2026
EDITION

THE NEW PARK OWNER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

YOUR HONEST, PRACTICAL, BATTLE-TESTED GUIDE TO YOUR FIRST 90 DAYS AND BEYOND

18 PAGES

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THE NEW PARK OWNER'S
SURVIVAL GUIDE

Everything Nobody Tells You About Owning an RV Park or Campground
— Until Now

Your Honest, Practical, Battle-Tested Guide to
Your First 90 Days and Beyond

2026 Edition | Powered by 5star.camp

A Note Before We Begin

Congratulations — you're either about to buy an RV park or campground, or you just did. This is genuinely one of the most exciting business decisions a person can make.

It can also be one of the most overwhelming.

The outdoor hospitality industry doesn't come with a manual. Most new owners learn by doing — which means learning by making expensive, exhausting, preventable mistakes. The experienced operator down the road knows things that would have saved you months of headaches, but they're busy running their park and you haven't met them yet.

This guide is that conversation. It's the brutally honest, practical, experience-driven advice that new park owners wish someone had given them on Day 1. We're going to cover the finances, the operations, the staff, the guests, the technology, and the mental game — all of it.

We won't sugarcoat the hard parts. Owning a campground is incredibly rewarding and it can be financially excellent — but it's also genuinely demanding, seasonally stressful, and full of surprises that the brochure didn't mention.

You're going to be fine. But let's make sure you're prepared.

$11B+

RV park and campground revenues in 2024 — and over 56% of campers reported difficulty finding available sites. You're entering the right business at the right time.

CHAPTER 1

The Truth About What You Just Bought

It's not just a property. It's a hospitality business, a real estate asset, and a lifestyle all at once.

Before you get into operations, you need a clear-eyed understanding of what kind of asset you're actually running. New owners who misunderstand this spend their first year frustrated and confused.

You Bought Three Things at Once

Asset Type	What It Means
A Real Estate Asset	Land with infrastructure. Appreciates over time, can be developed, mortgaged, and eventually sold at a gain. Managed like real estate — maintenance, capital improvements, asset protection.
A Hospitality Business	A service business where guests pay for experiences, not just space. Managed like a hotel — guest experience, staff training, reviews, repeat business.
A Lifestyle	For most owner-operators, the park is where you live and work. The boundary between personal and professional life is almost nonexistent. This is a feature and a bug.

The reason many new owners struggle in their first year is that they buy the park thinking primarily about one of these three things and get blindsided by the other two. The real estate investor who didn't expect to be answering guest complaints at 9pm. The hospitality enthusiast who didn't expect to be managing an aging septic system. The lifestyle buyer who didn't expect that their 'retirement' would be 60-hour weeks in peak season.

REAL TALK

Owning a campground is not passive income. At least not in the beginning. Experienced operators with great systems and strong teams can get close to semi-passive — but it takes years to build. If someone told you this was a hands-off investment, they were either wrong or selling something.

The Seasonal Reality

Most campgrounds generate the vast majority of their annual revenue in 3–5 months. This has profound implications that new owners frequently underestimate:

- You must generate enough revenue in peak season to carry your fixed costs for 12 months
- Your cash flow in October through March may be deeply negative — plan for this before it surprises you
- Staffing up and down by season is one of the most challenging aspects of operations
- Every peak season day of lost revenue — to weather, to poor marketing, to an empty site — has an outsized financial impact
- The off-season is not a vacation. It's when you do the capital work that makes next season possible

The 90-Day Rule

Your peak season is your financial foundation for the entire year. Nothing in your business deserves more preparation, attention, and intentionality than those 90 days. Every operational improvement you make in the off-season should be evaluated through one lens: how does this make peak season better?

