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The Great Outdoors
By Ralph Gardner

Though I haven't attempted it in years, I used to be a very talented camper—just as long as there was a car in extremely close proximity. The year I graduated from high school, my cousin George and I camped all the way from Paris to the North Cape, the northernmost point of Europe, 500 miles above the Arctic Circle. We were armed with nothing more than our backpacks, sleeping bags, and traveler's checks.

It wasn't our fault that an American hippie couple in a VW microbus picked us up somewhere around Oslo and allowed us to abuse their hospitality all the way to the top of the world and back to Paris. Nonetheless, the only time we slept inside the van with Ruth and Lloyd, our put-upon hosts, was one night when the mosquitoes in Finland were so ferocious that the couple had no choice but to offer us refuge.

And the summer I graduated from college a couple of friends and I camped across Canada—from Montreal to Vancouver Island and back to New York City—out of the back of my Ford Maverick, a lemon of a vehicle even before it left the assembly line. I still have my rusted camp stove, though not the car, to prove it.

But as I said, I hadn't spent a night under the stars in years—until last week after I received an invitation from AKA Central Park, part of a chain of "luxury services residences," essentially deluxextended-stay hotels, to sleep in their outdoor bedroom.



Andrew Hinderaker for *The Wall Street Journal*

The outdoor bedroom of the penthouse at AKA Central Park on West 58th Street.

Jeffrey Poirot, the general manager, said AKA's guests (I'm not sure what the letters stand for, even after he tried to explain it to me) range from New Yorkers whose apartments are under renovation, and apartment-hunting CEOs, to Hollywood actors and directors in town shooting movies. I was told that Diane Keaton has more than once rented the suite where I would be staying, though it hadn't been set up for outdoor sleep.

We had to reschedule my adventure several times because of inclement weather. Which tends to be the problem with an al fresco bedroom. My future wife and I once dragged a mattress into nature upstate, but our accommodations back then didn't also include a large LCD TV, sound system, telescope, outdoor wood-burning fireplace, candles, flowers and, of course, a king-size bed with Frette sheets and a matching duvet.

The penthouse suite, which normally goes for \$2,000 a night, also had a living room, a fully equipped kitchen, a couple of bathrooms and a bedroom where we knew we could always retreat in case the weather turned on a dime, as it had been doing all last week.

I checked into the residence, on 58th Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues, midafternoon and was given a brief tour. The décor is modern and the facility includes an intimate lounge open only to residents, and that seems ideal for conducting a discreet affair (though I'm not as certain about using an outdoor bedroom, surrounded by taller buildings, for that purpose); an excellent ground-floor café open to the public; and a workout room that features a six-screen video installation of reflections on water by artist Monika Bravo and adds a Zen quality.

I had to leave to attend a cigar smoke-in at Paley Park, conveniently located just a few blocks away. By the time I returned my wife, who was joining me (it would seem a pity not to share a luxury outdoor sleeping experience with somebody) and my daughters, who dropped by, were already taking advantage of the accommodations—sipping champagne and watching a DVD of the original King Kong on the TV while lounging on the bed. I was relieved to see that after days of rain the weather seemed to be holding up.

The suite, one of 134 one- and two-bedroom suites, whose 1,000-square-foot terrace wraps around the building—you have views in all directions—also features an outdoor dining-room table where I was told Ms. Keaton has held pizza parties with her girlfriends. We decided to do her one better by ordering a steak dinner from Quality Meats, just up the block.

My kids eventually cleared out and we went to bed—the only light that of the glowing fireplace, the candles, and all the buildings looming around and above us, even though we were already 17 stories in the air. Directly across the street was the Park Lane Hotel which soared at least another 20 floors, slightly to our right the Plaza Hotel, its American flag fluttering in the breeze, and directly to our east the massive 50-story 9 West 57th Street, with its sloping facade.

How do you describe such a setting? It was like a stage set, something from a '30s movie that everybody knows doesn't actually exist in real life, a fantasy just beyond the realm of common sense, but that you buy into anyway because you wish it would. What made it so special wasn't the king-size bed, with its 400-thread-count sheets, but the backdrop and the sense of coziness and serenity in an outdoor realm not traditionally known for either.

Nonetheless, I had trouble sleeping. It wasn't the noise; it didn't sound all that noisy. Or the light. You don't realize how bright New York is, even in the middle of the night, until you sleep outside—the sky not black but a strange orange, the clouds brighter orange still. It was more the sheer giddiness of the experience. Backdrops like this aren't made for sleeping; they're made for dancing, champagne and romance.

Somewhere around 2 a.m. I retreated to the indoor bed. But my wife slept peacefully outdoors until it started to rain, probably around 4 a.m., and then to pour. Indeed, so sound was her sleep that she has no idea how long she slept in the rain.

Everything got soaked—the sheets (fortunately the mattress had a plastic cover) the TV, the telescope. Which may explain why we were only the third guests able to take advantage of the outdoor camping opportunity since it became available last summer. It's hard to book rooms when you're at the mercy of meteorology.

Despite the rain—Mr. Poirot later reported that the TV survived—the evening is one I have no doubt I'll remember just as vividly and fondly a decade from now. The only letdown was checking out and returning to our own apartment. It was less than 30 blocks, but several light years, and a charmed galaxy, away.

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