

Life in the Valley



Crater Lake is seen from Watchman's lookout tower, a "kind of difficult" snowshoe and Nordic ski route. PHOTOS BY WILLIAM SULLIVAN/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

SEEKING SNOW

Find winter, and snow, at Crater Lake, with a base camp at Medford resort

William L. Sullivan
Special to Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

As our winters get warmer, the trick for pursuing snow sports is to go where the snow is. In Oregon, that's Crater Lake, with a current annual average of 35 feet.

To be sure, snowpacks have been steadily declining even at Oregon's national park, according to careful ranger records. The annual average in the 1940s was 52 feet. This dropped to 41 feet throughout the 1970s and 38 feet in the 2010s.

Still, the current level is the equivalent of more than an inch of snow falling every day of the year.

Spectacular snowshoe and Nordic ski routes at Crater Lake lead to Discovery Point (easy), the Watchman's lookout tower (kind of difficult) and 31 miles around the entire caldera rim (seriously difficult).

No equipment? No problem. You can rent snowshoes inexpensively at the gift shop or use them free on ranger-guided walks that leave Rim Village on weekends at 1 p.m.

Even when other mountain passes are bare, you still can expect a 5-foot wall of snow around the Rim Village parking lot, the lake rim's only plowed access.

Climb that bank, and you're face to face with the most famous, seldom visited winter scenery in the state — a startlingly blue inland sea ringed with snow cliffs. Wizard Island, the sorcerer's cone inside this magic missing mountain, switches hats in winter from black to white.

Incredibly, most Oregonians have never seen Crater Lake in the snow. Even on a sunny winter weekend, half of the 30 or so cars at Rim Village are from California. The only crowd is a daily busload of Chinese tourists who slip and totter 40 feet through the snow to take selfies at the rim's warning sign, "Danger! Keep Back!"

Perhaps you're worried that the national park has upped its entry fee from \$10 a car to \$15. Next summer, the rate will almost certainly climb to \$20, and there have been threats that it could zoom as high as \$70.

Not to worry. In winter, the rate is still \$10, and it's essentially by donation. The entry fee booth is boarded up, with a note suggesting that visitors detour to

park headquarters and offer to pay there.

Because the park's north entrance road is closed in winter, visitors from the Willamette Valley have to take a circuitous detour to the south entrance. It's a four-hour drive from Salem.

The quickest route is to take Interstate 5 exit 188a just south of Eugene and follow Willamette Highway 58 across Willamette Pass. Turn south on Highway 97 past Chemult 11 miles, and turn right on Highway 238 toward Diamond Lake 18 miles.

Immediately before reaching Diamond Lake, turn left on Highway 230 toward Medford for 25 miles. Just before the old-timey resort of Union Creek, turn left on Highway 62 for 18 miles to the south entrance road on the left. Then it's 3.8 miles to park headquarters and another 2.6 up to the end of the plowed road at Rim Village.

The gift shop and café at Rim Village are open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., but everything else, including the lodge, is boarded up tight.

Put on your skis or snowshoes and head left along the rim. Because Crater Lake has so many snowstorms, the lake itself is visible only about half the time in winter. If it's clear, you'll be stopping for photos every few feet. Just don't ignore the warning signs and venture too near the cliff edge. The snow can give way, and if you slip, there's no return.

The summertime trail toward Watchman Peak follows the rim closely, but in winter, the only ski trail is the snowed-under road, which veers away from the rim four times in 3 miles. The first time it returns to a viewpoint is at Discovery Point, after 1.2 miles. This is an easy turnaround point.

It's thought that Discovery Point was where pioneers first saw the lake in 1853. Native tribes considered the volcanic caldera taboo and hadn't told newcomers about it.

After another 1.3 miles on the road — and two more detours away from the rim — you'll reach a sign for the Lightning Springs Trail. The lake viewpoint here is the Wizard Island Overlook, another good turnaround point.

If you're scaling the Watchman, keep going on the road uphill, away from the lake, past cliffs for 0.8 mile. When the road levels out at a meadow opening, turn right through a snowfield. Head uphill 0.6 mile through increasingly steep, wind-gnarled pine woods to a



The Watchman lookout is seen at Crater Lake. Snowshoers and skiers can trek to the tower on a "kind of difficult" trail.

two-story lookout building. The stone patio here seems to overhang the lake and Wizard Island.

Most rangers agree that this is the best viewpoint of the lake. In winter, it's breathtaking.

Because of the long drive to Crater Lake, a trip here really ought to include an overnight stay. But where? In winter, the only overnight option in the park itself is snow camping.