The Most Common New Owner Mistakes — and How to Avoid Them

Mistake	What to Do Instead
Changing everything immediately	Observe for a full season before making major changes. Learn why things are done the way they are before deciding they're wrong.
Underestimating infrastructure costs	Budget a 15–20% infrastructure contingency on top of your purchase price. Something expensive will need fixing in Year 1.
Not keeping the existing staff	Prior staff know the guests, the systems, and the quirks of the property. Losing them all at once is extremely costly. Retain where possible.
Setting rates based on cost, not market	Price based on what your market will bear, not what you need to cover costs. Underpricing leaves money on the table and attracts the wrong guests.
Ignoring the online reputation	Your reviews are your marketing. A new owner who lets negative reviews go unanswered tanks the business before they've started.
Hiring friends or family without qualifications	The campground demands professionalism. Mixing personal relationships with employment in a high-stress environment rarely ends well.
Not having enough operating cash reserve	You need 6 months of operating expenses in reserve before your first off-season. Most new owners are undercapitalized.

CHAPTER 2

Your First 90 Days — A Survival Playbook

What to do, in what order, and what to avoid in your critical first three months.

Your first 90 days set the foundation for everything. Here is a practical, week-by-week framework for getting oriented, building relationships, and making smart early decisions.

Days 1–30: Listen, Learn, Don't Change

Your only job in the first 30 days is to understand what you actually have. Resist every impulse to fix, change, or improve. You don't know enough yet.

Week 1: The Property Deep Dive

- ✓ Walk every single site — note condition, drainage, hookup status, privacy, appeal
- ✓ Inspect every building — roof, plumbing, electrical, HVAC, structure
- ✓ Test every utility hookup — electric, water, sewer at a sample of sites
- ✓ Review all maintenance records — what's been repaired, what's pending, what's been ignored
- ✓ Locate every utility shutoff — water main, electrical main, propane, septic access
- ✓ Read every review from the last 2 years to understand your operational gaps — themes and patterns are your first intelligence briefing

Week 2: The Financial Reality Check

- ✓ Review actual P&L statements for the last 3 years — not just what was represented in the sale
- ✓ Identify every recurring expense — utilities, software, insurance, loan payments
- ✓ Map your cash flow by month — when does money come in, when does it go out
- ✓ Calculate your break-even occupancy rate — the occupancy you need to cover all fixed costs
- ✓ Identify your top 5 cost reduction opportunities without affecting guest experience
- ✓ Set up your accounting system — QuickBooks or equivalent, integrated with your park software

Week 3: The People Inventory

- ✓ Meet individually with every staff member — ask what's working, what isn't, what they'd change
- ✓ Identify your key person or persons — who knows everything and who would be most expensive to lose
- ✓ Review any existing employment agreements or contractor arrangements
- ✓ Assess staffing levels — too many, too few, right people in right roles?
- ✓ Introduce yourself to regular guests and long-term residents if applicable

Week 4: The Systems Audit

- ✓ Evaluate your current reservation and park management software
- ✓ Review your online presence — website, Google Business, OTA profiles, social media
- ✓ Assess your booking channels — where are reservations coming from?
- ✓ Identify what's documented (SOPs, emergency plans, maintenance schedules) vs. in someone's head
- ✓ Understand the pricing structure you inherited — when does it need to be updated?

REAL TALK

Every park you buy comes with deferred maintenance, undocumented processes, and at least one infrastructure surprise. This isn't a reflection of the prior owner's incompetence — it's the nature of the business. The question isn't whether surprises exist. It's whether you find them before your guests do.

Days 31–60: Build Your Foundation

You've observed. Now start making deliberate improvements — in order of guest impact and safety priority.

1. Fix anything that affects guest safety or experience immediately — broken hookups, plumbing issues, dangerous structures
2. Update your online presence — photos, Google profile, website booking capability, accurate information
3. Begin responding to all reviews — introduce yourself as the new owner, address any recurring negatives directly
4. Implement or upgrade your park management software if needed — this is your operational backbone
5. Start building your mailing list if one doesn't exist — every guest email address is a future marketing asset
6. Set your rates for the upcoming season based on market research, not just inheritance
7. Hire any critical staff gaps before peak season arrives

The New Owner Introduction

Post a brief, personal introduction on your Google profile, your website, and social media. 'We're the new owners of [Park Name] and we're committed to making this the best campground in the region. We'd love to hear from you.' This manages the transition, invites feedback, and creates goodwill. It also explains why some things may be changing — which guests appreciate knowing.

