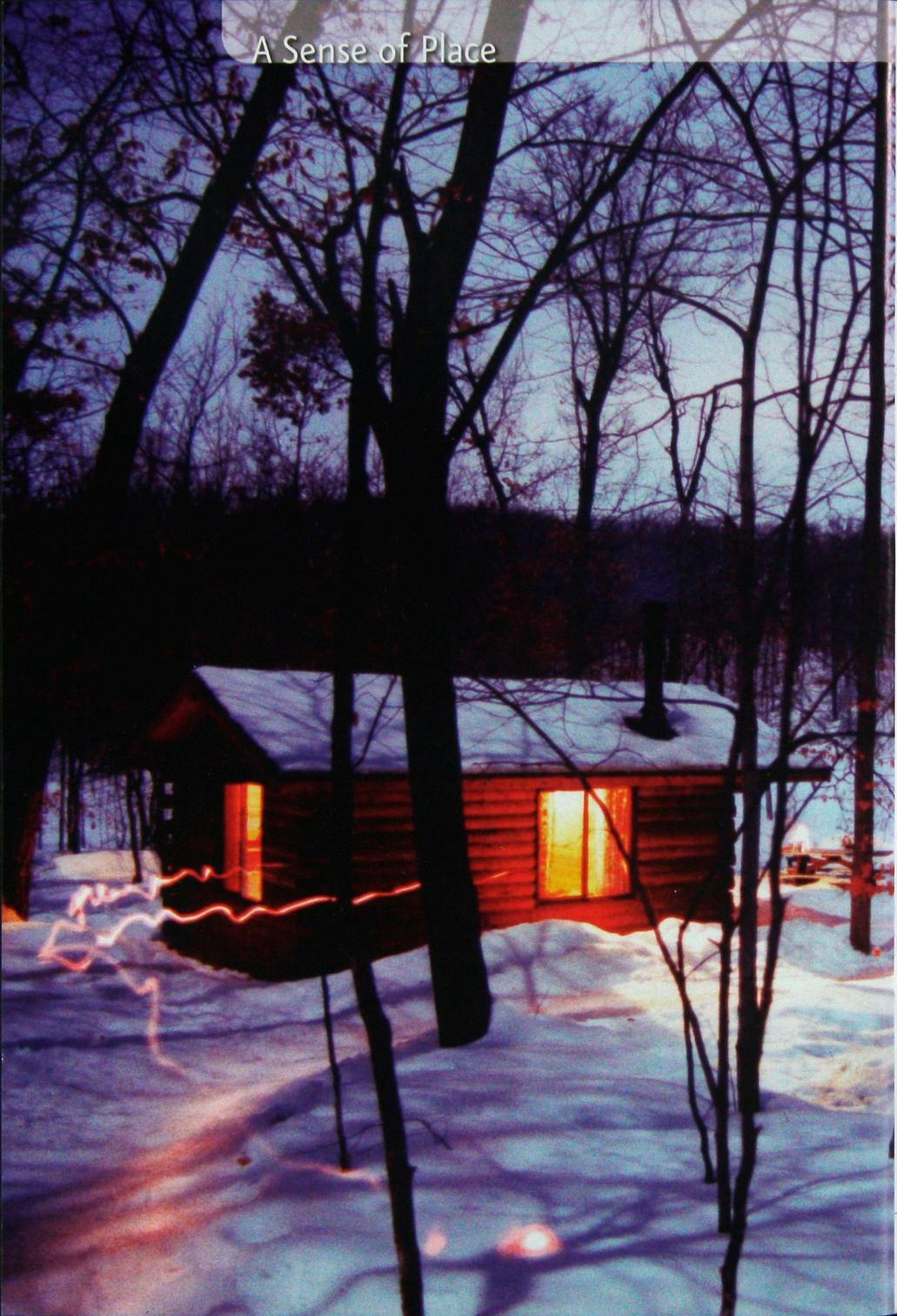


A Sense of Place



Family Camping Come Winter

A city family heads to their state park hideaway.

By Susan Maas



LITTLE BOYS' VOICES make powerful echoes in the woods, especially in the arctic stillness of late December. This simple fact is as good a reason as any to trudge through the forest, pulling sleds laden with sleeping bags, lanterns, cookware, and food, to a rustic state park cabin in the coldest months of the year.

A Minnesota state park cabin makes winter camping possible and fun for those of us who don't want to pitch our tents in the snow. The one-room log cabins are simple, spartan, and clean: two bunk beds (the bottom of each is a double bed), a table



t Lake Maria State Park,
Charlie Scofield takes a break from
ice skating on Putnam Lake.



