

The Washington Post  
**TRAVEL**

SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2020 · SECTION E

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JAMES HAWORTH

# Making the yard your campground

A vacation steps from the house offers solitude — to reflect, to grieve, to count blessings — or a memorable experience for kids

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

“I’m headed into the wilderness,” I said. I looked at Hammy, who, the previous day, I’d discovered halfway submerged in a bag of flour, looking like Casper the Friendly Beagle; Georgie, a young foster bunny who had recently eaten my third-to-last piece of fresh fruit; and James, the human I’d invited to be my quarantine (Dan Savage wittily rhymes it with “valentine”). “There’s no reception. No texting.”

“When will you be back from your trip?” James asked, playing along.

I shrugged. “Maybe never,” I said, smiling impishly. Then I slipped on my flip-flops, picked up my pillow and canvas bag, and opened the back door. With the house and monotonous quarantine life in my wake, I took a deep breath, scanned my surroundings and headed into the wilds of my 11-foot-wide backyard.

Until I began planning a camping trip behind my house, an acceptable loophole to stay-at-home orders, I didn’t realize the extent of my longing for a trip — and for the excitement that comes with its anticipation. Until I made the decision to camp solo, I didn’t understand how much I was craving alone time.

Isolation isn’t exactly what most people are hungry for during this pandemic, but if you’ve spent the past couple of months sheltering with other people, well, that’s a lot of together time. I figure I’ve spent more hours this spring with James, my partner, than I’ve spent with any other human in a single season since childhood. Cooking together. Cleaning together. Walking together. Video conferencing together. My introvert warning system alerted me to impending unrest. Must. Be. Alone.



SHANNA GUEVIN

**TOP:** The author reads to an attentive beagle in her backyard in the District. **ABOVE:** Four-year-old Alice camps with her mom in their yard in South Portland, Maine. They’ve now made backyard camping a regular activity.

I shared my camping plan with a friend, who understood my need for creative space and the importance of solitude. “It’s the opposite of a man cave,” she said. But it’s not a she-shed. It’s a she-tent.”

When I last slept in my backyard, I was a kid in the suburbs. I remember the delight of getting cozy in the pop-up trailer with my sister or a friend and the thrill of having a little space all our own. (I also remember being paralyzed with fear, during Truth or Dare, when I was challenged to walk to the end of the dark driveway. I chose truth.)

So on Day 44 of the District’s stay-at-home order, I busted out. The backyard felt different immediately. For years, I’d known the space as an extension of my house. Now, it was a destination. Twinkly lights peeped out from a climbing hydrangea, and branches of cherry and red maple trees swayed in the breeze, softening the voices of neighbors in their backyards.

After setting up my tent in a small patch between the blooming irises and the motorcycle, I lit a fire in the fire pit. Before dinner (a precious box of Annie’s mac and cheese a houseguest had left in March — which I’d abstained from in my plant-based kitchen), I foraged for edible plants to garnish my feast. Cilantro! Oregano! Basil! Chives! My campsite was lush and green and plentiful.

Birds cheeped loudly as I sat in front of the hissing fire, stabbing macaroni with my spork. For the first time, I found the space to grieve for my 99-year-old grandmother, who died alone in April. I wished I could call and tell her about this adventure. She would have loved it — and wanted to join.

Well before the sun set, I crawled into my tent and changed into pajamas, feeling more

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# A backyard break from your routine, without flouting stay-at-home orders

CAMPING FROM E13

freedom and glee than I'd felt in months. I considered my fortune during this time: I have my health, a pantry full of food, almost enough work, a human and dog I love sharing my life with, and friends who drop off fresh-baked bread or cutout hearts that say "Stay strog" [sic] in marker. And now, I even had a vacation — what a luxury. I gave myself permission, for the evening, to stop thinking about friends who are sick, family members at risk, people out of work, food management in my kitchen, the teddy bear on my windowsill.

A siren wailed in the distance, a motorcycle engine revved nearby, and dogs barked next door. Zipped away from the rest of the world, I could transport myself anywhere. I thought about solo camping trips in the olden days: in Colorado, when I left my tent before sunrise to hike the largest sand dune in North America; and in Baja California, Mexico, when a coyote stole a bag of water from my kayak as I slept.

