

# Mount Rainier West Auto Tour

AAA's **Mount Rainier-West Auto Tour** explores Mt. Rainier National Park, beginning near sea level in the Puget Lowlands west of the park and rising to nearly 5,600 feet at Paradise and 6,400 feet at Sunrise, both located on the volcano's flanks.

**Distance:** 162 miles (196 miles with sidetrip)

**Location:** From Puyallup, a clockwise route around Mt. Rainier National Park

**Time:** 3.75 hours (4.75 hours with sidetrip)

**Caveats:** Approved traction devices recommended in winter; roads closed during heavy snow. Park closed in winter (late November - early April)

Mount Rainier is one of earth's great volcanos, and it dominates the Cascades skyline in Washington. Its massive dome-like summit is the highest point in the Pacific Northwest, and at 14,411 ft, Rainier is visible from distances of up to 150 miles in clear weather.

In 1899, Congress created the nation's fourth national park when it set aside 378 square miles around the peak. The park includes an impressive array of natural zones -- from dense forest of coniferous trees cloaking the lower slopes to alpine woodlands at higher elevations. Higher yet is the realm of rock, talus slope and perpetual ice. The volcano supports the largest single-peak glacial system in the contiguous states.

The entire route is paved, with the exception of the Mowich Lake side road. Roadways are mostly two-lane, with some multi-lane sections in the Puyallup-Sumner areas. There are sections of winding alignment between Ohanapecoh and Longmire, between Elbe and La Grande and on the Sunrise Road. During the snowy winter months, roughly from late November into early April, all roads in Mount Rainier National Park are closed, except the road from Ashford up to Paradise. This road is kept open except during heavy snowstorms. Winter motorists should have approved traction devices and carry tire chains

We start our Auto Tour in **PUYALLUP** (pop. 33,900, alt. 48 ft.), the busy commercial trading center of the fertile Puyallup Valley, noted for its spring displays of daffodils and tulips. In early April the city co-hosts the annual **Daffodil Festival** with its neighbors: Tacoma, Sumner and Orting. Puyallup was founded in 1877 by pioneer Ezra Meeker who had trekked west on the Oregon Trail in 1852. It was first named Franklin and became a center of the hop industry. It was later

renamed for the local Indian tribe -- Puyallup means 'generous people.' Commercial bulb growing dates back to the 1920s. Area attractions include the 1890 Italianate Victorian **Meeker Mansion** at 312 Spring Street, and the **Van Lierop Bulb Farm** east of town. The compact downtown area has a number of antique and second-hand stores, mostly on Meridian Street. On Saturdays from June through September **Pioneer Park** hosts a farmer's market. The **Western Washington Fairgrounds**, on the south side of town, hosts a range of events, including the Spring Fair, Victorian Country Christmas and the Western Washington Fair, held each September.

There is an outstanding view of the massive, snowy dome of Mount Rainer, 30 miles to the southeast, from Highway 167, which leads to **SUMNER** (pop. 8,585, alt. 70 ft.), three miles east of Puyallup. The city's name honors Charles Sumner, a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century statesman. The **Ryan House**, 1228 Main Street, built in 1875, serves as the local history museum. Like Puyallup, Sumner was an early center of hop growing. The whole area is now part of the rapidly-urbanizing region that stretches from Tacoma north through Seattle to Everett.

East of Sumner Highway 410 ascends a long ridge, emerging on a large plateau. Mount Rainier looms on the horizon. The highway skirts the sprawling suburban community of **BONNEY LAKE** (pop. 9,980, alt. 605 ft.). Despite its name, the town sits on the shores of Lake Tapps, several miles to the north. Highway 410 continues east to **BUCKLEY** (pop. 4,330, alt. 726 ft.), established around a shingle mill in the 1800s. The town was first called Perkins Prairie, later White Siding.

