

Camping 101 in Ontario

Popular Ontario Parks program teaches newbies the basics



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FIRST POSTED: MONDAY, JUNE 04, 2012 12:00 AM EDT



Provincial park campsites with a lake view such as this one will soon be filled with summer campers. (Barbara Fox/Special to QMI Agency)

A whopping one-quarter of all Ontarians -- including yours truly -- has never gone camping. We've never slept under the stars, popped a tent, cooked over a Coleman, listened to the sounds of the forest at 1 a.m. or -- horrors -- been woken by the piercing drone of an invisible mosquito in the middle of the night.

A few years back, the Ontario Parks system did some investigating and discovered something more: New Canadians are even less likely to have tried camping.

Curious as to why so many of us are missing out on the one activity that is supposed come as naturally as hockey, Ontario Parks asked why. The answer? For newbies, the act of camping simply seems too complicated.

As a result, the Ontario Parks' Learn to Camp Program was introduced last summer. It provides a low-cost, overnight, hands-on course that takes you inside an Ontario provincial park, supplies all necessary equipment, and guides you through choosing a site, setting up your tent, lighting your fire, cooking your food -- all the basic, necessary skills are covered.

"We've done our homework," says Learn to Camp program coordinator Jeff Brown. "We've discovered lots of Ontarians -- many of them new Canadians -- are keen to try camping but don't because they lack the know-how, the skills and the confidence. So we've developed a hands-on course to help them get comfortable on a campsite."

In its initial season, Ontario Parks' new program proved so popular, it's back for Summer 2012 in even more parks and with an increased number of clinics.

Here's how Learn To Camp works:

Interested campers -- including family members of all ages -- sign up online for a two-day course at one of six provincial parks in southern, western and eastern Ontario: Bronte Creek, Darlington, Sibbald or Six Mile in the Greater Toronto Area; Ottawa's Murphys Point; or The Pinery near London.

The program is also offered on a lighter schedule at seven parks in northern Ontario, including two near Sudbury, two near Sault Ste. Marie, two in Thunder Bay and one in the Kenora area.

Once registered, participants receive a preparation package by mail that outlines what to bring, including bedding, food and personal items.

On the first day of their course, campers are greeted in their cars at the park gates by two program leaders, both experienced campers carrying all other equipment necessary for two days of camping.

"The program is sponsored by Coleman," Brown says. "They've supplied us with everything, including tents, stoves, coolers, cutlery, screened shelters -- you name it."

Together the leaders and students drive to a campsite, unpack and set-up. Help is offered choosing a safe, dry spot, securing the tent, inflating air mattresses, setting up the stove and lighting the campfire. Information is also provided on how to camp in the rain, how to safely store your food, and how to get through the night.

"There's only a piece of fabric separating you from the outdoors," Brown says. "The sounds of the forest you hear at night sound louder than they really are, so we have to prepare you for that."

Throughout the course, time is set aside for outdoor fun. Participating families -- including infants, toddlers, teens and grandparents -- are encouraged to swim, paddle, hike and hang out.

"It's not all work. We have lots of fun time as well built into the sessions," Brown says.

The Learn to Camp Program costs \$64 per family for one night and two days of camping for up to six people. Campsites chosen are all close to washrooms, showers and potable water. While all ages of campers -- including infants -- are welcome, Brown says parents need to be aware of the program's active schedule.

As for advice choosing a location, Brown says each Ontario Park has its own character. Bronte Provincial Park near Oakville is not on the water, but has a giant swimming pool, agricultural paths and a play barn for kids. Darlington near Oshawa is known for its sandy beach on Lake Ontario. Murphys Point near Perth is on Lake Rideau -- its heritage mica mine is a popular visiting spot.

On the shores of Lake Simcoe, Sibbald Provincial Park has excellent swimming. Six Mile park near Barrie is on a picturesque part of the Canadian Shield. And the sand dunes and beaches are popular features of The Pinery on Lake Huron. New campers heading north to the parks near Sudbury and beyond qualify for discounts on local hotel accommodations before and after their camping experience.

For more information on Ontario Parks and Learn To Camp programs, see ontarioparks.com/learntocamp.

loriknowles.com