

WINTER WONDERLANDS

Just because it's winter, doesn't mean there aren't fun destinations

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Despite frigid temperatures plaguing some parts of the U.S., winter does have unique charms, whether it's getting cozy by a fireplace with a mug of hot chocolate in a mountain inn or heading outdoors to a magical landscape of forests and mountains sparkling with snow.

Here are a few ideas for shaking off the January blahs with a trip in the dead of winter to enjoy festivals, parks, natural phenomena and all kinds of recreation. Just be sure to bundle up.

NATURAL PHENOMENA

Seeing the northern lights seems to be on everybody's bucket list these days.

There's no guarantee that nature will cooperate, but spend a few nights in a place like Chena Hot Springs, north of Fairbanks, Alaska, or take a northern lights tour in Iceland, and you may be able to check that one off.

Wisconsin is known for magnificent natural ice formations inside caves on the Apostle Islands, but it takes just the right weather conditions for a thick enough layer of ice to form on Lake Superior near the caves so that visitors can walk across the frozen water to get there.

Check the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore Facebook.

RECREATION

Not a skier? Not a problem. There are many ways to enjoy wintry landscapes.

Snowshoeing, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing are available in many snowy destinations and can be easier for beginners than downhill skiing.

Or try one of the more offbeat snow sports. In some places, you can go snow biking. Others, like Ouray Ice Park in Colorado, offer ice climbing.

There's also skijoring — skiing while pulled by dogs or a horse — and snow-kiting, which is like kite-surfing on skis, with the wind pulling the skier across the ice.

Dogsledding is popular in many wintry places, including Ely, Minnesota. For a truly remote experience, consider a sled dog safari with Tinja Myllykangas in Finland's Lapland wilderness.

How about Nordic skating? Also called tour skating, it's ice skating on a frozen trail rather than around a small rink, and it requires a different type of skate — typically a long blade attached to ski boots.

It's popular in Sweden, Finland and elsewhere in northern Europe, but you also can do it in North America on the Rideau Canal in Ottawa, Ontario, and the Lake Morey Ice Skating Trail in Fairlee, Vermont.

Roller coaster fans can also now enjoy winter thrills with mountain coasters — which are gravity-driven roller coasters with dips, waves and loops — at three Colorado resorts: Aspen Snowmass, Steamboat and Copper Mountain.

Colorado's Purgatory Resort also plans to open a mountain coaster this year.

YELLOWSTONE AND MORE

Travelers who have experienced Yellowstone National Park in winter say it's utterly magical: wildlife watching in the snow, geysers steaming in the cold air, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snow coaches, snowmobiles and more.

Rick Hoeninghausen, director of sales and marketing for Yellowstone National Park Lodges in Wyoming, says the weeks after Christmas are typically slow, though February is busier than January, with Presidents Day weekend often selling out.

Except for that Feb. 19 holiday weekend, he says "most folks should be able to find lodging in the park" this winter at either Old Faithful Snow Lodge or Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel.

Winter vacation packages like Winter Wolf Discovery or Winter in Wonderland combine lodging, meals and activities.

Or look into vacation rentals and resorts nearby. Big Sky Resort in Montana is 50 miles from Yellowstone's West Entrance, and Montana Backcountry Adventures offers an excursion to a yurt for an evening of dinner, music, sledding and stargazing.

But you don't have to go to a major national park to enjoy winter fun. Many smaller, local parks around the U.S. host special winter activities as well.

Toboggan Run in Pokagon State Park near Angola, Indiana, is a 30-second thrill ride that can hit 40 mph with a 90-foot drop over a quarter-mile.

Starved Rock State Park in Illinois, 90 minutes from Chicago,

has gorgeous frozen waterfalls, various trails and even an over-night lodge.

FESTIVALS

The Quebec Winter Carnival in Quebec City, Quebec, runs Jan. 26-Feb. 11, with snow slides, snow sculptures, night parades, an ice palace and snow baths, where brave (foolish?) visitors play in the snow wearing swimsuits.

The Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival in China is known for massive, elaborate and colorfully lit ice sculptures along with art exhibitions and sporting events.

The festival runs through late February, with heavy crowds expected the week of Chinese New Year celebrations, Feb. 15-23.

Japan's Sapporo Snow Festival, Feb. 5-12, also is known for ice and snow sculptures.

In Minnesota, a celebration called The Great Northern encompasses the St. Paul Winter Carnival, Jan. 25-Feb. 10, with ice

carvings and parades; the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships, Jan. 25-28, on Lake Nokomis, and the City of Lakes Loppet Ski Festival on Lake Calhoun, Jan. 27-28 and Feb. 3-4.

Minneapolis is also hosting the Super Bowl this year on Feb. 4.

In Wisconsin, Lake Geneva's

Winterfest (easily accessed from Chicago and Milwaukee), Jan. 27-Feb. 4, hosts the U.S. National Snow Sculpting Competition along with a chili cook-off and some wacky events like a human dog sled race.



— AP file photo

Visitors play on a slide on a castle-like structure made from blocks of ice at the annual Harbin International Ice and Snow festival in Harbin, northeastern's China's Heilongjiang province.



— AP file photo

John Houghton of Vermontville, N.Y., and his sled dog team give a ride to a couple in a snowfall around Mirror Lake in Lake Placid, N.Y.