Days 61–90: Get Ready for Guests

If your first peak season is approaching, this phase is critical. Everything needs to be ready before the first guest pulls in.

- ✓ Complete seasonal opening checklist (all facilities, utilities, grounds, safety)
- ✓ All staff hired, trained, and briefed on your service standards
- ✓ Reservation system fully operational and tested — live online booking confirmed
- ✓ Pre-arrival communication sequence built and automated
- ✓ Emergency response plan documented and communicated to all staff
- ✓ Camp store stocked and ready for season
- ✓ Social media announcing your first season — excitement, any new features, booking link
- ✓ Email to any existing guest list announcing you're open under new ownership

CHAPTER 3

Understanding Your Money

The financial realities most new owners learn the hard way.

Campground finance isn't complicated, but it has some specific characteristics that will catch you off guard if you're not prepared. This chapter covers the financial realities that don't always make it into the purchase conversation.

The Metrics That Actually Matter

Metric	What It Tells You
Occupancy Rate	% of available site-nights sold. Know this by month, by site type, and year-over-year.
ADR (Average Daily Rate)	Average revenue per occupied site-night. Your pricing effectiveness in one number.
RevPAS	Revenue Per Available Site — ADR × Occupancy. The single most important performance metric.
Ancillary Revenue Per Guest	Non-site revenue ÷ guest count. Tracks your store, rentals, and add-on effectiveness.
Net Operating Income (NOI)	Total Revenue minus Total Operating Expenses. What the business actually earns before debt service.
Cap Rate	NOI ÷ Property Value. The standard real estate valuation metric. Industry average: 8–12%.

Know these numbers cold. Review them monthly. If you can't tell a potential investor or lender your occupancy rate, ADR, and NOI from last season without looking it up, you're not yet running the business — the business is running you.

The Hidden Costs Nobody Mentions

The purchase price is just the beginning. Here are the costs that blindside new owners most often:

⚠ **Infrastructure Surprises**

Septic systems ($10,000–$40,000 to replace), electrical pedestals ($800–$2,000 each), water line repairs, and road grading are the most common large unexpected expenses in Year 1. Budget a 15–20% contingency.

⚠ **OTA Commission Fees**

Third-party booking platforms typically charge 6–15% of each booking. On $500,000 in annual revenue with 40% OTA bookings, that's $12,000–$30,000 per year leaving your business. Build a direct booking strategy from Day 1.

⚠ **Insurance Reality**

Commercial campground insurance is significantly more expensive than residential property insurance. Get multiple quotes before closing and factor the real number into your pro forma.

⚠ **Seasonal Labor True Cost**

Beyond wages, factor in workers' compensation, payroll taxes, housing (if you provide it), and the management time cost of hiring, training, and replacing seasonal staff each year.

⚠ **Deferred Maintenance Catch-Up**

Most parks sold by retiring owners have years of deferred maintenance. The due diligence inspection will catch some of it — but not all. Budget generously for Year 1 catch-up maintenance.

Financing Options for New Buyers

Option	Overview
SBA 7(a) Loans	Most common financing vehicle for first-time buyers. Up to $5M, 10–25 year terms, lower down payment requirements. Requires strong personal credit and a solid business plan.
SBA 504 Loans	For larger acquisitions with significant real estate component. Lower interest rates, longer terms, but more complex qualification.
Conventional Commercial Loans	Typically require 25–35% down payment. Faster process than SBA. Best for buyers with strong financial profiles.
Seller Financing	Seller acts as lender — often used to bridge gaps or as a goodwill gesture from retiring owners. Can offer flexible terms. Negotiate carefully.
USDA Business Loans	Available for rural campground acquisitions. Favorable terms for parks in qualifying rural areas.

