

No-Fuss Getaways

Yearning for a taste of the great outdoors without the camping hassles? Residence-based vacation packages combine the comforts of home with the thrill of a new locale.

By LAUREL KALLENBACH

With driftwood-strewn beach hikes

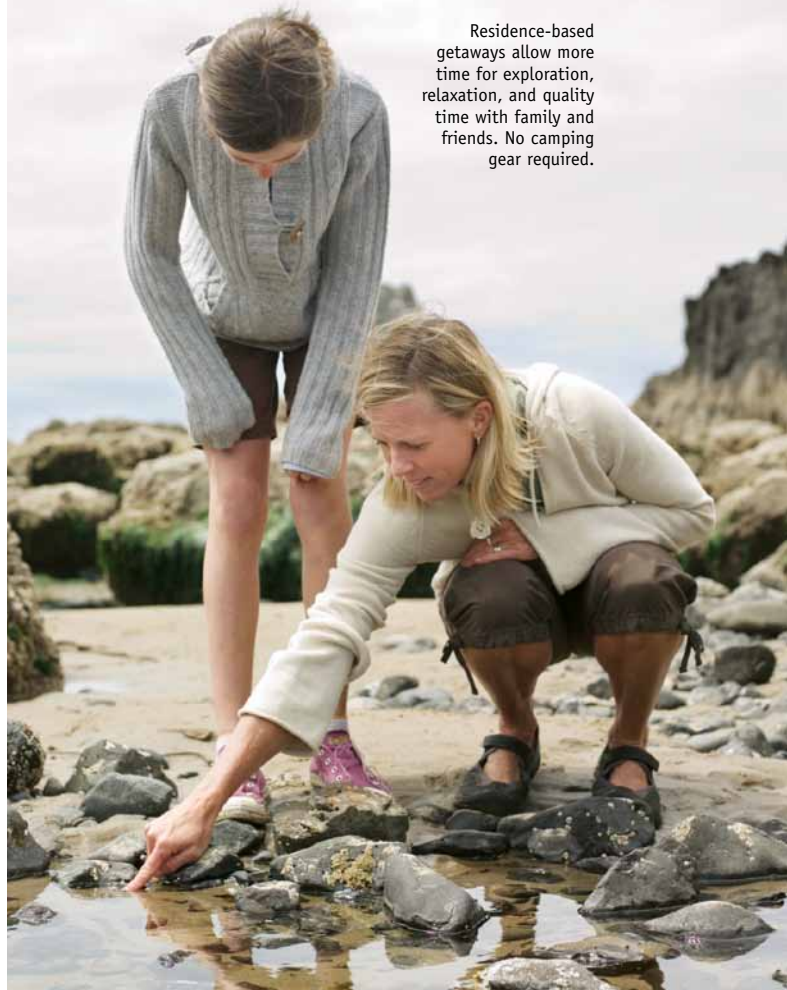
and whale watching from Cape Foulweather near Depoe Bay, Oregon's Central Coast was the perfect setting for a romantic rendezvous for my husband, Ken, and me. When afternoon storms blew in, we dove into the car, stopped at the grocery store for fresh ravioli and a bottle of Oregon pinot noir, and headed back to our vacation-rental condo, aptly named "Valhalla" for the mythic entryway to Viking heaven. There we cozied up by the fireplace, uncorked our wine, and toasted the wild waves crashing over the rocks just 25 yards from our front windows.

Despite our luxurious digs — private hot tub, flat-screen TV, gourmet kitchen — we still felt a part of nature. While cooking dinner, Ken and I took turns running to the windows to witness horizontal rain lashing the coast. We kept the blinds open so we could watch high-tide whitecaps without leaving the bed. In the mornings, we sipped home-brewed coffee on the balcony while sea lions barked and pelicans patrolled the waters.

At the end of our three-day idyll, we followed the condo's checkout procedures: Run the dishwasher, take out the garbage, shut the blinds. Then we left Valhalla as easily as we'd entered — by depositing the condo key in the lock box.

Rental cottages and homes, like these in Depoe Bay, Ore., are typically nestled in beautiful — and sometimes dramatic — natural settings.

Residence-based getaways allow more time for exploration, relaxation, and quality time with family and friends. No camping gear required.



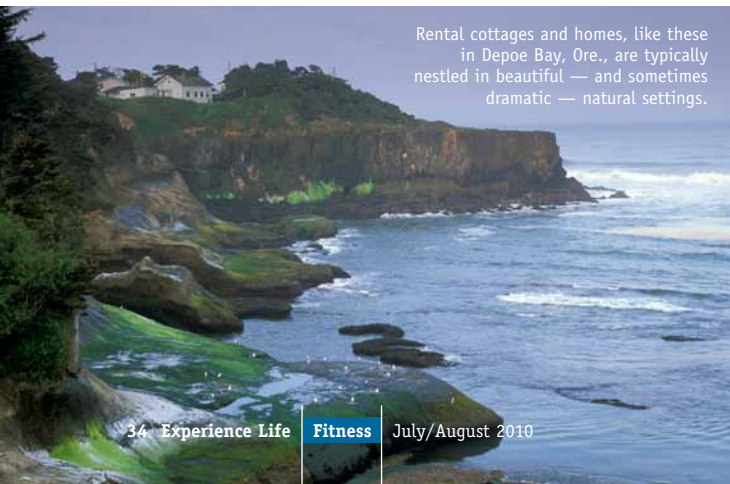
Less Fretting, More Fun

Summertime means escaping into the great outdoors, but not everyone is interested in the planning and preparation that camping requires. Why not keep a vacation simple by minimizing logistics and maximizing playtime?