### **Side trip to Carbon River / Ipsut Creek**

This side trip leads 22 miles into the northwest corner of Mount Rainier National Park. From Buckley, take SR-162 southwest 2 miles. At the junction with SR-165 turn south. The district south of here was an important coal mining area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The weathered towns along this road still reveal vestiges of this period. **WILKESON** (pop. 417, alt. 795 ft.) has a number of interesting buildings, abandoned rail yards and mines. Two structures, the **Holy Trinity Orthodox Church** (1910) and the three-story **Wilkeson School** (1913) are on the National Register of Historic Places. Two miles south, **CARBONADO** (pop. 650, alt. 1,175 ft.) is another former coal mining town. Company-built clapboard houses line streets and concrete foundations are all that remain of once impressive mining structures. From the 1880s until World War II, coal from the Wilkeson-Carbonado mines was sent to Tacoma by rail, where it was shipped

to San Francisco to fuel Southern Pacific steam locomotives.

South of Carbonado SR-165 parallels the Carbon River, which flows at the bottom of a narrow gorge. Two branches of this road lead into the northwest corner of the park. One (signed as SR-165) winds 16 miles up to scenic Mowich Lake -- most of this road is gravel, and is closed during the snowy months (generally from late October or early November into June). The northern branch follows the Carbon River through **FAIRFAX** (alt. 1,345 ft.), once an important mining and lumbering center, now little more than a string of summer cottages. The highway continues along the river into Mount Rainier National Park, ending at **Ipsut Creek Campground**. This stretch of roadway is prone to flooding and has been subject to periodic closure. From the campground a trail leads 3.5 miles to **Carbon Glacier**, said to be the lowest elevation reached by a glacier in the 48 states. The Carbon River emerges from its debris-covered snout.

Back on Highway 410, **ENUMCLAW** (pop. 11,180, alt. 742 ft.) is a pleasant small city of comfortable homes, well-tended lawns, a prosperous business district and an enviable view of Mount Rainier. It serves as trading center for a rich agricultural plain dotted with dairies and horse farms. Farmers homesteaded in the area starting in the mid-1850s, and the town developed with the coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad in the early 1880s. Its name derives from a Native American word meaning 'home of evil spirits.' Local Indians evidently avoided the area because of violent thunderstorms in the nearby Cascades. During late July Enumclaw celebrates the King County Fair at the fairgrounds complex east of town. Held annually since 1863, this is the oldest event of its kind in the state.

Just east of Enumclaw Highway 410 enters the forested foothills of the Cascades. Two miles beyond a sprawling lumber mill, a road branches south to **Mud Mountain Dam**, featuring a viewpoint, picnic area, playground and hiking trails. The highway now follows the White River whose pallid hue springs from its glacial origins on Rainier's upper slopes. Seventeen miles east of Enumclaw the road passes through **Federation Forest State Park**. This cathedral-like old growth grove stands in marked contrast to the heavily logged landscape typical of the area. The interpretive center exhibits Washington's diverse natural history life zones. The park also has picnic tables and hiking trails.

Observant travelers will note subtle changes in the natural vegetation as we gain elevation. Campgrounds, summer cabins and recreation areas dot the route

between **GREENWATER** (pop. 50, alt. 1,650 ft.) and **SILVER SPRINGS** (alt. 2,675 ft.). Beyond Greenwater the highway is officially known as the **Mather Memorial Parkway**, a federally-designated National Scenic Byway. From the latter a road branches 7 miles up to **CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN** (pop. 25, alt. 4,380 ft.), a resort community set at the base of its 7,000-ft. namesake peak. While downhill and cross-country skiing draw most visitors, the area also offers summer hiking and a chair lift ride to the alpine area for a spectacular panorama of Mount Rainier. The mountain-top restaurant is Washington's highest dining establishment.

Just south of Silver Springs we enter **MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK**. Inside the park boundary note the striking change in the landscape -- here untouched by logging and commercial development. Five miles inside the park, at White River Junction, a road branches west, running along the White River through a lush forest of Douglas fir, western red cedar and western hemlock. The **White River Campground** is set in a deep, glacier-carved valley. From this valley the **Sunrise Road** climbs 3,000 feet in a series of switchbacks, leading through an alpine forest of fir and spruce up to the 6,000-ft. crest of Sunrise Ridge. Stop at **Sunrise Point** for a sweeping panorama of Rainier's sister Cascade volcanoes -- Glacier Peak and Mount Baker to the north; mounts Adams, St. Helens and Hood lie to the south. Here at the timberline, scattered stands of pyramidal Engelmann spruce mingle with alpine meadows at their peak bloom in July and August. At road's end is the **Sunrise Visitor Center** with exhibits of natural history. A day lodge offers food and beverage. A variety of trails wind through an alpine wonderland offering stunning close-hand views of Mount Rainier's glaciers. The Sunrise area is normally closed from mid-October until June.

