

Learning to Love the Outdoors— Bugs and All

*Butterflies in her stomach almost kept troop leader **Maria Gallegos** from taking her Girl Scout Brownies camping. But with a combination of education and networking—plus a couple nights in a sleeping bag—she conquered her anxieties.*



Photograph by QUADYPHOTO

When her San Fernando, Calif., Girl Scout troop started clamoring for a camping trip in 2004, there was one major hurdle volunteer Maria Gallegos had to overcome: She had never been camping herself.

"I was worried about practical things—such as setting up tents and cooking over a fire," recalls Gallegos, now 46. Having grown up in Mexico City, she had never gotten the opportunity to go camping with her family or friends.

"I knew I needed to learn how to do these things myself before I could lead the girls on a trip." Gallegos was also intimidated by the thought of being responsible for

the whole group for an entire weekend. "Even though I'd been working with the girls for two years and knew them well, I was concerned. What if

one of them got homesick, or sick, or scared by noises in the night?"

At the time, Troop 8 was a group of six Girl Scout Brownies, ages seven and eight, all living in a suburban environment with little access to nature beyond manicured parks, and Gallegos had been their leader for two years. The girls heard about the Girl Scout-owned Cabrillo campsite in nearby Long Beach, Calif., from other Girl Scout Brownies at a council-sponsored event for area troops. "That campsite was a popular topic of conversation. When the girls heard everyone else talking about how much fun it was, they got very excited about taking a trip there," says Gallegos. Eager to follow the girls' natural interests, she began researching the steps she'd need to take to make the Cabrillo trip a reality—and to overcome her own nervousness.

The first thing she did was reach out to her co-leader, Xiomara Reyes, to assess her comfort level. "Luckily, my co-leader had been a Girl Scout in Guatemala, so she just needed to

Resources from Girl Scouts of the USA

Safety-Wise

This monograph has lots of information on how to plan for safety on a camping trip. At least one copy is given to each troop/group, and it's available in both English and Spanish. Refer to it before you go and bring it along on your trip. You can order from your council shop or <http://goshop.girlscouts.org>.

Outdoor Education in Girl Scouting

This book, available through local councils, covers a wide array of camping-related topics such as what to pack, how to build a fire, and how to have a minimal impact on the environment.



refresh her memory and pick up a few new skills," Gallegos says. Reyes also provided the initial boost of confidence that empowered Gallegos. "She told me not to be anxious because we were going to be together."

Gallegos contacted her local Girl Scout council to find out what would be required to take the girls camping, and was relieved to discover that the council provided comprehensive training for leaders: one three-hour class in a classroom setting and a weekend trip to a campsite. "I thought I might have to take the program twice, because I didn't think I would be able to learn everything in one training," Gallegos says. But the program boosted Gallegos' skills in just one session, covering everything from how to set up tents and build a fire to how to cook with a box oven. The council provided lists of supplies for the trip, and other troop leaders filled in details with specific suggestions for the particular campsite the troop would be visiting.

Jennifer Szafran Peter, camping consultant for Girl Scouts of the USA, says the organization takes seriously the needs and anxieties of adult volunteers. "All leaders are required to attend training before they can take girls camping, and all trainings are offered through local Girl Scout councils in order to address the particular needs of each Girl Scout community," she explains. In addition to teaching the practical skills adults will need on the trip, training is also designed to alleviate any fears first-time campers may have. "Adults who are taking girls camping for the first time are ultimately concerned with meeting the girls' most basic needs: Will they feel safe? Will they want to eat the food? Will they get enough sleep? And will they be engaged in the program? Each training program is tailored to eliminate those fears so that when the volunteers leave, they feel like, 'Wow I can do this.'"

After her training, Gallegos had a serious talk with the girls about what camping would entail. They went over how much preparation they'd have to do, and scheduled a

picnic to practice cooking without modern amenities and a one-night sleepover to practice spending the night away from home.

When the appointed weekend for the two-night camping trip finally arrived, there was only one point where Gallegos thought she may have gotten in over her head. "Because the girls were in school, we couldn't leave as early as I would have liked," she says. "We got stuck in rush-hour traffic, and by the time we arrived it was getting dark." Gallegos had heard from other troop leaders that she could have pizza delivered to the campsite, and had opted not to have the girls bring their dinner. The combination of setting up the tents in the dark, keeping the girls organized, and waiting for pizza (which never arrived) tested Gallegos' camping mettle immediately.

"These hiccups are inevitable and one of the many reasons the Girl Scouts require leaders to be trained before they camp," Girl Scout camping consultant Peter says. "The training teaches you how to keep your wits about you when unexpected things creep up, whether that's snow, running out of peanut butter, or someone stubbing their toe."

Gallegos made it through. "That first night was a little hard. But I have learned from Girl Scouts not to dwell on what goes wrong," she says. The rest of the weekend went smoothly—so smoothly, in fact, that the troop has since been back to Cabrillo. ("That next time, we brought our Friday dinner," Gallegos notes.) And for their next camping trip, they're going to a more remote Girl Scout campsite in the woods.

"That first camping trip made me realize that while I do need to be prepared and organized, I am not alone in my responsibility for the girls," Gallegos says. "It taught me to spend more of my time enjoying being with them and letting them lead the way, and less energy on worrying." ■

Kate Hanley was a Girl Scout while growing up in Rhode Island and went on to be a troop leader during college and a counselor at Near Wilderness Girl Scout camp in West Monroe, N.Y.

Planning Tips: Advice from a Pro

Marcy Mushrush, a Brentwood, Tenn., volunteer since 1984, takes girls on an average of three trips per year and has traveled as far as Alaska. Here are her time-tested tips for leaders embarking on their first troop camping trips.

Put the trip in context.

The best way to keep a camping trip from getting overwhelming is to relate it to something you already know. "Approach it as if you were planning a birthday party," Mushrush, 62, advises. "They both require the same decisions: who's going, what you'll eat, and what you'll do."

Let your site point the way.

"Camping in a cabin with all the amenities is way different from pitching a tent," Mushrush explains. "If you are staying in a cabin, you only have to plan the menu and activities. But if you're staying in a tent, you have to decide how you're going to be cooking—whether it's campfire cooking, or a camp stove, or a grill—before you can plan the rest of your weekend."

Keep it simple.

For your first camping trip, don't let the schedule get too complex. "Once you get outside in a new place the girls will be eager to explore," Mushrush says. "Go on a hike around the grounds to let them look up and see the trees rather than concentrating on beadwork."

Take advantage of the locale.

Mushrush's suggestions for daytime activities include scavenger hunts, nature walks, and outdoor-oriented arts and crafts. "On one fall camping trip we collected leaves, put paint on the leaves, and then pressed an imprint of them onto T-shirts," she recalls. Many Girl Scout camping sites also have planned activities available, such as horseback riding, archery, or ropes courses. For the nighttime, Mushrush recommends writing and enacting skits, putting on a talent show, and—of course!—making s'mores.