

A One-Day Winter Itinerary for Sun Valley, Idaho

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Visitors can witness beautiful sunrises at Sun Valley Lodge in Idaho.

Photograph by Marc Muench/Getty Images

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Visit Sun Valley today and it's easy to see why this part of south-central Idaho became the home of the country's first destination ski resort. Dominated by 9,150-foot Bald Mountain, the landscape is covered in dense groves of evergreens, columns of bone-white aspens, rolling hills, and the gentle saddle of the Big Wood River, just outside the town of Ketchum and a world away from anywhere else in the country. And when winter dumps as much as 220 inches of snow each year, the entire region transforms into snow-globe perfection, with world-class skiing and snowboarding, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, and family-friendly pursuits like ice-skating and tubing, all complemented by a dizzying number of dining options.

The resort's decades-long popularity with the well-heeled set—from its inception in 1936, celebrities like Gene Kelly and Marilyn Monroe flocked to Sun Valley—has attached a haute rep to the resort. But Sun Valley also wears its simple love of winter proudly on its sleeve, imbuing the high-class, classic European vibe with a hearty dose of the Wild West. This is why so many down-to-earth winter Olympians call it home and why ski bums are still a staple; Warren Miller himself lived out of a car in Sun Valley's parking lot until he broke out as the pioneering ski filmmaker.

The profusion of snow makes this one of the best playgrounds on the continent, but it also adds one unexpected element: Sometimes it's hard to get to Sun Valley. Storm systems routinely close the airport in the nearby town of Hailey, which adds a touch of island-like isolation to the region. Think Nantucket nestled in a snow-choked alpine setting. But once you're there, you're *there*.

What to Do

The moment the first chairlift of the season starts to run, typically in late November, the prime winter draw of Sun Valley is the skiing and snowboarding—and with good reason, as the resort boasts more than 2,000 skiable acres with 121 runs, at least one stretching up to three miles. The resort itself is divided into the two mountains that first caught Austrian Count Felix Schaffgotsch's eye in 1936, when he discovered Sun Valley and turned it into a snow-lover's paradise. Bald Mountain (known by locals simply as "Baldy") caters to most ski levels, but it's a veritable playground for intermediates, advanced, and experts, with deep bowls, dense glades, and long runs that carry a sustained pitch from top to bottom. Access is from two base areas, River Run and Warm Springs, both easily accessible from town.

Dollar Mountain rises up on the other side of the river, about a mile from Baldy, the original proposed location for the resort and now a godsend for beginners. In addition to a novice-friendly magic carpet, the mountain has two high-speed quad lifts; gentle, perfectly groomed runs; a tube park; and a terrain-based learning area. Master the slopes at Dollar, and you can graduate to Baldy's intermediate runs.

Sun Valley's wide saddle also affords a host of other winter activities that don't necessarily involve throwing yourself down a snow-covered hill. Starting from the resort's Nordic and Snowshoe Center near Dollar, you can access almost 25 miles of trails professionally groomed for Nordic skiing, skating, and snowshoeing. The Sun Valley Lodge—original to the resort and recently renovated—also offers year-round ice-skating, a yoga studio, a glass-enclosed pool, and a 20,000-square-foot spa.

And if spas are *really* your thing, visit Zenergy, a 48,000-square-foot facility with indoor and outdoor saline pools, a full fitness center, and more treatment options than anyone should enjoy in a single lifetime.

Where to Drink

To partake in Sun Valley's rough-and-tumble spirit, Apple's Bar and Grill is a must-visit après-ski spot. Located at Baldy's Warm Springs base area, Apple's bears witness to the region's storied history—the place has been here for decades, and it shows. The walls are replete with photos, posters, and racy Lange ski boot adverts signed by Olympic athletes, and once the lifts close a rowdy crew typically spills out into the road, dining on house burgers and swilling from a curated list of regional craft beers. Or head into town and elbow up to the bar at Pioneer Saloon on Main Street. The décor reinforces Idaho's Wild West identity, while stiff drinks and massive plates of aged steak provide the creature comforts you want after a long day on the mountain.

Where to Eat

On Baldy you'll find plenty of on-mountain dining, but target the Lookout Day Lodge for a midday visit. Sitting at the summit of Bald Mountain, it offers good food with nominal frills, loads of retro Sun Valley ski decorations, and a massive sundeck with panoramic views of the entire valley.

In Ketchum, Cristina's restaurant feels like walking into a wormhole attached to Tuscany. This charming restaurant is a short walk from Baldy, with a menu fit for a feast: antipasti, charcuterie and cheese boards, boiled shrimp, picante-stuffed banana peppers, seared-ahi slaw, grilled rosemary chicken breast ... Just save room for the house-made pastries. And ski apparel is the common attire at lunchtime.

For dinner, hit Rickshaw, a small joint that makes traditional street-food dishes from China, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia that are far better than you'd ever expect for a mountain town. Best to order a lot and share with friends, eating as the food leaves the micro-size kitchen.

Where to Stay

The legendary Sun Valley Lodge has been there as long as the resort, but it's recently undergone a total renovation, with 94 fully reimagined guest rooms. It also has an on-site 20,000-square-foot spa, a glass-encased pool, restaurants, and lounges. It sits near the base of Dollar Mountain, within walking distance of Sun Valley's Tyrolean-style pedestrian village, which offers a variety of dining, drinking, and shopping options. Free shuttles to Baldy are easy to arrange.

Within the heart of town, Knob Hill Inn offers staggering views of Bald Mountain and the Smokey and Boulder mountain ranges, with 29 boutique guest rooms as well as a cozy lobby with a wood-burning fireplace, an on-site restaurant, indoor heated pool, hot tub, and sauna. It's within walking distance of downtown Ketchum and offers shuttles throughout the region.

Logistics

Alaska, Delta, and United offer direct flights to Sun Valley from various cities: Los Angeles, Seattle, Salt Lake City, Denver, and San Francisco. All flights land in nearby Hailey, located 14 miles from the resort, but in inclement weather, a common characteristic of winter in Idaho, it's not uncommon for planes to take off—and then be forced to land in Twin Falls, from which you'll have to take a two-hour-long shuttle ride to Sun Valley.