

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

Double  
Issue

# MEXICO

DESTINATION OF THE YEAR





## Into the Woods

Setting out for the wilds of Utah, reluctant camper **Candice Rainey** discovers sleeping in a big yellow tent isn't quite as bad as she feared.

**A**BOUT THREE YEARS ago, my husband and I packed up our life in Brooklyn, New York, and relocated permanently to Salt Lake City, about 20 minutes from where I grew up. As middle-aged New Yorkers with a kid and a dog, we realized we were spending a hell of a lot more time strategizing Trader Joe's grocery runs than bopping around the Museum of Modern Art the way we did in our twenties. Would we have deathbed regrets if we didn't take advantage of our able bodies and cartilage-swathed knees? Instead of sticking around NYC to find out the hard way, we hightailed it out West to spend winters jump-turning in hip-deep powder and mainlining the shimmering sunlight



that—turns out—is what makes these sinewy mountain folk tan in February. When summer came, we took up road cycling and bought a couple of paddleboards. We even got another dog—and a canine life jacket so Griff could join us on the water. It was all very Subaru Outback commercial. I felt like I had officially earned mountain-jock status.

Well, almost. I had what some outdoor enthusiasts might consider a major character flaw that bonds indoorsy types across the globe: I loathed camping. There was nothing I found refreshing or therapeutic about sleeping in the dirt. (Attention Camping Industrial Complex: we all know sleeping pads are about

as comfortable as a motel bathtub.) I associated a night under the stars with wet socks and scooping ham fried rice into my piehole while trying not to think about the sinister sounds emanating from the woods.

Among the rock-scrambling, Thule-bike-rack-owning Utahns who humblebrag about “dirtbagging it” in the back of pickup trucks, this is sacrilege. “What about your *child*?” they would ask, as if I were refusing to teach my daughter some fundamental life skill. “Now I see the secret of making the best persons, / it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth,” as Walt Whitman wrote in “Song of the Open Road”—most likely while thinking back on the time he sat on a pile of rocks, pretending he liked it.

At least, that’s how I felt until COVID-19 hit. Three months into lockdown, desperate to go anywhere that wasn’t our living room, my husband decided to buy a Lugga Loo, or portable bucket bathroom, because it was Prime Day or something. Then came a big yellow family-size tent for the three of us and our two dogs. I was told we could “use it in the backyard,” but I quickly realized bigger trips were in my future.

My husband, a backpacking enthusiast who spent many a wet weekend back East hiking the Catskills with his buddies, had a bunch of what I can only describe as “camping crap,” such as a Jetboil stove and sleeping bags of various vintages. We bought even more stuff, including a skillet the size of a tire. He would’ve been content to rough it, but I booked a Sprinter van—with AC—so we could “camp” in Arches National Park.

But then we found out that many public lands were, at the time, still not open to overnight campers. Thankfully, my hairdresser clued me in to the pine-dotted Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest and its remote Alexander Lake. There, she explained, my family and I could four-wheel it, then enjoy a vista punctuated by lily pads and waters so still we could watch the reflection of the clouds float by. I had to admit that sounded serene—and about as far away from our backyard as the moon. I was sold.

It took us a week to pack for one night. When you’re going somewhere remote—and can’t just

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zip into town for toilet paper or a fork—you want to be sure you have everything you need. And did we ever. The sleeping bags, the paddleboards, life jackets, a giant cooler stuffed so full of food and booze we had to sit on it to close it, fishing rods, and what we like to call the poop loop. (That's an invention my husband came up with and fabricated himself. It's basically a length of rope you tie around a tree to lean back into to help when, you know, you need to squat.)

I white-knuckled the dashboard of our Jeep Wrangler as we drove up a switchback and through a boulder field. My daughter said it reminded her of the Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland. We arrived jostled but relieved we hadn't lost a tire. "Middle of nowhere" wouldn't do it justice: a glassy blue-black lake surrounded by a thick forest of towering pines, tips rocking in the breeze. There was no picturesque dock, no sandy beach, nothing but raw unspoiled nature, doing its thing.

We found a campsite near the lake, pitched our big yellow tent, and blew up the paddleboards. Unsure what to do next, we ate our sandwiches and cracked open a couple of Modelos. My daughter and I took a paddleboard out for a spin, steering around the cartoonishly big lily pads as best we could. On our second lap we picked up Griff and took him to hang out on still water and bask in the sun.

Back at camp, our Texas drying out, we built a fire and did...nothing. It was nice, and I get why people like that part of camping, especially if they have a flask of good whiskey and don't have to drive anywhere. Then, an unidentifiable, guttural roar that came from who-knows-where snapped us out of our trance. "Did we bring the bear spray?" I wondered aloud. "No," my husband said. "I locked it up in the safe at home, away from our child." Perfect. My husband and I pretended to play it cool, while my daughter tried to get her iPad to work in the tent and eventually gave up and fell asleep. Soon enough, maybe thanks to the whiskey, my husband and I forgot about the bear scare, too.

*This is truly peaceful*, I thought to myself, looking at the stars through the dome of branches above us.

"This is the worst part," my husband said.

"What is?" I asked.

"Sleeping. When you're camping, sleeping is just tossing and turning. I mean, you're really just lying in the dirt."

Still, maybe Whitman had a point. One day and night in the middle of nowhere, doing stuff outside together as a family, with a fire in front of us instead of Netflix: that's technically creating the good times, right? Doubtful I'll be thinking much of the bad night's sleep when I look back on our adventure years from now. 🌐