

SUMMER CAMP

(FOR GROWN-UPS)



PHOTOGRAPHS
BY DAVID ZAITZ

The days of roasting s'mores and making lifelong friendships in a week don't have to end when you reach legal drinking age. Summer camps are catering to adults now too. Want to become a grilling superstar? There's a camp for that. A skateboard master? Ditto. Here are the West's best places for big kids to return to camp this summer.

BY JENNA SCATENA



ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JON ADAMS



“WHY SHOULD SUMMER CAMP—THE PLACE OF FIRST KISSES, SILLY DANCES, FUNNY COMPETITIONS, BEST FRIENDS, AND STAR-GAZING—BE RESERVED ONLY FOR CHILDHOOD?”

THAT’S THE QUESTION Levi Felix says inspired him to launch Camp Grounded, a tech-free summer camp for adults set in California’s Mendocino redwoods. Mobile phones and tablets are banned, and days are spent learning fish-eye photography, hiking, taking yoga classes, and eating gourmet meals. His idea has caught on: Since launching in 2013, attendance has grown from 250 to 1,250 campers.

Camp Grounded isn’t the only place catering to grown-up guests. The American Camp Association now counts some 800 camps as adults only, and last year, they drew more than 1 million people. What’s the appeal? You’ll find a lot of the classic summer-camp draws (wilderness, new friends, soul searching) plus a focus on acquiring a new, often quirky skill—everything from geology to cookie decorating.

At George Kahumoku Jr.’s Ukulele and Slack-Key Guitar Workshop, amateur musicians learn to strum on a Maui beach. Adults who may have once dreamed of running away with the circus can live out their childhood fantasy at Trapeze Las Vegas, just a few blocks from Cirque du Soleil. You’ll even find a skateboarding camp near Mt. Hood. “A 10-year-old in the kids’ camp saw me skateboarding my first day and said to his friend, ‘See, if that mom can do it, you can do it,’” former camper Lynn Feasel recalls. “I

thought to myself, For this week, I only have to act as old as I want to feel.” You’ll find experiences throughout the West’s most remote and captivating places—the trails of the Colorado Plateau, Idaho’s historic mining towns, and the Denali Wilderness backcountry. “The moment campers realize their phones don’t work out here, there’s mass panic,” admits Rachel Reichert, vice principal of The Atlanta School, a camp that teaches deskbound adults how to chop, hammer, and saw in Idaho. “But they no longer feel the compulsion to Instagram their vacation.” As Cathy Smith, one of The Atlanta School’s former campers, puts it, “It was isolated and desolate. There were no spas, none of the silverware matched, and my ‘air conditioning’ was lifting up a little cloth flap on the window of my one-room cabin to let the air in. And you know what? It was perfect.”

With camps ranging from \$399 to \$3,500, you can make your experience as budget or luxe as you want. “Adults expect something more refined than cafeteria food,” says James Fleege, a host at the skateboarding camp. “So we’ll pile everyone in a van and go out to a local sushi restaurant. Still, sometimes that’s not enough, and I catch people sneaking out to a spa ... or to hook up.”

When your iCal seems to dictate your life months into the future, camp can be a refreshing reminder that there’s always time to learn something new. At intensive DIY camps, like Breckenridge Distillery’s Practical Distillation program in Colorado, whiskey drinkers acquire the complex skills of distilling over six days. “We always end up tasting too much whiskey during the ‘sensory analysis’ portion, then people sleep it off in their seats during the fermentation lecture,” says master distiller Jordan Via. “It’s kind of like college, except a bottle of whiskey is always next to the coffeepot.”

As adults, we’re constantly looking for ways to define ourselves—our job title, our neighborhood, and, yes, even our profile pic. Heading off to sleepaway camp is a way of *undefining* ourselves. “A lot of adults stop doing fun, goofy things,” says Feasel, the skateboarding camp alum. “You think you’re too old for something like skateboarding, but then you realize it’s just so much fun—these camps can keep your inner kid alive.” Read on for more tales of grown-up camping bliss.



