



# CALLED BY THE WATER

In Oregon, life is anchored to the state's vast network of rivers. These once-polluted and dammed waterways now flow healthy and free, offering opportunities for water-based adventures

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IMAGE GETTY

### The Willamette

Rain is drenching Oregon City. It's nothing unusual in this part of the Pacific Northwest, which experiences around 150 wet days per year. However, this isn't your regular storm: it's called an 'atmospheric river', so named because it unleashes the moisture equivalent of a major waterway.

I'm meant to be experiencing another river, the Willamette. But standing on a dock, watching fat drops thwack its surface in a relentless assault, it doesn't seem I'll be kayaking any time soon. Crane ships and storage containers bob on the water, watched over by a bridge ferrying cars along the interstate. I may be in the centre of this former industrial town, but a few miles away, the Willamette Falls — the second largest in North America by volume — plunge into the river. If I concentrate, I can hear their thunder.

Urban life is tethered to water in Oregon. Stretching 187 miles from south of the city of Eugene to northeast Portland, the Willamette is the state's main artery, with 70% of the population residing in its basin. It's part of a network of waterways that act as an essential source of food, hydropower and recreation for locals. And thanks to people like Theresa Tran, these rivers are in a state of regeneration.

"Let's go," she says, adjusting her yellow aviator glasses. The sun peeks through the clouds, the waters calm and the storm stops as quickly as it started. She's eager to show me her place of work — as an outreach coordinator for the Willamette Riverkeeper nonprofit organisation, she spends her time protecting this once-polluted waterway. "Us Oregonians are river rats," she adds as we drop our kayaks into the shallows and clamber aboard.

In the distance are empty silos and moss-covered factories, relics of the paper mill and lumber industries that once operated here. The first discharged toxic waste, the latter dumped wood debris, devastating local habitats. The fate of the Willamette was changed by two bills passed in the 1970s: the Federal Clean Water Act, which still governs the nation's water pollution; and the Willamette River Greenway, a cooperative state and local government effort to preserve 10,000 acres along the river.

Facing competition and waning demand, the industries closed in the 20th century. But organisations like Theresa's are still cleaning up the mess they left behind, with projects like habitat restoration and community outreach. Parts of the Willamette are even opening up to swimmers — a dock with river access was just recently unveiled in North Portland.

We paddle downstream, guided by the current. Theresa tells me the Willamette flows through the ancestral homelands of the Kalapuya, Chinookan and Molalla peoples. They traded and farmed all along the river, and they traditionally gathered at the falls for *potlatches* (gift-giving ceremonies).

These Indigenous groups were displaced by centuries of settler encroachment, government policy and industrialisation. Now, they're reclaiming stewardship over some of the ex-industrial areas. The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde have purchased land on the river's east bank, with plans to restore native vegetation and turn dilapidated buildings into cultural spaces. Meanwhile, the Willamette Falls Trust, led by four core member tribes, plans to reclaim land west of the falls to create public access green spaces. "It's about returning to thinking we're connected to something bigger," Theresa says, "and restoring those stewards who have the wisdom to live in balance with the Willamette."

We follow a bend, and the falls slowly come into view. The powerful spray fogs the air, the roar — some quarter-million gallons rushing every second — drowns out all sound. I watch the fresh water flow perpetually into the river, helping wash the area clean of its scars.



### The Columbia

It's a portrait of American pastoralism. Steel mailboxes line winding country roads. Handwritten signs direct traffic to pick-your-own farms hawking the harvest. The landscape — green and flat — is dotted with roving cows, idle tractors and red-splashed barns.

This is Sauvie Island, a quiet slice of countryside 20 minutes north west from Portland. A floodplain-carved land, it once overflowed with *wapato*, a marsh-dwelling tuber plant that was central to the diets of Indigenous peoples. These days, you're more likely to see apple trees and pumpkin patches.

They cover the land outside my car window. Along the road, floating houses bob on a river, backed by the Cascade mountains on the mainland. This is where the Willamette flows into the Columbia, the largest river in the Pacific Northwest, running from British Columbia in Canada to this very point.

I'm en route to Scappoose Bay, a narrow slough sandwiched between Oregon's two mighty rivers. People have used this estuary to fish for salmon for hundreds of years. But in the 20th century, dams altered the flow of the water, decimating the fish population. Thanks to habitat restoration efforts led by teams like the Scappoose Bay Watershed Council, salmon levels are slowly rising. They're turning this area into a wildlife-watching hotspot, with eagles and bears coming to feed on the fish.

"It's a special place," says Cody James, owner of The Paddle Shack, when I meet him beside the shore. Formerly a Portland-based office worker, he was so taken with the bay that he bought the local canoe and kayak club when it was at risk of shutting down. He tells me he now spends most days paddling, leaving me to drop my own canoe into the river, the late-afternoon sun dancing on its surface. The water is low now — since this is an estuary, its tides move in harmony with the ocean's — and the banks rise up in layers of reed canary grass.

