reduce food waste.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida's well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.