Toss out preconceived notions of summer camp and explore some of the options available at Illinois' scenic state parks.

Not Your Usual Summer Camp

With sites for everything from a pup tent to large motor homes, and rent-a-tent and rent-a-cabin options, Illinois state parks offer a variety of opportunities for introducing youngsters to camping.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

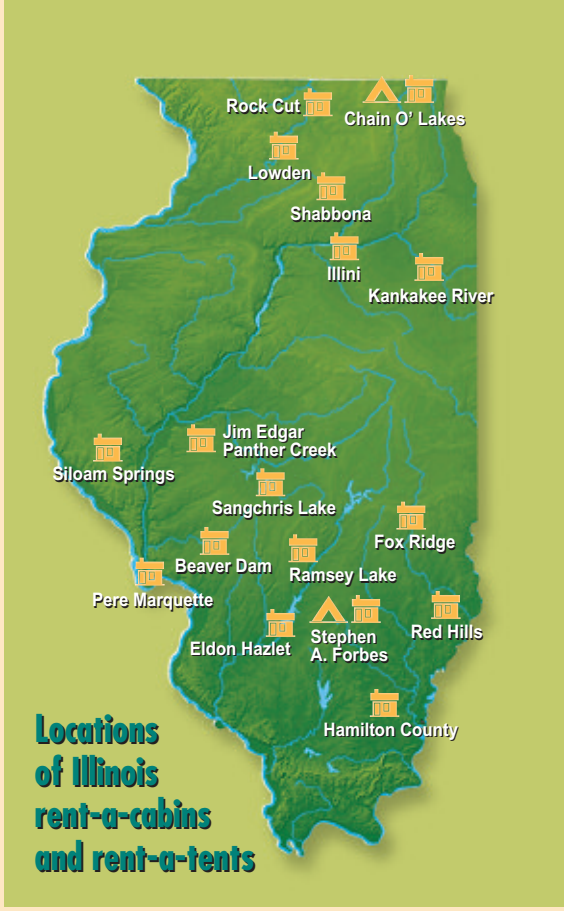
There are two types of campers.

There are those with expectations of a night around a glowing campfire after a simple, filling meal of crappie pulled from the lake just hours earlier, staring at a star-filled sky and listening to the sounds of the night.

And then there are those who recoil in fear at the thought of a night outdoors, visions passing before their eyes of summer camp horrors akin to those memorialized in the song "Hello Mudder, Hello Fadder."

Sure, tent camping and backpacking to far-off wilderness settings are exciting, viable options for many, but those with trepidation of a night outdoors will find that camping—and Illinois campgrounds—have changed considerably. It's worth giving sleeping in the great outdoors a second chance.

Camping is available at more than 80 facilities managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). From within the rugged, timbered limestone canyons of Apple River Canyon State Park in the state's northwest corner to the sandy shoreline of Lake Michigan at Illinois Beach State Park or along the Ohio



River at Cave-in-Rock State Park, Illinois' state parks include some of the most unique geologic features of the Midwest, and in many instances have been preserved for their significant historical events or biological resources.

The menu of camp offerings ranges from more than 40 parks designated as premium, Class AA campsites—offering showers, electricity and water and sewage hook up—to primitive youth, canoe and equestrian campgrounds.

Two venues offered by DNR provide ideal settings for people new to camping—or those interested in easing into it slowly and exploring options before making an investment in camping equipment.

Just add linens

With two sets of bunks and one full bed, the 34 rent-a-cabins available at 17 state facilities provide all the basics to comfortably sleep six people. The electrified cabins also contain a drop-leaf table with chairs, electric heater, ceiling fan, broom and dust pan. Outside are a charcoal grill, picnic table, trash barrel or bags, fire ring, camp light and fire extinguisher. Many cabins are handicapped accessible and there is direct vehicular access to the cabin. Restrooms and showers are close at hand in the campground.

If you plan to travel with your pets, contact the site in advance to learn of specific regulations that may apply. Pets are not allowed inside cabins.

For a weekend visit, book early in the calendar year as the popular rent-a-cabins fill early (the cabin at Siloam Springs State Park is available only on a first-come, first-served basis). Weekend reservations are easier to come by—and you'll find fewer people joining you

Complete with many of the basic comforts of home, rent-a-cabins, such as this one from Shabbona Lake State Park in northern Illinois, offer a convenient option for an overnight stay in a state park.

Set on a wooden platform, a 14-foot square rent-a-tent provides spacious accommodations and a quick means of setting up camp.

on the trails or beating you to the local fishing hot spot.

Rent-a-tent

Ready for the next step toward tent camping? Illinois offers rent-a-tents at Chain O'Lakes State Park in Lake County and Stephen A. Forbes State Recreation Area in Marion County. These 14-foot square tents are set on wooden platforms and come compete with cots and room to comfortably sleep eight adults. Included with the tent rental are key items to make the camping experience pleasant and safe—a broom and dust pan, charcoal grill, picnic table, trash barrel or bags, fire ring, camp light and fire extinguisher.

Go camping

Before the weather turns cool and the hectic school schedule starts anew, pack up the family and settle into a rustic cabin or platform tent—in a campground with nearby water, showers, playground equipment for the children and ample neighbors to socialize with. Or, dust off the tent and head out to one of the hundreds of simple, primitive settings where you can find the solitude needed to unwind from a hectic work week. And if you have the chance, hook the RV onto the truck and transport your home-away-from-home to the nearest campground.

Regardless of your accommodation of choice, Illinois' campgrounds have plenty to offer—and will leave you with an opinion vastly different from visitors to "Camp Granada."

Camping Checklist

The items needed for camping vary considerably by the time of year and type of camping facility you use. For a summer outing to a park-like setting, suggested items to pack include:

Bedding and shelter: sleeping bags, blankets or linens, depending on accommodations; pillow. As needed: air mattress or cot; tent; ground cloth (tarp put under a tent).

Personal comfort and safety: first-aid kit; hat; sunglasses; lip balm; suntan lotion; insect repellent; flashlights and extra batteries; water bottle; signal whistle; compass; map; safety pins; work gloves; cell phone; personal identification; money.

Food preparation and clean-up: food; eating and cooking utensils; can opener; water and water jug; ice chest and ice; stove with fuel or charcoal and lighter fluid; matches; pot holder; shovel; tongs; trash bags; bucket; biodegradable soap; table cloth.

Camp comfort: shade canopy; rope (hang clothing, light, tarp, etc.); stakes; hammer; folding knife; folding lawn chairs; recreational equipment; binoculars; battery-operated radio; lantern with fuel; whisk broom.

Personal items: appropriate clothing for the weather; boots; rain gear; personal toiletries; toilet paper; camera; prescription medicines.

For detailed information on the assorted types of camping programs available at Illinois state parks, including fees and amenities, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/programs/camping/index.htm.

The annual Illinois State Parks guide also provides a comprehensive listing of services found in state parks—camping, dining, lodging, trails and more. To obtain a copy, contact DNR's Clearinghouse at (217) 782-7498 or email clearing@dnrmail.state.il.us.

Book It

Reservations for the tents or cabins must be made with each specific site, and an advance payment made of the appropriate fees (fees vary based on level of amenities, day of the week and exemptions the visitor may quality for), including a non-refundable reservation fee of $5.

Gathering the family around the campfire provides time for reflection and discovery.