PROP/WARDROBE STYLING: ANNE ROSS
PROP FABRICATION: DARIUS BOSSINAS

COWBOY COLLEGE

BEST FOR
CITY SLICKERS

ARIZONA COWBOY COLLEGE / SCOTTSDALE
\$1,250 all-inclusive; 3 days; cowboycollege.com.

about horses. From day one it was all hands on—saddling up, brushing, cleaning, sorting cattle, and horseshoeing. Don’t expect a vacation; you’re there to get your hands dirty, but also to have fun. And they fold you in to be part of the family. You have breakfast with the whole family at 6:30 every morning. One thing I wasn’t prepared for was horseshoeing. It’s dangerous. If you’re not used to being around a horse, it can feel like a ticking time bomb. I was so out of my comfort zone, but I overcame it. I’m gunning for my own ranch now. I’m going back for another session. What I learned in a week would’ve taken a year of isolated workshops.”

—JEFF TAUTRIM, 45, MILFORD, PA



BEST FOR
→
SPOTLIGHT
SEEKERS

EXTREME FLYING TRAPEZE WEEKEND

TRAPEZE LAS VEGAS / LAS VEGAS
\$495; 3 days; trapezelasvegas.com.

out that fantasy for three days than Las Vegas? I was the oldest person there and not nearly as flexible as the girls in their 20s. But it's built for all skill levels, and soon I saw we all had our own strengths. We learned a lot of aerial artistry you wouldn't be able to cover in a daylong camp, like challenging returns, swings, and catches. After a long day of flying, we'd decompress with pizza and a movie, or lounge by the hotel pool. By the end, I was mastering impressive new moves, but I also realized timing and trust are just as important, the latter being the toughest. I had to put a lot of trust into people I just met—that the catcher would catch me, that the guy holding my safety line was paying attention—which wasn't easy. Just jumping off the platform was like a leap of faith. But that's what the trapeze is all about—learning to let go at the right time.”

—LINDA TAKAHASHI, 51, BURBANK, CA

“I’ve always wanted to run away and join the circus—the sparkle, the lights, the vagabond nature of it all. And what better place to live

BEST FOR
→
ASPIRING
ETSY-ERS

THE MAKERIE RETREAT

THE MAKERIE / BOULDER, CO
From \$865 for 3 days; themakerie.com.

“I wanted to meet some of my craft heroes, like Tamar Mogendorff, who is known for her soft sculptures. I first went with my mother-in-law as a bonding experience. We signed up for about four workshops, and we decided to divide and conquer by not taking the same ones, then teach each other what we learned. I dabbled in live wreath-making and paper perennials, but my favorite took me by complete surprise: cookie decorating. It was very intimidating—I was worried I wouldn't get the science down of squeezing thick frosting out of a tiny tube, but I discovered it was a hidden talent of mine. It's just a different version of painting: The cookies served as our canvas; the colorful frostings, our palette of paint. Then we'd build it out with sprinkles to give it character and structure. And if I didn't like the outcome, fine. I would just eat it, and no one would know. Now I have become known for making cookies for kids' birthday parties. They never seem to think anything is too beautiful to eat. Next year, I'm going back to the Makerie camp with my sister-in-law, mother, and a group of friends. The workshops are addictive, and going back each summer makes it really feel like a camp experience—we'll compare notes with other returning campers to see what new skills others are bringing in.”

—KAYLE BECKER, 39, NEW YORK CITY



GEOLOGY & GEOHAZARDS IN DENALI

**ALASKA GEOGRAPHIC
FIELD INSTITUTE / DENALI, AK**
From \$420 for 5 days;
alaskageographic.org.

BEST FOR
→
AMATEUR
SCIENTISTS

“We got to play scientist for a week, using the Alaska wilderness as our laboratory. It was like going on a geology treasure hunt. Instead of a guide giving us a tour, we were led through the discovery process. We questioned and developed hypotheses, which led us to our own understandings, instead of just accepting what someone else says. We studied slide zones and fault lines, and I came away seeing the world differently. Geology is all around us, so now I can go anywhere and understand what I'm looking at. I can see evidence of geology around my own town that I wasn't aware of before. So in the end, trudging barefoot through icy streams, braving high passes like mountain goats, and sharing space with grizzlies made it all worth it.”

