

Love thy neighbor's pool

Pool rental app Swimply helps people cool off during the pandemic

By Cynthia J. Drake
Special to the
American-Statesman

One sad side effect of a summer of social distancing due to COVID-19 has been the dried-up access to many community swimming pools throughout Austin, prompting locals to search for other avenues for cooling off.

Enter Swimply, the sharing economy's Uber-style answer to accessing your neighbor's pool for an afternoon of fun that's been making a splash, especially since the beginning of the pandemic.

The online private pool rental service launched in 2019, but since concerns over the coronavirus began this spring, it has grown exponentially in terms of app downloads and bookings. More than 50 Austin-area homeowners, including in places such as Leander, Manor and Georgetown, now offer up their pools for rental through the service, usually charging around \$30 to \$45 per hour.

Garrett Culver and his fiancée Kayla Dunster



Writer Cynthia Drake and her friend Karen Stephens enjoy their first swim of the summer together at the Round Rock pool owned by Garrett Culver and Kayla Dunster. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]

have been renting out their Round Rock pool and backyard since May through Swimply. After initially being skeptical about the idea of allowing strangers into their private space, the couple say they're happy with their decision.

Their pool, which includes a variety of inflatables (all sanitized

before each guest arrives) and a shaded gazebo, has been fully booked every weekend that it's available by couples, friends and families celebrating birthday parties. They've been able to funnel proceeds back into maintaining their pool, including funding an expensive new heater.

"Everyone's been very

respectful," said Culver. "A lot of people don't want to be anywhere in public — there are some water parks that were open, but of course everyone's walking around without a mask. They can utilize the pools to be with their family without having to worry about being with other people."

The first 'normal summer day'

Jeaneane McNulty and her family rented Culver and Dunster's pool for three hours in late July, along with another local family they have included in their "quarantine pod."

"Two community pools have been closed all summer, and most swimmable camping areas and parks were booked up through October," said McNulty, an Austin-based yoga instructor. "The best part, aside from having the pool all to ourselves, was sitting by the poolside after dinner, seeing my family finally unwound. It was the first time it really felt like a normal summer day this year."

After her neighborhood pool closed this summer, Jordan Bucher, a personal trainer in Austin, rented a pool in northeast Austin for a couple of hours with her husband and 13- and 9-year-old sons. The reservation also included the use of a small playground and bocce ball court.

"Our go-to pools are closed, and we wanted to do something special and

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Garrett Culver and Kayla Dunster's Round Rock pool is available for rent on Swimply.

[CONTRIBUTED BY GARRETT CULVER AND KAYLA DUNSTER]



Social distance (from people and bison) on Catalina's wild side

By Mary Forgiione
Los Angeles Times

SANTA CATALINA ISLAND, Calif. — It was the first day of my trip to Santa Catalina, and the island already was working its magic. I didn't see anyone for miles as I hiked an eastern segment of the Trans-Catalina Trail, which stretches from the town of Avalon to Parsons Landing, a remote beach on the western side of the island.

But that didn't last.

As I rounded a corner, I came upon two — or was it three? — bison lolling on the hillside. I stopped. The beasts, with huge heads, shaggy beards and sharp little horns, stared at me. I stared back. They looked mellow, but I knew better. I had read warning signs on the island



Hikers Erin Sakamoto, left, and her sister Jenna Sakamoto arrive at the Little Harbor campground Aug. 11 after hiking the Trans-Catalina Trail from Two Harbors. The TCT is the premier hike on Catalina Island that spans a total of 38.5 miles. [ALLEN J. SCHABEN/LOS ANGELES TIMES]

about how quickly they could charge. But my mind, and my body, had stopped. How far away was I supposed to be?

Before I could think it through, the voice of God boomed: "Please turn

back! Turn back!" I quickly retreated. Turns out God was a tour bus driver with a bull-horn on a dirt road who could see what I could not: I was walking toward 20 bison lying or standing along the trail.

Catalina's wild side can be surprising, and not just because of bison. The 38.5-mile trail that runs along ridgetops and crisscrosses the island in and out of canyons made me feel miles away. How could I forget how freeing an island visit could be?

Planning a getaway is tricky these days; I didn't want to wander far from my home in Los Angeles' San Pedro section because of the pandemic. On Catalina, I felt safe and serene, all without straying out of Los Angeles County.

The wild side

Catalina, the closest of the Channel Islands to the mainland, is about 22

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Cynthia Drake's family enjoys an afternoon at the Round Rock pool owned by Garrett Culver and Kayla Dunster. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]



Garrett Culver and Kayla Dunster's Round Rock pool is available for rent on Swimply. [CONTRIBUTED BY GARRETT CULVER AND KAYLA DUNSTER]

POOL

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make a good memory in a summer that has been otherwise pretty boring for the kids," said Bucher. "We have been talking about doing it again in the next few weeks, probably with another family this time."

Bathrooms and liability concerns

When you rent someone's pool, everyone always asks: What about the restroom situation? Each homeowner handles this differently, with many (like Culver and Dunster) allowing guests to use the private restroom inside their house. They require guests to wear masks and use hand sanitizer prior to entering the home.

Other houses might offer a pool house-style private restroom, an outhouse, or directions to the nearest public restroom.

Bucher said her pool rental did not include a restroom option, which wasn't ideal — "double-and triple-check with

Swimply

Want to rent a neighbor's pool? Learn more at swimply.com.

your kids that they use the restroom at home before venturing out," she advised.

Some people express concern over liability issues in case of injuries or accidents on someone's private property.

"Swimply works with liability waivers through its service where every guest is asked to sign and identify themselves," wrote Emily Esrig, a representative for the company.

When 23-year-old Swimply CEO Bunim Laskin appeared on an episode of "Shark Tank" that aired earlier this year, the panel of business executives laughed at his gumption, and he walked away without an investor.

"Who in the world thought this was a good idea?" asked investor Robert Herjavec.

At least for several Austinites during this pandemic-scorched summer, it would seem that question has been answered.

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