



JAMES JOHNSTON

Walk on Mars

Three Sisters lava fields open for business.

The opening of the Old McKenzie Pass Highway is an annual rite of spring for everyone who loves the high country of the Three Sisters Wilderness. This 40-mile long ribbon of asphalt snakes its way up the rugged canyon walls of the White Branch River before a long flat run over a barren moonscape at the crest of the Cascades.

The route was completed by private entrepreneurs in 1872 as a toll road, charging \$1 for a person and a horse, and \$2 for a wagon. The road was opened to automobile traffic (for free) in the 1920s.

But snowplows can't negotiate the steep grades and narrow turns in the winter, and over-the-Cascades travel from the Willamette Valley to Sisters was closed for half the year until Highway 126 was completed in the '60s.

There are dozens of trailheads that lead south into the Three Sisters Wilderness from the Old McKenzie Pass Highway. The trail to Four-in-One Cone and Yapoah Crater showcases some of the most interesting cinder cones, craters and lava flows. It's a landscape that has more in common with the surface of Mars than the lush rainforests and rolling hills of the lowlands.

To get there, take Highway 126 east from Springfield. Approximately 4.5 miles past the town of McKenzie Bridge, take a right onto the Old McKenzie Pass Highway (Hwy 242). Drive 242 past milepost 71 and pull off to the left at a sign for Scott Lake. The trail begins at a hiker symbol sign on the

other side of the highway.

In a quarter of a mile, continue straight at a trail junction. For the next two and a half miles, the trail switchbacks through a boring sub alpine forest (snow and fallen trees will cover portions of the trail until late June), before you get to the pay-off: A flat plateau, leveled by lava flows.

From here, the trail winds between jagged walls of basalt (broken by hand by early pioneers crossing the Cascades on their way to the farmlands of the Valley) for 300 yards and then dips south, skirting the immense lava flow for another mile before reaching the base of Four-in-One Cone.

As the name implies, Four-in-One Cone is actually four distinct craters that belched lava from 2,500 to 3,000 years ago — a blink of the eye in geologic time. You can scramble north across the lip of these craters for breathtaking views of the Three Sisters to the southeast.

For even more spectacular views, continue east for three-quarters of a mile to a junction with the Pacific Crest Trail, in the middle of a lush meadow choked with wildflowers in July and August.

From here you can turn north and climb to the top of Yapoah Crater, or turn south to Collier Cone and a fifteen-mile loop back to your vehicle that takes in Sunshine and the Obsidian Cliffs.

There are dozens of adventures to be had when the Old McKenzie Highway is open for the summer. **EW**



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