**Showcasing the DNR: From tiny houses and safari tents to geodesic domes – growing lodging options for state park visitors**

**By CASEY WARNER**

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It used to be that staying overnight in a state park meant pitching a tent or hauling an RV. Visitors can still do that, but, as travelers’ needs and preferences have changed, so have the options available at Michigan’s state parks.

For many years, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources has offered lodging options like mini cabins, camper cabins and yurts at some parks, giving visitors who may not own their own camping gear or RV the opportunity to book a stay.

With travel trends continuing to evolve, the DNR is now adding even more choices for accommodations.

The growing popularity of platforms like Airbnb, which allows people to book a stay in someone’s home, and of “glamping” – or glamourous camping, with more luxuries – points to some travelers looking for more comforts than traditional camping offers.

“Understanding the allure of Airbnb, many state parks and recreation areas have new and unique overnight lodging options, some boasting amenities of home,” said Chuck Allen, an analyst with the DNR Parks and Recreation Division and member of the division’s Innovations Team, which is spearheading the efforts to enhance state park lodging.

“These locations are modernizing and exploring lodging options for the next generation of traveler, including tiny houses, public-private partnerships and revitalizing aging infrastructure with a more modern experience.”

Waterloo Recreation Area, in Jackson and Washtenaw counties, opened its “tiny house” in May 2021. Tiny houses – typically under 400 square feet and often built on trailers – are part of a social movement that advocates for smaller, simpler, more energy-efficient living spaces. The tiny house trend has been highlighted on several television series, like HGTV’s “Tiny Luxury.”

The Waterloo tiny house, located in the park’s Sugarloaf Lake Campground near the designated swimming beach, offers a deck with a lake view. It sleeps four people with a full-size bed and a single trundle bed on the main floor and a single bed in the loft. Amenities include electrical service, including air conditioning, ceiling lights and a fan, a couch, small table and chairs, a mini-refrigerator, a microwave and a coffee maker.

“The tiny house has resulted in new visitors that previously would not have stayed at Sugarloaf Campground because they may not have camping equipment. It is a great way for people to test out camping before making a major investment,” Jim O’Brien, unit manager at Waterloo Recreation Area, said.

Clear Lake State Park in Montmorency County, McLain State Park in Houghton County, Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in Ontonagon and Gogebic counties, and Sterling State Park in Monroe County will open their new tiny houses next spring.

The DNR also has partnered with private companies to offer a wider range of camping experiences.

Thanks to a partnership with Tentrr, 20 new safari tents at Highland Recreation Area in Oakland County and Sleeper State Park in Huron County give visitors the opportunity to camp in style.

“Tentrr has invested more than $180,000 to establish new infrastructure while bringing attention to the beauty of these lesser-visited destinations,” Allen said.

The sites, which sleep up to six and are located in rustic areas outside the park campground, feature a spacious, safari-style, canvas-walled tent set on a raised wooden platform and outfitted with a comfortable bed for a good night’s sleep. There are also Adirondack chairs for resting, a fire pit with a grill and a picnic table with a pantry storage cabinet.

Another private partner, Recreation Resource Management, has invested $1.08 million to build 25 cottage cabins and full-amenity cottages at Pontiac Lake Recreation Area in Oakland County, Port Crescent State Park in Huron County and Sterling State Park.

“A highlight of this partnership with RRM has been two geodesic domes at Port Crescent, reshaping and expanding the definition of the state park experience,” Allen said.

The two environmentally friendly geodesic domes at Port Crescent offer a comfortable setting, with spruce paneling, skylights and windows looking out to Lake Huron.

The RRM lodging facilities feature amenities like beds, electricity and kitchenettes. The cottage cabins and full-amenity cottages have a screened-in porch and patio furniture, and the full-amenity cottages have a bathroom, full kitchen, dining space and common area with a futon.

The DNR receives a portion of the sales from Tentrr and RRM site bookings and is projecting $120,000 in annual revenue from the five locations.

The DNR also has started “reimagining” some of its existing lodging facilities to make them more appealing to a wider range of visitors.

“It’s not a piece-by-piece renovation, but an entire overhaul of the interior, exterior and surroundings to appeal to the next generation of traveler,” Allen said. “Our lodging experiences need to match the splendor of our resources.”

A professional designer is helping guide the process of revamping state park lodging.

Ionia Recreation Area in Ionia County is home to the first fully reimagined mini cabins, designed with input from professional interior/exterior designer Day Designs in Traverse City.

Located in the modern campground and backing up to the woods, these mini cabins each sleep three people comfortably, with room for up to five with the provided bunk cots. They each have a new, covered front porch and include a kitchenette, a beautiful, reclaimed wood hearth area complete with electric stove, a ceiling fan, electrical outlets with USB ports and a bar area with stools. The cabins come with the use of a canoe stored just a short drive away.

Reimagining projects continue in 2021 at Traverse City State Park in Grand Traverse County, Brimley State Park in Chippewa County and Island Lake Recreation Area in Livingston County.

While these new lodging options offer many amenities, there are also new options for those seeking a more minimalist – but still unique – camping experience.

Port Crescent State Park now offers two hammock-only sites, located in the park's modern campground and set along Lake Huron's lakefront. Each site includes four posts and hooks for hammocks, a picnic table, an electrical power pedestal and a fire ring. Hammock rentals are now available at the park.

These hammock sites were funded by campers who graciously made donations when making their reservations.

More information about the variety of lodging options at Michigan’s state parks is available at [Michigan.gov/DNRLodging](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79119_79145_81213_81219---%2C00.html). Reservations can be made at [MiDNRReservations.com](https://midnrreservations.com/).

In addition to providing lodging that meets travelers’ needs, the DNR is also striving to provide meaningful experiences for state park visitors.

“This means not only providing safe, fun and unique lodging opportunities, but working to tell a story with each one,” said Maia Turek, resource development specialist with the DNR Parks and Recreation Division and another member of the division’s Innovations Team. “As we look toward the future, we are developing night sky viewing lodges for our dark sky parks, providing native gardening ideas through the landscaping surrounding our reimagined cabins and bunk houses, or even just increasing awareness of the plant and animal species in an area through artwork.

“This is an important aspect to fulfilling our mission and empowering our visitors to be advocates and storytellers for their public lands.”

In the months and years ahead, travelers will continue to find new and interesting opportunities for planning a state park vacation – no tent or RV required.

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