ACCESSIBLE CAMPING: a Little Bit of Heaven

BY GILLES MALKINE

Many years in the planning, International Paper John Dillon Park, a fully accessible private campground in the Adirondacks, is now in the midst of its first full season, which runs May 1 to Sept. 30. The park is an open air and water facility with completely accessible trails, campsites, facilities, and lake access. No shuttling all day between one paved blacktop wheelchair pad and the next here, or dodging lumbering RVs — this is a haven for campers with disabilities who crave a true wilderness experience in sites separated enough to provide seclusion. The refuge is nestled in a stunningly beautiful forest region just north of the Lake George area, about an hour due west from Exit 29 of the New York State Northway (Interstate 87).

International Paper, a world leader in forest industry products, does business in the United States, Europe, Asia, and South America. Committed to environmental, social, and economic sustainability, the company prides itself in having long refused to use or produce any products involving endangered trees. Retired CEO of International Paper John Dillon and other IP executives, officials from the state of New York’s Department of Environmental Conservation, Paul Smith’s College, the National Organization on Disability, and the Adirondack Conservancy were the essential players in the coordinated effort to make this Adirondack retreat a reality.

The campsites are linked by three miles of trails surfaced with compacted crushed stone through pristine forest. Rough-hewn wooden boardwalks span boggy patches, shored up here and there along the sides by rows of small boulders. Fishing and boating may be accessed from accessible docks, and individual campsites feature open log cabin lean-tos, raised campfire bases, and sleeping platforms on wooden floors. Bear-proof food boxes are provided at every site, as are spacious wheelchair-friendly outhouses that employ organic composting toilet units. Large solar power panels provide electric recharge stations. Some trails line the lake, while others lead away into the coolness of forest shadows to the campsites. You can easy along the shore and peer through the trees to see ospreys, eagles and loons cavort and dive in the lake.

Packed stone dust trails lead from the parking/recreation area to the lake’s shore, the docks, and all the campsites. Access into the shelters consists of a ramp that takes you gently from ground level up to the floor levels of the lean-tos, which are built a foot or so above the ground. Campers have the option of transferring directly onto the floor or wheeling up the ramp into the lean-to.

This facility, conceived by John Dillon, a life-long Adirondack resident, was designed and built on land donated by IP with the participation of nearby Paul Smith’s College’s forestry department. The original idea was to restrict the use of the camp to only people with disabilities and their families and/or caregivers, but the camp has since graciously been declared an all-inclusive facility. Paul Smith’s College manages the park, which consists of seven accessible campsites — six with shelters and one for tents — distributed through 200 acres of woods along Grampus Lake and Handsome Pond. The park is used as part of a college curriculum to train and instruct students in subjects such as eco-tourism and outdoor/forest recreation. Students gain invaluable experience dealing personally with the needs of, and accommodations for, people with disabilities.

Camping is absolutely free. Choose between day use, including accessible picnic areas, or overnight stays with a 10-day limit. Pets and service animals are welcome, and reservations are preferred. Traveling along these beautiful trails, lined by ancient firs, young hardwoods, and mossy crags is as close to a time warp into pre-historic America as you can imagine. As the sunshine splashes every conceivable shade of yellow and green through the leafy canopy, I guarantee you will be visited at least once by the thought of never going home.

For reservations or more info, call 518/524-6226 May through September, 518/327-6226 October through April, or visit www.johndillonpark.org.