We of society are slaves, not so much to others as to ourselves; our superfluities are the chains that bind us, impeding every movement of our bodies, and thwarting every impulse of our souls.”

—Washington Irving, 1835

Camping is illogical. Why sleep on the ground when there’s a perfectly good bed at home? But sleeping in a tent or under the stars is little about comfort and much about the temporary liberation from what Washington Irving called “our superfluities”—be they good wi-fi or the convenience of a thermostat—perhaps so we can ultimately appreciate them all the more.

Oklahomans are not so far removed from the days when settlers traveled across Indian Territory on the California Road, camping every night along the South Canadian River; when the Plains Indians made camps along clear streams beneath giant cottonwoods as they followed the bison; when cowboys slept by campfires as they drove their herds to market.

So it makes sense that Oklahoma offers a rich outdoor experience. This land, which Irving described as containing “great grassy plains, interspersed with forests and groves and clumps of trees, and watered by the Arkansas, the Grand Canadian, the Red River, and their tributary streams,” remains as alluring today as it did in 1835, when he traveled into the wilderness of Indian Territory.

Anywhere in Oklahoma, outdoor adventure is close at hand. Travelers are unlikely to get bored with the same old landscape because of the state’s unusual natural diversity. Oklahoma has mountains, lakes, prairies, forests, rivers, and swamps in eleven ecoregions, and all of them have public lands well-suited for camping. More than two million acres lie in state parks, wildlife management areas, national forest, grasslands, recreation areas, and wildlife refuges.

The state park system alone has more than 3,500 unimproved campsites, and primitive camping is permitted virtually anywhere in the 350,000 acres of Oklahoma’s portion of the Ouachita National Forest alone. Beyond that, many local governments and private businesses offer camping and recreation opportunities.

What better way to appreciate the state than to backpack the Ouachita Trail or spend the night in a Panhandle oasis near the state’s highest point; camp in a cave or on a granite slab under the stars; or see the blackjack oaks silhouetted against the sunset from a lakeside tent in the Cross Timbers? It’s all waiting in Oklahoma.
SAFETY CHECK

ANIMALS: Most critters want to avoid humans as much as humans want to avoid them. Venomous snakes like copperheads and rattlesnakes live throughout Oklahoma, but snakebites are uncommon, and death from snakebite is rare. Watch your step, wear long pants and boots, and don’t pick up a snake under any circumstances. To avoid an encounter with a member of eastern Oklahoma’s black bear population, keep food and trash locked in a vehicle or hung high from a tree—never in a tent. And the lumbering bison is quick and agile and may charge with little or no warning. Keep your distance.

BUGS: Chiggers, mosquitoes, and ticks quickly can take any trip from relaxing to uncomfortable. The best avoidance strategy is to camp and hike in late fall through early spring when the weather is cool. Applying insect repellent containing DEET on clothing and exposed skin can help repel these pests. Wear long pants, even in the summer.

HEAT: Many Oklahomans avoid outdoor activities during August’s blistering heat. If hot weather camping is your thing, stay hydrated, and avoid strenuous activities in the middle of the day to prevent heat exhaustion and heat stroke. If you’re hiking in hot weather, drink at least sixteen ounces of water per hour. It’s best to acclimate before a long hike by training for the distance, gradually increasing mileage as the weather warms up.

POISON IVY: It’s found all over the state. Learn to recognize its seasonal color changes and avoid it year-round. Get outdoors in late fall to early spring for the lowest risk. It’s still there but not leafed out, making contact less likely. Even in warm weather, wear long sleeves and pants to avoid the itchy rash. If you suspect you’ve been in contact with it, remove your clothing, turn it inside-out, deposit it in the washing machine, and wash it separately in warm water. Wash your skin with soap and water to remove the plant’s oil.

INJURY: Sprained ankles, cuts, contusions, and broken bones happen to even the most careful outdoorspeople. Carry a first aid kit, and know how to use it. The Red Cross offers frequent first-aid classes. Don’t count on cell phone service in remote areas to summon help in case of a serious injury. Instead, consider carrying a satellite GPS messenger such as a SPOT Gen3 or DeLorme inReach.