The Pro Forma Reality Check

Before you close on any park, build a conservative pro forma — a financial projection based on real numbers, not the seller's optimistic projections. Use the actual last 3 years of financial statements, assume 10% lower revenue than the best year, and assume 10% higher expenses. If that scenario still works for you financially — buy the park.

CHAPTER 4

Operations You Need to Master Fast

The practical systems that determine whether your park runs smoothly or barely runs at all.

The Operations Hierarchy

Not all operational challenges are equal. Here's how to prioritize where to spend your energy:

Priority	Focus
Priority 1: Safety	Anything that could harm a guest or result in liability. Fix these before anything else, always.
Priority 2: Guest Experience	Cleanliness, working utilities, functional check-in, responsive staff. Determines your reviews and repeat bookings.
Priority 3: Revenue Systems	Pricing, reservations, add-ons, and ancillary revenue. Determines your financial performance.
Priority 4: Efficiency	Automation, software, processes that save staff time. Reduces costs and improves consistency.
Priority 5: Growth	New amenities, new revenue streams, expansion. Only pursue after 1–4 are solid.

Technology: Your Most Important Early Investment

New owners often delay investing in the right technology because they're managing costs. This is a mistake. The right park management software pays for itself within weeks through better pricing, reduced no-shows, automated communications, and time saved on manual processes.

What your technology stack should include from Day 1:

- Park management software (PMS) — your central operating system for reservations, guest data, site management, and reporting
- Online booking — at minimum 70% of your bookings should be available without a phone call
- Automated guest communications — confirmation, pre-arrival, post-stay, review request
- POS system for your camp store — integrated with your PMS ideally
- Financial software — QuickBooks or equivalent, reconciling with your PMS data

REAL TALK

The park management software you choose will affect every aspect of your operations — guest experience, staff efficiency, pricing, reporting, and revenue. Don't choose based on price alone. Choose based on what it can do for your business. The difference between mediocre and excellent software is worth thousands of dollars per year in captured revenue.

Staffing: The Challenge Nobody Talks About Enough

Staffing is the hardest part of running a campground for most owners. Here's the honest picture:

- Good campground staff are rare — people who are warm, reliable, calm under pressure, and willing to work weekends and holidays don't grow on trees
- Seasonal work is not attractive to everyone — your applicant pool is smaller than you'd like and turnover is high
- Work campers are often your best resource — RV enthusiasts who trade labor for a site are frequently among the most motivated, experienced, and passionate employees you'll ever have
- The owner-employee relationship in a live-in operation is uniquely complex — boundaries need to be explicit and respected
- Cross-train everyone — in a small operation, everyone needs to be able to cover for everyone else

The 3 AM Test

Before every major staffing or operations decision, ask: if something goes wrong at 3 AM, who do I call, and what do they do? If the answer is 'call me,' you don't have a system yet. The goal is a park that can handle a nighttime emergency without waking the owner for every situation.

The Regulations Landscape

Campground regulations vary significantly by state and county. Most new owners are surprised by how many layers of compliance exist.

- State health department regulations: Govern bathhouses, pool water quality, sewage disposal, and potable water
- Local zoning: Determines what you can build, how many sites you can have, what activities are permitted
- ADA compliance: Accessible sites, bathrooms, and paths are a legal requirement, not optional
- Fire codes: Fire lane clearance, extinguisher requirements, campfire regulations
- Business licensing: State, county, and sometimes municipal licenses may be required
- Environmental regulations: Wetlands, floodplains, stormwater management — especially relevant for waterfront properties

⚠ **Join Your State Campground Association**

Every state has a campground and RV park association. Membership gives you access to legal updates, regulatory guidance, peer networks, and education. It's one of the best investments you can make in your first year. Find yours through the National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds (ARVC).

CHAPTER 5

Guests, Reviews & Your Reputation

How to build the kind of park that markets itself.

