

# Staying in the Loop

The seeds for exploring Steens Mountain in the remote high desert of southeastern Oregon were planted over a decade ago while I was riding fine singletrack in the Wind River Range with Dale Hill, an avid cyclist from Wyoming. He said he'd heard that the massive mountain was nearly 10,000 feet tall,

loaded with wildflowers, and contained a backcountry byway loop that traversed all its wonders. It was one of those trips that sounded great, but for some reason it was always kept on the back burner. After passing through the Steens' region while on another excursion, I got the needed taste of



# on Steens Mountain

the alluring Oregon outback and decided it was high time to give Dale a call and finally make this trip come alive. All good things come in time, right?

The base for our journey around Steens Mountain was the tiny burg of Frenchglen. When I say tiny, I mean a hotel, a mercan-

tile, a Bureau of Land Management fire-crew station, a few residences, and thankfully for a caffeine-hound like me, Joe Mama's, a coffee-stand oasis in the middle of the Oregon backcountry. For a barometer of its remoteness, consider that the town could not flick on a light bulb until electricity arrived in

Story and photos by Chuck Haney

1959. The settlement is flanked to the north by the immense Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, which attracts birders nationwide with a great variety of waterfowl, songbirds, and raptors, especially during the spring and autumn migrations.

While Dale and I were savoring our home-cooked breakfast of fluffy pancakes and French toast at the Frenchglen Hotel, we couldn't help but wonder, "So, where exactly is the mountain, anyway?" Although the Steens present a dramatic mountain view from the east, the western perspective from Frenchglen is nothing more than a gradual slope. We were about to find out exactly how long that gradual slope was by pedaling the twenty-five miles up to the summit.

Steens Mountain was named after Major Enoch Steen, who explored the region with the United States Army around 1860. The mountain itself is a result of a fault in the earth's tectonic plates. Massive internal pressure has forced the eastern edge of the Steens upward into a thirty-mile long, fault-block mountain with a spectacular and rugged east face that rises abruptly over a vertical mile from the Alvord Desert below. In fact, the mountain is such a dominating force of nature that it creates its own weather. While rain and snow accumulate on the west side keeping creeks and rivers flowing all season, the mountain's mass blocks moisture from reaching the parched Alvord Desert, where a scant six inches of rain reaches the ground in an average year.

After our leisurely and tasty breakfast at the Frenchglen Hotel, Dale and I had time to kill because the lady who owned the Frenchglen Mercantile decided not to arrive until 9:30 on that particular morning and we needed more gasoline for the shuttles we planned for our mountain-bike tour. In Frenchglen, there simply are no other options. We spent the spare time making phone calls on the public pay phone because cell service was not available. State law in Oregon dictates that gas station attendants must pump the fuel into your vehicles, so by the time the mercantile proprietor arrived there were three vehicles lined up to be filled. Our host promptly informed us that no credit cards would be accepted and then grumpily filled our thirsty vehicles. By the time Dale and I had dropped off my vehicle at our first



**Waiting for weary cyclists.** Turkey vultures take advantage of what man has made.

night's destination and returned to Frenchglen to begin our ascent, it was already near noon, with the sun blazing and the temperatures in the mid-eighties.

As we left town on our bikes, we received a stroke of cycling grace — a giant road grader scraping gravel toward us meant the road would be smoother with less washboard than we'd anticipated. I would have high-fived the driver if possible, but a simple friendly wave had to suffice.

We soon passed by the remnants of the P-Ranch headquarters. Hollywood could easily make an epic movie about the life story of the region's most famous resident, Peter French. French worked for the Sacramento Valley, California, wheat baron, Hugh Glenn. Glenn sent the twenty-three-year-old French into the Oregon country in search of grazing lands. French arrived in the Blitzen Valley in 1872, trailing some 1,200 shorthorn cattle, over 200 head of horses, and leading a crew of Mexican *vaqueros* called buckaroos. French established a ranch that turned into an empire. At one time, this ranch spread out over 200,000



**Good eatin'.** The Frenchglen Hotel provides the chow before the trail riding begins.

acres, complete with 45,000 cattle and 5,000 horses that were tended by over 200 buckaroos, making it one of the largest cattle ranches in the country. The ranch

acquired all the water rights in the valley and when other settlers started moving in, French was not about to sell any land to accommodate these newcomers. The day

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after Christmas in 1897, French was shot and killed by an angry homesteader who was later found not guilty of murder because many local landowners despised French's somewhat shady land dealings. With the death of the cattle king, the empire crumbled as the ranch split into many hands. Beside the ranch headquarters there is a unique round barn that French constructed to break horses. It is still in good condition near the tiny community of Diamond.

