

8 Stunning Local Wonders You Should Visit This Summer

You don't have to leave Washington to see amazing wonders



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PUBLISHED ON: JUNE 11, 2018





Awesome wonders right in our backyard

Sure, pictures of icy Nordic fjords, Guilin's limestone karst hills or the Great Barrier Reef may make you long for an international summer vacation but turns out, we've got some pretty great spots in our own backyard.

If you live in Washington, you don't need reminding that the active volcano Mt. Rainier is the fourth highest peak in the U.S. and a beauty at that. And you already know that Snoqualmie Falls is both taller and more beautiful than Niagara – while also offering an easy, family-friendly hike.

In fact, you're probably familiar with many places on this list (it's hard to keep a natural wonder secret) but there may just be a few surprises in the mix. Here are eight wonderful wonders in our own backyard.



PHOTO: Credit: Flickr, CC, Diana K

Mt. St. Helens

Unlike the lengthy recent eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull and Kilauea, the [1980 eruption of Mt. St. Helens](#) did most of its catastrophic damage in only a few minutes with the entire event over in a day. Fifty-seven people were killed when the eruption triggered the largest landslide in recorded history, and the entire north face of the mountain collapsed with ashes scattered across a dozen states. Nearly 40 years later, the area inside the blast zone is just beginning to show signs of new life.

For families, the [Johnston Ridge Observatory](#) at the end of State Highway 504 in the heart of the blast zone is the best way to see Mt. St. Helens. Displays, films and ranger talks at the Observatory tell the biological, geological, and human story of Mount St. Helens. There are hiking opportunities, a food cart and a gift shop.

The Observatory is only open in the summer and requires an \$8 day pass (kids under 15 are free) or recreation pass. Please leave pets at home.



PHOTO: Credit: Flickr, CC, BFS Man

Ape Cave

You expect to find lava tubes in Hawaii or Iceland, but Washington has one of its own, and it's a good one.

At roughly three miles long, [Ape Cave](#) is the third longest lava tube in North America. The two-part Ape Cave formed nearly 2,000 years ago from lava streaming down the southern flank of Mt. St. Helens. As the outer edges cooled into a hardened crust, the inner molten lava was able to drain away before it hardened, leaving behind a tube.

The shorter Lower Cave is an easy walk with level floors and a geographic anomaly called the Meatball. The longer Upper Cave is a more challenging, but more interesting hike, with more variation in topography, a natural skylight and a lava-fall ascent.



PHOTO: Credit: Flickr, CC, John Walker

Olympic National Park

New Seattle residents might still be under the impression that all rainforests are tropical. Definitions vary in the amount of rainfall required to qualify, but three sections of Olympic National Park — Hoh, Queets and Quinalt — meet them all with their 12 to 14 feet of rainfall each year.

[The Hoh Rain Forest Visitor Center](#) at the end of the Upper Hoh Road on the west side of the Olympic Peninsula is often the first point of contact with the only rainforest in the continental United States. Open daily during the summer, the visitor center is also the access point for two nature trails: the famous Hall of Mosses Trail and the Spruce Nature Trail.

Both are about a mile and suitable for young children. For avid hikers, the 17.3-mile Hoh River trail leads to Glacier Meadows on the shoulder of Mount Olympus.



PHOTO: Credit: Flickr, CC, Shubhika Bharathwaj

Kerry Park

Don't let proximity and familiarity lull you into forgetting about this natural wonder. Yes, it's just a city park — and, at 1.26 acres, a small one at that — but [Kerry Park](#) offers a free, public viewpoint that's jaw-dropping.

You'll find the park at the top of Queen Anne Hill with a direct lookout out over downtown Seattle and Elliott Bay with a backdrop of Mt. Rainier. It's the view on nearly every Seattle postcard and has appeared on screen as that Fraser saw from his condo as well in the cult classic "10 Things I Hate About You."



PHOTO: Credit: Flickr, CC, drburtoni

Columbia River Gorge

Even after last summer's devastating wildfires, the spectacular canyon where the Columbia River cuts through the Cascades is unmatched. [The Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge](#) is drier than the [Oregon side](#), but there are still enough awe-inspiring waterfalls to inspire a road trip.

And if you're looking for culture, The Wall Street Journal called the [Gorge Amphitheatre](#) near the town of George one of the most scenic concert venues in the world.



PHOTO: Credit: Michael Melford, National Geographic

Palouse/Scablands

If you don't know the geology, you might miss the wonder of the Palouse, a region of gently rolling wheat fields in southeastern Washington that contrasts with the nearby [Scablands](#), barren areas too soil-poor to support agriculture. But both the pastoral scene and the bare rock were formed by the same natural force: flooding so strong it defies imagination.

Beginning 20,000 years ago, the Glacial Lake Missoula covered an area the combined size of Lakes Erie and Ontario in what is now western Montana. Glaciers formed an ice dam that caused the water level in the lake to rise. Every few centuries, pressure from the lake caused the ice dam to collapse, resulting in floods so big they caused earthquakes. Containing as much water as all the rivers in the world today, the floods scoured the Scablands and deposited fertile loess soils from the lake bottom in the Palouse.

Today, a great spot to view the Palouse is [Steptoe Butte](#). To get a sense of the Missoula floods, visit [Palouse Falls](#) where the current water level is a dripping faucet compared to the floodwaters that carved the canyon it flows through.



PHOTO: Credit: Flickr, CC, Bethany Kankelborg

Long Beach

[Long Beach](#) isn't actually the longest beach in the world – that honor goes to the 150-mile Praia do Cassino in Brazil – but it is the world's longest continuous beach on a peninsula.

This 28-mile stretch of sand along Washington's southwest coast reaches from Gray's Harbor to almost the mouth of the Columbia River. Long Beach also marks the endpoint of the Lewis and Clark expedition. While it shares the postcard-perfection of tropical beaches, Long Beach's cold water and constant wind make it a better option for kites and clamdigging – perfect for a family-friendly weekend getaway.



PHOTO: Credit: Burke Museum

Blue Lake Rhino Cave

About 14 or 15 million years ago, a rhino was overtaken by basalt magma flows. The cooling magma formed rock around the rhino's body, which eventually decayed. Like a plaster cast, the rock remained in the shape of the rhino. And guess where you'll find that amazing fossil? In Eastern Washington, a few hundred feet above what is now called [Blue Lake](#).

The cave mouth can be viewed from the lake's surface (you can rent a row boat at Sun Village Resort). Skilled rock climbers can even crawl through the cave. Rumor has it that you can still see the impression of the rhino's belly button.

Climbing into the void not your jam? You can see a reconstruction of the rhino based on molds taken in the cave, as well as bone fragments found in the cave, at the much safer (and closer by) [Burke Museum](#) in Seattle.