One way is to choose a vacation rental near outdoor activities you enjoy. Offered to visitors by the week or night, these rustic cabins, luxury condos, quaint cottages and remote farmhouses typically come equipped with bedding, towels, cooking utensils and modern amenities. Some even include bikes or rowboats in the price; others let you bring your pet. And if you pick a destination close to home, you'll skip air-travel hassles.

You can spend considerably less on a vacation-rental getaway than on a hotel-and-restaurant trip, depending on the number of your travel companions and whether you cook your own meals. An Austin, Texas, lakefront apartment with pool, dock and waterskiing, for instance, costs just \$300 per night and sleeps six to 10.

"Spending vacation time in a hotel reminds people of being on a business trip," says Rick Prill, owner of Red Rock Ranch, a rental property 150 miles southwest of Denver. "Staying in a private home-away-from-home — a place with character — gives them a chance to kick back and get outdoors."



Where the Deer and the Antelope Play

When the Riley family — 24 adults and 18 kids — gathers at Red Rock Ranch for their annual weeklong family reunion, a typical day involves everything from fly-fishing to horseback riding to hiking in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. In the late afternoon, the clan reassembles for happy hour at the Homestead Cabin, where kids kick a soccer ball or play in the pool, while the adults visit. Later, all 42 eat steaks and burgers grilled by the Texas uncles on the terrace.

“The ranch fits us perfectly,” says Margarita Riley, 43, a USAID worker who recently moved from Colorado to Panama with her husband and sons. “There’s room for everybody to do a million different things, yet we’re all there together.” With three separate, Old West-style homes — each with its own bedrooms, bunks and fully equipped kitchen — the ranch feels homey despite its 50-person capacity. “We have every convenience, yet we’re surrounded by sagebrush and mountains. It’s breathtaking from every angle.”

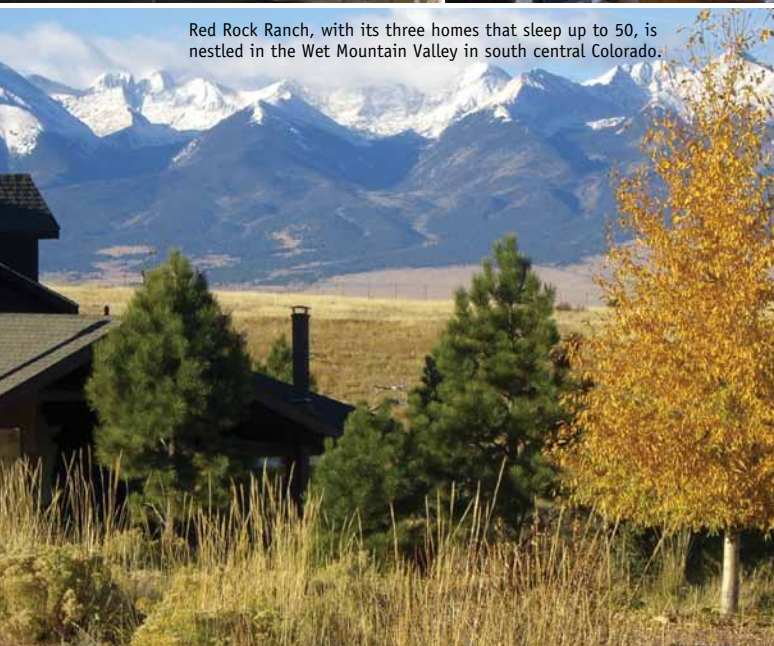
A Riley-reunion highlight is white-water rafting, when the family expends all their energy paddling. “There’s no time to cook on rafting day,” Margarita explains. “So we hire a local caterer to drop off a hot meal that’s ready to eat when we return from the river.”



Red Rock Ranch’s Cottage Home has six bedrooms, including the outdoor Cottonwood Room, which is fully screened in.



Despite being built in the 1880s, the Homestead Cabin at Red Rock Ranch comes fully equipped.



Red Rock Ranch, with its three homes that sleep up to 50, is nestled in the Wet Mountain Valley in south central Colorado.

Buying Time

Want someone to shop for you and deliver your groceries? Need help finding a rock-climbing guide? Caterers and concierges can help handle your trip logistics, clearing more time for the outdoor adventures you love.

“A concierge knows the area like the back of their hand,” says Toby Gonzales, co-owner of Outer Banks Concierge, which serves visitors to the North Carolina coast. “You could spend six hours on the Internet researching your destination without learning much. Or you could spend an hour on the phone with a concierge and get an itinerary and services tailored to your perfect vacation.”

