

Out In The Cold: Build a snow cave for a night in an outdoor icy cage

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John Becker and I look ridiculous. The chairlifts have stopped at Ski Santa Fe, and the last skiers of the day are all heading downhill, toward Totemoff's bar for a mid-mountain beer or to tailgate parties in the parking lot. We're moving in the opposite direction, up the slopes, aided by special friction skins on the bottom of our skis. We're wearing preposterously large backpacks, stuffed to the ripping point with gear—snow shovels, a heavy tent, down jackets, thick gloves, fuel, water bottles, sleeping mats, avalanche gear, cooking equipment, goggles and more. Sweating, huffing, bowed by the weight, we stop often to catch our breath. The red-faced après-ski crowd at Totemoff's gives us understandably puzzled looks, and a few mocking hoots of encouragement. We look like a sorry pair of astronauts who got drunk and wandered away from their lander, a duo of pathetic Sherpas who mistook Nambe for Namche and now find themselves schlepping past a Khumbu of drunk Texans. But screw it. We're going camping.

Winter camping is not most people's idea of a good time. It's cold. There are no s'mores. You're lucky if you can dig up enough sticks and tinder out of the snow to start a fire, and you're luckier if you don't make any forehead-slapping bumbles like letting the stove frost over or forgetting your lighter and matches a few miles back at the car. Leave the sporks to be buried by snow after dinner and you'll be eating your oatmeal with your fingers. Lay down with a bottle of water, wake up thirsty with ice.

But if you can keep the needle on the misery meter pointing more toward adventure than disaster, winter camping can be a blast. Becker and I are headed to Deception Peak, near the edge of the precipitous Nambe chutes, 2,000 vertical feet above the ski area parking lot. It doesn't always require that sort of slog. There are great places to camp in winter all throughout the Santa Fe National Forest, some that have sites right next to your car (a good idea for first timers). We reach our spot, a 10-foot-deep drift on a wind-scoured shoulder of the peak, just as the sun sinks below the Jemez Mountains to the west.

The wind is blowing hard. Spindrift is snaking across the snow's icy crust and zipping past my headlamp, looking a little like the stars when a movie spaceship goes to light speed. The stinging flecks of snow dust quickly find their way through every seam, collar, pocket and pouch, where they congregate like cold colonies of lice. We decide to scrap the idea of pitching a tent and get out of the wind by digging a snow cave.

A snow cave is less shelter than bunker, more freezer than hearth. In architecture, it resembles a womb. The entrance is a body-length tunnel just wide enough for a person to slither through on their stomach. The tube climbs slightly into a cavity in the snow just large enough for a grown man to sit and two to lie down. Because the sleeping area is higher than the door, body heat collects inside, and soon the cave is perceptibly warmer than the outdoor air.

John starts digging, first on his knees, then on his stomach, burrowing like a worm into the white meat of an apple. Soon, all that's visible outside the hole are his orange ski boots, kicking occasionally as he scrapes at the crumbly, sugary snow at the heart of the drift. A few hundred pounds of snow must be excavated with a small avalanche shovel, passing the snow back through the hole his body is plugging. "How's it going in there?" I shout as the orange boots epileptically twitch.

We take turns and, after an hour or so, the cave is ready. I poke a small hole in the two-foot-thick ceiling with an avalanche probe, just enough to let a trickle of fresh air in from above but not wide enough to let out the heat. We unroll our foam sleeping mats and thick goose-down sleeping bags inside.

A snow cave is not for the claustrophobic. Zipped into a mummy-shaped sleeping bag, I can barely move. Brushing the walls, only a few inches away on either side, is not a good idea, since it will get the warm bag wet; knocking the ceiling, a foot above my face, knocks a spray of snow crystals onto my face. When Becker switches his headlamp off, the cave goes completely black, and my mind begins to mischievously amuse itself by playing out various nightmare scenarios in its sleeplessness. Is the ceiling dripping? Have the door and vent been plugged by drifts? How long would we last if the ceiling collapses and traps us here, squirming helplessly in straightjacket-tight bags under a ton of snow? Outside, it's 3 degrees above zero and howling. Inside, still air is over 30 degrees. The bags are almost toasty. I'm soon sleeping fitfully.

Becker and I awake to a faint blue light through the wall and ceiling of the cave. We crawl out, just as the top of Lake Peak catches the first orange of sunrise. Standing on the edge of the chutes in down slippers, with a warm mug of tea, I watch whirlwinds of spindrift twirl across the chutes as the sunlight pours down into the cirque.

We pack up, stuff our feet into frozen boots and ski toward home. Dropping through the trees, we pop out onto a groomer, our thighs burning with each heavy turn, while intermediate skiers go careering past us down the icy hardpack. We're again conspicuously out of our element, overloaded cargo planes amid a swarm of zippy little jets, but it doesn't bother me. My mind is back up on those whirlwinds on the ridge. A teenage snowboarder heckles, enthusiastically from a chairlift, an emphatic, monosyllabic screeed lost in the muzzle of his scarf. I raise my pole and wave. Yeah buddy. Right on. What you said.

Winter Camping Tips

- Gear: A foam sleeping mat and a down or synthetically insulated sleeping bag, rated to approximately 15 degrees or lower, are essential. A sturdy, four-season tent is a good idea for beginners. Get equipment, clothing and seasoned advice from the crew at Sangre de Cristo Mountain Works (328 S. Guadalupe St., 505-984-8221) and REI (500 Market St., Railyard, 505-988-2753) and apparel at Santa Fe Mountain Sports (607 Cerrillos Road, 505-988-3337).
- Clothing: Waterproof pants and jacket are critical, and you'll want several layers of warm clothes (for example: a down jacket over a fleece midlayer on top of a wool base) as well as a wool hat and thick, waterproof ski gloves. Don't forget sun block, sun glasses and a brimmed hat. Never, ever wear cotton.
- Cooking: In general, liquid fuel stoves work better than canister stoves, which have trouble burning in cold weather. Melt snow for water and keep a warm bottle in your sleeping bag so it stays liquid through the night.
- Site: Stick close to roads or trails unless you're experienced in winter backcountry travel. Pick a flat spot far from any steep slopes (anything steeper than approximately 25 degrees or about the incline of a black diamond ski run). Big Tesuque Campground is an excellent, easy-access spot for first timers, albeit crowded in the morning.