Wealthy parents are investing in high-end, 'backyard' camp experiences and private excursions to give their kids a taste of summer in light of COVID-19

Robin Madell  Jul 19, 2020, 6:15 AM
The vast majority of parents have had to kiss typical family activities goodbye this summer, with everything from beach trips to camps to birthday parties being put on the chopping block during the pandemic.

With so many anticipated hot-weather rituals going the way of the dodo in 2020, parents have been hard pressed to come up with other options for cooped-up kids antsy from school closures.

Some parents with greater means have been able to pull out all the stops in facilitating alternative summertime experiences, footing high bills for the chance to offer their kids a taste of pre-pandemic life in line with the season.

Camp consultants said some families are hiring private counselors and coaches to entertain and train their kids in their own backyards, while others are paying for luxury excursions to private homes and beaches.

Embark Beyond is one company that plans private trips that allow parents to give their kids intimate camp experiences, which can include aerial adventure ropes and zip lines, a paintball adventure course, horseback riding adventures, and scenic river trips.

"A week at an amazing ranch like Brush Creek would run around $50,000 for a camp package," said Julie Danzinger, owner and managing partner of Embark Beyond. "The Preserve in Rhode Island is also a gem, which prices can vary, but figure about $15,000 for a week with amazing activities at your finger tips in a comfortable, remote environment."

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"I've had quite the experiences working with rich parents to find a summer camp for their child," camp consultant Mark Evans, who runs Summer Camp Hub, told Business Insider. "For one, some of these camps are very expensive due to all the exotic activities and top-tier training/learning from teachers at these camps."
university. For example, **Camp Laurel** in Maine for kids seven to 15 years old costs **$14,300**, not including fees that can add several thousand more to the total bill. **Raquette Lake Camp**, an overnight camp in the Adirondacks, costs **$14,050**, and **Camp Vega**, an elite camp in New England, is **$13,900**. All three programs are seven weeks long, from late June to mid-August.

Jake Schwartzwald, director of consultancy firm **Everything Summer, LLC**, added that some parents invest even more in the camp experience by hiring independent consultancies to help "maximize camp's positive impact."

Schwartzwald shared that his company's hourly rate of $300 to $400 is in line with other professional services that affluent families may also hire, including high-end tutors, school consultants, and therapists.

A "Summer Camp Consult," which is Everything Summer's most basic package, is priced between $2,000 and $3,000 and generally includes meeting with families as well as speaking extensively with professionals and camps. The fees are "respectively higher," Schwartzwald said, for Everything Summer's "Summer Seasonal Package" and comprehensive "Total Child Program," which he added are "more involved."

"When a family hires us for camp, our goal is to identify the right-fit options for their child," he said. "Oftentimes, the families who invest in our services aren't looking for the highest-status camp — after all, that information is generally available in their circles — but the camp that's the best fit for their specific child, and the best place for them to (ideally) grow year after year."
Schwartzwald noted that a camper is more likely to make friends if they're surrounded by kids they naturally get along with, is more likely to navigate camp's stresses if they feel comfortable talking with their counselors, and is more likely to develop confidence if they can pursue activities they enjoy — so camp consultants help create those situations for families. Consultants also work with camps to help them create the best plan for an individual camper.

"A new camper might be assigned a seat on the bus to camp next to a specific returner with common interests; a counselor might be assigned to check in every night and be the child's 'go-to' first line of support; a camper might be given an extra chance to waterski in the mornings," he said.

"Backyard' experiences that bring camp home

more limited this year due to COVID-19. According to a study conducted by tech company CampMinder, more than two-thirds of summer camps ended up unsure of
"The vast majority of the camps I know or work with have closed down," Evans said.

This unfortunate reality has opulent families turning toward other options, such as shelling out money for private camp counselors and coaches to keep their kids busy at home.

"Some families are creating a camp-like experience in their own backyards," Evans said. He meant this quite literally. In such cases, families with enough disposable income are hiring camp counselors to create and run camp activities right on the family's property, with their backyard serving as the camp location.

In addition to enlisting counselors for private gigs, Evans added that these parents are also recruiting sports coaches to teach their kids popular camp sports in their own neighborhood.

"A lot of high-end summer camps often bring in highly-trained teachers for specific sports like equestrian, gymnastics, basketball, and tennis," Evans said. "Since this isn't possible right now, parents are hiring their own coaches for their kids."

Read more: Parents are spending thousands on the latest gadgets, coding bootcamps, and tech tutors for their toddlers to prepare them to compete in a digital world

While a large backyard can't completely replace a playing field or community pool, "Let's just say that space isn't necessarily a problem for some of these neighborhoods, [even for] activities like archery, capture the flag, and water sports," he added.
With the coronavirus still causing safety concerns in many areas, Embark Beyond's #EMBARKatHome program — in which the company's network of hotel owners, tour guides, and other influencers bring curated local experiences to families and children — is also in high demand.

Julie Danzinger, owner and managing partner of Embark Beyond, told Business Insider that one of their eight-week, home-based programs goes for $3,500 per week for up to 10 kids. Other Embark at Home programs are higher priced depending on if the staff is local or brought in, or if the requirements and interests of the children are more particular.
"We are bringing the classic Embark travel experience to their backyard," Danzinger said. "So where most [backyard summer programs] are just counselors crafting activity, we are adding our Embark flavor to it with daily schedules, documents, [and] helpful information all loaded on a personalized app for each group."

