

# Steins Pillar: drive a little for a big treat

By Craig F. Eisenbeis  
Correspondent

I had heard of Steins Pillar before but had never visited it until a friend suggested that we do just that and hike the four-mile round trip. So, off we went and discovered that Steins Pillar is 57 miles from Sisters in the Ochoco National Forest.

Our first surprise was how lush the area was. It was also relatively cool on a very hot day. We had both traveled the area east of Prineville many times and thought of the area as being much hotter and drier. However, the valley through which Mill Creek flows on its way to the Ochoco Reservoir is very green and scenic. When we reached the trailhead, we were surprised to see abundant Douglas fir trees mixed in with the ponderosa pine. Farther along, we even found tamarack (western larch) trees in a moist area of northern exposure.

Another surprise on this early June visit to the area was the abundance of wildflowers — and the variety, in particular. We counted more than two-dozen different species of wildflowers along this unusual two-mile trail, and that included one of the largest concentrations of Indian paintbrush that I've ever seen. There were numerous butterflies, including a tiger swallowtail that played chicken with us in the middle of the trail.

The trail has a multitude of unpredictable ups and downs. According to one source, I read that the vertical drop going to the pillar was 680 feet. Exactly where that occurred, I'm not exactly sure because the whole trail was up and down. I suppose most of that elevation loss occurs between the final viewpoints and the base of the pillar.

Steins Pillar, itself, is not visible during most of the hike; and it kind of jumps out at you from an excellent viewpoint as you near your destination. If you would like a sneak peak of the pillar before setting out on your hike, there is a good viewpoint about two miles farther up Mill Creek Road beyond the trailhead turnoff.

As we approached the pillar, we noticed some other large rock formations which some have mistaken for the pillar. However, if you are not sure, then I guarantee that what you are looking at is not the pillar. The pillar is unmistakable and quite impressive. From the aspect facing the hillside, it measures approximately 350 feet in height, and is much taller if measured from the outside edge. It is somewhat reminiscent of Monkey Face at Smith Rock State Park.

Steins Pillar is comprised of volcanic welded tuff that was laid down during an eruption of the Wildcat Mountain Caldera 40 million years ago. Welded tuff is a

rock that is sort of sedimentary and sort of igneous. Tuff results from layering of tremendous quantities of volcanic ash. In the case of welded tuff, the pyroclastic ash is still so hot that it bonds, or "welds" itself, to adjacent particles, creating relatively solid rock rather than loose deposits.

Over the millennia, softer deposits around the pillar have eroded away, leaving the monolith we see today. Although portions of the exterior of the pillar may appear solid, because of the nature of this rock, it is not very stable. Consequently, it is subject to crumbling, which makes rock climbing here rather difficult. As a result, the pillar was not successfully climbed until 1950.

The pillar is named for Major Enoch Steen, U.S. Army, who explored eastern Oregon in pursuit of Snake (Northern Paiute) Indians just before the Civil War. Steen camped on Mill Creek, near the pillar, on June 3, 1860. As was often the case, his name was misspelled; and, by the time the error was noted, the misspelling was permanently recorded in history.

Steins Mountain in southeast Oregon is also named for the major, but bears the correct spelling, even though that feature was also frequently misspelled as Stein. Several other prominent landmarks in New Mexico are also named for him, with both spellings still in use.

