

Explore Fort Rock valley for unique outdoor option



INTO THE OUTDOORS

BY JAYSON JACOBY

Most outdoor enthusiasts tend to head for the mountains and the forests during the winter months in search of recreational opportunities such as cross-country skiing and snow camping. For Eugene-Springfield area residents, that typically means somewhere in the Cascades, where there is an abundance of groomed ski trails, as well as more adventurous areas to choose from, each offering a different winter experience.

But most people concentrate only on those areas while ignoring some unique recreation and exploration areas east of the Cascades. One of the most interesting is the Fort Rock valley southeast of Bend, which is accessible most of the winter.

This desert, dominated by sagebrush and a few stunted juniper trees, gets only about 10 inches of annual precipitation, most coming either in summer thundershowers or as winter snow. The hills and ridges surrounding the valley usually get about twice as much and serve to block incoming moisture.

But although this technically is a desert, it shouldn't be associated with its distantly related cousins such as the Sahara. There is much more than just sand here.

To get to Fort Rock valley, drive east of Eugene on Highway 58, crossing Willamette

Pass and eventually reaching a junction with Highway 97, which runs north-south the entire length of central Oregon from The Dalles to Klamath Falls.

Turn north on 97 and drive 18 miles through the small communities of Gilchrist and Crescent to a junction with Oregon Highway 31, which is marked by signs for Lakeview and Reno, Nev. Follow this road for 35 miles and look for a sign pointing left to Fort Rock and Christmas Valley.

This paved road then leads north five miles to the tiny hamlet of Fort Rock, where another road runs two miles to Fort Rock.

The feature after which this entire area was named is the central feature of the valley. It truly is one of the most impressive and awe-inspiring natural features in the state.

Fort Rock is a large column of basalt lava 200 feet high with a roughly circular shape. During the Pleistocene era, roughly one million years ago, a shallow inland sea stretched across this valley. Over time, the waves eroded the softer parts of Fort Rock, eventually breaching the eastern side and creating a huge amphitheatre.

The erosive forces left behind sheer sides on the outside of the formation, which plunge vertically to the floor of the valley below. Fort Rock can best be described as a huge natural version of a Roman Coliseum. When seen from the road to the town of Fort Rock, it appears to

be a huge medieval fortress, surrounded by high cliffs.

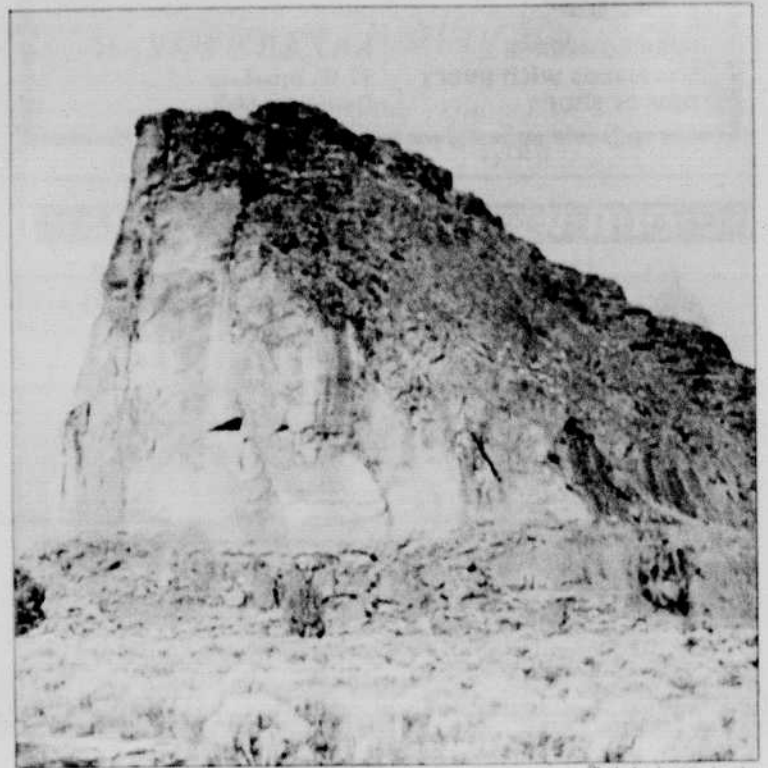
There is a state park at Fort Rock, as well as a small informative display and an old cemetery with stones dating back to the 19th century. There are no official trails inside the rock, but that just leaves the exploring up to the individual. It is possible to climb to the top of Fort Rock from the inside, but because of the steep drop, extreme caution should be used. The alert visitor may see a hawk or eagle, which use the cliffs as nesting areas.

