

Off-Season Adventures in America's National Parks

Hiking a desert paradise all by yourself. Skiing through a herd of buffalo. Paddling among alligators. Here's how to make the most of the national parks in winter.



Winter at Canyonlands' Mesa Arch: The only time you can have it all to yourself

TRAVEL

CYCLING AND SNOWSHOEING THE HIGH DESERT

Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, Utah

Winter in canyon country is like stepping into a perpetual golden hour, when the sun lowers, the light softens, and the red rocks are dotted with snow. More important, the flood of hikers, bikers, and rafters dries up, leaving Arches and Canyonlands, on either side of Moab, up for grabs. "In the summer, there's a hundred people trying to shoot Delicate Arch," says photographer Dan Ballard of the iconic rock formation in Arches. "In winter, you may see no one at all." All the area's infamous biking trails are fair game, but the best experience once the snow falls is cross-country skiing in La Sal Mountains, which loom over the area with views that stretch for hundreds of miles. The Utah highway department plows the 60-mile La Sal Mountain Loop Road in winter, so in the morning you can cruise up to the 9,600-foot parking lot at the Geysers Pass road, where groomed ski trails snake through the meadows.

Then, once the sun starts turning the snow to slush, head back toward town for rock climbing at Wall Street, a sandstone cliff along the Colorado River. "It can be 30 degrees in town," says Nate Sydnor, owner of Moab Desert Adventures, which offers climbing trips year-round, "but it'll be 50 degrees and sunny on the wall." Think of Moab as your winter adventure wonderland, sans the cold. —JAYME MOYE

FLY TO: Moab has limited flights, so head to Grand Junction, two hours east, which has more options and cheaper fares.

STAY: Dining in Moab is mediocre at best, so rent a Village Rim condo with a full kitchen — and a hot tub. moabcondos.com



Yellowstone's geothermal pools — even more dramatic in snow

SOLITUDE AND WILDLIFE

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Every year 3 million people show up at Yellowstone, and only a tiny fraction of them do so during winter. But agoraphobia isn't reason enough to wait for the snow to fall: Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are at their peak, and the park's many geothermal features attract heat-seeking wildlife, which are easier to spot in all that snow. Besides, you can watch Old Faithful spew forth virtually alone, a vast improvement over summer months, when hordes as large as 10,000 can crowd around, looking to snag a selfie. On a clear winter day you can wander out just minutes from the newly renovated Old Faithful Snow Lodge and get lost in the pines with geese, foxes, bison, owls, and moose. Of course, if it's wolves you want, head east to Lamar Valley. (You can stay just outside the park in the town of Mammoth.) "In terms of population and accessibility, there's no better place in the lower 48 to see wolves," says Yellowstone's Rick Hoeninghausen. Plus, in winter, deep snow brings the canines down from the high backcountry for easier hunting — and viewing. Even they know enough to avoid the summer crowds. —MARK HEALY

FLY TO: Bozeman, the only large airport with access to the park's western entrance.

STAY: Old Faithful Snow Lodge has deck views of the geyser, and the park offers a shuttle from Bozeman airport. yellowstonenationalparklodges.com

FROM LEFT: KENNAN HARVEY/AURORA PHOTOS; BROWN CANNON/III/INTERSECTION PHOTOS



Death Valley's sky is one of the darkest in the world.

VEGAS' REAL LIGHT SHOW

Death Valley, California

It's strange but true: One of the best places to stargaze in the United States is a two-hour drive from the Las Vegas Strip. Death Valley is ranked as one of the world's darkest skies, and there's no darker time than winter, when there's less atmospheric disturbance. For utter blackness, head to Mesquite Spring campground, where you can light

a fire to stay warm (lows are in the 40s) and roast marshmallows before heading back to your hotel. "As the sun sets, you can see the Zodiacal light, a brilliant column of sunlight reflected off space dust," says David Blanchette of the Las Vegas Astronomical Society. Peak viewing is an hour and a half after sunset, when the Milky Way is so bright you'll think you're on the moon — and coyote howls will be the only thing bringing you back to Earth. —J.M.

FLY TO: The two-hour drive from Las Vegas to the park is one of the best in the Southwest.

