

Camping satisfies our urge to escape – but we take our baggage with us

Level 3 • Advanced

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Great claims can be made for the virtues of campsite culture, but don't overdo the hype

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- 1 The Oxford philosopher G A Cohen thought that a camping trip was a good model of what socialism might look like. When we go camping, claimed Cohen, "there is no hierarchy among us; our common aim is that each of us should have a good time, doing, so far as possible, the things that he or she likes best". During a camping trip, all the campers have control of the means of production. "Even if they are privately owned things, they are under collective control for the duration of the trip," Cohen explained.
- 2 A camping trip becomes an occasion when "people cooperate within a common concern that, so far as is possible, everybody has a roughly similar opportunity to flourish, and also to relax, on condition that they contribute to the flourishing and relaxing of others". If things go as they should, "even most anti-egalitarians accept – indeed, take for granted – norms of equality and reciprocity".
- 3 But do things always go as they should? This summer, my car was packed with a tent, sleeping bags and boxes of food, and I was starting to get worried. For the first time in more than a decade, I was about to go camping. As we drove out of the city, I thought about how excited everyone else seemed to be about spending a few days in a tent. I couldn't help wondering why.
- 4 Each year, people take 15.2 million camping trips in the UK. This has created a £2.2bn-a-year industry. It is often seen as a cheap and healthy alternative to other forms of tourism, and while it does have an impact on the natural environment, its ecological footprint is relatively small.
- 5 Yet it is not just the low cost, small ecological footprint and health benefits that make camping so attractive. As I began to realize, when we set off on a camping trip, we like to imagine we're escaping from many of the problems of the modern world, getting closer to nature, becoming more connected.
- 6 But during my weekend in a tent, I started to see that when we escape into life outdoors, we often end up recreating the life we are trying to get away from. This has certainly been true historically. Take gender roles. One fascinating study from US campsites in the 1960s found there was a strict "division of play" between men's camping activities (fishing, rock-throwing, fire-play) and women's camping activities (relaxing, sunbathing, food preparation). Another US study in the 1970s found people at camp, men and women, conformed to the gender roles that were the norm at home.
- 7 Although social patterns in society have become more fluid since then, in most campsites, a strong gendered division of play persists. Men are more likely to tend fires while women prepare vegetables and salads. Recent studies have found that when women step outside traditional gender roles at camp, they can face subtle and not so subtle forms of sexism.
- 8 Similarly, people often say the thing they like most about camping is that it offers an escape from work. Yet many campers seem to relish the opportunity to do work-like activities. One study found that campers would do a huge amount of unnecessary labour, such as running invented errands, improving their camping pitch, building makeshift furniture and chopping too much firewood.
- 9 Camping is also supposed to offer us an escape from a lonely and disconnected world. Through building and tending a campsite, people also build and tend their threadbare social networks. But the way they do that has changed. In the past, campers typically connected with people across the whole campsite. Today's campers tend to socialize only with people in their immediate party. In a world of technologically enabled disconnection, camping has become a way of reconnecting with friends and family. But the way we camp today makes us less likely to connect with people we don't know.
- 10 It's also been noted that campers often recreate the material lives they lead at home in miniature on the campsite. During the 1960s, campsites started to resemble mini-suburbs with all the conveniences of home. Today, some are hipster eco-villages complete with craft beer, artisanal bread and axe-throwing. These temporary homes give us a feeling of comfort and familiarity while offering the fantasy that we are doing something very different.

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- 11 So campsite culture is more complicated than we might think. Even Cohen, notwithstanding his glowing portrait of socialist camping, had his reservations about what the tented lifestyle offered. In fact, he didn't like camping all that much, writing: "I'd rather have my socialism in the warmth of All Souls College than in the wet of the Catskills."
- 12 As for me, during my weekend in a tent, I started to realize that, despite caveats, camping truly does offer a sense of escape. It gives us that

sense of temporary liberation without many of the risks of actual escape. While camping, we enter into a setting where the normal rules are temporarily relaxed. We can be different people for a few days. Perhaps that promise of escape is why I am now looking forward to my next camping trip. Bring it on.

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