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On a cross-country trek to Yosemite Ski Hut

Michael Shapiro, Special to The Chronicle

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Our goal was just 10 miles away: a drop-dead view of Half Dome and a rustic hut where we'd huddle around a roaring fire and feast on lasagna and red wine.

In summer one can drive from Yosemite's Badger Pass to Glacier Point in half an hour. But in winter the unplowed road is covered with several feet of snow and there's just one sensible way to get to the point: on skis. Our group wouldn't have had it any other way.

Last month, I joined an Environmental Traveling Companions trip to the Ski Hut at Glacier Point, renowned for its panoramic views of Yosemite's majestic massifs and waterfalls.

ETC, based in San Francisco (www.etctrips.org), helps physically challenged people to embark on outdoor adventures. As an occasional ETC volunteer, I had the chance to join a group of 13 that included two women who have lost the use of their legs and poled themselves along the trail while seated atop a pair of skis and a two visually impaired skiers who followed the sound of our voices.

After a week of wet weather, we were hoping for a crystal-clear dawn, and when the sun illuminated the blue skies above the valley, we knew we were in for a perfect day.

Getting there

From the Bay Area, take Interstate 580 to I-205 to Highway 120 and head straight through Manteca and Oakdale (good places to refuel both car and body) to Yosemite.

From Yosemite Valley it's about a 40-minute drive (in good weather) up to Badger Pass, where the ski track to Glacier Point begins.

You can take Amtrak to Merced and from there buses connect to Yosemite Lodge (www.amtrak.com). Park buses run regularly from Yosemite Valley to Badger Pass.

A perfect day of cross-country skiing

9 a.m. Meet in the parking lot at Badger Pass and wash down an Odwalla bar with Gatorade.

9:30 a.m. Set up equipment, including the sit-skis, and finish packing our gear for what's expected to be a six-hour trek. All we need to bring are toiletries and a change of clothes; the tour includes all meals and snacks at the hut.

10:30 Start skiing through pine forests along a tracked trail (this means a plow has compressed the snow with a set of parallel tracks for skis) toward Glacier Point.

11 a.m. After huffing mostly uphill for the first mile, we catch our breath and admire the serene green-and-white tableau. Walter Raineri, a blind skier who had seen Yosemite before he lost his sight, asks us to vocalize our ooohs and ahhs to help him "see" the beauty of the valley.

Noon We stop after 2.5 miles to have lunch. The winter sun has brought the temperature up to the high 40s and the trail is softening.

2:30 p.m. More than halfway to the hut, we reach Clark View and begin to enjoy vistas of Yosemite's high country. A bit farther on we catch our first glimpse of Half Dome, especially dramatic because it has taken hours of effort to see it.

4 p.m. We reach the ridgetop at the Sentinel Dome cutoff, just 1.5 downhill miles from the hut. The valley view, including Vernal and Nevada waterfalls, is a bit obscured by incoming clouds but still magnificent.

5 p.m. After flying down the homestretch, we arrive at the spacious A-frame hut, snap some photos with Half Dome in the background and head inside to claim our bunks. We hang our snow-dusted clothes on a rack by the wood stove.

7 p.m. Three steaming trays of lasagna (one just for vegetarians) appear out of the kitchen, flanked by six bottles of red wine and a crisp salad full of fresh veggies. We toast our hutkeeper/chef, McCray Wimpsett, and dive ravenously into dinner.

8 p.m. Wimpsett mentions that some prior guests left behind a bottle of limoncello. I have just one thought: yellow snow! We go outside, grab some white fluffy powder and douse it with the bright yellow Italian liqueur. A new apres-ski drink is born.

8:30 p.m. Completely sated, we sprawl in front of the fire and share stories from the day.

10:30 p.m. We settle into our Army barracks cots, too tired to let our fellow skiers' snores bother us, and fall quickly asleep.

Heading home

After a layover day that included a 2-mile snowshoe hike to the summit of Sentinel Dome for a 360-degree view of the valley, we awake to a snowy morning. We fuel up on granola, pack our things and head into the whiteout.

Our third day in the high country, we're better acclimated to the 7,000-foot-plus altitude and ski out a bit faster than we skied in. At the Badger Pass cafeteria, we warm up with soup, fries and hot chocolate and hit the road, soaking up some misty views of El Cap on the drive out of the park.

If you go

Stay

To reserve a space at the 20-bed Ski Hut at Glacier Point, call (209) 372-8444. For information, see www.yosemitepark.com. Reservations are required and must be made by phone.

At least six people per night need to sign up in order for the hut to open. If you're just two people that's fine, as long as others are signed up.

Saturday nights are booked through March 29 when this season ends, but cancellations may result in openings. The self-guided hut trip price is \$110 per person per night and can be booked on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday nights.

Guided tours, with a ski instructor, meet at 9 a.m. at the Badger Pass Cross-Country Center and cost \$192 per person for one night at the hut, \$288 for two nights. For both guided or unguided trips, all meals are provided.

Booking for next winter is expected to start this October. The season typically runs from mid-December to the end of March, depending on snow levels.

Splurge

Spend a night in or near Yosemite before you start skiing. That will help acclimate you to the altitude and avoid an early morning drive. We stayed in El Portal at the Yosemite View Lodge, 11136 Highway 140; special winter weekday rate was \$95.

Saver

For \$13, save your back by renting a sleeping bag at the hut so you don't have to haul yours in.

Good to know

Wrap your belongings in plastic bags so if it rains or snows, you don't arrive with wet clothes. The cabin has a few good books, so you don't need to pack your own, but a headlamp is handy for reading in bed. Leave a clean change of clothes in your car for the drive home.

Resources

Find what-to-bring lists, a trail description and emergency advice at www.yosemitepark.com. The main park site is www.nps.gov/yose.

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