

# Sequoia National Park: Snowshoeing Among Giants

by Cathleen Calkins

*“When I entered this sublime wilderness the day was nearly done, the trees with rosy, glowing countenances seemed to be hushed and thoughtful, as if waiting in conscious religious dependence on the sun, and one naturally walked softly and awestricken among them.”*

*- John Muir, commenting on the giant Sequoia trees*

**I**t’s late when we arrive at the Foothill entrance station to Sequoia National Park. The Ranger smiles as he hands me the

winter guide and advises us on conditions. The roads are slick and four inches of new-fallen snow covers the highway. We display our entrance pass on our windshield, wave good-bye, and carefully drive the remaining 25 miles to our destination, the Wuksachi (pronounced wook-sah-chi) Lodge.

The highway twists and turns and spirals as it ascends 5,300 feet. At Moro Rock the road levels off more or less. The scenery has changed from scrub oak to towering pines and occasionally we are treated to a glimpse of the Park’s famous trees, the giant Sequoias. But only when our headlights point skyward. The rich hue of their red bark is striking and appears ethereal in the darkness of our winter evening.





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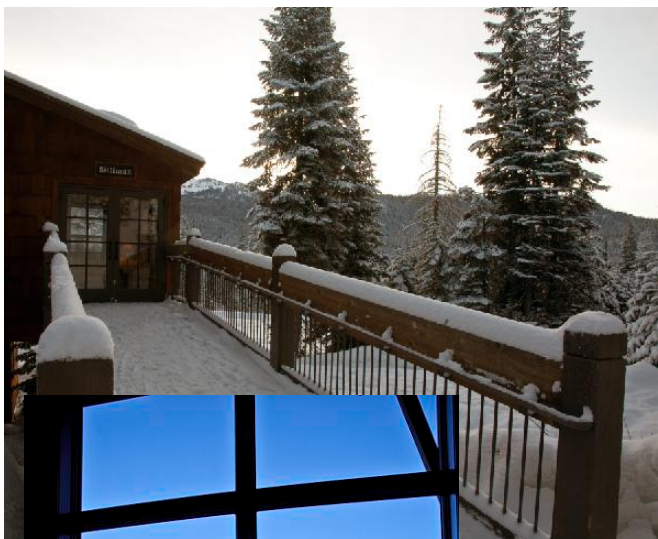
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Sequoia National Park, California's first National Park, was established in 1890 under President Harrison at John Muir's urging. It is home to some of the world's largest trees, the giant Sequoia. They are particular to the region and only grow between 5,000 and 7,000 feet above sea level on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains – a range that runs North-South and divides most of California in two.

While I have travelled to Sequoia National Park countless times over the last 20 years, I have never visited during winter. My time here has always been spent camping at Lodgepole, hiking summer trails, or backpacking to destinations far beyond the highway. Except for now; my purpose is to snowshoe among these giants with the Lodge as my home base.



Although the Wuksachi was built in 1999, it is reminiscent of the West's grand lodges, like Yosemite's The Ahwahnee and Yellowstone's Old Faithful Inn. It offers us all of the traditional amenities – a restaurant, bar, gift shop, convenience store, and wireless internet in the lobby. The only thing we are missing is cell service. It's non-existent. I panic about missed calls and unreturned voicemails. My anxiety is fleeting; I remember I am also here for solitude.

We return the friendly greeting at check-in and follow directions to guest parking and our accommodations for the next two nights. We unload onto a snowy bellman's cart that sits idly at the end of a long path leading up to the Silliman building and our room. I push the cart as my partner pulls. After the six-hour drive the exertion feels good in the cold air.

Before going to bed, we decide to get acquainted with the Wuksachi and return to the lobby bar – this time opting to walk despite the chilly temps. A lighted path works its way back toward the main building. Snow banks on either side rise to the height of my shoulders. The front desk agent said this recent snow was the first they've had since receiving ten feet in



December's storms. I'm thankful. This crisp, new layer of powder has refreshed the scene and I'm excited to snowshoe.

In the morning we wake to brilliant blue skies. Feathery crystals on the snow's surface dance upward in the early light; evidence the night was clear and cold. We dress for snowshoeing and walk to the restaurant. Breakfast is nourishing and our table overlooks a forested meadow.

Mount Silliman's summit is illuminated in the distance.