GETTING LOST: Losing your way is unlikely but not out of the question. Carry a map, compass, and a GPS with spare batteries, and maintain your orientation throughout the hike. Don’t rely on a cell phone for navigation. It’s best not to hike alone, but if you do, tell someone where you’re going and when you expect to return. Carry a headlamp in case darkness falls while you’re still on the trail.
Alabaster Caverns State Park

Wild cave camping at Alabaster Caverns State Park is one of Oklahoma’s most primitive and unusual camping experiences, says park manager Mike Caywood. From April to September, groups of three to fifteen campers can rent the Water Cave for an overnight stay. Birding, bat watching, touring the park’s namesake cavern, and exploring other wild caves nearby make Alabaster Caverns a rich adventure destination in northwest Oklahoma’s Gypsum Hills.

Six miles south of Freedom on State Highway 50, (580) 621-3381 or TravelOK.com/parks.

Black Mesa State Park

In the tablelands of the Panhandle, Oklahoma’s highest point tops out at 4,973 feet above sea level. Hike to the summit, and camp down the road in the creekside oasis of Black Mesa State Park. Shaded tent sites along South Carrizo Creek offer a peaceful canyon setting, and the area’s dark skies make for ideal stargazing. Enjoy the shelter of the unique Red Rock campsite, which is tucked into a rugged outcrop.

Twenty-eight miles northwest of Boise City on State Highway 325, (580) 426-2222 or TravelOK.com/parks.

Beavers Bend State Park

“Breathtaking” is an overused but completely appropriate description for the riverside setting in Beavers Bend State Park’s Elm Campground. Site 14 offers privacy and a close-up view of the bald-cypress-lined Mountain Fork River as it flows beneath towering limestone bluffs. From there, it’s a short walk to canoe rentals and hiking trails in one of Oklahoma’s most scenic state parks. Eight miles north of Broken Bow on U.S. Highway 259, (580) 494-6452 or TravelOK.com/parks.

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1. Choose a level site free of debris, and avoid places where rain could pool. Select established sites to preserve the natural setting.

2. Camping near water provides convenient access, but stay at least 200 feet from lakes and streams to prevent contamination. Be sure to filter all water before drinking it.

3. When the wind comes sweeping down the plain, you’ll be happy your site has a windbreak such as large boulders or a stand of trees.

4. Pick a spot that’s shady during the day, but before setting up camp, look at what’s overhead. A dead tree limb hanging over a tent is called a “widowmaker” for good reason.

5. Get to camp at least two hours before sunset to avoid rushing. Point the tent’s head end toward the east to catch the sun’s early rays—they’re nature’s wake-up call.

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Shaded sites along South Carrizo Creek at Black Mesa offer a peaceful canyon setting, and the area’s dark skies make for ideal stargazing.
Chickasaw National Recreation Area

Water is the big attraction in the Chickasaw National Recreation Area near Sulphur. The springs for which the town is named still gurgle into rock-lined pools feeding the park’s streams and waterfalls. Pitch a tent in Rock Creek Campground at Site 70, a secluded spot where the stream’s trickle lulls travelers to sleep. Don’t miss a chance to wade in Little Niagara waterfall and hike to Antelope and Buffalo Springs near the Travertine Nature Center. And the park is so close to town, campers can pop into Sulphur for lunch or shopping at the Artesian Hotel, Casino, and Spa. U.S. Highway 177 south of Sulphur. (580) 622-7234 or nps.gov/chic/.

Glover River

Southeastern Oklahoma’s Glover River and its surroundings are about as wild as it gets in the state, so this campsite is best found via GPS coordinates (34°18’32.4”N 94°56’09.6”W). “The Glover is the last free-flowing river in the state,” says Dakota Christian of the Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area, through which the stream flows. This primitive campsite is located near a low-water bridge and a deep hole, making it a good spot to fish for native smallmouth bass. Bring a boat to canoe or kayak these remote waters. Sixteen miles north of Broken Bow on State Highway 259, (918) 527-5308 or wildlifedepartment.com.