STAY: Furnace Creek Resort — two hotels, restaurants, and a bar in the middle of nowhere. furnacecreekresort.com

WILD TIMES IN FLORIDA

Everglades National Park, Florida

Ninety minutes from Miami, Everglades is Florida's time warp back to the Jurassic era — panthers, alligators, manatees, and 360 types of birds, all fighting it out for survival in the largest subtropical wilderness in the U.S. But in summer, 90-degree temps and 95-percent humidity cause even the wildlife to wilt and seek shelter. Which is why November to May — when the sky clears, the mosquitos disappear, and the water levels drop — is the best time to witness the life-and-death dramas playing out in the swamp's back channels. "You probably won't see a panther — that's a cat that can run nearly 30 miles per hour," says Charles Wright, a Florida naturalist and owner of Everglades Area Tours. "But alligators, dolphins, sea turtles, shore birds, and birds of prey, for sure." The only real way to explore the 1.5 million-acre park is by kayak or boat, and by launching in the Turner River where it crosses underneath Tamiami Trail, you'll have the best chance of seeing wildlife without packing camping gear. Slowly the channels will narrow and birds will alight as you pass. Alligators may even start patrolling the waters — and quickly your night out in South Beach will seem tame by comparison. —J.M.



Everglades exploration: Paddling is the best way.

FLY TO: Miami is only an hour and a half away and has the cheapest car rentals.

STAY: Chokoloskee Island Park and Marina, which has boat rentals and is 10 minutes from the Everglades. chokoloskee.com

Ski Season Getaways

Now is the perfect time to book your winter escape. Here are this year's best new deals.

POWDER ON THE CHEAP

This winter, the best trend in skiing is the rise of multiresort ski passes, which offer free days at partner mountains. Nearly every resort in the country is part of a larger collective, meaning it's cheaper than ever to take multiple ski trips in a single year. For pure number of days on the mountain, Vail's \$769 Epic Pass, which is good for unlimited skiing at the company's 12 resorts, including Colorado's Beaver Creek and Breckenridge, is the best bet. The better buy for skiers who want to chase powder out West is the \$399 Mountain Collective pass, with 14 days of skiing at 15 mountains, including Alta/Snowbird, Aspen/Snowmass, and Whistler/Blackcomb. And if you're primarily an East Coast skier, the \$599 Intrawest Passport is good for six days at the company's six resorts — including Colorado's Steamboat, Blue Mountain in Pennsylvania, and Stratton Mountain in Vermont.

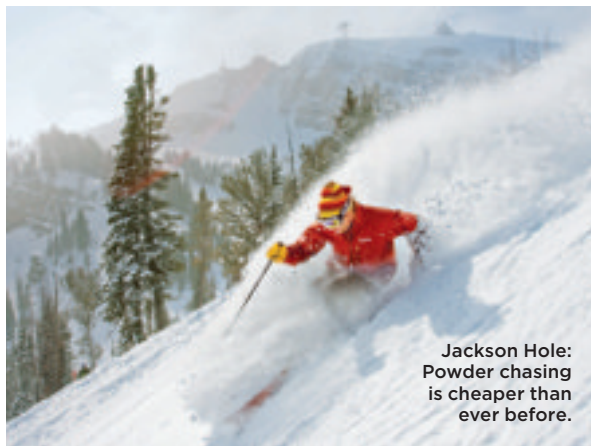
THE REBIRTH OF TAOS

New Mexico's Taos Ski Valley, recently bought by billionaire conservationist Louis Bacon, debuts its much-hyped triple chair to the summit of 12,481-foot Kachina Peak this season. The new lift will access 50 acres of

the country's best ski terrain — previously accessible only via a 45-minute hike. "The past 30 years of walking up Kachina have been magical," says 15-time Everest climber and veteran Taos ski patroller Dave Hahn. "It will be an even better thing if more people

get to experience it."

Along with upgrades to its base facility and snowmaking capabilities, the new lift will help elevate Taos into one of the premier resorts in the country. And at \$82 per day, its lift tickets are still a steal. taosksivalley.com



Jackson Hole: Powder chasing is cheaper than ever before.

BACKCOUNTRY FOR BEGINNERS

Exum Mountain Guides, the premier climbing outfitter in Wyoming, is bringing its expert training to the winter backcountry, offering classes that will help you do everything from assess avalanche conditions to learn how to belay. For beginners the best class is Exum's four-day Fantasy Camp: By night crash at the Four Seasons Jackson Hole, and by day follow professional skiers and filmmakers from Teton Gravity Research into Jackson's backcountry, searching out powder stashes and refining skiing techniques with the help of the pros. \$3,500 (not including rooms); exumguides.com