

CAMP CURIOUS

THERE ARE SUMMER CAMPS — AND THEN THERE ARE SUMMER EXPERIENCES. IS YOUR KID READY FOR A SKILL-EXPANDING ADVENTURE?



By ERIKA RASMUSSEN JONES

Mention the word “camp” and most parents have images of canoe rides and singing “Kumbaya” around the campfire. Those traditional and much loved forays are certainly easy to find: There are more than 12,000 overnight and day-camp programs in the United States, according to the American Camp Association (ACA).

But when it comes to summer adventure, kids looking to do more than play capture the flag and roast marshmallows have got some intriguing options. “Specialty summer programs and camps are a growing part of the camping industry,” says Jill Tipograph, director of Everything Summer, a New Jersey- and New York-based private summer program and camp consultancy. They offer teens and tweens many of the benefits of a traditional camp — like increasing confidence and making new friends — while also cultivating specialized skills in a stimulating, developmental environment.

Such programs are geared for kids who are already camp-savvy and who have enough emotional maturity to handle a little challenge. “Specialty summer experiences and camps tend to focus more on personal skills growth,” says Tipograph.

Choosing the right camp experience for your child can be daunting, so we’ve researched a few that offer life-expanding experiences in three areas that many kids would find both enticing and educational: outdoor adventure, health and fitness, and community service.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE: LONGACRE EXPEDITIONS

Pennsylvania-based Longacre Expeditions is designed for 11- to 19-year-olds with an appetite for adventure. Since 1981, Longacre has been involved in the adventure-travel-camp industry, providing challenging wilderness treks that emphasize physical accomplishment, academic skills and emotional growth.

Longacre’s adventure programs mix external adventures with introspection and interaction. The offerings include a 15-day eco-service, backpacking, rock-climbing, skiing and sea-kayaking trip in British Columbia; 18 days of biking, white-water rafting and surfing in Oregon; a 21-day scuba, sailing and sea-kayaking trip in the Virgin Islands; and an intensive 28-day Leadership Training program in Colorado.

The physical demands are designed to foster self-confidence and growth. “A group that goes into the wilderness — isolated from other people and separated from the creature comforts of civilization — comes out much more bonded and confident in themselves as a group and as individuals,” says Roger Smith, Longacre’s owner and director.

But the program isn’t all about sweat and survival. Early in a trip, a camper might be asked to “interview” a fellow camper and then report back to the group what was learned about the person. Later, campers are asked to give and

PHOTO: MATT SCHULER

receive feedback on how their actions during the trip have affected others in the group. These exercises aim to improve listening and speaking skills, as well as to teach campers to think about individual autonomy, maturity and communal responsibility. During and after the outing, participants also meet one-on-one with group leaders to evaluate the camper's cooperative and leadership strengths and weaknesses so those skills can be improved as they continue in the program.

By focusing on interpersonal interaction and development, teens and tweens improve their communication skills, problem-solving abilities and decision-making expertise. "Not only does the group get tighter, but kids have the opportunity to adjust their assumptions and behaviors," Smith says. "During even a limited period of time, kids can really change quite dramatically. They're more confident, more willing to hold eye contact, and they approach things like homework and making friends with a whole different attitude."

The experience certainly seemed to boost the self-confidence of Sarah Friedman, now a student at James Madison University. The 18-year-old spent the past three summers at Longacre, most recently as a part of the Leadership Training program for 16- to 19-year-olds. "Lots of people think camp is going to a facility and living in a rustic cabin and doing activities," says Sarah's mother, Kathy Friedman. "But what these camps do is increase self-sufficiency. The kids live outdoors, and they learn much more about outdoor survival skills than they would at a traditional camp. I think it's a more valuable experience, because it really stretches them — they realize they can do more than they think they can."

Sarah says she came away with map-reading skills, wilderness first-aid expertise, and the ability to plan and lead group trips. "I had to take responsibility for myself and the other people around me," she says. "You come out of the program with a strong sense of what it means to be a leader."

