

Just pop the hatch and put up the tent

A wayfaring pair give an inclusive car-camping service, based in the District, a Virginia road test

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

One day in April, I returned from a camping trip — a quick 24 out of the city — and ran a load of laundry. What's more telling is what I didn't do.

I didn't hose down a muddy tent, I didn't soak a shoddily cleaned pot, and I categorically did not empty a cooler or clean out a car. Instead, I relied on a new District-based adventure outfitter called Trailhead Outdoor Journey Cooperative, an Airbnb of sorts for

car camping, to provide all my gear and — blessedly — clean up afterward.

Trailhead is the brainchild of Brandon Smith, a Washingtonian who was an Airbnb host in Chicago and plans to expand the camping service to other cities. Not only does Smith provide more than 100 items that he values at \$7,100, but his insured car is part of the package. When I emailed about reservations, I imagined a fleet of vehicles. Smith wrote back, "We just have the Subaru Outback available. It's a v small operation!" I



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Trailhead Outdoor Journey Cooperative supplies a 2008 Subaru Outback jammed with camping gear — ready to go.

asked him about dogs. "Def cool with canines," he wrote. "Our standard cleaning/damage policy applies: anything we can clean is cool. (And we have a lint brush.)"

Like many travelers, I enjoy preparing for a trip — I like making lists, packing the right gear and anticipating possible scenarios. I love setting off on a journey knowing I'm equipped well. But Trailhead's website got me thinking about what it would be like without hours of preparation and post-trip cleanup — which is exactly what Smith had intended.

"Think what all you could think about if you didn't have to think about stuff," teases the website

CAMPING CONTINUED ON F5

In D.C., a car-camping outfitter's service puts the cleanup in your rearview

CAMPING FROM FI

trailheadjourney.com. Whether you're renting someone's house, van, bike or car camping equipment, you're paying for entrepreneurs like Smith to deal with the hassle of acquisition, maintenance and storage — so you don't have to.

I learned about Trailhead from my neighbor and reserved a night in early April (\$202.50, plus tax) for my friend Carol, her beagle Seamus, my beagle Hammy and me. I had one conversation with Smith, and we had a friendly email exchange about logistics.

Sometime during the night before we left, Smith did his best imitation of the tooth fairy and left the Outback on my block on Capitol Hill, then emailed me a code to access the key. In the morning, I was excited to see the car packed with colorful gear bags (and relieved to see it hadn't been vandalized).

As Carol and I loaded our backpacks, ukuleles, food and beagles, the four of us quickly scanned the contents of the vehicle and found them to our liking: Trailhead's formidable Yeti cooler was already cold with ice packs, a glass jug with five gallons of water sat in the hatch and a bag of dog treats awaited the hounds.

We set off with a full tank of gas, which — awesomely — Smith doesn't ask customers to replace. He had suggested Elizabeth Furnace Recreation Area in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, so we headed west out of the city. The city stress and the busyness of our lives began wicking away.

I pulled off the highway near Front Royal, cruising by a Confederate flag, a 7 Express Mini Mart and a large cemetery. As we entered George Washington National Forest, Carol said, "I wonder who Elizabeth Furnace was." She began typing into her phone — which she had been juicing up with Trailhead's charger — and a moment later, she lost coverage. We soon arrived at the campground, chose a spot near the stream and began setting up camp.

Smith was meticulous in curating Trailhead's inventory. The tent is a two-person geodesic structure called the Cave (\$760 on the Heimplanet website) that we unrolled onto a ground cover and inflated in what seemed like just a few pumps. The frame came alive like a giant tarantula, leaving us giddy with the ease of assembly.



The pump bag inflator for the cushy Exped Megamat Duo 10 sleeping mat (\$369 at REI), like a few other pieces of gear, required some trial and error. But ultimately, we were pleased to know we had the competence — and patience — to figure things out without Google instructions or YouTube videos.

As much as I loved setting up the big-ticket items, the real fun came in rummaging through all the classy waxed-canvas bags to see what goodies the camping fairy had bequeathed. Smith had typed (like, on a typewriter) labels such as, "Emergency/survivalist pack. If your life is in danger, use beacon as last resort." I found many tools I knew we'd need (chef's knife, titanium sporks, LED headlamps), some I was thankful we wouldn't have to employ (SAS Survival Guide, poison plant wash and water purification germicidal tablets), and others I didn't even know how to use (solar panel and bear-proof food canister, which also turned out to be writer-proof).

