

Winter Camping Basics: How To Set Up The Perfect Snow Camp

By Nicole Atkins / January 22, 2022



Winter camping is an unparalleled experience. There's nothing better than the tranquil stillness of an alabaster vista. But, with great reward comes great responsibility. Whether you're car camping or hitting the backcountry, things can go south if you're unprepared. Camping in the cold comes with unique challenges.

We're here to guide you through the process so you can make the most of your winter camping adventure. With the right knowledge, skills, and equipment, you'll be an expert in no time.

We've got everything you need to know about winter camping, from start to finish. Follow these guidelines for a safe and fun winter camping trip.



Preparation For Winter Camping

Preparation is the most important step for camping in the winter. The last thing you want is to end up in sub-freezing temperatures without a plan.

With a bit of preparation, you can sit back and enjoy your snow camp in all its glory. Follow these steps to plan an amazing winter camping adventure that will knock your wool socks off.

Plan Strategically

Check the weather. Before anything else, check the weather forecast on a reliable site like [The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (NOAA). Look for possible storms, extreme temperatures, or rapidly changing conditions.

If the weather is questionable, download a weather app like NOAA Radar Live or Storm Radar to track changes. It's best to have a Plan B in case you face unforeseen circumstances.

Check avalanche conditions. Make sure your campsite isn't in the path of avalanche danger. Check [avalanche conditions](#) before leaving, and keep a close watch on potential hazards.

Even better, take an avalanche safety course with [The American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education](#) (AIARE), so you know what to look for while you're out there.

Plan for safety above all else. Choose a campsite that's close to safety in case you need to make a quick retreat. If a storm comes through, you'll want to be close to a ranger station, road, or emergency tower. Try a developed campground first if you're new to winter camping.

Most national and state parks keep sites open year-round for snow camping enthusiasts. That way, you'll still have access to basic amenities and firewood. It's also a good idea to have basic [cold-](#)

[weather first aid](#) and [survival skills](#) to help you through unexpected situations.

Tell someone where you're going. Tell at least two people where you're going and when you plan to return. If possible, give them exact coordinates. Otherwise, provide them with directions and a copy of your topographic map. Bring your phone or emergency communication device that tracks your location and allows you to call for help in an emergency.

Plan your menu. You [burn more calories in cold weather](#), so plan on bringing more food and snacks than you think you'll need. Make it easy on yourself by bringing simple, calorie-dense foods that can be eaten on-hand or quickly heated.

It can also be nice to have warm drinks on hand, like coffee, hot cocoa, or camping cocktails. Bring plenty of water, or make sure you have access to a water source.



Pick The Right Spot

Focus on comfort. Comfort is the most important factor in winter camping. That means picking a spot within your skill level or bringing an experienced friend. Try camping in a campground or your backyard before heading into the wilderness. Practice setting up your

tent so you can pitch it quickly in the cold. And start with one or two nights of car camping before moving to the backcountry.

Winter isn't the time to push your abilities. It's more important to stay comfortable so you can enjoy your time in the snow.

Make it easy to have fun. Look for a campsite that's close to recreational activities, like skiing, snowshoeing, or sledding. Extra points if you find a spot that exposes you to breathtaking sunrises and sunsets. Wherever possible, choose a flat area that's sheltered from the wind and exposed to morning sunlight.

Your mornings will be frigid, but you'll wake up a little warmer if the sun is shining on your tent. If you're in the backcountry, find a spot where the snow is at least five feet deep to protect the vegetation underneath. Keep an eye out for familiar landmarks so you can easily find your way back to camp during a storm.

Give yourself the gift of water. Try to find a spot near running or potable water. You'll need water to stay hydrated and cook meals. It takes twice the amount of fuel to melt snow than heat water, so bring extra fuel if you can't find a convenient water source.

If the water isn't potable, treat it with a water filtration system or [purification tablets](#). If you do find a running water source, make sure you camp at least 200 feet away.

Head out early. Getting to your campsite and pitching your tent will take longer in snowy conditions. Make sure you have at least a few hours of daylight left by the time you reach your destination.

Dropping temperatures and fading light can make the process harder than it needs to be.



