



# THE QUIET SEASON

Explore these top national park destinations when no one else does.

By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan

The afternoon sun pours into Oregon's Crater Lake from this off-trail vantage just northwest of Rim Village. Turn the page to learn how to score this view for yourself.



# WINTER IN THE NATIONAL PARKS



Breathe in. Feel the tingle of cold air in your nostrils. Now breathe out, a billowing cloud of steam sparkling in the sunlight of a landscape so intensely white it makes your eyes hurt. Now, listen. Let your ears fill with the hollow sound of emptiness, snow crunching under your feet, wind whistling through pines. Winter brings a new sensory experience to the parks, and scenery so fleeting you have to know where to find it. Here are our top picks for the best of the fourth season.

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## See Fire and Ice

YOSEMITE NP, CA

Winter's plummeting temps and low-angle sunlight bring a little extra pizzazz to Yosemite's iconic waterfalls. To see an ephemeral, flame-red "firefall" pouring from El Capitan's eastern face, head toward Horsetail Fall in the second half of February. When conditions are right—high water, fair skies, and a clear sunset—the sun strikes Horsetail just so, lighting it up in glowing shades of red and orange that look just like tumbling lava. For the best views, start at El Capitan Picnic Area and stroll east into the snowy meadow for a good vantage. **Season** Mid- to late February **Info** [nps.gov/yose](https://nps.gov/yose)

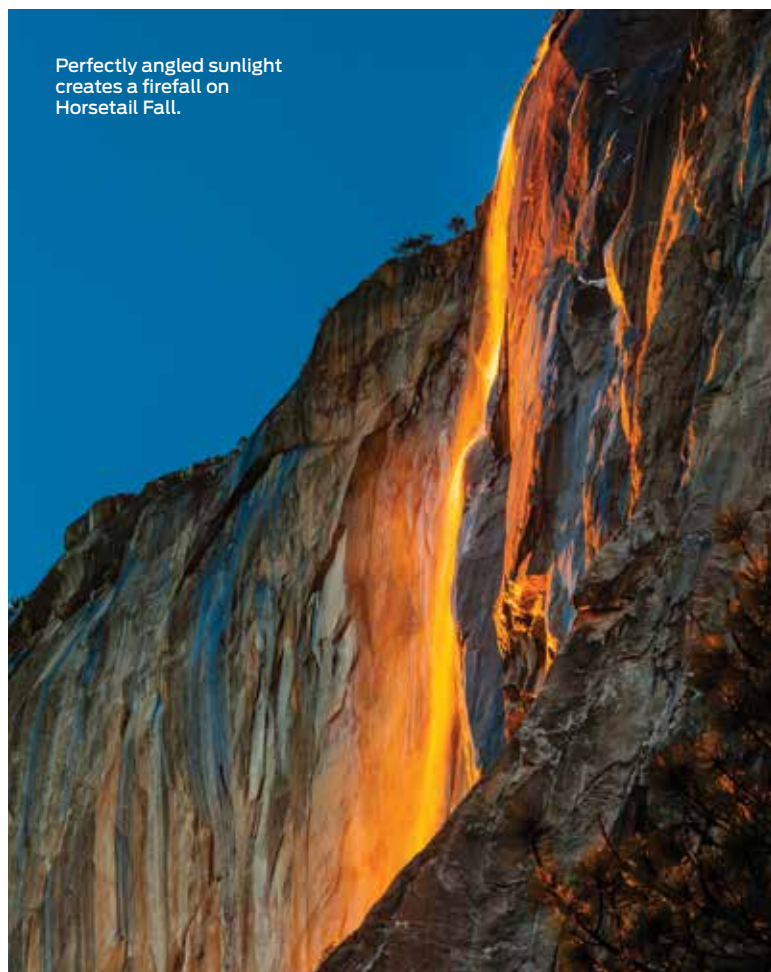
### Keep It Clean

Yosemite is one of three parks attempting to go zero-landfill, thanks to a partnership between Subaru and the National Park Service. How can you help? Minimize waste by planning ahead. Cold weather tip: Pack bulk hot chocolate instead of single-serve packets. Little changes can go a long way. [Learn more at \[subaru.com/environment\]\(https://learnmoreat.subaru.com/environment\)](https://learnmoreat.subaru.com/environment)

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## Ski around Coastal Peaks

ACADIA NP, ME



Perfectly angled sunlight creates a firefall on Horsetail Fall.

