

Conestoga Wagons®, glamping tents from Tent-Masters.com and park model tiny homes from Clayton Homes are three of the many options available for unique accommodations.



OFFERING GUESTS MORE WAYS TO STAY

The Appeal—and Profit Potential—of Unique Accommodations

One reason people love to go camping is to enjoy new experiences. In fact, that's one factor helping to fuel the current glamping trend. According to The 2019 North American Glamping Report sponsored by **Kampgrounds of America (KOA)**, 67 percent of the travelers surveyed believe that glamping provides a unique outdoors experience and more than half of them want to stay in unique accommodations.

As many ARVC member-parks have found, offering alternative accommodations that go beyond standard RV or cabin rentals can be a very effective way to attract more business. Here are three popular—and potentially lucrative—options for giving your guests more ways to stay:

PARK MODELS

They may be small, but their impact on a campground can be pretty big. Just ask **Carmen Simpher**, owner of ARVC member-park **Little Arrow Outdoor Resort** in Townsend, Tenn. Her campground has added park models (Little Arrow markets them to campers as “tiny homes”) to its inventory that already includes RV and tent sites, cabins, glamping tents, vintage Airstream rentals and a vacation home.

“We’ve had nine one-bedroom models from the Clayton Homes’ Lakeside series for almost two years, and they have been very well received,” she says. “Our Alexander model sleeps six people, so it’s really awesome for families. Then this past winter, we added two bedroom, two bath tiny homes. Those are really nice for two sets of couples that are traveling together or maybe parents and older children that want a separate bedroom and bathroom. Those have also done very well.

“I think the tiny homes are a great asset to our property because we have a little more space to accommodate groups for family reunions and corporate events,” she says. “There are so many people that want to camp, but don’t want an RV to haul and to store.”

Each of Little Arrow’s park models measures slightly under 400 square feet. Simpher says working with the manufacturer was a very smooth process and they got to pick out their countertops and other finishes.

She says the time frame for site prep, which involves leveling the land, putting in footers, and putting in the electric, water and sewer hookups, really depends on your local con-

tractor. Clayton Homes worked with her contractor to provide the necessary specs for each model.

Simpher says the park models have helped her campground attract guests they wouldn't normally have, such as RVers who want to bring friends along with them on vacation or who want to have family gatherings that include family members who don't own RVs. Little Arrow's tiny homes currently rent from \$170 to \$207 per night, depending on the model and time of year.

"The popularity is growing very rapidly," she says. "I think we were at about 40 percent occupancy. But the more we get the word out and the more people know that we have them, the more we will continue to grow."

COVERED WAGONS

Like park models, covered wagons are part of the popular glamping trend. They allow campers to experience a bit of what life was like during the days of the Wild West while enjoying modern day amenities like king size beds, mini-refrigerators, microwaves, A/C and heating.

Conestoga Wagons®, based in Bloomington, Idaho, has been in the wagon business for nearly five years.

"It's been fun to watch how well they rent and learn from owners' experiences on what little features I can improve on," says **Jason Olson**, director of sales for the company.

He says people can enjoy the unique experience of staying in a Conestoga Wagon in locations throughout the U.S. Their use is not limited to the west, as some people assume.

"We have our Conestoga Wagons in campgrounds from the coast of Oregon to the coast of Maine now and multiple places in between."

Dania Egedi, general manager of ARVC member-park **Falls Creek Cabins and Campground** in Whitley City, Ky., initially added three Conestoga Wagons to her park. They were so successful that she added three more the following year.

"They have been great for us," she says. "When we first got them, I actually had to hire somebody whose only job was to respond to questions on social media. Even now, during the summertime, I often have to have someone whose main job is to take people out to show them the wagons because we have so many people just stopping to take a look at them. We've gotten a ton of free advertising from various magazines and news channels doing tourism stories."

She generated some of this free advertising by reaching out to media that had previously done other stories on her park, but she says other coverage was simply generated by word of mouth.

Falls Creek is a family-oriented resort and Egedi allows up to six people to stay in a wagon at no extra charge. She also has a lot of family groups that will rent three or four wagons for a family reunion. The campground makes this convenient because they have literally "circled the wagons" by placing all six of them in the same area.

"I priced them so they were a little bit more expensive than what you would expect to pay at a hotel out by the interstate," she says. "The wagons don't have bathrooms (re-

strooms and shower houses are located nearby), but they're a really unique experience."

The wagons work well for couples, too.

"We even have clients now that do just couples-only wagons," Olson says. "They're actually an upsell, and they make them a little nicer."

"THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE THAT WANT TO CAMP, BUT DON'T WANT AN RV TO HAUL AND TO STORE,"

To create a couples-only experience, some campground owners upgrade the décor and place the wagon in a more private location and/or in one with a better view. Some will even assign a private bathroom to the couple staying in the wagon.

The standard configuration for a Conestoga Wagon is 25 feet, long, 10 feet wide and 12 ½ feet high with an interior height of 8 ½ feet. They have 180 square feet of floor space and can be customized with optional amenities such as a custom wood door, bunk beds, AC, heat and different options for electrical service. A double canvas canopy can also be ordered for added insulation.

Olson says campground owners are often surprised to find that Conestoga Wagons are spacious enough to accommodate a king size bed. The company has found it's not practical to include a bathroom because of issues related to comfort and maintenance. To address this need, Conestoga Wagons offers turnkey shower houses.



Conestoga Wagons® are popular with families and couples who want to experience a bit of the Wild West while enjoying modern amenities.