A TYPICAL DAY: There's a 7 a.m. wake-up call for campers on the cooking crew, who prepare breakfast while the rest of the group breaks down camp. Leaders discuss safety aspects of the day's activity (rock climbing, for instance). Then the activity gets under way. By 5 p.m. everyone heads back to camp. The supper crew prepares dinner, and afterward there's an evening meeting. It begins with thanks and sharing, then proceeds to structured leisure activities.

MORE INFO: www.longacreexpeditions.com

HEALTH AND FITNESS: JULIAN KRINSKY/CANYON RANCH

The Julian Krinsky/Canyon Ranch Young Adult Summer Program may be the offspring of Julian Krinsky Camps and the famed Canyon Ranch Health Resorts, but don't let that spa connection fool you: This is no Club Med. The program aims to inspire kids to get the most out of life by living healthier every day, and it provides them with take-home tools by focusing on fitness, nutrition and mind-body awareness. (Spa services like massages are available but aren't the focus of the program.)

Julian and Tina Krinsky, who have been in the summer-camp business for 28 years, got the brainstorm for the joint venture when they saw their tennis campers showing up out of shape and eating foods that didn't mesh with their athletic goals. "We said, 'Why do we have to wait until adults are 40 or 50 years old to come out to Canyon Ranch and correct bad habits?' The best time to make an impression is in the teen years," says Tina Krinsky. "So our mission is all about education — and the best way to educate teens is when they're having fun."

The program, located at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Penn., offers 13- to 17-year-olds more than 100 activities, from mountain biking to meditation and →

Pushing Limits: Specialty summer programs are inspiring, yet challenging. They're best for kids who have some traditional-camp experience and a little more maturity. For the right kid, these programs can be life-changing. They broaden kids' views of themselves and their surroundings in a safe, well-supervised environment.



PHOTO: ROGER SMITH



PHOTO: BOB CLEMENS

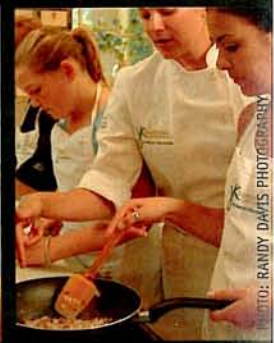


PHOTO: RANDY DAVIS



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qigong to aqua aerobics, nutritional workshops and hands-on cooking classes that use organic, locally grown ingredients. Programs last between one and six weeks and, so far, have attracted attendees from 30 states and 15 countries.

When Cheryl Hammer's now-17-year-old son, Brandon, began attending the program two years ago, she admits that a positive self-image was something he was "working on." Yet, after he attended Krinsky/Canyon Ranch for four weeks, she says he returned home with vastly improved self-esteem. "He loved it — he felt so good about himself and he learned so much," she says. "Now, if I don't make it to the gym, he'll help me train at home. He cooks Canyon Ranch recipes a couple nights a week. It's such a valuable learning experience. There's a lot of feeling good about yourself and your body."

The camp also helps debunk the misinformation and mixed messages teens often get. "This is a place where kids can ask everything from nutrition questions to 'What's the right footwear for this activity?' or 'How do I not injure myself on gym equipment?' or 'How can I gain confidence with my body?'" Krinsky says. The guidance they receive is designed to extend beyond the program too. "We try to send them home with the knowledge they need to continue expanding the skills they learned during the program," Krinsky says.

A TYPICAL DAY: After breakfast, students begin their personal schedule of activities and workshops. Choices might include a Spinning class, cooking classes or cardio circuit. After lunch, there are more specialized programs, free time and private lessons. An organized evening activity, like a swim party, campus Olympics, concert or guest speaker, follows dinner.

MORE INFO: www.jkcp.com

COMMUNITY SERVICE: VISIONS SERVICE ADVENTURES

If your teen is volunteer-oriented, he or she can partake in a mini-Peace-Corps-type experience with Visions Service Adventures. The program blends social awareness, cross-cultural learning

and outdoor exploration for teens ages 14 to 18 through construction-based community service in villages and towns in the United States, South America, the Caribbean, the West Indies and Australia. Its mission is to create dynamic learning opportunities for teens while working for, with and in communities that lack financial and development resources.

