

# THE FOCO OFFICIAL UN~ SKI GUIDE

NoCo's glorious winter brings weekends on the slopes and epic powder days. And if we're honest, traffic and crowds. The beeline west every Saturday morning—especially holiday weekends—slows to an excruciating crawl without fail, and don't get us started on the Sunday evening commute out of the mountains. Luckily we've got eight other ways to play on a frosty afternoon—from lazy hot-springs soaks to adrenaline-rush adventures. No waiting in line required.

BY JULIE DUGDALE





## SOAK IT UP

**TRY:** The hot springs at Saratoga Resort & Spa in Saratoga, Wyoming

**DEETS:** Head north over the state line to this Western-style resort for a winter escape to Wyoming's Platte Valley and Medicine Bow National Forest. You'll have to book a room and make it a weekend to use the hot springs, but it's worth it. The springs were thought to have healing powers by the original Native American inhabitants of the area, and even though the nourishing mineral content is high, the sulfur scent is pleasantly faint. Try out the 70-foot main pool for a soothing swim, or lose yourself in a smaller teepee pool, which is a private soaking oasis—yup, in a teepee—you can duck into on a first-come, first-served basis. Tack on a day of snowmobiling for a taste of some of the most pristine winter landscape around. "As far as snowmobiling in Wyoming, it's what Colorado used to be," says the resort's Cindy Loose of the remote landscape. "There are 365 miles of groomed trails, and there are days you can be out there and not see anyone else."

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** What's not to love when everything you need is under one roof? After a long day on the trails in the Snowy Range, grab a seat at the Snowy Mountain Pub, the resort's onsite microbrewery, and order the seasonal beer. Continue unwinding with a soak in the springs, and follow it up with a decadent massage at the Healing Waters Spa. If fancy grub is more your speed, make reservations at the Silver Saddle Restaurant for an evening of rustic fine dining.

**NEWBIE TIP:** If you're looking for fun on a budget, you can rent cross-country skis (\$20), snowshoes (\$20), or sleds for (\$15) to access the network of trails.

**ON THE SIDE:** Hop over to the historic Hobo Pool on the Platte River on your way out of town. Owned by the town of Saratoga and open 24 hours a day with free entry, the hot pool is a steamy 106 to 119 (!) degrees, and the not-so-hot pool tops out around 100 degrees. Slide by and take a dip before you hit the road.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [saratogaresortandspa.com](http://saratogaresortandspa.com), 307-326-5261

PHOTOGRAPH BY CELIN SERBO



## WILD SIDE

**TRY:** Wildlife watching for moose and bighorn sheep

**DEETS:** Getting outside in the cold requires a purpose, and seeing big game in the wild is special enough to do the trick.