—CATHERINE KERSHNER, 48, FAIRBANKS



CAMP GROUNDED

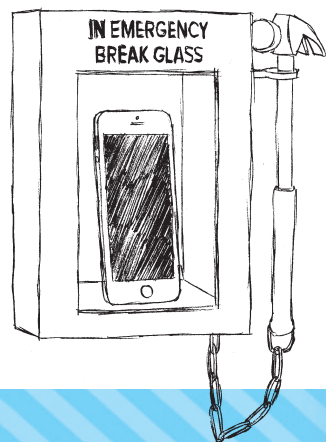
BEST FOR
TECHIES WHO
WANT TO
UNPLUG

DIGITAL DETOX
MENDOCINO, CA
From \$495 all-inclusive for
3 days; campgrounded.org.

"I wanted the challenge of a mandatory tech detox—and I knew the only way for me to truly unplug was to have someone literally take the devices from me. I used to be a camp counselor as a teenager, and I remember the joy of learning something new, like building and flying a kite—tangible, real-life experience I miss in my digitally oriented life. Here I was able to try a bunch of new activities, things I wouldn't normally do as an adult. I tried solar carving (using the sun to carve designs into a piece of wood), walking on stilts, archery, fish-eye photography, and hula hooping. Everyone is a little out of their comfort zone because we're acting like kids, but that's what we all ended up bonding over. People's adult baggage—rocky relationships, family drama—brought them here, but we got to leave all that behind for a little while.

I didn't miss my phone—I didn't want it back at the end. I can live without it."

—ALICIA BENJAMIN, 35,
BOULDER, CO



ADULT SKATEBOARD CAMP

WINDELLS CAMP / MT. HOOD, OR
\$1,999 all-inclusive; 8 days; windells.com.

"I'M 42 YEARS OLD AND AT SKATEBOARD CAMP. ANOTHER GUY WAS A 38-YEAR-OLD LAWYER. WE'RE ADULTS IN DEMANDING JOBS; THERE'S LITTLE SPACE SET ASIDE TO GOOF OFF ANYMORE."



"I'm a snowboarder and wanted a hobby I could do in the summer. I was starting from

the get-go—I mean, I really packed on the pads. There were a lot of falls, practicing ollies and nosedives. We were filmed so we could evaluate our

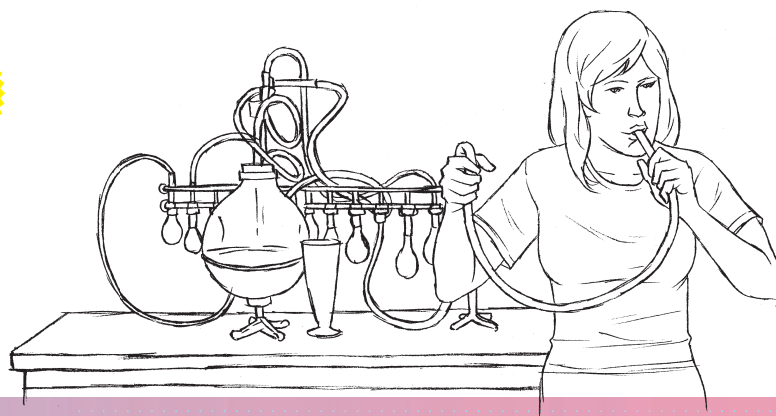
form, and everyone would say, 'You're not going to put that on Facebook, right?' The best parts were the field trips to Portland's skate parks. After, we'd come back to the house where seven guys and I were staying for the week. We'd crack open a beer, look out at Mt. Hood, and recount our best crashes of the day. I'd have these realizations, like 'Oh my god, I'm 42 years old and at skateboard camp.' Another guy was a 38-year-old lawyer. We're adults in demanding jobs; there's little space set aside to goof off anymore. But you know what? We did it for the skill set, but also to keep our inner kid alive. I didn't leave being the next Tony Hawk, but I did conquer the half-pipe."

