

FODOR'S PACIFIC NORTHWEST, 18th EDITION: TOP EXPERIENCES

The Laser-Light Show at Grand Coulee Dam, WA

You truly get a sense of the awesome magnitude of the Columbia River when you view some of the enormous hydroelectric facilities set along this meandering Northwest river. The Grand Coulee Dam, built in 1932, ranks among the world's biggest concrete structures, and towers over the landscape. On summer evenings, grab a seat and watch the nightly laser-light show projected across the dam. This is a favorite family activity in this otherwise relatively remote part of northeastern Washington.

Wine-tasting in Walla Walla, WA

Although you'll find super wine-making in several parts of the region, including Oregon's Willamette Valley and Washington's nearby Yakima and Columbia valleys, the dapper college town of Walla Walla has evolved into the Northwest's best overall wine-country hub. The handsomely revived historic downtown abounds with smart boutiques, lively cafés and restaurants, and several prominent tasting rooms. And throughout the surrounding vineyard-studded hills you'll find elegant inns and some of the most critically acclaimed, if still somewhat underrated, wineries in the country.

Skiing Mt. Hood, OR

Just 60 mi east of Portland, the state's highest mountain is the only place in the lower 48 where you can ski year-round. There are actually three different facilities on this mammoth, snowcapped mountain. Timberline Lodge Ski Area is the one that remains open year-round, and its runs pass beside the venerable Timberline Lodge, a restaurant and hotel dating to the 1930s. Nearby Mt. Hood Ski Bowl has less interesting terrain but the most night skiing acreage in the country. Around the north side of the mountain, you'll find the most challenging, extensive, and interesting terrain at Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort, which offers some 2,000 acres of winter snowboarding and ski fun.

Picnicking at Silver Falls State Park, OR

The lush Silver Falls State Park, about 25 mi east of Salem, is so impressive that serious campaigns to admit it to the national park system have taken place recently. In the meantime, it's something of a secret treasure. The 8,700-acre swatch of skyscraping old-growth Douglas firs climbs into the foothills of the Cascade Range, where rain and melting snow supply the torrent that roars through 14 different waterfalls, several of them more than 100 feet tall.

Driving Through the Columbia Gorge, OR/WA

The roughly 75-mi section of the mighty Columbia River that extends from just east of Portland to The Dalles provides some of the most stunning scenery in the Pacific Northwest. Towering cliffs on both the Washington and Oregon sides of the river form a dramatic backdrop, and meandering highways line both banks (on the Washington side, Hwy. 14 is slower but offers better views). There's much to see and do in the Gorge: visit the 620-foot-high Multnomah Falls, stroll among the restaurants and shops in quaint Hood River, or try your luck at sail boarding, a sport well suited to the river's high winds.

Festival in Ashland, OR

Sunny, hilly, and attractive Ashland is a charming, small city in its own right, with a bustling downtown popping with notable restaurants specializing in farm-to-table cuisine and wines from nearby vineyards. But the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which presents world-class plays (from Shakespeare to classics to contemporary) on three different stages from mid-February to early November, really put this town on the map. Try to see a play in the largest venue, the Elizabethan, which replicates London's famed Fortune Theatre.

Coffeehouse-Crawling in Seattle, WA

Sure, for kicks, it's worth stopping by the original branch of Starbucks, which is across the street from Pike Place Market. But as arguably the nation's coffeehouse capital, Seattle has far more interesting java joints to consider. Especially fertile (coffee) grounds for coffeehouse-hopping include the Capitol Hill, Queen Anne, Ballard, and Fremont neighborhoods—try Vivace, Caffè Vita, Fremont Coffee Company, or Caffè Fiore for stellar espresso.

Shopping at the Portland Saturday Market, Portland, OR

Despite its name, this expansive outdoor market—the largest weekly arts-and-crafts gathering in the country—is actually open on both Saturdays and Sundays (from March through Christmas). The recently expanded market grounds are just below downtown's Burnside Bridge, and here you'll find every imaginable creation: offbeat patio sculptures, jewelry made from recycled wares, stylish yet practical housewares. Artists here are required to appear in person to sell their art, providing customers with a chance to chat and ask questions about potential purchases.

Biking around Lopez Island, WA

Whether you're an ardent cyclist or an occasional weekender, Lopez Island offers some of the best biking terrain in the West. This laid-back, gently undulating island that's part of Washington's fabled San Juan archipelago is ringed by a beautiful main road and dedicated bike paths. As you cycle past lavender fields, blackberry bushes, horse farms, and occasional patches of woodland, you'll encounter little automobile traffic. There are several bike-rental shops, and the Lopez Island Soda Fountain is a fine spot for a refreshment.

Riding the Ferry to Victoria, BC

This is a perfectly simple way to admire the region's coastal scenery, from the mountains in Olympic National Park to the meandering shorelines of the San Juan Islands (if you're coming from Washington) and Gulf islands (if you're coming from mainland British Columbia). Numerous ferries of many sizes ply the waters around Victoria and Vancouver Island, and the trip is best enjoyed on an open deck, while devouring a cup of clam chowder.

White-water Rafting on the Rogue River, Grants Pass, OR

Of the many excellent places for whitewater rafting in Oregon, the Rogue River offers some of the most thrilling rides. Several outfitters offer trips along this frothy, 215-mi river in the southwestern part of the state, from half-day adventures well suited to beginners to multi-day trips that include camping or overnights in local lodges.