

Life in the Valley

Savor those last trips of summer

Head out to these 5 places you must visit in E. Oregon

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With summer coming to an end, there’s only so much time to squeeze in that last road trip of the season. So why not make it a good one? Load up the car, hop across the Cascade Range and explore the vast canyonlands and mountains of Oregon’s east side. Here are five of my favorite places in Eastern Oregon.

Steens Mountain

Although many people mistake this for an entire range of mountains, Steens is one massive fault block of a peak rising above the vast Alvord Desert. Fifty miles from end-to-end, Steens is an alpine island carved by deep gorges and rivers. The good news is that access is easy via the Steens Mountain Loop road and camping and hiking are abundant. It’s particularly appealing during autumn, as the mountain’s groves of aspen trees turn bright fall colors. Two of the best campground base-camps on Steens Mountain are Fish Lake and South Steens. Each brings its own charm. Fish Lake is a blue pool stocked with trout, sitting among aspen and willow trees particularly gorgeous during autumn. Home to 23 campsites (\$8 per night), people swim and canoe at Fish Lake and hike nearby trails. South Steens is on the far side of the loop, 30 miles from Frenchglen. It’s nice enough with 36 campsites for \$6 per night but is best-known for providing trailhead access into spectacular Big Indian and Little Blitzen gorges. On any trip, make sure to visit Wildhorse Lake.

Ritter Hot Springs

Visit this ghost town tucked away in the mountains north of John Day for hot springs water with “magic” qualities. The resort includes a rustic hotel that runs \$30 to \$36 per night, while camping on the lawn is \$5 to \$20. Two nicely equipped cabins are \$81 and \$120 (but call in advance for details). The resort is only open until Labor Day, so plan your trip soon. In terms of hot springs, there’s a main swimming pool filled with pure, silky-smooth hot springs water that feels silky due to the high alkalinity that can be good for your skin. “People have come here with rashes, and by the end of the day, they’re sometimes gone,” said Mike Tillay, the resort owner, when I visited last year. “Our water is a very strong anti-oxidant.” There are also concrete soaking tubs on the far side of the river. All of the facilities are rough, so, again, don’t come expecting a high-end resort. This is the opposite. You can make reservations — recommended for weekends — but a favorite detail is that you pay on an “honor system” by sticking money in a box. Ritter Hot Springs is particularly



Big Indian Gorge is a great place to check out the best of Steens Mountain. PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

close to the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, home to some of the best family hikes in Oregon.

Hager Mountain and Summer Lake Hot Springs

One of the most beautiful hikes in southeastern Oregon takes you up Hager Mountain to a fire lookout that’s staffed in summer and open for rental in winter. In late autumn, you can hike up this volcanic cone to a 7,185-foot summit with views all the way from Mount Hood to Mount Shasta on clear days (though smoke can be an issue). The hike ranges from just 2 miles round-trip to 8 miles round-trip, depending on where you start. For the best details, see William Sullivan’s book “100 Hikes in Eastern Oregon.” The lookout at the summit can be rented from November 15 through May 15, but requires snow travel and is a very difficult trip. Once you’re done on Hager, visit the other charms of this area. Stay the night at lovely Summer Lake Hot Springs before making sure to stop at Crack-In-The-Ground hike or Fort Rock State Park.

Wallowa Mountains

It’s difficult to know where to begin when you’re talking about the grandest mountain range in Eastern Oregon. The so-called Oregon Alps feature the state’s largest wilderness area, a fun state park at a beautiful lake, and wonderful tourist opportunities in nearby towns Joseph and Enterprise. There is no shortage of campsites in the Wallowa Mountains, located northeast of La Grande. The most popular is Wallowa Lake State Park, home to 121 full-hookup sites and 88 tent sites with



The climb up the Matterhorn, the second-tallest peak in the Wallowa Mountains at 9,826 feet, takes climbers into the alpine county of the Eagle Cap Wilderness.

bathrooms and showers. Smaller Forest Service campsites dot the surrounding areas, with some of the nicest in the Lostine River Canyon, south of the town of Lostine. Once you’re established, my picks would be: Most difficult and rewarding: Backpacking to Ice Lake and climb the Matterhorn. Moderate challenge but awesome: Backpack or day hike Hurricane Creek Trail Easy and fun with kids: Iwetemlaykin State Heritage Site, just south of Joseph. The 1.2- to 2.4-mile trek features stunning views of the mountains and a good feel for the area’s history. Easy ride to the top: Ride on the Wallowa Lake Tramway to the top of Mount Howard’s 8,150 foot summit in just 15 minutes. Ride the trails: Pedal specially-designed contraptions on the railroads below the snow-capped mountains with the Joseph Branch Rail Riders.

Elkhorn Mountains

The most overlooked range of mountains in Oregon is the Elkhorn Range. Start off with a base camp at stunning Anthony Lake or tour the area’s numerous campgrounds, lakes and reservoirs on the 106-mile Elkhorn Scenic Byway. My pick for this area is a backpacking trip across the 26-mile Elkhorn Crest Trail, one of the state’s best backpacking experiences. Traverse high ridgelines, drop into mountain lakes and get up close and personal with mountain goats on this tour. Make sure to call Range Range Tour and Shuttle Co. to set up our trip. Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for 10 years. He is the author of the book “Best Hikes with Kids: Oregon” and “Hiking Southern Oregon.” He can be reached at zurness@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at @ZachsORoutdoors.

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