—LYNN FEASEL, 42, CALGARY, AB

BEST FOR
SPORTS
ENTHUSIASTS

PRACTICAL DISTILLATION

BEST FOR
SPIRITS
CONNOISSEURS



BRECKENRIDGE DISTILLERY / BRECKENRIDGE, CO
\$3,500 all-inclusive; 6 days; breckenridgedistillery.com.

ing a small whiskey distillery, so we signed up for this as a fun test. We'd start around 7 a.m. and cover lab trials, proofing, blending, and bottling. We were done at 5, but most of us would keep tinkering until 7. As a group, we made our own bourbon, then we all signed the barrel, which is still aging. We'll have to have a reunion to taste it. We're opening our distillery this summer: Restless Spirits. And I'm inviting all of them to the opening."

—BENAY SHANNON, 47, KANSAS CITY, MO

"My husband and I were toying with the idea of open-

gone to a basic skills boot camp first. With help from my instructor and other campers, I'd managed to ski down a black-diamond trail, but really I belonged on the bunny slopes. Still, I enjoyed the experience."

—CARLOS KOTKIN,
41, LOS ANGELES

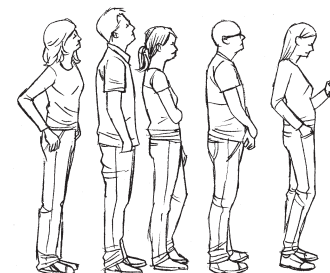
SMALL STRUCTURES WORKSHOP

BEST FOR
CARPENTRY
GEEKS

THE ATLANTA SCHOOL / ATLANTA, ID
From \$700 all-inclusive for 2 days; theatlantaschool.org.

"I never went to summer camps as a kid, so now that I'm retired, I wanted to go somewhere off the grid and rediscover my 10-year-old self. The drive down a dirt road to Atlanta, a nearly abandoned mining town in the Idaho mountains, was a great start to the adventure. I've always had a penchant for outhouses, and here we got to build one from scratch. We each submitted blueprint proposals and had to think about things like would it be a one- or two-seater? Slanted roof or pitched? Then we scavenged the hills for reusable materials: debris, scrap metal, and wood. There's no store, so anything else we needed, we wrote on a shopping list and gave it to the mailman, who would bring it back the next day. Then we built the entire outhouse by hand, no power tools. It was satisfying to get away from computers, get dirty, and see the results of our manual labor. At the end of the day, we would reward ourselves at the hot springs before retiring to our one-room cabins."

—CATHY SMITH, 63, BOISE



GRILLING & BBQ BOOT CAMP

THE CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA / ST. HELENA, CA
\$895; 2 days; enthusiasts.ciachef.edu/boot-camps.

BEST FOR
CHEFS IN THE
MAKING

"Becoming a master chef overnight seemed like a great idea even if my current skills were lacking. (I'd set a frozen pizza on fire only the week before camp.) No matter. The only requirement for attending culinary boot camp was a willingness to learn. That, I

had. We began with a lecture on what we'd cover in the course: everything we ever wanted to know about brines, rubs, marinades, and sauces. I assumed we'd be given a step-by-step presentation too—but it was literally a trial by fire. We chopped, grilled, and jumped right in. At the end of each day, we'd eat a big meal of all the dishes we'd labored over—grilled trout, sirloin, chicken—and it was delicious. But I was naive to think I'd become a master chef so quickly. I should've



UKULELE AND SLACK-KEY GUITAR WORKSHOP

BEST FOR
➡➡
BEACH BUMS

GEORGE KAHUMOKU JR. / MAUI, HI
\$1,400; 7 days; kahumoku.com.

