

photo by Julie Reimer.

How to Do It »

Quinzee Living

Wake up to luminescent blue snow by sleeping in a snow structure of your own creation

If a quinzee can keep you warm in the Minnesota North Woods (shown above), it's sure to be a cozy home in Washington.

If you spend much time in the backcountry during the winter months, knowing how to build a shelter out of snow is a great survival skill to have. After all, snow is an excellent insulator and inside your snow shelter it can be a "cozy" 30 degrees, even when the temperature has plunged into the teens outside.

Pronounced *KWIN'zee* and of Athabaskan origin, a quinzee is, in essence, a large pile of snow that has been hollowed out for a place to sleep.

Quinzees are versatile structures, and not nearly as particular in their building requirements as snow caves or igloos. You can build them in any kind of snow, not just hard pack or windblown snow and you don't need to find the leeward side of a hill. To build a quinzee, you can simply find a sheltered spot in the woods and start piling up snow. (Okay, there are a few more steps than that, but not too many.)

Build It Up

Your first step is to determine the size of the quinzee you wish to build. First you define the diameter of your snow shelter, and then you

disturb the snow within it. My approach is to stomp out the diameter of the quinzee while wearing my snowshoes and pack the interior down. This step helps eliminate layers in the snow and provides a strong platform on which to build your shelter.

Now, it's time to start piling up snow. This will take some time and you can really heat up doing it, so be sure to pace yourself and use your layering well. There's no sense having a great snow shelter to camp in if you are cold and clammy anyway after sweating all day.

Once you have piled all the snow you need, let the mound set up. You will want to wait at least ninety minutes before you start digging it out and two to three hours would be even better. Go on a hike, or fire up your backpacking stove and make a bite to eat while you wait. This wait time is critical as it allows the snow to go through a process called "sintering." The energy released during the movement of the snow as you piled it up helps bond the snow crystals together so they have structural integrity. It's this process that allows you to build a quinzee out of sugar snow that wouldn't be fit for a snowball otherwise.

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Hollow It Out

Once your mound of snow has firmed up, you can start to hollow it out.

The first step in the hollowing process is to punch a number of foot-long twigs into your mound. These will serve as guides for you while you excavate the chamber. Don't punch your sticks entirely through; leave roughly two inches of branch sticking out so that you can remove them later. Your mound will now look a bit like a porcupine.

The next step is to start your entry tunnel. Ideally, your entry tunnel will head a bit downward into the snow surrounding your mound before you start digging upward and into the chamber area. Your tunnel will then serve as a cold air sink to trap the warmer air inside the quinzee and make it quite pleasant to sleep in. (Don't worry if you can't do this. I've made plenty of quinzees where I couldn't create a lower entry due to sketchy snow conditions, and I'm still here to write about it.)

Plan on spending the next couple of hours hollowing out your sleeping area. You can use snowshoes, pots and pans, tarps, shovels and your own feet to scoop out and remove the excess snow.

When you notice daylight through the snow walls, begin digging a little more carefully. Stop digging when you've reached your guide sticks. Ten inches is an ideal wall thickness.

Add Fresh Air and Ambience

When the majority of the interior snow is removed, you can move on to your quinzee's final touches. Carefully punch two to three fist-size holes through your dome, about one-third of the way down from the top, to let fresh air in. A small trench around the base of the sleeping platform can help manage condensation and air quality. For maximum comfort, carve a few shelves in the wall for small candles. They'll provide some mood lighting, but, more importantly, they go a long way toward a warmer quinzee. Just be sure to blow them out before you fall asleep.

Now, all that's left to do is to enjoy a great night's sleep and look forward to waking up to a dazzling performance of sunlight through the snow. Watching the morning sun turn the walls a luminescent blue is a backcountry memory in the making. ♦



photo by Diane Bedell.

Moving all that snow is going to take awhile, but keep at it!

Quinzee Considerations

Due to the time and energy required, quinzees are a good choice for multiple-night excursions or backyard adventures.

This structure is best built when one person is helping from the outside. Having someone else help move all that snow out of the way just makes the process that much smoother. (And, while construction collapses are rare, it's nice to have another person ready to help in case it does happen.)

Plan on sweating. Layer appropriately and be able to change your base layers completely if needed.

Don't leave candles burning in the quinzee overnight and don't use your cook stove inside. Make sure you have some type of fresh air flow to prevent carbon dioxide build-up.

Trail Book »

Here's something new to the guidebook genre: a deck of cards detailing 50 trails in Western Washington that you can hike during the winter. Craig Romano's latest work, published by Mountaineers Books, gives everyone plenty of reasons to go hiking in January and February.

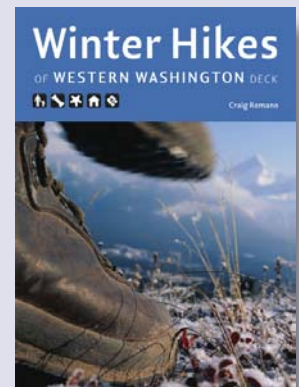
What is a guide deck, you ask? It's a stack of glossy 4-inch x 6-inch cards contained in a smooth, blue box. Each hike has it's own card. One side describes the hike and provides driving directions, distance and elevation information, as well as suggestions of what else to do in the area; the other side has a map.

There are distinct advantages to this card system. No need to haul a hefty guidebook up the trail or photocopy pages of it. You can just pick the relevant card and go, and on many of the hikes, the map is completely sufficient for navigation.

I also appreciate the thoughtful selection of hikes. There are plenty that you might know (Hoh Rain Forest, Squak Mountain, Dungeness Spit), but there are many more that even the most diehard hiker won't have heard about. How about the Chehalis River Surge Plain or the Hansville Greenway?

If I had one quibble with the concept, it's that it is hard to keep the cards in the right order. But that is a small price to pay for the ability to stuff your hike of choice into your coat pocket and take a walk on a winter day.

—Review by Susan Elderkin



Winter Hikes of Western Washington by Craig Romano (\$10.95, 2009)