What sets Visions apart from other community-service-oriented programs is its ongoing commitment to the people it assists, says Visions director Teena Beutel. "We return to the same communities year after year," she explains. "As a result, we forge deep ties to the host community. And the cultural component is deeper because we're in one place all summer — we feel like locals, not tourists."

Within Visions Service programs, teens have a choice of working on several different service projects on a particular day — from constructing a clinic or a playground to running a day camp for local kids or doing trail work. They also participate in formal cross-cultural activities, like listening to local storytelling and history sessions and participating in traditional Native American sweat-lodge ceremonies. Leisure activities vary by the location: In Peru, for example, a favorite activity is hiking to the top of Machu Picchu. In Alaska, teens go ice climbing and backpacking, while in the Caribbean they choose from whale-watching and snorkeling excursions.

Sarah Wolfson, a 16-year-old New Yorker, spent July 2004 in Montana on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. "I wanted to experience a new landscape and new culture, and travel to a place I'd never been before," she says. "It was one of the best experiences of my life. It taught me to appreciate who I was and where I came from, and I've gained a newfound respect for Native American culture. I got to see it, experience it and hear about it from native people, directly. We were staying on tribal property and living with this community every day."

A TYPICAL DAY: After a 7:30 a.m. breakfast, teens choose a service project or work site for the day. After the evening meal, teens and staff gather for a Circle meeting in a field overlooking the scenery and discuss their day's activities, what they learned and what their experience has been like so far. At day's end, everyone moves on to a fun leisure activity or outing.

MORE INFO: www.visionserviceadventures.com

KIDS' STUFF

MORE UNIQUE SUMMER CAMPS AND PROGRAMS:

ADVENTURE TREKS — Wilderness adventures for 13- to 19-year-olds in the Pacific Northwest, Canadian Rockies, California and Montana. Emphasizes personal growth, community development and skills development. www.adventuretreks.com

CAMP THUNDERBIRD FOR BOYS AND GIRLS — Located in Bemidji, Minn., Camp Thunderbird offers traditional, multispecialty camps for boys and girls ages 8 to 15. Campers may also participate in half-day to nine-day wilderness-trip programs in backpacking and canoeing. For older kids, the camp offers backpacking trips to destinations including the Canadian Rockies and the Pacific Northwest. www.campthbird.com

TRAIL'S END CAMP — An all-around camp program for kids ages 7 to 17, Trail's End, in Beach Lake, Penn., also offers a three-year "varsity" program for 9th-, 10th- and 11th-graders that adds a leadership component to the experience. www.trailsendcamp.com

FARM & WILDERNESS — A Quaker-philosophy-based organization in Plymouth, Vt., that serves children ages 9 to 17 through five different residential camp programs. Farm & Wilderness provides programming that encourages kids to develop a relationship with the land and community and to develop both spiritually and physically. www.fandw.org

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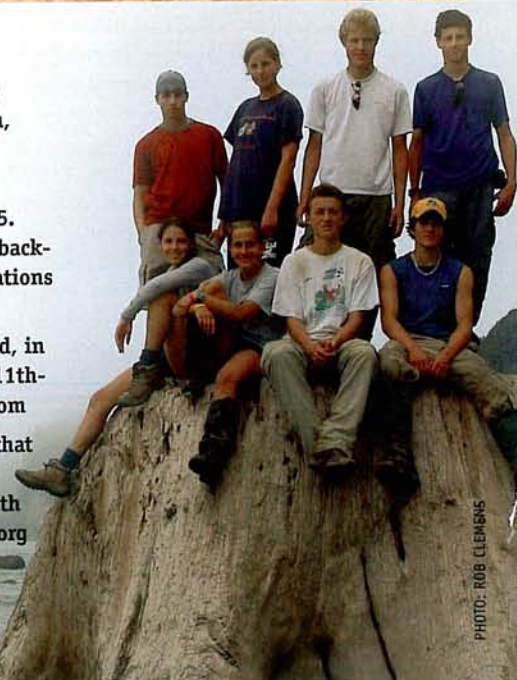


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