

Let's go camping! Ooh, but baby, it's cold outside

By Katie Surman Great Falls Tribune February 29, 2008

As a native New Yorker who then moved to Texas, my only "camping" experience was when my family rented a cabin in Maine. Those were summer trips and the cabins all had running water and soft beds. But my latest camping adventure involved neither solid floors nor central heat. My husband, Anthony, is in the Air Force and we move around every few years, so I want to make the best of every place we go. When the chance came up to go winter camping, I said yes.

Anthony just looked at me but then said I could go as long as I didn't complain, and my mom even commented on his bravery and patience for taking Zsa Zsa into the great outdoors. One of Anthony's friends recently returned from Iraq and he soon will head to his new base in Colorado. He planned the trip — the location, equipment and overall logistics.

The plan was simple: We would all meet at the Outdoor Recreation building on base to pick up our supplies and equipment and then head to the site.

Anthony and I had most of what we needed in terms of the clothing, but we did go to the store to get hand warmers, wool socks, bagged meals and some good mittens. I initially resisted the idea of mittens, because I'm not a big fan of the claw hands feeling, but I gave in when it was explained to me that mittens keep your fingers warmer than gloves since they are all together. Plus, it gave me a reason to go shopping.

The night before we left, we got all of our stuff together and laid it out in our hallway. We made sure we had multiples of everything — three hats each, extra socks, two pairs of gloves and several scarves. We borrowed a heavy duty backpack from another friend who wasn't able to join us, and packed it full with our gear. I started to get pretty excited as we were getting everything together, because the whole experience was totally new and different.

When Friday rolled around, we triple-checked our supplies to make sure we weren't forgetting anything. I dropped off our dog with a friend. The dog is small and I didn't think she would do too well outdoors for that long.

We headed off to base where we met up with Jim Beisel, the outdoor adventure coordinator at Malmstrom. He enjoys winter camping and goes as often as he can, but it's not too often that a willing group comes along. Beisel fitted us with snow shoes and further properly outfitted us. We headed off and arrived at our campsite about an hour later.

I knew I was in trouble as soon as I stepped out of the truck and I began adding more layers under my jacket; I even put on my ski mask. My enthusiasm further faded when I had to take off my mitten to strap on the snowshoes. It's amazing how cold your hand gets when it's exposed even for a brief time.

Oh well, I had signed up for this. But once we started walking to stake out a good place to set up camp, I warmed up. We found a nice little place in between some trees, and it was pointed out how the trees block the wind and make it a little more bearable. We began tromping around the

area in order to harden up the snow - a technique I never would have thought of, but made total sense.

We began collecting firewood while the snow hardened and became more compact. It's amazing how much firewood it takes to keep a small fire going. I definitely underestimated that one. Jim started to build a very innovative fire pit/cooking/sitting area. He dug a wide circle all the way to the ground for the fire, with a seating area around it and carved a place into the wall of snow for the stoves.

We then began to set up our tents on the compacted snow. Jim helped us with that as well, which probably saved us a lot of time and frustration. With the tents set up, we took off on our snowshoes. There was no one else around and we were able to make our own trail.

The scenery was peaceful and calming, and I felt like I was in the scene from "Christmas Vacation" where they go looking for the perfect tree, although my eyes were not frozen shut.

I discovered that I thoroughly enjoy snowshoeing although it can get tiring. The exercise helped warm me, and I even took off my hat and gloves, but quickly realized it was still really cold. We snow shod about three-quarters of a mile and then turned around to head back as it was getting to be dark, and wildlife kind of freaks me out. I was assured many times that the bears were hibernating and the snow was too deep for wolves, but I still proceeded with caution.

When we returned to our campsite we boiled water on the stove to add it to our dinner bags. The fire was strong and we enjoyed just sitting there on our pads around the fire. If you are thinking about winter camping, do not forget some insulated pads to sit on, unless you literally want to freeze your butt off.

After hanging around the fire for a while, we called it a night. Anthony set up our sleeping bags inside our tent, so all I had to do was get in. We had bags rated to 40 below zero and they worked well. Apparently the bags work off of your body heat, so the more layers you have on, the colder you will be. It makes sense, but at the time I did not see the logic in taking off layers and no one could tell me otherwise. I ended up sleeping pretty well though, probably because my body went into preservation mode and I was too focused on staying warm to worry about anything else. I found that I stayed a lot warmer by crawling down to the bottom of the bag instead of sleeping normally with the top of the bag wrapped around my head. I also put some of the hand warmers into my socks and in my bag, which seemed to help.

The next morning, it took a lot for me to get out of the sleeping bag, but I eventually did it. The fire was already going by the time I woke up and we started cooking breakfast. Some people brought instant oatmeal, which was a pretty good idea. We brought eggs in a bag, and I thought all we would have to do was add water, but apparently we needed a skillet. I decided to just add boiling water anyway, figuring it wouldn't be that bad, but I was wrong. Luckily we had granola bars and trail mix with us.

After breakfast we started to pack up our bags and tents, which seemed to take longer than it did to set everything up. We then loaded everything onto the sleds and carried it back to the trucks.

We were only there for one night but I was glad to see the trucks again and couldn't wait to get back in it and get the heat going.

I will never forget that trip, and I recommend winter camping to anyone who is interested. The best advice I have is to make sure someone in the group knows what they are doing, and to always take extras of everything.