

Near Bryce Point,
orange canyon cliffs
melt into snowy mist.

Bryce on ice

Follow the storms to Utah's stunning national park,
BY MATTHEW JAFFE

RUSS BISHOP

where red rocks, fresh snow, and no crowds equal pure winter bliss

AS DECEMBER STORMS paint Bryce Canyon National Park with fresh snow, you won't find a more beautiful winter landscape anywhere in the world.

Big words to be sure. But for some of us, catching this park in south-central Utah on the perfect winter morning is an annual and urgent quest. I'm looking for those days when the snow still hangs heavy on the ponderosa pines, when a

new layer of white intensifies the canyon's red-orange turrets and towers. Some guys search for big waves. I'm searching for Bryce on ice.

Not that it's always easy.

Inveterate weather watchers that we are, a friend and I have been tracking Bryce's snowfall for weeks. We're hoping to get out just ahead of a storm and then catch the immediate aftermath, when

Travel | Getaway

Bryce is at its best. Bryce typically receives about 7 feet of snow each year; in a normal winter, the park, which tops out at 9,115 feet, gets its first big hit in late fall. But so far this season, the winter storms have lacked oomph.

The snow's not building, but our impatience is. And so, with a tentative, kinda-maybe-sorta forecast for a storm, we throw caution to the jet stream and head for Utah.

Chasing winter

Passing through Zion National Park, about 80 miles southwest of Bryce, we get the first signs that we may have lucked out. What is it about a good winter storm? Nothing is happening yet, but the chill in the air has an extra heft, and I can practically taste the coming snow: dry, with lingering hints of Alaska.

Two hours later along Bryce's Rim Trail, dark clouds are building like an overture above the fabled Bryce Amphitheater, where the circular contours and clusters of tentacle-shaped hoodoos give it the improbable look of an enormous red sea anemone.

Higher up in the park, the snow swirls in wispy cyclones across the road. A mule deer and her fawns move through the forest, apparently attempting to reach lower elevations as the storm crashes into the Paunsaugunt Plateau.

Sitting atop the Natural Bridge turnout sign, a pair of ravens appear unintimidated by the weather. Catching flakes of snow, their coal black feathers ruffle in the wind, and as we pass, the ravens grudgingly shuffle a few inches sideways along the sign, as welcoming as grumpy old dudes making room for new arrivals on a park bench.

Beyond the ravens, we get our first real taste of Bryce in winter. With a crenellated top that gives it the appearance of a giant rook, Natural Bridge seems to shiver under its frosting of snow. Snowflakes whirl up through the arched opening like ocean spray through a blowhole, obscuring the forest in the canyon below.

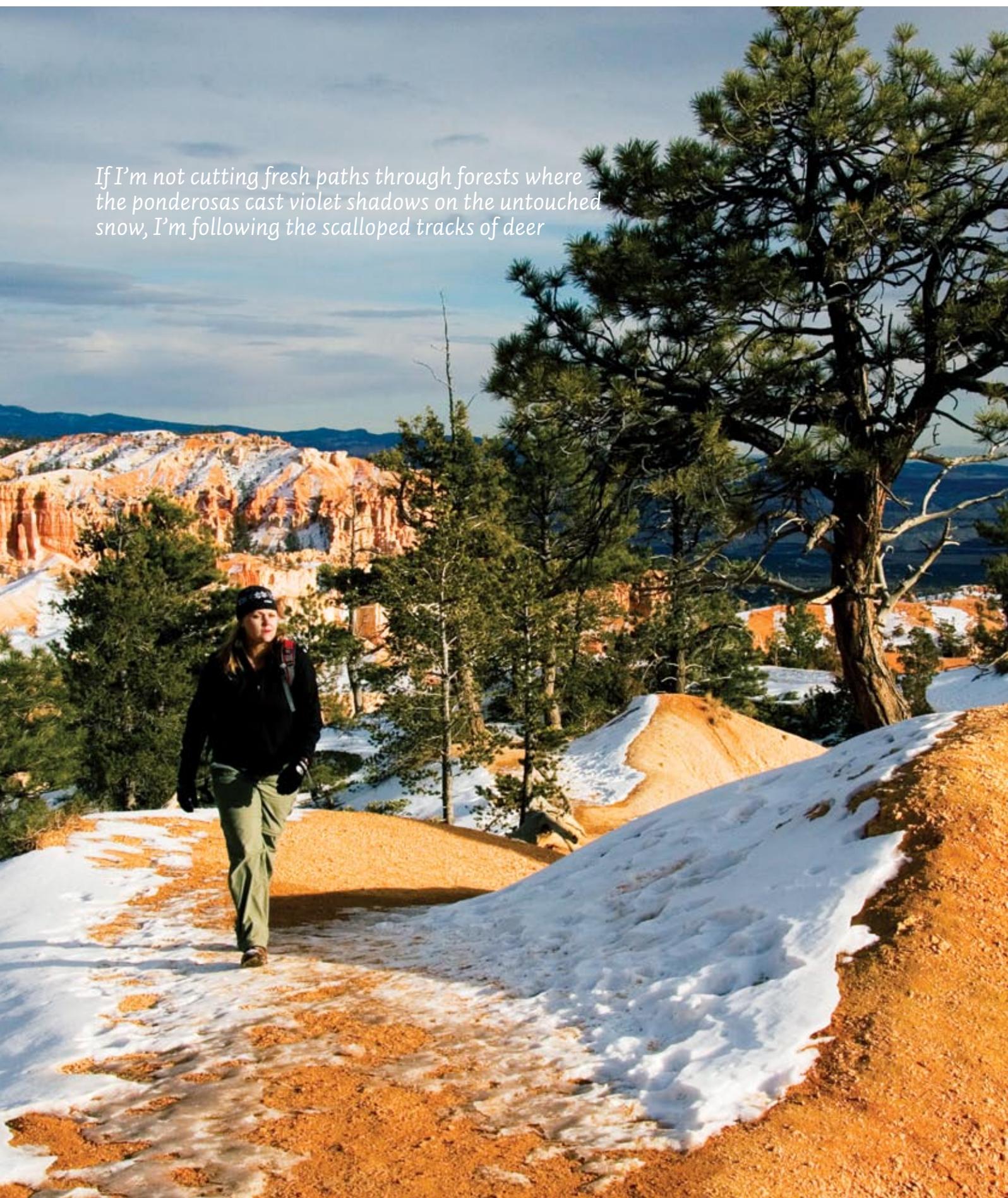
Our timing seems perfect, except that we notice a car shimmying down the rapidly icing road. We're about to get

