

Snow Caves: a Unique Winter Experience

by Scott_Staats

I woke up in the middle of the night, stuck my head out of the sleeping bag and thought to myself, "Where the heck am I?"

Then I remembered. I'm about six feet under the surface of the snow on the side of Mount Bachelor in the middle of winter. This wasn't a dream (or a nightmare), but one of the most memorable winter experiences I've ever had.

Dave Nissen of Wanderlust Tours of Bend peeks out from a snow cave. All photos by Scott Staats. Wanderlust Tours of Bend has been taking people on winter outings for the past ten years. Owners Dave and Aleta Nissen have a goal of introducing people to the natural wonders of Central Oregon in an environmentally sensitive way.

For those seeking the ultimate winter experience, Wanderlust offers something unique. "Snow camping is for the more adventurous outdoor winter enthusiasts," said Aleta. "We offer two options to get out to the campsite, either by snowshoes or by dog sled." There are about a dozen trips per winter where people dig their own snow cave and spend the night in the winter woods.

"Going out building snow caves and sleeping in them can be an adventure of a lifetime," Dave explained.

On this winter outing, I joined Dave along with Rick Spencer, producer and photographer for Northwest Outdoors, an award-winning outdoor show out of Yakima, Washington.

We loaded up backpacks and a sled full of camera equipment and headed out on snowshoes into the snow-covered forest surrounding Mount Bachelor. Dave chose a campsite high on the east side of Mount

Bachelor in an old growth hemlock forest. To build a good snow cave, Dave explained that it's best to have at least eight feet of snow on the ground and a slope of about 30 degrees.

We dropped our packs and grabbed our telescoping snow shovels. Dave got Rick and I started on our cave then began work on his own. We dug a hole four feet by six feet and about six or seven feet deep. Next, we carved an archway into the face wall, which would be the crawl hole to the cave. This is around three feet high and shoulder-width wide.

Our cave ended up about ten feet in diameter and five to six feet high. Our sleeping platform was big enough to fit two of us comfortably. Total cave building time took about around four hours, with a timeout for lunch.

“Usually the temperature in the cave hovers around 40 to 45 degrees,” Dave said, “no matter what the temperature is outside.” He’s been out many times when it’s well below zero.

“One time, we went several miles out on dog sled and spent the night in a beautiful amphitheater-shaped lava formation and we had a raging snowstorm at night,” Dave recalled. “I went out at night and stood under a massive five-foot diameter hemlock tree and watched the storm for about 30 minutes. Back in the cave, I couldn’t even hear the storm.”

The caves also come with “central heating.” Several candles, along with your body heat, actually raise the inside temperature, making the cave a cozy place to spend a winter night.

Wanderlust Tours provides lunch, dinner and breakfast and all gear except your personal clothing. Not only are the trips fun, but also informative as Dave also teaches survival skills.

The following morning, after a hearty breakfast, Dave demonstrated how to build smaller survival snow caves. These aren't as complex as the ones we camped in but they could save your life if you're ever caught out in a blizzard.

Dave also takes campers on short hikes around camp to teach some winter ecology. Just before leaving, the snow caves are collapsed and filled in so no backcountry skiers or snowshoers fall into them.

There is plenty of snow in the high country to build caves. Dave said he has built caves as early as the end of November and as late as the end of May. A few winters ago, the snow was over 30 feet deep in the mountains.

"We like to indulge people in the silence of the winter landscape," said Aleta. "When you're out in a snow-muffled forest, you feel insulated from everything around you. On outings, the guides have the group spend a few quiet minutes just listening to what's around them."

Wanderlust has had snow cavers from age 9 to 78 on winter outings. Jack Cleveland of Bend, went on one of Wanderlust's winter outings, built his own cave and slept in it. "It was 22 degrees outside but I slept surprisingly warm," Cleveland said.

The Cascades in the middle of winter can be foreboding for the inexperienced. That's why Cleveland said he chose Wanderlust Tours. "When you go out in the wilderness in winter you are on the edge and I trust Dave and his guides with our lives," he said. He plans on calling upon them again for more adventure. Jack is now in the category of octogenarian.

Dave estimates that he's been on about 40 snow caving trips. He noted that snow caves are the darkest, quietest environment anyone will ever sleep in.

“People always say that sounds like a lot of work but it’s spread out over several hours and I encourage people not to concentrate on the amount of snow they have to move but what a great joy to be out here in the winter,” Dave explained.

People also think that it’s too cold to be out there building caves and sleeping in them. The building of the caves keeps you warm and once in the caves, you’re out of the elements. People do need to be in fairly good shape for one of these outings.

Besides building snow caves, Dave and Aleta also offer snowshoeing and caving trips (in lava tubes) all winter. For more information, or to book a winter trek, contact Wanderlust Tours at 541-389-8359.

Who knows, maybe later this winter I’ll wake up in a snow cave again.

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