

'Glamping' with MS



How to rough it in comfort.

by Kelsey Blackwell

The smell of freshly brewing coffee serves as your morning alarm. You flip off a cozy duvet and shuffle across the wood floor for a mugful before pushing open the door into a crisp morning. Outside you are greeted by woodland birds serenading the arriving sun and a gentle trail just waiting for you to discover its charms. No, you are not at a five-star hotel or some fancy resort, but instead enjoying the great outdoors—on your terms. This is “glamping.”

Glamping, or glamorous camping, is a comfort-focused way of “roughing it,” and it’s growing in popularity, thanks in part to more recreational facilities, state parks and third-party operators offering top-notch amenities to appeal to outdoor lovers who also love the comforts of home. And now, glamping is also making it possible for people with disabilities to get off the beaten path.

Lynn Anderson, distinguished service professor in the recreation, parks and leisure studies department at the State University of New York at Cortland, notes that with glamping, “You’re able to spend time in the outdoors overnight but have some of the amenities that you’re used to in everyday life to facilitate that experience.”

Electricity, accessible washrooms, full kitchens, furnished accommodations complete with bedding and automatic coffee makers are just some of the options glampers may choose from.



Karen Francisco, diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 2003, enjoys her RV, which allows her to spend time in nature with comfort and accessibility. Her kitchen, for example, has a refrigerator, where she stores her MS medication. Photo courtesy of Karen Francisco

While experiences and prices vary, glamping generally means sleeping off the ground in an insulated space. This is commonly in a cabin, hut, yurt, recreational vehicle, Airstream trailer or cottage, though the growing industry is now catering to imaginative and adventurous travelers with teepee, treehouse and even igloo rentals.

For those looking for a truly luxurious experience, the sky really is the limit, thanks to third-party vendors that arrange every aspect, from setup and breakdown of lodging to gourmet meals at the end of the day.

A breath of fresh air

Karen Francisco, a customer service specialist in Federal Way, Washington, raised her children to have an appreciation of the great outdoors, and they tent-camped often as a family. After being diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis in 2003, she and her husband realized that to continue spending time outside, they'd need to create a more comfortable and accessible experience. "We got an RV, so now we're a little bit fancy," she says. Those who can't splurge for an RV may find that renting one is a more affordable option.

The Franciscos' RV is equipped with a refrigerator (useful not just for food but also for her medication), air conditioning, heat, a bathroom and a railing, which makes it easier for her to step in and out of the vehicle. Now, getting outside while managing her MS symptoms is possible. In fact, the ability to get away, she says, improves her health. And the Franciscos take advantage of that, taking the RV out about once a month. "I can leave everything

behind; I don't even have access to the internet," Francisco says. "I love being outside.

"I go for lots of walks. The quiet is very peaceful, and the fresh air is energizing. It gives me the opportunity to think about life and decompress."

Like the Franciscos, many people who have transitioned from normal tent camping to glamping find that the experience is often heavy on pros and light on cons.



An experienced traveler, Kera Miller, here in Belize on top of a Mayan ruin, has glamped closer to home. She was diagnosed with MS in 2005.

Photo courtesy of Kera Miller

"I really can't think of many drawbacks," says Kera Miller, a therapist from Denver who works with adolescents. Like Francisco, Miller has always been an avid hiker and camper. After her MS diagnosis in 2005, she worried she might not be able to continue to enjoy outdoor life. In 2013, Miller and her sister glamped in a yurt (an often-insulated circular tent built on a wood frame) in Big Sur, California, for the first time. "It was pretty cool," she says. "It was November, and we were still able to have a camping experience despite the cold. We had beds and heat. It's really an ideal way to camp."

Glamp across the USA

Motivated by the accessibility needs of aging baby boomers and people of varying abilities, many recreational sites are making it a priority to provide glamp-style accommodations.

Glamping.com provides listings for glamping facilities across the world with more than 200

sites in the U.S. alone.

In Oregon, glampers may choose from yurts, cabins and teepees (some are pet-friendly) offered by the state's Parks and Recreation Department. All yurts and cabins include a skylight, electricity, heat, lights and an outdoor fire pit. Prices range from about \$40 to \$55 per night. Deluxe accommodations also come with a kitchen, bathroom and shower.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources also offers yurt accommodations in three state parks: Afton State Park, Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area and Glendalough State Park. And, in line with the increasing focus on accessibility, one yurt in each location is designed to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act's standards.

"Most state parks are now very in tune and aware of universal design [structures, products and environments that are inherently accessible to older people, people with disabilities and people without disabilities]," Anderson says. "Many, for example, are adding yurts that have entry ramps, and some sites are being remodeled to include showers and restrooms that are accessible for people with different functional abilities."

