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Ice & Fire: Volcano Trail

WHY GO The volcanoes of the Pacific Northwest rank as the region's most iconic and breathtaking natural sights. Take the scenic route from Seattle to Portland and tiptoe around sleeping giants on this back roads trip down the exquisite volcanic spine of Mts Rainier, Adams, St Helens and Hood.

Kick off this trip by heading southeast from ❶ **Enumclaw** on the Chinook Scenic Byway and you quickly find yourself in the shadow of a volcano. Between Enumclaw and Greenwater you are effectively driving along the Osceola mudflow, a huge lahar (mud slide of water, rock and ash) created 5800 years ago when 2000ft of Mt Rainier collapsed, leaving Enumclaw 70ft deep in debris.

Twenty minutes down the road, the family-friendly trails through the magical old-growth forest of ❷ **Federation Forest State Park** are a good way to avoid the national park crowds. Kids in particular will love the 45-minute hike to the Hobbit House, where a tree stump has been converted into a residence worthy of Bilbo Baggins.

Hwy 410 continues up the White River Valley, past several national forest campgrounds and into ❸ **Mt Rainier National Park**. If the mountain is out (ie there's clear weather) the detour up the switch-backing road to ❹ **Sunrise**, the highest part of the park reachable by vehicle, is a must. A pause midway at Sunrise Point offers a unique view of five volcanoes, but it's the view from Sunrise and the trails beyond that reveals the true scale of Rainier, home to more snow and ice than all the other Cascade volcanoes combined.

With a giant the size of Rainier (14,411ft), sometimes you have to step back to get the best views. For one of the park's classic photo ops, and

TIME

4 days

DISTANCE

480 miles

BEST TIME TO GO

Jul – Sep

START

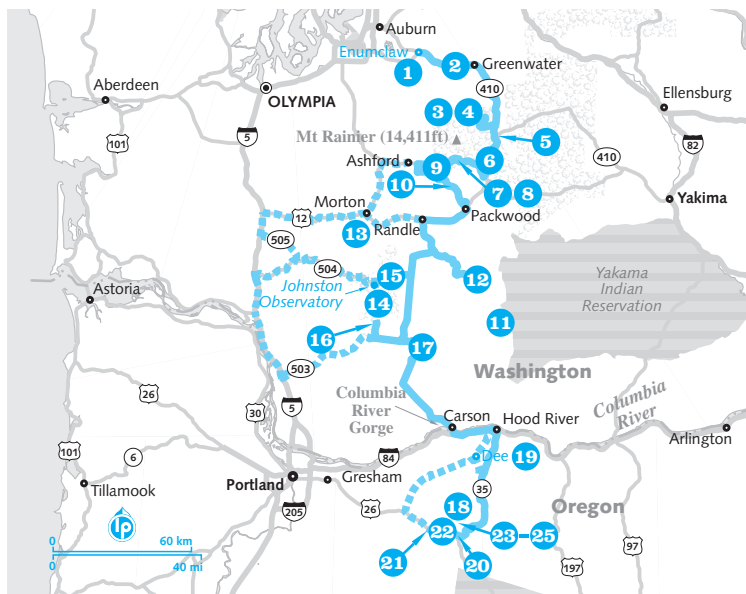
Enumclaw,
WA

END

Portland, OR

ALSO GOOD FOR





a fine picnic spot, detour east of the main road to Chinook Pass, where the mountain reflects perfectly in **5** **Tipsoo Lake**.

After the tundra-like terrain above Sunrise, Hwy 123 drops quickly into the clear-running streams and old-growth forest of **6** **Ohanapecosh**, where the park-run campground offers a fine night's camping under a towering canopy of cedars and firs. Beat the crowds at dusk or early the next morning and hike the 1.3-mile Grove of the Patriarchs trail to a collection of 1000-year-old hemlocks and Douglas firs that occupy an island in the middle of the Ohanapecosh River.

7 **Paradise** is the busiest part of the park and a good place to avoid on summer weekends. Popular hikes here include the 1.2-mile Nisqually Vista loop (which offers views down onto the toe of Nisqually Glacier) and the Skyline Trail to Panorama Point (5 miles); but don't expect trails here to be snow free until the middle, or end, of July. Even Paradise needs a face-lift now and then and 2008 saw the opening of a new visitors center and the \$22 million renovation of the flagship **8** **Paradise Inn**. Built in 1917, the historic hotel's barnlike interior boasts a good restaurant and live music each evening courtesy of the lobby's antique piano.

While the views around Rainier are spectacular, the food generally is not – one reason the **9** **Copper Creek Inn** is so outstanding. This former gas sta-



tion just outside the park's Nisqually entrance has been knocking out killer pancake breakfasts for 50 years and the homemade blackberry pie is still worth driving across the state for.