Winter turns Acadia's carriage roads into Norman Rockwell paintings, all white evergreens, quiet frozen ponds, and stone bridges dusted with snow. Tackle the intermediate, mostly groomed 13-mile Around the Mountain Loop, which circles Parkman, Sargent, and Penobscot Peaks, for vistas of frosted mountains. At Brown Mountain Gatehouse, click into cross-country skis that can handle off-track travel (see page 60) and kick off east to the Amphitheater Loop, north past Jordan Pond, then climb through 3.5 miles of ungroomed snow on the Upper Loop for views that extend to Katahdin. Ski over the stone Waterfall Bridges on the Upper Hadlock Pond Trail to close the loop. **Season** January to March **Info** [nps.gov/acad](https://nps.gov/acad); [friendsofacadia.org](https://friendsofacadia.org)

## THE FIRST 100 YEARS

Winter has its own set of milestones in the park system. Here are a few of the best from our world:

**1872** Pioneers of the first national park winter propel themselves into Yellowstone on 12-foot wooden skis to hunt.

**1928** Jules Fritsch opens what is believed to be California's first ski school at Yosemite.

**1971-2** The Paradise area in Mt. Rainier NP receives 1,122 inches (about 93 feet!) of snow, at the time a world record.

**1988** Apparently immune to fear, loneliness, and cold, Vern Tejas is the first to survive a solo winter ascent of Denali.

**1995** Yellowstone reintroduces the original masters of winter, wolves, in January.

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) JOE AZURE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM; BERGREEN PHOTOGRAPHY

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## Circle the Country's Deepest Lake

CRATER LAKE NP, OR

This pool cradled in the leftover bowl of an ancient volcano is at its still, sparkling best in the off-season, when snow frames the crater rim. That's when the road circling Crater Lake, a stop-and-snap series of drive-by viewpoints in summer, transforms into one of the park system's finest multiday ski or snowshoe tours (day trips also possible). The three- to four-day, 31-mile circuit treats experienced winter travelers to challenging climbs, hulking snowdrifts (the park averages 520 inches of snow yearly), lakeview campsites under snowy evergreens, and a peek at the 1,943-foot-deep lake from every angle. From Rim Village, follow the ungroomed West Rim Drive clockwise around the crater, dipping in toward the crater rim when conditions allow. Camp in the trees (away from the road and out of the wind) and bring extra food (in case common winter storms strand you) and avalanche skills. **Season** December to May (go in March and April for the best weather and longer daylight hours) **Permit** Free; pick up at the visitor center or ranger station **Info** [nps.gov/crla](https://nps.gov/crla)

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## Bunk in Skiers' Heaven

SEQUOIA NP, CA

Your idea of a perfect weekend: ripping down the snowy slopes of 11,000-foot Sierra peaks by day, then kicking back at a cozy, timber-and-stone hut by night. Your backcountry heaven: Pear Lake Winter Hut. This 10-person shelter in a snowy bowl at 9,200 feet—more intimate and surrounded by more skiable terrain than neighboring Yosemite's better-known Ostrander Ski Hut—requires a strenuous, 6-mile ski or snowshoe trip to reach, making it best for intermediate to advanced winter travelers with avy know-how. Once you've called your bunk, earn your turns on challenging ski runs with views over barbed Sierra summits or snowshoe through quiet conifer forests and up steep ridgelines—or don't. Somebody's gotta keep the pellet stove fed and make the hot toddies. **Season** December to April **Lodging** \$40/person per night; apply for a spot through the lottery which is being drawn on November 2 this year. **Info** [sequoiahistory.org/pearlake](https://sequoiahistory.org/pearlake)

**NPS100**  
All year we're counting down the things that make the NPS special. See our progress so far at [backpacker.com/nps100](https://backpacker.com/nps100).

