

This family's cottage is on four wheels

By LEE PETERS
News Staff Writer

ST. JOHNS—The Donald Sabos have a cottage on four wheels!

It's a Coachmen motor home with all the comforts of home. But there's one exception, the Sabo family of 303 Lindy Lane feels.

"You're not tied down to one place," explains Sabo, a pharmacist at Arnold Drugs in Southgate Shopping Plaza. He reports that on a three-day weekend one can travel a distance of 600 miles comfortably. That can put you in one of five different states, the St. Johns man adds.

Since buying the unit a couple months ago, Don, his wife Maureen and children, Robert and Lisa have visited such places as Charlevoix, St. Ignace, Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes at Traverse City, Detroit's Greenfield Village, Port Huron and Higgins Lake. They try to get away every two weeks and in a recent adventure they searched for Petoskey Stones in Petoskey.

There's no problem finding a place to camp, says Sabo, since the motor home is completely self contained. He advises that if state campgrounds are full or private facilities overcrowded, a rest area or parking lot can fill the bill.

His air-conditioned 25-foot camper sleeps six, has its own generator, stove, oven and refrigerator and bathroom. It has connections for both gas and electricity. Carpeting is just one of the added luxuries.

Under normal conditions, Sabo says the vehicle should not be driven over 60 m.p.h. And he ought to know after motoring 1,500 in only a few weekends. For those thinking about investing in a motor home, Sabo cautions that you have to really like it and to be an engineer, too.

This summer the Sabos have planned a camping trip to the west coast. Their

itinerary isn't complete yet, as they like to get off the beaten path and away from crowds. There are many luxury 'campgrounds,' reports Sabo. It seems where one stops there are always a half dozen who follow, he believes. People like to congregate, he thinks, and one of the main reasons is protection.

The large number of campgrounds is due to franchised companies like Kamptown of America (KOA) and several motel chains, like Ramada Inn, entering the business. And with more competition, the level of luxury at the campsites also grows.

According to the Wall Street Journal, some campgrounds resemble small towns, and investments run into millions of dollars. A facility near Wildwood, Fla., will open next month with 1,150 campsites, and plans call for 1,900 sites by the end of next year. "On a full day it will have a population upwards of 3,000 people," says George Wayson, president of Continental Camper Resorts Inc. which owns the facility. The company's investment will total nearly \$6 million.

Each campsite has a telephone, and the sites are arranged around an 18-hole, 6,500-yard golf course. A \$1 million clubhouse has locker



Here's Donald and Maureen Sabo with Robert and Lisa in front of their Coachmen motor home. The 25-foot vehicle is self contained and has all the comforts of home.

rooms, dining rooms, a pro shop and whirlpool and sauna baths. All the campground's restrooms are air-conditioned, and one restroom, which cost \$100,000, is especially equipped for the elderly with grab rails, wheelchair ramps and individual shower stalls.

Other companies are developing "condominium" campgrounds where the individual campsites are sold to campers. Outdoor Resorts of America Inc. formed four years ago to build campgrounds, has developed three such facilities in Florida and one in Tennessee, and it plans a dozen more in Michigan, Colorado, California, New York and Missouri. The sites measure 35 feet by 70 feet and sell for \$4,200 to \$9,000 depending on location. When

an owner isn't using his campsite, the company will rent it for him - at \$5 to \$10 a night - and split the income with the owner.

The concept is being well received, company officials claim. Campers like the idea of always being assured a place to camp, and owning a campsite also appeals to investors looking for appreciation in land values, the officials say. At the company's Orlando, Fla., facility, where sites cost up to \$9,000, more than half of the 980 spaces are sold.

Some camping experts are critical of the concept. They contend that campers who buy a site with an eye partly toward appreciation in land values may be disappointed, at least in the short run. Few of the campgrounds are

sold out, and the unsold sites are a drag on the market, they explain.

Also, some consultants wonder about the long-term attractiveness of such campgrounds. Says one: "The reason people buy camping vehicles is to travel, not be tied down to one campsite." Outdoor Resorts attempts to satisfy its customers' wanderlust by offering owners of sites in one campground the right to rent sites in its other facilities at half price.

But increasing campground costs and services are showing up in higher overnight rates. The average at KOA facilities now is around \$3.50 a night, compared with \$2.25 three years ago, said Darrell Booth, KOA president. Sites at Wildwood

will be priced at \$7 for those farthest from the clubhouse and not on the golf course; those best situated will rent for \$12.

Also, there are a few indications of growing camper unhappiness over accommodations. "Our studies show a definite pattern of dissatisfaction is arising," says Wilbur Lapage a campground researcher. "When we started surveying campers eight years ago we got no gripes at all, but lately we get complaints about high prices, noise, crowded facilities and campgrounds being too-commercial and too much like a resort. We may see a surge back toward more simplistic camping in reaction to all this commercialism."