

Summer Lake in Winter

by Scott_Staats

With quiet anticipation I lift my head from the warm comfort of the king-sized bed and gaze out the windows at the impending sunrise over the lake. Soon the sky is filled with orange, red, yellow and gold, reflecting off the ice and the open channels of water. Finally, the morning light pours over the rim and fills the lake basin once again.

My wife and I make at least two trips a year to Summer Lake and our last one occurred over Christmas. This part of the high desert is unique with several remnant lakes left over from the last ice age scattered between mountain ranges. The open views make it as if you can see forever. But we go for the quiet.

Cabins at Summer Lake Inn is two hours south of Bend. Winter Ridge is shown in the background. Photos by Scott Staats. "Summer Lake is even more peaceful and quiet in the winter," said Julie Little. "And the stars are so bright at night," she added. She and her husband Tim are the innkeepers of Summer Lake Inn. The couple has even heard owls hooting in the trees around the inn.

After walking into our cabin, it was very difficult to leave and go birding at the Summer Lake Wildlife Area. It was the nicest cabin I've ever stayed in. The true test of a real birder presented itself. Go to the refuge or stay in the comfortable cabin and look out at the lake in front and Winter Ridge behind? We did a little of both.

We took a few short hikes down some of the dikes at the wildlife area and saw a variety of birds including marsh hawks, marsh wrens, song sparrows, bufflehead, trumpeter swans, Canada and snow geese. Take note that duck and goose hunting is allowed in the wildlife area until the end of January.

There are six cabins and three townhouses at the inn. All have great views of Summer Lake to the east and Winter Ridge to the west. The cabins have gas fireplaces and complete kitchens. All but two have Jacuzzi tubs. There are no phones or Internet access. It's a place to relax and forget about everyday bustle.

Cabins range from 600 to 1,100 square feet and are constructed with a variety of wood including pine, cedar, redwood, juniper, hemlock, fir and hickory. There are several hundred videos and CDs to choose.

From the cabin, I watched a marsh hawk hunting down near the lake. It would hover, using the wind to its advantage as it searched out a rodent for its next meal. From the deck I watched a hooded merganser and an

American coot swim side by side on the pond near the inn. It appeared they became friends after the rest of their respective flocks flew south.

Another relaxing place is the hot tub on the inn's deck. We soaked there a few times, looking out at the lake and watching the birds feed nearby. Besides birding at the wildlife area and the inn, there are other outdoor activities to keep visitors busy should they choose to leave their cabin.

Although the Summer Lake Valley doesn't receive a lot of snow in the winter, that's not the case with Winter Ridge, which gets three to five feet of the white stuff each year -- plenty for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling. There are at least three access points to the ridge from the valley floor, including a Sno-Park just out of Paisley 18 miles south of the inn.

Summer Lake itself can freeze every winter but it also thaws quickly. Most of the shallow playa lake was frozen over on our visit but the wind and warmer temperatures carved out long channels from south to north.

Along with the natural beauty of the area, the Littles also like its friendly people. "Neighbors may be as much as 30 miles away but they are there to help you," said Tim. From Silver Lake to Lakeview, he noted that the locals always wave when you meet them on the road.

We cooked most of our meals in the cabin but elected to have one dinner at the inn since the Littles are renowned for their gourmet meals. Dinner started with oven-roasted tomato soup with chipotle peppers followed by a pomegranate and champagne palate cleanser. Next came barbecue beef short ribs with oven-roasted polenta and Brussels sprouts. Finally we had bete noir, a rich chocolate dessert with a scoop of ice cream.

Other meals include ribeye steak or filet mignon, wild salmon, rack of lamb, Asian-glazed pork tenderloins, barbecue chicken breast. The dining schedule is seasonal so guests need to call ahead for hours and reservations.

Owners Julie Bryant and Bill Roach purchased Summer Lake Inn last September. "We bought the inn because we love the lake and we love the land," said Bryant. "The inn is such an eclectic and personal place."

The couple doesn't have any big changes planned for the inn. They are looking into solar power and other green building technologies for the future but want to keep the character of the place.

“People come here for the peace and quiet,” said Roach. “Guests won’t see or hear noisy motor boats on this lake.”

For those who like stargazing, bring a telescope. There are few places in the country where the sky is so dark. Two cement pads and a bench are located on a small hill adjacent to the cabins for stargazing or bird watching.

For those seeking solitude, Summer Lake is the place. Lake County has a population of 1 person per 2 square miles. The inn is just two hours south of Bend so you don’t have to travel all day to get there.

For more information call 800-261-2778 or visit www.summerlakeinn.com.

After our stay at Summer Lake Inn, we headed a few miles south to Summer Lake Hot Springs. The two resorts offer experiences at the opposite end of the spectrum. Cabins and townhouses at Summer Lake Inn range from \$115 to \$235 per night while the two small cabins (15 X 15 feet), ranch house and homestead house at Summer Lake Hot Springs range from \$65 to \$125 a night. The hot springs also offers tent sites (\$10/person) and RV sites (\$25). For those not camping or staying at a cabin, there is a day use fee of \$5 to use the pools.

The original Cowboy Bathhouse of Summer Lake Hot Springs houses a 15'x30' cement pool with water at 103 degrees. The main draw is the original Cowboy Bathhouse, which was built in 1927. The 15 X 30 foot cement pool is located in an old barn and the water enters the pool at about 103 degrees. Prior to the early settlers’ arrival, the undeveloped springs were known as “Medicine Springs” to the Native Americans. In 1843, explorer John Fremont passed through the area naming Summer Lake and commenting on the healing properties of the hot springs.

“I love the open space of this valley,” said owner Duane Graham, “and it gives you time to think. Winter Ridge creates its own weather and the sky seems to change about every 20 minutes.”

The cabins and Graham’s house have radiant floor heating that uses the natural hot water coming from the ground. It’s an even heat and it doesn’t blow dust around like other heating systems, Graham explained. He is using green building techniques such as radiant floor heating, recycled materials and using insulation without formaldehyde.

As I sat at the table in the cabin, I looked through my spotting scope and saw three bighorn sheep feeding up on the surrounding hillsides. Graham said heâ€™s seen up to 40 or 50 bighorns as well as deer, elk and antelope. Bald eagles can also be seen in the valley.

There are trails leading out to the lake. For more information call 541-943-3931 or go to www.summerlakehotsprings.com.

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