I opened bags upon bags of items: pencil torch, heatproof glove, bear locks for the cooler,



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

At Elizabeth Furnace Recreation Area in Virginia, the author's camping companion, Carol Backstrom, top, deflates the tent. Chairs and a fire pit, above, were included.

waterproof notebook and pen, clothesline, collapsible saw, no-rinse shampoo, salt and pepper grinders, chain mail pot-scrubber, compass and topographical maps of George Washington Forest. Many were contingency items — just in case it rained or we got lost, developed blisters, ran out of food or wanted a Nerf ball — but what a treat to have someone else worry about that for a change.

Carol pulled some fire-starter sticks out of a linen drawstring bag and lit a blaze in Trailhead's stainless steel fire pit — a Solo Stove Bonfire. We made tea and chopped veggies on an end-grain cutting board and, after realizing we'd forgotten the pasta, dug into the stash of extra-fee (but reasonably priced) minibar-type items and settled on a pouch of dehydrated Thai curry.

the sound of a woodpecker in the distance and snowflakes on the roof. Carol prepared steel-cut oatmeal on the campground fire (so we could pack up the Solo while it was cold) while I fixed tea and hot chocolate in silicone expandable mugs. She's a coffee-drinker, and the Costa Rican/Ethiopian coffee with "notes of apricot and brown spice" smelled lovely, but Trailhead's hand-cranked coffee grinder and copper Hario V60 pour-over cone and its filters were a little daunting.

After breakfast, we deflated the dome ("Easiest tent ever," she declared, as the tarantula collapsed) and boiled water to rinse out the pots. We couldn't find dish soap, and I think we mistakenly used a microfiber washcloth for the dishes instead of the dish towel.

After a short hike across the street on the Bear Wallow trail, we stopped by nearby Henry's Grocery, where you can buy firewood, camp food, bulk pipe tobacco and 25-ounce beers. A fierce hunger overcame us. "Elevenes," Carol said. Somehow naming our hunger made us feel better about ordering subs an hour after breakfast.

Back home, the Yeti cooler was still cold. Smith arrived to pick up the car and solicit feedback. (He asks campers for a 60-second conversation about the experience.) I told him we appreciated that everything was clean and high-quality, and I suggested laminated inventory lists to make it easier to find stuff. A few more instructions — especially for novice campers — would be helpful too, I said. I admitted that we'd improvised for a sheet because we hadn't figured out until morning that the item we'd set aside — thinking it was a tent divider or mosquito net — was actually a mattress sheet. And we didn't understand how the tripod camp stove grill worked, but it became obvious after I saw the pictures on Trailhead's website and Instagram page. As for the dish soap, we'd somehow missed the tiny package of soap leaves.

Enveloped in a bouquet du campfire, I unpacked my clothes. Carol emailed to let me know Elizabeth Furnace wasn't a person after all; it was a 19th century blast furnace in the Shenandoah Valley.

I started the laundry.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer based in the District. Her website is melaniedgkaplan.com. Find her on Twitter: @melaniedgkaplan.

Carol and I are both eager, but infrequent, campers. We probably camp a couple of times a year and generally let others take care of the heavy lifting, or at least the complicated tent poles that easily confounded us. We agreed that Trailhead was great for people who didn't have all the camping gear they needed or those who do have it but want to test out different products before a purchase.

After dinner we walked with Seamus and Hammy around the park and greeted a half-dozen other campers. The beagles followed their noses, pulling us to abandoned campsites and indiscernible smells of long-ago meals.

The sun set, and we burrowed below a heavy Ikea duvet with the hounds. I flipped through one of Smith's books, "Cabin Porn: Inspiration For Your Quiet Place Somewhere," reading about treehouses and yurt-building. Before long, I switched off my headlamp.

"Hear the frogs?" Carol asked. I heard a chirping sound. "Those are frogs?" The question hung in the cold air, punctuated by the sound of a snoring beagle. Carol was asleep.

We woke, toasty and rested, to