It doesn’t have to be super pricey, either. Gonzales can have lasagna and salad (\$15 to \$20 per person) delivered to your beach cottage while you’re windsurfing. That evening, you reheat the lasagna and dine on your private oceanfront deck for less than you’d spend at a restaurant. For \$20 to \$30 per person, a personal chef will cook a seafood dinner right in your kitchen *and* clean up afterward. (You can find concierges on the Internet or through the local chambers of commerce.)

A Quiet Woodland Retreat

When Robin Chilton and her four best friends wanted to mark their 50th birthdays last year, they celebrated →

Another Home Sweet Home

BE SURE your vacation experience lives up to your expectations by finding out which comforts and conveniences your rental residence has to offer:

- What activities are available on-site? Nearby?
- How close is it to other cabins or cottages?
- How many bedrooms does it have? What size are beds or sofa sleepers?
- Are towels and bed linens provided?
- What amenities (fireplace, hot tub, washer and dryer, phone, TV, Internet, deck) are available?
- Is the kitchen completely outfitted?
- Are extras (deck chairs, hammocks, boats, bikes, outdoor grill, games) included?
- Are children or pets allowed?
- Can I request midweek housecleaning if I need it?
- How far is it from a grocery store?
- What are my responsibilities (stripping the bed, putting out garbage) at checkout time?

The Naples Chalet at The Quiet Place, nestled in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York — between New York City and Niagara Falls — overlooks lush rolling hills and Canandaigua Lake.

with a weekend getaway. Friends since high school, they've gathered together monthly for 25 years to play board games and cards. This time they wanted a mini-vacation: no kids, no husbands — just somewhere to relax, enjoy nature and play outdoor games.

"We all have families, so we wanted someplace close enough that we could drive home quickly in an emergency — but we wanted it to be far enough away to feel like a getaway," says Chilton, a registered nurse. The women chose The Quiet Place in New York's Finger Lakes region, less than two hours from their Buffalo-area homes.

The Mountain View Chalet has four bedrooms, a hot tub on the deck and a large lawn, which was perfect for a fast-action game called KanJam that Chilton brought. "One person tries to throw a Frisbee into a can while another tries to deflect it," she explains. "We laughed so hard my stomach hurt."

Though a local wine festival was tempting, the friends didn't want to deal with crowds, preferring to stay at their peaceful — and inexpensive — hideaway. "By splitting the cost of the chalet and groceries, we spent less than \$200 apiece," says Chilton. In fact, the weekend was so carefree and fun-filled that the women are planning another stay this September.

An Old-Fashioned Lakeside Cottage

John Hess and his 5-year-old son, Grayson, skip stones on Kangaroo Lake as the sun dips behind the trees. This ritual — along with buying worms for fishing, collecting bugs on nature walks, swimming at the sandy beach and going to a local fish boil — are their best memories of Door County, Wis., vacations.

John Hess and his son, Grayson, enjoying the tranquil water in Door County, Wis.

"My wife and I love hopping in the car and going someplace completely different from our everyday lives," says Hess, 36, creative director for a Chicago marketing agency. "Door County is just five hours away, but it evokes a simpler, more leisurely time."

When the Hess family discovered East Shorewood Cottages three summers ago, they were hooked. Rustic but comfortable, the cottages are a perfect compromise between camping and a hotel, he says. "We love seeing stars at night, but we're definitely city people, so we're not into roughing it."

Hess admits to overpacking. "The car is pretty full, but each year we bring less stuff. All the clothes we need are shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops. The beach chairs and boats are already there, the kitchen is fully equipped, and we can buy fresh produce from roadside stands." What they do bring, however, are towels and sheets, which the resort provides only for special circumstances.

Simplicity and the outdoors help the family unwind. "Most of the cottages don't have phones or TVs, so our evening entertainment consists of board games, puzzles, reading or hanging out at the communal bonfire," Hess says. And because cell-phone reception is spotty, he enjoys a total break from work. "This is where we come to leave worries behind. We love to just go and see where the adventure takes us." ●

Laurel Kallenbach writes from her home in Boulder, Colo.

RESOURCES

Some cottages and cabins rent by the week during summer and may require booking months in advance — but you can always find last-minute deals and shorter stays. Vacation Rentals by Owner (www.vrbo.com) and HomeAway.com list rentals worldwide.

East Shorewood Cottages: Located on Kangaroo Lake in Baileys Harbor, Wis. Birch cottage: \$975 weekly (capacity: 5). 920-839-2166; www.eastshorewood.com

The Quiet Place: Cabins in upstate New York's Finger Lakes. Mountain View Chalet: \$245 per weekend night, with two-night minimum (capacity: 8). 585-657-4643; www.thequietplace.com

Red Rock Ranch: Three-house ranch near Westcliffe, Colo. \$2,300 per day, four-night minimum booking (capacity: 50). 303-717-5445; www.ranchretreats.com

Skyshine Vacation Rentals: Coastal condos in Depoe Bay, Ore. Valhalla: \$315 per night (capacity: 8). 866-800-0338; www.skyshinevacations.com

