

Knowing how to make a snow cave a handy winter skill

By RICH LANDERS

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LOOKOUT PASS, Idaho (AP) — A group of Spokane Mountaineers shouldered packs and snowshoed out from Lookout Pass with shovels and positive attitudes for their first winter camping experience in snow caves.

"Everybody who heads out in winter should know how to make one," said Sara Schmelzer, the outing organizer.

They didn't have to, but they wanted to build snow caves and sleep in them.

Each member owned a perfectly good tent. In fact, with his snow excavating skills still untested, Shannon Lavada packed one with him just in case. "Murphy's Law seems to rule wherever I go," he said.

But Lavada took to winter shelter making like a young badger digging its first den.

By late afternoon, he and his caving partner, Lexi Nelson, had a roomy white suite in the five-foot snowpack of the St. Regis Basin. They were all smiles. The tent stayed in the pack.

"This was my first winter camping experience, and I loved it," Nelson said later. "From Shannon's experience, I learned it's necessary to bring a complete extra outfit to wear because your clothes and gloves will be soaked from digging," she added, noting that Shannon did most of the under-snow excavation.

Water-resistant overmitts can be worth packing, along with good rain gear.

Leslie Hvozda liked the performance of an inexpensive shovel she'd bought at an auto parts store. "The slightly curved blade shape helps shave off smooth walls and ceilings," she said.

Ideally, a group might also have a shovel with a flatter scoop, which is better for cutting and lifting out snow blocks from the snowpack.

The group talked about site selection. Champagne powder doesn't work without packing and time to settle. The snow pack should have some consolidation, as in a drift. Above all, avalanche terrain must be avoided.

On the trek in, they passed a small group of dads and young Boy Scouts who'd made a snow shelter camp at a safe lower elevation. The snow wasn't deep enough for a cave, but Scouts are resourceful.

They'd built a quinzhee - a giant pile of snow they'd shoveled up and then hollowed out to create a shelter. It looked a bit like an igloo from the outside. Sleeping platforms were neatly carved out of the interior. Nicely done.

Snow shelters can range from a rabbit hole in a tree well and a snow-block-covered trench to a multiroom cavern. They almost always require more time and energy to build than simply stamping a platform in the snow with skis or snowshoes and



Seth Flanders and Leslie Hvozda begin digging a snow cave near Lookout Pass Idaho during an overnight snowshoeing trek with the Spokane Mountaineers on Jan. 28.

pitching a tent.

When planning a winter trek, one must ponder these and other pros and cons of a four-season tent against a snow shelter.

Tents provide quick shelter that's dependable in a wide range of conditions. Finding or digging a fairly level platform is necessary, but that usually requires less exertion than building a snow shelter and there's far less chance of getting clothing wet.

The inside of a tent can be warmer than a snow cave during a sunny winter day, but the tent will be colder on cloudy days and at night.

Meanwhile, the interior temperature of a ventilated occupied snow cave and a couple of candles burning will hover around 32 degrees, which is pretty dang nice if the temperatures are in single digits outside.

A snow cave or igloo might be the preferred shelter for a multiday stay at a base camp. Snow shelters are bombproof in high winds that can damage tents, although snow-block walls can help protect a tent in a storm.

Time is a major consideration. The Mountaineers required 3 to 4 hours to build their first snow caves. Tyler Nyman had to redirect his efforts when he dug into a boulder.

Excavation became more tedious when they dug in and discovered the snow slope they'd selected was riddled with alder branches that might have been flattened lower to the ground had the first deep snows of the season been wetter and not so light.

"Always carry pruning clippers," Nelson advised, thankful that Schmelzer, a veteran snow caver, came prepared.

In the 1970s, the late Russ



Lexi Nelson and Shannon Lavada check out the newly carved snow cave they built near Lookout Pass Idaho during an overnight snowshoeing trek with the Spokane Mountaineers on Jan. 28.

Keene, a veteran of the 10th Mountain Division, and his son, Rob, had a tradition of skiing up the slopes from Schweitzer Mountain Resort and building a snow cave for a week of celebrating the new year.

They were masters. Rob, who'd learned to eliminate wasted steps and shovel strokes, could build a comfortable cave for two or three people in less than 90 minutes.

They loved to invite people to join them on the extra sleeping platforms they would build, each with its own carved out shelf for keeping head lamps, mugs and toiletries handy, and a nook for a candle.

The warm glow of the flames in the cave (a vent hole was punched into the rounded ceiling) set the atmosphere for a toasty evening inside while sipping hot tea and talking about the art of winter camping.

