



FRED FOX/Tribune photos

Minnesotans Tom and Delores Mix, above, relax outside their camper at Fort DeSoto Park. Right, Bob Dreher sets the table inside the screen tent.



CAMPER/Refugees from winter fill sunny campgrounds

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scarce and staying outdoors a pleasure, the toughest thing about camping is finding a campsite.

The 235 campsites are nearly full with campers in RVs bearing license plates from faraway and often frigid places like Minnesota, Wisconsin and Canada.

"We were cold, and we wanted to get somewhere hot," said Ann Bailey, who arrived here from Toronto with her husband, John, a few weeks ago.

The park caters to "family" campers. It includes restrooms with shower and laundry facilities, dumping stations and a convenience store. The spacious campsites are separated by palms, cedars and palmettos that afford shade and privacy.

"That's what we like about it. You're not packed in," said Delores Mix of Ely, Minn., who was camping with her husband, Tom, and son, Vernon.

Most of the campsites are on Mullet Key Bayou. Each provides hookups for water and electricity, a picnic table and charcoal grill, for \$18.75 per night.

"You won't beat that price anywhere," declares park Ranger Paul Weidemann, who met his girl-friend, Laurie, while she was camping last year.

While campers are limited to a 14-day stay, some have found a way around this restriction, Weidemann said.

"What they'll do is they'll spend their two weeks here, and they'll roll down to a state park south of here and then they'll come right back," he said. "So they'll work the system, back and forth. I'll see the same faces, over and over."

Raccoons are a startling fact of nature at the campground. Campers tell stories about the masked mischief-makers unzipping tents or unlatching food-filled coolers.

"My son and I were sitting right here the other day, and we had a can of cashew nuts here with the lid on," said Stu Post, of Michigan. "And the raccoon came, and we never heard him until he grabbed the thing. And then he ran. Boy, they're fast."

The campground is run by Ranger Trevor Spink, a good-natured, former Philadelphia beauty salon owner whose idea of camping is staying at a Holiday Inn.

"I'll be honest with you, my idea when I go on vacation isn't sleeping on crushed shells," said Spink, the campground's supervisor since February.

Spink said most RVers don't consider themselves camping. For them, camping is not an end unto itself, but rather a means to an end.

"These people, what they want to do is they want to travel," he said. "They want to see parts of the United States they've never seen before. But they're spoiled. They don't want to lose the luxury of their homes."

Overholt, the RV'er from Tennessee, said he has never camped in a tent and has owned five RVs in the past 40 years. He enjoys their comfort and convenience, even though he and his wife could stay in a motel for much less than the \$1,500 a month he spends on his motor home.

"You can never justify a thing like this," Overholt said. "But we just like it. It's private, we can stop along the road and sleep if we want to, eat, go to the bathroom, whatever."

Plus, you don't have to be a long-haul tractor-trailer driver to handle one, said Nelda Morris, a friend of the Overholt's who was among six Tennesseeans traveling in three full-sized rigs.

"It's beautiful. We love it," she said of the 34-foot RV she owns with her husband, Harold. "It drives like a car."

But the Blaneys, the tent campers from Safety Harbor, and their friends Ralph and Karen Elenbaum of Tampa, say they're just as happy with their air mattresses and Coleman lanterns.

"Tent camping is easy. You just load up the back of the truck and go," Karen Elenbaum said.

Fort DeSoto Campground

WHERE: The campground is in Fort DeSoto Park, off the Pinellas Bayway at the southern tip of Pinellas County.

CAMPITES: There are 235, each with water and electrical hookups, a picnic table and a charcoal grill.

Some sites are designed only for tents, vans and pop-ups, but most can accommodate all types of camping units, including recreational vehicles. Most face Mullet Key Bayou. Ground fires are prohibited.

AMENITIES: The park has a camp store, playgrounds, day room, dump stations, modern restrooms and laundry facilities, as well as extensive beaches, boat ramps, a bicycle trail, picnic grounds and a historic fort. Pets are prohibited in the campground. Alcoholic beverages are banned throughout the park.

COST: The daily rate is \$18.75. Credit cards and personal checks are not accepted. No reservations can be made by phone or mail.

CALL: (813) 866-2662.

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Stu Post
Visitor from Michigan



A camping trailer is backed into a space at Fort DeSoto Park, the only Pinellas County park that allows overnight camping.

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