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Ocean views and other wonders of Bay Area campsites

Can you imagine waking up in your sleeping bag, poking your head out your tent and being greeted by a spectacular waterfront beach, the water lapping gently at the shore.

Then hearing a light scratching noise, quickly turning to scan the surrounding landscape, and spotting a dozen elk just 40 yards off, pawing at the ground, nibbling at fresh greenery.

Can you imagine doing this at a campsite in the Bay Area?

This is no dream. There's a place where fantasies like this come true. This scene can happen virtually any morning at the campsites along the west shore of Tomales Bay at Point Reyes National Seashore, where there are a series of boat-in camps set along sandy coves, ideal to reach by kayak or canoe.

Of the 50 campgrounds in the Bay Area, this is the best of them. Other camps feature redwoods forests, backpacking trail sites, ocean bluffs, stunning views, launch points for boating, and hidden spots within eyeshot of San Francisco. In most cases, reservations are required.

For the coming spring and summer season, here are my ratings:

1. Tomales Bay boat-in, Point Reyes National Seashore: There are 20 dispersed campsites nestled along the shore of Tomales Bay, from Tomales Point on south to just north of Indian Beach (at Tomales Bay State Park). This setting is gorgeous and quiet, and with Inverness Ridge to the west, sheltered from coastal winds. Opportunities for sea kayaking and canoeing are unparalleled in the region. Boaters must bring portable toilets. (415) 663-8054.

2. Kirby Cove, Marin Headlands: This is a drop-dead beautiful campsite set amid a small grove of eucalyptus and cypress. It is small and hidden, with space for just four tents, with a jaw-dropping view of the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco Headlands and



Tom Stienstra
Outdoors

7. Butano walk-in, Butano State Park: The reward here is a campsite secluded in dense redwoods in the coastal Santa Cruz Mountains, set on the threshold of excellent hiking. Very short walks are required to the best sites. (800) 444-7275.

8. Steep Ravine, Mount Tamalpais State Park: Ten primitive cabins are set on a bluff at Rocky Point, overlooking the ocean. That is why this is the most popular campsite in California, with reservations cleaned out within 10 minutes on the first day of each month. An additional half-dozen walk-in sites are exposed to coastal winds. (800) 444-7275.

9. Del Valle Regional Park: This is the best drive-to family campground in the Bay Area. The park features a recreation lake, boat ramp, boat rentals, swimming, fishing, biking and hiking and a wilderness trailhead. (510) 562-2267.

10. Snug Harbor, Sacramento River Delta: The best privately operated park by far in the Bay Area. The place sparkles and features park-model cabins, RV and tent campsites, boat launch, docks, and waterfront sites, with boat rentals available nearby. (916) 775-1455.

Others Bay Area campgrounds of significant note:

► **Marin:** Sky Camp, Coast Camp and Glen Camp at Point Reyes National Seashore, (415) 663-8054; Samu-

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3. **Sunset Trail Camp, Big Basin Redwoods State Park:** Sunset trail camp is perched on a forested ridge, just above the spectacular Berry Creek canyon and its three beautiful waterfalls. This requires a 5.7-mile hike (one-way), backpack-style, to reach the camp. There are 10 campsites, but if groups double them up, a problem on Saturday nights, it can get crowded. (831) 338-8861.

4. **Wildcat hike-in, Point Reyes National Seashore:** This is a stellar campground perched in a meadow on an ocean bluff. On calm evenings, the call of gentle waves will float you to sleep. Reaching the camp requires a 5.6-mile hike, backpack-style, from the Palomarin Trailhead near Bolinas. Nearby 40-foot Alamere Falls; miles of untouched beach, nearby lakes and wildflowers galore crown this trip as one of the best. (415) 663-8054.

5. **Angel Island backpack, Angel Island State Park:** When the last ferry boat leaves at 4:30 p.m., campers have the island virtually to themselves. Rewards are spectacular lookouts of the bay and unlimited scenic points. The hike-in campsites are dispersed at nine areas, requiring walks of 1-to-2 miles. (800) 444-7275.

6. **Pantoll walk-in, Mount Tamalpais State Park:** This is the best first-come, first-served camp in the region, with 100- to 500-foot walks to campsites. It is set at the trailheads for the spectacular Steep Ravine and Boot-jack/Sunset trails. (415) 388-2070.

China Camp State Park, (800) 444-7275; Bicentennial Walk-in, Hawkcamp and Haypress hike-in at Marin Headlands, (415) 331-1540.

► **San Francisco:** Rob Hill Group Camp at Presidio, (415) 561-5444; Candlestick RV, (415) 822-2299.

► **San Mateo County coast:** San Francisco RV Resort, Pacifica, (800) 992-0554; Half Moon Bay State Beach, (800) 444-7275; Pelican Point RV, Half Moon Bay, (650) 726-9100.

► **Peninsula & Sanita-Cruz Mountains:** Memorial County Park, (650) 879-0212; Portola Redwoods State Park, (800) 444-7275; Big Basin Redwoods State Park, (800) 444-7275; Sanborn-Skyline County Park, (408) 867-9959; Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, (800) 444-7275.

► **East Bay foothills:** Chabot Regional Park, (510) 562-2267; Mount Diablo State Park, (800) 444-7275; Sunol Regional Wilderness, (510) 562-2267.

► **Sacramento and San Joaquin Delta:** Eddo's Harbor, 925/757-5314; Sandy Beach County Park, (707) 374-2097; Delta Marina RV Resort, (707) 374-2315; Brannan Island State Park, (800) 444-7275; Lundborg Landing, (925) 684-9351.

► **Santa Clara County foothills:** Grant County Park, (408) 274-6121; Henry W. Coe State Park, (800) 444-7275; Uvas Canyon County Park, (408) 779-9232; Coyote Lake County Park, (408) 355-2201.

Detailed info: See the book "California Camping." www.TomStienstra.com.