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Oregon's Steens Mountain: An Airborne Oasis

Steens looks like your average mountain, but hike up high and you'll find a hidden paradise.

Diane Kightlinger · Updated: Feb 14, 2017 · Original: Jan 31, 2000

Even Oregonians refer to Steens Mountain as a range, and who can blame them? When you approach from a distance, it has all the ingredients of a first-class string of mountains.

Yet, geologically speaking, Steens is a single 9,700-foot-high fault block thrust skyward some 5 to 7 million years ago, a mass of jumbled basalt that floats like a vision across 30 miles of alkaline playa sea. From end to end, the mountain offers a slew of possibilities for hiking, from rough-rocked desert washes to verdant canyons to subalpine meadows. The mellow western slopes lead to U-shaped gorges carved by glaciers. To the east, Steens Mountain gives way and plunges a mile to the Alvord Desert.

The Desert Trail (see Signpost, June 1999) and its offshoots are the perfect way to discover Steens' bounty, but the ad hoc nature of the "path"-you follow milestones rather than a footbed through the open landscape-make map and compass skills mandatory.

In early spring (call ahead to see if it's snowfree), follow the John Scharff section of the Desert Trail as it winds along the banks of the Wild and Scenic Donner und Blitzen River. Climb out of the canyon and wander among the juniper, gray-green sage, and-by May-wildflowers. For a 16-mile hike, ford the river at Big Springs and continue to Blitzen Crossing and the South Loop Road.

A few months later and a few miles farther up the mountain, South Loop provides a jumping off point for the Big and Little Indian Gorge Trails. The trek up either of these colossal gorges is 10 miles to the East Rim viewpoint.

Come July, you can follow the Desert Trail 15 miles south from a point near Steens's summit to Frog Springs at the edge of this desert oasis. The path threads through snowfields, groves of quaking aspen, willow, and a riot of stubby wildflowers. Spur trails lead to the alpine basins of icy Wildhorse Lake and beautiful Little Wildhorse Lake.

QUICK TAKE: Steens Mountain NRA, OR

DRIVE TIME: Steens Mountain is about 400 miles (8 hours) southeast of Portland and 250 miles (4 1/2 hours) southwest of Boise, Idaho.

THE WAY: From Burns, Oregon, drive 60 miles south on OR 205 to Frenchglen. Turn left onto North Steens Mountain Loop Road immediately south of town, or proceed 10 miles on OR 205 to the South Loop Road. Trailheads are located off this bone-jarring 66-mile road. Uplands access is blocked from about Halloween to July 1.

TRAILS: The Desert Trail runs 45 miles across Steens, but spur trails provide access to many more miles of hikeable terrain. Map and compass skills are mandatory.

ELEVATION: Steens Mountain tops out at 9,733 feet. The Desert Trail drops to 4,025 feet at Frog Springs.

CAN'T MISS: The views of half-mile-deep Big Indian Gorge and the hanging valley that cradles Wildhorse Lake are two points you won't want to skip.

CROWD CONTROL: July, August, and weekends draw the most visitors, particularly on trails off South Loop Road, and in popular Big Indian and Little Blitzen Gorges.

PIT STOP: After your trek, drop by the historic Frenchglen Hotel (541-493-2825) for comfort and food. Soak tired muscles in the Alvord Hot Springs pool 22 miles north of Fields.

WALK SOFTLY: Damage to the high desert takes a long time to heal. Use existing trails and campsites when possible, and stick to durable surfaces when bushwhacking.

MAPS AND GUIDES: USGS 30 x 60-minute quad *Steens Mountain* gives the big picture; use 7.5-minute topos for details (800-435-7627; www.usgs.gov). For trail guides: Desert Trail Association, P.O. Box 34, Burns, OR 97220; <http://juniper.madras.net/dta>.

MORE INFORMATION: Bureau of Land Management, Burns District Office, HC 74-12533 Hwy. 20 W, Hines, OR 97738; (541) 573-4400; www.or.blm.gov/Burns. No permit required.

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