Your reputation is your most valuable asset. In a business where guests choose based on reviews before they ever visit, the experience you deliver translates directly into the marketing you receive.

Who Your Guests Are — and Who They're Becoming

Guest Type	Characteristics
Traditional RVers	Retirees and empty-nesters with time and disposable income. Loyal, longer stays, lower maintenance. The backbone of most parks' revenue.
Young Families	30s–40s with kids, often new to camping. High expectations, shorter stays, responsive to programming and activities. Growing fast.
Millennials & Gen Z	Experience-seekers who camp for the vibe and the 'gram. Will pay more for unique accommodations. Heavily influenced by reviews and social media.
Digital Nomads	Remote workers who need reliable Wi-Fi and stay for weeks or months. Low maintenance, steady revenue, growing fast.
Weekend Warriors	Local guests staying 2–3 nights for a quick escape. High turnover, volume-dependent revenue, price-sensitive.

Understanding your guest mix matters because different guests need different things — and different marketing. A park that serves retirees needs different amenities, pricing, and communications than one targeting young families.

The Honest Truth About Difficult Guests

You will have difficult guests. Prepare for this mentally, and train your staff for it practically.

- The rule-breaker: Someone who ignores quiet hours, lets their dog run loose, or violates fire regulations. Enforce your rules calmly, consistently, and without anger. Write your rules clearly, post them visibly, and back your staff when they enforce them.
- The refund demander: Someone who demands a refund for a complaint that doesn't warrant one. Have a clear, written refund policy. Stick to it. Offer goodwill gestures (store credit, future discount) without setting a precedent of caving to pressure.
- The chronic complainer: Someone who finds fault with everything. Serve them professionally. Know when a guest is genuinely not the right fit for your park.
- The online reviewer: Someone who threatens to leave a bad review as leverage. Never negotiate under this threat. Address the concern on its merits, not the threat.

REAL TALK

You cannot make every guest happy, and trying to will make you miserable. Some guests are simply not the right fit for your park — and that's okay. Your goal is to deliver a consistently excellent experience for the guests who are the right fit, and handle the rest professionally.

Building Your Community

The most successful parks build something beyond a business — they build a community. Guests who feel a sense of belonging return year after year, recruit their friends and family, and become genuinely invested in your park's success.

- Learn and use guest names — the single highest-impact habit in hospitality
- Create regular events that bring guests together — potlucks, movie nights, fishing tournaments, holiday celebrations
- Welcome returning guests like old friends — because they are
- Introduce guests to each other when there's a natural connection — 'You should meet the family in Site 22 — they just came from the same trail you're headed to'
- Be present and visible as the owner — guests feel differently about a park where they've met the person who owns it

CHAPTER 6

The Mental Game

Nobody talks about this. We will.

Owning an RV park or campground is a rewarding, meaningful, financially interesting life choice. It can also be exhausting, isolating, and psychologically demanding in ways you won't fully understand until you're in it. This chapter is about what to expect mentally — and how to stay healthy and sane.

What Nobody Warns You About

- Peak season is a sprint that lasts 3–5 months. There will be weeks during this time where you work 60–70 hours with no days off. This is normal for the first few seasons. Plan for it and have a support system around you.
- You will never fully 'leave work' because you live where you work. The park is always there. Guests will knock on your door at dinner. Learning to set and maintain personal boundaries is one of the most important skills you'll develop.
- The first off-season can feel deeply strange. After the intensity of peak season, the silence of November can feel like a void. Have a plan for what you're doing with that time — whether it's rest, capital projects, or travel.
- You will second-guess the purchase. Almost every new park owner has a moment in Year 1 — usually during an infrastructure crisis or a difficult guest situation — where they question everything. This is normal and it passes.
- It takes 2–3 seasons to really know your park. The first year is survival and learning. The second year you start to understand your patterns. By Year 3, you're running the business instead of the business running you.

Protecting Your Energy

Your energy is your park's most important resource. A burned-out, resentful owner creates a burned-out, resentful park culture. Protect it intentionally.