The Pear Lake Winter Hut offers the perfect base-camp for skiing Sequoia. Check out more of the country's finest backcountry ski huts at [backpacker.com/huts](https://backpacker.com/huts).





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## *Snowshoe in the Moonlight*

**BRYCE CANYON NP, UT**

Winter's long nights mean more time to tromp around this maze of desert hoodoos in the moonlight. Bryce Canyon's very dark nights and very clean air can make the full moon spotlight-bright—and when it reflects off a fresh cloak of snow, you may as well leave the headlamp in your pack as you descend to the inner canyon. Rangers run a popular full moon snowshoe hike each month when snow is deep enough (at least 8 inches), but you can explore the canyon's snowball-capped towers on your own. The steep, 1.5-mile route from Fairyland Loop trailhead to the Chinese Wall drops to views of knobby hoodoos forming a skinny cliff; up top, snowshoe .5 mile to 8,176-foot Paria Point for a look at the canyon's spires in starlight (check snow conditions first).

**Season** November to March **Reservations** Required (and free) for guided Full Moon Snowshoe Hikes; call the visitor center at (435) 834-4747 up to two days ahead for a spot.

**Info** nps.gov/bzca

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## *Tour an Icy Cave*

**LAVA BEDS NM, CA**

Deep under the craggy volcanic landscape, ice takes on weird and wonderful forms: spiky sheets of icicles, miniature frozen spires, glazed rock faces, and a hoarfrost-sprinkled ceiling that sparkles like the night sky. Every Saturday from January to March, six lucky visitors can see it firsthand on a three-hour guided tour of Crystal Ice Cave, where they'll scoot down a frozen slide, wiggle through tight passages, and squeeze behind an ice waterfall. For your best shot at a spot, call right at 8:30 a.m. three weeks before your desired date. And don't delay—climate change is melting surface ice, which seeps into lower caverns and refreezes, sealing off more and more of the cave every year. **Season** January to March **Permit** Free; reservations required. Call (530) 667-8113. **Info** nps.gov/labe

Busy in every other season, Bryce Amphitheater is quiet in winter.



PHOTO BY ANDREW PEACOCK / TANDEMSTOCK.COM



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*Tour the Geysers*  
YELLOWSTONE NP, WY

Summertime geysers, even glimpsed while jostling with high-season crowds: impressive. Wintertime geysers, bubbling and bursting over the snowy landscape to an audience of precisely you: unforgettable. (And that's not counting the near-guaranteed wildlife sightings.) In winter, a snowcoach ride and a few miles of mellow cross-country skiing or snowshoeing are all that separate you from a private, multigeyser viewing experience. Hop a ski shuttle from the Old Faithful Lodge to the trailhead at Kepler Cascades, then follow the Firehole River 2.5 miles on a groomed, wooded trail to Lone Star Geyser, a 40-foot plume that blows every three hours. Return to the lodge via the snowed-over park road (easy; 7 total miles) or the Howard Eaton Trail (difficult; 6 total miles). For a shorter outing, wind 5 easy miles through the hot springs and geysers of Biscuit Basin (pick up the trail across from the lodge), a wintering site for elk and bison. **Season** December to February **Ski shuttle** \$21/day; drop-off only; yellowstonenationalparklodges.com **Lodging** From \$104; same website **Info** nps.gov/yell



See Yellowstone's resident bison on a winter tour of the park.

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) JASON SAVAGE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM, AIDAN LYNN-KLIMENKO AND MADISON PERRINS (6)



**BEST JOB EVER**

**THE FIRST 13,000 MILES**

We partnered with Subaru to send a pair of travelers on a yearlong grand tour celebrating the national parks centennial. Their task: explore ways to see, protect, and understand the essence of America's great park system. Three months, 17 states, and 11 parks later, Madison Perrins and Aidan Lynn-Klimenko's journey has barely begun. Here's what they've found so far.



