

From the Nisqually entrance of Mount Rainier National Park, drive the road past Longmire to Narada Falls viewpoint and park your car. Water and heated restrooms are available here.

If a National Park Service sign informs you that the open slopes above the east end of the parking lot are "Closed to Skiers," hike 0.3 mile up the road to the junction of Stevens Canyon Road. Turn right and ski another 0.2 mile along this road to an intersection. Leave the road here and climb southeast over a 5,150-foot pass to Reflection Lakes.

If there is no sign and your assessment indicates the slope is stable, climb the hill behind the comfort station up to Stevens Canyon Road. Either way, ski the gentle downhill grade to Reflection Lakes Basin for 1.5 miles.

Looking directly south to the Tatoosh Range, you will see pointed Pinnacle Peak and, to the left, the Castle (the reason for its name is obvious) and distant Unicorn Peak. Avoid the steep slopes below Pinnacle Peak. From the road, make a climbing traverse southeast to the tree-studded ridge that runs northwest from the Castle. Climb this ridge and the bowl above it to the broad saddle to the left of the Castle.

From the saddle, there are numerous possibilities. Unicorn Peak lies over a mile to the southeast along a ridgeline; runs can be made into every drainage. The northern slope of the saddle has cliff bands that can be breached via steep gullies. Conservative skiers can retrace their tracks to the road and out.

Muir Snowfield ⁹⁶

Start Point: Paradise Parking Lot, 5,450 feet

High Point: Camp Muir, 10,000 feet

Best Time: October to June

Day Trip: 9 miles

Skiing Time: 6 hours

Skill Level: Intermediate

Difficulties: Moderate avalanche potential; routefinding required; permit/fee area

Maps: USGS 7.5-minute series, Mount Rainier East

The broad, low-angle southern apron of Mount Rainier rises from Paradise at 5,440 feet to Camp Muir at 10,060 feet. Early season tours (October to November) offer the best combination of snow conditions, weather, and entertainment value on the Muir Snowfield. Navigation skills (and the requisite equipment) are required for this tour; whiteouts occur frequently, and the descent takes place on a broad, curving ridge with cliffs on either side. Keep a log, mental or otherwise, so you can find your way down in fog.