

Last-minute camping

In the Golden State it's not too late to sleep out under the stars. Here's where to go

By Ann Marie Brown

Somehow the summer slipped by and your best-laid plans for a camping trip were thwarted by too much work and too little vacation time. Take heart; the outdoor recreation season isn't over yet. Now that the summer crowds have dispersed, you can set up your tent in relative solitude at one of six close-to-home campgrounds. Roll out your sleeping bag, toast a few marshmallows, and let the night sky lull you to sleep.

NOTE: Whenever possible, it's wise to make reservations for campgrounds in California, no matter how late in the season.

Northern California

■ **Portola Redwoods State Park, La Honda.** A wooded, fern-filled sanctuary on the western slope of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Portola Redwoods is a favorite of Bay Area campers who retreat to the shade of its tall trees. Hike all or part of the 13-mile round-trip Peters Creek Loop from the visitor center through old-growth redwoods. Or bring your mountain bike and pedal the easy, level Old Haul Road. *60 sites; \$12 per site. Flush toilets; coin-operated showers. From I-280 in Palo Alto, take Page Mill Rd. exit. Drive west 9 miles to Skyline Blvd.;*



Dogs are welcome at tree-shaded Woodside Campground and Gerstle Cove Campground (below).

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Salt Point State Park, Sonoma Coast

Gerstle Cove Campground is one of the few places in Northern California where you can car camp with an ocean view. (Best vistas are seen from sites 7, 9, and 10.) If the wind is howling, forgo the view and camp across the highway at tree-sheltered Woodside Campground. Take a hike on the Bluff Trail or Stump Beach Trail, or visit the park's pygmy forest of stunted cypress and pine trees.

30 sites; \$12 per site. Flush toilets; no showers. From Jenner take State 1 north 20 miles. Woodside Campground is on the right; Gerstle Cove Campground is on the left. Reservations: (800) 444-7275 or www.reserveamerica.com; park information: (707) 847-3221.

cross Skyline, continue west 3¼ miles on Alpine Rd. Turn left on Portola State Park Rd.; drive 3¼ miles to the park. Reservations: (800) 444-7275 or www.reserveamerica.com; park information: (650) 948-9098.

■ **Ventana Campground, Big Sur.** Longing for a Big Sur weekend? Although Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park's campground is booked solid through October, lesser-known Ventana Campground isn't. Though the privately owned camp closes for the season on October 21, you can still spend the night in the dense redwood canyon (the most secluded sites are numbers 14, 47, 61A, and 69). All of Big Sur's attractions are within a few miles. If you get tired of eating blackened hot dogs, the upscale Cielo Restaurant is a short walk from your tent.

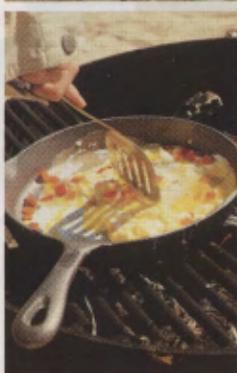
80 sites; \$25 to \$35 for two people, \$4 each additional person (up to five per site). Flush toilets; showers. From Carmel take State 1 south 32 miles; turn left at Ventana Campground (2 miles past Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park). Reservations: (831) 667-2712.

Southern California

■ **Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, Julian.** If you want to see fall color in San Diego County, camp out under the trees at Paso Picacho Campground. In the nearby town of Julian, celebrate the annual apple harvest by sampling everything from pippin to McIntosh to apple pie. Then hike off those calories on two summit trails leading from camp. Try the 5½-mile round-trip hike to 6,512-foot Cuyamaca Peak or the 4-mile round-trip hike to 5,730-foot Stonewall Peak.



The sandstone walls at Red Rock Canyon State Park form an incredible backdrop for stargazing. Easily accessible campsites allow for elaborate camp cuisine.



Ricardo Campground Red Rock Canyon State Park, Mojave

At this Mojave Desert park, stargazing is so popular that rangers post constellation charts by the restrooms, detailing each evening's display. Ricardo Campground is set at the base of White House Cliffs, a colorful backdrop of eroded sandstone walls. Gather the kids for a campfire program on Friday or Saturday night, or join a ranger-led nature hike on weekend mornings.

50 sites; \$8 per site. Vault toilets; no showers. From Mojave take State 14 northeast to the park entrance on the left. Reservations not accepted; park information: (661) 942-0662.

85 sites; \$12 per site. Flush toilets. Currently, because of a water shortage and dry conditions, showers are not in use and campfires are prohibited (pack your camping stove). From Julian take State 79 southeast 11 miles; campground is on the right. Reservations: (800) 444-7275 or www.reserveamerica.com; park information: (760) 765-0755.

■ **Two Harbors Campground, Catalina Island.** Although Catalina Island's "big city" of Avalon attracts year-round visitors, the village of Two Harbors on the island's west side is nearly deserted after Labor Day. Two Harbors Campground is a few hundred yards' walk from the boat landing. If you don't feel like lugging your

own equipment, reserve a tent cabin (\$30). The view from each site is a sparkling expanse of blue ocean. Go snorkeling, mountain biking, or kayaking; equipment rentals are available. Or reserve a more secluded site at Little Harbor Campground, accessible by bus from Two Harbors. 69 sites at Two Harbors Campground, 17 sites at Little Harbor; \$12, \$6 per child. Vault toilets and cold showers at both (coin-operated showers a few hundred yards from Two Harbors). Reservations: www.scico.com/camping; park information: (310) 510-2500. Catalina Express sails directly to Two Harbors from San Pedro; phone (800) 481-3470 for schedule and fares. ♦