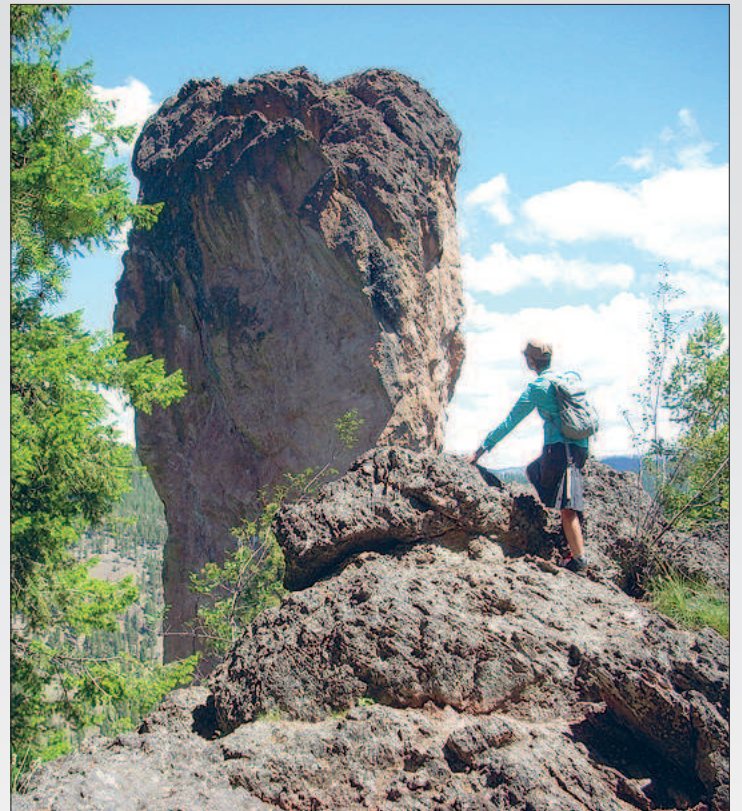


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The tip of Steins Pillar is seen from a viewpoint where the access trail skirts another rock formation.

The hike to Steins Pillar should probably be classed as moderate because of the ups and downs and some steep stretches, particularly those leading to the base of the pillar. The trail, however, is generally in good condition and is well marked — except at its origin. We saw no trailhead marker of any kind, although the well-worn path is easily spotted.

To reach Steins Pillar, head east from Sisters on Highway 126 toward Redmond. Follow the signs to Prineville and continue east on Highway 26. From

the U.S. Forest Service offices at the east edge of Prineville, continue another 7.6 miles. With the Ochoco Reservoir on your right, turn left onto Mill Creek Road (which turns to gravel at about 5.1 miles but is suitable for passenger cars) for 6.7 miles. Turn right onto Forest Road 500 for two miles of winding, uphill gravel road. Road signs clearly mark the route up until this point. A turnaround parking area is on the left but was not marked at the time of our visit; accordingly, there were also no signs requiring parking fees.

**Gordon's Last Touch**  
Cleaning Specialists For... **541-549-3008**  
Carpets • Upholstery  
Windows  
Snow Removal!  
Accepting VISA & MasterCard!  
Member of the Better Business Bureau  
Serving Central Oregon Since 1980  
Bonded & Insured

**The Garden Angel**  
  
Kalin Emrich & Katie Crabb  
**541-549-2882**

**SISTERS COFFEE**  
INTRODUCING OUR LATEST RELEASE  
**><CARDI><**  
**Sidama, Ethiopia**  
Breakfast 6-11 | Lunch 11-2 daily | Buy coffee at SistersCoffee.com  
541-549-0527 • 273 W. Hood Ave.

**SUMMER JOBS** **NOW HIRING**  
AT BLACK BUTTE RANCH  
ASK ABOUT OUR \$50 REFERRAL BONUS PROGRAM\*  
Work at the NEW Lakeside Bistro this summer!  
BEST VIEWS IN CENTRAL OREGON!  
Opening June 2015  
Positions include:  
• Brick Oven Pizza Cooks  
• Bartenders  
• Baristas  
Apply online at [BlackButteRanch.com/jobs](http://BlackButteRanch.com/jobs)  
POSITIONS ALSO AVAILABLE IN OTHER DEPARTMENTS  
Human Resources 541-595-1523 | [BlackButteRanch.com/jobs](http://BlackButteRanch.com/jobs)

**Save Energy, Time and Money with the Dynamic Daikin Ductless Heat Pump System!**  
As low as \$2,395 with monthly payments as low as \$49!  
  
Greater efficiency and energy savings at lower costs • State-of-the-art inverter technology • Stylish solutions  
100% satisfaction guaranteed • Full 12-year parts warranty • The ONLY company that makes this offer!  
Proudly serving Central Oregon since 1953  
For more information call 541-382-1231  
[www.BendHeating.com](http://www.BendHeating.com)  
BEND HEATING & SHEETMETAL, INC.  
As an Energy Trust of Oregon trade ally, we can help you access cash incentives to make it easier to improve your home's energy efficiency.