We crossed the Donner and Blitzen River, named in 1864 by a military expedition that attempted to cross the river during a thunderstorm while pursuing the local Native Americans (*donner* and *blitzen* mean thunder and lightning in German). Soon we were pedaling a steady seven miles an hour along the fragrant sagebrush plains of the high desert, hoping that we would not be passed by too many cars because every cloud of dust in the distance indicated we were about to receive an all encompassing dust bath. You know it's a dusty road when the back windows of passing cars have "Wash me" covered by another layer of dust on top.



**Refreshingly clean.** Chuck pumps while Dale scrubs himself clean of the day's trail dust.

Luckily for us, most of the passing cars were very considerate and slowed down so we did not choke on the fine dust particles. Perhaps, judging by some of the strange inquisitive looks we received from the pas-

sengers and drivers alike, the Steens Loop doesn't receive many cyclists. Maybe the novelty of twenty-five miles of climbing has something to do with that?

During our first rest break, under



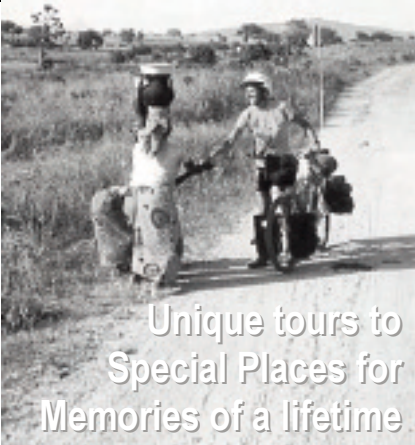
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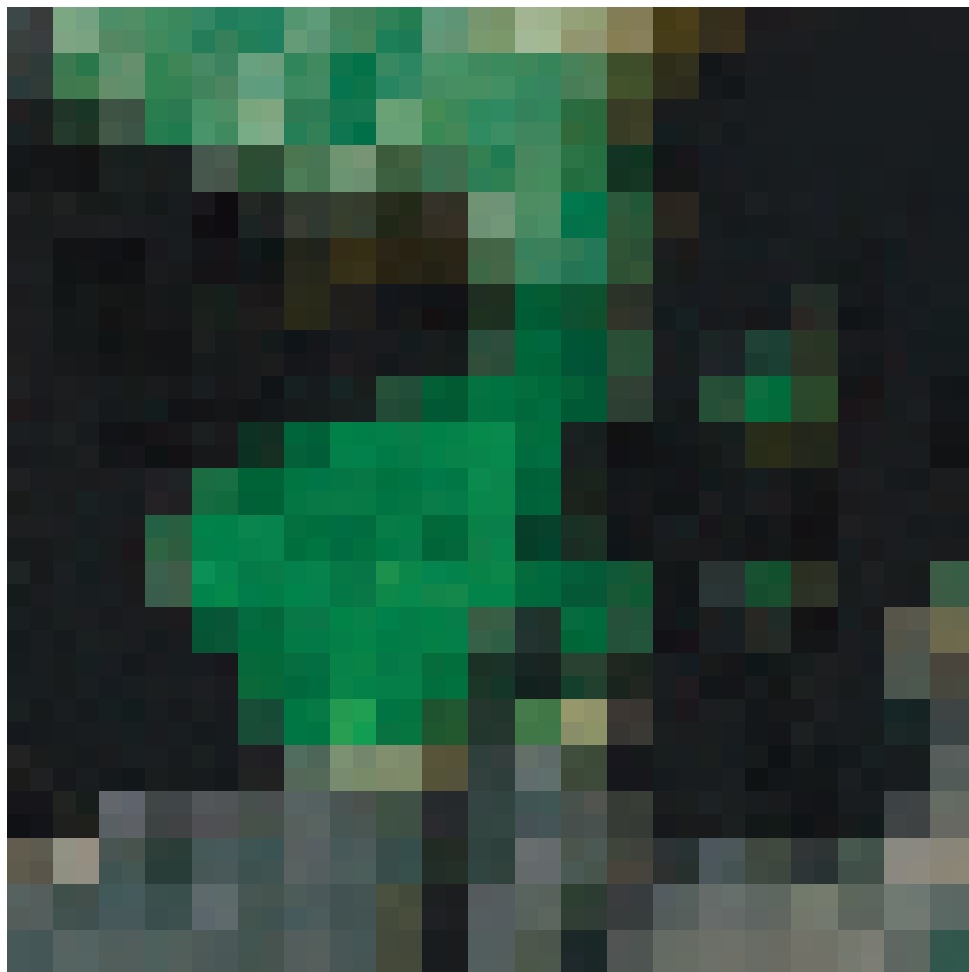
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much-needed shade of giant juniper trees, I heard Dale exclaim, “Life is good!,” a mantra that would be repeated for our brief three days in this exceptional country. We agreed that this part of Oregon could be good therapy for a person who needs a respite from the daily grind of modern civilization.

