



## ■ sports & leisure

# The Maine Attraction Into the Woods with 'Camp' Camp

by Elizabeth Stiras  
Photos Courtesy of 'Camp' Camp

Imagine sitting around a campfire and licking s'mores off your fingertips without a worry in the world. Surrounded by new friends, you're relaxing after a day of mountain biking, hiking, softball, and working on your tan.

If you've ever thought about finding an alternative to the typical tropical cruise or other boozy vacation, look no further than the little slice of heaven just outside Portland, Maine, known as 'Camp' Camp.

For one full week in August, about 200 GLBT Campers come from all over the country—and sometimes from as far away as Australia—to enjoy summer by getting away from it all and diving headfirst into the fun they used to have before entering the taxing drudgery of adulthood.



“Maybe it’s a political statement to live unplugged for one week with no cell phone, no Internet, no CNN, no way to hear about Ann Coulter’s latest ignorant tirade,” says Kerry Riffle, codirector of ‘Camp’ Camp.

Riffle works nearly year-round on camp preparation, and only takes a month or two off at the end of one year’s camp before getting to work on the next. He has a background in theater as a director and a stage manager. This experience works in his favor, as he likens Camp to a weeklong show.

Riffle and fellow codirector Susan Clinkenbeard took over camp operations just last year, but Riffle has been a Camp staffer since the beginning. “Corny and cliché as it may sound, it is really great to see the fruits—no pun intended—of your labors resulting in 200 people smiling.”

Riffle had his first camping experience in the sixth grade, and although it severely traumatized him, he never forgot his hunky camp counselor. When he saw an ad for ‘Camp’ Camp 11 years ago, he couldn’t resist the thought of a weeklong late summer respite in scenic Maine.

Founded by Bill Cole in 1997, ‘Camp’ Camp activities range from artistic pursuits like stained glass and pottery classes to more

physically demanding endeavors like rock climbing and kayaking. Even if it takes campers more than one summer to summon the courage to conquer the camp's climbing wall, this achievement becomes a highlight of the vacation. "The rush and the sense of accomplishment once you make it is intense, a total high," beams Riffle.



Although this year's preparation is still in its early planning stages, Riffle expects to add karate class and possibly a Vegas night, which would make use of the resident chef's new chocolate fountain. The chef hails from Houston, Texas, and prepares a variety of savory yet nutritious dining options, including a vegetarian and vegan menu. (For the vegan menu, campers pay a \$25 surcharge.) Vacationing like a kid doesn't mean you have to eat like one.

Thursday afternoon's Tea Dance, an all-time favorite, has led to the emergence of a costume—i.e. drag—extravaganza, with some attendees planning their outfits months in advance. However, shorts and a T-shirt are also common. "We work hard to create an environment where everyone can come and just be themselves," Riffle remarks, "which is hard for many of us to do 24/7 in our real lives."

After a decade, 'Camp' Camp has yet to play host to a single Minnesotan. Noting that the majority of campers come from the Northeast, the codirectors would love to see a stronger Midwestern presence. Registration fees are \$965 per person, but mention this article and receive a generous discount; simply use the discount code LAVENDER when you register online.

Accommodations resemble traditional camp boarding—bunk beds and attached bathrooms in rustic yet comfortable cabins, shared by groups of 5-20 men or women. The setting is authentically bucolic, but doesn't call for survivalist tactics.

Since 80 percent of campers are single, hook-ups and romance are bound to happen, but don't count on cruising the whole week. "If you come to Camp determined to leave with a new partner, or to get laid every night," Riffle cautions, "you will probably have a lousy week."



But the camp's strongest appeal, especially for returning visitors, lies in the lasting social connections. "Many first-time campers are genuinely surprised that the people they've met and the friends they've made end up being their favorite thing about the week." 'Camp' Camp cultivates its own community, and while the week in August remains the group's focal point, social, athletic, and cultural events bring campers back together throughout the year. There's even an annual post-holiday weekend getaway in the Berkshires every January.

"The GLBT community tends to be very sexist and ageist, and give physical beauty too much reverence," Riffle says. "We don't always treat our fellow queers with the respect we all deserve."

For Riffle, the 'Camp' Camp experience means more than feeling like a kid again. It makes campers feel unconditionally supported and encouraged. "Living that way for a week somehow magically becomes this delightfully vicious cycle of bringing out the absolute best in everyone who is there."