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## Camping: Once torture, now tempting

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Like most Canadians, I was exposed to camping at a young age.

These expeditions into the great outdoors usually started inside a Canadian Tire store, where my father led us through aisles of tents, portable stoves and sleeping bags.

"Children," he would say.

"We're Canadian. This means we're going to rough it this summer."

Every so often, his cart would stop near a display of boxes emblazoned with pictures of a tree or a firefly or a smiling woman sitting on a log.

"Dad, what's that thing?" we would ask.

"I have no idea," he would reply. "But let's buy one just in case."

A few days later, we packed our provisions into the station wagon. With a smile on our faces and fear in our hearts, we journeyed to remote destinations in Ontario, Ohio or Pennsylvania, places that usually contained the words "Point" or "Rock" or "Danger."

One summer, we roughed it all the way to Edmonton.

During these trips, we pitched our tents, roasted marshmallows and hiked.

We played Frisbee. We ate like orbiting astronauts. We told spooky stories around the fire, most of which were inspired by actual events from that day.

During these trips, I also realized something: I didn't like camping.

Maybe it was mosquitoes and black flies the size of plums. Maybe it was the unstructured tedium. Maybe it was the general shock of having to do your business in a place so dank and foreboding, it was a miracle I was able to produce urine at all.

Camping seemed entirely without merit. It was deranged. It amounted to voluntary torture. If camping was Canadian, I longed to be something else.

One night, as I carried a lantern down a trail, trying to ignore what sounded like a predatory owl-bear, I made myself a promise: In the unlikely event that I should survive the next 48 hours and live to become an adult, I would never go camping again.

But now, well, now I'm not so sure.

An Angus Reid survey released this month found that 46 per cent of Canadians are "considering

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camping or 'staycations' – day trips close to home – to save money on their summer holiday this year."

According to the survey, a weekend camping trip for a family of four, including gas, food and campsite fees, can cost less than \$500. Compare this to other travel options and it is (financially) easy to see why the woods are beckoning in '09.

"When you're strapped for cash but still want to get away, camping trips and short day-trips are an affordable alternative," says Pat Gray, director of marketing with Coleman Canada, which commissioned the survey along with, surprise, Canadian Tire.

The other night, a friend was regaling me with tales from Algonquin Park.

She recently returned with her two young children and says the experience rivalled any vacation she has ever taken.

"You guys should come next time!" she enthused.

"That sounds fantastic!" I lied.

But I'm no fool: This is the fourth camping invite we have received in two years. Invites to Paris: Zero.

We have small kids. Our cool friends have abandoned us. Camping is inevitable.

So with Canada Day nearly upon us, I must ask: Is there any way to teach an old Canadian new outdoor tricks? Are there courses a pathetic city slicker can take? Is there a place you know about that would appeal to someone who can't swim, climb or start a fire without a Zippo?

Like my parents, I don't want my kids to miss out on this Canadian ritual, even if it kills me.

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