Setting Up A Snow Camp

Winter camping is easy with the right equipment and a few basic skills. After a few trips, you'll know what works for you and what doesn't. Follow these guidelines to set up and maintain the perfect snow camp.

Flatten the ground. Upon arriving, find a good spot for your tent and use your feet, snowshoes, skis, or a shovel to pack down the snow. Flatten an area slightly larger than your tent's footprint and vestibule, so you have room to maneuver in and out of the tent. You can also dig out a trench or build walls around the tent to protect it from the wind.

Pitch your tent. Set up your [4-season tent](#) and rainfly according to the [tent assembly instructions](#). Try to avoid pitching your tent

underneath trees with heavy snowfall or ice. The door should face away from the wind. You may want to open a vent or leave space at the top of the door zipper for ventilation. Otherwise, you'll collect moisture and wake up in a wet tent.

Be mindful of where you place your gear while you're pitching the tent. Lightweight items can blow away in the wind or get lost in falling snow.

Stake it down. Most standard tent stakes aren't enough to hold your tent firmly in the ground during a wind storm. Since you're staking your tent into the snow, you'll need to reinforce it with [snow load poles](#) and snow stakes. Placing a [tarp](#) above your tent can offer extra protection from the weather.

Set up the kitchen. Set up a separate cooking area 100 to 200 feet from your tent. Cooking in your tent can be a fire or carbon monoxide hazard. Build a designated kitchen outside the tent or in a well-ventilated vestibule. You can use a shovel to dig out benches and a cooking surface. Feel free to place a tarp over the kitchen area for extra protection.

If you're collecting firewood, only use downed deadwood. And make sure you store food (and other scented objects) in a bear canister or sealed container. Even though bears are hibernating, there are plenty of other critters happy to nibble on your granola bars.

Designate a bathroom. Set up a bathroom area at least 200 feet from your campsite. Having a designated bathroom makes it easier for you to do your business in the cold. If you can, dig an eight-inch hole into the ground (underneath the snow) to bury your feces.

Otherwise, plan to bag it up and pack it out.

You can make your bathroom area more comfortable by building snow walls around the perimeter.

Make your campsite feel like home. Once your tent is secure, roll out your sleeping pad, [sleeping bag](#), and a [fleece blanket](#). If Fido is with you, place the [dog bed](#) next to your bag.

You can also share your bag with the dog to take advantage of heat transfer. Store your gear and supplies in your tent or vestibule—the more tent ground you cover, the warmer it will be. You can tie a string on the roof of your tent to hang wet clothes. And make sure your water and headlamp are readily available.



Essential Gear For Winter Camping

Winter camping requires special equipment for the snow. You're a little more vulnerable, so you need gear that will keep you safe, warm, and entertained. These are the essentials to get you started on your winter camping adventure.

Winter Apparel

Layers. Camping in the winter requires more forethought about how you dress. Wearing layers allows you to peel off or add clothes as your body temperature fluctuates. You'll want at least three layers: a moisture-wicking base layer (like thermals), an insulating middle layer (like fleece or a puffy jacket), and a waterproof outer layer (like a hardshell jacket).

Winter accessories. Maintaining a balanced body temperature is critical to staying comfortable. Make sure you come equipped with a hat (like a beanie), gloves or mittens, and warm non-cotton socks (wool is a great option). Bring extra socks; wet socks are miserable and can contribute to hypothermia. Always change out of wet clothes as soon as possible. You may also want to bring sunglasses or goggles to protect your eyes.

Footwear. If the snow is shallow, you can get away with regular hiking boots. But if it's more than a few inches deep, consider wearing [winter boots](#) or mountaineering boots. They offer more protection, waterproofing, and insulation. It's also a good idea to wear gaiters to keep the snow from creeping up into your pants.

Sun protection. You can get a mean sunburn in the winter. The snow reflects even more of the sun's harmful rays, making you more vulnerable to sun damage. Make sure you apply SPF 30+ sunscreen and lip balm a half-hour before going out.

Food And Drinks

Simple hot meals. There's nothing like a hot meal to top off a great day of winter camping. Bring plenty of dehydrated food you can reheat or simple meals that are easy to make. You don't want to be stuck washing a lot of dishes in the cold, so the simpler, the better. Soups, stews, and pasta are all great choices.

