

Visiting North America's deepest canyon

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

When we returned from our trip to Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, I realized that not many people seem to know that North America's deepest canyon is right here in Oregon. Several people asked me where I had been last week; and, when I said "Hells Canyon," the most common response was, "Where's that?"

In fact, Hells Canyon, which forms part of the Oregon-Idaho border in the northeast corner of our state, is purportedly more than a thousand feet deeper than the much better-known Grand Canyon. I say "purportedly" because the geographical natures of the two canyons are so different as to make direct comparison rather difficult, but more on that later.

Hells Canyon had been stuck on my to-do list for roughly half a century. It was placed there in the 1960s by Oregon's then-governor, Mark O. Hatfield. I had a slight working acquaintance with Hatfield because of some political and fraternity interactions while I was in

college.

When the governor first brought Hells Canyon to my attention, my dad and I were headed east on our way to our annual Labor Day camping and hiking trip in the Eagle Cap Wilderness of the Wallowa Mountains in north-eastern Oregon. We stopped at a Chevron station in the Columbia Gorge (my dad worked for Chevron, so there was no other option), when a black limousine bearing the Oregon license plate number of "1" pulled in from the other direction.

Since I sort of knew the governor, I walked over to chat. He asked me where we were headed, and I told him. He told me that his favorite spot in that part of the state was Hat Point above Hells Canyon; and, so, the seed was planted.

We didn't make it there on that trip; and, since Hells Canyon isn't exactly on the way to anywhere, it was 50-some years before I did. Even at that, it took something else to get me there. Some good friends recently moved to Walla Walla from the Seattle area and invited us to come visit them in their

new abode on Walla Walla's Mill Creek. Curiously, even though they have a Walla Walla, Washington, address, their house is actually in Oregon!

Since we were sort of in the neighborhood, I thought it was finally time to visit Hat Point. My wife wasn't satisfied with just that, however; so she booked a jet-boat ride through the Snake River rapids of Hells Canyon.

Upon leaving our friends' place, we headed for the Wallawas; and our first stop was at Wallowa Lake, near Joseph, where we took the gondola tramway to the 8,000-foot summit of Mt. Howard. Knowing that we had a long day ahead, we took a short, and very scenic, hike at the top, then returned to the base of the mountain for a drive to Imnaha. From there, Hat Point is at the end of a 24-mile winding, gravel road. If you can manage to average 24 mph, it takes about an hour each way.

Just as the Three Sisters watch over us here in Central Oregon, the Seven Devils preside over Hells Canyon. These mountains rise to more than 9,000 feet on the Idaho side of the canyon; and Oregon's Hat Point — at a mere 7,000 feet — offers a spectacular view of the peaks.

To my disappointment, however, only a distant sliver of the Snake River was visible, with a faint white riffle. Also, like much of Oregon, the forest at Hat Point had been swallowed up by fire.



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

This stretch of the Snake River can be seen in Hells Canyon, more than a vertical mile below Hat Point.

Wildflowers in the area were stupendous; and, all in all, the place didn't seem all that hellish.

Unlike the vertical-walled, flat-topped Grand Canyon, Hells Canyon is a more typical V-shaped canyon, with many mountainous irregularities. As a result, with the river thousands of feet below, it is virtually impossible to view the vast topographical features from a realistic perspective. The next day, however, we were to learn — firsthand — that the faint "riffle" we could see from Hat Point was actually a violent stretch of Class 4 rapids!

After returning to Imnaha, we took a beautiful, paved forest road south to the community of Oxbow. If you attempt this trip, however, be forewarned: do NOT rely on GPS; carry a map and common sense. Both our vehicle and smart-phone GPS systems insisted on sending us off into impassable oblivion. We ignored their impassioned pleas, however, and did just

fine.

Our Oxbow B & B hosts told us that traditional roadside rescue services will not respond to the frequent GPS-created emergencies. Two backwoods brothers, however, have made a very lucrative business out of rescuing GPS victims in the area. It should also be noted that, with the exception of our B & B breakfast, there are no food or fuel outlets in this remote corner of Oregon. So, plan accordingly.

The jet-boat tour that my wife signed us up for was an all-day adventure operated by Hells Canyon Adventures aboard a 36-foot aluminum craft which can carry more than two dozen passengers. I highly recommend a tour from the south end of the canyon rather than the north. The Oxbow (south) end of the canyon has by far the biggest rapids and deepest canyon.

In addition to the adventure itself, we saw quite a bit

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PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The Wallowa Lake Tramway lifts visitors to the summit of 8,255-foot Mt. Howard above Wallowa Lake.

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