

SUMMER'S SWEET SURPRISE

Pack up your duffel, don your T-shirt, brush up on your campfire-song repertoire, and get ready to enjoy all that sleep-away camp has to offer—no matter your age!

BY HOLLY PEVZNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIM LOWE

WHEN I TOLD MY FAMILY that I wanted us all to go to summer camp together in August, my boys, Theo and Eli (9 and 7 at the time), were beyond stoked. They'd done day camps before and loved the idea of taking it to the next level by overnighting it in the woods in Maine for a whole week. We'd all be there, you know, I told them. Much to my relief, they didn't roll their eyes to let me know that I was encroaching on their sacred kid turf. Instead, the boys scrolled through Medomak Family Camp's website, cheerfully calling dibs on which activities they each wanted to do. *Mama, can we kayak together?* Sure. *Will you do archery with me?* Of course!

My husband, Nathan, was more skeptical: "Summer camp? Like, with icebreakers and forced activities with strangers?" I so knew where he was coming from. In fact, the idea of participating in a camp-wide talent show à la *Dirty Dancing* terrified me. But, unlike Nathan, I had already done my research and really believed the positives would outweigh our jitters: We'd have our own cabin and bathroom. Food and activities were included. And the camp promised that we'd enjoy a nice mix of family time and alone time.

In the end, it was a leap of faith. I really wanted our city kids to have a grass-between-their-toes, jump-in-a-lake, make-new-friends kind of summer. And I selfishly wanted to witness it all. I knew that this experience would shove me right out of my comfort zone and into an amazing all-in family adventure. I was nervous, but I was ready to have all my worry and expectations turned upside down. And, boy, I wasn't wrong!

CAMP EXPECTATION The kids would cling.

CAMP REALITY Freedom, found!

I knew from previous parents-can-stay situations that my mere presence can muck up my kids' budding independence. But apparently, camp counselors cancel that out. Almost as soon as we set foot at Medomak, a swarm of friendly, energetic, and intuitive twentysomethings pied-pipered every single child into a foosball tourney, a game of kickball, or an in-depth discussion about Pokémon. They were instrumental to my boys' excitement, their give-it-a-go attitude—and, ultimately, their freedom. Because I knew that counselors were everywhere I wasn't, my hovering tendencies disappeared.

I let Theo paddleboard and kayak solo. I watched from a distance as Eli scampered down the beach path with Bella (his camp crush, natch). I got to say, Yes! Go jump off the dock. Yes! Go buy Cow Tales at the candy shop! (Three pieces max. Camp rules.) Yes! Go search for the coveted Golden Rocks. (After all, you need 'em in order to vote on which counselor had to walk the plank at the end of the week.) Yes, yes, yes! I loved watching my little guy play flashlight tag with new friends, with zero fear of getting lost. I adored the swagger with which my oldest (and shyest) would exit the cabin at 7 A.M.



“I’ll be in the barn playing basketball. See you at breakfast.” In fact, most days, my boys would arrive at the dining hall before my husband and me. We’d find them settled in with pals. They always made room for a counselor but never saved a spot for dear ol’ mom, and that was just fine. Being able to let my boys run amok solo was exhilarating.

CAMP EXPECTATION The kids would make friends, but I wouldn’t.

CAMP REALITY We all made true connections.

I figured (rightly) that the kids would easily strike up friendships, but I wasn’t so convinced that Nathan and I would fare the same. We were all, “What kind of people choose this as a vacation?” Not totally getting the irony of our worry. The thing is, with no iPhones (electronics are pooh-poohed) and with kids often occupied, there’s a lot of room for grown-up human connection. While I liked (mostly) everyone, I took a quick shine to a few moms—and a grandma. I went on a kayak trip with one. I tackled a 1,000-piece puzzle with another. I knew that once birth stories and IEP tales were shared, I’d made some solid bonds. It wasn’t until our last night that it dawned on me that I had no idea what these women did for a living. We never even talked about work. Crazy, right?

CAMP EXPECTATION This wouldn’t feel like a vacation.

CAMP REALITY Best. Vacation. Ever.