Nutritious snacks. Bring lots of snacks. During [winter activities](#), bring snacks with a nice balance of protein, fats, and carbohydrates to keep you going throughout the day. Granola bars and PB&J are two great snack options.

Water, water, water. It's easy to skimp on water in the winter because you're less likely to "feel" dehydrated. Don't be fooled. [Cold weather increases your risk of dehydration](#), so it's crucial to sip on that beautiful H₂O. If you're using a water reservoir, make sure it's insulated to avoid freezing. Keep your water bottle from freezing by carrying it close to your body, protecting it with a koozie, and storing it upside down to prevent the cap from freezing shut. Unless you plan on camping near potable water, bring a [water filter](#).

Cookware and utensils. If you're car camping, you can splurge on a complete set of camping cookware and utensils. If you're heading into the mountains, you're better off with a lightweight [backpacking spork](#) and a bowl. No matter where you are, you'll want at least one coffee mug or thermos.

Snow Equipment

Transport. You'll probably be traveling through the snow to get to your campsite. In shallow snow, you can get away with hiking shoes and microspikes. If the snow is deeper than six inches, you'll want to use skis, a snowboard, or snowshoes so you can float or glide your way to basecamp. You may also want to consider using a sled if you're traveling long distances or carrying a lot of gear.

Avalanche safety equipment. The most important safety gear you'll need is avalanche equipment, especially if you're camping in the backcountry. That means bringing an [avalanche probe](#), a [snow shovel](#), and an [avalanche beacon](#). Being prepared with avalanche gear can save your life. Your best bet is to take an [AIARE avalanche safety](#) course.

Camping Gear

4-season tent. For milder temperatures at low elevations, you can use a 3-season tent. But for most winter environments, you'll want a [4-season tent](#) with snow stakes. A 4-season tent has thicker materials, sturdy poles, and a larger rainfly. They're more effective at protecting you from the wind and snow.

Size up, so your tent has enough room to fit bodies and gear. And you might want to consider a brightly-colored tent, so rescue teams can spot you if anything goes awry.

Comfortable pack. You'll need a durable, waterproof backpack to carry your gear and supplies to camp. If you're car camping, you can get away with a smaller pack. But if you're heading into the backcountry, you'll be transporting everything on your back. If your trip is four days or less, aim for a 55-65 liter pack.

If it's longer than four days, go big with an 80-liter pack (or larger). Make sure your pack is comfortable, with extra pockets for your gear.

Sleeping bag. Staying warm through the night is one of the most important elements of great winter camping. You'll need an insulated [sleeping bag](#) with a [temperature rating](#) for lower temps. A good rule of thumb is to get a bag rated ten degrees lower than the lowest temperatures you expect. A bag that fits tighter around your body (like a mummy bag) will generally keep you warmer. You can also add a sleeping bag liner to add a little more insulation.

Sleeping pad(s). Don't get caught sleeping on the cold ground. To stay warm, raise your body off the ground with at least one sleeping pad, preferably two. Most all-season sleeping pads have a [sleeping pad R-value](#) of 4 or higher. You can also use them around the fire, in the kitchen, or on the ground.

Cooking stove and fuel. Your cooking stove and fuel are critical pieces of your gear. Without them, you'll have to forage for food, which is an entirely different set of skills. You can get away with a traditional camping stove if you're car camping. But if you're camping off the grid, you'll need a backpacking stove.

The two best stoves for winter camping are liquid fuel (or white gas) stoves and canister stoves. [Liquid fuel stoves](#) work better in freezing temperatures, but they're heavier and slower to heat up. [Canister stoves](#) are lightweight but don't work as well in the cold. Test your stove before the trip, bring extra fuel, and make sure your fuel doesn't freeze between uses.

Lighting. The days are short, and the nights are long, so make sure you have ample lighting. Hang a lantern in your tent and bring at least one headlamp. Don't forget the extra batteries.

Entertainment. You'll probably spend more time than usual in your tent, so bring plenty of entertainment. Popular options are games, books, and writing journals. Electronic devices lose their juice faster in the cold, so keep them warm and turn them off at night.

The essentials. No matter what, make sure you pack every single one of the [ten essentials](#).