The sun dipped, and I began rereading a John Irving book by headlamp, dozing and wakening. I scribbled ideas in my notebook and watched tiny bugs on the roof of the tent. They scurried around, making circles on the thin netting, blissfully ignorant of the

world's woes.

During the night, I woke several times and listened to the crinkle of the tent in the wind. Once, I tensed after hearing an unidentifiable sound, a frightening moment that somehow made my camping adventure feel authentic. Another time, I woke and was surprised that the night was devoid of bird sounds, as though someone, at a prescribed hour, had flipped off the bird switch.

Just before sunrise, I woke to someone rolling a trash bin in the alley. The birds stirred and began staggering their songs, like an orchestra warming up by section.

I slithered out of my bag and looked for my jar of overnight oats. My back was a little stiff, but I felt relaxed, even recharged. And then, as my trip neared its conclusion, I felt something curious, a fleeting sentiment that I hadn't experienced since the Time Before. Without warning, I found myself missing Hammy and James.

Later, I would ask them to join me for breakfast in the tent, and I would invite them to camp with me a few days hence. But in that moment, I sat alone, my imagination carrying me away and the morning sounds of the District bringing me back. Outside, the tall irises leaned in the breeze, and a few petals dropped to the ground. I smoothed out my sleeping bag and tidied up my little place of



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**The author's backyard camping trip yielded many of the same benefits of far-flung travel, including the anticipation.**

refuge. Then I unzipped the tent and tiptoed into the quiet house.

## Backyard camping 101

The same week I camped, I asked some friends to do the same and report back with tips. My friend in Maine camped with her 4-year-old daughter, Alice, and said it was probably the best thing they could have done during quarantine. Alice was crawling in and out of the tent all day and was fascinated with the sleeping bag zipper. She was "over the moon," her mom said, and they've now

made backyard camping a regular activity. Below are 10 tips for making your own adventure a stellar one.

**Practice** Set up your tent inside first, especially if borrowing one you haven't used before. Outdoors, use a ground sheet or tarp to protect your tent. If you need advice on purchasing gear, REI is setting up appointments for virtual outfitting with an expert.

**Bring an overnight bag** Nothing says "I'm going on a trip" like a packed bag by the door. Toss in your PJs, toothbrush, water bottle

and a book. If you forget something, hike back to the house.

**Set realistic expectations** Understand, especially with wee campers, that you might not make it till morning — and that's okay. If the night sounds are too scary or the bugs too pesky, simply head inside. With kids, know that bedtime might be later than normal. That's okay, too.

**Pack light** After sunset, bust out the fun lights. If you have a headlamp, you'll look like a pro, but just as useful is a lantern, flashlight or book light. REI sells cool solar-powered lanterns and string lights.

**Make it extra special** Bring a telescope, board game, ukulele, podcast, tunes or scary movie — whatever makes you happy. Remember ear buds to keep your neighbors happy.

**S'mores, of course** Fire pits have never seemed so essential. Pack chocolate, marshmallows and graham crackers, plus whatever other snacks or breakfast you'll want to enjoy in your tent. Keep food in sealed containers so you're not feeding critters outside your family.

**Be comfy** Winning at backyard camping doesn't mean roughing it to the point of discomfort. Set up a couple of camp chairs or a hammock if you have them. Each camper needs a sleeping pad, which provides an important layer of insulation (indoor blowup

mattresses are not recommended). Use a sleeping bag that's rated for the weather; if you're not sure, check REI's sleeping bag temperature ratings. Expert tip: Fill a Nalgene bottle with warm water and slip it into the bottom of your bag before you zip in. Don't forget to pilfer a plush pillow from your bedroom.

**Canines love camping, too** Invite your pup to join the fun, and make sure he has his own water bowl, snacks, and pad or blanket. Dogs, watch those nails on the tent floor.

**Go early, stay late** If your schedule allows, set up the tent early in the day so kids can play inside; don't rush to take it down the next day. Remember to let your tent and sleeping bags dry completely before storing to prevent mildew.

**Try the great indoors** If your outdoor space isn't practical or safe for camping, set up in your living room or basement. Hang a string of lights, load a virtual crackling fire on your device, and set a few plants outside the tent door. No tent? Grab some sheets, blankets and brooms, and dust off your fort-making skills.

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