

Luxurious Backcountry: Exploring Hut-to-Hut Trail System on Mount Rainier

By Anna Brones



When planning a multi-day winter trip to kick off my winter vacation, I envisioned sounds of fresh snow breaking away beneath my feet, crisp air biting my cheeks. Instead I found myself hiking a mile in from a Sno-Park in merely my boots, snowshoes strapped to my pack, the half-melted, thin layer of December snow barely resembling anything that would have required more extreme gear. When I finally reached more rugged terrain, I miserably strapped on my snowshoes, an afternoon rain dripping off the bill of my rain jacket and into my face. This was not a winter trip. I cursed silently.

This multi-day snowshoeing trip would be my first, and in the midst of an incredibly cold and gray winter, the thought of getting to do a winter trip without the wet hassle of winter camping seemed enticing, and so I'd chosen to try a hut-to-hut system, where accommodations were simple and trails were groomed. Tucked into the foothills of Mount Rainier, Mount Tahoma Trails Association maintains North America's largest No-Fee Hut-to-Hut Trail System in North America. With more than 50 miles of trails, 20 of which are ungroomed, and in the vicinity of one of the Pacific Northwest's most iconic National Parks it's a snowshoer's paradise, complete with warm and well-equipped accommodations.

There's a certain romanticism in staying in backcountry cabins, spending a day trekking through cold snow and wintry conditions with the knowledge that whatever happens you'll still end up with a roof over your head and the chance to curl up with a warm drink in front of a fireplace. That, and it simply takes out the time consuming part of planning for backcountry winter camping. When you're planning trips on short notice and only have a few days to spare, this can be the difference between taking off to explore the great outdoors and simply accepting second best and resorting to day hikes.

I had spent some time researching the potential of places where I could snowshoe in and stay in some form of maintained accommodations, and because of time and logistical constraints (I was borrowing my father's car who lives outside of Seattle) I settled on the MTTA huts. In a world of sleek websites and live Twitter feeds, I was secretly happy to find that the MTTA website felt just a little old school and I was forced to snail mail in my reservation; MTTA doesn't accept reservations online or over the phone. For someone that enjoys finding spots off the beaten track, this boded well.



After a stop at Whittaker Mountaineering the first morning of the trip to pick up a map of the trail system, I was ready to experience this much talked about hut-to-hut system first hand. But with my windshield driving to the trailhead pelted with raindrops, and even after I finally made it to a section of trail that even necessitated snowshoes, things felt more like a miserable death walk than a delightful snowshoe. I frowned.



Good snowshoeing after all requires snow, and snow requires certain weather. Gray downpour wasn't exactly that, and I trudged along cursing every footstep, wondering what I had gotten myself into, and "would you be happier sitting in front of your parents' fireplace right now?" Yes, was the answer, but I pushed along, any benefit of being outside taking second place to my frustration that the weather wasn't working in my favor.

Well versed in the fickle nature of Pacific Northwest weather, I should have known better, in fact I should have been happy about the mere fact that I was away from the computer and outside completely disconnected, and yet all I wanted for this snowshoeing trip was blue skies, sparkly white untouched trails and morning cowboy coffee with perfect views over Mount Rainier.

This thought rotated through my brain as I watched the miles tick by, the downpour slowly turning to a mist.

Yet somewhere in between my moaning and groaning I managed to make it the five miles to the trip's first stop: the Yurt. Fashioned on the traditional Mongolian style of yurt, this one was certainly meant for more than your average nomad, complete with ample sleeping pads to house an army, a plethora of kitchen utensils that put my own to shame and a wide selection of outdated outdoor magazines that could keep any adventure loving reader engaged for at least several hours. Add to that a propane stove that turned on with the flick of a switch and soon my downpour misery washed away just as quickly as my boots dried out in the newfound heat.

To be perfectly honest, when the MTTA website mentioned that all I needed to bring with me was my sleeping bag, food and emergency gear, I was slightly skeptical. How could these yurts and huts possibly be that well accommodated? But they are. Thanks to hundreds, if not thousands of volunteer hours, these places are well stocked and well thought out, even down to the hand crank radio that let me listen to the evening NPR news.

Somehow my luck took a turn for the better and the next day's morning downpour steadily turned to a snowstorm, which let me take advantage of the trails around the yurt and head up towards Griffin Mountain, only to be forced back to camp in the midst of a white



out. Again, the weather getting the better of me.

Two nights down and one to go and it was time to set off for the trail system's most notable sleeping accommodation, High Hut. This is the one that graces the front of every MTTA map and brochure, and originally floored my interest in going. My extra toast of wine the evening before to the weather gods had apparently paid off too, as I awoke to complete bluebird and fresh, unmarked trails. Snowshoe paradise.

Trekking along the Outer Loop trail it was easy to spot animal tracks in the fresh snow. A midday break along the trail called for a grand picnic, complete with freshly made hot chocolate, brie cheese and salami. Visions of grey downpour had completely vanished and I was totally immersed in winter bliss. The kind of bliss only made better by the realization that you have to remove your down jacket because the sun feels so warm.

The final climb to High Hut was steep, and at altitude required a bit of effort. I was hoping to reach the top and be graced with the classic panoramic view of Mount Rainier that the MTTA brochure boasts, but afternoon clouds foiled my plans. After a day of blue sky and sunshine, there was however no sense in complaining.

