



# Snowshoeing Palm Springs

By Heather L. Nicaise

**T**hink of Palm Springs, California. You're thinking of posh resorts among the desert sands, lush golf courses lined with palm trees, and full-service spas, aren't you? Don't forget about snowshoeing!

A visit to Palm Springs is not complete without discovering the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. Ascend to Mount San Jacinto State Park and Wilderness Area in their rotating tramcars, the largest in the world. At the top, the snow is several feet deep in the winter. Hiking in the Mount San Jacinto Wilderness Area will provide snow sports aficionados with more powder than they can handle in a day.

The Palm Springs Aerial Tramway has the only two rotating tramcars in North America. Their rotating tramcars are the world's largest, each car holding about 80 passengers and one tramcar operator. (The other rotating tramcars are located in Engelberg, Switzerland and Cape Town, South Africa).

The Tramway was named an Engineering Wonder of the World in 1963. Four of the five support tower locations were inaccessible by road, so helicopters delivered the construction workers, as well as supplies and building materials, to the tower sites. Their creative use of helicopters was unprecedented at the time.



During the winter, the temperature in Palm Springs can be a lovely 70 degrees while Mountain Station is near freezing. Don't be deceived by the comfortable weather in the valley. Parkas and boots will be needed at the top of the mountain where the temperatures are low and the wind is often blowing.

The Palm Springs Aerial Tramway has multiple parking lots just below Valley Station. The road approaching the tram station becomes steep, but do not despair. The Tramway provides shuttle service for the most distant parking lots and there are many shuttles in service during busy days, such as winter weekends and



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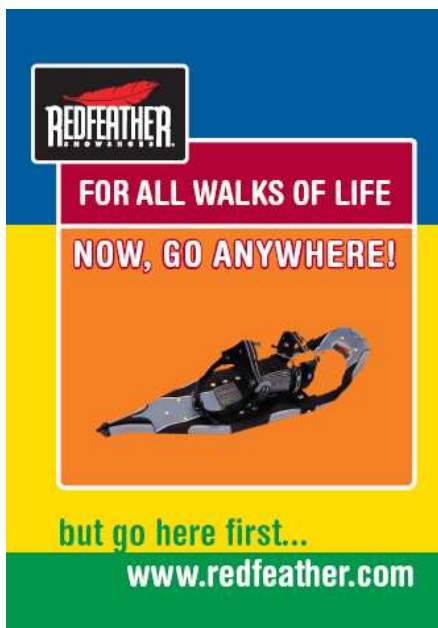
holidays. The lines at the shuttle stops may look long, but things move swiftly. Even on New Year's Day when it seemed that everyone else had the same destination idea, I waited at a shuttle stop for under half an hour. Non-peak days such as weekdays and spring weekends will be a breeze.



You may bring your gear with you on both the shuttle and the tram as long as it is not too large or unwieldy and doesn't bother other passengers. I certainly wasn't the first one with snowshoes and ski poles, nor will I be the last. Other visitors had skis, snow tubes, sleds and bags overflowing with mittens, scarves and winter coats.

After obtaining tickets, I waited an hour for my scheduled tramcar. (In May, I boarded immediately after making my ticket purchase.) The waiting period allowed me to browse the gift shop and sit on the patio at the rear of Valley Station. The patio offers views of Chino Canyon, the arriving and departing tramcars, and a soothing waterfall. I spent my time listening to the waterfall and watching the red-lettered golden tramcars disappear as they ascended the steep face of the canyon.

When you board the tramcar, you will find that railings are situated all along its outer



edges. As the tramcar started moving up the mountain, the tram operator welcomed us, and we listened to a brief history of the tramway. The railing that I had a death grip on started moving. Apparently, being so focused on getting to the top and heading out into the snow, I missed the fact that the cars rotate. I was in a gently swinging aerial tram traveling up the side of a steep mountain face *and* rotating. (They leave the tram's windows open for a reason. Fresh crisp air is necessary on this ride!) Okay, so the ride isn't *that* scary. Once you get your footing, enjoy the 360-degree view offered by the tramcar.

The tramcars travel approximately two and half



miles from Valley Station at an elevation of 2,643 feet to Mountain Station at an elevation of 8,516 feet. During the ten-minute journey through Chino Canyon, enjoy the spectacular views of Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley. On clear days, you can see as far as the Salton Sea, California's largest lake. Look north and you can see Mount San Gorgonio, southern

California's highest peak at an elevation of 11,502 feet. As you ascend, you will pass through four different life zones. When you begin your ascent, palm trees and cacti surround you. When you reach Mountain Station, the palm trees and cacti become firs and oak, and a thick layer of snow blankets the ground.


