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Beyond the trails: The right shoe is important for snowshoeing adventures

By Tristen Critchfield / For the Journal
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Hiring a guide can be useful for first-time snowshoers.

Courtesy of Less Traveled Trails

Brian Johnson's interest in snowshoeing began some 35 years ago, about the same time he arrived in the Land of Enchantment.

"I started connecting with other outdoor loving people and realizing that getting out there doesn't end when winter starts," Johnson said.

Fast-forward to the present day and Johnson runs Less Traveled Trails, which in addition to backpacking and hiking excursions, offers snowshoeing expeditions.

"You get out in the snow, (it's) all around you and it's very quiet," Johnson said. "And then the wildlife kind of starts waking up.

"... Really, it's the solitude. And, you can even be on the same trails that you hike in the summertime, but now it's winter and you can just go anywhere you want. You're not limited to the trails. You can go cross-country."



While Johnson has more than three decades' experience with snowshoeing, those looking for an introduction to the activity should be aware of the type of equipment needed to get started. First and foremost, that includes the shoes,



which can have a wide range of prices.

“You should look at the pricing and be realistic,” Johnson said. “Are you going out for fun? Like you’re a recreational hiker, snowshoer. In that case, you’re spending maybe \$100 to \$150 for a set. If you’re more serious, like maybe you’re already on a search-and-rescue team and you want to get up to speed, then you could even spend up to \$400.”

For beginners, Johnson recommends the less expensive choices — especially if one is unsure about their long-term commitment. There’s also the option of hiring a guide, which will likely include snowshoe options with the trek. Such is the case for Johnson and Less Traveled Trails.

“I take people out from solo travelers to groups of 12 — or even larger if needed,” he said. “I have a fleet of snowshoes so I can help fit a large group, as well as accessories like poles and even the gaiters — that’s for around your ankle to make a nice protective barrier for the snow that’s accumulating around your boot.”

The snowshoes themselves are composed of a frame, deck, cleats on the bottom and a binding. Johnson says it’s essential to ensure that the binding wraps around each person’s boot comfortably. It’s also important to identify what type of terrain will be covered and select the type of snowshoes and cleats accordingly.

“There’s three types of snowshoes based on terrain — flat terrain, rolling terrain and then mountain terrain,” Johnson said. “So if you’re more of a mountaineer, you want a really good cleat system on the bottom that’s going to attach you to the snow. If you’re going straight up a slope or if you’re going

sideways around a slope, you want snowshoes to hold you.



“But if you’re more of a recreational snowshoer and you’re just doing the trails, maybe you don’t need to worry as much about the cleats you can go for a less expensive model.”

For clothing, adhere to the basic concepts of layering, Johnson says, because as one exerts more, it could be necessary to shed clothing that was initially worn to protect against the winter elements.

“Snowshoeing can be strenuous; it’s about one and a half to two times more strenuous than hiking,” he said. “Your stride isn’t as long as maybe when you’re just freely hiking. You’re depressing into the snow and it’s just taking more energy, more calories as you go along.”

Another valuable accessory for snowshoeing are traction devices known as micro spikes. These will assist snowshoers when terrain shifts from snow to ice. As a guide himself, Johnson believes it can ease the transition when a snowshoeing veteran is present to help select the ideal route to fit the situation.

“Maybe they (newcomers) don’t even really know how to go about checking on snow conditions,” he said. “So they can leave that all up to me and immediately go to a trail where there’s the best snow and it’s tailored to your abilities.”



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Coming in November

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As the trees in New Mexico turn gold and the mornings feel crisper each day, thoughts start to turn toward the winter wonderland the Land of Enchantment is about to transform into.