

STEENS MOUNTAIN

Road Riding in Southeast Oregon

Story and photos by Chuck Haney



By virtue of its sheer ruggedness, the remote, high desert outback of southeastern Oregon has a strikingly simple appeal. Travel in this country is reduced to basic questions. Do I have enough water? Did I remember the patch kit? A map? Out here, self-reliance is as valued a commodity as a full Camelbak on a scorching day.

On my first visit to the area, I decided to check out the region's icon, the massive 30-mile-long Steens Mountain, by climbing the 25 miles to the summit via the churning wheels of my mountain bike (March 2007 issue of *Adventure Cyclist*). During this initial visit, the paved roads down in the valley floor looked so inviting that I couldn't resist a return trip. This time, instead of slowly climbing skyward on

fat rubber over gravel, I chose to circumnavigate the lonesome miles around Steens Mountain on a sleek road bike via low-trafficked valley roads decked with smooth, black pavement.

After 16 years of dependable service, my trusty Davidson road bike found a new home, hanging from the garage hooks. I finally plunked down the money for a new road bike, another Davidson, a few weeks before departing for Oregon. I arrived eager to put some miles on it while cruising past equally new scenery.

My first ride was along the East Steens Road. The surrounding landscape was carpeted in springtime green and full of bird and wildlife activity. I did an out-and-

back ride of 23 miles in which I counted five jackrabbits, two red-tailed hawks (probably searching for those jackrabbits), approximately 87 dung beetles crossing the road, several herds of cattle gazing distantly in the sagebrush, and a total of two automobiles. It was a numerical ratio that would happily carry on through the remainder of the week.

I rendezvoused with *Adventure Cyclist* editor Mike Deme on a rainy Sunday afternoon in the area's largest town, Burns, population 3,000. Historically, when Mike and I get together for a road trip, *interesting* things happen. Turbulent cold fronts follow us and seemingly collide as we, regardless of season, routinely encounter sleet, snow, and mud during our rides. I guess by now we could have predicted the inevitable — on our first outing, a spin north up Highway 205 from Frenchglen to the Narrows, we encountered constantly increasing headwinds with a brief squall of grauple, which is a soft, opaque hail.

The challenging weather didn't diminish the ride's beauty, however, as the empty highway led us past chocolate-colored boulders that had crumbled and rolled down



Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Wetlands and wildlife surround Steens Mountain.

from higher cliffs and were guarded by high romanesque walls of colorful lichen-splashed basalt. Without the constant whirl of automobile traffic, the ride was reduced to the basic elements of sky, hills, and a whole lot of sagebrush. We arrived at the Narrows, which is where the roadway bisects two

large lakes on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. One of the owners of the RV park there, Linda, turned out to be the sister of a good friend of mine back in Whitefish. It really is a small world.

Other than dealing with inclement weather, we goofed up as usual, like forgetting keys and front wheels during our shuttles. A raccoon or two set off my car alarm in the middle of the night at our campsite, rudely awakening the other slumbering campers. I earned the trip's dummy award by almost rolling my car off a rocky embankment in my rush to catch the sunrise. (Note to self: defrost the window longer!)

For our second ride, we decided to explore the Diamond area between Frenchglen and the Narrows, which lies right in the heart of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and the cowboy country of massive Harney County. The county itself covers over 10,000 square miles, making it larger than several eastern states. Although the county boasts of mammoth things like the refuge, vast ranches, and a 30-mile-long mountain, the population remains a minuscule 7,600. All those statistics add up in the cyclists' favor, and we pedaled along relaxed enough to have a conversation without worrying about the next oncoming vehicle. One constant of our ride was waterfowl — mallards and white-faced ibis exploded skyward from seemingly every canalway and flooded grassland we glided past. Malheur National

Wildlife Refuge was established in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt to prevent the slaughter of swans, egrets, herons, and grebes by plume hunters who sent their feathers back to New York and France to make fancy hats (the slaughter was so great that egrets were almost exterminated). The refuge is nearly 40 miles long and 40 miles wide, making it a haven for birds and wildlife. Besides all of the bird life we encounter during the ride, we also saw plenty of mule deer, antelope, and — a rare sighting for us mountain boys — badgers.

We rode to the Peter French Round Barn Visitor Center where we visited with the other prevalent road travelers of Harney County at this time of year, the birders. With their checklists in hand and binoculars at the ready, we appreciated their slow driving pace as they traveled along the same county roads we cycled. At the barn site, Mike and I decided to take different routes to the tiny burg of Diamond, population 5, to meet for lunch at the Diamond Hotel. Mike was riding his touring bike with wide tires, so he decided to take the shorter route to Diamond via gravel roads while I looped back on the pavement. I arrived at the hotel's restaurant and sipped on a beverage while awaiting Mike's arrival. After an hour of waiting, I was getting worried. If Mike disappeared, how would this story ever get edited? With typical small-town hospitality, the friendly owners of the hotel told me, "We have a red car out in the parking lot with the keys in it. Go look for your friend." I drove the red car up the gravel road that Mike was due to have traveled, but there was still no trace of him. After returning to the hotel, I decided that Mike must have ridden right by the establishment. After all, it's not that hard to miss a town with a population of five. I jammed the 12 miles back to our shuttle car through a brief hailstorm, and sure enough, there was Mike awaiting my return. I told you our travels are full of unexpected adventures!

We hoped our ride would be smoother the next day as we shuttled a car ahead to the tiny town of Fields. Fields began as a stagecoach stop between Burns

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East of Steens Mountain. Chuck rides the salt flats of the Alvord Desert.

