

# Comfort In The Back country

Deck tk to fit in this beautiful  
space which I could use  
right now to bring  
this to a  
close etc.



Imagine waking up in a warm, dry bed with jaw-dropping scenery outside the window of your cozy room. There are no roads in sight. The aroma of a hot breakfast fills your nostrils. Your camera gear is nice and dry. You didn't need a huge backpack stuffed with your camera gear, tent, sleeping bag, food and cooking gear to get here. The only pack you'll need is a day pack filled with camera gear, a water bottle and an extra jacket. Imagine gourmet meals. No setting up camp in hailstorms. Hot showers. No mosquitoes buzzing your head as you shovel down your evening gruel, and no threat of being flattened by speeding RVs as you jockey for position amid 20 other photographers at the side of the road. If this sounds appealing to you—and I know it does—then you're going to love the world of backcountry lodges.

Other than comfort, there are a number of rea-

*Captions for all on this spread to go here as shown. Note: the direct above shot is the same scene as the big intro shot at left only from back farther etc. Captions for all on this spread to go here as shown. Note: the direct above shot is the same scene as the big intro shot at left only from back farther etc. Captions for all on this spread to go here as shown. Note: the direct above shot is the same scene as the big intro shot at left only from back farther etc. Captions for all on this spread to go here as shown. Note: the direct above shot is the same scene as the big intro shot at left only from back farther etc.*





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sons why you might want to consider hooking up with a lodge or a hut in the backcountry can throw during overnight treks, lodges and hits are ideal. Or suppose you simply don't have the physical ability or the inclination to strap on a huge backpack bulging with camping and camera gear for a week in the backcountry. Perhaps you're a roadside shooter and have already captured all the standard pullout shots in the national parks and are looking for something off the

beaten path without sacrificing creature comforts. Maybe you just want a break from sleeping in a soggy tent and waking up with fogged-up lenses every morning. With food and shelter provided, think of all the lenses, film and extra camera bodies you can take with you.

I've done my share of time in storm-battered rock shelters perched precariously on some crumbling glacial cleaver in the middle of nowhere, and in many ways, I enjoy that. Recently, though, I

decided that a little less "manly-man" adventure against the elements and a little more comfort might be a refreshing change of pace.

My first experience with "comfortable" backcountry accommodations occurred during an anniversary trip to the Canadian Rockies with my wife, Susie. We were spending a month backpacking, climbing, kayaking and photographing around Banff, Jasper and Yoho national parks. As I organized the trip months before, I realized I could score a few points with her if, on our anniversary day, I didn't schedule some back-breaking, bushwack accent with full packs over some storm-swept alpine divide. Instead, I arranged for several nights in a cozy cabin at Lake O'Hara Lodge in Yoho National Park. I figured not only would we be very comfortable, but I'd be able to photograph the dramatic scenery surrounding Lake O'Hara without needing to be a pack mule.

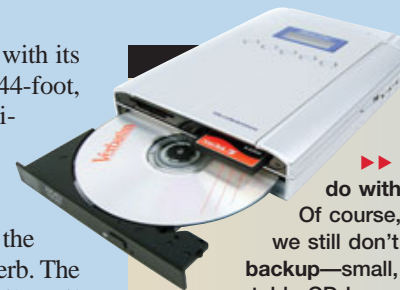
Lake O'Hara Lodge consists of a main building and a handful of small cabins at the edge of brilliantly hued Lake O'Hara. This beautiful turquoise lake sits in a glacial basin surrounded by some of the most dramatic scenery in the Canadian Rockies. Fifty miles of meticulously groomed hiking trails lead to a number of alpine lakes and ridgelines, making this a hiker's and photographer's paradise. Mountainsides of larch trees change to golden yellow during the last half of September. For the best photographic vantage points, I'd recommend the Yukness Ledges, Wixaway Gap and All Souls' trails. Come prepared for gourmet meals, afternoon tea, hot showers and a very cozy atmosphere. Summer access is provided by shuttle bus, while winter visitors must ski seven easy miles along the fire road. While you may need to increase the limit on your credit card before leaving home, you won't regret it.

In general, the Canadian Rockies is world-renowned for its wide variety of backcountry accommodations, ranging from primitive shelters to luxurious lodges. The vast majority are only accessed via ski/hiking trails or helicopter. They range from basic sturdy shelters perched on high ridges for climbers, which can be had for about \$15 per night, to comfortable and cozy lodges, such as Lake O'Hara Lodge, which go for around \$300 per couple per night.

