

Five ways to experience winter

By Hilary Nangle | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 04, 2012

Instead of holing up with a hot toddy, reach out and embrace winter. Here are five ways to savor the season, from acoustical concerts in the Swiss Alps to a guided safari deep into one of the United States' favorite national parks.

Zermatt Unplugged draws snow enthusiasts, music fans

Ever since Julie Andrews ran across an Austrian mountain field singing "The hills are alive with the sound of music," alpine resorts have been angling to capitalize on the image. One of the best productions is Zermatt Unplugged, scheduled April 9-13, with nine stages. Past performers at this acoustic music festival have included Billy Idol, Alanis Morissette, Lionel Richie, Seal, David Gray, and Suzanne Vega.

It's not just big names that draw music lovers to this five-day festival in the Matterhorn's shadow, it's also the opportunity to hear new voices and rising stars, all performing unplugged. Last April's festival comprised 42 concerts, including 29 free performances, ranging from folk to rap, jazz to rock. Some venues require tickets, but most are free.

Stages are set up both in the exhaust-free village, renowned for its clear air and spectacular views, and on the mountains. That makes it possible to ski Zermatt's many peaks and over 170 miles of marked trails, innumerable acres of off-piste bowls, tobogganing runs, and Nordic trails between concerts. www.zermatt-unplugged.ch



Wildlife Safari: A chance to see winter wildlife in Yellowstone.

For an obscure wintervacation, consider Scotland

Glen Coe, Scotland, one of Britain's most spectacular wilderness areas, is renowned among hill walkers and mountain climbers, famous for its ornery weather, and notorious as the site of the 1692 massacre, when Campbell clan soldiers slaughtered members of the MacDonald clan as they slept, after availing themselves of their hospitality for 12 days.

It's also home to Glencoe ski area, a belt-notcher for those seeking obscure but challenging destinations. Truth is, with aging base facilities and lifts and minimal snowmaking and grooming, there's not much to recommend Scotland's oldest ski area but the panoramic views over Rannoch Moor, local lore, and bragging rights.

Serious skiers and riders prize Glencoe for its natural half pipes, Haggis Trap gully jump, and challenging terrain, including Flypaper, the longest and steepest trail in Britain. The rocky, treeless, wind-shaped terrain is subject to the weather whims of the Highlands, which usually include relentless winds and abundant snowfall.

"Glencoe is cold, windy, and barren, but on three or four days each season, there's no finer skiing anywhere," says Beppo Buchanan-Smith, proprietor of the Isle of Eriska Hotel, located about 50 minutes away.

Hit it on a bluebird day, after a storm, and when the winds are merely a stiff breeze, and it's one for the memory books. www.glencoemountain.com

Hut two, three, four: Maine Huts and Trails expands

Maine Huts and Trails is opening Stratton Brook, its fourth of a planned 12 full-service, trail-connected huts, on Dec. 21. This is the nonprofit's first alpine-sited hut, and the views of the Bigelow Mountains, Sugarloaf, and the Carrabassett Valley are spectacular.

"Each hut gets better and better, as we incorporate the lessons learned and best practices from prior huts, from more solar panels to more hooks in the bedrooms," says executive director Nicole Freedman.



JOE CONDRON

Zermatt Unplugged, We Invented Paris at Blue Lounge.

Like the other huts, each located about a day's hike or ski apart, Stratton Brook is powered by alternative energy. There are hot showers, hearty meals, and cozy social areas, in addition to 10 bunkrooms, four of which are private, sleeping a total of 44 guests. Access to Stratton Brook is on a new trail spur located just north of the Sugarloaf Access Road in Carrabassett Valley. The hut is about 8 trail miles from the original hut at Poplar Falls.

"This winter, we'll have about 50 total trail miles available for winter hikers, snowshoers, and cross-country skiers," Freedman says.

Reserve overnight stays Dec. 21-Jan. 21 at any of the Maine Huts by Dec. 15 and save 20 percent midweek; nonmember discounted rates begin at \$64 per night, which includes bunk, blanket, pillow, breakfast, and dinner. 207-265-2400, www.mainehuts.org

Red Parka Pub Challenge Cupcelebrates 40 years

The Red Parka Pub Challenge Cup, the oldest continuously held pro-style race in the country, will celebrate its 40th anniversary on March 15. The event complements 40 years of good times at one of New England's best-known après-ski hot spots, the Red Park Pub in Glen, N.H., family owned and operated since 1972.

During its run, the dual-format, modified giant slalom race, punctuated with a 3-foot jump, has drawn top-notch talent, including Olympian Tyler Palmer, five-time women's pro champion Toril Forland, and NCAA Division 1 racers.


"A lot of the original racers are still competing, but in a different age group," says second-generation Red Parka co-owner Terry O'Brien. Winning, she says, requires not only skill, but also stamina. It takes 18 runs, alternating courses in each round.

In honor of the anniversary, former World Cup chief of course Barry Bryant is returning to set the course.

The Parka is returning to the original bib draw format, with competitors drawing numbers the night before the race in the pub. "We're also inaugurating the RPP Challenge Hall of Fame, honoring all past winners and long-term volunteers," O'Brien says.

The Eastern Slope Ski Club's junior program benefits from the race. The race is open to

anyone age 21 or older. Registration is \$70, which includes lift ticket, RPP hat, and the after-party; deadline is March 8. 603-383-4344, www.redparkapub.com



Explore Yellowstone on a naturalist-guided winter safari

This winter, Spring Creek Ranch, in Jackson, Wyo., is offering overnight, naturalist-guided safaris into Yellowstone National Park.

“We’ll be traveling by snowcoach, which has treads instead of wheels, allowing access at this unique and quiet time of year,” Johnson says.

The interpretive trip is focused on Yellowstone’s unique ecosystem. “It’s home to the greatest concentration of geothermal features on the planet, with about 10,000 within the park’s confines,” Johnson says.

The most striking aspect of Yellowstone in winter is the interaction of its geothermal features, which are near boiling, with the air temperature, which can be between zero and 20 degrees. “There’s steam everywhere, creating a surreal effect,” Johnson says

Wildlife sightings might include elk, bison, coyotes, eagles, otters, and perhaps wolves.

The Winter Safari package is \$1,450 per person, based on double occupancy. 800-443-6139, www.springcreekranch.com

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