

20 Sweet Spots for Winter

The summer travel season can steal the spotlight, but the winter months have more than enough to offer — smaller crowds, holiday displays, skiing opportunities and more — to make them a great time to take a trip. Read on for 20 reasons why winter is wonderful.

By ShermansTravel.com Editorial Staff

In life, being in the right place at the right time can come down to serendipity, but in travel, it is almost always the result of good planning. To avoid crowds and inflated prices, we recommend the period between high and low seasons when the weather is fine, places are still open and happy to welcome travelers, and you can explore a destination at your own pace. We call this magical time and space continuum the Sweet Spot and make it a point to round up the best of them for you each season. **We've covered the 20 best places to travel for value this winter and grouped them by region — follow the links to right to discover this season's Sweet Spots.**

[United States](#) & [Canada](#)

Winter forecast: With the exception of its southernmost terrain, the U.S. and Canada experience the colder side of winter. Cool breezes from Canada spill into the northern United States, serving as a tailwind for southbound vacationers. The Rockies see a surge in ski traffic, while [Florida](#) celebrates the end of hurricane season. Regardless, seasonal shopping overtakes [New York](#) and [Chicago](#), spreading holiday cheer.

1. [AUSTIN](#)

The music starts at the airport, but that's not all this hip, funky Texas capital city has to offer. Consistently ranked as one of the most livable cities in the U.S., Austin embraces film, cuisine, and its outdoor terrain equally.

Why go in winter: You'll find more package deals and fewer crowds during winter months, yet the weather still hovers around a pleasant 65 degrees. The best deals can be found in December, including during the holiday period.

2. [LOS ANGELES](#)

As the frontier of the American Dream, laid-back Los Angeles allows visitors to be a pampered star, an earnest culture vulture, a die-hard foodie, and anything else their heart desires. Head here for celebrity sightings, super shopping, and the chance to mix with the beautiful people.

Why go in winter: Spotty rains, temperatures in the mid-60s, and that trademark West Coast sunshine clear Los Angeles of its usual smog halo during the winter months, making for picturesque cityscapes, room discounts, and comfortable celebrity-spotting from Beverly Hills to Hollywood. Don't miss the Rose Bowl Parade in January, and starch that bowtie for the all-important Academy Awards come late February.

3. [MAINE](#)

From its towering mountain summits to its sandy seashores, Maine offers diverse year-round activities for vacationers of all stripes. Maritime sites abound, romantic inns flourish, and family fun spots thrive in all regions. Stay south for sparkling beaches and quaint coastal villages, or trek north for rugged, untouched wilderness.

Why go in winter: Holiday time is bustling in harbor villages, but not bursting at the seams with tourists. Winter snows bring calm to the coast, but droves of skiers shush down the slopes in Kennebec and Moose River Valleys and huff along the Nordic trails in the Highlands.

[Slide Show: 12 Travel Highlights for 2009](#)

4. [NEW ORLEANS](#)

The Big Easy is a delectable gumbo of red-hot jazz, historic streetcars, lacy French-colonial balconies, powdery beignets, and zesty Cajun cuisine. Its unique blend of Southern hospitality, eccentric tradition, and unabashed debauchery give it a distinct character unlike anywhere else in the United States. The city's tourism infrastructure — especially in the relatively unscathed [French Quarter](#) — has largely recovered post-Katrina.

Why go in winter: Daytime temperatures in the mid-60s and fewer crowds make winter a comfortable time of year to visit New Orleans. Winter is also quiet and less crowded, though New Year's Eve draws crowds who come for the fireworks and the ball drop.

5. [PARK CITY](#)

Host to several events in the 2002 Winter Olympics, this chic resort town invites outdoorsy types to go skiing, sleigh riding, snowshoeing, ice skating, hot-air ballooning, or even bobsledding down the same track used in the Olympics. But Park City also offers plenty of entertainment for the more laid-back crowd: lounge at the Egyptian Theatre on historic Main Street, stroll through 20-plus art galleries, or debate between 100-plus bars and restaurants for a dinner destination.

Why go in winter: An early ski season in a place with near-perfect snow conditions is a bargain hunter's dream come true. Three easily accessible premier ski resorts offer bargains to jump-start the season, and the town is dripping with alpine holiday spirit.

6. [SANTA FE](#)

Considered the heart and soul of New Mexico, enchanting, 400-year-old Santa Fe, with its narrow streets and quaint adobe structures, offers one of the best blends of dining, shopping, art, culture, and history in the United States.

Why go in winter: Good snowfall, sunny days, and families on holiday spell crowds, but many properties offer worthwhile ski and stay package deals during this time.

7. [VANCOUVER](#)

Nestled between the Pacific Ocean and the Coast Mountains, British Columbia's largest city is heralded for its culture, cuisine, and proximity to the region's spectacular natural surroundings. Given all Vancouver has to offer visitors, it's no surprise it was chosen to host to the 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

Why go in winter: Take advantage of lighter crowds to see museums and galleries and to sample Vancouver's multicultural menu offerings. Note though that March is Vancouver's wettest month, with January and February close behind.

