

# NO-HIBERNATION ZONE

You don't have to travel far for winter recreation opportunities aplenty.

BY MELINDA SCHNYDER

Devil's Bathtub Trail in Spearfish Canyon

Fat-tire biking in South Dakota

COURTESY OF TRAVEL SOUTH DAKOTA

PHOTO BY BIRON BANASIK/TRAVEL SOUTH DAKOTA

a winter playground. Terry Peak Ski Area, with its 7,100-foot summit, has the highest lift service between the Rockies and the Alps. Operations run from mid-December through March, based on weather, and include lessons, rentals and day lodges—not one, but two—with restaurants and bars. Choose from 25 trails and a freestyle terrain park.

## Kansas City Metro

Snow Creek, owned by Vail Resorts, takes advantage of the natural topography along the Missouri River bluffs to offer skiing, snowboarding

and tubing in Weston, Missouri, about 30 miles northwest of the Kansas City metro area. With an annual average of only 10 to 12 inches of snow here over the past two years, operations rely on 60 snowmaking machines that can cover the terrain in as few as 72 hours. The season's duration depends on temperatures staying below freezing, so it could start as early as the week of Christmas or as late as January and typically runs through the first weekend of March.

In addition to convenience, the ski area—with its 300-foot vertical drop, multiple lifts and 12 trails from beginner to expert—offers an affordable and less intimidating outing than heading to Colorado, says Snow Creek General Manager Greg Mottashed. He also recommends Snow Creek's 700-foot-long tubing hill as a great place to get started if you're new to snow sports.

"There's no real skill involved in tubing, so it's a great way to get out and enjoy winter," Mottashed says. "Once [novices] are out here and they see others having fun skiing and snowboarding, that usually launches their curiosity into maybe trying [those sports] next."

Snow Creek offers a day lodge serving food and drinks as well as equipment rentals, lessons, and

Living in the Great Plains means big-time winter recreation destinations like Colorado, Wyoming and Montana are an easy drive away. But if you'd rather experience winter adventures even closer to home, affordable getaways and approachable experiences, including some unexpected ones, await right in the region.

## Western South Dakota

From cross-country skiing as a kid with her outdoor-loving parents to downhill skiing and snowboarding with her own children at Terry Peak Ski Area, Carrie Gerlach has always

viewed wintertime in western South Dakota as magical. For the past 18 years, Gerlach, founder of Black Hills Adventure Tours, has led sightseeing and adventure tours year-round from her base in Rapid City. But her favorite time to hike (or snowshoe) is when the ponderosa pines and aspen trees are blanketed with snow. "The trails are even more beautiful covered in snow, plus you have fewer bugs, you don't have snakes, and the trails aren't as crowded. It can be very peaceful," says Gerlach.

Among her favorite winter hiking spots is Devil's Bathtub Trail in Spearfish Canyon, which is part of a

22-mile scenic driving route through limestone bluffs, dense forest and along beautiful Spearfish Creek.

This is also prime territory for fat-tire bicycling on the 109-mile George S. Mickelson Trail or riding some of the more scenic of the state's 1,500 miles of snowmobile trails, which are typically open December 15 through March. One option is to book a cabin at Mystic Hills Hideaway, near Deadwood, where you can rent snowmobiles and have direct access to the 350 miles of groomed trails of the Black Hills Trails System.

Skiers and snowboarders also will find the Northern Hills region to be



Snow Creek

COURTESY OF SNOW CREEK/VALE RESORTS



PHOTO BY RICK NEIBEL/NEBRASKA TOURISM

Winter tanking in Nebraska

special events such as S'mores Sundays and scavenger hunts throughout the season.

## Nebraska's Sandhills

Leisurely floating down a river in a metal tank that's normally used to feed and water livestock might sound absurd in wintertime, but tanking has become a popular enough regional activity for Glidden Canoe Rentals in Mullen, Nebraska, to offer outings year-round by appointment. The stock tanks can accommodate up to eight people, making this a

creative way for families to spend time together. Just layer up and bring along chairs, food, music and games to enjoy while floating 3.5 miles over 2 hours on the calm, meandering Middle Loup River. Or sit back and watch for deer, migratory birds and other wildlife among the sloping canyons of the Sandhills region.

## Oklahoma City

Riversport OKC brought simulated Class II to IV whitewater rafting and kayaking to downtown Oklahoma City in 2016, and now it's serving up

winter sports. Ski OKC uses an indoor artificial ski surface called PoleSnow on a slope with run settings ranging from beginner green to challenging black diamond. You can try a 1-hour discover experience or purchase day passes and private or group lessons.

Other traditional winter activities at Riversport include a replica icy terrain climbing wall, where harnessed climbers are equipped with an ice ax-like tool, and curling, which involves sliding stones toward a target area on a synthetic ice surface.

And since these winter activities are indoors, you don't need to wait for snow. Activities are available daily during the summer and weekends in the spring, fall and during winter special events. For a seasonal vibe, visit during Winter Glow, the attraction's holiday festival that runs November 24 through December 30.

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Whether you're prepping for an epic ski trip or looking to try a new activity one afternoon, these destinations bring all the fun of winter recreation close to home.



COURTESY OF RIVERSPORT OKC