

The Maine Attraction

Bergen County kids gain independence, skills and lifelong friends as they cultivate a love for Nature at Maine Summer Camps



When it comes to sleepaway camp in Maine, 316 days go into making the best 49 days of many kids' lives. When you understand the philosophy, see the passion of the camp owners—such as Bergen County's own Keith Klein—and speak with camp families from Bergen County, it all makes sense. Klein is an owner of Camp Laurel and Camp Laurel South, two premier Maine camps, part of the Maine Camp Experience (MCE) community, where many Bergen County families choose to send their kids to enjoy the authentic camp experience: fresh air, crystal clear water, and incredible activities

and instruction.

"Parents agree it's more transformative for the kids because the air smells different, the pace is more relaxed and the natural beauty is abundant," Klein says.

Jill Marks of Demarest, whose daughter Samantha switched from camp in Pennsylvania to Camp Laurel in Maine, agrees. "Camp Laurel was great for Samantha who loved swimming, water skiing and sailing on the huge, beautiful lake. The focus on sports and building character were ideal."

Klein will be gearing up for his 41st year in camping when he leaves Bergen County for Maine this Memorial Day. This BC native got his start at Knights

Day Camp in Upper Saddle River as a young kid and then "grew up" at sleepaway camp in Maine for eight summers at Kamp Kohut, another MCE member camp. It was there, amidst the mountains and lakes, that he flourished. In 1994, Klein bought Camp Laurel (a seven-week coed camp), which he and partners Jem and Debbie Sollinger transformed into a camp geared toward instruction and structured programming. In 1997, he bought Camp Laurel South (a four-week coed camp) with partners Roger and Dagni Christian.

Klein shares that the distance from BC to Maine is one of the best parts about going to camp there. "By going away five or six hours from home, kids



feel more independent and empowered," he explains. "They are accomplishing so much on their own, and this is what builds self esteem. Families also like that these are not just neighborhood camps full of everyone you know from your local community."

While up to 100 Bergen County families attend Camps Laurel and Laurel South combined, there are 20,000 campers from nearly every state and 30 countries who travel to Maine each summer, which is one of the reasons why Jenn Law, creator of the popular website BergenMama.com, chose to send her daughter Jessie to Camp Laurel last summer. "Jessie had the opportunity to learn skills and play sports, including

wakeboarding and lacrosse that she may not have had elsewhere at such a young age," Law notes.

"People will travel to Utah or Colorado for a five-day ski vacation, so why not travel to Maine for a seven-week unparalleled camp experience?" asks Klein. "From the first time you drive into Maine, you see nature, and you feel different. There are no billboards; you just don't get that experience elsewhere."

Campers can take a five-hour bus from Purchase, NY, or a 45-minute chaperoned flight from Newark, LaGuardia or JFK.

Behind the scenes, there's a lot that goes into making the experience seamless for the kids. Klein is responsi-

ble for all of the camps' operational aspects, including the health center, food service, buildings (150+ at each camp) and grounds (he confesses to having a "green grass fetish"). He goes to Maine a few times during the year to check the buildings, sports fields and courts (including 25 tennis courts), as well as cabins, ChefCamp culinary facilities, and dining halls and kitchens that serve more than 4,500 meals a day. Before the start of camp, Klein and his partners prep year-round, meeting with prospective families, recruiting staff, and honing programs and operations. June is ramp-up time for opening days at both camps.

Klein notes that camp time remains

Continued on pg. 58

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Continued from pg. 57

basically technology-free. "It's good to unplug and disconnect for four or seven weeks," he says. But these days, there's more emphasis on skill development and achieving goals than there was 20 years ago.

"One of the greatest things at the end of the summer is seeing how your children excelled with their skills and sports abilities. The coaches are top notch and really spend time to help them with their skill sets," according to Alpine resident Jeff Kurtz, whose two sons attend Camp Takajo.

Camp food has expanded to include more choices, and the kids now eat healthier, and more often (six or seven times per day, if you include snacks). The activities have evolved to feature things like farm-to-table culinary programs, state-of-the art fitness facilities and music recording studios. Becoming involved in social responsibility programs (e.g., the elderly, environmental, animal shelters) is another hallmark of experiencing camp in Maine.

Maine Camps are an enduring tradition for generations, which is why parents, such as Andrea Maline, a Norwood resident and Camp Mataponi alum, and Karen Miller, a Tenaflly resident and alum from Camp Pinecliffe, choose to send their kids to their alma maters.

"When we looked at camps, my daughter loved the fact that I was a Mataponi girl myself and it would ultimately become something for us to share," notes Maline. "At the camp's 100th year celebration in 2010, I sat singing the same songs with my girls that I sang when I was their age; it brought tears to my eyes. There are few things that my husband and I have given our girls that are as valuable, and will be as long-lasting, as the gift of camp."

"My girls gain from Pinecliffe the same values that helped to shape my childhood," adds Miller. "I am filled with nostalgia on each visiting day, and I'm so grateful that my girls are having this experience."



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In fact, Maine camps seem to run in the genes when it comes to many camp families. Stephanie Pasternak from Tenafly attended Tripp Lake Camp, and her brother (and cousin and his father) went to Camp Androscoggin as children. Stephanie and her husband, Jon, then sent their daughter, Hannah, to Tripp Lake Camp and two sons, Eli and Jonah, to Camp Androscoggin. "At these camps," Stephanie says, "my kids gained a deep appreciation, respect and love for their friends with all the experiences they had together. They learned how to treat and respect each other, and how to respect themselves. They learned how to communicate and how to present themselves, and made great connections for college and jobs beyond."

Hannah's passion for camp led her to an ideal job working at Everything Summer, an independent consultancy dedicated to summer guidance, located in Englewood and founded by Jill Tipograph, another Bergen County native.

Regarding sleepaway camp in Maine, Tipograph says, "It's important to consider the summer environment where your children will spend their formative years. The incredible diversity of Maine's outdoor activities makes the state a unique place to spend summers as a child, and also provides families with the opportunity to take great vacations and create life-long memories."

So as Klein prepares to bid *adieu* to his favorite BC haunts—including Dimora, Grissini, The Kitchen, Alpine Country Club, Tenafly Racquet, Cool Hot Yoga and Flywheel—he'll head for "greener pastures" and embark on the most incredible, most memorable and most rewarding 49 days of the year.

Laurie Kaiden is the Maine Guide at Maine Camp Experience. For personalized information about the best Maine camps for your child, call her at 877-92-MAINE or visit www.maineexperience.com.



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