The greatest part of the tour has been the strange sense of being an explorer in the country we've always lived in...



...from the places we never knew existed, like Voyageurs in Minnesota (where Aidan is from)...



...to the places, like Wind Cave, that we simply couldn't imagine.



This sense of wonderment brims from each park. Sometimes it's enough to stop a toddler in her tracks, as here in the Badlands.



The simplicity of this life grows on us with every one-pot meal we eat (in this case at Diablo Lake in North Cascades).



We're making memories by the mile, campsite, park, and photograph. Come with us. Check backpacker.com/nps100 for our updates and Instameets, or follow us on Instagram @backpackermag.



It's like there's a full, new world on the other side of every highway, park border, or tent door, like we found in Wrangell-St. Elias.





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*Ski the Backcountry*

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NP, CO

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Hidden Valley ski area was among the most famous places in the world to hit the slopes. But in 1991, the National Park Service finished dismantling the mini-resort, letting the area revert back, mostly, to what it was prior to 1950. And what it was continues to draw skiers today. Follow the old skin track (from the parking area off Trail Ridge Road) as it climbs 2,000 feet to above-treeline views and windswept slopes. Down mountain, old ski trails offer wide-open tree skiing that feels like having a resort to your lonesome. Better yet: Slopes angled 30 degrees or less dominate the area, leading to a lower (but not zero) avy risk. **Season** December to May **Info** [nps.gov/romo](https://nps.gov/romo)

PHOTO BY D SCOTT CLARK



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*Stormwatch on the Coast*

OLYMPIC NP, WA

Instead of hiding from winter rains, hardy souls celebrate the Northwest's dreary season with stormwatching trips to the sleety Pacific, where ferocious, 20-foot rollers regularly pound the evergreen-fringed beach. For a front-row seat, head to Shi Shi Beach on the park's northern tip: The sand is wide enough here to put a safe distance between your tent and the waves, and you won't need to cross any swollen creeks. From the Makah Shi Shi trailhead, stroll 2 miles through the rainforest, then scout for a sheltered site along the next 2.3 miles of beach. Note: Consult the tide table pretrip and avoid the highest high tides (above about 8 feet), which can produce dangerously big waves, and check current storm conditions with rangers. **Season** November to March **Permit** Two required. Pick up a park permit (\$5/person per night) at one of three visitor centers and a Makah Recreation Pass (\$10) in Neah Bay. **Info** nps.gov/olym

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*Climb Lake Superior Ice*

PICTURED ROCKS NL, MI

Each winter, groundwater seeps through the porous sandstone cliffs edging this lakeshore park, decorating the rock with dramatic spires and sheets of ice plunging straight down to Lake Superior. More than 50 named climbing routes spider up 25 miles of shoreline on the park's west side, luring everyone from gawking hikers to rookie ice climbers to seasoned pros. Beginners and intermediates can head to the Sand Point Escarpment (a 1-mile hike from Sand Point Beach) to try their top ropes on formations like The Curtains, a 30-foot, rippling ice wall, and Sweet Mother Moses, a 70-foot frozen pillar. **Season** December to March **Info** nps.gov/piro



See ice falls on the Chapel Loop Trail, .5 mile west of Chapel Rock Beach.

## THE NEXT 100 YEARS

**Climate change is coming to the park system. By now, everyone with a TV is aware of the most obvious effects (disappearing glaciers and mega forest fires, for starters). But milder winters followed by hotter summers will also coerce iconic wildlife, like elk, to change their seasonal patterns and habitats. How—and whether—to manage the future of those herds and flocks is a challenge managers are grappling with. But at least there's a silver lining. "One of the things we can do now is give those animals time and space to adapt to the changing climate," says Dr. Nicholas Fisichelli, an NPS ecologist. "That's what the parks do."**

PHOTO BY VIKTOR POSNOV