In John Dillon Park in the Adirondacks, all amenities are universally accessible. In addition to motel and cabin accommodations, the nonprofit park offers Adirondack lean-tos—wooden structures with an open front. Each has a ramp for entry and fold-down shelf beds with handrails for sleeping. The lean-tos also have accessible fire rings, and a nearby visitor's center is available for charging electrical devices.

For RV glampers, Moss Park Campground in Orlando, Florida, offers level sites with raised grills, high-sided fire pits, paving around water, and electrical hookups and paved paths to universally designed bathrooms and showers. Similarly, the Franciscos' favorite RV campground, Maple Grove Resort in Randle, Washington, offers a level, easily accessible campground plus gentle hiking trails, a heated swimming pool and hot tub. "Now, this is roughing it!" Karen jokes.

An 'in-tents' experience

If sleeping in a tent is high on your wish list, even that can be possible without tapping energy reserves. Some professional companies will set up and take down your accommodations for you, complete with a cushy off-the-ground bed, so you can simply show up, enjoy and rest when needed.



Staying in a yurt, a lightweight, portable shelter built on a wood frame, is one way to retain some creature comforts. Photo courtesy of Golden Gate Canyon State Park

If you're considering creating your own glamping experience, Anderson suggests bringing equipment that gets you off the ground. Folding chairs, a table, and a cot or camp bed are all helpful. In addition, a reliable cooler for storing medications is essential. If you need electricity, you may be able to use a power adaptor from your car or a portable generator.

Those who want to invest more in creating their own adaptive glamping experience might consider Eureka's Freedom tent, which is specifically designed for people with disabilities. Broad zipper pulls facilitate opening and closing for anyone challenged by fine motor movement, and a front vestibule supports transferring from a wheelchair into a main sleeping area.

Is glamping right for you?

The range of available options helps take the guesswork out of finding a great glamping experience, but is glamping right for everyone?

While traditional camping may be out of reach for people who have MS symptoms such as fatigue, pain, ambulatory difficulties or other physical challenges, glamping can still work, as long as you do your research and prepare, says Gus LaZear, certified recreation therapist and vice president and general manager of the Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center for Persons With Disabilities in Phoenix.

"You must ask the right questions for your specific needs," LaZear says. "Maybe the accommodations are accessible, but the grounds are not. Maybe the nearest bathroom would require an outdoor walk that would not be covered in the rain. How likely are you to make that walk? As with any camping trip, planning and preparation are key. For those with MS, it's important to ensure you have some control over your environment, rather than it controlling

you.”

Anderson agrees, and specifically suggests considering two key factors: temperature and fatigue. More time outdoors means less insulation from the elements, and excess cold or heat can aggravate MS symptoms. Be prepared to regulate your own temperature by bringing layers, and keep in mind that temperature can swing drastically between day and night in desert and mountain locations.

Fatigue is an important factor for anyone with MS to consider. “Plan to take more time than you think you need for everything, especially if it’s your first time,” Anderson suggests. “For planned outdoor activities, set a reasonable agenda and pace. When you’re not in a hurry, you’ll find there’s a lot more to enjoy.”

For those who need assistance with activities of daily living, LaZear adds, “[Park staff or third-party vendors] are not going to offer personal care services like helping you shower or dress, but they will make sure the trip is accessible and safe for everyone.”

For those reasons, LaZear recommends glamping with a friend or family member who can assist you if necessary. He also suggests keeping your first glamping trip short—say, one to three days—to see how your body responds before booking a longer vacation.

Even with the comforts of home, LaZear cautions that glamping may not be for everyone. “If someone is looking for a more resort-like vacation with room service or other such amenities, some glampsites may come close, but the experience is really more ideal for people who want to get into nature.”

Planning your trip

Whether arranging your own trip, or booking lodging at a glampsite, think through what would most help you feel comfortable and supported. Maybe that’s an accessible bathroom in your room or paved trails that would more easily allow you to experience nature.

Be sure to consider every MS symptom that could affect your trip, such as cognitive challenges or issues with vision; you may need to bring additional flashlights or portable lamps, for instance. Talk to your healthcare providers, who may be able to offer specific suggestions to make your trip even safer and more enjoyable.

“I tell people to think about the experience they’d like to have, rather than potential limitations,” Anderson says. “Maybe it’s getting into the mountains, or maybe it’s waking up to the sound of crashing surf? With glamping, there are ways to make it possible.”

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For more information on traveling and other leisure activities, visit the Society’s resource page on [Recreation and Travel](#).