Mountain Station offers many amenities and activities. There are gift shops, two restaurants, film viewing, a natural history museum and a park visitor center. When you're hungry, you can choose from Elevations Restaurant, offering fine dining, or for those of you in your hiking clothes and snow gear, there is also the Top of the Tram Restaurant available for a casual cafeteria-style lunch or dinner. Expect the prices to be a little bit higher than normal. In the early morning, before the public has access to the trams, food, supplies and water are transported via tramcar to Mountain Station. There are no roads to the summit.

When you disembark, head toward the rear of the building and walk down the stairs to the lower level. Exit to the left of the visitor's center. Long Valley is about one third of a mile from Mountain Station.

Snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and snow camping are popular winter activities in the Mount San Jacinto State Park and Wilderness Area. Those who choose to picnic or play in the snow tend not to stray far from Long Valley. If you desire to escape from the crowds, you don't need to travel far into the backcountry. Wilderness permits are required to enter the Mount San Jacinto

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Wilderness Area and can easily be obtained from the ranger station at the north end of Long Valley. (Permits are not required if you are staying in the Long Valley area). The station also has reasonably priced maps of the area.

The outside walkway to Long Valley is often covered in hard-packed snow and ice, so walk carefully and use the railings. I slid most of the way down during my New Year's Day visit. When I came for snowshoeing in early May, the walkway and Long Valley was devoid of snow and I needed to go into the Wilderness Area for snowshoeing. I suspect that this place often has spectacular spring snowshoeing conditions if I still found useable snow on a warm May afternoon.

If you are not in possession of your own snowshoes, there are snowshoes available for rent at the Winter Adventure Center, at the western edge of Long Valley's midsection. Equipment reservations are not available. Snowshoes are only available on a first come, first served basis. The center is typically open from November until April, or when there is snow and a need for rental equipment. If you need equipment, head here first and then north to the ranger station for your self-issued wilderness permits.

If you are in search of fresh powder and a quieter atmosphere, leave Long Valley and try out the trail to Round Valley that begins at the ranger station and shortly thereafter follows a stream traveling through a V-shaped valley. Round Valley is 2.1 miles from Mountain Station. The trail is steep in some places and ski poles for balance and extra traction will benefit you immensely. The trail is appropriate for experienced snowshoers.

If you are only in the mood for a short workout or you are strapping on snowshoes for the first time, hike the 1.5-mile

long Desert View Trail loop at the southeastern end of Long Valley.

If you are in exceptional shape and have arrived early, try the San Jacinto Peak Trail which leads you to Mount San Jacinto, the second highest peak in southern California that reaches an elevation of 10,834 feet. The distance to the peak of Mount San Jacinto is 5.8 miles. The snow will

be deep and the trek will be strenuous. Experts will find this trail challenging and satisfying.

It is strongly suggested that you have a compass and very detailed map. The trail may seem to disappear in the snowdrifts, especially if the trail is not heavily used and packed down by cross country skiers and snowshoers. There are signposts along the trails, but I found that they were either partially buried deep in the snow or missing completely where I knew they should have been.



The Round Valley trail begins behind and west of the ranger station and is well worth



your time. I enjoyed the trail immensely although I was completely exhausted after exploring the forest. The trail following the stream gradually steepened as I headed west towards San Jacinto Peak. The elevation combined with holiday food and steep slopes had me and every other snowshoer dragging our feet. I stopped a few times to politely offer some snowshoers room to pass, but they were quick to chuckle and mention that they weren't going to be traveling any faster than I.

About the time that I started to question my bearings, I finally reached a large clearing, a vast expanse of nearly untouched snow. A sign at the west end told me I had reached my goal for the afternoon: "ROUND VALLEY ELEV 9,100." Some brave snow campers were setting up their tents at the north side of the field. I was surprised to see another large group of snowshoers pass. I don't often see

other snowshoers, but this area seemed to attract them. It was nice to know I wasn't the only one running around in southern California with snowshoes strapped to my feet.

I reluctantly headed back, as it was late in the afternoon and the darkness of early evening was ominously approaching.

When I reached the ranger station, I returned my permit so that they knew I had returned from the snowy beyond. I passed all the exhausted children lugging their beat-up sleds behind them. When I reached Mountain Station after dragging myself up the snaky walkway, I swore I'd never do that again. I lied. The snow there is just too good.

My feet and gear felt heavier as I trudged onto the tramcar. I looked out of the corner of my eyes and saw sleepy-eyed snowshoers leaning on ski poles in the dim light. The tiny lights of Palm Springs sparkled as the tramcar descended into blackness. A wholly satisfying day was now behind me.



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Directions from the Los Angeles area:

Take 10 East heading towards San Bernardino. Take the CA-111 exit towards Palm Springs and head south for about eight miles. Make a right turn at Tramway Road, and after about 3.5 miles there will be several parking areas. If you arrive later in the day, you will need to park at a lower lot and take the free shuttle to Valley Station.

Information:

Visit the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway website at <http://www.pstramway.com> for updates on operating hours, ticket prices, snow levels, rental information and much more.

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