As Dale and I rode, we noticed the ecological transitions as we gained elevation. The high desert sagebrush at lower elevation was replaced by a landscape full of juniper trees and grasses. Then we began to see stands of quaking aspen and meadows as we neared our first day’s destination, the Jackman Park Campground. The campsite was a welcome relief after climbing seventeen miles and gaining nearly 3,500 feet in the heat of day. We were two tired and dirty hombres as we relaxed under the shade of an aspen tree and then set up camp. Soon the prospect of washing off all the accumulated dust from our extremities with an old-fashioned long-handled water pump was irresistible. Refreshing is actually a dull term to describe the sensation of ice-cold water splashing hot, dry skin. Seconds after the gushing ice water coated my head, I felt like I’d eaten ten ice-cream cones at once. The back of my head was literally frozen, and I had a headache. Still it was fun, the pain soon subsided, and I did feel quite refreshed and much cleaner, ready for camp dinner and tomorrow’s big day to reach the summit of Steens Mountain.

The next morning brought a much earlier start to our ascent. Cool temperatures and a changing landscape kept our banter lively in between deep breaths, as we were now over 8,000 feet in elevation and above tree line. Grassy knolls and sweeping meadows filled with pockets of alpine wildflowers dominated our vision. We felt like we were riding in the Pyrenees Mountains, a landscape we’d seen a few weeks earlier while watching the Tour de France on television. We were hardly holding Tour pace, however, because we were reduced to five miles an hour as the road grade steepened the higher we climbed. We took a breather at the Kiger Gorge overlook. Kiger is one of four immense gorges that descend from Steens Mountain. Retreating glaciers dug these perfect U-shaped gorges artfully during the last ice age. I liked the apt description on the interpretive sign: “Bulldozed by a glacier.” As Dale stopped to





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**Pleasant cruising.** Dale glides along the Steens Mountain Back Country Byway.

admire another fantastic view, this time of the Little Blitzen Gorge, I was feeling good and pressed on for the summit. Maybe I was spurred on because there was such a burst of life in this part of Oregon. Although it had been mostly devoid of human population, the valley floor of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge was abuzz with insects, birds that eat insects, and a wide variety of flora and fauna. Meanwhile, nearing the nearly 9,800-foot summit, riding where the air was still and crisp (and also very thin!), butterflies were exploding from wildflowers, and golden eagles and hawks soared on thermals rising from the desert below. I reached the parking lot of the East Rim viewpoint and decided to pedal the very last twenty feet to the sign overlooking the Alvord Desert over a mile below. Then, boom, without warning my ride was suddenly over. My chain had slipped over the last cog and into my spokes breaking my derailleur hanger, bending my derailleur, snapping my cable, and breaking the chain. My elation quickly turned into grumbling four-letter words that I can't repeat in this magazine. Later I found that my lockring holding my rear cassette had loosened, causing this mechanical mishap. After Dale reached the summit, I made the best of the situation, turning my steed into a singlespeed. I proceeded to coast the eight miles to my car back at the Jackman campground.