She explained that each Embark at Home group also has a unique name and theme.

"For example, our friends at Dorchester were kind enough to send Beverly Hills Hotel T-shirts and caps — so instead of traditional 'camp shirts,' kids received Beverly Hills Hotel plush high quality shirts and hats," she said.
Embark Beyond's "camp gear" for backyard campers. Embark Beyond

Embark Beyond also partnered with a number of high-end properties to have theme groups, including the Ritz Carlton, Oetker Collection, Eden Roc Cap Cana, Kimpton Hotels, and Aman. The company is also working with a few select properties now to partner and give "gift stays" as a giveaway raffle at the end of the summer to families.
Danzinger said that the company launched the At Home program after receiving a call from a family in the Hamptons who said that they were unable to travel but would love to have Embark brought to their backyard.

"We were not planning on doing that," Danzinger said. "We then received a second call from Hamptons, and then a third from someone in Aspen. We figured, let's give it a go." The company now has At Home programs running across the entire US.

**Made-to-order summer activities in choice locations**

Also popular among parents who can afford it: signing up for private luxury camp experiences.

In addition to its At Home offering, Embark Beyond also offers an extensive array of private and semi-private accommodations for affluent families in destinations around the US, Caribbean, and Mexico.

"Basically, it's a vacation for the entire family in very expensive resorts for one to two weeks," Evans said.
parents get to relax and do their own thing. The Camp Embark team tailors customized programs for every age of child around the child's own interests.

"Of course, in order to be safe during the pandemic, instead of flying with airlines, they have private jet options for families," Evans said.

Danzinger shared with Business Insider that there's been a surge in demand for her company's services in light of the pandemic.

"We actually received 212 new requests in 10 days for private camp experiences all over"
She added that while some families had camps they were planning to attend cancelled, others were "just not comfortable" sending their kids into a larger summer camp environment and wanted something intimate.

"We were able to provide that for them ... on a high level, both on vacation and at home, should they choose to stay at their beach house or second home," Danzinger said.

She explained that ranch vacations are currently among the company's most popular camp packages. The perks that come along with each property and concept are completely customizable to encompass a wide range of potential inclusions. For example, staying at The Lodge & Spa at Brush Creek Ranch in Saratoga, Wyoming, offers options for aerial adventure ropes and zip lines, a paintball adventure course, horseback riding adventures, and scenic river trips.

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Danzinger named Dorado Beach in Puerto Rico and Nizuc in Cancun as two other coveted family destinations in her company's portfolio of offerings.

"Dorado actually has a fantastic option where you can stay in one of their incredible homes right on the beach for a month for around $65,000. On the flip side, Nizuc is just amazing and the value for luxury there is jaw dropping," she said.

The owner said that she's sold programs for around $150,000 or so, but that her company can offer something "a bit simpler" for affluent travelers looking for a great...
Virtual camp options teach kids valuable skills

Despite having some in-person camp options to choose from, Schwartzwald emphasized that safety concerns around COVID-19 have led many families to opt for online camp experiences instead.

While Schwartzwald's organization works with families from all over the world, most come from urban areas, and many live in New York City. (Everything Summer's office is in midtown Manhattan.)

"I think many families saw first hand the impact of the coronavirus, the uncertainty surrounding the crisis, and took in-person options off the table," Schwartzwald said.

In some cases, the camp or program that a family had signed up for transitioned to virtual, yet in most cases, Schwartzwald and his team needed to help families adapt to identify new remote options.

"We have clients pursuing virtual camps or experiences in everything from sports broadcasting to film to writing to visual art to coding to ecology — and that only scratches the surface," he said.

Some popular programs offering online summer camps include Camp Edmo — which is currently offering a "Shelter-in-Place" rate of $150 per week instead of $180 per week for its 2.5-hour camps — and Camp SuperNow, which gives full camp access to sessions featuring one-hour daily online cabin time with six to eight other campers, plus a camp counselor and two half-hour "Super Shows" of virtual guided activities for $199 per child.
Evans said that in a world where money isn't a problem, there will often be a disconnect between what a parent wants their family to do for the summer and what a child wants.

"One thing I experience a lot that involves wasteful spending is when a parent insists on adding an activity for a child even when the child doesn't want it," he said.

Minson Vo, a 17-year-old high school senior located in the Fort Bend Independent School District in Houston, Texas, and founder of negotiation firm Courtier Consultations, validated Evans' observation, noting that he and his friends are always on the receiving end of their parents trying to persuade them to attend various summer activities. He noted that he's seen parents spend hundreds to thousands of dollars "forcing their kids to join camp every year."
"Every year before high school, my mom would always urge me to attend either boy scouts, tutoring, or Catholic camp during the summer," Vo said. "I always refused to go and if she forced me, I would show [so] much disinterest in it that there was no option but to take me out."

Vo's suggested parents can help preserve teens' autonomy by involving them in the information-gathering and decision-making processes, using the carrot rather than the stick.

"I would rather my parents send me a commercial or show me an ad about a camp I might be interested in rather than forcing me to go there because they think it's the best choice," Vo said.

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