

Rooms to Breathe

Summer tent cabins turn into unique family business

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Photos by CRISTA JEREMIASON THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Back in a slower time, city dwellers would head out to cooler climates in the country as soon as June's heat set in. For three months, home, at least on weekends, was a rustic cabin devoid of comforts but packed with good memories.

It seems there's a "summer place" in everyone's memory, whether it existed in fact or fantasy. Now at least the feeling of a warm weather hideaway in the trees can be had for only several thousand dollars and a few extra feet in the "back 40."

About eight years ago, the extended Staub clan had the idea of marketing the durable tent cabins they had created for their family vacation compound near the Russian River.

Since then, their Sweetwater Bungalows have been bought by people attracted to the charm of camp-style accommodations who have also found them a practical way to add living space at a fraction of the cost of new construction. These tent-cabins are being turned into guest cottages, art studios, home offices, family vacation housing and bunkhouses for kids' sleepovers and play dates.

The bungalows really fall into their own unique niche. While there are any number of intriguing tent structures on the market, from Indian tee-pees to Laplandic lavuus to Mongolian-style yurts, the Sweetwaters have that classic look of a cabin in the woods.

"They're reminiscent of California miner's tents. They look like the 1860s," said Kelsey Maddox, who uses one on his Sonoma Mountain homesite for a summer office and guest bedroom. "They're fabulous to sleep in. Up on the mountain at night you can hear the coyotes. It's really fun to hear nature but be in luxury and nothing is going to get you."

They come unassembled in a kit for \$3,300 to \$6,000, depending on size. A wooden platform or deck is required. But once that is constructed, two people can put one up in six to eight hours, said Blair Patterson, one of four Staub siblings and the one who now oversees the company from her home in Truckee.

The timber frames and real windows and doors make the bungalows look like a small cabin. But the cream or white vinyl walls create a soft filtered light inside, like the dreamy glow inside a tent.

Temporary origins

The company started after patriarch Jim Staub, an investment manager, bought 230 acres in west Sonoma County 10 years ago, with the idea of building a rambling Spanish-style hacienda big enough to contain his four adult children, assorted wives, husbands and partners, grandchildren and a wide circle of friends, relatives and dogs.

But that scheme was scratched after son Jonathon Staub, an interior designer, dreamed up the tent bungalows for temporary housing.

"We built the tents just to experience the land, but we fell in love with the ambiance of being inside them," Jim Staub said. "It's just the light, being close to the outdoors and the chance to see the stars."

The Staubs wound up building a smaller "lodge" where everyone cooks, showers and gathers for board games like cribbage and Scrabble. But when night sets in, everyone heads out to their own individual cabins, set among the oaks like an old-fashioned kids' summer camp.

"This way we can retreat to our own quarters when we want to," said Patterson, reclining in an Adirondack chair on a bungalow porch, looking out beyond a steep ridge to wooded hills and a canyon below. "It's wonderful sleeping out here, being in this beautiful wilderness and hearing birds and frogs and the wind."

Each has been decorated with comforters, grass mat rugs and cute shabby chic furnishings. There is plenty of room for a double bed, small desk, dresser and nightstands. Because they are so airtight, they can be heated up within a half-hour with a properly vented space heater, propane heater or wood-burning stove, Patterson said.

Three sizes

The bungalows are made to order in three sizes -- 10 by 12 feet, 12 by 14 feet and 14 by 20 feet. They come with a standard storm door. And the mid-priced "Sonoma" bungalow kit includes enamel coated aluminum slider windows although one can upgrade to a Colonial French door and grid-style windows. The windows can be cut anywhere along the walls so customers can decide how they want to control their light and views.

If they are left up more than six months of the year -- and most are -- the county would consider them a permanent structure subject to a building permit, said Kevin Berger, a senior civil engineer in charge of building plan checks for the county of Sonoma. They also would need a firesafe roof because of concerns over wildland fires in rural areas, he added.

Patterson maintains that the heavy polyester vinyl material is fire-retardant. The smallest bungalow has just enough square footage to not require a permit if used only as a playhouse or storage.

The standard pitch of the roof is nine feet, with 5-foot walls; a larger model has 7-foot walls and an 11 foot pitch.

"You're really buying everything but the platform it sits on. For that we give a plan and materials list because everyone's ground is different," Patterson explained. "It might be sloped or level, where you can just put the pier foots right down. Or it may be a really cantilevered slope where you have to raise it up."

The shell is surprisingly drum tight and weather resistant. A rain fly is draped over it, secured by an eave and awning system. Other than an annual cleaning with soap and water, they are durable and are estimated to last 10 to 15 years. The only vulnerability is to UV light so Patterson suggests putting them up in a shaded area, but not too close to tree branches.

Less than renting

Maddox said he became enchanted with the bungalows after staying in one at Costanoa, a resort in Pescadero that features a number of them for rent. He bought his to live in while remodeling his Penngrove home, figuring that at less than \$10,000, it was less than renting. And five years later he now uses his as an office in summer and as guest sleeping. It is connected to the home nearby via underground electrical lines.

Since then, at least a dozen friends and acquaintances who saw his, were persuaded to buy one as well, including a couple who installed one as a cheap weekend getaway on their property in Cloverdale. "You can't even buy a trailer for what these cost," he said.

Tim Hockenberry, a San Francisco musician, installed a tent bungalow on his weekend property in Guerneville. He and his wife have three kids, and when all are squeezed into a two-bedroom cottage on the property, there is no room for guests. So he and his wife bought two bungalows for guests.

"Right now it looks a little like Martha Stewart has spent some time in both of them thanks to my wife, who goes into Healdsburg and picks out cute antique white furniture" Hockenberry said. "The thing that's really great is people just love them. They have a remote privacy. In one of them we put a pot bellied stove with a tile floor underneath that is just so great in the winter. And they just look cool in the woods, shining through the trees."

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