Conestoga Wagons® offers turnkey, two-unit shower houses that arrive ready to install. ADA-compliant units are also available.



"I like to say the wagons are a moneymaker and the shower houses are a problem solver."

Olson also addressed the issue of maintenance of the canvas covers on the Conestoga Wagons.

"For budget planning, we try to be conservative and tell people they'll need to replace the canvas every five to six years for the single canvas dome. With a double canvas dome, the inner canvas may last up to 10 years because it isn't exposed to the weather elements. We have an instruction manual so clients can change the canvas or they can request that we do it."

Olson says Conestoga Wagons can be rented in every season. Since they can be equipped with heating and AC, some properties rent them all year. If winter storage is necessary, Olson recommends placing an oversized tarp they can provide over each wagon. The tarp will also make it easier for snow to slide off and protects the canvas from UV rays.

"Conestoga Wagons have quick return on investment because there's so much interest in them," Olson says. "They attract people to the campground."

He says the actual ROI will depend on factors such as the campground's location and the length of their season.

"The customers that have our Conestoga Wagons rent them from \$140 to \$300 a night and the average rental on the wagons has been \$180 per night. I have several customers that paid them off in the first season, but most will take two to three years to pay them off, which is still a fast ROI."

GLAMPING TENTS

If you're looking for an option with bathrooms included, you can find glamping tents that will fill that need.

"Glamping, in general, is a very broad term," says **Steven Woodburn**, director of sales and marketing for **TentMasters.com** in Sevierville, Tenn. "You have many different options. Our tents are more oriented towards the luxury side of things. Our philosophy is 'bringing you closer to nature without sacrificing the amenities of a hotel.'"

Far from being standard canvas tents, TentMaster.com's models include many of the comforts guests are used to enjoying at home.

"We'll put European rain showers in our tents along with proper facilities with toilets and wash stands. A lot of our units have gas stoves for cooking and you can put in wood stoves, pellet stoves or gas stoves for heating. They're quite versatile in that regard. Of course, you're always sleeping on a mattress, not a not a soggy bed roll or anything."

TentMasters.com currently offers eight different tent models, and Woodburn has found that a few of them are of particular interest to ARVC member-parks.

"For campgrounds, our most popular unit right now is called the Woody Jr. Tent. It's a smaller version of our Woody Safari Tent. The reason it's so popular is it's an eight by ten foot tent. A lot of campgrounds that we've been selling to have pitch-your-own-tent sites. Unfortunately, a lot of these sites have poor turnover. So what we've been seeing is a lot of campgrounds purchasing our smallest tents and converting these pitch-your-own-tent sites into glamping tent sites. They'll rent them out and they've had a lot of success."

ARVC member-park **Camp Gulf** in Miramar Beach, Fla. recently purchased seven of the Woody Jr. tents and is planning to rent them for \$120 per night.

"The tent retails for \$7,000, so in about three months, they can see a full return on their investment," Woodburn says.

Other popular tent models the company offers include the Woody Safari Tent and the two-story Glamping Lodge. All of TentMasters.com's tents are manufactured in The Netherlands by Luxetenten, the European market leader in luxury accommodations. TentMasters also has a few warehouses in Tennessee.

"All of our floor plans are very versatile," he says. "Nothing's pre-determined. We offer full turnkey packages, but we can switch things around."



Glamping tents by TentMasters.com offer many of the comforts and conveniences guests are used to enjoying at home.

The company offers an integrated floor system that uses tongue and groove flooring on the inside.

"We highly recommend anyone who purchases from us use a tongue and groove floors on the inside. It keeps the bugs out and keeps everything nice and tight. If they want to build the decks themselves before the tents arrive, we will send them the blueprints for everything. If they opt to use our integrated floor system, it's an Azobe hardwood peg system. Our tents are based off African safari tent design. The hardwood pegs are something that can be staked into the ground and can last 25 years.

"One of the key points about our tents, and this is very important is, that they are non-permanent, temporary structures. After all, it is a tent. I can put it up within a couple days. I take it down within a couple days. I can also leave it up year-round. And that's mostly important for the permitting and coding that's entirely dependent on each municipality. Every county, every city, is different, but it's certainly something you want to keep in mind."

Woodburn, a millennial, described why camping in glamping tents is a growing trend for his generation.

"We like to stay on mattresses. We like to go camping. We like to experience the outdoors, but we want to have the luxuries, we want to have the basic amenities. I travel all over the country, and I stay in hotels quite often. Twenty years down the road, I'm not going to remember that night in a hotel room. But if I were to rent out one of these Woody Safari tents, 20 years down the road, I'm going to remember that. It's the novelty and the experience that we have to offer. It's very unique. Not only that, but our tents are offering some of the hottest returns on investment in the accommodations industry right now."

Whether you decide to add park models, covered wagons, glamping tents or other unique accommodations to your park, you'll not only attract new guests—you'll give them something they'd never get by staying at a hotel. As Carmen Simpher of Little Arrow Outdoor Resort emphasizes, they'll get the same welcoming campground community feel that your other campers already enjoy at your park.

How to Find Suppliers of Unique Accommodations

Ready to start doing your research on all of the great options you have? We've made it easy for you. Just check the Marketplace section on page 31 under Manufacturer – Buildings and Housing for a complete list of ARVC Supplier Council members who offer cabins, tents, park models, covered wagons, yurts and treehouses. You'll find more than 15 suppliers to choose from.



IS YOUR PARK THE BEST?

THEN IT DESERVES AN AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

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