Assiniboine Lodge falls into the cat-

egory of rustic and comfortable with its dramatic setting below the 11,844-foot, Matterhorn-like Mount Assiniboine. Heated private rooms, electricity and full meal service are provided. The surrounding area offers great day hiking and the photography possibilities are superb. The lodge can be reached via a 17-mile trail or helicopter flight, or you can hike or ski in while your gear is flown in. Capture first light on Mount Assiniboine reflected in Magog Lake as you keep an eye out for grizzlies. An easy trail up Nublet Peak provides a panoramic view of the peaks and lakes around Mount Assiniboine. A short hike to Wonder Pass, especially during autumn with the yellow larch trees, provides beautiful views of Lake Gloria in its deep glacial valley at the base of the mountain.

Built in 1914 by the Great Northern Railroad, Granite Park Chalet in Glacier National Park, Montana, serves as a hiker's shelter at the end of the Garden Wall trail.



## Essential Gear...

▶▶ Digital gives us a chance to do something we could never do with film: back up and protect our images while still in the field. Of course, even though huts make the backcountry more comfortable, we still don't want to carry too much. Two main choices emerge for backup—small, portable hard drives, such as those from Kanguru, and portable CD burners, like RoadStor from MicroSolutions. Both have built-in card readers to download images from memory cards and both will work with battery power. The lightweight, compact hard drives store many gigabytes of data quite easily. However, they're more sensitive to being roughly handled. The durable burners let you create multiple CDs for reliable backup, but the CDs are limited to approximately 700 MB of data each.

Along with very basic, dorm-like, unheated rooms without showers, a rustic kitchen provides cook stoves, pots, plates, cutlery and boiling water for meals. While limited freeze-dried dinners are available for purchase, most hikers bring their own food. Sweeping panoramas of the McDonald Creek Valley and surrounding peaks provide the setting.

The chalet is accessed by hiking seven

miles along the moderate flower-lined Highline/Garden Wall trail. Surely one of the most beautiful walks in North America, the trail winds along above treeline just beneath the jagged ridge-line of the Continental Divide. Once you reach the chalet and drop off your gear, a moderate trail leads to the top of 8,435-foot Swiftcurrent Peak. Perched on the Continental Divide, the peak provides



a wide-angle view from Mount Cleveland in the north to Reynolds Peak in the south. Another short climb to the divide allows for views of Grinnell Glacier and three turquoise lakes in the basin far below. Wildflowers fill the meadows surrounding the chalet in late July and early August, and the setting sun illuminates the towering flanks of Mount Gould every night.

While it may be a simple endeavor to spend a week photographing in the high country during the gravy days of summer based out of a tent, winter conditions make it much more difficult. Most huts and lodges in the Canadian Rockies are now open in winter and can be accessed via helicopter if you wish to avoid the ski or snowshoe in. I don't need to mention the obvious advantages of having a warm room at night to dry out camera gear and heat up your fingers before you venture outside for another round of photography.

If you're looking for something more along the lines of a storm-battered shelter in a spectacular alpine setting, it's tough to beat the hut system in Mount Cook & Westland National Parks in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. Although the calendar may indicate summer, be

prepared for raging blizzards at the Tasman Saddle or Grand Plateau huts any month of the year.

The first thing I noticed when I visited the Tasman Saddle hut many years ago was the system of steel cables bolted into the surrounding bedrock that hold the hut in place during typical "blows." This is one of the few huts in the world where you need to rope up when you visit the latrine. There are few places on Earth with such easy access to huge glaciated mountains and these huts provide the only reasonable shelter. Surviving in a tent could be just that.

I once spent seven days hunkered down in the Grand Plateau hut during early summer while successive storm fronts hammered the mountains around us. I had planned to photograph a climb of Mount Cook up the famed Linda Face, but the chest-deep snow and constant storms thwarted our efforts. While we managed to get out of the hut for brief sessions of photography between wave fronts, we never had a chance to climb Cook. If we had been in a tent, our rescue team would have needed sonar to locate us. Ten days after I returned home, the entire northeast corner of the mountain fell off in what geologists called a

one-in-10,000-year geologic event. The Linda Face was gone. We would have been the last party to climb it.

The huts in Mount Cook & Westland Parks provide bunks with mattresses, cooking equipment and utensils. Your body is your only heat source. You'll need to bring a sleeping bag and food. Access is provided via fixed-wing ski planes followed by a short traverse on skis or snowshoes. Unless you're familiar with glacier travel techniques, I'd highly recommend contacting Alpine Guides in the park. They can book the huts, arrange your flights and provide fully guided trips up the high peaks and across the heavily crevassed terrain.

