



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Set up camp with a start-up

Cruise fans bring their beloved seas to dry land

BY KARA NEWMAN

Cruising enthusiasts Jen and Jonathan Sternfeld found an unusual coping mechanism during the coronavirus pandemic: a fake cruise. Each day, the couple from Schenectady, N.Y., would draw up a cruise “schedule” full of meals and activities to look forward to, including cocktails on the “Sunset Deck” (their front porch), tiki Tuesdays, movie nights and elaborate “chef’s table” menus. As they posted photos of their “cruise” on social media, more and more friends — including me — began to follow along.

“All of us were collectively missing cruising,” recalls Jen Sternfeld, who has been on 29 real-life cruises. (No. 30, a voyage to Spain and Portugal, was postponed to 2021.) Inspired by friends posting nostalgic throwback photos of previous cruises, “I just said we could do a virtual cruise by taking pictures at home.”

As travel plans remain on pause for most Americans amid measures to stem the spread of the coronavirus, cruises seem particularly fraught. In July, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention extended a “No Sail Order” for cruise ships through at least the month of September. Some cruise lines, such as Cunard, have opted to pause cruises until at least November.

SEE CRUISES ON E15

Three companies aim to make getting outdoors less of a struggle

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

When I began pitching my tent at a shaded campground in Virginia last week, a little girl at the adjacent campsite stood watching me for a moment. ¶ “We have a new neighbor!” she exclaimed to her sister. I smiled and waved and then turned my focus to wrangling tent poles. ¶ These days, the value of a slight change in scenery and community cannot be overstated. So it’s no surprise that many of us have turned to camping — a pastime inherently suited to seclusion and social distancing. There’s nothing quite like a focus on basic needs — shelter, food, water, beagle contentment — to dislodge pandemic anxiety. Toss in some wildlife sightings, waterfalls and scenic overlooks, and you’ve got the perfect (and affordable) recipe for getting away.

SEE CAMPGROUNDS ON E16



TOP: Beagles George and Hammy hang out at a Tentrr site in North Carolina that includes a tent and a bed. ABOVE: Pohick Bay Regional Park in Fairfax County was quiet on a recent visit, so the author and her dog had the water to themselves for a morning paddle.

Rental homes meet need for virus-wary vacationers

BY KATE SILVER

As people venture back out on the road again, they’re doing it on their own terms, and that often means avoiding hotels and major cities. Instead, they’re renting houses and apartments in places such as Sandwich, Mass.; Asheville, N.C.; York, Maine; and Aspen, Colo. Vacation rentals, it seems, are having a moment.

“Short-term rentals, particularly vacation rentals, which usually are whole homes, are hot right now,” says Dennis Schaal, founding editor of Skift, a travel industry media company. “That’s because many travelers don’t want to get on a plane, are shunning cities and are driving to remote or nonurban locations for vacations, or even for work, as a temporary solution.”

In July, Airbnb announced that for the first time in a single day since March, guests booked more than 1 million nights of stays. Of those, 50 percent were within 300 miles from home, and more than two-thirds were within 500 miles. Families are booking accommodations later in August, September and October than in the past because flexible schooling and remote work allow for flexible travel, Vrbo reports. Anecdotally, travelers say that they’re drawn to the privacy and solitude of a vacation rental, at a time when social distancing is paramount and anxiet-

SEE RENTALS ON E14

NAVIGATOR

At hotels, seemingly free items often have a price tag attached. E14

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted travel domestically and around the world. You will find the latest developments on The Post’s live blog at www.washingtonpost.com/coronavirus/

LIFESTYLE

Why campers and hikers should stop stacking rocks in the outdoors. E15

Planning to camp? These companies can help you out.

CAMPGROUNDS FROM E13

After a couple of successful nights camping in my backyard in April, I decided to venture farther afield and turned to three camping-related start-up companies for help locating, assessing and booking campsites.

Hipcamp, Tentr and the Dyrt, born of frustration with conventional camping recommendation and reservation systems, make camping more accessible by streamlining the campground search and evaluation process, simplifying booking (sometimes), creating a community of campers who share reviews and advice, and actually augmenting the number of available spots — helpful at a time when campgrounds are fuller than normal.

Ultimately, the camping nights I booked using these websites weren't more spectacular or memorable than those I arranged using traditional methods. In fact, the camping highlight of the summer wasn't planned at all. It featured an 11th-hour detour to Badlands National Park in South Dakota, a stumble across a free campsite with resident buffalo and prairie dogs, and a night sky glittering with stars, horizon to horizon. But in some cases, these platforms — which are still smoothing out some rough edges — proved invaluable. Whether you're a camping ace or a roughing-it rookie, take them for a spin.

