

Life in the Valley

Retreats among the redwoods

Rent these cozy cabins right at Redwood National Park

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Each year in the spring, we take a family trip just across the border to California's Redwood National and State Park system.

There is nothing that quite compares with the redwoods — the skyscrapers of the dinosaurs — and I was particularly excited this year to have our 1- and 3-year old girls in tow.

The problem, though, is that camping can be a challenge with such young children. They love sleeping in a tent, but our youngest often cries loudly, for extended periods, during the night.

The idea of being the person who wakes up the entire campground was not appealing.

That's why we were so excited to test out a new development at Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, near Crescent City, Calif., our favorite of the four parks in the system.

Jed Smith recently installed four new cabins in its iconic campground, a place where you can spend the night among the giants.

The cabins cost \$100 per night, which is pretty high, and anyone traveling there during the height of summer will need to make reservations in advance.

But as you'll see below, it's easily worth the extra money, especially if you have young children. Trust me on this one.

The cabins have bunks, heat and electricity, but don't have mattresses, stoves and you're not allowed to cook inside. There's a picnic table and fire ring outside.

The new cabins were also installed at Patrick's Point State Park, and Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, about 50 miles north of Eureka.

Escape the rain

There's a couple of reasons to consider the cabin experience in the redwoods.

The first is that my favorite time to visit the redwoods is during the off-season — spring and the depths of winter.

Summer crowds have exploded in the redwood parks, to the point that I won't even visit in July and August.

The problem with the off-season, of course, is that it often rains. A lot.

A cabin solves that problem by allowing you to read a book or play games when the rain arrives. Then, once it passes (which it does quite quickly) you can head back into the forest.

Happy sleeping children

The best thing about the cabins, at least for me, is being able to put my kids to bed in a mostly soundproof structure.

It goes like this:

At 6:30 p.m., I get our 1-year-old ready for bed and around 7 p.m., we lay her down inside the cabin. She will usually cry for a while, but because it's nice and dark and secluded inside — and because she can't hear us just outside — she falls asleep much quicker.



Newly installed cabins can be rented at Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park. PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Then, we enjoy the campfire and play games with our 3-year-old until around 7:30 or 8 p.m. and put her into bed. Again, because it's dark, she can't hear us, and is usually tired, she falls asleep quickly.

After that, my wife and I can actually talk to each other and enjoy the fire, going to sleep when we feel like it.

In a tent, this bedtime routine is just much more difficult. One kid will usually wake up, wake up their sibling, and everyone gets less sleep, which makes the trip less enjoyable.

The cabin, despite the high price, made our trip at least 30 to 40 percent better. That's why I paid for it.

Fun stuff to do at Jed Smith

Another reason to consider the cabins, as opposed to a hotel in a nearby town, is that you can enjoy the best of the redwoods right outside your doorstep.

Here's a few of my favorite adventures at Jed Smith. See below stories for good ideas in the redwoods as a whole.

Drive Howland Hills Road

One of the most beautiful drives in the world takes you on a gravel road through the heart of the park. The road is rough, but it's a great way to get to know the redwoods.

You can stop at numerous pullouts, take a selfie with a giant tree, and continue on your way. There's numerous hikes and places to explore along the way.

Stout Grove

The best easy hike at Jed Smith is Stout Grove, which features the most impressive redwood grove in one place.

The best thing about coming here with kids is that the hike is very easy — just 1 mile with options for longer adventures — and you can have fun along the way.

It's one of the best places in the world to play hide and go seek, because kids can actually fit inside cavities in the trees.

In summer, there's a walking bridge across the Smith River from the campground to Stout Grove.



The new cabins in the Redwood National and State Park system can sleep around 6 people. They also offer bunks, heat and electricity.

Float the Smith River

The Smith River is one of the most beautiful in the world — it's water is so clear it seems like a stream of liquid glass bright with rich blue and turquoise green.

And, it just so happens to float right through the redwoods. One of the best ways to combine the two is with a redwood float through the park.

There are no very few rapids on the float, and it's quite scenic, especially on a sunny day. Few people do it, so you're unlikely to be crowded.

You can rent and get a shuttle — or take a guided float — with Redwood Rides (redwoodrides.com).

Sandy beach

Speaking of the Smith River, some of the most beautiful sand beaches I've come across can be found with a short hike from the campground.

Just following the Riverside Trail at the campground, and pointers will drop you down to a place along the emerald river, below the redwoods, and in the sunshine.

The river is pretty chilly, but it's still great for swimming on hot days.

Boy Scout Tree Trail

If you're looking for a longer hike —

and the best overall trek at Jed Smith — tackle Boy Scout Tree Trail. The 5.6-mile trek takes you deep into the forest, away from the sound of roads and among the largest across-the-board collection of trees on a trail.

The trail is named for Boy Scout Tree, a redwood where two trees have joined in one massive, 40-foot diameter trunk. The tree splits off as it rises, as though giving the two-finger Boy Scout salute. The path ends at Fern Falls, a small trickling waterfall.

Grove of Titans

This grove of massive trees has a complicated situation — currently, park officials are asking people to view it from a distance. Soon, however, they're planning to create a new boardwalk trail through a grove of the world's move massive trees.

More stuff

There are many more things to do at Jed Smith. But it all starts with having a good base camp, and you can't do better than the cabins inside the park.

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