

Hike Smart on La Luz - Winter

Winter Hiking

Every year, unprepared hikers, lured by warm weather and easy access from Albuquerque, experience severe illness, injury, or death when hiking La Luz trail. La Luz is situated entirely in the wilderness backcountry and is 7.5 miles in length. The climb is 3,775 feet. Hiking the backcountry has inherent risks and involves unavoidable hazards. Your safety depends upon your judgment, your experience, and a realistic assessment of your abilities.

Check the [Forest Service La Luz website](#) and call the Sandia Ranger Station at 505-281-3304 for current information on trail conditions and situations affecting the Sandia Mountains.



A successful and safe winter hike depends on weather and routes but realize that any hike can be affected by unforeseen natural occurrences. Routes and trails are susceptible to deterioration from ice and deep snow. Weather, at any time of the year, can compromise an individual's ability to cope with the psychological challenges of backcountry travel. Always be sure you have adequate food, water, and equipment to deal with the unexpected.

Stay on the trail. Staying on the designated trail helps to prevent avoidable injuries, lost hikers, and erosion. If you get lost, stay put and call the NM State Police at 505-841-9256 or call 911.

If you have doubts as to your ability to hike safely in the La Luz area, do not attempt to do so! All visitors should be aware that efforts to assist them may be delayed and limited due to weather, rescuer safety, and incident urgency.

Deep canyons in the Sandias have little to no cell phone coverage. Before you start, let someone know where you will be hiking and what time you expect to return.

Don't rely only on cell phone apps for navigation. A cell phone battery may not last the day. If you are far from a cell phone tower and/or taking a lot of photos, the battery can drain rapidly. Cold weather can reduce battery capacity. Also, if there is no coverage, a cell phone app may not update the map when needed. Always carry a paper map as a backup.

Do not rely on physical strength alone, hiking smart will take you much farther. Use this information to hike smart.

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Winter Hiking Essentials

1. Water – plain and some with electrolyte replacement.
2. Food – especially salty foods. Eat twice as much as normal.
3. First Aid Kit – band-aids, ace wrap, antiseptic, moleskin, etc.
4. Map – while many trails are well-marked, maps are helpful tools.
5. Backpack – to carry the essentials.
6. Headlamp or Flashlight with Spare Batteries – allows you to hike out at night.
7. Appropriate Footwear - waterproof hiking boots rated to 0 degrees or lower, gaiters to keep snow and mud out of your boots.
8. [Over-the-shoe traction devices](#) - it will only take a short and unexpected stretch of ice to make you glad you have extra traction.
9. Snowshoes and Crampons – for deep snow in upper La Luz and Crest Spur
10. Hiking Poles – to help with footing on icy trails.
11. Whistle and/or Signal Mirror – for emergency use, know how to use your equipment.
12. Personal medications, toilet paper, sunglasses, sunscreen, sunscreen lip balm, knife.
13. Waterproof Matches or a Lighter – Fire Starting Kit
14. Waterproof/Warm Clothing – Base layer and socks (merino wool blend or synthetic), polar fleece or down jacket, exterior waterproof layer, hat, gloves for the snow and rain, plus an extra set of dry clothing – in case you get wet.

Don't Force Fluids - Drink When You Are Thirsty - Rest and Eat Often

Ambient temperature, elevation, and exercise intensity and duration increase the physiological strain, calorie and water demands on our bodies. This makes hiking La Luz in the winter more difficult than traveling the same distance on level ground or in warmer temperatures.

Despite the fact that sweating isn't as obvious in the winter or in dry climates, hydration can be more important in the colder months than the warmer months. Cold, dry air strips the water from our bodies faster than warm humid air, necessitating the consumption of more water during a winter hike.

It may be necessary to keep your tightly sealed water bottle inside your coat to help keep the water from freezing.

Even a mild level of dehydration can make hiking a lot less fun. Over-hydration and lack of salty foods can be equally as dangerous, as this may lead to a life-threatening electrolyte disorder called hyponatremia.

The sensations of thirst and hunger are influenced by many factors and should not be used as the only guide to replenishment. Eat and drink enough throughout your hike to replace the calories and fluid your body is using. Make sure that you balance your food and fluid intake, to avoid the risk of becoming exhausted, debilitated, or severely ill.

The Hazardous "H"

WATCH OUT FOR THIS HEALTH HAZARD!

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HYPOTHERMIA - A life-threatening emergency where the body cannot keep itself warm, due to exhaustion and exposure to cold, wet, windy weather.

Symptoms: uncontrolled shivering, poor muscle control, careless attitude, confusion, exhaustion (even after rest). Look for signs of the "umbles" - stumbling, mumbling, fumbling, grumbling.

Treatment: remove wet clothing and put on dry clothing, drink warm sugary liquids, warm victim by body contact with another person, protect from wind, rain, and cold. If re-warming is unsuccessful - seek help.

