

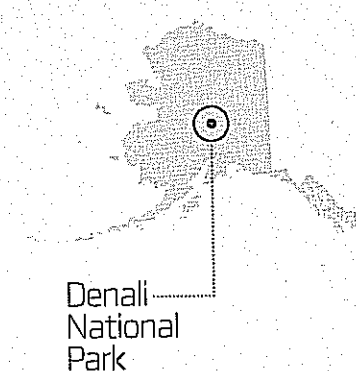
Winter is the time to make miles overland in Alaska."

TRY THIS

## Your Own Winter Wonderland

Enjoy Denali without the crowds

BY EMMA WALKER



Denali National Park

Denali and the Park Road in winter.

**O**N A CHILLY JANUARY afternoon, I swished along the Denali Park Road on my cross-country skis. In the last three hours, we'd watched a lynx stalk its prey, heard wolves howl in the distance, and caught a million-dollar view of the park's namesake mountain. Except for my husband and our dog, skijoring down the road a hundred yards ahead of me, there wasn't another soul in sight.

"Do you hear that?" my husband asked. We listened as the paws of a dozen huskies met the snow around the corner in front of us, punctuated by a musher's shouts of "gee" and "haw," mushing commands for right and left. Two backcountry rangers waved from their sleds as they passed, and the dogsled teams were gone as quickly as they came. Once again, we had Denali National Park to ourselves.

This experience—of being alone in the

park's six million acres—is a far cry from the one visitors get during the summer. In July, Denali regularly sees more than 150,000 visitors.

"About 96 percent of backcountry visitor use occurs between May 15 and September 15," says Backcountry Logistics Manager John Bruecke. But Denali sees just a few hundred visitors each month during the winter. And while Denali may be quieter between late September and May, it's anything but closed.

Your first stop in the park, says Supervisory Park Ranger Dan Irelan, should be at the Murie Science and Learning Center, Denali's wintertime visitor center. Except on major holidays, it's open daily from 9:00am to 4:30pm. There, Irelan says, a ranger is on hand to tell visitors about current conditions, remind them where the road closes, and even lend out snowshoes—free of charge.

"Visitors can check snowshoes out for the day, or even for a couple of days," says Irelan. "Rangers will show you the basics of how to use them, and then you can very easily hike off-trail, too."

Denali also puts on two annual winter events. Winterfest, held in February, is a community-wide effort with other local organizations and includes social and educational events. There's also a candlelight ski to celebrate the winter solstice.

Once the Denali Park Road closes to vehicle traffic, it becomes a different kind of thoroughfare: It remains open to cross-country skiers, skijorers, mushers, and, of course, hikers and snowshoers. From late September until February, visitors can park at Mile 3 and head up the road from there. Beginning in February, the road opens as far as the Mountain Vista Trailhead at Mile 13.

A number of ski trails, ranging from easy to strenuous, are open near the park entrance. "There are also established mushing trails every year," adds Irelan. Personal dogs and teams are allowed in the park for skijoring and mushing.

One of the best ways to see Denali in


winter is to sign on for a mushing tour with Denali Dog Sled Expeditions.

"There is something about the cooperation of musher and dog team, working for a similar goal, traveling in the park, that offers a unique and special experience," says owner Jon Nierenberg. It's ideal for those looking for a true wilderness experience.

"Winter is much easier for travel," he notes. "Rivers are frozen and are natural highways." Having guided dogsled tours in the park since 1985, Nierenberg can say with authority: Winter is the time to make miles overland in Alaska.

Kennel Manager Jen Raffaelli agrees. "Winter is really the essence of this place," says Raffaelli, who spends weeks in the Denali backcountry during the colder months. "It's such an intimate time, when it really feels like your own park." The ease of exploration and access allow Denali park rangers to conduct ongoing backcountry patrols by dogsled into areas difficult to reach on foot in the summer and off limits to motorized vehicles. Patrols vary in length from a week in the field to five weeks—so if you're venturing into the backcountry, this means you might be lucky enough to meet the dogs in action. It also means the teams are often away from the kennel, so Raffaelli recommends checking in with the ranger at Murie to see if the dogs are around for a visit.

There's plenty of wildlife out and about in winter, too, says Denali Education Center Youth Programs Manager Patrick Kelly, who's encountered moose, lynx, and plenty of smaller critters. "Plus," he says, "there are no mosquitoes." Nierenberg notes that visitors are likelier to see wolves and caribou during winter, too.

Rangers and locals also agree that visitors can expect clear skies during the colder months, affording a better chance of seeing Denali, the Alaska Range, and at night, northern lights. The best part: You'll likely have the view to yourself. 

*Emma Walker is an Alaska Pacific University alum and counts skiing in Denali among her favorite Alaska adventures.*

A musher and team take a rest at the base of Denali.



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