

SPORTS

Pass highway has much to offer



INTO THE OUTDOORS

BY JAYSON JACOBY

Few state roads are as demanding on drivers as the McKenzie Pass highway. Thankfully, motorists can choose from a myriad of off-highway pursuits when they get tired, ranging from forest campgrounds to a unique observatory constructed of the area's most abundant natural building material: craggy basalt lava.

To get to the pass, drive east of Eugene on Highway 126 past the hamlet of McKenzie Bridge. Two miles past the McKenzie ranger station turn right at a well-marked junction with Highway 242. The McKenzie Pass summit is 22 miles farther.

The first driving break — Limberlost campground — is less than two miles from the junction (and about 60 miles from Eugene). Limberlost is an ideal retreat on hot summer days — set in the shade of huge old-growth Douglas Fir trees.

Beyond the campground the road begins to climb through serpentine curves, a pattern that continues most of the way to the summit.

About four miles past Limberlost is the turn-off for the White Branch Youth Camp, a popular snow-play area during the winter. The first of two snow gates is also located here, and from about November through June the road is closed beyond this point.

Two miles past the snow gate — with a postcard view of the Three Sisters on the way — is the half-mile trail to Proxy Falls, a pair of 100-foot cascades that pour off lava cliffs. The easy path crosses a lava flow before splitting near the falls. The right fork leads to the lower cataract and the left branch to the upper.

Just a mile past the Proxy Falls trailhead is a second, smaller campground — Alder Springs. There are actually two separate sites; the second and largest is a few hundred yards past the first. If you have more than a few minutes to spend, consider the almost level, one-mile trail to jewel-like Linton Lake that starts from the first camping site. This scenic body of water was formed when a lava flow dammed a creek.

Beyond the upper campground — where the second snow gate is located — the road climbs Deadhorse Grade, the steepest and twistiest section of a road already short on straightaways.

This five-mile stretch — which gains more than 1,200 feet of elevation — was named back in the pioneer days. The story goes that a pack horse dropped dead while making the ascent. By the time you get to the top of the grade you will probably believe this tall-sounding tale.

Blurry-eyed drivers — not to mention dizzy passengers — can unwind after Deadhorse Grade by stopping at a viewpoint of the Three Sisters. These three sibling volcanoes were originally named Faith, Hope and Charity by 19th-century settlers.

Less than two miles past the roadside viewpoint is the turn-off for the largest campground along the highway at Scott



Photo by Jayson Jacoby
Little Bellknop Crater, with an elevation of 6,305 feet, is one of more than 10 peaks visible from the Dee Wright observatory.

Lake. This lake is popular with campers and anglers during the summer and is also a base camp for hiking trips to lakes located inside the Mount Washington wilderness area to the northwest.

A few miles past Scott Lake — after passing through the middle of a beautiful alpine meadow that is dotted with wildflowers in June and July — the highway leaves the forest and enters the summit lava fields.

This barren, 65-square-mile prairie of jagged black basalt is desolate enough to have served as a training ground for moon-bound astronauts. Only a few hardy, wind-blasted whitebark pine trees have been able to scratch out a living on this inhospitable surface.

A mile west of the summit is the turn-off for the Pacific Crest Trail, the most developed hiking/equestrian trail in the western United States. The trail leads off to the north through the lava, eventually crossing the Santiam Pass highway on its way to the Canadian border.

The highlight of the drive is at the 5,325-foot summit. The Dee Wright observatory offers one of the state's best views of the high Cascade snowpeaks.

Built almost entirely of the lava upon which it sits, the observatory is named after a horse packer who also helped build trails in the area. Wright also oversaw the observatory's construction by Civilian Conservation Corps workers but died before it was completed.

A unique feature is the enclosed mountain-viewing room, where holes in the lava walls isolate specific mountains.

On the observatory's open-air top, a brass plaque also identifies the area's landmarks: Mount Hood nearly 80 miles to the north, the Three Sisters, and lava stretches for miles in all directions.

The summit area also features markers explaining the region's unique natural features. In addition, a short, paved trail lined with interpretive signs winds through the lava fields near the observatory. There are also restrooms near the observatory's parking area, sure to be in demand after the drive.

A pleasant loop trip can be made by continuing 20 miles east to Sisters, where Highways 20 and 126 lead over Santiam Pass and back to Eugene.

Jayson Jacoby is a sports reporter for the Emerald.

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