Clayton Lake State Park

Lakeside camping at its loveliest is the essence of Clayton Lake State Park. Three primitive campsites line the shore in Area 2, where you can pitch a tent on lake’s edge and wake to the sight of vibrant foliage through the morning mist. The Clayton area also offers some of the state’s best off-roading trails, so bring a four-by-four or dirt bike. Five miles south of Clayton on U.S. Highway 271, (938) 569-7381 or TravelOK.com/parks.

Charon’s Garden Wilderness Area

Only ten campers are permitted to stay in this 5,000-acre rugged valley of immense boulders in the Wichita Mountains every three days, meaning outdoorspeople who overnight here likely will not encounter another human—especially since campfires are prohibited. The surrounding terrain also is a mecca for rock climbers and day hikers. Reservations are required. Ten miles west of I-44 on State Highway 49, (580) 429-3222 or fws.gov/refuge/Wichita_Mountains.

Pitch a tent in Rock Creek Campground, a secluded spot where the stream’s trickle lulls travelers to sleep.

ETIQUETTE

Be a good neighbor on the campground with these simple guidelines.

1. Minimize your environmental impact by following “Leave No Trace” principles including disposing of waste properly, minimizing campfire remnants, and traveling and camping on durable surfaces. For more information, visit int.org.

2. Pack it out even if you didn’t pack it in: Leave the campsite cleaner than you found it.

3. Noise is irritating in direct proportion to the hour of the day. Keep quiet. If arriving late, keep voices low and lights to a minimum.

4. Be friendly and greet other campers, but always respect your neighbors’ camping and personal space.

5. Completely extinguish your campfire when you’re done. As Smokey the Bear says, “Only you can prevent wildfires.” Gather only downed wood. Avoid cutting branches—even dead ones—from live trees, as they may provide cover to birds and wildlife. Have extra firewood? Leave it behind for the next campers so they can minimize their own impact.

Be a good neighbor on the campground with these simple guidelines.
Illinois River

Floating the Illinois River is an Oklahoma summertime rite of passage, and camping along the Illinois’ bank completes the experience. Outfitters and campgrounds line the river near Tahlequah, and Round Hollow Public Access Area, with a gravel bar and easy river access, makes a great base for a canoeing or floating weekend. Camp at Site R-8, which overlooks the river from a knoll beneath the draping limbs of a large oak tree. Sixteen miles northeast of Tahlequah on State Highway 10, (918) 456-3251 or ok.gov/osrc.

Osage Hills State Park

Near Pawhuska, visit the world’s largest protected remnant of tallgrass prairie at the Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, then camp close by at Osage Hills State Park. This densely wooded park is full of historic Civilian Conservation Corps infrastructure and features miles of mountain bike and walking trails. “Tent Hill” is located on a hilltop away from park lights; on its north end, Site 0 is prime for solitude and scenery. The stone lookout tower makes a comfortable place to stretch out and count shooting stars or watch the sunrise over Osage County. Eleven miles west of Bartlesville on U.S. Highway 60, (918) 336-4141 or TravelOK.com/parks.

Ouachita Trail

Oklahoma’s only long-distance hiking trail begins near Talihina and runs across the Ouachita Mountains to just outside Little Rock, Arkansas. Forty-six of its 222 miles are on the Oklahoma side of the border, and they are some of the most rugged on the Ouachita Trail. Primitive camping is allowed anywhere along the trail, but volunteers have built log shelters every nine miles or so. Each three-sided structure has a sleeping platform, fire ring, and picnic table. Rock Garden shelter at mile 9.4 is a great first night’s stop for backpackers on this rugged section of trail or a good overnight for an out-and-back. In “leaf off” season, the view across Holson Valley is spectacular. The trailhead is located in Talimena State Park, six miles north of Talihina on U.S. Highway 271, (918) 567-2052 or TravelOK.com/parks.

Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area

From a ridge in Ellis County’s Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area, look out upon rolling grasslands easing down to the wooded bottoms of the Canadian River. From a ridge in Ellis County’s Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area, look out upon rolling grasslands easing down to the wooded bottoms of the Canadian River. From a ridge in Ellis County’s Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area, look out upon rolling grasslands easing down to the wooded bottoms of the Canadian River.

Okmulgee and Dripping Springs Lakes and Recreation Areas

The Cross Timbers were a notorious barrier to travel for early explorers and, though diminished, their thick stands of post and blackjack oak still run north to south across Oklahoma. One of the largest contiguous stands of ancient Cross Timbers is located at Okmulgee Wildlife Management Area, across the road from lakeside camping at Okmulgee Lake. Camp along the shoreline at Red Oak campground for a bit of seclusion, and the park’s scenic overlook is the perfect place to watch a spectacular Cross Timbers sunset. After a rain, don’t miss the thundering cascade pouring over the lake’s massive stone spillway. Five miles west of Okmulgee on State Highway 98, (918) 756-5971.

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Roughing it doesn’t have to mean giving up flavor. Kent Rollins, Oklahoma’s state chuck wagon cook, offers recipes to spice up your campfire. kentrollins.com.

**Hot Damn! Fried Bananas**

Excerpted from *A Taste of Cowboy* by Kent Rollins

1 cup sugar
1 Tbsp. cinnamon
3 peeled bananas
1 stick butter
1 cup Hot Damn! cinnamon schnapps
Vanilla ice cream

In a small bowl, combine the sugar and cinnamon. Set aside. Cut the bananas in half, and then cut again lengthwise. Toss them in the sugar and cinnamon mixture until generously coated. Leave them in the mixture.

In a cast-iron skillet, melt the butter over medium-low heat. Add the bananas to the skillet and fry on each side about 1 to 2 minutes or until slightly softened. Pour the schnapps into the skillet, and lightly stir the bananas around to absorb some of the flavor. Light the schnapps on fire. It should flame off quickly. Remove from heat. If desired, serve the bananas over ice cream, and drizzle with the remaining sauce from the skillet. Serve immediately.

**Tip:** To keep more of the schnapps flavor, save your match and don’t light the mixture.

**Mountain Man Skillet Breakfast**

6 large eggs
1 4-oz. can chopped green chilies
2 Tbsp. mayonnaise
¾ cup shredded cheddar or pepper jack cheese
½ tsp. smoked paprika (or more to taste)
6 slices thick-cut bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
1 russet potato, diced
1 small to medium yellow onion, diced
Salt and pepper to taste
Tortillas and Green Chile Chipotle Relish (see recipe below) for serving

In a medium bowl, beat the eggs. Stir in the green chilies, mayonnaise, cheese, smoked paprika, salt, and pepper. Set aside. In a large cast-iron skillet, fry the bacon over medium-high heat until three-fourths done. Remove and place on a paper towel. Set aside. Add the potatoes to the skillet with the bacon grease. Fry until they begin to brown, then add the onions. Continue frying until tender. Drain any excess grease from the skillet. Add the bacon back into the skillet with the potatoes. Cook over medium heat for 1 to 2 minutes or until warmed. Pour the eggs into the skillet, and mix well. Continue cooking 2 to 3 minutes or until the eggs are cooked through, stirring frequently. Serve warm alone or with tortillas and Green Chile Chipotle Relish (recipe below).

**Green Chile Chipotle Relish**

Excerpted from *A Taste of Cowboy* by Kent Rollins

1 7-oz. can of chipotle peppers in adobo sauce
1 10-oz. can Ro*Tel diced tomatoes and green chilies, drained
1 4-oz. can chopped green chilies
1 cup sugar

Remove the chipotle peppers from the can and dice. In a saucepan, combine the chipotle peppers in adobo sauce with the Ro*Tel, green chilies, and sugar. Cook over medium heat for about 10 minutes, stirring frequently until the sauce thickens slightly and is warmed through. May be served warm or chilled.

**Tip:** Make this relish before your camping trip and store in a Mason jar or plastic bag.