

A 'One-Tank' Trip From La Grande to ...

PALOUSE FALLS



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A stitched composite panoramic photo of Palouse Falls, Washington, taken on Sunday, May 30, 2021. For a few weeks in spring, the falls will sport green foliage that quickly turns golden brown in the summer.

With one tank of gas, there's a lot you can reach from the hub city of La Grande.

Admittedly, our region is absolutely chock-full of photographic vistas that lay out before you when driving down narrow gravel roads, and each obscured corner seems to promise some new sight to behold.

Over the weekend, and with only one tank of gas, I drove out with my girlfriend to the site of my first adventure in photography — Palouse Falls — nearly three years after I had last visited. This time, however, I was driving to the falls in the daytime rather than at night.

Starting in La Grande, two routes were recommended by Google maps — complete with the shrieking voice of an android whenever I'd want to turn off the road to look for photos.

The phone dutifully allowed me to choose the slower path up north — through Tollgate and the Blue Mountains as opposed to the faster and familiar I-84 through Deadman's Pass and Pendleton.

The last time I drove through Tollgate I found homes completely submerged in snow. That was February. Now it is May and the snow is middling but determined in the deepest of shadows. I stopped by a small clearing that gave way to a sprawling mountain view — one I had photographed a few months ago by climbing atop 10 feet of sheer snow pushed aside by the blowers. As a perfectionist, I thought that the photo would look better another time — today it was not meant to be. I snapped a few short photos and continued on.

Along the way, Google Maps had recommended to me an almost secret road — the quickest way, in this case, was through paradise and Harvey



ONE-TANK TRIPS

ALEX WITTWER

'One-Tank' Trips

This is the first in an occasional series of travel stories about destinations that can be reached from La Grande with a single tank of gas. Today's feature is Palouse Falls in southeast Washington.

Shaw Road and Lyons Ferry Road.

I cannot stress this enough — once you leave Walla Walla along Highway 125, you must take this road, or risk losing out on one of the best drives in the region.

The winding road led through some of the most dramatic curves of wheat fields I had seen. It was like driving through the iconic background of Windows XP, but instead of a short small hill in Napa Valley, it was here just mere miles north of where I live. It also stretched for an eternity, it seemed.

Daylight was quickly waning and I needed to get back on the road if I was to make it to Palouse Falls before sunset. The rest of the drive wasn't as memorable — a small sign advertising Clyde's Shooting Preserve gave a chuckle, and an abandoned half of a pickup on the side of the road led to personal anecdotes about how it got there — until we hit just a few short miles before the falls themselves. There, the grassy vistas gave way to a cornucopia of sagebrush, while field mice darted across the road.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Immature wheat grows along Lyons Ferry Road north of Walla Walla on Sunday, May 30, 2021.

The Route

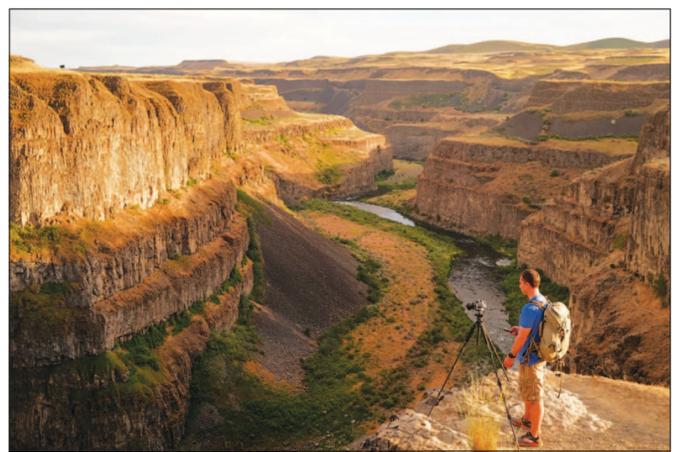
- From La Grande, Highway 82 to Elgin, Highway 204 (Tollgate) to Highway 11, on Highway 11 (Highway 125 in Washington) through Milton-Freewater to Walla Walla.
- From Walla Walla, north on Highway 125, then turn left on Harvey Shaw Road and follow it north to Highway 124. Continue north on Lyons Ferry Road to Highway 261.
- Follow Highway 261 across the Snake River through Lyons Ferry State Park, then turn right onto Palouse Falls Road.

A grain silo stood against the backdrop of overcast skies — slightly ominous given that I wanted to capture a sunset of the falls, not the falls clouded in pall light from the clouds. We stopped along the field and made our way across cracked brush for a quick photo before moving on.

Over a bridge, under another, and we arrived at Palouse Falls. Admittedly, I didn't purchase a Discover Pass prior to this trip — a requirement if you want to visit the falls.

The overcast day was quickly clearing up as the sun began to set, and the falls were surrounded by brilliant ochre-colored rock and a hint of green from the brush — the green, as I was told by one of the dozens of photographers there, wouldn't last long.

I had forgotten to bring my tripod,



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Landscape photographer Danny Seidman waits for the sun to set at Palouse Falls on Sunday, May 30, 2021.

and I was a bit hesitant about joining the scores of photographers lined up inches from the ledge and certain death with their expensive cameras — I have a rather stiff fear of heights, and that fear certainly wasn't unwarranted.

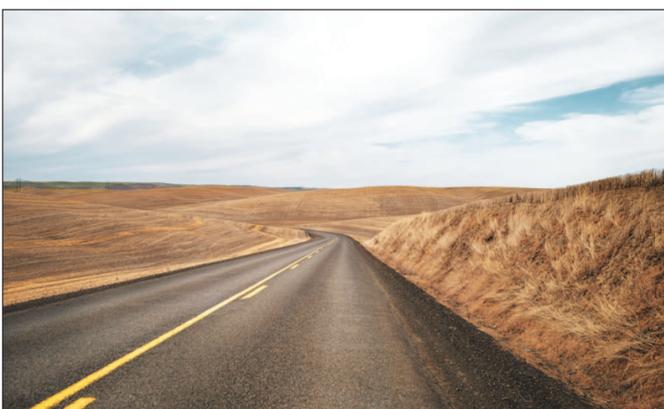
Palouse Falls is known for its deaths. Sheer cliff sides with no railings are everywhere, and the drop is almost 200 feet — or approximately 10 seconds to think about on your way down.

I would pay for my arrogance later with nightmares of falling in the moments before I slept, but for now I set up alongside a landscape photographer named Danny Seidman. He had the best spot for shooting the falls, and the best lens. He was assured to get a great photo of the sunset over the falls.

My small, point-and-shoot trusty camera dangled from my wrist. Not nearly wide enough to capture the whole scene. I would have to either settle for a tighter frame, or suffer later by taking a high-dynamic-range panoramic shot, which meant manually stitching together 10 photos in Photoshop in order to emulate a wider lens.

Again, I chose later suffering — but despite the nightmares, I'd have to say I was much more pleased with the photos taken during the vibrant green drive through wheat fields than I was with the photos taken during the vibrant green drive through wheat fields waiting for the sun to set over the desert.

I suppose it's fair to say that the journey was more important than the destination — sage words that I received from countless friends over the years.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

View of Lyons Ferry Road, north of Walla Walla, on Sunday, May 30, 2021. You'll follow this road through winding hills to Palouse Falls.