There are two main routes to consider as you head south to Randle. The main Rte 706 passes the climbers' base camp at Ashford before swinging south to the logging town of Morton and then east to Randle. The shorter, and more adventurous, alternative (closed in winter) is **10 Skate Creek Road** (FR52), a rougher (though mostly paved) mountain road that short-cuts between Ashford and Packwood. Late September's blur of brilliant oranges and reds makes this one of the region's best fall drives.

Rainier is the region's big-name draw and summer weekends often translate into packed parking lots and full campgrounds. The antidote to this temporary park madness is **11 Mt Adams**, an overlooked 12,276ft gem wrapped in 46,000 acres of wilderness. Nestled at the foot of the mountain, 34 miles southeast of Randle, **12 Takhlakh Lake** offers perfect views of the peak from what is one of the nation's most scenic campgrounds. Watching the glacier-covered peak blush pink with twilight's alpenglow may just be the highlight of your trip. Getting to the lake involves navigating a series of forest roads (FR23 and FR2329), including 7 miles of dirt road, but it's worth it. Road conditions and campground opening dates change frequently here, so pop into the **13 Cowlitz Valley Ranger Station** in Randle before setting off.

From Takhlakh Lake cut westward on FR76 and then FR25 to the **14 Mt St Helens National Volcanic Monument**. Most people visit the west side of the mountain, which is fine as this leaves the remoter eastern side just for us. The east slope may lack facilities, but with its eerie views of the felled forest and lifeless Spirit Lake, it offers a far more palpable impression of the cataclysmic 1981 eruption.

Forestry Service road 99 winds into the blast zone, past the "miner's car," flipped and crushed by the eruption, and up to **15 Windy Ridge**, where steps zigzag up the barren slopes for outstanding views of Spirit Lake. Once surrounded by lush forest, the lake's mat of decomposing logs is the result of the 850ft-high tsunami triggered by the eruption. Hikers can follow the 6-mile Truman Trail down onto the pumice plain for views of the partially collapsed crater, now bulging with a fresh lava dome. This is the perfect place to take in the eruption's mind-boggling statistics: a 600mph blast that sent 540 million tons of ash around the globe and melted 20 billion gallons of water off the peak in a single day. Yes, this is an awesome place.

"As you descend into the pitch-black lava tube it's hard not to feel like Jonah entering the belly of a whale."



The spectacular 1981 eruption was only the most recent of many volcanic events that have shaped the surrounding landscape. One place to get up close to (inside!) a 2000-year-old lava flow is **16 Ape Cave**, on the southern side of the mountain. As you descend into the pitch-black lava tube it's hard not to feel like Jonah entering the belly of a whale. In reality you are standing inside the cooled crust of an ancient lava flow; lava pulsed through the tube for months and you can still see the flow lines on the walls. This is no sanitized experience; there are no lights here, no trail, no guide. Turn off your flashlight deep inside the cave and you'll quickly feel the panic rise in your chest. It's a fantastic experience but come prepared with good shoes, a raincoat and two reliable flashlights.

From Ape Cave head back to the junction of FR90 and FR25 and take FR51 (Curly Creek Rd) and then FR30 south down the Wind River Hwy toward Carson. Thick forest blocks most of the views along this route, except at

17 McClellan Viewpoint which offers superb views back toward the intact southern cone of Mt St Helens, superbly silhouetted at sunset.



If late summer snow levels or storm damage have resulted in the closure of Rte 25 or the east side of Mt St Helens, you'll have to detour to I-5 and take the popular Spirit Lake Memorial Hwy (Hwy 504) up the west side of the mountain to the **Johnston Observatory**. As compensation for the crowds you'll find the mountain's best crater views. Back on I-5 you should then be able to cut round to the mountain's southern slopes on Hwy 503 to rejoin this trip near the Ape Cave.

As you head south from Hood River and the Columbia Gorge, snowcapped **18 Mt Hood** (11,239ft), Oregon's highest peak, rises into full, glorious view. If you have time, make the detour west on the Hood River Hwy (281) to **19 Dee** for lovely views of the mountain framed by rolling pear and apple orchards, as Mt Adams fills

your rear-view mirror. Despite what the roadside "Nottingham" and "Sherwood" campgrounds would have you believe, Mt Hood is named not after Robin, but rather Samuel Hood, an 18th-century British admiral. Native Americans have long used their own name for the mountain (Wy'east), as they have for fellow volcanoes Rainier (Tacoma), Adams (Pahto) and Mt St Helens (Loowit, or "The Smoker").

The Mt Hood Scenic Byway hooks south and then east around the mountain, offering fabulous views at every turn, but there are a couple of classic detours to consider. Man-made **20 Trillium Lake** combines camping and kayaking with perfectly reflected views of the mountain. Further west, the mountain's most popular trail is the family-friendly 3-mile return hike to photogenic **21 Mirror Lake**; for even better views and fewer crowds continue up past huckleberry bushes to the top of Tom, Dick & Harry Peak for a moderate 6-mile return hike. Both lakes get very busy on summer weekends.