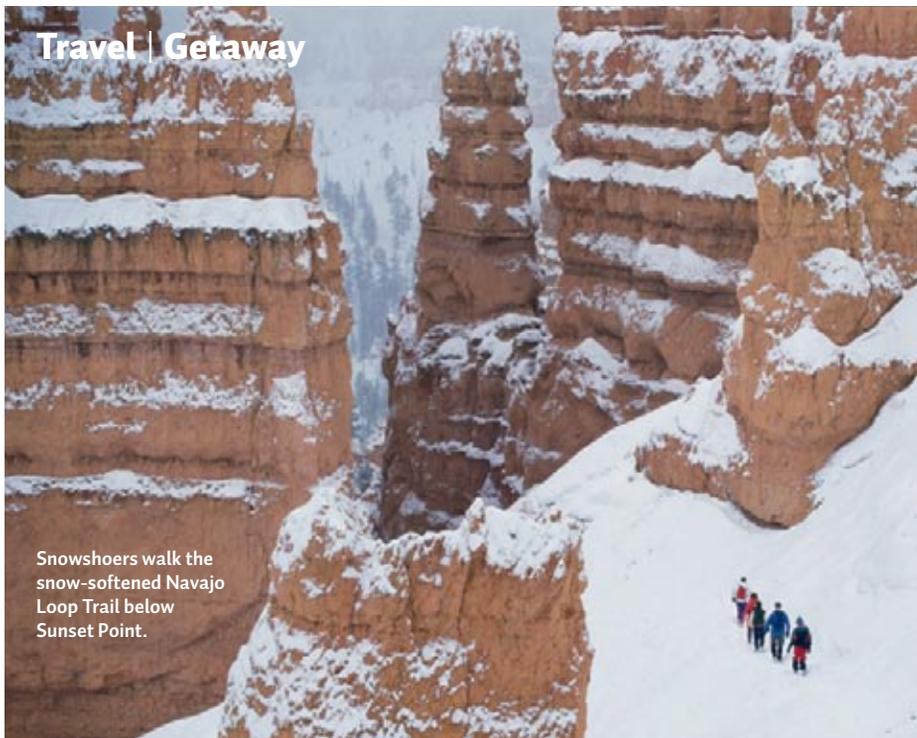


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Mule deer are a common sight along the trails. A solitary hiker walks a gentle slope in Bryce Canyon National Park; even in winter, most park trails are open. Snowfall on Douglas fir cones. A frozen waterfall glistens against red rock at Water Canyon.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TOM BEAN, TAYLOR S. KENNEDY
GETTY IMAGES, TOM BEAN, BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

If I'm not cutting fresh paths through forests where the ponderosas cast violet shadows on the untouched snow, I'm following the scalloped tracks of deer





Snowshoers walk the snow-softened Navajo Loop Trail below Sunset Point.

snowed out, at least for this afternoon. Trying to get beneath the weather, we head down toward Mossy Cave, a hidden spot that many Bryce visitors miss. In winter, its name does this frozen grotto no justice. Water seeps from cracks in the ceiling, drip by drip, adding to pillars of ice that rise from a glacierlike base. They resemble the canyon's hoodoos but cast in opaque blues, not limestone reds. A cluster of smaller columns is reminiscent of goblins, or of gowned figures in a shimmering choir. We are in a small but intensely beautiful palace of ice.