- Build one genuine day off per week into your schedule during peak season — non-negotiable, even if it requires creative staffing
- Find at least one other park owner you can talk to honestly about the business. The RV park community is generous — reach out at conferences, through state associations, or online communities
- Set and communicate your personal boundary hours to staff — when you're reachable and when you're not, and what constitutes a true emergency
- Celebrate the wins. A 5-star review, a fully booked weekend, a guest who says they're coming back next year — these moments are the point. Notice them.

Building Toward Freedom

The end game for most park owners is a business that runs excellently without requiring their constant presence. This doesn't happen automatically — it's built deliberately, through systems, staff, and technology.

- Document everything — every process, every SOP, every emergency procedure. If it's in your head and not on paper, you're the bottleneck.
- Hire and develop a key manager who can run day-to-day operations without you — this is your most important long-term staff investment
- Invest in technology that automates what staff would otherwise do manually — pricing updates, guest communications, maintenance tracking
- Accept that you cannot do everything — and that the attempt to do so is what traps owners in their parks rather than running them

The 5-Year Vision

Write down what you want your park and your life to look like in 5 years. What does the business look like? What does your typical week look like? How involved are you day-to-day? Use that vision to drive every system, hire, and technology decision you make along the way.

CHAPTER 7

Your 90-Day Roadmap & New Owner Toolkit

Everything in one place. Start here on Day 1.

The 90-Day New Owner Roadmap

Period	Focus
Days 1–7	Property physical inspection. Meet all staff. Read all reviews. Locate all utility shutoffs.
Days 8–14	Financial deep dive. Build your real P&L picture. Identify top 5 cost concerns.
Days 15–21	Staff individual meetings. Identify key people. Assess skill gaps. Begin training plans.
Days 22–30	Systems audit. Evaluate all software, processes, and documentation. Identify what's missing.
Days 31–45	Fix safety and guest-experience priorities. Update online presence. Begin responding to reviews.
Days 46–60	Implement or upgrade PMS software. Set rates for next season. Close staffing gaps.
Days 61–75	Complete seasonal opening prep if applicable. Launch pre-season marketing. Train all staff.
Days 76–90	Full operational readiness check. All systems go. Welcome your first guests as the new owner.

Essential Resources for New Park Owners

Resource	Details
ARVC (National Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds)	arvc.org — Industry association with education, conferences, advocacy, and peer community
Your State Campground Association	Every state has one — find via ARVC. Local regulations, peer network, regional expertise
The Dyrt & Campspot Reports	Annual camping industry data and trends — essential reading for market intelligence
KOA North American Camping Report	Published annually — comprehensive consumer research on camping trends and preferences
Workamper News	workamper.com — Best platform for finding work camper staff for your park
RV Park Sales Brokers	Specialists in campground transactions who often have seller-side intelligence you can learn from

The New Owner's First Week Checklist

- ✓ Walk every site — document condition, issues, and potential
- ✓ Test all electrical hookups at a sample of 10+ sites
- ✓ Run all bathhouse plumbing — check hot water, pressure, drains
- ✓ Locate and test all utility shutoffs — know where they are before you need them
- ✓ Meet every staff member individually — listen more than you talk
- ✓ Read every review from the last 24 months on Google, Facebook, and camping apps
- ✓ Review 3 years of actual financial statements
- ✓ Check your insurance coverage — confirm it's adequate and appropriate for a commercial campground
- ✓ Introduce yourself online — Google Business post, social media, website update
- ✓ Join your state campground association

You're Going to Build Something Great.

The outdoor hospitality industry is one of the most human businesses there is. People come to you to rest, to reconnect, to make memories with their families. You get to be the person who makes that possible.

That's not a small thing. Build it well.

THANK YOU!

YOUR SUCCESS IS OUR #1 GOAL. FOR MORE TOOLS, SYSTEMS, AND MUCH MORE, PLEASE VISIT OUR FAMILY OF SITES

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