

The Ultimate Camping Greenhorn

Your baby will probably fare better than your nerves.

BY DONALD FRASER

Clara had her first camping experience at eight months of age. By nine months, she was an experienced canoe camper. We say this even though she mostly slept through the paddle to her first ever backcountry site. This summer, year two, we already have a few camping trips planned. And Clara will be bringing some pint-sized friends along to show them the fun of crawling in the dirt. In my mind, that makes her a guide.

It was on these few early trips last year that we learned the most important lesson in camping with very young children: infants are incredibly adaptable. Parents – not so much. See, as long as you keep your young one safe, warm, and dry, they're probably going to be just fine. The same can't be said for your central nervous system as you worry about whether or not they'll be okay.

Which is the main thing to consider when roughing it with your infant or young toddler. Yes, camping is doable. Yes, camping is fun. But those first few times are also a bit of a challenge.

Here are a few tips to help make it a rewarding experience:

Choose somewhere close. Sure, you used to drive

4 hours to get to a nicer park. Scratch that. You don't want to start a challenging trip by having to find ways to entertain the baby in the car. And chances are good you're never going to get far from your site anyways. Also, should anything go wrong – say a meltdown by either child or parent – you can pull up stakes and be home, in bed, in no time.

Don't plan on daylong hikes, full afternoons at the beach, or late night fireside stargazing. Just as at home, the need for naps, snacks, and early bedtimes are going to break up any day into short shifts. Our first few trips consisted of hour-long walks, short trips to the beach, playtime at the campsite, and books in the tent.

Forget the beer and fishing. The beer cooler will probably become the baby food cooler. Which is okay, because you'll be sharing a tent with a very tiny person who doesn't want a snoring Daddy rolling over on top of her. And that early morning fishing time will probably be replaced by taking over for mom, who will have probably spent a good portion of the night keeping your child asleep.

That's because babies are not used to sleeping in strange places – and a tent is about



Photo: Donald Fraser

as strange as you're going to get – and they need to be kept warm. This means bringing along a hat, some mittens, and a winter sleep sack. A 10 degree low doesn't seem much to you, but it's a whole different story to a 25 pound baby.

Your first trip or two will definitely not be the experience you are used to. But it will be rewarding nonetheless. Watching 8-month old Clara leaning backwards in her mother's sling and goggling as the dappled sunlight flickered through the tree canopy was truly magical. It was breathtaking to see her experience the world.

And, sure, your little backpack of joy isn't likely to remember her greenhorn adventures. But for you, those memories are going to last forever.

Donald Fraser writes for television, radio, print, and web publications. He doesn't anticipate getting much sleep on his next few camping trips.



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