

Campground memberships

Campground memberships are not for everyone, but they do work for a lot of people. If you are new to the RV'ing lifestyle, I would suggest waiting a year or two before buying a membership. See where you like to go, what kind of camping you like to do, the amenities you like to have when you get there, and how often you go.

Campground membership systems usually call their parks "resorts". This does not necessarily reflect the level of service or the quality and quantity of amenities. Some resorts may be more pavement than grass, more open space and less trees, or out in the woods where you can hardly see your neighbor. Some will have swimming pools, hot tubs and tennis courts, while others will have just the check-in office and store. Make sure you know what kind of "resort" system you're buying into.

Here is a list of membership park systems that I have found:

- Thousand Trails/Leisure Time/NACO (<http://www.ltra.com>)
- KM Resorts (<http://www.kmresorts.com>)
- Western Horizon Resorts (<http://www.whresorts.com/>)
- Sunrise Resorts (<http://www.sunriseresorts.com>)

(If you know of any others, please let me know so I can them by sending me an email.)

A question that comes up a lot... "Is a campground membership worth it?" The answer depends on how much you go camping (or would like to go), where you like to go and how much will it cost to join. So let's look at each question separately.

How often?

Take a look back at how often you've gone camping in the past. Was it a week or two of vacation plus a few weekends here and there, or were you just an occasional weekend camper? On average, how many days were you out camping the past few years?

Where?

Where did you go, or where would you like to go camping? Are there resorts in these locations that you would be able to use?

Cost

How much does it cost to sign up?

What are the annual dues?

How long do you have to pay, or how long are you likely to remain a member?

And looking back at your previous camping trips, how much per night (on average) did it cost to stay in a campground?

Most membership systems have different types of membership. Thousand Trails for example, has a nation-wide membership, an Eastern or Western US membership, and they also have some smaller regional memberships. Some memberships may limit you to the number of nights that are included with additional nights costing a small extra fee.

And some systems may limit the number of consecutive nights that you can stay “in” the system. Each different type of membership will cost a different amount.

Time for the math

Okay, time to break out the calculator and do a little math and figure out how much this membership would cost.

First thing you need to do is estimate how long you think you will remain a member. Since you’ve probably made a sizeable investment in your RV lifestyle, let’s say you’ll be a member for the next 10 years. Take the initial sign-up fee and divide by 10 (or however many years you think you’ll remain a member) to get an annualized cost. Add the annual dues to this, and then divide by the number of nights you expect to be out camping. Now you have your “nightly cost” for the membership.

Is the membership nightly cost more or less than your prior camping trips? Whether it is more or less, you may still have some questions to answer before you decide. Are there resorts located where I would like to go? Do the resorts have the amenities I would like to be able to use? And probably the most critical question...will I use the membership enough to pay for itself?

Answering these questions should give you a pretty good start in making your decision.

Another thing to consider with any membership is, how or when does the membership end? In other words, how do I get out of it? To answer this question, you should talk with the sales representative and carefully read the membership contract so that you understand completely what your options are should you decide in a few years that you no longer want to be a member. **BE CAREFUL HERE!!!** Some memberships are touted as “lifetime”, and they mean it! There may be no other way out of the contract except to die or sell it to someone else. Some memberships may have a limit to the number of times they can be re-sold, leaving the last buyer “stuck” with the membership. Some memberships might be easier to sell than others. So make sure you understand your options for terminating the membership.

Affiliate Memberships

Another feature of many membership systems is what is called the Affiliate Membership. To purchase the affiliate membership, you must first buy a membership at what is called your “home park”. These affiliate systems are comprised of campgrounds that “buy into” the affiliate system in hopes of attracting other customers from membership systems in a location where they may not have a resort.

Affiliate memberships are available from:

- AOR/ACN – Adventure Outdoor Resorts/Adventure Camping Network (<http://www.whresorts.com/aor/>)
- Coast to Coast (<http://www.coastresorts.com/>)
- RPI – Resort Parks International (<http://www.resortparks.com/>)
- ROD – Resorts of Distinction (<http://www.resortsofdistinction.com/>)

(If you know of any others, please let me know so I can them by sending me an email.)

Many of these affiliate memberships have several restrictions on their use, such as the number of nights (or the number of times) you can stay at a particular resort in a year, and dates that you will not be able to visit (usually major holidays). Many have only a few sites available for affiliate members, saving the majority of their sites for their (home park) members. Reservations can usually only be made 30-90 days in advance, so planning a trip may be a bit challenging, but with a little organizing, it can be done. Most have what is called the “125 mile rule” which states that you cannot stay at an affiliated resort that is within 125 air miles of your home park. The “air” miles is important here...you may want to stay at a resort that is a 200 mile drive away from your home park (over the mountains or across the water), but if it is less than 125 miles “as the crow flies”, you won’t be allowed to stay. Make sure you understand the restrictions of any affiliate membership program you may be interested in buying.

Along with the benefits of the affiliate membership comes the buy-in cost and annual dues. Some are more expensive than others, so make sure you check out what you are paying for and figure this into your total cost of membership. Unlike many home park memberships, affiliate memberships are easy to get out of...you just stop paying the yearly dues (check to make sure). But be careful doing this...it may cost you a lot more to get back into it at a future date should you decide to rejoin.

New or Used?

Yes, there are used memberships available to buy from current members that “want out”. If you attend a sales presentation at a membership park, ask the sales rep if they have any used or “resale” memberships available. You may be able to save a ton of money doing this.

Another possibility is doing an internet search for “used campground membership” or “campground membership resale” or any other similar phrase. There are specialized brokers and websites (such as Ebay) that deal with buying and selling “used” campground memberships. Again, be careful, read the sales contract thoroughly and make sure you understand it completely! When buying a “used” membership, you may be assuming or taking over the original contract. Make sure you understand what it is that you are buying...the benefits, the restrictions, and the way out!

If taking over an existing membership, get the membership number and talk to the company about that specific membership. Find out the costs, the benefits, the restrictions, and the way out!

If you are thinking about buying a used membership but visit the park beforehand and sit through the sales presentation and don't buy there, you may not be able to buy a used membership for 1-2 years after attending the sales presentation. I have heard of a few membership systems keeping track of the sales presentation attendees and looking for the names of membership transfer requests. If the name is found on the list, the transfer may be denied.

Getting out!

Okay, I've said this enough already, but it's worth repeating again! This is probably one of the biggest areas of problems I have noticed with campground memberships...how do I get out of it? Make sure you read and understand the membership contract thoroughly, especially the parts concerning how to terminate the membership. Things can and do happen that you don't expect that could impact your ability to keep enjoying the membership as you had originally intended. Make sure there is "a way out" that is acceptable to you.

Discount clubs

You've heard of them...Costco, Sam's Club and the like. But there are some just for RV'ers too! Check them out to see if one would work for you.

- Passport America (<http://www.passportamerica.com/>)
- Happy Campers (<http://www.camphalfprice.com/>)
- Recreation USA (<http://www.campingandcampgrounds.com/>)
- North American Camping Club (<http://www.campnacc.com>)
- Good Sam Club (<http://www.goodsamclub.com>)

All have annual fees and discounted nightly rates at a limited number of participating campgrounds. Unlike a "membership" park or campground, these discount clubs can be dropped at any time by simply not paying the annual renewal fee.

Enjoy

Whether you join a membership system or not, you are bound to enjoy the RV adventure. At a membership system, you may see the same faces all the time, and this can be just fine for many people. Some like the adventure of meeting new people all the time, even if they are not moving around a lot. Either way, you're bound to make friends and memories that could last a lifetime.

