



PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Ryland and Noah Peters look out at sunset on Anthony Lake in the Elkhorn Mountains of Eastern Oregon.

Adventures

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9. Old Cascades Wildflowers

The geologic region known as the Old Cascades are smaller, older and far less visited than more famous High Cascade volcanoes that rise nearby.

But what the Old Cascades lack in sky-scraping grandeur, they make up for with old-growth forest, cliff-walled meadows, smaller crowds and most impressively, wildflowers.

Wildflower season in the Old Cascades lasts from around late June to mid-July and makes for a glorious day-trip from Salem, or part of an overnight camping trip in the Santiam Pass area. Old Cascade hikes often follow semi-overgrown trails and have a tendency to be short and steep. But such is life.

My favorite Old Cascade hikes, from easiest to more difficult, include Echo Basin (2.4 miles), Bachelor Mountain (3.8 miles), Middle Pyramid (4.2 miles) and Crescent Mountain (9 miles).

There aren't a ton of campsites within the Old Cascades, but nearby spots in the Santiam Pass area, near Clear Lake or Marion Forks, get the job done.

8. Oregon Coast Railriders

It's not quite a bike, and it's not quite a railroad car.

The only thing certain about the wheeled contraptions that allow visitors to pedal down defunct railroad track between Bay City and Tillamook is that they are a lot of fun.

Oregon Coast Railriders take visitors on a two-hour tour along the northern Oregon Coast, featuring views of Tillamook Bay, coastal forest, estuaries, dairies and a series of cool bridges that cross the Kilchis and Wilson rivers.

The vehicles seat four people and cost \$20 per person (12 years and older) or \$10 (11 years and younger when accompanied by an adult). The railriders all depart together in a pod, starting at 9 a.m., noon and 3 p.m. each day Thursdays through Sundays. Reservations are recommended by calling 541-519-3891 or emailing info@ocrailriders.com.

7. Steens Mountain

Of all the mountains in Eastern Oregon, this gigantic fault block in the state's southeastern corner probably offers the most options to families.

Oregon's eighth-tallest mountain is accessible via a 52-mile road that loops past campsites, above canyons and almost all the way to the 9,733-foot summit. The road makes it possible to enjoy some of Oregon's most dramatic scenery without a major expedition, yet also provides access to beautiful and wild canyons that offer fantastic hiking.

Check online for my breakdown of the best hikes here and a guide to all the best campsites and stopping points.

There are multiple options for a base camp. The nearby town of Burns features modern amenities, the hamlet of Frenchglen has a hotel formally used as a stagecoach stop and there are plenty of campsites. A favorite time to visit Steens is autumn, when the mountain's



Wildhorse Lake is seen near the summit of Steens Mountain.

famous aspen trees turn brilliant shades of gold, red and orange.

6. Tumble and Opal Lakes

These two lakes north of Detroit are pretty, quiet and only about a 90-minute drive from Salem.

If you're looking for a place to spend a hot summertime day picnicking and swimming — or even taking your kids on their first backpacking trip — both are worthy of consideration.

Reaching both lakes does require navigating rough Forest Service Roads, and then hiking a steep and horribly maintained trail. But then again, that's why the two lakes are less crowded.

Tumble Lake is the more spectacular of the duo, but also requires a longer hike — a 3.5-mile round-trip trek that drops 1,100 feet. This hike is classified moderately difficult. There are only a few campsites, so plan on getting there early (or on Friday) if you want to stay over the weekend. Make sure to hike to the lake's outlet to view the top of a huge waterfall and consider the side trip hike up to the stunning viewpoint of Dome Rock.

Opal Lake is a shorter hike, just 1 mile round-trip with 350 feet of drop/climb but requires a longer and rougher drive. The trail, last time I was there, was in truly awful shape.

A few campsites stand out in old-growth forest. The lake is pretty and clear and great for swimming. The same recommendation applies for camping here on weekends.

5. Scott And Benson Lakes

Put down a tent at Scott Lake Campground, and prepare for some of the best views in Western Oregon.

Scott Lake itself is spectacular — especially if you're camping in the walk-in sites on the lake's northern shoreline — and bringing a canoe or kayak is encouraged. However, to find the best views, hike less than a mile to clear and beautiful Benson Lake and follow a "user trail" up

to the lake's overhead cliffs. Here you'll find the Three Sisters rising in dramatic splendor at one of Western Oregon's best viewpoints.

