

Obsidian Trail is a special place

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

Old-growth trees, towering mountains, mountain meadows, acres of wildflowers, mountain streams, and fields of sparkling natural glass: It's no wonder that, for decades, the Obsidian Trail was designated as a "Heavy Use Area," with vague instructions such as "try to avoid."

In more recent years, however, the Forest Service was forced to take further steps to limit user impact and designate it a "Limited Entry Area," requiring possession of an entry permit, the numbers of which are ... uh, limited.

The upshot of all this is that it's no longer possible to be spontaneous in exploring the Obsidian Trail; but, with a little forethought, permits are easily available online at www.recreation.gov. But then, most of us don't undertake a difficult 12-mile hike without some advance planning.

After obtaining my permit,



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Obsidian Falls is a scenic highlight along the Pacific Crest Trail, which can also be accessed from the Obsidian Trail near McKenzie Pass.

a friend and I set out to enjoy this route anew. For both of us, our experience on this trail was similar. Specifically, it had always been part of a trek to somewhere else farther down the trail. This time, though, it was to be all about just enjoying the Obsidian.

The trail starts out in a lush, westside forest of unburned green. Near the trailhead, lodgepole pine and true firs are common, but huge hemlock trees soon predominate; and the always-upward grade of the trail is not too extreme. At about 3.5 miles, the forest cover is interrupted by a lava flow, where expansive and majestic views of the mountains open up. The trail stays in the lava for about three quarters of a mile; and, shortly after returning to more vegetated ground, the trail crosses White Branch Creek, and soon forks in a very nice meadow filled with wildflowers.

This fork is the starting point of a challenging and scenic loop that will return the hiker to this exact same spot about four miles later. I highly recommend taking the right fork in the direction of Linton Meadows and Obsidian falls. The left fork, Glacier Way Cut Off, is very steep and covers, in 0.8 mile, approximately the same elevation gain as the right fork does in 1.7 miles.

As the trail continues, in the shadow of the Obsidian Cliffs, obsidian chips begin to appear in the trail dust until, roughly midway between the trail fork and its junction with the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), the route crosses a flat field paved with thousands — probably millions — of obsidian chips that glisten in the sun.

The volcanic obsidian rocks, from which this trail derives its name, played an important role in the

area's cultural history. For thousands of years, Native Americans sought out this area as a source for high-quality obsidian for use in tools and weapons.

The glass-like black obsidian is formed when silica-laden molten lava flows to the earth's surface without making contact with water. When this same lava encounters water, it produces the more familiar air-filled porous lava rock. When sufficient foaming or frothing occurs in lava, extremely porous and lightweight pumice may be the result.

A bit farther along, the trail passes near one of three unusual memorial plaques located along this hike. The first honors Richard Ward Montague (1862-1935), who was a prominent Portland attorney, conservationist, and past president of the Mazamas Mountaineering Club. The Mazamas' conservation trophy still bears his name. The Mazamas have a long history, since 1894, of exploring and protecting Oregon's wilderness and mountains.

I was fortunate on this hike to be accompanied by Keith Mischke, himself a past president and executive director of the Mazamas, who was able to fill me in on some of the historical background of these wilderness plaques. In fact, Mischke was acquainted with Montague's grandson.

Eventually, the Obsidian Trail links up with the PCT. To complete the return loop of this hike, take the PCT left (north) to Obsidian Falls, which is a nice place for a lunch or rest stop. Two more memorial plaques appear along the PCT portion of this hike, honoring past Mazama presidents Harley H. Prouty (1857-1916) and Jerry E. Bronaugh (1869-1938).

With spectacular views of the North and Middle

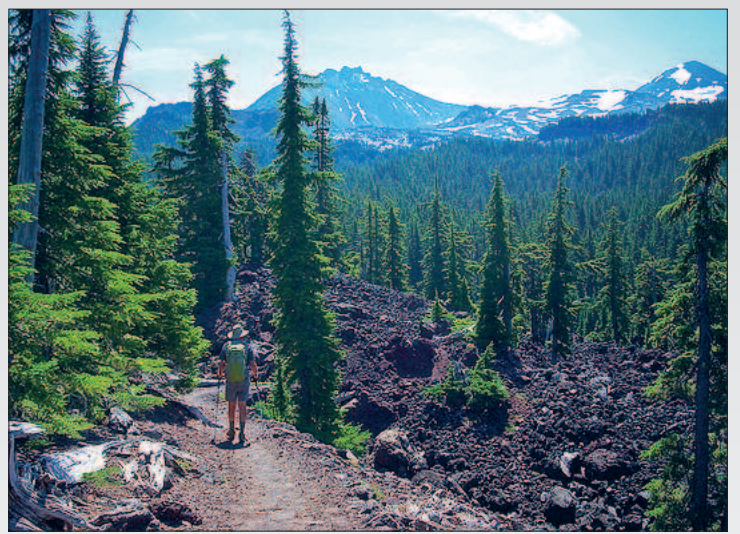


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The North and Middle Sisters are seen here along the Obsidian Trail.

Sisters, as well as smaller, lesser-known peaks, the PCT continues north through vast wildflower meadows and past the diminutive Arrowhead Lakes, a nice spot for a pleasant swim on a hot day. In this area, the hike tops out at an elevation of about 6,500 feet, which makes for a total elevation climb of approximately 1,700 feet from the trailhead. From this area, climbers' trails can be seen heading farther up into the mountains.

Continuing north, the PCT meets up with the upper end of Glacier Way Cut Off, which is your cue to take this steep westbound trail downhill and back to the wildflower-laced meadow where the trail forked. Returning to the trailhead by the same route from this point, the total distance of this hike is a

commendable 12 miles.

To reach the Obsidian Trailhead at Frog Camp, take the historic McKenzie Pass Highway (242) west from Sisters. From the summit of the pass, continue west for another 6 miles and turn left (east) at the Obsidian Trailhead. In addition to the limited-entry permit, a federal parking pass is also required at this location.

Limited-entry permits are supposedly "free," but there is a \$6 "transaction fee." Limited-entry permits can be obtained online at www.recreation.gov or by calling 1-877-444-6777. This entire hike is within the Three Sisters Wilderness boundary. Always be properly equipped for wilderness travel, and carry the 10 essentials and ample emergency supplies.

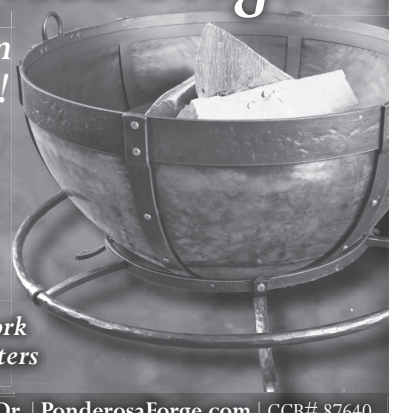
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