If you've dragged your teenagers around one too many dull mountain trails it may be time to reward them at the **22 Mt Hood Skibowl**. The outdoor equivalent to an intravenous shot of Red Bull, the bowl's Adventure Park offers everything from a half-mile alpine slide to an 80ft reverse bungee jump (we feel sick just writing about it). Let the kids run wild, while you load your mountain bike onto the bowl's two lifts and freewheel back down miles of single track.

There's really only one accommodations to consider in the Mt Hood area and that's the iconic **23 Timberline Lodge**. Fans of *The Shining* will find it hard not to whisper "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" as they approach the lodge. The property allowed director Stanley Kubrick to film exterior shots here but requested he not use the book's original room number 217 (a real room in the lodge), fearing no-one would ever stay in it again. At least the hotel retains a sense of humor; look for the axe in the lobby with "Here's Johnny!" carved on it. For a classy meal you can't beat the lodge's superlative **24 Cascade Dining Room**.



If you've traveled the Mt Hood Scenic Byway before, consider taking the wilder **Lolo Pass Road** around the little-visited northwestern flanks of the mountain. The single-lane road is mostly paved (the section around the pass is gravel) but is still only motorable from late June to October. En route you'll pass several scenic viewpoints and the turnoff for the 7-mile return trail to feathery 120ft Ramona Falls, one of the mountain's best hikes.

Several hiking trails tempt trekkers away from the lodge or you can join the summer skiers on the Magic Mile chairlift up to the meadows around the **25 Silcox Hut**, a former warming hut converted into deliciously remote accommodations for groups of 12 or more. Watch the climbers set off from the hut on their ascent of the mountain, while the rest of us descend to the Timberline's cozy Ram's Head Bar to raise our own Ice Axe IPA in solidarity (albeit in pint form) and toast the end of this great mountain odyssey.

Bradley Mayhew



TRIP INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

From Seattle take I-5 and Hwy 167 south to Auburn and then Hwy 164 east to Enumclaw; a 41-mile drive.

DO

Ape Cave

Choose between the easier lower cave or the more strenuous upper route through this 2.25-mile lava tube. ☎ 360-449-7800; www.fs.fed.us/gpnf/mshnmv; Gifford Pinchot National Forest, WA; Northwest Forest Pass \$5; ☞ Jun-Sep

Cowlitz Valley Ranger Station

Your best source of information on road, trail and campground conditions in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. ☎ 360-497-1100; www.fs.fed.us/gpnf; Hwy 12, Randle, WA; ☞ 8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Mon-Sat

Federation Forest State Park

The 600 acres of old-growth forest here boast picnic sites, hiking trails and an interpretive center. ☎ 360-663-2207; www.parks.wa.gov; Hwy 410, WA; hdawn-dusk

Mt Hood Skibowl

Bungee jumps, zip lines and alpine slides make this adrenaline-junkie heaven. ☎ 503-222-2695; www.skibowl.com; Hwy 26, Mt Hood, OR; day pass \$29-59, bike rental half/full day \$25/32; ☞ 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun

Mt Rainier National Park

The Northwest's most popular park offers everything from rainforest to glaciers, along with four visitors centers and three campgrounds. ☎ 360-569-2211; www.nps.gov/mora; 7-day/annual pass \$15/30

Mt St Helens National Volcanic Monument

Check the roads are open before setting off for the less-visited eastern side of the moun-

tain. ☎ 360-449-7800; www.fs.fed.us/gpnf/mshnmv; Northwest Forest Pass \$5; ☞ dawn-dusk Jun-Oct

EAT

Cascade Dining Room

World-class cuisine with a Northwest twist makes this the place for a special dinner. ☎ 503-622-0700; www.timberlinelodge.com; Timberline Lodge, Mt Hood; mains \$26-40, 4-course set dinner \$35; ☞ 5:30-8:30pm

Copper Creek Inn

Start the day with a fine breakfast or grab a house-roasted espresso and "copper topper" cinnamon roll at the counter. ☎ 360-569-2326; www.coppercreekinn.com; 35707 Rte 706E, Ashford, WA; mains \$7-22; ☞ 7am-9pm

SLEEP

Paradise Inn

Not on a par with the Timberline, but still Rainier's best example of "parkitecture." The unbeatable location makes up for ho-hum rooms. ☎ 360-569-2275; <http://rainier.guestservices.com>; Mt Rainier National Park, WA; r \$99-210, ste \$228; ☞ mid-May-early Oct

Takhlakh Lake Campground

Reserve your site in advance at this breath-taking national forest campground and you'll have perfect lakeshore views of Mt Adams. ☎ 1-877-444-6777; www.recreation.gov; FR2329, WA; sites \$15-17; ☞ Jul-Oct

Timberline Lodge

This gorgeous historic lodge on the flanks of Mt Hood boasts hand-crafted furniture, a three-story fireplace and rooms in all price ranges. ☎ 503-622-7979; www.timberline.lodge.com; d \$105-290

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www.mthood.info
www.visitrainier.com

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