

fleeting urge to shoot into the I-90 turn lane.

Before I'd fully grasped the folly of this move, I'd ascended 3,000-foot Snoqualmie Pass, my windshield wipers obliterating wet gobs of heavy snow. There wasn't much chance I'd make it to Portland that night, so I scanned my cell phone's browser for the cheapest motel in Yakima. I also posted my whereabouts on Twitter (yeah, I'm one of those people).

The first sizable town I reached, upon descending from the snow and clouds, was Ellensburg, which I pegged as a good stop for dinner.

Downtown Ellensburg just about shouts "Wild West," its vintage redbrick storefronts rife with old-school steak houses, boot-repair shops and pioneer-era antiques stores. A huge sign advertises the town's most famous event, the Ellensburg Rodeo (held in early September, it's Washington's largest). It's also the heart of Washington's hay-farming industry and home to Central Washington University, well-regarded for its Summer Institute for Theatre Arts.

Just as I opened the door to a promising-looking restaurant called the Starlight Lounge (I've since learned they make potent martinis), I received a text message from a friend in Seattle who'd seen my Twitter post. She suggested I drive another hour east and spend the night at a swanky inn, Cave B, on the Columbia River. As a point of disclosure, she handles the inn's PR. Well, who am I to pass up an enticing excuse to drive even farther out of my way?

It was dark and pushing 9 p.m. when I arrived at Cave B Inn and Tendrils restaurant, which together anchor a 700-acre mini-resort and vineyard. I grabbed a seat in the amber-lit restaurant, soaking up the pleasing bustle of the exhibition kitchen, and tucked into a meal of farm-fresh, deftly executed cooking: golden beets with organic greens, handmade ravioli filled with duck confit, and a selection of local cheeses served with fresh fruit and mountain wildflower honeycomb. Cave B Winery produces first-rate Spanish, French and Italian varietals, and I sampled several of these with dinner, coming away the most impressed with a Bordeaux-style blend called Cuvee de Soleil.

I eventually ambled (stumbled?) down a graded path to my room, actually one of 15



Cave B Inn offers a Columbia Gorge-ous view from its mini-resort in Quincy, WA.



North Town Coffeehouse, in Yakima's historic district

self-contained "Cliffehouses" perched along a bluff. At sunrise I discovered that each unit faces a particularly dramatic section of the Columbia Gorge. The Cliffehouses offer the cushiest digs, but Cave B also has 15 more moderately priced rooms, plus a full-service spa and a tasting room at the winery. It's an impressive operation with an enviable setting beside the stunning Gorge Amphitheatre, which presents major concerts (Sasquatch Festival, Dave Matthews) in summer.

Upon checking out, I had one of my typically spirited discussions with Mandy, the woman who lives inside my GPS. She insisted I hop back on I-5 toward Yakima. I reasoned that I'd already strayed so off track, I might as well detour still farther out of the way toward

the kitsch-Bavarian town of Leavenworth. Poor Mandy—she never wins these standoffs.

I meandered along Hwy. 28, following the Columbia River through Wenatchee, a prominent apple-farming center, and arrived in Leavenworth around 3 p.m. The town adopted its gleeful, if slightly surreal, embrace of all things Bavarian as an economic redevelopment plan in the early '60s, following the decline of its railroad and timber industries. I found the insistent chalet-style architecture and panoply of shops selling everything from charbroiled bratwurst to toy-soldier nutcrackers both cloying and fabulous.

As the sun began to flame out over my German campfest, I realized that, yet again, I'd probably not make it home to Portland that

evening. But I at least consented to aiming my car in the correct direction, and by 9 p.m. I'd arrived at exactly the hostelry I'd originally reserved for the night before: the Motel 6 Yakima. It turned out to be everything I'd hoped it would be (i.e., cheap and easy). I tested out a relatively new restaurant called Second Street Grill for dinner. The food was fine, if unmemorable—a mix of traditional American and Pan-Asian pub fare. But the wine list featured dozens of excellent local varietals, which inspired me to plan a short vineyard jaunt the following day in the adjacent Yakima Valley.

The next morning, I ventured downtown in search of caffeine, passing by the lewdly endearing Brewlesque drive-thru espresso stand (the staff dress in corsets and fishnet garters) and settled on what turned out to be an exceptionally good cafe called North Town Coffeehouse. I liked that it overlooked both a wine bar and the county jail (good people-watching!), but moreover, it served Stumptown beans as well as tasty gelato.

My afternoon wine-touring detour took me into Wapato and Zillah, where I passed not only countless vineyards but also lavender fields and cherry orchards in full spring blossom. Sagelands Vineyard caught my attention, and there I sampled several elegant Cabernet Sauvignons and a fine Malbec (which I bought a bottle of—just \$18).

Finally, I succumbed reluctantly to the need to get home and turned down U.S. 97 toward Portland, stopping briefly in Toppenish, whose downtown is notable for both excellent Mexican restaurants (the population is 75 percent Hispanic) and more than 70 huge murals painted on the town's building facades, depicting the region's history.

By just after sundown, having enjoyed a stunning drive along Hwy. 14 through the Columbia Gorge, I arrived safely back at my condo in Riverplace, happy to have discovered an engaging, if geographically idiotic, alternate route to and from Seattle. I posited that next time I sought a reprieve from the I-5 doldrums, I'd again loop around Mt. Rainier, by way of Yakima. Or maybe Walla Walla. There's always Spokane. And where was I just reading about the ice wines in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley...? 

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