

Meandering by Map

By Jim Moore

In the right hands, a humble road map can transcend navigation and move right on to imagination and inspiration. Sitting in the back of the family car as we drove into our new home state of Oregon in the summer of 1970, those accordion folds unveiled a new world of possibility.

I discovered, to my pre-teen delight, that a long-ago lover had been immortalized by an Eastern Oregon peak named Nellie's Nipple. That in this state you could visit both a Dufur and a Nimrod. That if you headed east from Burns, you would first hit Stinkingwater Pass, then Drinkwater Pass. That if you wearied of life in Idanha, you could start over in New Idanha. And who could resist the lure of places called, simply, Hole-in-the-Ground and Crack-in-the-Ground?

I've been to all those places by now (except Nellie's Nipple, which was apparently renamed some time ago). And I'm on either my third or fourth map, after wearing out the predecessors. Over time I developed both a travel philosophy and a travel habit. The philosophy is that you should get to know your state, your country and your world – in that order, but as equally as you can – to balance your experiences and, especially, perspectives. The habit? It involves a yellow highlighter.

I don't remember exactly what year I started marking all the roads I traveled in Oregon, but I do know it was several maps ago. The practice became a simple one: Whenever I have a tank of gas, some time and a general direction, I'll look for a road I haven't yet highlighted. And if I'm headed somewhere in particular, I'll look for a new way to get there. The long way.

My current map has a yellow overlay following nearly every numbered highway in Oregon. And that's how I've been able to see Nashville, Deadwood, Pittsburg, Allegany, London, Norway and Little Sweden without crossing a border. And visit Agness, Mabel and Athena, and Joseph, Dale and Otis, to get to know them better. (By the way, Agness plays hard-to-get-to, Joseph has an artistic bent, and Otis will fix you one hell of a café breakfast.)

There are still two red highways I haven't highlighted – 395 between Burns and Lakeview, and 95 from Burns Junction to Jordan Valley. But I could probably cover those in the same trip if I get out that way... and even swing by Fields for one of those famous burgers and a shake. But the quest still won't be complete – there are a couple more black highways to see, and lots of gray roads, and tons of forest-road shortcuts. For instance, I really need to head up Highway 3 in the far northeast corner – I see that you can find Paradise there.

Taking the Long Way

Here are a few alternative routes to consider as you're headed from one place to another.

Portland to Astoria via Scappoose, Mist and Jewell – Soak up some serious forest-and-river atmosphere on this meandering route to the coast. Head up Highway 30 to Scappoose, angle northwest toward Vernonia, and hang a right on Highway 202. You'll follow the lovely Nehalem River, crossing it at least six times as you roll through Mist, Birkenfeld and Jewell. Check out the elk preserve outside Jewell, then enjoy the tranquil vistas of Youngs Bay on your way into Astoria.

Portland to Central Oregon via Estacada, Breitenbush and Detroit – Splendid isolation and a smooth, sinewy road through tall trees and dappled sunlight. Access Highway 224 from I-205 and head to Estacada. Once you've passed through this logging town, you'll play hide-and-seek with the Clackamas River for miles. The road will become FS 46 around Ripplebrook Ranger Station as you continue to climb along the river, between Rhododendron Ridge and Pinhead Buttes. After cresting, the road snakes and rolls down along the Breitenbush River to Detroit Lake. For an extra-crunchy flavor, add a stop at Breitenbush Hot Springs Resort.

Eugene to Central Oregon via the Aufderheide and McKenzie scenic routes – Two of Oregon's most spectacular back-road byways on one trip. Set out on Highway 58 just south of Eugene and head toward Oakridge, turning off to Westfir for the Aufderheide Memorial Drive. Starting at a magnificent covered bridge, you'll wind up and along the babbling, wonderfully named North Fork of the Middle Fork of the Willamette River through a cathedral of forest for 30 miles. Then it's a downhill roller-coaster ride on a ribbon of great pavement, past Cougar Reservoir and Terwilliger Hot Springs. After you reach Highway 126, turn east for less than 10 miles before taking Highway 242 – the scenic McKenzie Pass Highway. After you negotiate sharp switchbacks and emerge from the dark forest, you'll be dazzled by the stark aesthetic of a lunar-landscape of lava rock extending miles to the horizon. Stop at the unique Dee Wright observatory, made of the same lava rocks, the view 360 degrees of named peaks, then cruise on into Sisters.

LaGrande to Baker City via Union: Heading out I-84, jump off the freeway to experience a new way. Just south of LaGrande, take Highway 203 toward Union, passing the historic Hot Lake Resort, now being restored. After a stop to check out Union and its grand old hotel, take a left to stay on 203 and follow bucolic Catherine Creek on a long, gradual climb. Once you reach the crest, roll down into the Powder River Valley, where golden hills spread out before you in all directions. Rejoin 84 just before Baker City, feeling refreshed.

Roads to Seek Out

Here are a few gems you're not likely to be near unless you go looking for them. And a quick note: You should mitigate your pleasure trip's environmental impact by making an economic one – in the towns you discover along the way.

Quartzville – Check out a slice of Oregon's rugged mining past. From Sweet Home, turn off Highway 20 onto Road 11. Pass Green Peter Dam and skirt its lake, then head up into

them thar hills. At times only a lane wide, this road is nonetheless smooth and well-built, and it feels as if you might encounter a hermit miner around any turn. You'll connect to Highway 22 near Marion Forks, between Detroit and Sisters.

Fort Rock and Christmas Valley – In south-central Oregon, a land of magical natural wonders awaits. Plan a trip that includes Hole-in-the-Ground, Crack-in-the-Ground, Fort Rock and the Lost Forest. This will take some diligent map-reading, but start by heading south from Bend on Highway 97, then turning left onto Highway 31 past LaPine. And promise you'll get out of your car to explore every stop, especially climbing down in Crack-in-the-Ground and climbing up inside Fort Rock to the rim to see the view.

Valsetz – Once there was an entire town – a logging-and-sawmill “company town” – tucked deep into the fertile logging lands of the Cascade Range. It had a post office, a high school and everything. But in 1984 the company that owned it closed the town and drained Valsetz Lake, and now you can hardly tell it was there. But it's a beautiful and adventurous drive, and if you go further into the mountains you can visit the Valley of the Giants, a magnificent old-growth forest with a great hiking trail. From Monmouth, head to Falls City and beyond – but the road is only open to the public on weekends.

Hells Canyon the Hard Way – I was once parked at an overlook far above Hells Canyon and noticed on my map a dotted line called Hess Road that appeared to go straight down into the canyon. It wasn't straight, but it certainly was down. That was an adventure – mind you, I had a high-clearance four-wheel-drive – that took us right to the river with only a few white-knuckle moments. Access it from Road 39 between Halfway and Joseph.

Steen Mountain Loop – Not exactly an unknown route, but you really have to want to get there. Oh, boy, is it worth it. From Frenchglen on Highway 205, head up this massive fault-block mountain, with glacier-carved gorges thousands of feet deep on its western flank and a nearly vertical drop-off from its upper edge at 9,670 feet to the flat Alvord Desert roughly a mile below. Climb to the edge for the view, and don't miss the picturesque lakes along the way. The aspen stands are glorious in the fall.