

Camping With the City Kids

(Sort-of) Roughing it in Banff National Park

By Karan Smith • Illustration by Sandy Nichols

“Is there a splash pad?” my three-year-old asks.

“No.”

“Is there a swimming pool?”

“No,” I sigh as we wind through the mountainous beauty of Banff National Park. “There’s a lake.”

“I don’t want to eat outside!” says my seven-year-old.

Oh brother, what are we in for on this inaugural family camping trip?

No one could accuse us of roughing it, exactly.

We’re booked for the next few nights into one of Parks Canada’s A-frame prospector tents at Two Jack Lake. Such handy accommodations have been popping up across the country as parks try to lure an increasingly urban population into the woods.

For me, the trip is more personal. I grew up in the Yukon, climbing trees and crushing petals into perfume, and assumed my children would naturally embrace the outdoors. Instead, I find my city kids arguing over their favourite coffee shops and myself setting the timer to enforce “outside time.”

I do feel a bit like an urbanite as I bump our rolling suitcases down to the campsite in a forest of one-man tents. But whatever first impression we’re making, the oTENTik, as our new home is called, is greeted with *oohs* and *ahhs* from my offspring. There’s a deck, a Weber barbecue and inside, it’s like an IKEA version of camping: a long communal bunk with mattresses and canvas flaps that zip over the windows.

Initial signs from my three offspring are encouraging, too. Once bed space is staked, it’s shoes off and they’re wading at the shallow shore. The views are postcard-gorgeous: Two Jack Lake, about a 15-minute drive north of Banff, is edged with white spruce trees, and rocky limestone peaks fill in the vista. As if on cue, paddlers pass by in a red canoe.

Together, we explore a narrow trail that skirts the lake. I feel a sense of pride as my kids find big sticks and stop to throw rocks in the water. So far, so good. But other skills seem to come more slowly. Say, my son’s seeming inability to move away from the billowing smoke as we sit around the

fire. And there is the occasional regression to city ways, as I later catch my kids playing inside the car.

“Inside the car?” I say, trying not to raise my voice. “This place is literally an outdoor playground!”

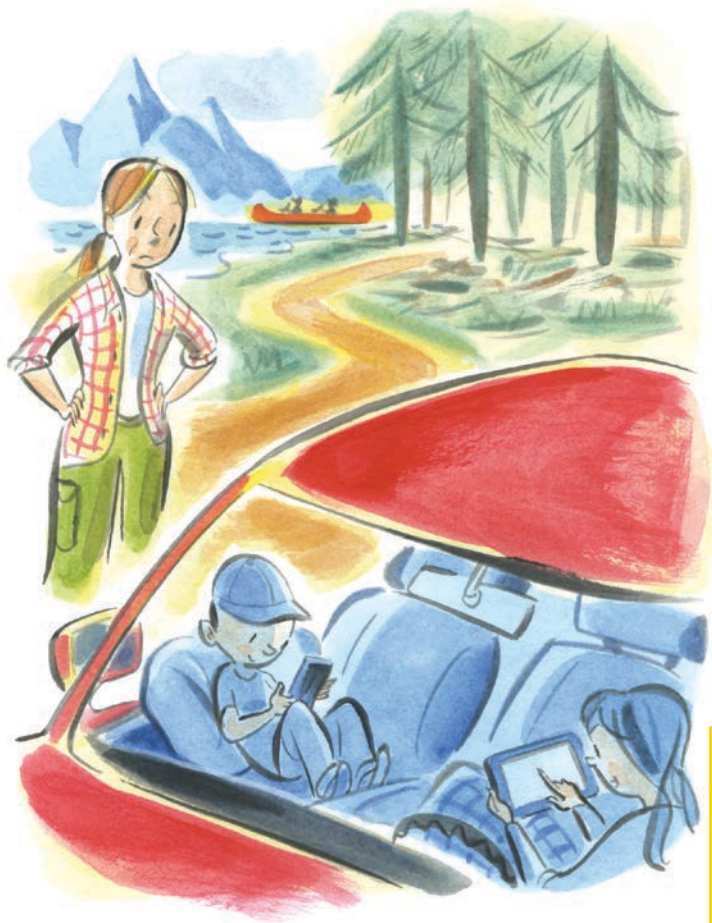
“Okay, okay, calm down, Mom,” they say, and unbuckle their seat belts.

When I was a kid, I had my fair share of outdoor adventures. Then I moved to Toronto.

An initial foray into Ontario’s Algonquin Provincial Park with my first baby was a bit of a disaster. My husband had so loaded the car with baby gear that he forgot the tent. Then, after returning home to pick it up, we encountered traffic so bad we ended up spending the first night in a motel. When we finally arrived at the park, we saw wide-open sites, noisy with families, among tall, thin trees. After that, we took to renting cottages instead of campsites.

But now, here in Banff, I suspect we have a second chance to become the campers I’d always hoped we’d be.

On the first night, we find unity over a bag of marshmallows as I lose count of how many they’ve had, and my kids roast them to a perfect black crisp. No one mentions *Minecraft*.



Ottawa-based writer Karan Smith taught her children the multi-layered marshmallow roasting technique on this trip.