

## Snow camping: Once you try building an ice shelter, you just may dig it



By **KAREN SYKES** **BIO** SPECIAL TO THE POST-INTELLIGENCER  
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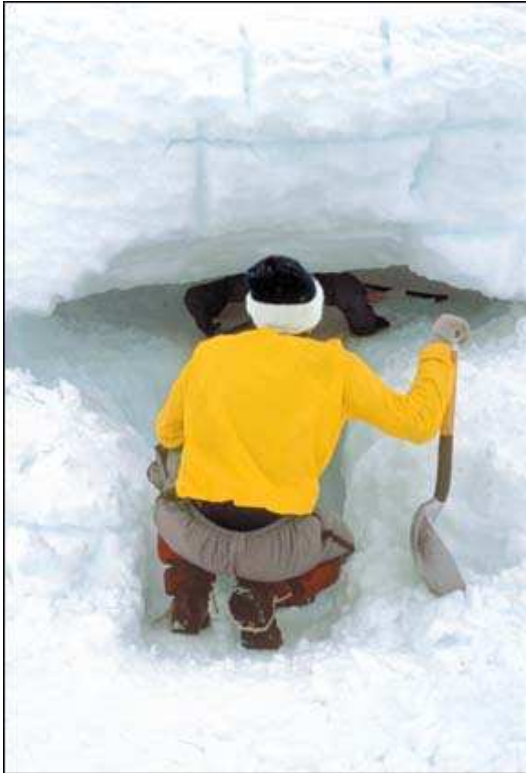
If you've never spent the night in an igloo or a snow cave, you might give the outrageous activity of snow camping a try -- and let your inner engineer run wild. It's challenging. It's beautiful. It brings out the spirit of play. But it is hard work. Having done it once, you may swear never to do it again. Or you may swear never to stop doing it.

I've participated in snow camping classes where elaborate structures were made -- split-level snow caves, even one with a spiral staircase fashioned out of rock and snow. Some students hung out a "For Rent" sign and Christmas decorations. At night we'd tour by headlamp, traveling from one snow cave to another to see if we were keeping up with the Joneses.

A cave can be small or large, depending on party size and snow conditions, but smaller caves are warmer. Last year three of us fashioned a large snow cave, 12 feet by 12 feet, large enough to stand up in. Sometimes caves are built with mere survival in mind, and knowing how to build one could save your life.

The winter scenery wakes up the soul. The wind blows and shapes snow into soft, sensuous shapes and the sky is like torn colored silk. Sunrise and sunset can be subtle or intense, but even if the weather is not clear, the scenery is pure, with trees seeming to pray, limbs bent down by the weight of the snow.

Perhaps some of us cannot appreciate wilderness until we've endured extreme conditions, where you'll also find extreme beauty.



Once on Mount Hood we were tent-bound during a violent storm, but I was snug and warm, calm in the eye of the storm with absolute faith in my gear and clothing. As the wind howled and tucked at the rain fly, I dozed and dreamed like a bear in its den. When we broke camp next morning we found we had camped a short distance from the memorial for some young people killed on Hood several years ago.

Another time, on Mount Rainier, conditions were so bad that one of the caves collapsed and the hike leaders instigated a night watch. We took turns in twos, patrolling the caves in two-hour shifts, sharing a thermos of hot cider in the bitter-cold night as gaudy stars danced above.

Still want to play in the snow? If you are a novice, I suggest you not try this until you have taken a [course](#) or gone with people who have snow-camping experience.

### **Snow camping: Options for shelters in the snowy wilderness**

Three strong people can construct a cave in three to four hours with two people shoveling and another getting rid of the snow that is shoveled out. On a steep slope, the person getting rid of the snow throws it down slope. On a flat area, a tarp can be used to haul it away. If conditions are poor, construction can take longer. Allow extra time for glitches such as digging into an unexpected obstacle like a rock or a tree and having to start over.

The snow cave may collapse during construction, but relax, snow caves are unlikely to collapse once they have "set up."

My husband, John, begins a cave by digging a slot (or trench) into the slope to a point where he's created a wall about 4 to 5 feet tall. He then establishes the cave floor level about 1-1/2 to 2 feet above the bottom of the trench. At this point he cuts out a large snow block wide enough to span the trench by 6 inches on each side; this snow block is set aside and saved. The trench is continued into the wall another 2 to 3 feet, taking care not to destroy the ledge created by removal of the snow block.

