

## OREGON'S HIGH-DESERT HAVEN

**The scenic areas surrounding Bend and Redmond invite outdoor pursuits and less strenuous diversions**

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*GSC Highways*

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The sound of rippling water served as background music during our hike along the Crooked River in Smith Rock State Park. A hawk soared in lazy circles near a towering rock face that glowed in shades of apricot and rust. But it wasn't the natural wonders that seized our attention that day. Instead, our gaze was drawn to a group of climbers that scaled the colorful rock hundreds of feet above like insects on a sheer wall.

Smith Rock, located just a few miles outside Redmond, Oregon, is one of the world's premier rock-climbing destinations. And you don't have to be a mountaineer to enjoy it. You'll get an adrenaline rush just from watching the skilled climbers as they appear to defy gravity with every step and every handhold on the nooks and crannies that dot the sheer face.

Smith Rock is just one of many attractions that have helped give central Oregon a reputation as an outdoor-recreation mecca. In addition to world-class climbing and winter sports, visitors will discover miles of hiking, biking and riding trails, 25 golf courses, whitewater rivers, trout streams, mountain lakes and geological wonders galore. You'll also find a fine museum, scenic drives, a lively downtown, compelling art, great food and drink and friendly and energetic people.

Make sure you bring a camera, because the volcanic peaks of the nearby Cascade Range—the Three Sisters, Broken Top, Mount Bachelor, Three Fingered Jack, Mount Washington and Mount Jefferson—provide a dramatic and ever-changing backdrop to this high-desert landscape.

Capturing moisture blown to Oregon by prevailing winds, the mountains serve as a shield against the rain, and, as a result, a sunnier climate prevails. In addition, their 2,500- to 4,500-foot elevations help moderate summer temperatures.

A good place to start any trip to central Oregon is the High Desert Museum south of Bend, which will orient you to the area with exhibits on local natural and human history and desert wildlife. During our visit, we enjoyed a close view of a Western screech owl named Williamas in Shakespeare who was named in honor of the world-famous Oregon Shakespeare Festival held 200 miles to the southwest in Ashland every summer.

There's also plenty of human history at the museum. The Brooks Gallery depicts the exploration and settlement of the region with historic maps. Another gallery tells the tale through a series of dioramas, while a third recounts the tale of the Columbia Plateau Indians, the region's original inhabitants.

About eight miles farther south, the 55,000-acre Newberry National Volcanic Monument gives a glimpse into past geological upheavals. The monument encompasses a mile-long lava tube, a lava-cast forest, the largest obsidian flow in the country and

monumental Newberry Crater, which is 18 miles across and contains two lakes and 20 waterfalls. Lava Lands visitor center is a great starting point for this attraction.

Looking for something a bit more civilized? Bend, a growing city of 75,000, offers a break from the great outdoors with its historic, compact downtown and inviting shops, galleries and restaurants. Our search for food and drink led us to the Deschutes Brewery, where we enjoyed India Pale Ale, and to the historic Pine Tavern, where we ate steak and prime rib beside a ponderosa pine growing through the dining-room roof. During one evening, we indulged in martinis made of locally distilled gin flavored with Oregon juniper berries at the Bend Distillery.

Another afternoon, we tasted award-winning Oregon reds at Volcano Vineyards' downtown tasting room. Just south of downtown, the redeveloped Old Mill District offers more shopping, including a large REI retail store housed in the mill's former power plant.

Next, we crossed the Deschutes River at its double meander for which the town of Bend is named and headed west toward Mount Bachelor. This route took us to the Cascade Lakes National Scenic Byway, and we passed numerous fishing spots and scenic views, including Little Lava Lake, headwaters of the Deschutes.

Twenty-one miles northwest of Bend, the village of Sisters rests beneath its mountain namesake. Old West style buildings house an eclectic collection of shops, restaurants and art galleries. Barely 20 miles east of Sisters, Redmond is home to the region's commercial airport and the Deschutes County Fairground and Expo Center. This full-service community of about 20,000 will host The Rally, July 19 through 22, and it's a convenient base for exploring central Oregon.

Just north of Redmond, we boarded the Crooked River Dinner Train for a midday journey to Prineville and back. Hauled by a steam locomotive, the vintage dining cars recall an era when travel was slower but much more elegant. While savoring lunch and the scenery of the Crooked River Valley, we were treated to a simulated holdup at gunpoint by masked desperadoes on horseback. The theatrical Train Robbery troupe of performers who reenact train holdups as they might have occurred in the 1800s runs summer Sundays, while Murder Mystery dinner trains run Friday and Saturday summer evenings.

Known for its rich geological surroundings, Prineville attracts rock hounds from across the United States. Prineville's chamber of commerce helpfully provides maps to digging sites, and visitors have their hands full discovering agates, thunder eggs, fossils and the like. A backcountry byway leads south from Prineville on Oregon Route 27, and this way follows the Crooked River for 17 miles to Bowman Dam. Flowing between towering basalt cliffs, this popular fly-fishing waterway has plenty of public campgrounds along its banks.

If you're looking for a nice side trip, check out the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. A little more than 100 miles east of Redmond via Oregon State Route 126 and U.S. Highway 26, the monument's visitor center is located in the Sheep Rock Unit, one of three separate locations of the monument. The modern building houses exhibits, a theater regularly screening educational films and a viewing area where visitors can see paleontologists at work through a window. The Painted Hills Unit is

reached along the same route, with a turnoff at about 65 miles, followed by about three miles of gravel road. Striations of vivid rust, ochre and cream running across the hills make this area a photographer's delight, especially later in the day. The third unit, Clarno, about 75 miles northeast of Redmond, has a signposted trail that reveals ancient fossils, including a tree limb that appears to have grown through rock.

If you're arriving in central Oregon from the south or departing in that direction, a visit to Crater Lake is mandatory. One of the most spectacular natural wonders in the country, Crater Lake is worth a detour and an extra day especially for anyone who hasn't yet seen this steep-sided caldera set with a sapphire lake.

We found an almost endless array of outdoor pursuits in central Oregon. We also found a surprising collection of less strenuous diversions. This combination, set in a place of jaw-dropping beauty, continues to bring us back.