

THE METHOW VALLEY AND NORTH CASCADES

Okanogan is the third largest county in the United States in terms of land area with nearly 60% of its total acreage in the hands of county, state, not-for-profit conservancy or federal agencies. The bulk of these lands tend to be mountainous in nature and constitute a collection of sub ranges often referred to as the 'American Alps.' The county's western most community, Mazama, is forty minutes closer to a glacier than it is a stoplight and home to a host of mountain oriented businesses including a climbing guide service, a heli-ski operation, a survival school and over 40 miles of cross country skiing trails. As with many of the county's other mountain-based communities, Mazama's early history is derived from serving as a way station for native American trade routes linking the Methow Valley to the coast; then, later, as a hub of mining and timber operations; then, finally, as a second home community. The roads developed to serve these various industries now make for spectacular road trip through some of the west's most varied and appealing country. The route recommended below describes just one such excursion though many other opportunities can be found by consulting the Visitor's Information centers in either Twisp or Winthrop or by contacting the Okanogan Country Tourism Committee at www.okanogancountry.com.

1. From Sun Mountain drive to the town of Winthrop and US Route 20 (the North Cascades Highway). Make a left turn head west crossing the Weeman Bridge after 7 miles and then making a right turn into the tiny settlement of Mazama at 14 miles. Head out the Lost River Road for 6 miles to where it crosses the Lost River and look for the remnants of old miner's cabins in the woods. In the late 19th century these cabins served as a bustling community supporting the 5,000 miners working claims above Hart's Pass. Return to the Mazama Store and buy coffee and baked goods for the drive ahead.
2. Continue driving west on US Route 20 as it traces Early Winters Creek and eventually veers through a sharp hairpin turn at the base of the Early Winter Spires. At the top of the pass enter the Overlook parking area for a head scratching encounter with the world's most expensive outhouse and jaw-dropping views of Silver Star peak, Kangaroo Ridge and the massive east face of Liberty Bell Spire. With good binoculars and a little luck you might even spot climbers negotiating the famous 'Liberty Crack'.
3. Continue heading west past views of Cutthroat Spire, Black Peak, Rainy Pass, Easy Pass and then through a long and winding descent along Granite Creek to the Ross Lake overlook. Pull over and enjoy stunning vistas of the lake and its surrounding peaks. A few miles later you will drop precipitously to the shores of Diablo Lake (look for Sasquatch tracks crossing the road) and another series of winding climbs and descents along the headwaters of the Skagit River. Stop in the small community of Newhalem to stretch your legs, use the restrooms or visit the store.
4. Now, with the sun behind you, head back east along your original route taking in a whole new set of breath-taking views and enjoying the 28 miles twisting climb that will eventually bring you back to Rainy Pass and a short hike out the dead flat asphalt covered trail that leads to Rainy Lake. As you continue east watch for the Wine Spire to suddenly appear directly in front of you. A long descent will eventually bring you back to the Methow Valley and Winthrop where a stop at the Lost River Winery (beside the baseball field) is highly recommended as is a short walk through the many shops and galleries the line downtown corridor.
5. Head back up to Sun Mountain via Twin Lakes Road and enjoy a short nap before dinner.