I used to think that having a hotel suite or a big rental house was a vacation must. I was wrong. Here, we all shared a one-room cabin, albeit a big and sunny one, oozing New England charm. And I’m shocked to say that I loved that part. (I also loved that the kids left me and my husband alone in said cabin for several hours each morning.) We all stayed up late every night—all stinky from the campfire and awestruck by the constant shower of shooting stars—to recap our day as if we were all kids away at camp. But unlike kids-only camp, there were no franks-and-beans or burger-and-dog suppers. Instead, we dined on lobster, pulled pork, roast chicken, pear tarts, beet salads, and more. (There was a rumor that the last cook left to compete on *Top Chef*.) Not having to cook would have been vacation enough, but getting gourmet-quality meals and treats was beyond.

CAMP EXPECTATION The regimented schedule would be suffocating.

CAMP REALITY The structure allowed for more fun.

I’m quite accustomed to forcing my dear family to follow a routine, but having a schedule imposed on us by

someone is another story. It turns out, I quite like not being the one barking orders and organizing everything. All of us quickly adapted to the rhythm of camp. I never had to harass anyone to come to dinner. (The meal bell did it.) I never had to hustle my kids to morning activities. They knew to be at the barn after breakfast if they wanted three hours of round-robin fun, like arts and crafts, sailing, nature walks, and archery. We all remembered that waterfront action started at 2, so there were no whines of “Can I go to the lake, pleeeeeease?” before I had my coffee. The structure took pressure off. And it was never so regimented that we couldn’t find wiggle room. I knew that if Eli, my sleepyhead, stayed in bed too long, Willie, the camp chef, would totally slip him an after-hours breakfast.

CAMP EXPECTATION It would be a little hokey and embarrassing.

CAMP REALITY It was just the right amount of hokey!

Honestly, this is what terrified me most about family camp: the prospect of things like talent shows, sing-alongs, and sack races with strangers. But I also wanted to show my kids that trying things that are uncomfortable can be a good thing. So in the spirit of parenthood, my husband and I dutifully participated in many variations of the



name game—chatting with kids about favorite ice-cream flavors, counselors about books, and fellow parents about our hatred of icebreakers. By the end, I was glad I powered through (and shocked how many names I knew).

I also learned that I love all things campfire. I quickly found myself singing along to “Herman the Worm” and smiling every time Allan—the campfire guru—bellowed, “This is a repeat-after-me song!” In fact, the grown-ups often lingered around the fire longer than any kid. But some grown-ups never even made it to the fire—and that was fine. The only pressure to join was self-imposed. I was happy that I caught on to that quickly. On night one, when the get-to-know-you activity was announced, my boys bolted to play soccer with a smattering of kids. My natural instinct was to go after them and make them participate. But as I watched them run, a fellow mom looked at me and said, “I guess they’re doing their own icebreakers.” She was right. This vacation wasn’t about forcing camp life on the family. It was about getting to the point that we all wanted camp life.

And sure enough, while the whole family scattered in horror when the evening Barn Dance was announced later in the week, we all came together to make tie-dyes; we all happily participated in the camp-wide sunset sail and game show, Minute to Win It. When Theo was called to flip a tea bag onto his head, he refused, cheeks flushed. But by the show’s finale—when everyone was invited up to slyly maneuver a cookie from one’s forehead to mouth—he didn’t hesitate to participate. I can’t help but think



WE TRIED IT **explore**

The Nitty-Gritty

Thinking of booking a family camp stay next summer? Know this:

COST OF CAMP

The good news: A week of family camp will be less expensive than flying your family to a resort in the Caribbean. The bad news: It still can get pretty pricey, depending on the level of luxury you are into. For instance, Medomak’s family-of-four rate, which includes all meals and activities, starts at \$3,375 a week. Meanwhile, Camp Concord in South Lake Tahoe, featuring private rustic cabins and buffet-style meals, will put a family of four back about \$2,170 a week. But there are less expensive options, such as YMCA Camp Du Nord’s summer family camp in Ely, MN, which starts at \$500 a week if you opt to tent it, plus \$109 to \$222 per person for all meals included. (If a week is too long, many camps also offer weekend experiences.)

FINDING A GOOD ONE

It’s a smart idea to zero in on family camps that have been accredited through the American Camp Association, which means the camp undergoes a thorough review of operations, such as staff qualifications and training, and emergency management. You can do a search at find.acacamps.org.

THINK OUTSIDE YOUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY

Family camp can easily include Grandma, Grandpa, cousins, and more. Think of it as an opportunity for a shared camp experience with any of the people you love!