

**Fifty years since the lighting of its first bonfire, this northern Minnesota camp shines bright for generations of Minnesota families.**



Photos by ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN • Special to the Star Tribune

With campfires, talent shows and cabins like this one in Northland Village, Camp du Nord is like a kids' camp for families.

#### ABOUT CAMP DU NORD

**When to go:** Camp du Nord runs family camp programs throughout the year; summer is the most popular and is administered by a lottery held in early December. • **The cabins:** Du Nord Village, the original part of the camp, has 14 cabins, three cabin tent sites and seven auto/tent sites. Northland Village, acquired in 1984, has four log cabins that date from 2007. Pine Pointe Village, acquired in 1994, has eight log cabins built since 2000. • **Information:** www.dunord.org. Inquiries are best by e-mail (info@dunord.org), or by calling the St. Paul office at 651-645-6605.

## CAMP DU NORD: STAR OF THE NORTH

By ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN • Special to the Star Tribune

Rain dripped from our slicker-covered bodies and pooled in a muddy pit that should have been home to a bonfire. Hands slapped bare spots on arms, shins and faces as swarms of mosquitoes took aim. Then a woman in rain gear fit for a monsoon mounted the outdoor stage.

"Welcome to Camp du Nord?" she asked with a shrug that received the only laugh of the evening. "We're going to cancel the opening ceremonies and just go back to our cabins."



Natural objects inspire artwork.



Sun plays off a spider's web.



A totem pole marks a meeting spot.

If this had been my clan's first visit to the modestly idyllic YMCA family camp tucked into the southern edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, I'd have been muttering about refunds. But this was the fourth summer my husband, Walter, and our kids — Peter, then 9, Henrik, 7, and Luisa, 4 — had made the drive past Ely to the North Arm of Burntside Lake for a midsummer week of canoeing, hiking, singing, crafts and crunching pine needles beneath our feet. Sure, I was upset about the weather. But I was confident we'd have a decent time even if the bugs and raindrops

competed for our attention the entire week.

Camp du Nord was founded in 1960 when the Greater YMCA of St. Paul bought a small camp with several circa-1930s cabins. Although the camp later was expanded, the concept remained simple and unique: Just as kids' overnight camps are as much about personal growth as archery and S'mores, a family vacation can move beyond the scripted opportunities offered at many resorts to become a catalyst for family reflection and spiritual discovery.

**Camp continues on G6 ►**

## Ash fallout could mean lower summer fares to Europe

Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano may have quieted for now, but that doesn't mean it's done impacting travel. Along with an ash plume, the eruption may bring about cheaper summer airfares to Europe.

"We are guessing that a certain percentage of the population who were planning a trip to Europe are going to stay home instead, not wanting to play ash cloud roulette with Mother Nature," said George Hobica, the head of Twin Cities-based airfarewatchdog.com.

A decline in the number of travelers to Europe could force airlines to cut fares, which have been rising as business and leisure travel rebounds.

According to Bing Travel's recently released Summer Travel Forecast, summer airfares to Europe were expected to rise 29 percent over last summer. Fares to Europe this sum-



BRYNJAR GAUTI • Associated Press file photo

The volcano in Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull glacier may continue to change the landscape for fliers.

mer are running \$1,270 on average, compared to \$902 last summer.

That upward trend may reverse depending on how many travelers decide to forgo a visit to Europe, which relies heavily on the airspace over Iceland for many popular routes. In Ice-

land itself, the airport wasn't hit as hard as those in parts of Europe because the ash clouds blew quickly away from it towards northern Europe and Scandinavia.

Hobica has been polling travelers about their summer plans and pre-

liminary results show that about 15 percent of the travelers say that they expect to change their travel plans to Europe.

"Even a 15 percent change of heart will have a downward effect or at least keep fares from rising further," Hobica

said, adding that the impact of volcano worries are akin to those of SARS and the H1N1 scare.

Tom Parsons, CEO of Bestfares.com, agrees. In a weekly analysis of airfare trends he said that in the wake of the SARS and H1N1 scares, it took airlines three to four weeks to adjust fares based on consumer response.

"We think the same may hold true for the volcanic ash incident in Europe," Parsons wrote. "The airlines are sitting on the sideline right now, hoping that you will pay \$1,500 for a ticket to Europe for summer 2010."

His advice? Wait it out and see what happens in the next few weeks. If airfares to Europe don't drop any further for summer, fly to Europe in September or October when airfares tend to be as much as \$500 off summer prices.

JIM BUCHTA

## THE HALLMARK OF THE DU NORD PROGRAM IS AGE GROUP, WHEN COUNSELORS TAKE KIDS ON AGE-APPROPRIATE ADVENTURES, FROM OUTDOOR COOKING TO PIRATE TREASURE HUNTS TO HIKES IN CHEST-HIGH MUD.