We pause to watch a great blue heron near a thicket of ash trees. As we round a corner, the bay opens up — and immediately we're greeted by a sturgeon, which leaps out of the water and lands back with a smack. "Because of the tidal influence coming in twice a day, the bay is alive," says Cody, explaining that the wildlife emerges when water levels are low and feeding grounds exposed. "This is one of the only places near Portland where you can quickly get out into the wilderness — you can't even hear the highway."

I feel peaceful as we glide across the water, the silence punctuated only by the occasional bird call. As the sun begins to dip, we turn our canoes towards the mist-shrouded Mount St Helens far off in the distance, its distinctive peak — flattened by a major eruption in 1980 — hovering over low-slung clouds. Nature confronts you at every turn here.

“We follow a bend in the river, and the falls slowly come into view. The powerful spray fogs the air, the roar drowns out all sound.”

From left: The Oregon City Bridge spans the Willamette; rivers like the Willamette act as recreation hubs for Oregonians; Hood River is the starting point of a cycling trail that follows the Columbia River Gorge; eNRG Kayaking offers trips on the Willamette. Previous pages: The Columbia River Gorge has been undergoing a programme to remove dams and other artificial barriers.



Biking on a cliff above  
the Columbia River  
from Hood River

### The Historic Columbia River Highway

It's typically dangerous to go only 15 miles per hour on a highway, but my burning thighs won't take me any faster. I'm cycling up a steep incline on the Historic Columbia River Highway, a scenic route just under two hours east of Scappoose Bay that runs for 75 miles along its namesake waterway. The bike I'm on may be electric, but it's no match for these precipitous slopes.

By contrast, guide Jim 'Hoppy' Hopkins from Sol Rides glides athletically ahead of me, his faded jeans and hole-ridden shoes belying serious athleticism. The road we're riding on was originally completed in 1922, making it the US's first scenic byway, a network of roads recognised for their natural or cultural significance. But once Oregon's interstate system was built in the 1960s, it fell into disuse. Works to restore it as a recreation trail began in the 1990s; since then, new sections are regularly opening to hikers and cyclists, including a path around the historic Mitchell Point Tunnel just last year.

It's all part of wider restoration projects in and around the Columbia River Gorge, as this northeastern segment of the waterway is called. We're riding along the stretch of water linking Hood River, an ex-logging city popular with weekenders, with Mosier, seven miles east. Here, the gorge has been undergoing a

decades-long programme to remove dams and other artificial barriers, and revive its natural flow. There are similar initiatives underway across the state, most notably around the Klamath River, the site of the largest dam removal effort in US history.

As we crest a hill, the suburban, timber-clad buildings of Hood River give way to giant white oaks. The road bends gently, its curves once meant to accommodate Model T cars from the 1920s. Great columns of basalt rock, lined up like a vertical xylophone, rise around us; below, winding tracks snake along the river, carrying brightly daubed steam trains. The water looks still from up here, but, thanks to major ecological wins, this stretch now flows as freely as we are cycling.

After sweeping into two tunnels, we reach Mosier. Like most ex-logging and fishing hubs along the Columbia, the town's hoping to make a pivot towards tourism. We push past its clapboard houses and automotive shops until we're surrounded by vineyards and apple orchards, now the main attractions here.

The sun is low now, blanketing the rolling landscape in gold. We turn back into the forest, whipping through rows of towering pines. Suddenly, the thicket clears, and the Columbia comes back into view. It's proof that everything here comes back to water — and a symbol of our ability to flow with the times. □

## CURRENT COUNT

### Oregon's Klamath River in numbers

## 257 MILES

The length of the river, from Oregon's Upper Klamath Lake to Northern California's Pacific Coast.

## FOUR

The number of hydroelectric dams constructed along its course between 1903 and 1962.

## TWO DECADES

The time Indigenous communities spent campaigning to free the Klamath's flow.

## 2024

The year the last dam was removed as part of the biggest dam removal project in US history.

## 400 MILES

The salmon habitat that's been restored by the removal of the dams.

### HOW TO DO IT

British Airways flies direct from London to Portland five times per week. [ba.com](https://www.ba.com)

Stay at the Independence Hotel to explore the Willamette Valley. From \$189 (£140), B&B. [theindependencehotel.com](https://theindependencehotel.com)

Hood River Hotel offers a base to explore the Columbia River. From £87 (£65). [hoodriverhotel.com](https://hoodriverhotel.com)

eNRG Kayaking offers tours of the Willamette; Paddle Shack covers Scappoose Bay; and Sol Rides takes visitors on cycling tours along the Historic Columbia River Highway. [enrgkayaking.com](https://enrgkayaking.com) [thepaddleshack-sb.com](https://thepaddleshack-sb.com) [solrides.com](https://solrides.com)