[Caribbean & Mexico](#)

Why go in winter: After hurricane season, winter reminds our Caribbean neighbors that island life is worth the trouble. Like clockwork, hotel occupancy levels peak come December and cost a premium for a week of perfect beach days. Spanning the same latitudes, Mexico thaws frostbitten Midwesterners and entices the adventurous into a thrill-packed mountainous interior. For a brief window pre-holiday season, you can expect great weather at affordable prices.

8. [OAXACA](#)

Although one of Mexico's poorest states, Oaxaca is rich in art and history. The city of Oaxaca is one of Mexico's colonial gems, surrounded by awe-inspiring ruins and villages specializing in local folk art, while the largely untouched coastline includes the beautiful beach areas of [Puerto Escondido](#) and Huatulco.

Why go in winter: With the exception of the Christmas holidays, winter is Oaxaca's low season, marked by stellar hotel deals and thinned out crowds. While temperatures can drop into the 50s, they often linger in the 70s during the day, making it warm enough to swim. Another plus: this period is comfortably rain-free.

[Europe](#)

Winter forecast: Less sunshine and every kind of precipitation have northern Europeans hibernating. Gondola lines snake their way across much of [Switzerland](#), [Austria](#), and [northern Italy](#), where snow is usually plentiful and the Alps have room for everyone. Much of Europe's charm sits in climate-controlled museums, gastropubs, and guesthouses, so the combination of

sharply discounted transatlantic airfare and low-season rates holds promise.

9. [ATHENS](#)

Greece's capital city serves as much more than just a pre-party island pit stop — this ancient birthplace of democracy manages to effortlessly mix history with modernity, owing much of its present-day polish to its hosting of the 2004 Olympics. Sights like the iconic [Acropolis](#) and the [theater of Dionysus](#) come together with inventive Mediterranean cuisine and some of Europe's best nightlife — it's easy to see why Athena and Poseidon once competed for power over this exciting metropolis.

Why go in winter: Lock in deals galore by visiting Athens in the winter. Cooler temperatures and sunny skies allow for comfortable exploration of outdoor antiquities. Tourist-trap restaurants close while authentic local eateries remain open.

10. CANARY ISLANDS

This Spanish archipelago off the coast of North Africa lures visitors primarily to Tenerife, the largest of its islands and a major port of call in the Atlantic Ocean, where visitors flock to Puerto de la Cruz, a charming colonial town of curving streets and plazas that attracts shoppers with its tax-free status. Its other less-traveled isles likewise beckon with national parks and Biosphere reserves, beautiful beaches, and activities like big-game fishing and camel riding.

Why go in winter: A good-value destination year-round, the Canary Islands see dependable springlike temperatures and a relatively peaceful lull in December and January before rowdy Carnival visitors take over in February.

11. [FINLAND](#)

Long influenced by both Sweden and Russia, Finland maintains a distinct culture, language, and mindset. While [Helsinki](#) couldn't be hipper and hotter these days, with booming architecture, film, fashion, and music scenes, the Finnish soul resides within the cool and timeless countryside beyond.

Why go in winter: Even before spring springs, the days get longer, temperatures get warmer, and the collective Finnish spirit lifts. Hotels are mostly cheaper than in summer — except in skiing areas, as this is peak ski season for tourists and locals alike.

12. [SLOVENIA](#)

Chock full of the same medieval towns and quaint villages that made the Czech Republic — namely Prague — a household name, Slovenia's charms can be enjoyed for a fraction of the price of its trail-blazing predecessor. Activities like winemaking are popular in Slovenian shore towns, while further north in the Alps, Lake Bled is a popular winter sports destination. A trip to the capital, [Ljubljana](#), reveals ornate row houses, picturesque rivers, and iconic castles and bridges.

Why go in winter: Nestled between popular ski regions in Italy and Austria, Slovenia's Julian Alps offer a similar experience for much less cost. Before heading to the modern ski towns of Kranjska Gora and Cerklje na Gori — which have remarkable winter deals — you'll fly into the capital city of Ljubljana, just a short distance from the ski resorts.

[CONTINUED: South America, Middle East, Central & South America](#)

Winter forecast: As fall rain clouds fizzle over the sea, the increasingly popular beaches and nature reserves of Central America prove irresistible to sun seekers. South America's summer swells with Carnival, and [Rio](#)'s beach culture is a memorable bonus. Moisture-laden air off the Pacific tempers the occasionally sweltering sun along the Andes, and exploring [Patagonia](#) digs up moderate temperatures.

13. [COSTA RICA](#)

Appropriately enough for a country whose national mantra is pura vida (pure life), ecotourism is the major draw in Costa Rica. One of the most biodiverse countries on the planet — home to 6% of the world's species — this stable, safe, and still affordable Central American democracy boasts dense rainforests, tropical beaches, unique cultural attractions, fresh eats, and growing number of luxury resorts.

Why go in winter: The value of visiting this popular destination during December and January is the weather: Skies are clear, temperatures linger in the 80s, and fresh from the rainy season, everything is lush and green. For more hotel availability and less congestion on jungle trails, skip the period between Christmas and New Year's when families on winter break flood in.