The Mountaineers brought various types of LED lights or lanterns to brighten their caves.

Rather than digging to start their entrance hole for a cave, the Keenes would double the use of that effort by using squarish shovels to excavate snow blocks and setting them aside.

The blocks would be used later to downsize the entrance hole and build a wind screen for the outside optional cooking and eating area. The finished cave and patio was fit for a Better Homes & Gardens spread.

Snow cave designs vary depending on size and snow conditions. Basic features include a step up from the entrance hole to a floor with the sleeping platforms a couple of feet above that. The lower area at the entrance acts as a cold air sump. A rounded ceiling increases structural strength.

Wands or ski poles with ribbons are used to mark the cave to warn away someone — a snowmobiler, for instance — from unwittingly crushing the structure.

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs

Tollgate, Ore.
CLOSED FOR SEASON

Anthony Lakes

North Powder, Ore.
Snow this week: 8"
Base depth: 69"
Conditions: Hill was closed Thursday due to weather. Varying for weekend.

Ski Bluewood

Dayton, Wash.
New snow: 2"
Base depth: 62"
Conditions: Machine-groomed wet snow

Ski Fergi

Joseph, Ore.
New snow: 2"
Base depth: 25"
Conditions: Rain/snow mix will make for varying conditions.

Mt. Hood Meadows

Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: 5"
Base depth: 102"
Conditions: Rain Friday. Wet-packed snow on the groom. Rain-soaked snow off piste.

Snow blocks can be brought just inside the entrance to seal out wind at night, or a pack can be used as a door.

A shovel should be brought inside the cave in case it's necessary to dig out through a snow drift.

The Mountaineers were equipped with one or two sleeping pads apiece. Insulation between your body and the snow is critical for a good night's sleep. A few pads were rolled out on the snow bench for comfort as they sat around a group kitchen carved out of the snow pack.

They shared stories and tips. The first-timers were warned that the roof of a snow cave naturally settles several inches during the night. It might seem much closer to your face when you wake.

Schmelzer said the most restrictive cave she's seen was a Y-shaped rabbit hole - one entrance branching into two sleeping tunnels.

The most interesting cave she's slept in was built into a tree well and included a small evergreen tree which, unbeknownst to the cave makers, was inhabited by a considerable population of wintering spiders.

"They awoke with the heat of our bodies in the cave," Schmelzer said, leaving the rest to our imaginations.

Over the years, stories have been written about skiers or climbers who survived unplanned overnights or endured deadly storms by holing up in an emergency snow shelter.

It's a skill you may never need, but then again, you might need it urgently.

Olympic National Park offers plenty of winter fun

SEATTLE (AP) — During the warmer months, no one needs to sell Olympic National Park to visitors.

Breathtaking 360-degree views that stretch from Vancouver Island over the Strait of Juan de Fuca and into the interior Olympic range are enough to draw thousands of visitors from all over the world to Hurricane Ridge on a typical summer day.

Come winter, things tend to quiet down a bit. Yes, the parking lot still fills up sometimes, but limited road access and variable weather push the visitor count down to around 1,000 people on popular winter weekends. Most are families from the Port Angeles and Sequim areas, up for a day of skiing, snowshoeing or innertubing. A handful make the trek from Bainbridge Island and the Kitsap Peninsula.

My fiancé and I, on a recent weekend trip from Seattle, were the tourists. It was an unexpected but refreshing realization, to feel like an outsider in a place we had visited at least a dozen times before. And the spectacular views were still there, made even more dramatic by the abundant early-season snowfall.

Winter is a great time to rediscover Washington's national parks. Fewer crowds, readily available lodging, and a variety of snow-sport activities add up to a stress-free, relaxing escape from the city — just the way our national parks should be experienced.

A friendly little ski area



This photo taken Jan. 7, shows a skier near the top of the rope tow at Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park, Wash. The visitor center is in the background.

When we arrived at Hurricane Ridge, several inches of untouched powder snow lingered from the last storm cycle, preserved by unusually cold temperatures and the standard weekday road closure. But Frank Crippen, director of the ski school at the Hurricane Ridge Ski Area, had his eyes on the water.

"You can actually do a surf check from a couple of spots around here," he said while giving us a quick tour of the local ski hill.

By the standard of most resorts in the Cascades, the nonprofit Hurricane Ridge Ski Area is tiny. There are two rope tows and one surface-level Poma lift, offering a total vertical drop of 800 feet. It gets just 5,000 skier visits in an average year.

What it lacks in size, Hurricane Ridge makes up for with a friendly ski culture and extensive backcountry access. The lifties toss footballs back and forth with kids on snowboards. A shuttle driver named Willie Nelson

(yes, that's his real name) offers free rides back up the hill to backcountry skiers and snowboarders making laps off Sunrise Ridge.

Everyone knows everyone, and it's not uncommon for parents to drop their kids off at the base area and head out for a backcountry tour.

Lift tickets are \$34 for the day and bear two marketing slogans: "I've skied in the Olympics!" and "Thanks to our supporters for keeping sea level to ski level alive."

Aside from being home to one of only three remaining ski areas located within U.S. national parks, the Olympic Peninsula is also one of few places where you can ski within 20 miles of the nearest surfing access. A popular springtime endeavor for locals is the "Triple S Challenge": skiing (or snowboarding), surfing and single-track mountain biking, all in the same day.

Crippen, who grew up in Seattle but moved to the peninsula in the 1990s, owns

a shop in Port Angeles called North by Northwest. It caters to all board-based sports.

"You'd never move here for the skiing, you'd never move here for the surfing, you'd never move here for the mountain biking," he said, smiling. "But when you put all those together."

That synergy isn't lost on Jill and Russ DeGroot, who moved to Port Angeles from Iowa with their four children just before Christmas.

"Yesterday we're hiking by the ocean," Jill said. "Today we're snowboarding. It's amazing."

Snowshoeing, too

After a full morning of skiing, I swapped footwear and headed toward the park service visitor center for a 90-minute snowshoe walk led by ranger Caroline Walls. Our group of 13 followed a gentle half-mile loop through the forest as Walls explained how various trees, animals and birds survive the winter and conserve their energy during the colder months.

Other popular snowshoe destinations accessed from Hurricane Ridge include Hurricane Hill, the Wolf Creek Trail and the Obstruction Point Road (closed to vehicles during the winter). Rangers warn that there are no marked or groomed trails for snowshoers or cross-country skiers, and that some routes pass through avalanche terrain. Pack the appropriate safety gear and check in with rangers before embarking on any extended backcountry treks.

Want to just sit back and enjoy the ride? The Hurri-

cane Ridge Ski Area offers innertubing for \$10 an hour, including tube rental and a push down the slope. There is also a small snowplay area where sledding is allowed for kids 8 and younger, free of charge.

A history of skiing

Skiing in the Olympic Mountains predates the park's formation. In the 1930s, the construction of a Civilian Conservation Corps lodge and a rough, one-lane dirt road to Deer Park made it the place to be for local winter sports enthusiasts. Two decades later, another construction push brought a two-lane road to Hurricane Ridge, where the ski area moved in 1958.

Aside from the addition of the Poma lift in the 1970s, skiing at Hurricane Ridge has remained relatively unchanged since then, even as larger resorts consolidated ownership and invested in high-tech equipment. But if there's one thing that's drawing more out-of-towners to Hurricane Ridge in the winter, it's the area's unrestricted access to limitless backcountry terrain.

"It's just gotten super on-the-radar lately," Crippen said.

Venturing out along Sunrise Ridge on our second day in the park, it was easy to understand the draw. A short rope-tow ride and straight-forward traverse brought us to the top of several runs of varying steepness, running off both sides of the ridge.

Patroller Russ Morrison, who has skied at Hurricane Ridge since 1968, pointed

out all the descent options as we skinned through the trees. One popular line called Maggie's Run is named after a plow operator who got stuck on a tight corner several decades ago and had to wait out the storm in his rig. We ended up dropping in at a saddle that rises to meet 6,545-foot Mount Angeles, with 800 or so feet of soft turns bringing us back to the road.

After hitching a ride up to the parking lot, I asked Morrison to sum up skiing at Hurricane Ridge in one sentence.

"Don't tell anyone!" he said with a grin. "We're so fortunate to have this — it's ridiculous."

If you go

The Olympic National Park road to Hurricane Ridge is open to uphill traffic in winter from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday-Sunday and holiday Mondays, conditions permitting. Downhill traffic must exit the park by 5 p.m. All visitors are required to carry tire chains and pay a park entrance fee of \$25 (good for seven days). Check the road status at 360-565-3131.

Ninety-minute ranger-guided snowshoe walks take place at 2 p.m. on weekends and holidays. Cost is \$7 for adults, \$3 for children 6-15 years old, and free for ages 5 and younger. Snowshoes are provided for the guided walks, and are available for rent for other use.

More information: nps.gov/olymp/planyourvisit/hurricane-ridge-in-winter.htm