

East of the Cascades



Eastern Oregon offers a lot more than desert.

Folks in eastern Oregon claim there are clear distinctions between their land and Mojave Desert perceptions western Oregonians have of the region east of the Cascades.

Compelled to destroy the myth that eastern Oregon is a massive wasteland to be avoided, its inhabitants choose to brag — likely their favorite pastime apart from hunting, fishing and hiking.

They swear western Oregon trees consulted eastern Oregon Douglas Firs on how to properly take root. They claim their lakes are deeper, bluer and populated with the most invincible steelhead trout on the planet.

And when avoided because of its sub-zero winters and scorching summers, residents of eastern Oregon simply say an erratic climate supports the untamed spirit of their 65,000-square-mile homeland.

Eastern Oregonians welcome outsiders to come explore the natural curiosities and nostalgia commonplace of the region, an ecumenical gesture toward removing social barricades erected between urban western and rural eastern Oregon.

Besides, with competition from vacation meccas like California and Canada, they need the tourism revenue.

Despite the rustic country, tourists also must remember not all eastern Oregonians are devout naturalists.

Travel expenses should be of little concern. For those on tight budgets, whether thumbing it or bumming it in a friend's car, a frugal route can be mapped out.

Perhaps most revealing for a first-time visitor is the highly contrasting landscape.

The Wallowa Mountains in the northeast corner of the state are referred to as "The Little

Alps," with glacier-cloaked peaks shooting far above chilly lakes and deep forests.

From a rugged wilderness to the prairies of Umatilla County, one will witness brilliant seas of wheat pouring gently over rolling hills bucking up against the timbers of the appropriately named Blue Mountains.

Moving farther west, the wind-swept Columbia River Gorge rarely fails to offer a scenic drive.

Down around Bend, where the Cascades abruptly meet the desert, the prospects are unending: miles of lava beds from archaic volcanic eruptions, deep canyons slicing through the countryside and a myriad of recreational resources.

One cannot breathe in enough of the scent of juniper and sage while venturing farther south into the mile-high desert. This region is characterized by unordinary alkali lakes and blooming desert foliage spanning more than 100 miles into Antelope rangelands.

Dead center in vast Harney County spectators gather to watch thousands of migrating swans, cranes, pelicans, geese, ducks and countless other species of waterfowl as they make their pit stops on the marshes.

These birds are protected on the 180,000-acre Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, a subdivision of the 35-mile long Malheur Lake that, through flooding in recent years, has permeated Harney and Mud Lakes, engulfing 36 ranches and 100,000 acres of land. It's now the largest lake in Oregon.

A few of the more popular sights include: the Snake River flowing through Hell's Canyon, which is 500 feet deeper than the Grand Canyon; the historical Oregon Trail along stretches of Interstate 80; and the John Day Fossil Beds, where relics of mammals living millions of years ago are

on display.

Also a must to visit are the Deschutes River for a wild ride down the rapids; the Pendleton Round-Up, one of the West's most popular rodeos; Wallowa Lake State Park, for a first-class camping experience complete with a 3,700-foot Gondola ride; and the former Rajneesh settlement near Antelope, just for the hell of it.

Or, to get off of the beaten track, one could simply plan a route according to which towns on the map sound like they'd be fun to visit. Namely: Dufur, Dairy, Echo, Greenhorn, Ruggs and Lime. But first check with the center for population research and census to ensure the next town on the way is still inhabited.

For instance, those who have been there might say McDermitt, far in the southeast corner of the state, is 100 miles from nowhere. Truth is, it is nowhere.

But dusty McDermitt's hallmark is that half the town is located in Oregon, half in Nevada. Thus, if one's luck with the Oregon lottery is proving unprofitable, there's always the quarter slot machines in the greasy spoon on the other side of town.

Such is the character of eastern Oregon.

Story and Photos
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(Clockwise from top left) Vehicles speed across a 1926 bridge built a steep 295 feet over central Oregon's Crooked River Gorge; Southwest of Baker, a water tower is still used to fuel a restored narrow gauge steam-powered train along a six-mile novelty route through Sumpter Valley, known for its wildlife habitat and gold-mining history; Century-old graves of early western pioneers bear impressive headstones and iron-work, such as this one near La Grande; Among pinnacles and spires in the countryside, the skull of a catlike predator believed to be about 25 million years old is one of several animal and plant fossils on display at the John Day Fossil Beds in east-central Oregon; Cattle feed beneath a scenic windmill on a ranch near Burns; Bub Whitely, 63, shoes his 17-year-old quarter horse outside his home in Halfway.