From White River Junction, Highway 410 climbs gradually up to the 4,630-ft. summit of **Cayuse Pass**. There's a great view of Rainier just south of the junction. At Cayuse Pass SR-410 continues its ascent to the Cascade crest at Chinook Pass (see AAA's *Mount Rainier - East Auto Tour* for a description of the park from the east side). Continuing south from Cayuse Pass, we follow SR-123, which drops steeply into the valley of the Ohanapecosh River. At the **Grove of the Patriarchs** a loop trail leads through a stand of thousand-year-old Sitka spruce. Several miles down the road, **Ohanapecosh** features a visitor center and campground. In the early 1900s there was a popular hot springs resort here.

The next leg of our Mount Rainier circle trip follows the **Stevens Canyon Road**

across the southern part of the park. It climbs out of the Ohanapecosh Valley ascending Backbone Ridge, then dropping down to the Muddy Fork of the Cowlitz River. At **Box Canyon** it spans a narrow gorge, 115 feet deep and only thirteen feet wide. To the west it runs through Stevens Canyon proper, a treasure trove of alpine glacial features. The canyon itself bears the U-shape profile characteristic of glacial erosion. To the southwest, the ragged ridge of the Tatoosh Range is a feature known as an *arête*. Individual peaks of the ridge are called *horns*; the intervening passes are *cols*. Oval basins at the base of these peaks are known as *cirques*, carved out by the erosion of ancient glaciers. Lakes that form in these basins are *cirque lakes* -- if these occur in a string they are called *pater noster lakes*, like the string of beads on a rosary. *Hanging valleys* form beneath tributary glaciers -- the cliffs at their base are often a springboard for waterfalls. **Fairy Falls**, well north of the road and beyond our view, is Washington's highest with a total drop of 700 feet. Our route skirts several *tarns*, or alpine lakes. Two such features -- **Louise Lake** and **Reflection Lake** -- offer hiking trails.

Beyond Reflection Lake, the road winds up to **PARADISE** (summer pop. 300, alt. 5,557 ft.), located at timberline amid splendid alpine meadows on the volcano's southern flank. The historic **Paradise Inn**, a sprawling lodge of wood and stone built in 1917, offers seasonal lodging and dining. The **Henry M. Jackson Visitor Center** features displays of the park's natural history. A network of trails branch out from Paradise -- most lead upwards, through meadows dotted with trees; some climb above the tree line to snowfields and glaciers. The views are magnificent. The wildflowers are at their best in July and August. Due to the melting of the glaciers in the area, the famous **Paradise Ice Caves** no longer exist. In winter visitors can practice Nordic skiing, take snowshoe hikes and enjoy the **Paradise Snow Play Area**.

From Paradise the road twists down the Nisqually River valley, passing numerous viewpoints. Two miles west of Paradise Junction, a short walk leads to a view of **Narada Falls** (168-ft. drop). Six miles further down the road an excellent viewpoint offers a grand perspective of the massive **Nisqually Glacier** spilling down its steep valley. A further two miles along the road is **Christine Falls**, which cascades beneath the ornamental stone bridge. Just beyond is **Cougar Rock Campground**, the largest camping facility in the park.

In the dozen miles between Paradise and Longmire we drop nearly 3,000 feet. The park's administrative headquarters are at **LONGMIRE** (pop. 50, alt. 2,757

ft.). Here too is a **Visitor Center** and the **Longmire Museum**, housing natural and human history exhibits in the park's former headquarters building. It's said to be one of the oldest national park museums in the country. The historic **Longmire Gas Station** has a modest display of transportation in the park. Lodging is available year round at the **National Park Inn** (built in 1926). The 1911 log cabin nearby hosts a gift shop and general store. There are a number of hiking trails in the vicinity, including the **Trail of the Shadows**, which loops through a meadow where the Longmire Resort once stood. Other trails ascend nearby ridges for excellent views.