We meet Carolyn Pistilli, the Lodge's Guest Recreation Manager, in the lobby at 10. She's tall and slender and has spent the last 31 years working, hiking, skiing, and snowshoeing Sequoia National Park. Fortunate for us, she's our guide for the day. Before climbing into her van, we take a look at a map. Trails are detailed and each has an icon associated with it. Carolyn explains the system's markers; that we should be able to stand at one and see the next.

Winter has transformed the Park. White dominates the scene. As we drive to the General Sherman parking area we don't pass a single car on the snow-covered road. Likewise, the area is empty. As we grab our equipment a blue Acura rolls towards us. Chains clank against the wheel well as the driver slows to ask if he needs snowshoes to walk to the General Sherman tree, the largest Sequoia in the world. The answer is no.

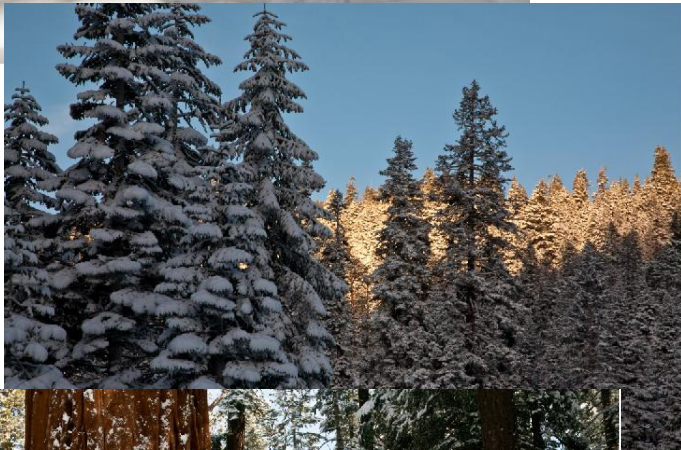


I ask Carolyn about the crowds during winter. Carolyn uses the absence of cars as a metaphor for what we'll find – complete solitude. “It's so pristine here,” she says. “With no one around, you own the forest.” She's right. We move beyond the stomped trail to the General Sherman Tree and veer south towards the McKinley trail junction. It's a mile away.



Following markers that feature a black moon crescent set against bright yellow, we cover ground that is rolling and gentle. The powder is light under our snowshoes and we leave the only tracks. Along the way we pass solitary, giant Sequoia's, including one named Telescope Tree. Its base is burnt and hollowed. At the junction, the Sequoia's become plentiful. There is the McKinley Tree, The Room Tree, and The Founder's and The House groupings of Sequoias.

Carolyn is dwarfed by the massive bases these trees stand upon. Powder gingerly clings to their ruddy bark and we are constantly dusted by falling snow as the sun reaches the upper branches.



We talk as we hike. During summer Carolyn is the manager for the Bear Paw High Sierra Camp, a backcountry tent camp that sleeps 18 and is 11.5 miles from the road. I ask her if the same people return year-after-year and if she thinks she'll ever leave the Park. She says it's a community in the high country and one that she will never abandon. She's interesting and cool, and I envy the life she has created.



We return to the car. This time we follow our own tracks. They are still the only sign anyone has ventured here today. Carolyn's right, we did own the forest.



Back at the Lodge, we say good-bye and Carolyn gives us a hug. We check internet, return to our room, and venture out for one more snowshoe. We leave from our building and gain access to the Clover Creek trail, turning back when we reach the Creek. We shower and return to the restaurant for our 7:00 pm dinner reservations. The dining room is mostly empty and our waiter is talkative. He shares with us he's from Texas and this is his second stint at the Wuksachi

as he takes our order.

Before returning to our room, we stop by the bar and cap off our day. It's a lively place despite the Lodge being mostly empty. I am relaxed and happy. I don't want to leave and we discuss a potential return visit. I'm convinced it's the solitude that will bring me back. For my partner he says it's inspiring to walk among these giant trees and in John Muir's footsteps.

**If you go:**

[www.VisitSequoia.com](http://www.VisitSequoia.com) – For reservations and more information about the Wuksachi Lodge. The Lodge recently hired a new Chef and he is looking to add fresh, locally grown foods to the menu offerings and indicates meals can be customized for every diet and occasion.

Every weekend interpretative rangers offer guided snowshoe hikes. Call for details and schedule. Snowshoes are available for rental onsite and include sizes for children.

Visit <http://www.nps.gov/seki/index.htm> for Sequoia National Park information and current conditions.





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