The cave is then dug in the shape of a small igloo hollowed out of the snow. With the snow block replaced in the opening over the trench, your cave is complete. It is necessary to crawl under the snow block and up to the floor level -- this ensures there is no wind blowing in.

A small vent is punched through the ceiling and should be 12 to 18 inches thick. There are

important finishing touches: Pointed areas on the ceiling will drip so the surface needs to be smoothed.



**An igloo takes longer** to build, requires more skill and you are more exposed to the weather during the construction process. We recommend igloo building on a clear, crisp day. The snow has to be of the right consistency to cut snow blocks. You can't work with dry snow. The ideal size for the blocks is about 12 by 18 by 6 inches.

The igloo is constructed in a spiral -- the first tier

rising at a slant so the second tier will spiral upward. Bevel the top of each tier inward -- if the top of the tier is horizontal you'll end up with a vertical wall of snow. This is where an engineering instinct comes in handy. The final block must have an opening for ventilation and chinks must be caulked. Also make sure you smooth down any drip points.

In the morning, collapse igloos and snow caves by stamping them in so unsuspecting skiers won't fall into them. Once snow has set up, it's like concrete.

Having participated in and instructed many winter camping courses, my preference is the snow cave. It is easier and can be built under more variable conditions than the igloo. Always carry a tent as a backup shelter in case you run out of light before you have finished your structure.



**If you merely want** to experience camping in the snow without the hard work, you may prefer a tent. A tent is faster and easier to set up but it may be hard to stake out in the snow: Use snow stakes, or ice axes -- regular tent stakes will pull out of the snow.

Pack down a tent platform with snowshoes before you begin and pack the platform again

by foot before putting up the tent.

Ensure adequate ventilation -- snow will accumulate on the tent during a storm and you may have to get up during the night to shake it off. Keep in mind a tent is colder than a snow cave -- the temperature inside a snow cave is about 32 degrees.

### **Snow camping: Tips for getting started**

If you haven't spent time in the mountains, take a class in winter camping and be in good physical condition. The Mountaineers (206-284-6310) offers a snow-shoe course each winter with an overnight field trip. The course has already started this year, but be on the lookout for other winter classes. Everett Parks & Recreation is offering one in January. Call 425-257-8300.

- You do need knowledge of mountainous terrain and winter hazards.
- Never camp at the bottom of an avalanche slope. An avalanche slope can be identified by its lack of "anchors" such as trees or rocks.
- Camp in the trees or on top of a ridge if it is not too windy.
- Don't camp beneath a cornice. A cornice is a "frozen wave," a collection of snow created by wind action that hangs on the leeward side of a ridge. Sudden changes in temperature can cause the cornice to break off and trigger an avalanche.
- You will need navigation skills as there are no trails to follow. Carry a map and compass.
- If you are going into terrain where avalanche is a possibility, everyone in the party should have an avalanche beacon tuned to the same frequency, and know how to use them.
- If it's your first time, camp close enough to the car that you can retreat if necessary. Leave emergency clothing and food in the car in case of unexpected highway delays.

- Cooking is a challenge. Keep foods simple -- this is not the time to try a gourmet recipe. Fruit will freeze. Don't diet, since you need plenty of food to keep going as cold temperatures will quickly eat up your energy.
- Working with stoves can be a challenge. White-gas stoves work best in cold weather. Water bottles will freeze unless you keep them inside.
- Keep your boots inside your shelter, or the laces will freeze.
- When you are working, stop frequently to eat and drink water -- you need fluids even when it is cold. Once you are inside your shelter -- tent, snow cave or igloo -- change clothing completely even if you think you are dry. Your clothing will be damp from perspiration.
- There are a few places where there's almost always enough snow to build a structure, such as Skyline Ridge above Stevens Pass (across from the ski area), or Mazama Ridge on Mount Rainier. If you plan to tent, you can go just about anywhere.
- One of the best parts of snow camping is sitting in a warm restaurant afterwards over a plate of pancakes reliving or embellishing the experience with your companions. Before your gear is even dry, you may find yourself looking for a date on the calendar to go out again -- and the next time it will be easier.