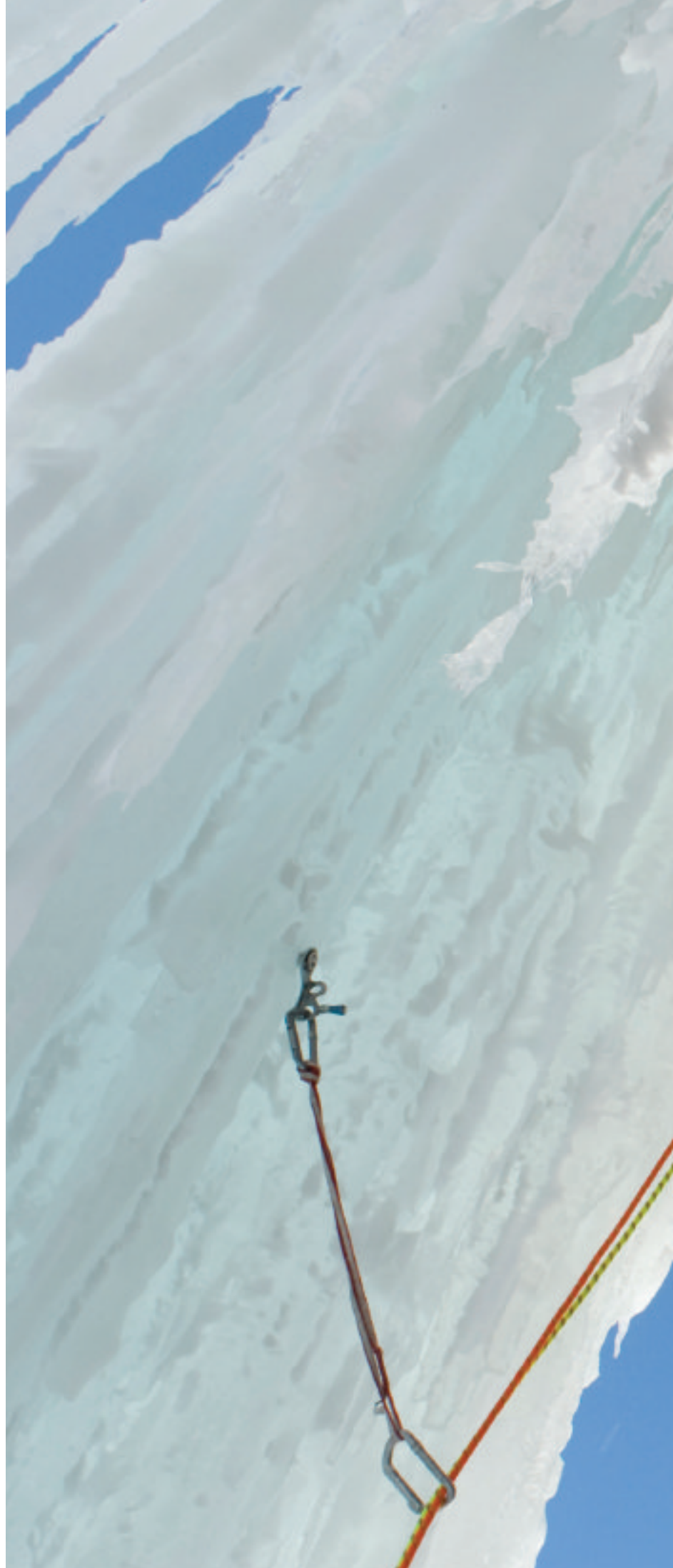
The Cameron Pass area is your best shot for watching moose. Dawn and dusk are prime times for moose spotting, and be prepared to stake out your watch territory for a few hours. Since they have no predators in Colorado, moose are often unafraid of humans. And because they're herbivores, humans often think they're tame, but don't be fooled. "They'll seem fine, but when they start walking toward you and lick the snout," says Jennifer Churchill with the northeast region of Colorado Parks and Wildlife, "it generally means they're going to attack."

To catch a glimpse of the elusive bighorn sheep, try the Poudre or Big Thompson canyon. November and December make up the rutting season; sheep like rocky ledges and canyons and are more active in the morning and afternoon instead of dawn and dusk.

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** It's a little bit about the thrill of the chase, but even more so about the majesty of these large animals on a crisp winter's day.

**NEWBIE TIP:** "If an animal changes its behavior, you're too close," Churchill says. "They're still wild. Besides, you're not going to get a great photo with your phone."

**ON THE SIDE:** Since you'll likely be staked out for a while, you'll want to bring something hot and delicious for nourishment. Swing by Lupita's or La Luz the day before and pick up breakfast burritos; you can reheat them before you leave the house in the wee hours for an easy, hearty, warm meal in the field.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAIN DENIS (RIGHT)



## GO VERTICAL

**TRY:** Ice climbing at Rocky Mountain National Park with Colorado Mountain School (CMS)

**DEETS:** It might seem a tad intimidating if you're a first timer, but ice climbing is totally doable with the professional guides at CMS, who have been the only permitted technical outfitter in the park for the past 30 years. They'll give you a solid introduction to the ice in either a group class (every Saturday morning in-season, \$195 per person) or a custom guided session. After orientation at CMS lodge in Estes Park, you'll head into the park to start your approach to either Hidden Falls (from the Wild Basin entrance), or Lochvale (from the Glacier Gorge trailhead). Both are well-known and popular climbing areas reachable via about an hour of snow-packed hiking. "There are both easy and challenging routes," says CMS operations manager Russell Hunter. "Everyone's going to be able to get up something. It can be a little frustrating if you've never moved in the vertical world. But a little fitness and an adventurous spirit go a long way." All your technical gear—helmet, harness, boots, crampons, ice tools, and ropes—are included.

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** Because you will feel strong, healthy, and, well, hardcore when you complete your first climb. There's nothing quite like pulling yourself up an 85-foot wall of ice to make you feel accomplished.

**NEWBIE TIP:** "Don't be afraid to rest," Hunter says. "Like rock climbing, you're better off being slow and controlled. And dropping your heels helps engage the crampon and saves your calves from getting exhausted." Finally, he says, loosen your grip on your axe. White-knuckling—a common habit among inexperienced climbers—can cut off the circulation to your extremities. When the blood comes rushing back, the sensation is often very painful.

