

Yosemite

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BY [CHRIS FUSCO](#) Staff Reporter

My legs ached. My lungs heaved. The sweat dripped down my face. Meanwhile, the 47-pound child on the back of my bike squeaked with glee, marveling at the size and smell of all the "pine cone trees" on this mountainous road bordering Yosemite National Park. "I could have a cup of tea right now," my son, Ben, declared deep into our 22-mile ride, the last half of it uphill.

His good mood, I presumed, had a lot to do with his feet resting on his trailer bike's pedals.

So began the vacation I'd been awaiting all summer: camping five nights in one of America's most beautiful places with my 5-year-old, my fiancée and five other families.

The trip had gotten off to a tiring start, but this marked Ben's first time on a bike without training wheels, so I couldn't get too frustrated about his lack of pedaling.

Still, I worried that my city-oriented kid, the youngest of the 21 people in our group, might have trouble tackling some of the other "firsts" he'd experience in the days ahead.

"Don't worry," said Evan Ratner, a father of three and veteran of 12 trips with Backroads, the California-based adventure travel company we paid to guide us through Yosemite. "Everyone will just scoop him up and bring him along."

I hoped he'd be right.

Same size as Rhode Island

Yosemite measures nearly 1,200 square miles, about the size of Rhode Island. Though attendance has decreased in the past 10 years -- from about 4.1 million visitors annually to 3.4 million -- the park still gets crowded, so Backroads camped us just outside its borders for the first three nights.

Our home was Evergreen Lodge campground in the Stanislaus National Forest. We had roomy tents, hot showers and free long-distance phone calls.

Those amenities came at a price, though. It took two to three hours by van to get to many of Yosemite's top sites. Fortunately, our guides did the driving, and the vans were spacious enough to let us all spread out.

After a blueberry pancake breakfast on day two (I'm sticking to the story we roughed it even though Backroads cooked us gourmet food and set up our tents), we drove to Yosemite's Glacier Point for panoramic views of the granite monoliths that inspired Ansel Adams and countless other shutterbugs.

Perched more than a half mile above Yosemite Valley, the famous Half Dome rock formation rose across from us, while the winding river and pine forest below looked like something out of a model railroad.

After a little sightseeing, it was time for Ben's first big challenge: a four-mile hike up the Pohono Trail to Sentinel Dome, an 8,122-foot peak whose reward is 360-degree views of Yosemite.

As I expected, Ben broke in his new hiking boots by tripping on a rock and skinnis knee. A few minutes later, the complaints started about his legs being "sooooo tired."

But with some help from his new-found friend Joshua Klein, 8, Ben and I eventually reached the top with the rest of our group.

It was as if he had summited Everest.

"Me and Josh runned like wild at the top of the mountain," Ben said. "We were running around getting blown away from the wind."

From that point, the trip became more about Ben trying new things than admiring the natural wonders surrounding us. It didn't bother me. The important thing was to make him enjoy this trip enough so he'd want to do others like it in the future.

No whitewater, no problem

The next day, Ben got the hang of the trailer bike on our ride through Yosemite Village -- the park's main tourist spot. We stopped to romp through the boulders at the bottom of Lower Yosemite Falls and took a leisurely float down the Merced River.

Had we been in the park in May rather than late August, Yosemite's waterways would have been more powerful because of the fresh snow melt. Still, the calm Merced proved just right for sunbathing and admiring Yosemite's cliffs.

We spent the final two nights of our stay inside the park at Tuolumne Meadows, parts of which look like a postcard from the Swiss Alps. With the kids at their rock-climbing class, the adults set off for a hike that took us to Dog Lake, a crystal blue gem surrounded by the snow-capped Sierra Nevadas. We gave our legs a workout by climbing up to the 9,450-foot-high Lembert Dome before heading down the John Muir Trail toward our campsite.

A blossoming camper

Ben is a cautious kid, so I was fully prepared to hear that he sat on the sidelines while the other kids rock climbed. But we arrived to see a dirt-covered Ben raving about how Josh belayed him. He then whacked whiffle balls with Josh and his older identical-twin sisters, Emma and Rebecca.

This was a positive development on several fronts, seeing as how Ben nearly set Emma on fire two days earlier.

It all started innocently enough, with a few kids putting sticks and bark into the camp fire while a few of us adults looked on. Using the "other kids are doing it" logic, Ben picked up a rather large piece of bark and tossed it in. An ember flew into the air and floated onto Emma's shorts. This prompted a panicked stop, drop and roll.

The uninjured Emma was a good sport about it, but the ordeal left Ben crying and me remembering Smoky Bear's famous phrase.

I redeemed myself on the last day of the trip, however, when Josh tripped climbing out of a tree in a giant sequoia grove. I caught him before he hit the ground.

"There, now we're even," I told his father, Mike.

Another night in a tent?

After five nights sleeping outdoors, it felt good to arrive at the Best Western Tuscan Inn in San Francisco, the starting and ending point for our trip.

My fiancée and I couldn't wait to sleep in a bed.

Ben told us he wouldn't have minded one more night in a tent.

So much for my fears about him not keeping up. He took to sleeping outside, hiking and rock climbing like a future outdoorsman.

Maybe the next time we go camping, he'll pull me on the bike.

cfusco@suntimes.com