SUSAN MAAS

with benches, and a fireplace. Many have screened porches, and all have latrines, outdoor fire rings, and picnic tables.

During the holidays we discovered the camper cabins in Lake Maria State Park, a hardwood forest retreat a few miles west of Monticello. Lake Maria's location and rolling terrain make it a popular day trip for Twin Cities hikers and cross-country skiers. The park's three cabins are hike-in sites, each a mile or more from parking and all near ponds or lakes.

We'd circled Lake Maria on our tattered state park map years ago, though our summer camping excursions always took us to the

bluff country or the North Shore instead. But last year for a post-Christmas breather from our hectic holiday schedule, with the kids still on winter break from school, we decided to make the hour's drive from Minneapolis to Lake Maria for a winter family camping adventure in a state park cabin.

Camping season extended

I like camping. I like cooking over a fire or on our gas camp stove. I like packing food and cooking supplies: figuring out, each time, what is essential and what would add needless weight to our hike.

I loathe housework at home, but I relish

Cozy Cabins

Twenty-two state parks have camper cabins for rent, including 13 parks that rent cabins in winter. Some of the cabin fireplaces burn wood; others are actually gas stoves. Some cabins have

electricity; others have lights powered by solar panels—these lights are on timers to limit power usage. None have indoor plumbing, but all have drinking water and pit toilets nearby. Prices are

\$45 or \$50 per night, and reservations—which can be made up to a year in advance—are essential.

To reserve a state park camper cabin, call 866-85PARKS or visit www.stayatmnparks.com.

campsite “housekeeping.” I like boiling water for dish washing, then scrubbing each plate and mug in the wash pan. I even like not showering. Though I’m normally a bit of a hygiene nut, there’s something about giving myself over to dirt and grime for days on end that, occasionally, appeals to me. On every camping trip, my inner mountain woman emerges.

The experience of camping got vastly more pleasurable for me after my husband gave me a French coffee press for Christmas a few years ago. The phrase “roughing it” doesn’t seem to apply when I’m sipping really good coffee, even if my muscles are sore and my hair matted.

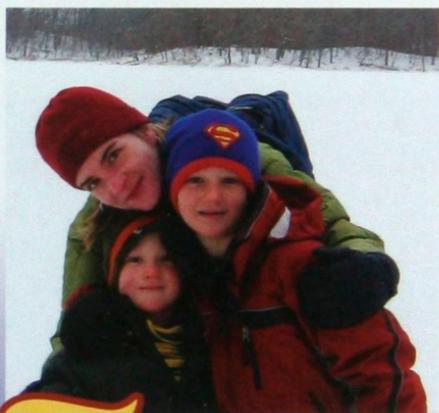
Nor are we completely “roughing it” when we’re in a snug, firelit camper cabin on a frosty December night. But we’re still camping. It’s still just the four of us, reading ghost stories and playing cards.

Most camper cabins have a guest journal—one of the features I enjoy most. I delight in reading the observations and reflections of previous campers—poetic musings by solo wayfarers; children’s drawings and notes about finding pine cones and toasting marshmallows.

Just as my husband and I had started to congratulate ourselves on our adventurousness—trekking on hilly, snow-covered trails with two young kids, pulling our food and equipment on sleds—an entry in our cabin’s journal brought me down to size. “Brought Grandma here for her 80th birthday. She loved it!” OK, so I’m not Ann Bancroft or Liv Arneson. Still, it felt like a small accomplishment to pull a sled loaded with 100 pounds of gear to the cabin, and I was starving from the endeavor, so I dove into our stash of holiday fudge with an unac-

customed sense of caloric entitlement.

During our days at the cabin, the boys wander off on little adventures, peering in hollow logs and following deer tracks. They wear themselves out sledding and ice skating. They find uncommon satisfaction in an ordinary bowl of oatmeal. They watch deer running through the trees, and they discover the frozen imprint of an oak leaf in the ice. They relish the sound of their voices against the maple-and-elm-covered hills, and then they quiet down—and so do their parents.



STEVE SCOFIELD



he author savors a winter camping moment with her two sons, Charlie, age 6, and Will, age 8.

Silences are deeper in winter. Woodpeckers pecking, coyotes yipping—the sounds of nature are sharper and crisper in the icy stillness. For a while at night, after listening to my husband and sons snoring, I turn on our shortwave radio and enjoy Russian folk music while sipping a mugful of chamomile tea with honey. But mostly, whether outside or in, I savor the quiet. ❶