

# LAGUNA BEACH COASTLINE PILOT

## Hansen: Laguna camping is a state of mind



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By David Hansen

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The RVs line up like big aluminum cigars, filling the breeze with the smell of baby back ribs, jumbo shrimp and baked beans. Kids ride scooters while dads pitch tents and moms straighten plastic sheets over picnic tables.

Behind it all, instead of a canopy of oaks or pines, is the eternal Pacific horizon.

It's summer camping at El Moro Campgrounds in Crystal Cove, the state's shiny new addition that already has become as popular as, well, Laguna Beach. The interesting thing is most of the people who camp there are local.

"Why drive so far when you can drive here?" asked Teja Geldmacher of Laguna Hills, spreading out his arms over the vista. "Everyone has an ocean view."

For Geldmacher and his wife, Teresa, the point is not how far you drive but what is there when you arrive.

"We went to the Sawdust and Art-A-Fair," Teresa said. "We went to the beach and got fried."

Like many at the campground, Kim Kroyer of Aliso Viejo agreed that the proximity was actually a benefit. Kroyer was camping for four days with her sister and invited other friends to join.

"It's nice because it's so close and other people can come," said friend Kelly Hughes of Garden Grove.

Kroyer knew of the long history of trying to develop the campground and the area's former mobile home residents who became displaced after development started.

"I feel bad for the people who had to leave, but now look at how many people can enjoy this beautiful spot," she said.

There is no doubt that the campground is nice. Everything is brand new. The restrooms are probably cleaner than most home bathrooms, certainly mine. Everything has an efficient, orderly patina.

The only real complaint is not having a fire pit, something that might make winter campers grumble. Giving up s'mores is a big deal.

But everyone acknowledges the enormous fire danger just steps away, as the ocean breeze could blow embers onto the arid, brown hillsides.

"We haven't needed it," said Helen Johnson of Laguna Niguel about fire pits. Johnson was tent camping at the park for four days with her husband, son and daughter.

"The kids feel like they are far away," she said. "At night it's so peaceful."

Johnson recounted the moments that have made the "trip" worth it: her son bodyboarding with a seal just five feet away; dolphins playing in a circle; family time with board games.

"We're coming back," she said.

For Laguna Beach residents, what does it mean to escape to a place that is essentially home — camping in our backyard?

How do we create a remote camping experience when we know we can walk to Javier's?

There is no question that to live in a resort town makes you feel like you're always on vacation. In fact, it's hard to take a formal vacation when you can look out of your window every day and see a postcard.

So if camping is a state of mind, what prevents us from applying that philosophy to daily living? In other words, aside from aesthetics, can we extend the "camping" experience to our regular life?

For example, if the El Moro Campground proves that you don't have to travel far to be a happy camper, then it's not the distance, but the break from our routines.

What does camping really do but force us to band together and socialize, either as a family or an extended group of friends?

And for Dave and Cindy Schuberth of Huntington Beach, it is about family. They had four families lined up to camp; the farthest came from Fountain Valley.

"It's nice because it's close," Dave Schuberth said. "But we miss the fire pit."

It's all about the s'mores.

And camaraderie.

And the acknowledgment that we sustain happiness by breaking free from the daily bustle of life to recharge, even when the world-class views are the same and the restaurants still serve five-star takeout.

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