**ON THE SIDE:** Grab some grub after your day on the ice at Nepal's in Estes Park. The family-run Nepalese joint is cozy and the momos (dumplings), noodles, garlic naan, and more are delish. If you're looking for more of a local climber's hangout, head to Ed's Cantina & Grill for a hearty plate of nachos and guac or a burger and beer.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [coloradomountainschool.com](http://coloradomountainschool.com), 800-836-4008



## COLD CYCLE

**TRY:** Fat biking with Front Range Ride Guides

**DEETS:** If you're jonesing for a good mountain bike ride before spring—and don't happen to own a fat-tired model—get your fix with one of the only local outfitters who offers winter fat bike tours. Fat biking involves extra-wide, under-inflated, grippy tires that let you float through tricky conditions like snowy, rock-strewn trails. The professional guides will take care of everything, from local transport to a backpack stocked with snacks or lunch (and a local brew!). Depending on conditions, you might ride at a trail outside town around 6,000 feet in elevation; or, if the snow is right, the guides will plan a route further in the high country up to 10,000 feet. Note: They generally stay away from pavement on fat bike rides. "We're not trying to do a city tour," says senior guide Nick Markiewicz. "We love showing off the area that we love. You'll have the goofiest smile on your face the whole time. It's like biking with a little skiing and sledding."

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** The guides will custom-tailor your ride based on your ability levels, so you won't be riding with strangers who are first-timers or expert rippers if you're an intermediate mountain biker.

**NEWBIE TIP:** Dress how you would to go skiing, but keep in mind that you're going to sweat and get a workout in. Plus, stay relaxed. It's a more slippery and fluid style of riding, but if you trust in yourself and your bike, you'll pick it up no problem, Markiewicz says.

**ON THE SIDE:** Local beer is a post-ride must-have. For a tasty happy hour, hit up Equinox Brewing or Odell Brewing Company's taproom in Fort Collins after you turn in your wheels.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [frontrangerideguides.com](http://frontrangerideguides.com), 720-208-0152

## WILDERNESS RETREAT

**TRY:** Hut trekking in the Colorado State Forest State Park

**DEETS:** Never Summer Nordic runs a system of rustic yurts and huts that offer the best kind of escape from the hustle and bustle of town: an unplugged, secluded, wilderness experience unrivaled by any lodge, inn, or typical cabin. That's because each shelter is generally only accessible by snowshoe or alpine touring skis in the winter season (October through June); they're remote enough to offer gorgeous snowy views, but near enough to your car—most require one to two miles of trekking to reach—that the approach is manageable. The Agnes Creek and Nokhu huts, which are separated from each other by a stand of trees, are solid options for spectacular scenery and some excellent backcountry fun (bring avalanche gear) at about 10,000 feet in elevation. Book as individuals or as groups—the huts are family-friendly—for \$90 to \$120 per night. You can string your hut stays together by trekking between them to extend your adventure and see a little more wilderness. Hike in for an overnight at North Fork Canadian Yurt, then make your way to Clark Peak or Ruby Jewel the next day. For a third night, continue on to Lower or Upper Montgomery Pass yurts.

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** You get all the cool things about camping—wilderness, remote scenery, camaraderie, an "unplugged" overnight—without the hassle of carrying (and setting up) your tent. It's a step above roughing it for those who want to sleep with actual walls around them.

**NEWBIE TIP:** You'll have a wood-burning stove to boil snow for water, a two-burner propane stove for cooking, and basic pots, pans, and utensils; bring easy-to-pack foodstuffs for meals, like spaghetti (remember, you need to trek it in). Don't forget a headlamp—with extra batteries—and hut shoes when the boots come off.

**ON THE SIDE:** If you're headed in on Highway 14, general stores at both Glen Echo Resort and Archer's Poudre River Resort are your best bets if there's anything you forgot.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [neversummernordic.com](http://neversummernordic.com), 719-440-1508



PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN GIRARDI (LOWER LEFT)



## GET HOOKED

**TRY:** Ice fishing on Lake John in North Park

**DEETS:** It'll take you 2.5 hours to get there, but the beauties you'll pull out will be worth it: trout, walleye, and perch stocked by Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Plus, you can make a weekend out of it at the Lake John Resort, which has been owned by Bill Willcox and his wife for the past 18 years. The lodge, cabins, and campground are 200 yards from the water on the northwest corner of the lake, but the campground is closed during winter. While the cabins don't have running water in wintertime, hot showers and water are available in the main building. You can pick up a fishing license, basic groceries, and bait at the general store, which is open year-round.

