

Headline	Camping with the kids		
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ROSLI YACOB/The Star

The great outdoors

Useful tips for parents before they set out on a camping trip with the family.

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On Holiday

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COME school holidays, most parents would be racking their brains trying to cook up a list of to-dos for their hyper kids. How about taking the children outdoors before they start bouncing off the walls? Camping outdoors is not only relatively cheap, it provides a good outlet for over-zealous kids and it's a wonderful way for families to create lasting memories.

Besides, research has shown that children function better cognitively and emotionally in "green environments" (*Last Child In The Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv); they have more creative play outdoors, develop better interpersonal relationships and have a more positive attitude to school.

But careful planning and a checklist of things-to-bring are a must.

Choosing campsites

"Depending on the children's ages and experience, choose a campsite that has easy access, offers plenty of activities and with minimal bugs around the site," advises Chadel Soon, a certified wilderness instructor from the National Outdoor Leadership School, the leading outdoor education school in the United States.

Younger kids tend to get bored easily, so easy and fast access to a campsite is important, Soon adds. If it's a long drive, break the journey into two days by stopping at places of interest.

"If you need to trek to get to the campsite, try to keep the trek to no more than one-and-a-half hours, especially if your kids are new to the outdoors," says the Klang Valley-based Soon who runs Learning Adventures, an outdoor education school in Malaysia.

To make the hike more interesting, pick a route that is parallel to a stream or river. Wading over rivers and skipping over rocks are fun activities for kids. Apart from the adrenaline kicks, kids can also learn about insects, fish, frogs and butterflies in their surroundings.

Ideally, a kid-friendly campsite should be close to a shallow river or stream but campers should have the option to move to higher ground in case of flash floods, environmental educator Gonthong Lourdesamy says.

"Not only can the kids get a refreshing dip in the river, they can check out the macro-invertebrates like worms, snails and insects that live under the rocks," says the mother of two boys aged eight and five. "Mosquitoes and sand flies can spoil your entire trip before it even begins so make sure your campsite has minimal bugs."

Types of shelter

In the hot and humid tropical weather, we may prefer tarpaulins and ground sheets but it's better to use a tent when camping with kids, advises Soon.

"In a tent, kids feel more secure, making it easier for them to fall asleep," he explains. A tent traps body heat so it's suitable for cold nights and if it gets too warm, just remove the flysheet.

Helping to set up the tent can be fun for kids too, Lourdesamy notes.

"They can be assigned the responsibility to clear twigs, branches and dry leaves from their tent site," she says.

For the non-purist, camping doesn't necessarily mean you have to pitch a tent. Forest chalets or huts are a good option for a comfortable night's sleep. It's easy and convenient; plus, you have the comforts of shower and bathroom facilities.

"Your entire adventure could be 'centre-based,' meaning you stay at one spot, head out for some activities during day and come back for a meal and to sleep," says Soon. The only downside: you don't get to sleep under the stars.

Most state parks, national parks and recreational forests around Malaysia have chalets and/or camping grounds.

Food, go for fresh!

Most folks tend to rely on canned or processed food during camping. But with extra planning and effort, your whole family can enjoy wholesome, home-cooked meals at campsite.

"It's easy to cook rice with omelette, and bring along lots of fresh fruits and vegetables that can be eaten raw like carrots and cucumbers," Lourdesamy suggests. Another option is to forage for forest ferns and bamboo shoots. Bring essentials like cooking oil, sugar, salt, dry spices, garlic and onions. Bread is a good staple as it can keep for several days.

"A good, hot snack that my boys love – boiled green (mung) bean soup – is easy and fast to whip up!"

Get your kids involved in the cooking or teach them how to cook. Who knows, you might uncover the next Junior MasterChef!

"Go the extra mile and try cooking extraordinary stuff," Soon quips. "Try making *chapati*, baking bread, cooking pasta or even baking a cake! There are tons of recipes online and books on camping cooking techniques."

Rope in the kids to help wash the dishes and utensils and clean up after them. "It's a good opportunity to teach them why animals come to disturb us because of leftovers or food scraps," Lourdesamy suggests.

Keep them busy

With so much fun outdoor stuff to do, it's unlikely your child will ever get bored.

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"One of my favourite adventures involving kids is kayaking or canoeing," says Soon, a father of a seven-month-old daughter.

"The boat carries the load, you could multi-task: fish, eat and travel and there's less chance of getting lost as opposed to jungle trekking," he adds. Safe paddling destinations in Malaysia include Chenderoh and Banded lakes in Perak or Kenyir, Pahang.

Examples of activities:

- > Give them a cheap, digital camera and ask them to snap as many insects or birds as they can find.

- > Try fishing or catching prawns under boulders and rocks by the streams.

- > Bring out the sketch pad, and get them to draw and catalogue what they see.

- > Teach them how to build a fire or make a compass using a needle and a magnet.

- > Get them to record animal sounds or noises and play back during dinner time to guess the animal.

- > Play board games or cards for after-dinner entertainment.

- > Star-gazing if the weather permits. Learn the constellations and Greek myths.

- > Create a sundial using paper or cardboard.

- > Educate your kids about minimal impact principles: we are the guests in the jungle.

We don't destroy animal or insect habitat.

We don't take anything home except litter.

And we leave the campsite like we were never there before, or in a better condition.

"Please take your garbage out with you!

It's common to see campers or picnickers leave dirty nappies by the river or stream," says Lourdesamy. "And do not throw cooked food into the river or stream."

