

Band Camp or Bust

Toni Straka plans to take several trucks when she hits the road. She needs them to transport percussion instruments -- everything from timpani to cymbals to a xylophone.



But instead of going to a concert hall, Mrs. Straka is heading to a rustic lodge, nestled in the tall pines of Cambria, where she and other musicians from throughout the country, all 50 and older, will learn 15 new works in a week of nonstop playing.

It's time for band camp.

"It's like going off to camp, except no one sends you any brownies," the 71-year-old Santa Barbara percussionist said. "But you get away from home, and all your meals are served. What more can you ask for?"

Cambria Pines Band Camp 2010, hosted by Santa Barbara-based Prime Time Band, is set for Sunday through March 19 at the Cambria Pines Lodge. Members from New Horizons bands throughout the U.S. will be there to rehearse all week, day and night. Prime Time Band is affiliated with the New Horizons International Music Association.

When they're not playing, the 90 camp participants and their spouses can take in the sights, which include nearby Hearst Castle. Alto saxophonist Judy Carr, 66, of Santa Barbara recalled seeing seals on a nearby shore back during one of the previous Cambria Pines camps.

Prime Time Band, open to anyone 50 or older, hosted the camps there in 2002, 2004 and 2006, said J.B. "Van" Vander Ark, who, as camp coordinator, was busy putting music into folders on a recent day at his Santa Barbara home.

This year, camp participants will be led by conductor Roy Ernst, the Tarpon Springs, Florida, founder of New Horizons bands, in songs such as "Brazil: Ceremony, Song & Samba" by Robert W. Smith and "Salute to the Cinema," a medley of pieces such as "Hooray for Hollywood" and "Over the Rainbow," arranged by Carl Strommen. Conductor Lou Sbrana of Santa Rosa will direct the group in works such as "Rain," a medley of well-weathered songs such as "Singing in the Rain." Peter Ziegler of Madison, Wisconsin, will direct the camp in songs such as "Fairest of the Fair" by march king John Phillip Sousa and "Fantasy on a Japanese Folk Song" by Samuel R. Hazo.

Band camp participants won't get their music until the first day of camp, said Mr. Vander Ark, 76, who taught band and orchestra from 1958 to 1993 at La Colina Junior High School before co-founding Prime Time Band in 1995. He directed the group until he handed the baton over to Jeff Peterson in 2005 and now plays euphonium, sort of a half-size version of a tuba.

Prime Time Band alternates its West Coast camp hosting duties with New Horizons bands in Santa Rosa; Olympia, Washington; and Bend, Oregon, Mr. Vander Ark said.



No more slots are available in the camp, which reached capacity in June, Mr. Vander Ark said. “People from the Midwest and East Coast love to come out here in the wintertime. We’ve had people from Iowa City; Atlanta, Georgia; Madison, Wisconsin; and Rochester, New York. We’ve had people from Canada, Florida, Arizona, Washington, Oregon and California.”

beach to walk on, Mr. Vander Ark said. “For someone from Iowa, that’s very unique. It’s a special treat for the out-of-state visitors to go and play golf. They can’t play in the snow in the middle of the winter.”

Twenty-eight of Prime Time Band’s 72 members are attending this year’s camp, Mr. Vander Ark said. “It can’t help but make the band better when the participating band members return with all this enthusiasm. It charges everyone up.”

Normally Prime Time Band members get just a weekly rehearsal on Tuesdays at the La Colina Junior High School band room in Santa Barbara.

Band camp means a lot more practice.

“In four and a half days, we will rehearse 20 hours with three conductors,” Mr. Vander Ark said. “It’s not focused on the performance of 15 pieces. It’s the enjoyment of learning new music. It’s like a large book club reading together. We rehearse in the mornings and evenings, and we make new friends.”

“Because of the common ground of playing music, it’s like the first time you meet them, you’ve know them your entire life,” Mr. Vander Ark said. “There’s no competition as to which band (from various cities) is better. We play music together.”

“Besides,” he added with a grin, “it keeps us off the streets.”

And out of the woods. Unlike youth camps, the New Horizons gatherings allow participants to stay in a lodge rather than roughing it in tents.

New Horizons holds six to eight band camps each year throughout the United States, in places varying from Aspen, Colorado, to Door County, Wisconsin, and Chautauqua, New York, Mr. Vander Ark said.

“For one of the drummers coming from Phoenix, it will be her 46th band camp in 15 years,” Mr. Vander Ark said. “Once you go to one, wherever it is, you want to go to more of them. It’s such an uplifting experience.”

He said the New Horizons band camps are less competitive than high school band camps.

“It just encourages you to practice more, to be open to working harder and experiencing new kinds of music,” Mr. Vander Ark said. Added Mrs. Straka: “You go home and think, ‘I didn’t know I could do that.’”



Mrs. Carr, a substitute organist at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Goleta, said the camp is a great way to meet musicians from all over the country. “We see some of the same people each time.”

“We have every level of player. It doesn’t matter if you make mistakes,” she said. “A lot of us are beginners. We have the same goal: a love of music.”

Participants will play their pieces in a free concert at 7 p.m. March 18 at Cambria Pines Lodge for guests, friends and spouses whom Mrs. Straka said are called -- no kidding -- “Band-Aids.” That includes her husband, Bill, who plays trumpet in Prime Time Band but decided this year to just enjoy the scenery in Cambria.

In addition to the full band rehearsals, people will get together in small groups in the afternoons for impromptu jam sessions, which could include some Dixieland, Mr. Vander Ark said.

Mrs. Carr added that musicians meet separately for sectional rehearsals throughout the camp.

Ken Lincoln, a Prime Time Band member going to the camp, said he likes learning from the various directors.

“Each conductor is different. We pick up different ideas from each one,” said Mr. Lincoln, 87, who joined Prime Time Band in 2003 after decades of not playing his trombone.

The Santa Barbara resident, who played in concert and marching bands at Stanford University in his younger days, recalled one of the most difficult pieces at a band camp was a medley of songs from “Les Miserables.”

He added that at his age, reading all the fast notes is a challenge. But he said he plans to keep performing as long as he can.

“It depends on what you call ‘good,’” he said with a laugh when asked about the quality of his playing.

Mr. Vander Ark said this year’s camp will end with Mr. Lincoln, his fellow musicians and their spouses and friends -- an estimated 111 people -- in a sing-along of campfire songs.