

Explore and escape

Register now for North Cascades learning center programs

By Sarah Jackson

KEN BURNS' latest documentary film series "The National Parks: America's Best Idea" is already generating increased interest in the country's national parks.

That includes the wooded and glacier-strewn expanse that is North Cascades National Park, home to the nonprofit North Cascades Environmental Learning Center.

Established in 2005, the learning center has become a hub of outdoor learning – an intensive summer camp for all ages – off Highway 20 on the shores of Diablo Lake.

"We're seeing this increase, a renewed interest and passion for natural parks and public lands in general because of that show," said Christian Martin, a spokesman for the North Cascade Institute, which runs the learning center with the city of Seattle and the National Park Service.

Registration recently opened for an array of spring and summer programs at the learning center, 16 eco-friendly buildings that serve as a home base for numerous educational field trips, family getaways and wilderness escapes.

"Just this past week, we registered a family from California and a family from North Carolina who have never been out here and never heard about us," Martin said, citing Burns' six-part PBS series, which didn't feature the North Cascades specifically.

If you're still filling out your vacation schedule, now is the time to plan a trip to the center or sign up for some of the center's multiday programs and adventures.

Many of the programs are structured, specialized and last three days, such as "Spring Birding Weekend: Migration and Song" June 4 to 6 (starting at \$215) or "Pocket Camera Wildflower Photography" July 19 to 21 with professional photographer Mark Turner (starting at \$215).

Others, such as the especially popular family getaways

and "Diablo Downtime" (for adults only) are offered on select dates and include optional guided activities — hiking, canoeing, yoga and special meals — that visitors can try at their leisure.

New this year is a program called Base Camp, which allows people to come to the learning center for visits of any length at any time on a space-available basis, Martin said.

"There's this really large pool of people. They want to come up and kind of do things on their own schedule," Martin said. "You essentially customize your own learning center experience."

Base Camp is also a way to save money if you go along with friends or groups. Group rates are \$195 a night for a room for four instead of the single rate of \$95 a person for a space in a shared room.

Private rooms are available at higher rates for Base Camp and most programs.

If you want to see the learning center before signing up for a program, take a free visit. There are three free Saturdays this year, May 22, June 5 and July 31.

Visitors can go canoeing on Diablo Lake in the learning center's new 36-foot, 18-person canoe or hike to a hidden waterfall with naturalists, to name a few treats.

There is a catch: You can't register beforehand for day trips. Drop-in sign up begins at 8:30 a.m., and it's first come, first served.

Martin said tough economic times haven't put a huge dent in the learning center's programs. In fact, decreased incomes might be encouraging people to explore locally rather than traveling across the country.

"People are not as likely to go to Disneyland," he said. "There's been a shift. They're looking in their own back yards for family vacations and personal retreats."