Safety

It is important to set ground rules as soon as you arrive at the campsite.

"Set the boundary for where they can or cannot roam around, what they can or can't do and, in case of an emergency, what they should do (stop, stay calm and shout for

help)," says Lourdesamy.

Keeping hydrated in the outdoors is vital, Soon points out. Bring flavoured oral rehydration salts (orange or grape flavour) to encourage the kids to drink more fluid.

Kids tend to scratch tiny wounds and insect bites, resulting in an infection, so stock up on your adhesive bandages and insect repellent. Your first aid kit should include medication, tweezers, bandages and antiseptic cream.

"Teach your kids about hygiene, especially when preparing food, during meals and after using the toilet," says Soon. "The consequence is very real here. We need clean hands!"

And most importantly, have a great camping trip!



One with nature: FRIM is a popular camping ground. — Photo courtesy of Nature Escapes

CAMPING is cheap and here's why: most recreational forests, and state and national parks in Malaysia charge an average of RM5 to RM10 a night for a site to pitch your tent. And most of these sites come with shower and toilet facilities.

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If you don't own a tent, places like Perlis State Park rent out a 10-person tent for RM10 a night. Unless you are an experienced outdoor person and resourceful about finding free camping spots, try to stick to designated campsites for safety reasons.

For the uninitiated, you may want to camp in your backyard with your kids for a couple of nights so they get accustomed to sleeping in a tent and on hard surfaces. Nothing spoils a vacation like whiny kids who can't rough it out.

Here's a short list of popular campgrounds, huts and cabins in wilderness areas around Malaysia:

Selangor

> A 15-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur city centre, **Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM)** is great for families on their first camping trip. Unfortunately, their camping sites are frequently booked by big groups, especially during school holidays. But a family of four (with primary school kids) can sleep comfortably in the A-huts that cost RM50 a night. For more info: www.frim.gov.my

> **Sungai Congkak Recreational Forest** in Hulu Langat (www.sungaicongak.com) and **Taman Rimba Komanwel** (Commonwealth Forest Park) in Rawang (www.cfpresort.webs.com)

are two popular, family-friendly getaways with waterfalls and jungle treks. Privately managed Taman Rimba rents out camping sites (RM10/night), dormitory, private chalets and individual rooms.

Pahang

> **Tasik Bera** is a great way for the kids to explore the outdoors and learn about the orang asli communities. The local Semelai folk offer a community-based eco-tourism experience with jungle trekking, canoeing and homestay with the villagers. Contact: Semelai Association for Boat and Tourism (Sabot) <http://tasekbera.jones.dk/>

> One of the oldest rainforests in the world, **Taman Negara** is the outdoor classroom for your kids and the park offers many camping sites managed by Perhilitan or private companies. The Sungai Relau, Merapoh campsite, for example, charges RM1 per person per day.

For more info, check out Perhilitan's website: www.wildlife.gov.my, under "National Parks and Ecotourism sites", or call Taman Negara Pahang National Park: 09-266 1122/266 4152.

> You can also find info on camping sites in **Kelantan National Park** in Gua Musang and **Terengganu National Park** near Kuala Berang, on Perhilitan website.

Other notable campsites

> Johor: **Endau-Rompin National Park**; www.johortourism.com.my

> Perak: **Royal Belum State Park**; www.peraktourism.com

[peraktourism.com](http://www.peraktourism.com)

> Sarawak: **Lambir Hills National Park**, Miri; and **Bako National Park** near Kuching; www.forestry.sarawak.gov.my

> Sabah: **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park**; www.sabahtourism.com



Kids can experience the Semelai culture in Tasik Bera, Pahang.

Gear checklist

EVER gone on a trip and realised, "Oops, we forgot the kids' walking shoes!" Yup, as most parents would agree, packing for a family trip is a tedious undertaking. Get your list ready weeks before your trip and keep tweaking the list if things pop up last minute. Here are some essentials for a camping trip:

> Tent: do you need a family tent or should the kids sleep in separate tents? Look for tents with lots of ventilation mesh panels as tents can feel stuffy in our muggy weather.

> Sleeping bags (if necessary) or sleep liners, sleeping foam/pad for extra cushioning, pillows (inflatable ones if you need to save space).

> Pack warm clothing like sweatshirts or long pants; the nights can get chilly even in our tropical climate. Don't forget the swimsuits or trunks.

> Footwear: hiking/sport shoes and slippers for use at campsites.

> First aid kit: medication for colds, fever and tummy aches; antiseptic cream for cuts, insect repellent and sunscreen.

> Torchlights, extra batteries, a small tool kit, rope (for makeshift laundry line), fire starters, multi-tools like Swiss Army Knives or Leatherman.

> Bring a cooler to store meat, fruits and vegetables to keep them fresh.

> Toilet paper and baby wipes are useful.

> If you are travelling by boat, you need a child-sized Personal Flotation Device (PFD). Use dry bags to keep your gear dry.

> Bring a shovel if you need to make your own bathroom holes.

> To keep your kid entertained during the car journey or at the campsite: bring puzzle games, a science experimental book, colour pencils and sketch pad, board games and animal/insect/bird picture book.

> Don't forget the camera!

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Junior cook: When out camping, get your kids involved in the cooking.



Splash! Ideally, a child-friendly campsite should be near a shallow river or stream but campers should have the option to move to higher ground in case of flash floods. — Photo courtesy of Nature Escapes