

WINTER HUTS

FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

Built for skiers and backcountry adventures, winter huts can be a great way to photograph the wilderness in relative comfort

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Have you ever wanted to shoot winter landscapes in more remote, less-visited areas of the wilderness but been unwilling or unqualified to commit to a full-on winter camping expedition? Don't want to get up in the middle of the night and snowshoe miles to your shot before the sun comes up? The solution may be a winter hut trip.

While many photographers enjoy getting away from the road and into the backcountry during the summer months, most photographers pack up and head for home once the snow starts to fall. That's a missed opportunity—the winter offers some of the best shooting conditions of the year.

Imagine climbing out of your warm sleeping bag in a wood fire-heated cabin, putting on your boots and stepping outside to shoot winter landscapes with freshly fallen snow just feet from the cabin door. No need for a cold alpine start or sleeping in a frozen tent. Backcountry winter huts offer photographers amazing access to rarely shot winter scenes

while being warm and comfortable at the same time. It makes backcountry winter photography quite civilized compared to winter camping.

Often referred to as backcountry “ski” huts, many of these huts are close to the road and quite accessible for those with even moderate ski or snowshoe skills.

History Of Winter Huts

While skiing has been practiced in the United States going back to the days of fur trappers or even before, the popularity of skiing in America didn't really take off until after World War II. With thousands of troops stationed in the mountains of Europe, some Americans were exposed to those conditions for the first time. Many of these troops were trained as part of the prestigious 10th Mountain Division, where they learned skiing and mountaineering, so it's no surprise that they returned home with a new love of skiing. This, combined with advances in ski and winter clothing technologies as byproducts of the war effort, helped the American ski industry explode in the decades after WWII.

Along with the new popularity of skiing also came an interest in winter ski huts, such as those that existed for generations in places like the Alps. The idea of being able to ski from hut to hut, accessing locations far from the road while having the comfort of a cozy heated cabin at the end of the day, was hard to resist. While a few huts already existed, including a couple that were part of a failed attempt to build a hut-to-hut system of winter trails along the Sierra crest in California, many of the huts that exist today were built by former soldiers or in memory of soldiers who fought during WWII or the Korean War.

Relative Comfort In Stunning Locations

While the dream of a completed system with hut-to-hut winter traverses was never fully realized, over the decades, many huts were built and continue to be operated to this day. Often thought of as mainly backcountry ski or snowshoe destinations, they also offer great access for the adventurous photographer. While some huts do require

long approaches that might even take more than a single day, others can be accessed by a shuttle service on a snowmobile or even helicopter, and a few are so close to the road that we snowshoed to them with our kids when they were in diapers. It's merely a matter of knowing your skill level and deciding how much work you are willing to put in, then finding the right hut that meets your needs.

For those interested in making a winter trip to Yosemite, perhaps the most photogenic hut location in the entire country is at Glacier Point, where you can stay within sight of Half Dome and Yosemite Falls in the winter. While it does require a 10.5-mile trek each way on the Glacier Point Road, the park service grooms the road, so it's relatively accessible for those with ski or snowshoe experience. Once you reach the hut, you have a warm place to stay, and I've heard rumors of hot meals served, bedding to rent and possibly even ways to have some of your gear shuttled to the hut. Imagine sipping a hot drink while photographing snow-covered Half Dome at sunset without the crowds. During the

Above: I love shooting night scenes of glowing tents and glowing cabins, and adding snow only makes things even better. For long exposures like this one of Yosemite's Ostrander Hut, I sometimes strap three ski poles together with a tiny ballhead atop of one of the poles. (Rubber ski straps have many uses beyond just skis.) While slow to work with, this setup has allowed me to get long exposures on trips when I was forced to leave the tripod at home.

Opposite: I have been working this winter location in Yosemite for years. On our last day of this particular trip, we decided to wait until sunset at this location to get one last sunset and then ski back to the car in the dark. Having been to the location before, I knew the angle I wanted and was set up waiting with the correct lens when sunset came. We spent the next several hours skiing with only the light of the moon and made it back to the car at midnight, exhausted but dreaming of the next adventure.

Previous spread: One of the best parts of shooting from backcountry huts is the ability to shoot winter images of well-known landmarks from totally unique angles. When was the last time you saw a sunset photo from the back of Half Dome? While staying at the Ostrander Hut, I spent a day scouting potential sunset photos, and on our last night, everything came together as a storm broke at sunset. Sadly, I was fairly limited in what I could do with the scene because to save weight, I had no tripod and only a tiny first-generation Micro Four Thirds camera with a single lens. On the other hand, carrying a tripod and heavier gear would have made the already-challenging 10-mile approach miserable.





2021 season, the hut wasn't open due to COVID and power outages, but I'm sure this popular location will reopen in some capacity when the timing is right.