After returning to my trusty Subaru, I rendezvoused with Dale at the South Steens Campground tracing the same route as if I had pedaled. The first five miles of the descent were fairly smooth with spectacular views in all directions. The next few miles turned rocky and bumpy as the road clung to a hogback spine separating the Little Blitzen and Big Indian gorges. I couldn't help imagining, while keeping my foot on the brake, how much more fun and speedy it would be on a mountain bike than in a car. But at that point I was reduced to a cyclist's daydream.

The following morning brought a beautiful sunrise full of puffy clouds, the perfect start for Dale's return ride to Frenchglen and my hike into the Little Blitzen River Valley to explore the BLM's Riddle Brothers Ranch National Historic District. Walter, Frederick and Benjamin Riddle settled on this side of Steens Mountain in the early 1900s to raise

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## Nuts & Bolts: Steens Mountain, Oregon

### Best times:

The Steens Mountain Back Country Byway loop is usually open from mid-July through October, depending on snowfall amounts. Contact the Burns, Oregon, District Office of the BLM for information at (541) 573-4400. Temperatures can be high on the valley floor so early starts are recommended.

### Precautions:

Besides the high temperatures, mosquitoes can be a nuisance. Although we didn't experience many on our trip, they do have a reputation in the area. There are rattlesnakes at lower elevations, whereas, up higher, thunderstorms with lightning can pop up suddenly and there is little cover available. The road can be dusty and full of washboard; the last several miles of the descent into South Steens

Burns, unless you like paying even more and depending on the mercantile in Frenchglen to be open. Also stock up on food and all other supplies in Burns, sixty miles north of Frenchglen.

### Other cool things in the area:

The immense Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is one of the crown jewels of the National Wildlife Refuge system. It was established by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 as a reserve to stop the slaughter of swans, egrets, herons, and grebes by plume hunters. An amazing variety of birds and wildlife now call it home. Check out the old lookout tower beside the P-Ranch; each morning the beams are filled with turkey vultures basking in the sunlight.

The Peter French Round

The Frenchglen Hotel, built in 1916, is on the National Register of Historic Places, and is an undiscovered gem of with clean and simple rooms. (You're not here to watch TV, right?) Delicious fresh-cooked meals are also available, and family-style dinners are served if you make the required reservation. Breakfast and lunch do not require reservations, so have Glenda make you some buttermilk pancakes to fuel up before the big ascent. It's a great place to meet other travelers, and having a cup of coffee on the screened-in front porch is living the good life. Reservations are recommended for lodging. Call 541-493-2825, or email [fghotel@centurytel.net](mailto:fghotel@centurytel.net).

### Contact information:

**Harney County Chamber of Commerce**, (541) 573-2636, [www.harneycounty.com](http://www.harneycounty.com).

**Burns District BLM**, (541) 573-4400, [www.or.blm.gov](http://www.or.blm.gov).

**Malheur National Wildlife Refuge**, (541) 493-2612, [www.r1.fws.gov/malheur](http://www.r1.fws.gov/malheur).

**Travel Oregon**, (800) 547-7842, [www.traveloregon.com](http://www.traveloregon.com). **Steens Mountain Resort**, (800) 542-3765, [www.steensmountainresort.com](http://www.steensmountainresort.com).

**The Narrows RV Park** is located thirty-five miles north of Frenchglen, (800) 403-3294, [www.thenarrowsrvpark.com](http://www.thenarrowsrvpark.com).



