

Coast Weekend Road Trip: Nehalem and Wheeler

BY M.J. CODY

Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain fascinated me as a child. That weighty peak, often shrouded in clouds, seemed mystical and important, highlighted by the legend of buried treasure. Every time I'd venture to this less-traveled part of the North Coast, I'd stare long and hard at that mountain, trying to envision likely spots for pirates to bury a treasure chest, yet wonder, "How the heck did they get up there?"

The logistics didn't fit my young brain and I was sure that when I grew up I'd go looking for that treasure. I never did. But Nehalem Bay and the mountain still hold their allure. Perhaps you will find some of that appeal on this road trip.

A few miles south on Oregon Coast Highway 101 from the Manzanita junction, you'll find yourself in the little charmer, Nehalem. You can't miss it, since a stop sign halts you smack dab in the middle of town. And if lucky, you might be surprised to find a sudden respite with patches of sun, even though the beaches you've left behind are enveloped in mist or fog. Aptly, the indigenous Tillamook people, who inhabited this enchanted landscape for thousands of years, called their area surrounding Nehalem Bay, "Hole in the Sky."

Perched on the banks of the Nehalem River, the town saw its first white emigrants in the late 1800s, and like its neighbor, Wheeler, it swiftly became a hub for exploitation of the area's rich natural resources with logging, farming and fishing.

Stopping here for a bite and a bit of shopping could include Wanda's Café and Bakery, one of the best eateries on the coast. Wanda's offers take-out only now, but you can enjoy your meal at a few tables in the front, or stroll down to the public dock where you will find riverside benches. On Seventh Street (that's the highway through town), you'll find shops and The Pizza Garden (pastas too) ready for take-out and indoor limited seating, with outdoor deck tables overlooking the river. Also, on the river, BayWay Tavern, famous for its broasted chicken and jojos, has take-out and limited indoor seating. Then, there's the Nehalem Riverside Trading Company with its food cart, Riverside Fish & Chips, both of which are located, um, riverside.

Back on the road for a scant three miles to Wheeler, you'll cross, and then follow, the Nehalem River into the expansive terrain of its wetlands, low islands and estuaries feeding into the bay. This is terrific birding territory. Keep an eye out for hawks and American kestrels perched on power lines, herons wading in the marshy reeds and osprey and



Photos by Alyssa Evans

Downtown Nehalem.



Downtown Nehalem features unique paintings for photo taking.



Teenagers sit at one of the docks in Nehalem.



Nehalem Landing County Boat Launch.



The Nehalem Bay Winery.

If You Go

If you only have a morning: Rent a kayak or boat at the Wheeler Marina to fish, crab or enjoy a water adventure. Grab a donut, croissant, or breakfast sandwich at The Roost, Handy Creek Bakery & Café, or Wanda's and stroll the waterfronts to watch for birds and waterfowl, or someone landing a salmon.

If you only have an afternoon: Grab some sandwiches and picnic at Oswald West State Park or Nehalem Bay State Park. Take a hike on Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain or go horseback riding on Nehalem Bay spit (Nehalem Bay Horse Excursions 971-237-6653 for reservations). And there's always antique hunting. Wheeler Station and Wheeler Treasures have great finds.

If you only have an evening: Dine with pleasure at Rising Star Café in Wheeler, or head to Nehalem for good food and (socially distanced company) at BayWay Tavern and Pizza Garden, both of which have limited indoor seating.



The Nehalem River, seen on the way to Wheeler.



Along the drive down to Nehalem and Wheeler, you can see wildlife from many viewpoints.



Both Nehalem and Wheeler feature unique art.

eagles soaring above. With no stoplights to slow your pace on the highway, you could breeze through Wheeler before you know it. A marina on your right and cluster of shops on your left should catch your eye, so watch for the parking lot in front of the adorable railroad station hut.

Overnight lodging is available at the historic Old Wheeler Hotel located above the row of shops, or down the highway a pace at the family-friendly Wheeler on the Bay Lodge. Coronavirus precautions for guests are taken seriously at both establishments, the former distancing adjoining rooms and at the latter, a motor inn style lodging with pri-

vate parking and separate room entries. Both offer hand-sanitizers and masks, but alas, neither is providing breakfast fare at this time. As a guest, you'll be free to use Wheeler on the Bay's private dock to tie up your own boat, watch for birds and wildlife, use the picnic tables, or use the kayaks. A special atmosphere envelops guests amid the meticulously chosen antiques and vintage décor at the Old Wheeler Hotel. Front-facing rooms provide a grand view of Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain and overlook the water and endless sky that change in color and tone from morn

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