OREGON TRAIL TOUR ON INTERSTATE 84

EXIT 261 La Grande, Home of Eastern Oregon State College, on your way to Walla Walla and the northern flank of the Walla Walla Mountains. Terminals for Side Trip A. The round shape of the valley is due to intersecting fault systems that became active about one million years ago. To the north, Mount Emily rises from the plain along a fault; to the south, other faults have tilted Craig Mountain above the town of Union. To the east, Mount Harris and Mount Fanny are uplifted on faults. The Grande Ronde, or Great Round, valley was, from all pioneer accounts, a welcoming sight.

"A beautiful level basin, or mountain valley, covered with good grass, on a rich soil, abundantly watered, where a farmer would delight to establish." (Captain J.C. Fremont, 1843)

"It is, for settlement, the prettiest place I have seen on the route." (Major Oakeshott, 1849)

EXIT 266 Grande Ronde Valley. Ladd Marsh and old shallow lakes tie along an old river meander channel. Hot Lake, discovered in 1812, was a favorite resting place for early-day travelers.

"Some very white glistening upon the plain...found them to be the top of a dry salt lake, or marsh, very fine and rare, which is covered thickly with a fine powder, containing a large quantity of carbonate of soda." (Captain J.C. Fremont, 1843)

EXIT 271 Columbia River basalt in road cuts. A great outpouring of lava between 17 and 6 million years ago covered approximately 40,000 square miles in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and is up to two miles thick. These basalt flows issued initially from large cracks in the ground of the Walla Walla Mountains and the Snake River Canyon. Reddish and yellowish brown zones mark the weathered tops of individual lava flows.

EXIT 275 North Powder Terminus for Side Trip B. The Elkhorn Scenic Byway, Mica in the North Powder River was often mistaken for gold..."fool's gold."

"The sand and mud were full of shining particles which some took to be gold. There seemed so much to waste gold that they could not eat." (Lavinia Williams, 1851)

EXIT 279 Columbia River basalt on bluffs of Walla Walla Mountains to the historic lone tree. (USDA Forest Service)


EXIT 283 Oregon Trail crossing Baldschook Slough near historic lone tree.

"The place called Lone Tree is a beautiful valley in the region of Powder River, in the center of which is a solitary tree, by the side of which travelers usually stop to refresh themselves." (Nevin White, excursions, 1843)

"From the heights we had looked in vain for a well-known landmark. We had seen the river several times during our journey and we knew it by Mr. Pierce at the latter and the lone tree. We found a fine tall pine stretched on a level ground, which had been felled by some reckless emigrants." (Captain J.C. Fremont, 1843)

EXIT 288 White-stopped, 150-million-year-old granite core of the Walla Walla Mountains here. (USDA Forest Service)

"Some of these are very lofty; their peaks present a very fantastic appearance resembling the snow mountains. This is striking, dazzling, appearance they possess is derived I think from the material of which the peaks are composed, a kind of white clay." (James Palmer, 1853)

EXIT 302 Flagg Hill to the east. Future site of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. Location of Virtue Flat and the Virtue Mining District, where the Oregon Trail crossed close to the rich Virtue Mine discovered in 1862. Access to Side Trips C and D.

EXIT 306 The somewhat celebrated mine of Colonel Rockwell is situated eight miles east of Baker City, on the eastern slope of a range of hills overlooking a large interior basin, across which for many miles may be seen great, grand, white, dusty and impenetrable rock mountains (Oregon Trail). (R.W. Raymond, U.S. Commissioner of Mining Statistics, 1930)

EXIT 309 Baker City, Queen of the eastern Oregon gold fields. That glorious past is preserved through the National Register of Historic Places, Oregon Trail Regional Museum, and the modern Miners Jubilee (held each July). Access to Side Trips D and E.

EXIT 312 Griffin Gash on the flank of Elkhorn Ridge to the west. Here was the center of the old northeastern Oregon gold mining districts, where gold had been produced since 1861.

"Stack Fast"—Hatchings Illustrated California Magazine, 1855.

EXIT 320 Rattlesnake Cliffs. On your way to the Outhouse. From the Flagg Hill Overlook, you can see the Outhouse. (USDA Forest Service)

EXIT 323 High peaks of Elkhorn Ridge. These are fragments of 200-million-year-old ocean floor.

"At a distance we could see what we supposed to be the Blue Mountains, and they stuck us in terror. Their lofty peaks seemed a resting place for the clouds." (Median Licht, 1843)

EXIT 328 Old gold mines along Burnt River fishing, on an old volcanic neck, to the east at MP 332.

"There is hill, gash, and placer mines all the way up Burnt River from Espee Ranch. Course gold, worth $15 per ounce, lines the stream, high points from 20 to 50 feet above the river." (R.W. Raymond, U.S. Commissioner of Mining Statistics, 1873)

EXIT 332 Nelson Marble, 240-million-year-old limestone. The industrial complex west of I-84 is the largest "gold" mine in Oregon—but here the "gold" is limestone, a rock used in making cement and in refining sugar beets.

EXIT 336 Crossing Conner Creek Fault and 170- to 200-million-year-old ocean island and ocean floor rocks. This fault is the southern boundary of the "Gold Belt of the Blue Mountains." This crime can probably be dated as a collapse of pieces of several different generations of crust, broken and deformed both before and while they were being assembled by plate tectonic processes. (Oregon Trail)

EXIT 339 Lower Burnt River Canyon. The river cuts into a 150- to 200-million-year-old sedimentary rock formation named after nearby site of Weathervane.

"We are now traveling through a very mountainous country, the scenery running rather to a range than a valley, and the road is occasionally bad and dangerous. . . . The mountains. . . were composed, near the base, of a strata of calcareous rocks in a metamorphic condition." (Captain J.C. Fremont, 1843)

EXIT 343 Kly Valley Access to Side Trip D.

EXIT 349 Huntington. Gateway to water recreation on 40-mile long Browder Reservoir; starting point for Side Trip E.

EXIT 353 Farewell Bend. Active sand dunes are being formed from flood deposits of the Ice Age (140,000 years ago).

"Hence we descended to the Snake River. . . it forms here a deep bay, with a low sand island in the middle." (Captain John C. Fremont, 1843)

EXIT 359 Tilted and faulted blocks of volcanic rock 15 million years old.

"The mind can hardly appreciate the amounts of dynamics adequate to displace and disrupt the surface of the earth so immensely. It appears like a great gavotte, fit only for Humans to use in leveling off the surface of some planet. Oh, when shall I view, once more, a verdant landscape! One thousand miles of naked rock!" (Bryce Ross, 1884)

EXIT 370 Ice Age loess (fine dust) deposits. "Proceeded about five miles over a very dusty road till it became so bad that we could not see our team or hardly breathe and were obliged to leave to have a season." (Cecelia Adams and Plathana Black, 1852)

EXIT 376 Crossing Malheur River. Oregon Trail crossing is 12 miles west at hot springs at Vale Butte—a place for the early-day travelers to rest and bathe.

"Temperature of the water was 197. The ground, which was too hot for the naked foot, was covered and below the springs with an incrustation of common salt, very white and proof." (Captain John C. Fremont, 1843)

EXIT 382 Ontario. Gateway city into Oregon, on the fertile plain at junction of Malheur and Snake Rivers. Vegetables, grains, and sugar beets are grown here under irrigation. Oregon Trail enters state further south and is farther west at this point. Starting point for Side Trip F.

"Farwell Bend, Snake River"