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and Winnemucca, Nevada, in 1881, and not much has changed in over 125 years, as is evident by the slogan I kept reading to describe it: “this is as far as one can get from anywhere.” Just down the road from Fields, at the turn of the last century, Chinese laborers worked seven days a week raking boron from the ground and then boiling it in steel vats fired by sagebrush. The resulting product was borax, and a ton of it was produced daily to be used in laundry deter-

gent. It was then hauled by 20-mule teams to the railhead at Winnemucca 130 miles away. Our labor was angling upward out of Fields on a nice six-mile climb past green-laden hills and mountains that reminded Mike of his cycle tour of Iceland. I commented that this was more like a Seinfeld episode, “a ride about nothing.” Our only thoughts were of the next pedal stroke along a steady black ribbon of asphalt,

engulfed by the fragrance of sagebrush. It was all perfectly balanced below a blue sky, and only a craving for the next tasty home-cooked meal at the roadside diner gave us any need for speed. The ride from Fields to Frenchglen is 52 miles, and most of that mileage encompasses the largest cattle ranch in the West. At approximately 500,000 acres, the Roaring Springs Ranch is not your typical cow-and-calf operation. There is even an

Nuts & Bolts: Steens Mountain

Statistics: A 240-mile counter-clockwise loop can be done using the region’s largest town, Burns, as the base. There is roughly 192 miles of uncrowded paved road and another 48 miles of gravel on the East Steens Road. A touring bike with 28-38mm tires would work fine on the gravel section. Add another 45 to 80 miles if you also choose to ride the Diamond Loop from Frenchglen. The paved road surface is excellent with nary a pothole and little automobile traffic. There are no services between the tiny burgs, and cell-phone service is virtually nonexistent.

Accommodations: One of the best things about riding in Harney County are all the homey accommodations available that come with great meals. Here are some of the best. **The Narrows RV Park:** (www.thenarrowsrvpark.com, 800-403-3294) is located 26 miles south of Burns on Highway 205. Besides the camping options, there are showers, good food, espresso, and Wi-Fi services. **Frenchglen:** The Frenchglen Hotel features eight charming rooms. Built in the 1920s, the hotel serves outstanding meals family style with reservations required for dinner. You don’t

have to be a guest to have breakfast or lunch. Call 541-493-2825. Just 3 miles down a gravel road is the Page Springs campground, which sits along the Blitzen River. Next door is Steens Resort (www.steen-sresort.com, 541-493-2415), an RV park with showers.

Diamond: Hotel Diamond (www.central-oregon/hoteldiamond, 541-493-1898) is located 12 miles east of Highway 205 in a beautiful valley and features friendly service, outstanding food, and cozy accommodations. **Fields:** Here you’ll find the Fields Station, part general store, liquor store, restaurant, and lodging. The food is excellent, and they are known for their handmade milk shakes and hamburgers. Next door, the Alvord Inn (www.alvordinn.com, 877-225-9424) was a pleasant stay. **East Steens Road:** You can camp right on the Alvord Desert



playa floor. There is also camping across the road from the hot springs and farther down the road at Mann Lake.

Nearby attractions: The Pillars of Rome are 100-foot-high cliffs located about an hour’s drive east of Steens Mountain off Highway 95 near the tiny burg of Rome. The Owyhee River is a popular canoeing destination. The neighboring ranch owns the Alvord Desert Hot Springs, but public use is permitted at this rustic spring in its picturesque setting. The Peter French Round Barn (www.roundbarn.net, 888-493-2420) is located near Diamond northeast of Frenchglen. Built in the 1880s to break horses, it is in remarkable

condition, and there’s an impressive visitor center with plenty of souvenirs to choose from. **Advice and precautions:** Spring and fall are the best times to road-ride in the Steens area. Summer temperatures can be hot and the mosquitoes fearsome. We didn’t experience bugs in May, but a few storms popped up, and there is little cover at times. Services are few and far between with little automobile traffic, so carry plenty of water and repair items on your bike. Spring brings plenty of birds to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and they are constant companions as you pedal along the refuge wetlands. Lots of birders come to fill up their checklists. With that in mind, if you plan on staying at any of the area’s hotels, make reservations well in advance.

Contacts: Harney County Chamber of Commerce: www.harneycounty.com, (541) 573-2636. **BLM:** www.or.blm.gov, (541) 573-4400. **Malheur National Wildlife Refuge:** www.r1.fws.gov/malheur, (541) 493-2612. **Travel Oregon:** www.traveloregon.com, (800) 547-7842.



Post-ride relaxation. Chuck soaks in the Alvord Desert Hot Springs.

airstrip near the ranch headquarters; I assume the plane is used to spot cattle as they prepare to move the herds. Our ride in the Catlow Valley was spent simply enjoying the ranch, a few ponds, a great view of Hart Mountain to the west, and a car pass-

ing by every 3 or 4 miles. It was a relaxing ride, to say the least. We hugged along Catlow Rim and spied up into remote canyons and cave entrances that once sheltered Native American tribes. Our last evening was spent lounging

with a few other tourists in the Alvord Desert Hot Springs along the East Steens Road. In the midst of the Steens Mountain rain shadow, the Alvord Desert is the driest spot in Oregon, receiving an average of four scant inches of rainfall annually. There is a party of land yachts at the edge of the desert preparing for the next day’s winds to fill their sails. The incredibly flat and smooth desert playa makes the perfect platform for these wind-propelled vehicles. With a couple of local microbrews, Mike and I toast to the “ride about nothing.” More accurately, the ride around Steens Mountain really has been a ride about something, something precious. If only for a short time, riding in the Steens area seemingly wound back the clock a few decades. In the Oregon out-back, the simple pleasures really shine. **AC**

Chuck Haney is a photographer who makes his home in Whitefish, Montana. He often awakes at an insanely early hour to capture images that appear in Adventure Cyclist, photography books, and calendars. He also teaches photography courses — www.chuckhaney.com.

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