Three miles west of Longmire the highway crosses the path of the **Kautz Mudflow**. Torrential rains on 2 October, 1947, sent a flush of mud and debris down Kautz Creek. Note the stand of western red alder -- this was the first tree species to colonize the area after the mudflow tore out the original coniferous forest. Another three miles down the road, the **West Side Road** branches north. This gravel road leads into the seldom-visited west side of the park. Vehicular traffic is halted at milepost 3. The road continues another nine miles north, but is closed to motor vehicles due to recurring mudflows -- hikers are welcome to follow the old alignment to several trailheads.

Just inside the park boundary is **Sunshine Point Campground**, the only campground in the park open all year. Passing beneath the wooden arch, we leave Mount Rainier National Park. Our route continues as SR-706, running along the north bank of the Nisqually River. The community of **ASHFORD** (pop. 600, alt. 1,775 ft.), just outside the park boundary, was settled in the 1880s. First a sawmill town, it became the main gateway to Mount Rainier National Park when the Tacoma Eastern Railway reached the town in 1904. In the early days most park visitors came by train; passenger train service continued until 1926, the same year the road leading to the park was paved. Today, Ashford has a collection of comfortable lodgings and bed & breakfast properties. A mile west is the village of **NATIONAL** (pop. 50, alt. 1,605 ft.), formerly a lumbering center. In the early 1900s its large mill specialized in cutting long timber.

Highway 706 continues west to the town of **ELBE** (pop. 325, alt. 1,211 ft.), named by an early settler for the river valley in his native Germany. The **Little White Church**, built in 1906 for a German-speaking Lutheran congregation, measures a diminutive 18 by 24 feet. Its six rows of pews can accommodate up to 50 cozy worshippers. During the summer months, the **Mount Rainer Scenic**

**Railroad** offers steam-powered train trips from Elbe to the former lumber camp at **MINERAL** (pop. 530, alt. 1,770 ft.), a 12-mile round trip. The two-story lodge beside Mineral Lake, built in 1906, is an impressive example of log architecture.

West of Elbe, Highway 7 winds along the shore of **Alder Lake**. Several places along the lake offer camping, boating, boat rentals and picnic sites. A roadside viewpoint overlooks Alder Dam and the gorge downstream. Just north of the hamlet of **LA GRANDE** (pop. 100, alt. 940 ft.), named for the "grand" 400-ft. cliffs lining the Nisqually River, is **Pack Forest**, a research station operated by the University of Washington's College of Forestry. From the roadside interpretive center a seven-mile drive/trail loops through the forest, passing an arboretum and stands of tress of varying ages, including a 42-acre patch of old growth cedar, fir and hemlock.

Continue north on SR-161 to **EATONVILLE** (pop. 2,040, alt. 800 ft.), once an important lumbering center, founded in 1889. Its name recalls pioneer settler Thomas C. Van Eaton. After the railroad arrived in 1904, large-scale milling began. Eatonville retains the ordered, well-tended look of a company town and has a pleasant "main street" business district. On the north side of town, 2.5 miles west on Ohop Valley Road, is **Pioneer Farm Museum**. This 1880s homestead offers visitors a glimpse into rural life in the late 19th century. The site also includes an **Ohop Indian Village**.

**Northwest Trek**, 6 miles north of Eatonville on SR-161, is a 600-acre wildlife preserve. Electric trams carry visitors through natural habitats showcasing animals from the northwestern region of the continent. There are also walk-through exhibits.

Highway 161 continues north, crossing rolling, wooded country dotted with lakes. Occasionally you catch glimpses of Mount Rainier off to the southeast. Subdivisions and heavier traffic signal the southern suburbs of Puyallup, part of the sprawling Puget Sound conurbation.

jpk - October, 2001