Before setting up shop on the ice, check with Willcox at the resort to see what's biting, how deep the water is, what bait to use (live bait is allowed, minnows are not), and where on the lake the getting is good.

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** The challenge of outsmarting the fish is universal to anyone with a fishing pole—and here, you don't

have to be an expert to snag a real prize. "Just the other day, someone pulled one out that was 28 inches," Willcox says. "A true trophy."

**NEWBIE TIP:** "Early ice and last ice is usually the best ice as far as bite goes," Willcox says. By Thanksgiving, you can venture 30 to 50 feet from shore, a depth of six to eight feet of water, to catch fish. After the first of the year, people are starting to drive out to where the ice is about 1.5 feet thick. Watch the weather carefully before you go, and don't take your front-wheel-drive vehicle; many people make it as far as Walden and get stuck there because the road out to the lake is closed.

**ON THE SIDE:** The resort doesn't rent fishing gear, so stock up. Try Jax in Fort Collins for the things you need: a hand auger; a safety rope long enough to pull someone out by, say, tying it to a truck bumper; ice spikes (for self extraction) if the ice is thin; plus, traction: "If there's no snow on the ice," Willcox says, "the ice is super slick. You'll want ice cleats or 'creepers.'"

**FIND OUT MORE:** lakejohnresort.com, 970-723-3226



# GET CAMPY

**TRY:** Pitching a tent in the snow

**DEETS:** Just because the temps plummet and there's snow on the ground doesn't mean your camping stuff should collect dust. For a taste of roughing it on a winter's night, check out an actual campground: Dowdy Lake Campground in Red Feather Lakes and Ansel Watrous Campground in the Poudre Canyon are both open in the winter at reduced rates, although they don't have running water. For heartier stock who like an adventure, you can find great (light) backcountry camping spots about 65 miles west of Fort Collins in the Cameron Pass Recreation Area—specifically, the winter-only Cameron Connection Trail or the Joe Wright Trail, both of which provide close-to-road access to set up camp when you want dispersed camping without having to lug the gear in for miles and miles.

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** Some summer habits are hard to kick, and there's something refreshing and exhilarating about looking at a night sky before you turn in for the night.

**NEWBIE TIP:** Be prepared to stay longer than you anticipated; make sure you have spare clothing layers in case yours get wet, and more food and water than you'll consume in one night. Winter weather is unpredictable, and hunkering down for an extra night is sometimes the best option.

**ON THE SIDE:** Three miles from the Dowdy Lake is the Red Feather Trading Post—your source for all things forgotten or supplies needed for your camping excursion.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [fs.usda.gov](http://fs.usda.gov), 970-295-6702

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB DENARO (RIGHT)



## DOGGED DETERMINATION

**TRY:** Skijoring at Devil's Thumb Ranch in Tabernash

**DEETS:** OK, we technically can't call this "un-skiing", but hey, no lifts and no lines. The Scandinavian sport requires a team effort from you (on cross-country skis, either skate or classic) and your trusty steed in a harness. Skijoring can be done with a horse, but we think it's more fun with a dog—and the most fun with your own pooch. That, of course, requires a little training. The Nordic Center at Devil's Thumb Ranch runs a skijoring clinic once a month on its pristine property not far from the Continental Divide. Instructor Louisa Morrissey ([skijornmore.com](http://skijornmore.com)) will teach you how to ski with your dog on DTR's 10 km of dog-friendly trails for \$40 (a \$75 package covers the equipment rental and trail pass as well). Once you have it down, you can hit the trails—try Left Field, Creekside, Coyote, and sections of Ram's Curl and Blue Extra with your pup.

**WHY YOU'LL LOVE IT:** Dogs, skis, mountains. Is there anything left

to say? Maybe this: The sport builds trust and strengthens the relationship between you and your dog as you learn to work together. "It can be hard to get your dog enough exercise during the winter months," says Samantha Martell, DTR's activities assistant manager, "so this is a great sport to help them run off some energy."

**NEWBIE TIP:** You should be an intermediate cross-country skier before attempting to skijor. "We do ask that people are comfortable on skis (stopping, downhills, etc.) before doing a clinic so that the focus is on learning skijoring," Martell says, "not learning to ski in general."

**ON THE SIDE:** After a day on the trails, make sure Fido has enough water, then treat yourself to the "Alpenglow Happy Hour" (Sun–Thu) at Heck's at the Ranch, DTR's hexagonal hotspot for a microbrew or small plate when you need to refuel.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [devilsthumbbranch.com](http://devilsthumbbranch.com), 970-726-8231 