Views from the rock include vast expanses of sagebrush-covered desert to the east and south, and the gently sloping shield of the Newberry volcano rises to the northwest. The vista of Fort Rock from the access road during a sunrise is magnificent.

But Fort Rock isn't the only worthwhile volcanic feature of this area. Six miles south of the monument is Hole-in-the-Ground.

The good gravel road that leads to Fort Rock continues south to the hole, which is about 400 feet deep and 1.5 miles across. The huge pit is considered a maar, which are formed when eruptions of hot lava come into contact with water, causing an explosion and leaving behind a pit. A road leads down into the hole, and there is a Forest Service information sign on the south rim.

In addition to Fort Rock and Hole-in-the-Ground, this area also features a cave, two miles northwest of Fort Rock, in



Fort Rock, a column of basalt lava that stands 200 feet high, is one of the main attractions in the valley southeast of Bend. At a distance, this huge formation looks like a medieval fortress, surrounded by high cliffs.

which Native American sandals dated at 9,000 years old were found in the 1950s.

Although the Fort Rock valley is an enjoyable place to visit in the winter, it can feature inhospitable weather. Despite the lack of precipitation, storms can dump up to a foot or more of snow at times. And temperatures often dip well below zero here, usually accompanied by strong winds. Visitors should come prepared for the weather,

and because this is fairly isolated country, with ranches and especially stores and service stations few and far between, gas tanks should be filled in Gilchrist or Crescent before making this trip.

The nearest tourist accommodations are in Silver Lake, 18 miles southeast on Highway 31, and Christmas Valley, 27 miles east on a paved road.

Jayson Jacoby is a sports reporter for the Emerald.

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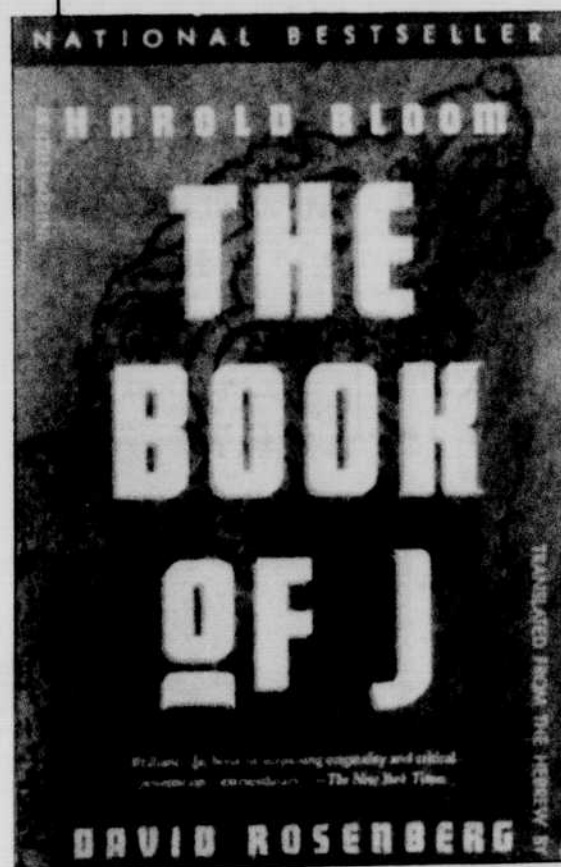
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