

A camping Christmas

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

Santa will trade Rudolph's red beacon for a CB radio in his search for the Jerry Donais family this year.

When he finds them — somewhere between their Troy home and Florida — he'll stow the gifts under a tree anchored in the bathtub. If he's lucky, he may get to nibble leftover Christmas duck or Jeannie Donais' freshly baked cinnamon rolls.

"We have a live tree — 4-feet tall — that we store in the bathtub when we're driving," she said. "RVs have small ovens, so I can't get a turkey. I bought a duck and we'll have all of the trimmings."

The couple and their 8-year-old daughter will hit the road over the Christmas holidays, driving caravan-style with four other motor homes. Travel details, including departure time, destination and trip duration, are a little hazy, but that makes for a more exciting celebration.

"We just decided to look at this as an adventure," she said. "It's new and different."

Although travel trailering and camping may not top the list of most holiday itineraries, they provide an alternative to traditional at-home celebrations.

THE DONAIS family is looking forward to southern sunshine, but outdoor buffs needn't head south for Yuletide fun. Enthusiasts can head out to Milford for a refreshing holiday.

"For the last two winters we haven't

had a single night without campers," said John Winters, park administrator at Proud Lake Recreation.

Located about 40 minutes from Troy, Proud Lake is the only state park offering full winter-time facilities, including a heated lavatory-shower building and electrical hook-ups.

"We have some people who come out during the Christmas holidays. There's an extended family that comes out for New Year's. They watch the games on New Year's Day and make a big dinner," Winters said.

"More people come out for New Year's than Christmas. Some spend the whole weekend."

Snowmobile and cross-country ski trails wind through the serene backwoods setting. The lake attracts ice fishermen and some skaters, although campers may have to put their arms to work shoveling before practicing figure-eight.

"It's an event just to get away from the city for some people. There's a lot more elbow room. You're not fighting the crowds like you do in the summer. It seems to be a psychological thing that people are tuned into seasons, and turn some activities off and some on with the season."

"I've always been surprised that you don't see a number of great big luxury motor homes in winter, even though they're the ones with all of the equipment. You see little units and tents."

BUT FOR THE Donais family, a nine-passenger motor home is an ideal way to travel. They brought the 10-month-old vehicle out of storage for their first winter camping experience at Thanksgiving upon the urging of a

friend, Dick Hamlin, president of the Michigan Congress of Camping Clubs. He'll lead the five-unit entourage south.

"It's a wonderful way to go. We have everything we need," she said.

The family also has "roughed it," without electricity or running water in state parks during the summer. Road safety during their first cold weather excursion last month concerned Jeannie, but the trip also "opened new horizons."

"I didn't know how it would behave on slick roads. But I said, by gosh, if we need to snowshoe out we will."

Mark Brouillard, co-owner of Camp R Cruise in Farmington Hills, said the risk of water system freeze-up also discourages holiday camping and motor home travel. Although interior pipes are protected, holding tanks and outside water lines are exposed to freezing temperatures. Heavy ice chunks, rattling around the inside of pipes and tanks, can damage the system.

Brouillard winters the pipes, putting toilets, sinks and showers out of commission in the four motor homes that his firm rents during off-season months.

"It's cold sometimes even with the heater on. Windows in a motor home aren't designed for winter. You can feel the cold coming through," he said.

HALF OF THE units rented through spring are used for transportation to a sunny vacation spot, for ski weekends or for convenient travel to athletic events. Fans also rent motor homes for

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The Donais family, including (from left) Jerry, Jeannie and Jeannie, may be on the road over the holidays — but won't be without a Christmas tree.

STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Tips for winter travel

By Jeannie Donais
Special writer

Don't let the cold crush plans for mid-winter travel in a recreational vehicle. The RV furnace and a small electric heater will chase the chill away on the coldest nights.

By following a few tips acquired by seasoned campers, novices will find winter travel easy and enjoyable. Whether en route to a cold or warm destination, campers can travel in warmth and comfort along the way.

— Here is some advice.

- Leave the furnace on en route so that "home" stays comfortable and inviting. Remember to turn off the gas when refueling.

- Water pipes and tanks with anti-freeze already in them need not be flushed nor re-winterized after the trip. Just carry fresh water from home in jugs. Seasoned campers call this "joggling it."

- Before pouring any water down kitchen, bathroom and bathtub drains, pour about one quart of RV anti-freeze down each drain and into the appropriate tanks. Be sure to add another quart

- of anti-freeze to the toilet and its tank, too. This prevents freeze-up of the lines and tanks in use. The catastrophe of a frozen fresh-water system is averted if it is never used.

- Carry the plastic water bottles in the bathtub for use in cooking, washing and flushing the toilet. As soon as more southern temperatures allow, flush and fill the fresh water tank if the stay is long enough to warrant this. Then fire up the hot water heater and enjoy all the comforts of summer travel.

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