

Winter camping can be cool | Bringing proper gear is the key

By Tom Wharton for The Salt Lake Tribune 12/05/2008

To borrow the title of a classic film, winter camping in Utah can be good, bad or ugly, sometimes all in the same trip.



On the plus side, campers will often share a campground with only one or two other groups, assorted wild creatures and, if the weather is right, an amazing star-filled sky on a moonless night.

"There is no place quite as magical if you are lucky enough to have a fresh snowfall and a nice clear day the next morning," said the National Park Service's Paul Henderson, describing a winter scene at Arches but one that could be repeated nearly anywhere in southern Utah.

Winter camping can be difficult, though, especially if you are in a tent. It can include cold feet, frozen eggs in the cooler, and what seems like a never-ending night. If the weather turns stormy and cold, things can get ugly. No number of blankets and warm sleeping bags inside a tent can compensate for a temperature hovering near zero, especially in the middle of the night when you have to get up and use the restroom.

When camping in the winter - and many Utahns enjoy the experience of quiet solitude in a beautiful place - the key is coming prepared for cold.

Lyndsie Langford of South Jordan enjoys a winter camping trip with her family almost every year. Though it's nice to sleep in a relatively warm trailer, she enjoys sitting around the campfire, even if it's cold.

"My favorite thing is the snow," she said. "We were the only ones there. Isolation is good."

Others, like Fred Doehring of Sandy, head farther south to Washington County in the winter where there's no snow but not too many people, either. He just spent Thanksgiving weekend for the second year in a row at Sand Hollow State Park near Hurricane in his trailer.

"You couldn't ask for better weather, no real crowds to speak of," he said. "The temperatures got down into the 40s, but with a heater in the trailer it's not a problem at all. One reason we do it is it fits our schedule. We have time off for the holidays and we have more time to camp. In the summer, there are too many things going on and it's difficult to get away."

Like Doehring, some campers use a propane heater and/or a campfire to survive the evening and early morning hours. They even use heaters inside a tent or recreational vehicle with adequate ventilation to take the edge off the cold, but should never, ever sleep with the devices running

due to concerns about carbon-monoxide poisoning. Even having a tent flap open might not provide enough oxygen.

Top ten utah winter campgrounds



Campers who do use such heaters in an enclosed area must be alert to symptoms of carbon-monoxide poisoning. (See box at right.)

Coleman's Jim Reid said perhaps the most important piece of equipment for winter camping is the proper sleeping bag.

"Too many people think one sleeping bag should cover all seasons," he said. "Winter camping requires a good, cold-weather bag with more insulation and construction features to retain body heat than found in mild weather bags."

Utah's Dixie near St. George in southwestern Utah is the best place to winter camp because temperatures tend to be higher than in other parts of the state. Snow Canyon State Park ranks as the state's best winter camping area, although the BLM's Dixie Red Cliffs and Zion National Park's Watchman are also good bets.

"We are usually not that busy, but there are some weekends and holidays where the campground fills up," said Christine Kennedy at Zion National Park.

All five of Utah's national parks keep at least one loop open in the winter and usually offer a heated restroom and water except in extreme cases. That even includes high-elevation Bryce Canyon, which often has deep snow and below-zero winter temperatures.

"Folks do camp there," said Bryce Canyon chief of interpretation Dan Ng of the North Campground's Loop A, which is open year-round. "It can get to be fairly cold. But the park is beautiful, and you can essentially have that whole area to yourself with a short walking distance to the rim. There is no lodging available inside the park in the winter, so you are physically in the park at night. It is quiet."

Riley Mitchell at Capitol Reef National Park said one loop remains open and winterized at that park's campground, which she described as "minimally used." Seeing wildlife such as chukars, mule deer and fox is common in the winter months.

Henderson said one loop is open year-round at both Arches National Park and at the Squaw Flat campground in the Needles District of Canyonlands.

"We don't get a huge amount of camping, but it is a rare night when there isn't at least somebody at Arches or Needles," he said.

Utah State Parks public information officer Deena Loyola said many parks offer limited camping during the winter months, but it's a good idea to call 800-322-3770 for up-to-date information.

Wasatch Front residents who want to camp closer to home and stay warm in the process might try East Canyon State Park, where yurts are open year-round and are heated. There is also a ski-in yurt in Mill Creek Canyon operated by Salt Lake County Parks and Recreation.

Winter camping can guarantee solitude and quiet. But go prepared. Long nights and low temperatures make it a whole different experience.

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Winter camping tips by The Salt Lake Tribune 12/02/2008

- Remember that it gets dark early so plan accordingly. Have plenty of firewood or a small heater to keep the tent warm while you're awake and bring games and even a small folding table for inside the tent. Or, if camped close to town, drive in for a movie or dinner.
 - Take the proper sleeping bag. Most bags feature a temperature rating. Pay attention to it and don't take a lighter bag. Use a ground pad for comfort and to insulate you from the cold. And wear a stocking hat to bed to keep in the heat.
 - Pitch tents and set up cooking areas with a shelter or in a sheltered area where wind chill does not make it even colder.
 - Plan ahead. Some campgrounds, especially private facilities, close in the winter.
 - Have a backup plan if the weather turns ugly, including enough money to stay in a motel if needed.
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Winter camping: Staying safe with a propane heater | The Salt Lake Tribune 12/02/2008

One of the hazards of winter camping inside a tent, recreational vehicle, camper, vehicle, shelter or other enclosed area is using a portable propane heating stove which produces carbon

monoxide, a potential killer. If camping inside a tent, manufacturers recommend turning on the heater before you go to bed, or when you're awake and engaged in some activity, but turning it off before sleeping.

Carbon monoxide poisoning produces flu-like symptoms that include watery eyes, headaches, dizziness, fatigue and possibly death. The gas is an invisible killer that can't be seen and gives off no smell. Opening a window or tent flap does not always remove carbon monoxide.

If you encounter someone who has been affected or overcome by carbon monoxide, here are the proper steps to take:

- Get the victim to fresh air.
- If the victim is not breathing, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
- Get medical help by calling the nearest emergency medical service, law enforcement official or ranger.
- Transport the victim to a medical facility with a hyperbaric chamber.

For more information about safe camping, a free "Camp Safe, Camp Smart" brochure is available from the Portable Propane Product Safety News Bureau, P.O. Box 45002, Cleveland, Ohio 44145 or by calling 888-226-7487.