Hipcamp

Shortly after my co-pilot, James, and I pulled up to our first Hipcamp site, just south of Missoula, Mont., our camping neighbors — a couple from West Seattle en route to Yellowstone — asked whether we had scrap paper to start a fire. Soon, they were offering hot coffee to the humans and a strip of bacon to the beagle. When the sun set behind the mountains in an eruption of pinks and purples, we all faced the show, in awe.

Hipcamp was founded in 2013 by Alyssa Ravasio, who told me recently that she wants to get more people outdoors so they will fall in love with nature and want to protect it. She also explained that there is a huge problem with public funding and overcrowding at campgrounds.

"That's where private land came into play," she said. Hipcamp's secret sauce is partnerships with landowners, many of whom are small farmers or ranchers, creating entirely new camping destinations.

Today, the San Francisco-based company is often called the Airbnb of camping. The experience is smooth and user-friendly, even if you're a novice camper. You can search by state, city or Zip code, swipe through alluring photos, and filter by amenities and activities, including stargazing and swimming holes.

On Hipcamp, users can find beach camping, forest camping, treehouse camping, vineyard camping, retro trailer camping and glamping with breakfast included. Some sites are cabins, some include toilets and showers, and some are arguably not camping at all. Like those on Airbnb, hosts can sell additional services such as wine tastings, yoga classes, nature walks and pine nut foraging.

Ravasio said she enjoys the story behind each listing, such as a host who is using her earnings from Hipcamp rentals to care for land that has been in her family for generations. One of her favorites is a former commune in Northern California, now a 230-acre working farm that rents geodesic domes for \$425 a night.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The author's beagle, Hammy, peeks through a tent opening at Badlands National Park in South Dakota. Hammy looks up from a paddleboard on Pohick Bay in Virginia. Tentr's private campsites include linens and drinking water.

Most campsites I explored on the site seemed to be in the \$25 to \$50 range, and I have seen them as low as \$10.

We didn't get the host's story when we stopped in Montana, but the site was available an hour before we were ready to stop driving. The listing said the spot bordered a wildlife reserve, and the description for the yurt, next to the tent area, said the views are "life changing." It showed stunning shots of mountains and wildlife, but it didn't show pictures of the portable restroom or the large garage across from the campsite.

But for \$25, plus a \$4.50 Hipcamp fee, we were pleased to have a safe place for a utilitarian overnight stay, and the views — while not life-changing — inspired a shared moment of joy. As we fell asleep in the tent, Hammy sat at my feet and stared at the campfire and his new friends, probably thinking about bacon.

In addition to private spots, Hipcamp lists national, state and regional parks for a total of 387,000 campsites, making it hard to beat for one-stop shopping. Searching for nearby spots as we traveled through North Dakota, we used Hipcamp to find Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park just south of Minot (which we booked through the park website since some state campgrounds aren't bookable on Hipcamp).

At another point, after a long day of driving, we looked for camping in Wisconsin, northwest

of Madison. James searched on his phone and found a spot for \$45, and I simultaneously searched on my Garmin GPS, found a listing and picked up the phone. Turns out we were both looking at Cedar Hills Campground. The man on the phone said he had spots available for \$25 and that it was a clothing-optional property: "You okay with that?" After 880 miles of driving, I would have been okay with campers in clown costumes.

We rolled in, paid cash and set up camp near a ridge. The three of us stretched our legs on a short walk, during which we chatted with two friendly guests who wore nothing but hiking boots and bug spray.

Tentr

Less than an hour after Hammy and I showed up at a Tentr site in Lillington, N.C., to meet our beagle and human friends from Raleigh, we heard a crack of thunder. Within minutes, the skies opened angrily, and an hour of heavy rains followed. It wasn't perfect camping weather, but we were perfectly happy to have the protection of Tentr's canvas tent.

Tentr, like Getaway, which rents tiny houses in natural settings, has its own private, plug-and-play lodging sites — which means you can pretty much show up with a toothbrush and spend every minute relaxing in nature. No hauling gear, no wrangling tent poles.

When the rain began, we unzipped the large canvas tent, cozied up on the bed (a comfy queen with fresh linens) and opened a deck of cards. Each electricity-free site, located on about 10 acres of private land, includes an extra pop-up dome tent, Adirondack chairs, a picnic table, a fire pit, a grill, drinking water, a solar shower, a wood-burning stove and a portable, eco-friendly camp

toilet.

About 70 percent of the company's 860 listings are these signature sites, starting at \$100 a night, but they account for 90 percent of its bookings. (The rest are backcountry sites.) The company, founded in 2015 and based in New York City, has locations in 41 states and Puerto Rico, more heavily concentrated in the Northeast.

Chief executive Anand Subramanian said Tentr, whose sites are also bookable through Airbnb and Expedia, mostly targets young travelers who want to camp within a two-hour radius of home.

"Millennials don't want to leave the city and go to a campsite with 50 other people right next to them," he said. "They want privacy. They want to check out."

