



Do you love camping? Or maybe NOT! My personal experience of contending with the rigors of the natural elements: Earth, wind, fire and water has been severely limited by my obsession for running water and electricity close at hand. Oh, and yes indeed, I've heard this convenience, too, has entered the camping world. Well, perhaps I will need to amend my opinion that "My idea of camping is a reservation at the Ahwahnee Hotel, Yosemite National Park, of course."

Yosemite is a wonderment of natural design in the High Sierra Mountains and majesty to experience, and there is plenty of camping to be had. However, the camping concept needed an alternative arrangement for me. With minimal preparation and virtually no hassle, my adventurous husband and I (to a lesser degree, intrepid) made the three-hour sojourn to spend a week in the ambiance of awe-inspiring beauty just outside Yosemite: Groveland.

We decided to stay at the Thousand Trails RV Campground, which has small hardsided cabins (left) in addition to full-hookup campsites, tent sites and yurts. Ten rental cabins with all the user-friendly amenities are located at Yosemite Lakes on the Tuolumne River, just five miles from the West Gate of the park. This South Fork of the gentle river traversing along the perimeter of the 400-acre campground is ideal for swimming, fishing and panning for gold.

Our experience was really over the top with spectacular weather, awesome adventures, hiking and sightseeing, and did I mention the unbelievably cozy cabin? With kitchen, bedroom, living room and, oh yes, bathroom with hot water shower, it is fully appointed with heat, AC, satellite TV, an enclosed front porch and outdoor picnic table. The cabin sleeps 4, and comes equipped with all cooking and eating utensils, even bed and bath linens for a small additional price. We found the knotty pine -lined interior with dual paned windows to be a no-frills option to other outdoor camping choices that offers all the practical conveniences for a stress-free stay.

We packed a couple folding chairs and our trusty little, dusty little, ever-portable Smoky Joe barbeque and a grub box filled with staples for cookouts, and away we went. There is a country

store on premises, but by no means would it be confused with your full service hometown supermarket. The best shopping for any and everything is in the quaint hamlet of Groveland, population 1,500, just a few minutes down the road on Hwy 120.

Wild flowers border the scenic route into town and follow the bumpy road to Back Street, where an ancient-looking book shop resides; nearby is the tiny Post Office. Trailing wild blackberry vines, loaded with fruit for the picking can be found near small businesses on the side roads.

We took in the pleasures of strolling along the several blocks of this historic community that was once a boom town of gold-



rushers, bars and bordellos in the years between 1848 and 1870. Supplanted by cattle ranches and a trickle of tourists with their sights set on reaching the treasured National landmark of Yosemite, one notable iconic landmark remains even yet: The famous Iron Door Saloon, (below right) which is noted as the oldest continuously operating saloon in California.

Built around 1852, its original doors were shipped around the Horn from England and continue to swing open for an unusual treat, where children are welcome with a menu of their own, live music and dancing afford entertainment in the evenings and within its hollowed walls resides a museum unto itself.

Another well-known attraction is the Hotel Charlotte, an ornate 10-room bed and breakfast on the National Register of Historic Places. It is reasonably priced and includes breakfast for two and also has a gourmet menu for lunch and dinner and a full bar.

The lure of the fresh fragrance of Firefall Coffee Roasting Company drew us in for lattes and fresh baked cinnamon rolls on our way to Serendipity Antiques, ensconced in a turn of the century home, impossible to resist. The Pizza Factory and Baskin Robbins Ice Cream parlor was a clear destination on one day and the Cocina Michoacana Authentic Mexican Restaurant on another. Clearly, our palates were satisfied.

Groveland hosts an annual 49er Festival (not the football kind) on the third Saturday of September, (this year: Sept.



17) sponsored by the Yosemite Chamber of Commerce, replete with kid's activities, an antique airplane flyover and parade with live music. The Ranger District office of the Stanislaus National Forest and the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection are centered in Groveland. There is, unquestionably, a small town look and feel in Groveland, 26 persons per square mile, where local ranchers still run herds down the main street in town. While beyond, Groveland is home to Pine Mountain Lake community, once a retirement center, where its Marina is their most popular beach

For more thrills and water sports, Lake Don Pedro, just 35 miles west, offers boating and water-skiing opportunities. Within the region, Moaning Caverns is a must to see. Its California's largest tourist cavern of long-standing notoriety for the howling sounds emitted as the wind travels through deep hollow spaces.

Columbia State Park is within less than an hour's drive and the Hetch Hetchy Dam Project, of 1914, diverting upper watershed from the Tuolumne River for the city of San Francisco are local points of interest.

On the property of Yosemite Lakes campground, we visited the lodge and family center, where the WI-FI connection provided service for computers and I-pads; cell phone service is patchy at best in the area. A pool table, lounge area and TV room serve for more relaxing activities. On site are horseshoe pits, basketball court, ping-pong, volleyball court, mini golf, laundry facilities and a fish-cleaning station.

Although a membership RV resort, Thousand Trails, in the Mother Lode of the Sierra Foothills, offers public check-ins for use of their facility, including group use. For more information, call 1-209-962-0108. Groveland Chamber of Commerce is at www.groveland.org --- KRB



Karen Dalton is a freelance writer, avid traveler and San Ramon resident. You can reach her at karen@freelance.com