Campground is rough with exposed rock and dropoffs. A cell phone will work at the top of the mountain but is as useless as a kickstand any lower, including town. Stock up with gas in the largest and nearest town of

Burns. The barn is located near the tiny burg of Diamond northeast of Frenchglen. Built in the 1880s to break horses, it is in remarkable condition, and there is even a visitor center. Call (888) 493-2420.

livestock. Apparently the tranquil valley was a good place for a man to be close to his horse because the three Riddle brothers remained bachelors for their entire lives. I explored a wonderful set of preserved buildings while

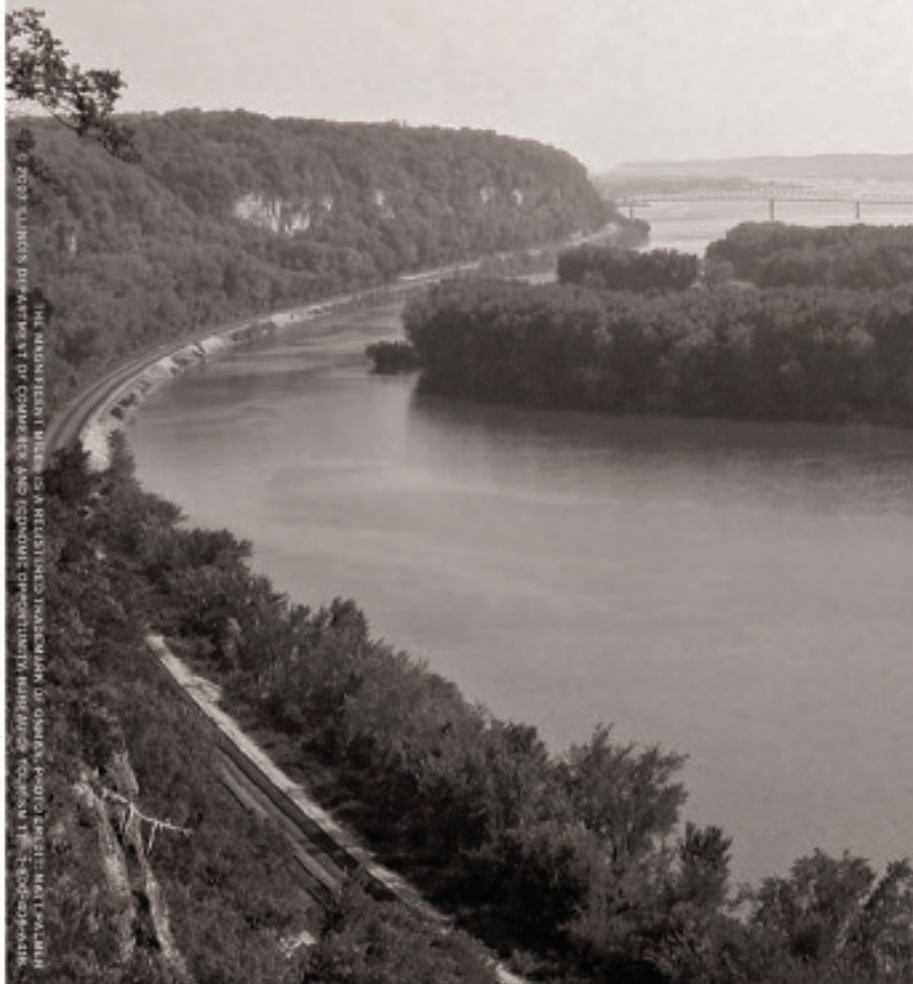


Dale kept an eye out for the band of wild horses that inhabit the Steens' south side as he tackled eighteen miles of jarring wash-board (our friend the grader hadn't reached this section of the loop yet) until he reached the smooth pavement of Highway 205. From there it was another ten miles back along the empty stretch of asphalt to Frenchglen, highlighted by the last two miles being fourteen percent downhill. Upon re-entering town, I went straight to Joe Mama for an iced latte to wash down the road dust and for an afternoon pick-me-up.

Dale and I reconnoitered at the hotel. Over lunch, we eagerly discussed the road-riding possibilities in the area, especially in spring when the mountaintops are still snow-capped and the bird migration is in full swing. If all goes according to plan, an article about these road rides will appear in *Adventure Cyclist* later in the year. **AC**

*Chuck Haney is a bicyclist/photographer who also takes pleasure in other hobbies, such as barn spotting. He is a regular contributor to Adventure Cyclist and more about him and his photography can be found at [www.chuckhaney.com](http://www.chuckhaney.com).*

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