Checking print-outs by poolside at a Texas Instruments resort in Chico, Calif.; cutting a high-tech profile at Club Med's Punta Cana retreat

Computers

Mixing Suntans with Software

*Camps that cater to adults are making a summer splash*

When Richard Schnelker packed his eleven-year-old daughter Suzanne off to a computer camp in Georgia's northern mountains, he packed his own bags as well. Blue Ridge CompuCamp was offering parents, for $375 a week, a chance to catch up with their children's knowledge of computers, and the 45-year-old lottery-company executive from Atlanta was determined to do just that. "Suzanne played tennis and hiked," he says. "But I was in that computer center ten hours a day for five days."

In other times, such overt parent-child rivalry might be considered unhealthy. These days it is considered smart. By the end of his week in the mountains, Schnelker had written and debugged a 1,000-line BASIC program and learned enough about computers to hold his own with both the programmers on his staff and the young know-it-alls at home. And Schnelker is not alone. This summer thousands of men and women are signing up for the nation's newest form of vacation retreat: the adult computer camp.

Like their juvenile counterparts, the camps for grownups combine indoor instruction with outdoor exercise, and are available for anything from a long weekend to a week or more. Typically, hands-on classes with the machines begin right after breakfast and continue until lunch. In the afternoon, such activities as hiking and boating are offered, although most campers head back to the keyboards for marathon sessions that may drag on until lights out. But it is not all work and no play. Says Eugene Galanter, who runs the Summer Computer Institute at Amherst College in Massachusetts: "We also have an occasional break for martinis."

Camp settings range from the spartan to the sublime. In Scotts Valley, Calif., Nolan Bushnell, the founder of Atari, will provide a rustic redwood scene where campers bring their own sleeping bags and mix VisiCalc with volleyball. The Computer Resort in Chico, Calif., sponsored by Texas Instruments, features jumbo-size steaks barbecued around a swimming pool. Princess Cruises in Los Angeles will coordinate 15 hours of classes with a ten-day sail that includes calls at Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco. Cost: $1,995. Prefer your silicon seminars on terra firma? For $879, Club Med provides Atari computers along with white-sand beaches and piña coladas at Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic.

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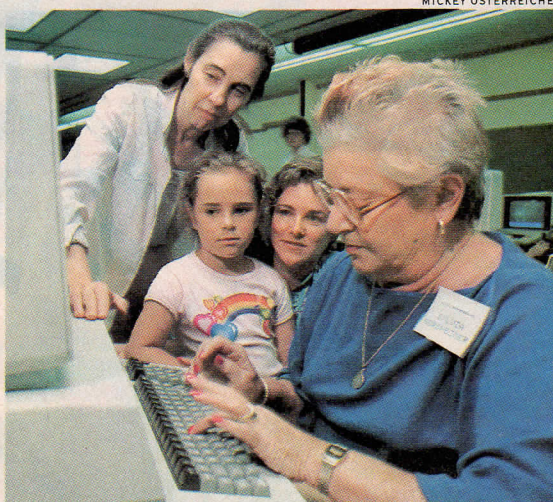
Mother, daughter and grandmother at Clarkson College
"Why should children be the only ones having fun?"

"Why should children be the only ones having fun?" asks William Gallagher, who started an adult computer camp with his wife Deborah at their home in Oakland, Calif. This summer the couple moved their operation to the 1,200-acre Silverado resort in Napa Valley and opened workshops in San Jose, San Diego, Seattle, Phoenix and Lake Tahoe. "We teach our guests what software to buy and what computer will fit their needs," says Gallagher. "We want them to be able to defend themselves in the computer world."

The relaxed setting of a camp helps soothe the anxieties that overwhelm many adults when confronted with a computer. Susan Cooper, co-owner of a New York City messenger service, went to the Amherst institute to catch up with her 14-year-old son John. Back home now in Ridgewood, N.J., she can look with new insight at print-outs of the programs he has written. "Finally, I understand what I was missing," she says. "He had grasped something that had eluded me for years."

For some, computer camping is a family affair. Hedy Messinger brought her mother, 68, and her two children, Candy, 7, and Mark, 13, to Clarkson College's Family Computer Camp in Potsdam, N.Y. At first, she was fearful that a heavy dose of computerese would bore her parent. Not so. "She was absolutely riveted," says Messinger. "We had to drag her away from the machine just to make sure she got nourishment."

An added benefit for adults, but not children, is that the cost of a computer camp can often be a tax write-off. Many camps point out in their brochures that the Internal Revenue Service regards computer instruction as a tax-deductible business expense. **—By Philip Elmer-DeWitt. Reported by Joyce Leviton/Atlanta, with other bureaus**