The lure of the hoodoos

The snow falls into the night as we head to dinner at Ruby's Inn. With the park lodge closed in winter, Ruby's becomes the main gathering place for Bryce visitors. Most are foreigners, and Japanese, German, and French blend into a Babel-esque chorus of excited voices.

Hoodoos, both the fantastical rock formations and the word itself, seem to be a source of endless fascination.

A German tourist asks, "The rock. The red rock towers? Like church." He awkwardly pantomimes a steeple. "What called again?"

"Hoodoos," the waiter replies.

"Hchew ... tsoos?" the tourist asks gutturally and tentatively.

The waiter has clearly been through this drill before and answers patiently. "You're good, you're real close," before drawing, "Hooooo doooooos."

We walk back to our room belting the old Bo Diddley rave-up "Who Do You Love?" then wake up the next morning to 8 inches of Utah's finest powder atop the truck, the parking lot, and, by the looks of the Weather Channel, a good portion of the state too.

Although it took millions of years to form the red-orange limestone labyrinth of Bryce Canyon National Park, in winter it takes only one day and a good storm to make this ancient place look new again. Bryce feels reborn. For one thing, virtually no one is in the park. If I'm not cutting fresh paths through forests where the ponderosas cast violet shadows on the untouched snow, I'm following the scalloped tracks of deer or the stitchlike footsteps of rabbits between buried manzanitas.

As for the hoodoos, their reds appear deeper against the pure white backdrop. Snow etches every crevice and joint, highlighting the rock's intricate textures. I can't shake the notion that somehow, overnight, the desert has pushed its way into the clouds, a heaven of red rock with an otherworldly beauty so purely of the Earth. This is what we were looking for. ■

Getting there

Bryce Canyon National Park (\$25 per vehicle; nps.gov/brca or 435/834-5322) is roughly 270 miles from Salt Lake City and Las Vegas. The park regularly plows State 63, the 18-mile-long main road. Expect clear, crisp days with temperatures in the 30s, but if you need to get out of the snow, head for a lower-elevation destination such as spectacular Kodachrome Basin State Park (\$6 per vehicle; stateparks.utah.gov or 435/679-8562). Combine a visit to Bryce with a stop at Zion National Park (\$25 per vehicle; nps.gov/zion or 435/772-3256), and you have an off-season escape to a pair of the country's top national parks. Services are more limited than during other seasons, but all of the basics are available.

Where to stay

Best Western Ruby's Inn

Located 1 mile north of the park, the sprawling inn has motel-style rooms, restaurants, an indoor pool, and other services. 368 rooms from \$60; rubysinn.com or 866/866-6616.

Stone Canyon Inn

Spacious and luxurious cabins as well as B&B-style rooms in the main building. 4 self-catering cabins from \$225; 6 rooms from \$80, including breakfast; in Tropic; stonecanyoninn.com or 866/489-4680.

Where to eat

Clarke's Restaurant

Mostly known for chicken and ribs, it also serves steaks and Southwest entrées. \$\$; closed Sun–Mon; 141 N. Main St., Tropic; 435/679-8383.



Cowboy's Buffet and Steak Room Restaurant at Ruby's Inn offers hearty dining that hits the spot on a winter's night. \$\$; 1000 S. State 63, Bryce; 435/834-5341.

What to do

Cross-country ski and snowshoe rentals

(from \$7) are available at the ski shop at Ruby's Inn, which groomers nearly 20 miles of trails with connections into the national park. The Red Canyon area on State 12 west of the Bryce entrance is another good nearby spot for winter sports.

Guided snowshoe walks

(free; 435/834-5322) are given occasionally by the park, weather permitting. Some destinations inside Bryce:

Mossy Cave Easy 0.8-mile hike to a hidden winter gem. Off State 12 east of park turnout.

Paria Ski Loop Beautiful 3.5-mile forest route includes a spur to a hoodoo overlook.

Rim Trail Moderate 10.5-mile round-trip between Fairyland and Bryce Points takes in the park's best winter views.