14. [VENEZUELA](#)

This biodiverse paradise at the top of South America boasts thundering waterfalls, a vast chunk of the Amazon, nearly 1,800 miles of Caribbean coastline, and snow-covered Andean peaks. Visitors can combine [Amazon](#) expeditions, beach time, and rich South American culture for a cheap, culturally rich vacation.

Why go in winter: You'll experience occasional spots of rain during this shoulder season, but prices are down and crowds are minimal. Temperatures hover in the 90s.

[Asia & Middle East](#)

Winter forecast: In Asia, squirrely North Pacific winds cause trouble closer to the equator, whipping up monsoons, but they suppress rates at coastal resorts in [Vietnam](#) and [Malaysia](#). West of Mount Everest, the blanket of heat is temporarily lifted from the Indian subcontinent, prompting a festival blitz that can at times be experienced for low-season rates. The Sahara Desert region experiences a bout of cool, dry, winter weather that makes visits to most of the Middle East mild and comfortable.

15. [HONG KONG](#)

Designated a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of [China](#) after the British handed it back in 1997, Hong Kong is a study in opposites: colonial, historical buildings nuzzle up against cutting-edge skyscrapers, while the entire city stands starkly against lush, green mountains and the jewel-blue buffer of the surrounding South China Sea.

Why go in winter: It's the best time of year for savings on hotel stays and weather is comfortably cool — around 55 degrees — in the earlier part of the year. Avoid Chinese New Year when crowds abound and attractions close.

16. [JERUSALEM](#)

The spiritual home of the world's three major religions will enchant even the most secular of visitors with its rich history, ashen stone buildings, delectable cuisine, and abundant sacred landmarks. Although the past few years have been rather turbulent for the Holy City, for now the situation has become relatively calm, making it an ideal time to visit.

Why go in winter: While winter in Jerusalem can be extremely cold, the drastically reduced rates on hotel stays make bundling up to see the sights well worth it.

Editor's note, January 2009: This article was written before the recent onset of violence in Israel, which started Dec. 27, 2008. At this time, the U.S. Department of State has issued a travel advisory for Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. For current information about traveling overseas, please consult the department's Bureau of Consular Affairs' Web site at www.travel.state.gov.

17. [JORDAN](#)

Unlike its neighbors, Jordan has few natural resources. And yet, the country has capitalized remarkably on its natural and historic treasures, making it one of the Middle East's top tourist destinations. Visitors can enjoy ancient ruins in the desert, bathe in Dead Sea mud, and, indulge in five-star hotel stays.

Why go in winter: Even though the winter months bring cold weather to Jordan, outdoor sightseeing is still more comfortable during these times than the scorching summer months. The Red Sea and Aqaba, in particular, are worth visiting during this period.

[CONTINUED: Pacific, Africa, Australia & Pacific](#)

Winter forecast: As the summer sun beats down on inland [Australia](#), the island's southern coast enters a peak season made desirable by tempering oceanic breezes. Wannabe Kiwis touch down on [New Zealand](#) beneath clear skies and ideal trekking conditions. The threat of cyclones throughout the [South Pacific](#) should be watched, not to mention the incredible deals on beachside bungalows.

18. MARQUESAS ISLANDS

There's no better place to get away from it all than in the Marquesas Islands. Located northeast of Tahiti and comprised of twelve volcanic islands (only six of which are inhabited), the Marquesas are situated further away from a continent than any other islands in the world. Only Nuku Hiva and Hiva Oa provide hotel accommodations — the former island is best known for its stunning Ahuui waterfall, while the latter earns its acclaim for its giant stone tikis (the biggest found in Polynesia) and out-of-this-world landscapes, including the remains of a sunken volcano.

Why go in winter: These remote Pacific islands shine in the waning dry season, pairing the best-preserved tikis outside Easter Island with the appeal of Eden.

Africa

Winter forecast: From [Casablanca](#) to [Cairo](#), winter is rainy along the coast, with days that are ideal for deeper exploration of the Sahara. Farther south, the Southern Hemisphere's summer brings drier days and peak safari season, which coincides with a big bump in lodge rates. Namibia's nefarious Skeleton Coast is almost guaranteed to be rain-free as precipitation gives way to Atlantic breezes down the southeastern coast.

19. MOZAMBIQUE

On Africa's southeastern edge, tropical temperatures, turquoise waters, and over 1,500 miles of beach mix with colonial-era architecture, salsa music, and wildlife, making Mozambique one of the continent's most up-and-coming destinations.

Why go in winter: Temperatures are high, but in most areas the rains haven't started and visits can be highly enjoyable. Prices are also reasonable, except for the Christmas-New Year holiday period, when high season prices apply, and advance bookings are essential.

20. ZANZIBAR

Picture-perfect beaches, tropical temperatures, beautiful palace architecture, the exotic old Stone Town, and a culture shaped over the centuries by monsoon winds give Zanzibar, also known as the "spice islands," their timeless appeal.

Why go in winter: Outside of the busy Christmas-New Year period, these months usually see fewer crowds and better hotel rates. Expect warmer weather (mid-80s), sporadic rains, and fickle winds, especially in December.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin