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Camping: A Resort Destination

In this new era of cost-cutting vacations and staying greener when visiting national parks or the mountains, nothing beats getting back to nature like camping at any of the award winning Townsend area campgrounds which offer many hidden amenities that few are aware of.

Many modern campers are seeking "comfort camping," an experience that sits somewhere in between camping and staying at a hotel. The modern campground is becoming a final destination and not a stop along the road. More and more campgrounds are increasingly offering such amenities as wireless internet access, cable television hookups and prefabricated cabins, most equipped with refrigerators, microwave ovens and flat-screen televisions. Many also have swimming pools, bicycle rental stations, arcades and miniature golf courses which match or surpass those of standard hotels.

"Campgrounds are indeed a resort destination," said Kampgrounds Of America's chief executive, James Rogers. "The world wants to get outdoors. At the end of the day, they also want a hot shower and a clean bed."

Some of these comforts can be found locally at the Townsend/Great Smokies KOA, Big Meadow Family Campground and Misty River Cabins & RV Resort which are just a few of the places that offer ways to get away from the house for a long weekend or excursion. In Townsend alone, there are eight campgrounds (Lazy Daze, Tremont Hills, Ye Olde Mill, Tuckaleechee, Cades Cove) located within a few miles of each other, all offering an excellent outdoor experience.

A nationwide survey co-sponsored by KOA last year found that 42.3 million people over age 6, or 15% of Americans, regularly go camping, either in tents or recreational vehicles.

Setting up camp can mean a variety of things to people. Some enjoy tent camping which can be very rustic, while others enjoy the comforts of luxury RV or cabin at a campground. Camping also offers the flexibility of eating at their unit over an open fire or heading off to one of the fine nearby restaurants.

"We cater to the market that wants to get back to nature. We see everything from eco-friendly campers to the movie star buses," said Jimmy Felton, owner of Misty River Cabins & RV Resort.

Camping brings about an openness that you don't find when confined in a hotel room. It has the ability to forge relationships that last with other campers and campground owners. Likewise, there's a comradery among owners nationwide that want to succeed and make the experience family friendly.

Some of those quality family experiences include weekend marshmallow roasts (just bring your own stick), ice cream socials, tie-dye t-shirt making and movie night. Camping brings quality time with family and friends, or just relaxation.

"There is so much to do in this area, the challenge is to do campground events when people are around," said Mark Chipperfield, General Manager Townsend/Great Smokies KOA.

It's estimated that there are about 8,000 independent campgrounds in the United States. That is everything from a little station out in the middle of nowhere to a resort property on the keys of Florida.

In addition to the recreational camper, there has developed a new group called Work Campers. These are a whole new generation of people in the United States that have RV's that are working at campgrounds; they work at NASCAR, at Disney or as insurance adjusters just to name a few occupations. These are people who have retired from their careers and want to continue to enjoy the freedom of travel and need to offset their living expenses and not eat away their 401K and IRAs.

They have come out of corporate America, they jump into their RV and they work for three months before moving on.

"We get a lot of groups from churches to family reunions, company retreats and bike and car rallies. KOA has a relationship with Cruise America RV Rental and Sales which aids in publicizing the camping experience," said Chipperfield.

Campground staffs are friendly and take an interest in campers by making rounds to ensure everything is satisfactory. They are involved in every aspect of the camping trip from set up to tear down as needed. The staff are visible for a sense of security, even though campers do a good job of policing themselves. There is really an emphasis on one-on-one customer service as everyone needs something different.

"If the camp starts badly, especially for the novice camper, they won't come back," said Felton. "I offer assistance in every way to make their trip great from start to end, so it's the experience they remember and want to do again. Likewise, if I can help the next guy have a better campground; it makes things better for us."

As part of the family atmosphere that is being generated, organizations like the CHilhowee ARea Ministry (CHARM) pulls churches from other communities to do things for campers like holding informal non-denominational services on Sunday to bible studies during the week.

"Come camp for a weekend and experience it. Moneywise it is the best value out there. Or, just visit a campground and see what it is like," said Felton.

With East Tennessee campgrounds being little more than a day's drive from 75% of the total U.S. population, it's no wonder that more than 90% of returning campers head to Blount County where they have found something special in mountains.

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Event Calendar

The new event calendar on www.BlountChamber.com allows Chamber members to post their events directly to gain added exposure. These are great opportunities for members to connect and network with potential customers. The events and meetings below will be held at the Chamber unless otherwise noted. Visit our website to receive notices of events and meetings you would like to attend – www.BlountChamber.com, click on Events Calendar. For more information, call 983-2241.

Mar. 20	3 p.m.	FREE Small Business Franchise Seminar
Mar. 21	11:45 a.m.	Ambassadors Meeting
Mar. 22	8 a.m.	Transportation Committee Meeting
Mar. 22	9 a.m.	Small Business Counseling
Mar. 29	8 a.m.	Coffee Club @ Gray Hodges Corporation 724 Brenda Drive, Alcoa
Mar. 29	9 a.m.	Small Business Counseling
Apr. 3	8:30 a.m.	Glenn Shepard Seminar
Apr. 5	9 a.m.	Small Business Counseling
Apr. 7	All Day	Herb & Wildflower Day – Townsend Visitors Center
Apr. 12	9 a.m.	Small Business Counseling
Apr. 12	3:45 p.m.	Afternoon Mixer- Blount Habitat for Humanity
Apr. 13	7:30 a.m.	Education Leader's Breakfast
Apr. 16	noon	Women in Business
Apr. 18	11:45p.m.	Ambassadors

To schedule a free small business counseling session or to make an appointment with a representative from the Tennessee Small Business Development Center call Vicky at 983-2241.

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