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Hut Skiing Near Mt. Hood A Thrill for Family

by Peter Frick-Wright
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We're hardly out of the Sno-Park, but I'm already hanging back to make sure no one tries to turn around and go home.

Ahead of me, my two sisters, their boyfriends and my parents are negotiating the twisting downhill beginning of the Mineral Jane Trail on our way to an overnight stay in a hut on Barlow Ridge.

But there's a coat of ice underneath a thin layer of snow and, despite years of experience all around, we can't seem to stay on our skis.

"Thirty feet in and this is the hardest trail I've ever been on," says Maren Frick-Wright, my oldest sister, as she wrestles herself out of the snow.

"This is going to be one of those 'What did we learn?' trips isn't it?" says Laurel Frick-Wright, second-oldest and trying to make the same corner.

Boyfriend one, Thomas Williams, removes his skis and sinks knee deep with every step. Boyfriend two, Fabian Rieping, takes the hill at top speed and sails out of view.

Rhonda "Mom" Frick-Wright pulls off to the side to reorganize the top-heavy pack that keeps toppling her. Dave "Dad" Frick-Wright gauges remaining daylight and the distance to our hut. "This has to get better," he says.

Each winter, Don Bain and James Koski of Cascade Huts transform their hut-to-hut mountain bike tour around Mount Hood into a cross-country route on the south side of the mountain. They



Peter Frick-Wright/The Frick-Wright family and friends stride out for the Barlow Ridge Hut.

move two of their huts from summer locations on Surveyors Ridge and Lolo Pass to winter spots on Barlow Butte and Barlow Ridge, so snowshoers and skiers can go hut-to-hut or base out of one spot to access miles of trails before breakfast.

We're doing a one-night hut-to-home trip, but right now it looks as if our adventure might end almost before it begins. Three of the seven of us have surgically repaired knees; there is talk of sending a group back up the trail toward the car before a fourth joins the club.

Farther down the trail, my particularly snow-covered mother says the words I've been both expecting and dreading. "Whose idea was this?"

At the top of the next ridge, however, the trail evens out. Settling into a rhythm as we pass through a meadow, it's snowing hard enough to tickle our faces and we start to get consistent glide from our skis.

Like the summer route, the huts are stocked with sleeping bags and pads, dishes, a propane heater and a stove, with an outhouse a short trek away. Unlike the summer route, skiers have to pack their own food and trash in and out and melt snow for their drinking water. Also, unless you're Thomas trying to prove the insulating properties of snow by burying yourself up to the neck in five feet of it, your group is basically confined to the inside of the 256-square-foot hut once the sun goes down.

No strangers to the concept of backcountry luxury, my family came well prepared for making merry. Chocolate liqueur, marzipan and chocolate-

covered macadamia nuts make up the first round; cookies and hot cocoa follow our freeze-dried dinners.

Soon, the hut is a home and we're winding toward sleep. It comes quickly, but with the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, we have to shut the heater off at night. So begins a slow losing battle against the cold. We have sleeping bag liners and extra clothes, and we sleep in hats and balaclavas, but it takes 12 hours to get eight hours of sleep.

In the morning, several folks who didn't start the night in the same bed are huddled together on top bunks.



Peter Frick-Wright/The snowpack at the Barlow Ridge Hut is impressive in early January.

We recount our night over a breakfast of M&Ms and oatmeal. Laurel says she spent most of the night racking her brain trying to think of when she has been colder.

Outside, the first break in the weather reveals blue skies and Bonney Butte under eight inches of new snow.

I only paid for one night, so we pack slowly and ski out along the ridge enjoying sunny views of the White River valley and a gentle downhill slope toward home. Maren and Thomas stop to take a picture next to a heart-shaped waterfall. Mom says something about "next time we come to the hut."

I ski behind the group, to make sure no one tries to turn around and go back.

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Cascade Huts in winter

Choose a hut, or string them together: There are three winter huts, each with its own attributes. The Barlow Ridge Hut has views; the White River Hut is sheltered from the elements by trees and a valley; the Barlow Butte Hut is closest to a Sno-Park (two miles). If you're looking for telemark hills, the Barlow Ridge hut is at the top of a 1,000-foot descent down to the White River valley, where the White River Hut is located. You can stop and spend the night there or enjoy a 4-5-mile ski or hike up the White River valley back up to Barlow Ridge. All the huts have easy access to cross-country ski and snowshoe trails, although the White River Hut is most convenient to the long, gradual White River Trail and the historic Barlow Road trail.

The Barlow Ridge Hut: The ski-in distance is 4.3 miles starting from the Barlow Pass Sno-Park, with a total elevation gain of 985 feet. The route starts with a steep descent and then a climb up the opposite ridge. From there, the trail is flat to Barlow Ridge Road, which takes you up to the hut at 4,500 feet, with moderate climbing for the first mile. For a longer tour, park at Frog Lake Sno-Park and head in on 8.8 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail and Barlow Ridge Road.

Cost: \$150 per night to rent a hut with eight bunks; \$275 for two nights; \$350 for three nights. More info, including distances to the huts from various Sno- Parks and ski distances between the huts: www.cascadehuts.com/winter.htm. Or call 971-322-3638.