

The best summer camp you've never been to Nature thrills await families venturing to Strathcona Park Lodge in Canada

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I'm halfway across Strathcona Park Lodge's high ropes course -- a Tarzanesque playground of cable bridges, ropes and logs that are suspended up to 20 feet above the forest floor in British Columbia -- when my can-do attitude sputters.

Between the log I'm standing on and the platform I must reach is a gap, no more than three feet wide, appropriately named "the leap of faith." Though I'm helmeted, harnessed and safely clipped to an overhead cable, the thought of jumping across the chasm makes my legs go wobbly.

It's the first day of Family Adventure Week, and suddenly I'm not feeling so adventurous.

I look ahead to where my 9-year-old son, Spence, is scrambling through a spider web of ropes that hang from a giant fir tree. I look down, way down, to where my 11-year-old son, Shane, waits for his turn. "Come on Mom," he yells, a young adventurer's grin plastered on his face. "Just go for it." Trying new things together Going for it -- stepping (or perhaps, leaping) outside your comfort zone -- then sharing the resulting buzz with family members is what the Family Adventure Week at Strathcona Park Lodge and Outdoor Education Centre is all about. This wilderness retreat, nestled on the shores of British Columbia's Upper Campbell Lake and encircled by snowcapped mountain peaks, lies 200 miles north of Victoria and 25 miles west of the nearest town, Campbell River.

The lodge attracts an international clientele -- from hard-core outdoor types to families with small children -- who are looking for unique vacations amid the stunning scenery of central Vancouver Island.

While the resort is rustic -- guests are housed in an eclectic collection of rough-hewn chalets and cabins, with no televisions or telephones to disturb the natural vibe -- the lodge still coddles its visitors.

Energetic, highly competent guides organize all the equipment and logistics for outdoor activities that range from kayaking, canoeing and sailing to hiking, rock climbing and more. Executive chef Ian Graham and his crew serve imaginative, healthful meals in the Whale Room, a buffet-style dining room where gluten and dairy-free, vegan and heart-smart alternatives are available. And no matter how simple the accommodation, every guest sleeps under a fluffy duvet.

Goodness knows we Family Adventure campers need our sleep. For six action-packed

days our effervescent guides, Jacqui Coward and Tania Smethurst, keep our multinational group -- the Vinden family from England, the Allens from Seattle, and my family from Vancouver, B.C. -- physically challenged, mentally engaged and highly amused. Bonding with humor The laughter begins at our first meeting when Smethurst hands out yellow Post-it Notes and instructs us to stick a note to our forehead, then print our name on it. Steve Vinden, a farmer-cum-tourism operator from outside London, hands back the note and writes his name directly on his forehead with the colorful markers provided. We all hoot, then follow suit.

The funny looks we get trooping in to dinner just accelerate the group's bonding. Over roast chicken, ratatouille and salads, we talk about why we've come to camp. Jackie Vinden explains that she and Steve were looking for a summer adventure with their children, 10-year-old Zoe and 9-year-old Sam. "We didn't want to spend our vacation just lying on a beach," she says. "We'd tried a few days at an outdoor center in Devon, and thought a Canadian camp might be the ticket to some quality family time."

Cezanne Allen wasn't sure exactly what she was looking for when she typed "family camping" into her Internet search engine. "My husband, Demi, and I are fairly outdoorsy, and we wanted a place where our children (6-year-old Bryson and 10-year-old Haley) could try activities geared to their ages and abilities. Plus we wanted to be active right along with the kids."

These motivations are common among families at adventure camp, according to Christine Clarke, executive director and daughter-in-law of Myrna Boulding, who opened Strathcona Park Lodge, along with her late husband Jim, in 1959. "Parents who come here want to spend time with their kids," Christine says. "They want to have shared experiences as a family. And we hope that, as a result of their time here, they develop a greater sense of themselves and the world around them." Kayaks, canoes and bears We sense that the world around us is wonderfully wild. On an afternoon hike to a 10,000-year-old sphagnum bog, home of the insectivorous sundew plant, Jackie expresses her desire to see a bear. Jacqui and Tania, our ready-to-please guides, point out bear scat and bear-ravaged huckleberry bushes but, much to my relief, no bears. "Really," says Jacqui with a big smile and shake of her head, "I can't believe we're actually hoping to see bears."

The following afternoon, Jacqui sends our kayaking session into the deep end of silliness by inventing a new game: The Princess and the Parasite. Children and adults take turns hanging, barnacle-like, off the bows of the bright blue, pink and white plastic kayaks while their partners maneuver the crafts in a frantic game of can't-catch-me. Later, we line up the kayaks like sardines in a can and attempt to run across the bows that bob like so many colorful piano keys.

The highlight of the week is an eight-mile overnight canoe trip to an isolated beach at the foot of Mount Titus. Blessed with a healthy tailwind for our 3 1/2-hour paddle to the campsite, we raft our three freighter canoes, fashion a sail out of a tent fly, and spend much of the journey singing camp songs. We're delighted to discover that Steve knows every word to "American Pie."

We practice no-trace camping by building a moderate fire, bagging all refuse and

scrubbing our pots with bits of fir boughs. At bedtime, Jacqui demonstrates no-trace toothpaste spitting, which involves swinging our heads from side to side like elephants while misting the surrounding ground. Our family sleeps under the stars. The next morning, Shane tells us he woke in the night. "I thought you were shining a really powerful light in my face." It was the full moon.

Family memories that last The trip back is a long, tough paddle. Yesterday's accommodating tailwind is today's nasty headwind. We stop at Treasure Island, a small tree-covered bump in the middle of the lake, to eat lunch. Jacqui pulls out a bottle of sparkly silver nail polish and the kids paint their mom's and dad's toenails.

Our last meeting is one big group hug. Encouraged to share our thoughts about the week, Shane declares, "The rock climb (on a 30-foot basalt face) was the hardest thing I've ever done." Sam chimes in, "I learned to never, never give up. I didn't give up on the high ropes and I didn't give up canoeing." Cezanne articulates how close our group has become: "This whole week, there was our family, and then there was the bigger family." Spence says, "This was the most fun I might ever have."

I thank the group for their encouragement on the ropes course. Not only did I make the leap of faith, but I also found the courage to fly like a brakeless human gondola down the 150-foot zip line. The final word goes to Steve, who wiggles his silver-tipped toes for emphasis: "I'm just thankful that the memories will last longer than the nail varnish." Ann Campbell is a freelance writer from Vancouver, B.C.

If you go: Strathcona Park Lodge

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Getting there: From Portland, fly to Vancouver, B.C., or Victoria, B.C., and connect with a flight to Campbell River. Restricted round-trip airfares begin at about \$300 through Vancouver; more through Victoria. The Lodge offers airport pick-up, or you can rent a car to make the 45-minute drive yourself. Or, drive to Anacortes or Port Angeles, Wash., catch a ferry to Victoria, then make the easy three-hour drive to Campbell River.

Family adventure: Five Family Adventure Weeks at Strathcona Park Lodge this summer begin on July 6 and Aug. 3, 10, 17 and 24. Cost, including six nights' accommodation, meals, group equipment and guided activities, are about \$618 (U.S.) per adult and \$444 per child, six to 13 years of age. The lodge also offers two programs for families with older children, Family Adventure Too (ages 9 to 15) and Nootka Family Adventure (sea-kayaking with teens), and an Elder Adventure Week for active grandparents and grandchildren ages 9-14.