If given a choice, I usually prefer to spend my backcountry nights in a tent or out in the open under the stars. I've discovered, however, that it's not so bad every once in a while to have a roof over my head and a warm, dry place to lay out my camera gear at the end of the day. While I wouldn't like to see huts and shelters festooning every ridgeline in every mountain range, the occasional hut or lodge can often provide welcome relief. Judging by their increasing popularity over the last couple decades, many people would agree. **OP**

## Resources



### ALASKA:

**Thompson Pass Mountain Chalet**  
30 miles north of Valdez  
Mile 19 Richardson Highway,  
Box 1540  
Valdez, Alaska 99686  
(907) 835-4817  
email: chalet@alaska.net

### CALIFORNIA:

**Peter Grubb Hut, Baenson Hut, Bradley Hut, Ludlow Hut Clair Tappaan Lodge,**  
P.O. Box 36, Norden, CA 95724  
(530) 426-3632  
www.sierraclub.org/outings/lodges

**Meiss Meadow Hut  
Sierra Ski Touring/Husky**  
Express P.O. Box 176, Gardnerville,  
NV 89410 (775) 782-3047  
www.highsierra.com/sst/

**Pear Lake Ski Hut  
Sequoia National Park**  
(559) 565-3759  
email: a-seqnha@inreach.com  
www.sequoiainhistory.org/pearlake/  
pearlake.htm

### COLORADO:

**Hidden Treasure Yurt**  
located on New York Mountain  
in Eagle County, Colorado  
(800) 444-2813  
email: htayurt@yahoo.com

**Red Mountain Huts  
Southwestern Colorado  
Red Mountain Enterprises,**  
David & Karen Dow, 1922 N. 2nd  
Ct., Grand Junction CO 81501  
(970) 257-0787  
reservations@skihuts.com

### NEW HAMPSHIRE:

**High Mountain Huts**  
(network of eight huts)  
**White Mountain  
National Forest** (603) 466-2727  
www.outdoors.org/lodging/  
huts/index.shtml

**Randolph Mountain Club**  
White Mountain National Forest  
Gray Knob, Crag Camp,  
The Log Cabin and The Perch  
www.randolphmountainclub.org

### NORTH CAROLINA AND TENNESSEE:

**LeConte Lodge, Great Smoky  
Mountains National Park**  
250 Apple Valley Rd., Sevierville,  
TN 37862 (865) 429-5704  
email: reservations@leconte  
lodge.com  
www.leconte-lodge.com

### GEORGIA:

**Len Foote Hike Inn  
Amicalola Falls State Park**  
(800) 864-7275  
www.hike-inn.com

### MICHIGAN:

**ABR Trails Rustic Cabins, E5299**  
West Pioneer Rd., Ironwood,  
MI 49938 (906) 932-3502  
www.michweb.com/abrski/  
lodging/

### WYOMING:

**Rendezvous Huts**  
Grand Teton National Park  
Rendezvous Ski and Snowboard  
Tours 1110 Alta North Rd.,  
Alta, WY 83414 (307) 353-2900  
email: skiyurts@yahoo.com

### IDAHO:

**Williams Peak Yurt**  
Sawtooth Mountain Guides, P.O.  
Box 18, Stanley, ID 83278  
(208) 774-3324  
email: getaway@satoothguides.com

### OREGON:

**Wing Ridge Hut**  
P.O. Box 714, Joseph, OR 97846  
(800) 646-9050  
wingski@wingski.com  
www.wingski.com

### Canadian Rockies Alpine Club of Canada

(403) 678-3200  
Canadian Rockies Backcountry  
Lodges www.canadatrails.ca/lodg  
ing/lodge.html

**Lake O'Hara Lodge**  
(250) 343-6418, (403) 678-4110  
www.lakeohara.com

**Mount Assiniboine Lodge**  
(403) 678-2883  
e-mail: assinilo@telusplanet.net  
www.canadianrockies.net/assin  
iboine/lodge.html

**Purcell Lodge**  
(250) 344-2639  
e-mail: places@rockies.net  
www.purcell.com

**Mount Cook National Park,  
New Zealand Alpine Guides**  
011-64-3-4351-834  
e-mail: mtcook@alpineguides.co.nz  
www.alpineguides.co.nz/  
agl/home.htm

**Glacier National Park, Montana  
Granite Park Chalet**  
(800) 521-7238  
e-mail: info@glaciarguides.com  
www.glaciarguides.com