Avoid hypothermia by checking the latest weather report, taking layered clothing for protection against cold and wet weather, eating frequently, replacing fluids and electrolytes by drinking before feeling thirsty, and avoiding exposure to wet weather.

Hiking La Luz in The Winter

The La Luz trail is well known, and the trailhead is generally easy to access in the winter. The primary access road is FR 333 which is administered by the U.S. Forest Service. The trail is 7 ¼ miles long with an elevation gain of 3,775 feet. The slope is about 9% average, which is moderate, but there are sections which are double this.

Hikers usually start at the La Luz trailhead and hike up to the Sandia Peak Tramway upper terminal. Most ride the Tram back down, but some do an out-and-back round trip.

Some hikers start at the Sandia Peak Tramway lower terminal and hike Tramway Trail to the intersection of La Luz, and then continue up La Luz. This adds about two miles to the hike for a total distance of 9.6 miles with an elevation gain of 4,000 feet.

KNOW TRAIL CONDITIONS BEFORE YOU START!

Some trails are more difficult than others to navigate in the winter. With heavy snow and ice, La Luz can be the most dangerous trail in the Sandias. Call or stop by the Sandia Ranger Station prior to your hike for a trail update. Pay close attention to the weather forecast. Winter travelers are reminded that precipitation patterns in the mountains are quite variable. Just because it is the winter season doesn't mean it looks or feels like winter on the ground. The following descriptions assume that winter has set in and that a snowpack exists on in the Sandias. This is most likely to be the case January through March. However, snow and ice can persist well into June.

The following narrative is meant as an introduction **ONLY** to winter trail conditions in the western Sandias. Further research, including talking with the Ranger Station, is highly recommended prior to your first winter hike in the area.

Tramway Trail and the lower 2 miles of La Luz are in the high desert and are usually dry in the winter. Although shady sections can remain icy throughout the winter. Over the boot traction devices can be welcome for icy sections.

Many hikers, encountering warm and dry trail, mistakenly think that the entire trail is this way. In fact, the lower section can be warm and dry, while the upper trail sections can have up to five feet of snow with temperatures well below freezing. The last mile of La Luz can be impassable due to deep snow.

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The trail section just after the turn through Chimney Canyon is known for developing a serious stretch of ice. This is due to the trail's shady exposure and significant daytime heating. When this daytime thaw combines with the cold nighttime temperatures of the lower canyon you have a perfect recipe for trail-ice. The Chimney Canyon turn is about 2.5 miles from the lower trail head. This is a good spot to turn around if you don't have over-the-shoe traction devices.

The next section of trail, up to the Five Mile Sign enters the forest and gradually becomes snowier. If you encounter snow here, it is another good place to turn around. Many hikers think that the snow will decrease if they go a little further; however, the amount of snow will increase steadily all the way to the end. It does not get better or easier.



After the Five Mile Sign, hikers enter the rockslide/switchback area. This section of trail lies in upper La Cueva Canyon and is known for deep snow and frigid temperatures. Areas in upper La Cueva Canyon remain in the shade all winter long.

At 6.4 miles, hikers reach the junction with Crest Spur. The final mile of La Luz is the most dangerous section during winter. The trail travels along a steep cliff and the snow can be up to five feet deep. Many hikers reach this area around dark, get lost and stuck, and must call for rescue.

A slip or misstep along the last mile of La Luz can have severe consequences, including death. Some hikers turn up Crest Spur instead; however, this trail also travels along a steep cliff. This takes you up to the highest point in the mountain – which also has the deepest snow. Crest Spur can be just as dangerous as the last mile of La Luz.

One problem encountered by hikers is not reaching the top before dark. La Luz can take 4 to 8 hours to hike in good weather for average hikers. With five feet of snow, progress slows to a crawl. There is less than 9 hours of sunlight on La Luz in the winter. With deep snow, hikers often cannot reach the top before dark and get trapped on the trail. There have been dozens of search and rescue incidents in this area in the past 10 years.

Hikers planning to return via the Tram should call Tram Operations at 505-846-1532 to ensure that the Tram is open. The Tram closes for maintenance periods several times a year. Operators also close the Tram during high winds. If the Tram is closed, hikers must either hike back down, or hike 2 additional miles to the Sandia Crest and have someone pick them up. Be aware that the Crest Highway often closes for a period after major snowstorms. It can be several days before the highway department can bring in snowplows to clear the road. You can potentially be trapped in the wilderness overnight with no way to get down.

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The equipment and gear necessary for a La Luz winter trip are not standard lightweight items. Your destination is at 10,300 feet and winter can be severe at this elevation. Come prepared for severe trail ice and deep snow. Cotton clothing and jeans are not appropriate because they hold moisture against your skin hastening hypothermia. Wear synthetics or a merino wool blend.

Photos of Upper La Luz During Winter (Courtesy of Cibola Search & Rescue)

Photo of a narrow section of trail with a steep drop off.



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Photos of Deep Snow on La Luz

With deep snow, it can be impossible to follow the trail.



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Friends of the Sandia Mountains

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