“Last summer was my seventh year at the camp. Going back to the same camp each year has taught me that there’s always more to learn, more depth to things than you initially might have thought. Or maybe the next year there’s another teacher that fills in a missing piece for you. About half the people come back every year, many of whom are spouses, so it’s become what’s called an *‘ohana* in Hawaiian, like a reunion. The new people get folded in. But it’s different from a family reunion because it’s people who you otherwise would never have dinner with, much less play music with—people from Japan to Palo Alto to Virginia. During the day, we write songs and practice slack-key and the ukulele. Every evening we jam out in a music circle. At the end of the camp, there’s a student performance. The big crescendo. Despite being a middle school teacher, I’m a mess of nerves in front of adults. One year I resorted to a song I always played as a kid: ‘Puff the Magic Dragon.’ Everyone laughed, and it turned into a group sing-along. Now it’s a running joke people still bring up every year.”

—TERI HAWKINS, 59, SAN LEANDRO, CA



SONOMA GRAPE CAMP

BEST FOR
➡➡
WINE NERDS

SONOMA COUNTY WINEGRAPE COMMISSION / SONOMA
\$2,000 all-inclusive; 3 days; sonomagrapecamp.com.

“My wife and I have a hefty wine collection, so we wanted to investigate the back end of what really goes into a bottle. We spent three days picking, hauling, sorting, and blending, and our efforts were always rewarded with a beautiful meal cooked by a local chef. The most memorable was in an old apple orchard beneath the stars and strings of lights at Martinelli’s. I’d go back again just for that. That, and for the blending boot camp. We were split into teams, and each group was given about six varietals to blend with. We quickly turned it into a competitive sport, throwing barbs back and forth with the other teams. Now when we pick a bottle from our cellar, we stop to think about what went into it—the heat of the day the picker was in, the long nights sorting during harvest, and the precision and care from the winemakers. It puts a face to the labels.”

—LARRY EPSTEIN, 66, ENCINO, CA



RUNNING GETAWAY

BEST FOR
➡➡
WANNABE OLYMPIANS

McMILLAN RUNNING COMPANY
FLAGSTAFF
\$399; 4 days; mcmillanrunning.com.

“All the campers were at different levels, from recreational runners to hard-core athletes, but the staff (which included a former Olympian) did a good job of accommodating everyone. I’ve been running since high school and always had a vision of what kind of runner I was: an endurance monster. But by evaluating what kind of training I respond best to, this camp showed me my real strength was as a speedster. We also got coached on nutrition strategy and mental-focus techniques, which were a big help. I learned as much about the other people at camp as I did about myself. The scenery and weather in Flagstaff were a beautiful backdrop to get to know others while running on trails at 7,000 feet. It became much more about the experience and bonding with others than about the workout.”

—BECKY NESBITT, 45, HEMPSTEAD, TX



BEST FOR
➡➡
HEAVY-METAL FANS

SAND CASTING

IDYLLWILD ARTS / IDYLLWILD, CA
From \$770 for 4 days; idyllwildarts.org.

“The first thing I noticed was that the teacher had built the kiln himself. I was skeptical—it looked like a circular stack of brick with a hair dryer blowing into it—but when he lit it up, it sounded like a jet engine, and out came the flames. It made me realize how simple the equipment can be and how easy it would be to do as a hobby at home. At first, working with liquid metal was intimidating, but soon we were melting down aluminum and bronze in the furnace, and pouring the molten metal into beautiful sand molds, letting it cool and occasionally finishing them with a patina. As a software engineer, I found it invigorating to feel the heat from the molds and the metals, and get back to something so low-tech and hands-on. It’s how they did casting in the Bronze Age. The instructor really filled out the whole experience; he lives on an Indian reservation in the Idyllwild area and told captivating stories through the whole process.”

—WILLIAM STEIN, 54, HILLSBOROUGH, CA