Another classic hut in the Yosemite backcountry, and my personal favorite, is in Tuolumne Meadows, where the campground converts the office into a bunk room in the winter, complete with a woodstove and electric lights. The hut gives skiers and adventurous photographers amazing access to the meadows when they are perhaps at their prettiest, but the nearly 16-mile and 4,000-foot elevation approach explains why we hardly see any winter photos of the Yosemite high country. When I did it, we rode our bikes several hours uphill with all our ski and camera gear from the locked gate in Lee Vining to the snowline and then skied the rest of the way—a big day for sure. Tuolumne Meadows isn't easy to reach, but among backcountry skiers, the Tuolumne Meadows ski hut is a rite of passage, and for motivated photographers, it offers a wealth of untapped photographic potential.

If both of these huts sound a bit too much for you, a little research can lead to huts that offer photographers lots of potential that are only a couple miles of easy terrain from the road. Due to the limited number of winter landscape photos posted online from many of these locations, I often spend time looking at Google Earth and even summer photos posted on social media to get an idea of what a location could look like in the winter.

Because huts throughout the country are owned or managed by so many different organizations, including the Forest Service, Sierra Club, Yosemite Conservancy, land trusts and private owners, there is no one-stop shop for all hut location information, but a little searching will turn up websites for specific regions hosted by different land managers. The Lake Tahoe area in California, for example, is managed by the Sierra Club. No single website covers huts throughout the country, and though at first, this may seem like it makes things more difficult, I think it makes things more interesting. As

Above: After a long ski or a cold sunset shoot, nothing beats warming up inside of a hut by the fire. This hut is only a couple miles away from the road, so it makes a perfect location to take first-timers or even kids. Dry firewood and a place to hang your wet clothes... what more do you need?

Opposite: The last time I skied to Glacier Point, the ski hut was closed for the season, so we ended up finding shelter inside the Glacier Point geology hut. I can't think of a better camp spot than having Glacier Point all to ourselves and a private stone balcony from which to enjoy it.





you get to know an area, you hear through the grapevine about other huts in other spots that are lesser known. It's a rabbit hole that quickly sucks you in, as it's only a matter of finding something that matches your skill level and photographic interests. If you do a good job matching these two, the sky is the limit in terms of adventure and photos.

How To Prepare

While some huts have hut keepers and offer hot meals, private rooms and bedding, for the majority of huts, you'll need to provision for yourself. Most huts offer a main room with a woodstove for heat, a sleeping loft or bunk room to lay your sleeping bag and an outhouse.

Perhaps the most important part of having a successful hut trip is an honest assessment of your winter skills and choosing your best approach wisely. If you've never been on skis or snowshoes, perhaps starting with something closer to the road is best unless you use some type of shuttle. But if you frequently hike or backpack in the summers or regularly backcountry ski or snowshoe, then perhaps a 10-mile approach isn't as risky an undertaking. Either way, make sure you're prepared for winter weather. It's critically important to keep an eye on the forecast and to bring enough food and clothes that you could survive if something goes wrong. I always have a puffy jacket and plastic sheet in my

Yosemite's Ostrander hut is plush, with lawn chairs, a great front porch and even a hut keeper. But don't let that fool you; it is one of the hardest huts in the Sierras to reach, with a 10-mile approach that crosses through avalanche terrain. When choosing your hut, make sure you match your skills with an appropriate destination.



pack just in case I'm forced to spend the night out.

Photo Gear Recommendations

One of the big benefits of staying in a winter hut is that you get to shoot photos in remote locations when the light is at its best, but you don't need to carry all the gear necessary for winter camping. With the woodstove cranking, often huts are warm enough to not need much more than a light jacket and slippers. (Don't forget your slippers.) Not needing to carry gear like tents and heavy winter sleeping bags (I only use a lightweight, 30-degree sleeping bag in huts) makes room for more camera gear.

Depending on the photographic potential and the difficulty in reaching a hut, I may end up carrying something as heavy as my full Nikon Z 7 kit with a 14-24mm, 24-70mm, 70-200mm and a tripod or something as small and light as my Sony RX100 with a tabletop tripod that can be strapped to ski poles. Most huts don't have power, so I always bring lots of extra batteries or even a USB battery pack—remember that batteries don't work as well in the cold. It's all about balancing the photo potential versus your skill level and willingness to suffer when determining how much photo gear to carry. I've even been known to carry a guitar into a couple of huts.

The beauty of a hut is that once you are there, you can explore the area around the hut with your camera until you're cold and then just run right back inside to warm up with a cup of hot chocolate, or maybe something a bit stronger.

See more of Josh Miller's work and his upcoming workshops, including Bears and Eagles of Alaska, Lake Tahoe and Costa Rica, at joshmillerphotography.com.

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