With increased demand during the pandemic, the company is now also setting up camp in secluded sections of state parks. The signature Tentr tents are available in Utah, Michigan, New York and Maine state parks, with more states on the horizon.

Tentr is still refining its operation. I found it frustrating to not be able to search by Zip code on the website, and when I needed to reset my password, the process took three hours. At one point, I had to cancel a weekend reservation because of a rain-filled forecast (full refund if it's more than 72 hours out), but after the weekend, an email prompted me to review the property I had never visited.

Subramanian said his team is working on improvements, and I'll be patient with Tentr because the camping itself was exactly what I wanted — a relaxed getaway, a quiet visit with friends and the calmness that comes with knowing I wouldn't need to spend a day cleaning wet camping gear back home.

The Dyrt

When I thought about booking a campsite in Virginia last week, I was looking for 24 hours out of the city and a place to paddle. I entered "Virginia" into the search bar of the Dyrt, a camping review and ratings site, and looked for campgrounds on the water within an hour of Washington. I often get discouraged reading reviews online — it's time consuming, and I'm skeptical of the reviewers.

But I felt more comfortable reading reviews on the Dyrt, which seemed like neutral ground compared with sites on which hosts and guests rate each other and may feel compelled to review positively. Although there's nothing stopping each campsite's staff from leaving a bunch of five-star ratings, I went in with an open mind and soon came to appreciate the site's grass-roots spirit. The Portland, Ore., company's co-founder, Kevin Long, compared the platform to Yelp and said that they have been developing it for seven years, focusing largely on building a community.

The Dyrt lists more than 44,000 public, private and RV campgrounds (including all the Tentr locations) and has 1.2 million user-submitted photos, reviews and tips.

In March, the company launched the Dyrt Pro, which allows paying members to access the entire database offline — useful if you're off the grid. Members also get discounts on campgrounds and gear and access to two very cool features: the trip planner and the maps that show free backcountry camping areas in national forests and on public lands.

The Dyrt has contests that incentivize writing reviews, with extra points if you're the first to review a campground. It also allows users to track camp visits on

If you go

Hipcamp

Camping's version of: Airbnb
Best if you're: New to camping, looking for unusual lodging and add-on activities or searching at the last minute.

Numbers: Offers 392,118 public and private campsites in 50 states
Drawbacks: Quality can vary wildly; don't expect every spot to look like a national park, even if the pictures show otherwise.

Also: Some Hipcamp hosts offer extras, such as honey-making classes, photography tours or baskets of farm-fresh veggies.

Tentr

Camping's version of: Getaway
Best if you're: Seeking solitude with your camping crew without the hassle of packing gear.

Numbers: 860 camping locations
Pricing: Signature sites start at \$100 for two to 12 campers
Drawbacks: Website search functionality is limited; fewer offerings in the West.

Also: Tentr is giving away five two-night stays to health-care workers every month. Nominate a health-care worker at tentr.com/nominate-a-healthcare-worker.

The Dyrt

Camping's version of: Yelp
Best if you're: A regular camper looking for ratings, reviews and community.

Numbers: More than 44,000 campgrounds; 1.2 million user-submitted reviews, photos and tips
Pricing: The Dyrt PRO is \$35.99; you can try it free for a week.

Drawbacks: It can take some time to navigate the site and understand what it can (reviews and ratings) and can't (booking) do.

Also: If gamification is your jam, you'll love the Dyrt's contests; you earn points for posting reviews of any campground you've ever visited.

— M.K.

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For a reliable Airbnb, look for a 'Superhost'

On Mondays at 2 p.m., the Travel section staff hosts Talk About Travel, an online forum for reader questions and comments. The following is an edited excerpt from recent discussions.

Q: I'm going to fly to visit my elderly mother as soon as her state lifts its two-week quarantine for outside visitors. I'm considering renting an Airbnb, just to be safe. I've never stayed in one. Any tips on

choosing a reliable owner and lodging, especially when it comes to new cleaning procedures?

A: Look for a "Superhost" designation — those are the hosts who are generally well-reviewed and have a good track record. Read all of the reviews before deciding on your two or three favorite properties. And don't hesitate to reach out directly to the host with any questions or to find out if they would be willing to offer a special rate if you're

visiting during the offseason.
— Christopher Elliott

Q: My wife and I are considering some pandemic road trip options. Is there a way to determine how crowded Mount Rushmore (or other major touristy sights in the upper Midwest) is from late September to early October?

A: During normal times, the summer months are the busiest, and visitor numbers will drop off

a week or two after Labor Day. This year, we can safely assume that even fewer people will visit tourist sites during the shoulder season. I would reach out to the parks' visitor centers and ask about the less popular hours/days. If possible, travel during the week, when most people are at work or "in school." Check opening times in advance, since many businesses might shorten their hours. — Andrea Sachs
travel@washpost.com

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