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The author's son Henrik checks out the dock at Camp du Nord. Swimming and canoeing are among the offerings at the camp, which is designed to be a simple place where families spend time together.

# STAR OF THE NORTH

### ◀ CAMP FROM G1

It's a formula that has obviously worked. Camp du Nord is so popular that there's a lottery, held in early December, to determine each family's week and cabin. I've met people in their mid-40s who have been there every year of their lives.

I'll be honest: Spiritual growth wasn't our top priority when we signed up for our first week. And the fact that alcohol is prohibited in the dining hall and other public buildings gave us pause. We worried that a place that frowned on a glass of wine outside the shadowy confines of your own cabin would not be much fun.

Still, we sent in our application because we'd heard raves from other families. And as the strung-out parents of three little kids, Walter and I hoped that the extensive roster of supervised children's activities would give us a chance to relax.

#### Rituals and relaxation

That first summer, our initial concerns dissolved into the crisp evening air within minutes of arriving. And that's not because our resource family — volunteers who help other families in exchange for free lodging — had enough hard liquor in their cabin to stock a North Woods bar. As for the spirituality: You can partake in vespers or a Sunday prayer service set on the shore of the lake. Or you can crank up the sauna, whack a tetherball, or practice your portaging skills.

The only vaguely religious activity required is grace before each meal, if you choose to eat in the dining hall (some cabins have kitchens and all

campsites come with fire pits). The prayer changes every night and includes highlights that I remember from my own sleep-away camp career, including "Johnny Appleseed" and "Thank you God for giving us food," sung to the tune of the Superman theme song.

A week at Camp du Nord starts on a Saturday night, when families are allowed to settle into their cabins. But the action doesn't really start until the opening ceremonies on Sunday night. From there on out, the evenings are a variety show of skits, singalongs, nature lectures and bonfires.

#### Family favorites

Walter and the children embraced the communal vibe from the start.

For last summer's Monday night campfire, they huddled together and brainstormed answers to the icebreaker: Each family was asked to come up with two truths and a lie

about themselves; the other families had to guess fact and fiction. I stood to the side and longed for the novel waiting on my bedside table. When other families asked if they could join us for dinner, I nodded, hoping Walter would fill in any uncomfortable pauses.

The hallmark of the Du Nord program is Age Group, which is the chunk of the morning between 10 a.m. and noon when counselors take kids on age-appropriate adventures, from outdoor cooking to pirate treasure hunts to hikes in chest-high mud. Adults can also enjoy their own activities, including guided (or not) hikes, nature photography lessons and orienteering exercises. Or they can sit on the dining hall porch, drink a cappuccino from the trading post and watch loons land on the lake, their wings ruf like a pack of cards being shuffled.

Our kids love Age Group primarily for one reason: the counselors, many of whom return year after year from the end of high school though college and beyond. I'm not sure if what makes them so special is that the Du Nord staff has a talent for finding the most open-hearted young adults in America or that a summer immersed in nature sands the rough edges off any attitude.



Camp counselors prep themselves to hide in the woods. Once found by children, they are tossed into the lake.



Seeing those young men and women grow up is perhaps my favorite part of the Du Nord experience. They are at once the camp's workhorses and their most effective promoters, since many have spent summer weeks as campers themselves.

#### Why we'll return

In fact, it's those kinds of connections that bring my family back year after year.

Last summer, the rain finally did stop — on Friday.

That bit of sun was all my children needed because it meant they could wear their bathing suits to the counselor hunt. Basically a game of hide and seek played with more than 100 kids, the counselors smear their bodies with mud, leaves and branches and tuck themselves into nooks and crannies throughout the camp. When they're found, packs of kids throw them into the lake. By the end, there's so much screaming and splashing that the water looks like a washing machine on high agitation.

Walter and I joined the fun, too. Because even though I spend the first days of every visit avoiding strangers, by midweek I'm inevitably singing the repeat-after-me songs, locking arms with people I've just met and laughing with other naked women in the night sauna before we run into the navy blue water.

Walter and the kids feel the love, too. After our first year, Peter announced that because he was younger than Walter and me, he'd get to go to Du Nord a lot longer. This year we're bringing along one of our nephews to expand the circle.

Being at Du Nord allows each and every one of us to give ourselves over to a hokey sweetness that is harder to locate back home. And that's where Du Nord delivers on its mission. Because if that kind of connection isn't spiritual, I don't know what is.

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Photo provided by CAMP DU NORD

At Camp du Nord, special canoes can hold many paddlers.