Once you've had enough, continue on the trail and follow signs up Scott Mountain, a moderately difficult hike of 8.8 miles round-trip. The summit offers views of every Cascade peak from Hood to the Sisters.

McKenzie Pass has plenty of other highlights as well, and a short drive will take you down to Proxy Falls Trailhead and up to Dee Wright Observatory.

4. Rogue River

I've written more than once about the famous 36-mile "wild" section of the Rogue River, a wilderness stream that requires a permit, camping and the ability to navigate Class IV and V rapids. Most people, unless seasoned river runners, go with a guided outfit that can cost a family of four upwards of \$4,000.

A great option for families that still want to experience the glories of the Rogue — but don't have the funds or ability to run the wild section — is to consider the "recreation" stretch of the river northwest of Grants Pass.

Filled with smaller rapids but scenery that's almost as dramatic, the recreation section of the Rogue River is centered around the town of Merlin and Glacie. The area features two wonderful campgrounds — Indian Mary and Alameda — along with nice lodging at Morrison's and Doubletree. Stop by Galice Store, and they'll set you up with rafts or inflatable kayaks, along with the information you need to spend a day splashing through mostly Class I and II rapids on days that often reach 100 degrees.

3. Elkhorn Mountains

The Elkhorn Mountains might be the best-kept secret in Oregon.

The range of craggy peaks in Eastern Oregon, outside La Grande and Baker City, feature

one of the best backpacking and mountain biking destinations in the Pacific Northwest, along with an excellent family-friendly base camp.

The backpacking and mountain biking route is the Elkhorn Crest Trail, one of the highest and most unique trails in Oregon.

The 23-mile national recreation trail tightropes across the granite spine of the Elkhorn Range, where mountain goats roam sheer peaks and alpine lakes dapple multicolored valleys. Since the trail stretches from pass to pass, there is limited elevation gain, making for an easier backpacking experience than you'd expect given the sweeping, high-elevation views.

The Elkhorn Crest also is among the very few alpine trails in Oregon open to at least in part to mountain bikers. To learn more about mountain biking tours and backpacking shuttles on the trail, see this story online.

The family-friendly destination is Anthony Lake, an alpine pool home to a campground, good fishing, easy trails and a historic cabin you can rent. Anthony Lake makes a great base camp for adventure in this recreation-rich area.

2. Cascade Climbing (without ropes)

The Cascade Range defines Oregon in so many ways, we almost take it for granted. Whether exploded or intact, shaped like a lightning rod or an ice cream cone, this string of volcanoes are the most iconic landmarks in a state defined by dramatic geography.

Given that prominence, it makes sense the adventurous among us want to scale these white beacons in the sky for a view that often takes in half the state.

But many of the peaks require technical ability, using ropes or snow mountaineering, for example.

But not all of them. There are a handful of spectacular Cas-

cade peaks that can be reached by simply following a trail — as long as you're in good shape. Most of these mountains are best climbed in late August, September and early October.

My favorites include, from easiest to most difficult, Mount Scott (Crater Lake National Park), Mount McLoughlin (Southern Oregon), South Sister (Central Oregon) and Mount St. Helens (Washington, permit required). See the online version of this story for more details.

1. Wallowa Mountains

What makes the Wallowa Mountains the best adventure in Oregon, especially for families, is that it has something for everybody.

For families, there is fantastic "soft adventures." Centered around Wallowa Lake State Park and the town of Joseph, families can enjoy fishing, boating, putt-putt golf, railriding, ice cream and a tram that brings you to the top of 8,255-foot Mount Howard. The food is likewise excellent, with downtown Joseph stocked with local cafes and art galleries.

Two favorites are Red Horse Café for breakfast and Terminal Gravity Brew Pub for drinks and dinner.

Of course, what really makes the Wallows great is the backcountry. The Eagle Cap Wilderness is the largest roadless area in the state, home to dozens of peaks above 8,000 feet.

My favorite multi-day trip includes backpacking to Ice Lake and then climbing the 9,826-foot Matterhorn, the second-tallest peak in the range. The entire trip is exhausting, at 20.4 miles round-trip and 5,517 feet of climb, but it's worth every step.

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