Tenting in the snow can be fun if you are equipped and experienced. It's essential if you intend to trek all the way around the lake — usually a three-day trip.

About 120 people a year attempt to ski or snowshoe around Crater Lake in winter on the snowed-over Rim Drive. About half are turned back by storms.

All snow campers must get a free permit at park headquarters, in person, during business hours, so rangers can check gear and read warnings about avalanches.

If snow camping isn't your thing, head for the Union Creek Resort, 26 miles toward Medford. In winter, it's the closest place to Crater Lake that offers actual beds and showers.

Opened in 1922, this funky outpost in the woods has been visited by Zane Grey, Jack London and Herbert Hoover. Because it's on the national historic register, it looks much as it did in the olden days.

The Union Creek Lodge has a general store, a fireplace lounge and nine nice rooms (with shared bathrooms) that rent for a reasonable \$78 to \$89.

Beckie's Café, across the street, opens every day at 8 a.m. It's named for Ed Beckleheimer, whose wife, Cassie, became legendary for her huckleberry



Skiers pass Hilman Peak in the Rim Village. Free ranger-guided walks with equipment provided leave Rim Village on weekends at 1 p.m.

pies.

Most of the resort's 23 rental cabins date to the 1920s or were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. They cost \$119 to \$245 and are extremely rustic, with log furniture and tiny bathrooms. They're loads of fun if you're in the mood. Only Cabin 21 overlooks Union Creek's whitewater.

The resort is at a low enough elevation that it's often snow-free in winter. After trying out the snow at the national park, you can round out your day with a short hike at Union Creek. Trails from the lodge lead up Union Creek a mile to a bridge or up the Rogue River half a mile to a gorge where the river churns edgewise though a deep, mossy slot.

Snow is getting scarcer in Oregon. Rangers at Crater Lake have monitored the trend for nearly a century. In warm years like this, if you want to use your Nordic skis or snowshoes in February, you have to go where the snow still falls deep enough for such sports. In Oregon, the safest bet is Crater Lake.

Now's the time to prepare asparagus beds



Gardening
Carol Savonen
Guest columnist

Question: I'd like to plant asparagus. When do you plant it?

Answer: February is the time to order asparagus crowns, which mature a year or two faster than seed. And our relatively dry weather we've been having will allow you to work up a new bed.

Choose a sunny site, and amend the soil deeply with plenty of organic matter. Asparagus will not grow well in heavy, poorly drained soils, such as clay.

Be sure to add plenty of compost. Then, around mid-March, plant crowns.

Planting a new asparagus bed is a great example of delayed gratification, as the crowns need a couple of years to mature into a fully harvestable patch.

Fortunately, asparagus is a perennial vegetable, so your efforts will pay off for

many years to come. A healthy asparagus patch may yield luscious green (or purple) spears for decades.

An added incentive is that home-grown asparagus is way less expensive and much better quality than store-bought spears, which sometimes tend to be woody and tough.

Asparagus crowns are for sale in early spring. Territorial Seed Company offers their beginning in mid-March. The company has a variety called Pacific Purple that I love. Its dark purple spears are so tender they can be eaten raw or cooked. Pacific Purple supposedly outperforms and yields more than most other green varieties, with thicker, tender stringless spears that are higher in sugars and anthocyanins. The purple color fades with cooking.

Once you get the crowns, plant them into the ground as soon as possible. The crowns that you purchase for planting often are the roots gleaned from 1-year-old plants. Crowns offered for planting

have long fleshy roots extending from a central axis.

Oregon State University Extension horticulturists recommend planting asparagus in a trench about 6 inches deep, planting crowns about 12 inches apart. Spread roots, and cover the crowns with 2 inches of soil amended with compost or slow-release fertilizer. Add lime if soil is acidic. As the spears lengthen, fill the trench with soil.

Male plants usually are more productive than females, which produce seed that tend to sprout all over. Reputable companies, such as Territorial Seed, offer predominantly male plants.

The OSU Extension Master Gardeners recommend refraining from harvesting spears their first spring. Their "ferns" provide food for the plant. The second spring after planting, a few shoots can be harvested, but only for a week or two, then the rest should be left to feed developing roots. The third spring and thereafter, spears can be



From planting to harvesting asparagus takes two to three years, but the wait is well worth the reward. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

harvested until mid-June, then allow the fern to grow and keep the root crowns healthy. Thereafter, fertilize asparagus as the spears emerge each spring and after the last harvest in June.