The High Hut is the ultimate when it comes to the MTTA trail system, and it's also the most common day trip destination. It's no surprise as to why; perched at 4,760 feet, on a clear day offers an unbeatable view of Mount Rainier and the valley below. Just like the Yurt, it's also supplied with plenty of kitchen supplies and features a loft for extra sleeping room. Solar powered LED lights let you read by the kitchen table as late as you like and issues of Outside Magazine from the early 90s are sure to keep you entertained.



All good things come to those who wait, and that view of Mount Rainier did happen, thanks to my commitment to getting up at the crack of dawn, stirring up some cowboy coffee and sitting on the High Hut porch waiting for sunrise. As pinks and oranges filled the sky, the majestic mountain broke through the clouds only briefly, allowing a quick session of photos and a few brief moments of utter awe. This is what winter trips are made of.

I headed back into the High Hut, the expansive glass windows on the front of the cabin still looking out over the snow encrusted slopes below and refilled my coffee. I'd certainly gotten my winter trip fix, and gauging by my dry

boots resting in front of the fireplace, so had they.

The Basics

Exploring the MTTA trail system is easy and only requires a small permit processing fee. Reservations are made by printing out a form on the MTTA website and sending it in to their headquarters. Access to the trail system lies just near Ashford, Washington, only six miles west of Mount Rainier National Park, putting you within easy driving distance of both Seattle and Portland.

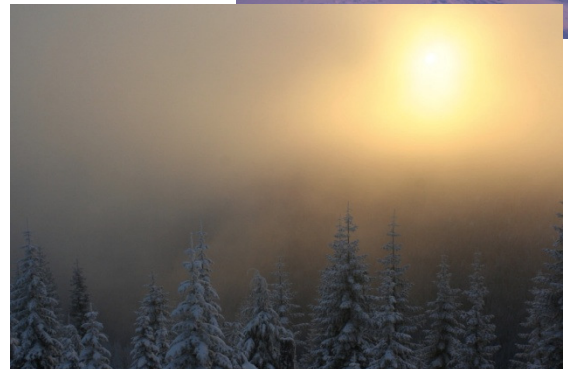
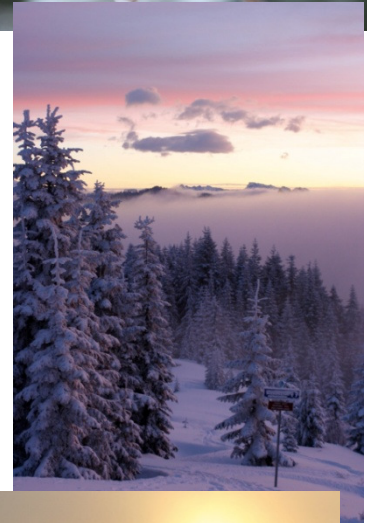
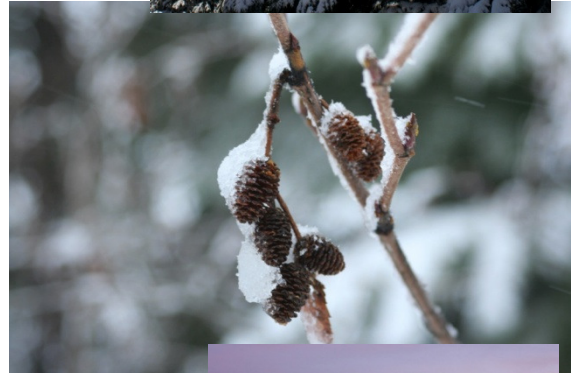
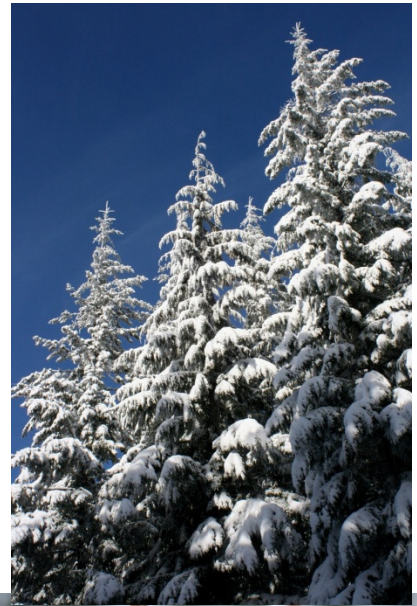
The trail system isn't just a winter wonderland; MTTA takes the time and effort to make sure that its huts and trails are maintained during the summer months as well.

During the warmer months, MTTA South District remains open, leaving 20 miles of trails that links the huts together open for mountain biking, hiking, trail running or whatever suits your fancy when you're keeping in shape during your snowshoeing off season.

Resources:

<http://www.skimtta.com/>

<http://whittakermountaineering.com/>



About the Author:

Anna is a writer, editor and social media strategist with a love for travel, languages and the outdoors. She has a B.A. in International Affairs and French Studies from Lewis & Clark College and has lived in Sweden, France, Guadeloupe and the Pacific Northwest. Her talents and expertise can be fully appreciated by becoming more familiar with Under Solen Media – a new media and marketing organization with an emphasis on the outdoor and nonprofit worlds. For more information, visit <http://undersolenmedia.com>.

