

Who can resist the smell of campfires, munching on s'mores, and stargazing under a clear night sky? Eastern Oregon draws thousands of campers each year, some with tents, some in RVs and trailers. The variety of camping options here is vast; we'll suggest a few, but you'll have to do some exploring to find your favorite.

Emigrant Springs State Historic Area

Modern travelers will have an easier time reaching Emigrant Springs than the early pioneers who named it. Located between La Grande and Pendleton, just off I-84, the camping and recreation area is sheltered from traffic noise by tall stands of Douglas firs and lodgepole pines.

The site has a long history as a campground. It was used as a rest stop for Oregon Trail wagon trains before they made the steep descent out of the Blue Mountains. Wheel ruts can still be found near the park and just up the road at Blue Mountain Crossing. During the summer, rangers present regular interpretive talks in the amphitheater. Heritage Days, with

fiddle music and historic re-enactors, will be celebrated July 15-16 this year.

Open year-round for day use, Emigrant Springs offers camping facilities from May 1 to Oct. 21. This includes 32 tent sites and 18 full hookups for RVs. If log cabins are more your style, there are seven rentals available year-round. Flush toilets and steamy showers are an easy walk from most sites. For more information, visit oregonstateparks.org.

Wallowa Lake State Park

Where the rushing snowmelt flows into the south end of glacially carved Wallowa Lake, you'll find one of the most scenic campgrounds on this side of the state (and one of the largest). Wallowa Lake State Park offers 121 hookup sites and 89 tent sites near the water ... and near the hot showers. There are even a couple of yurts available.

The lake, almost 300 feet at its deepest, is an ideal fishing spot for kokanee and rainbow trout, with a marina next to the campground. There's also a beach for sunning or swimming, assuming you like brisk water.

Campers have a packed list of leisure activities to choose from. Try a Hungarian dinner at Vali's Alpine

Restaurant or spend time with the kids racing go-karts and playing mini-golf. Hiking trails lead to alpine waterfalls and local horse packers offer day trips and overnight excursions into the Eagle Cap Wilderness. An aerial tram ride to the top of Mt. Howard (8,256 ft.) affords spectacular views that confirm the area's nickname: "Little Switzerland."

The state park, six miles from Joseph, has year-round camping and day use. Though large, the park is also very popular, especially in summer. Reservations are recommended; call 800-452-5687.

Fall Mountain Lookout Cabin

So you really want to get away from it all? Here's just the place for solo campers or couples. About 20 miles south of John Day is the only rentable fire lookout tower in Eastern Oregon. The Malheur National Forest operates this decommissioned lookout, a mile high in elevation and another 18 feet off the ground. This 14x14 foot cabin-in-the-sky has 360-degree views of Strawberry Mountain Wilderness (just ignore that cell tower) and is far enough from city lights to see the Milky Way at night. Inside you'll find most comforts of home, including a futon, electric heat, power outlets, a stove, refrigerator, table, chairs and lots of cabinets. A vault toilet is located below.

The catch? Two people maximum and you must bring your own water and bedding. The season is short; snow limits access to May 6 through Oct 31. Reservations can be made up to six months in advance – but they go fast, so plan ahead. Search www.recreation.gov for Fall Mountain Lookout Cabin to get more details.

— Greg Alexander



Contributed photo by RJ Sanchez

Wallowa Lake State Park was one of the first state parks to introduce camping for visitors in 1951.

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