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Features

JULY / AUGUST 2018

- 38** Backcountry Lodging
- 46** Creating Smiles:
Silverwood Theme Park
- 50** Explore 5 Northwest Caves
- 56** Travel Happily at 25 MPH
- 60** Road Tripping on
the Alaska Highway



ON THE COVER
Cabin Veranda
by Evan Schneider

THIS PAGE
Huckleberry Cabin
with wildflowers
by Nicole Freshley




BACK COUNTRY LODGING

*“Where we’re going,
we don’t need roads.”*

BY ADAM SAWYER

Ultima Thule Lodge



“Roads? Where we’re going, we don’t need roads.” At the time, that triumphant quote from Doc Brown at the end of “Back to the Future” elicited understandable laughter from movie-goers, as the revamped DeLorean became airborne and flew away. But that statement in and of itself makes for a fine little adventure motto. The reality is that some of the best places are far beyond the road’s end. If you explore the great outdoors at all, you already know that. But there are also hidden oases in this region that miraculously meld creature comforts with authentic wilderness experiences. They are the off-road lodges of the Northwest.



In addition to unparalleled scenery, some of these lodges provide chef-driven farm-to-table cuisine on par with any top-tier urban restaurant, or thoughtfully detailed luxury accommodations you'd expect to find in a downtown hotel in a major city. Others specialize in being comfortably rustic, serving as the perfect home base for instant access to the remote and wild attributes of their immediate surroundings. Getting to these places requires alternative modes of transportation—hiking, kayaking, horseback, a jet boat, raft, chartered flight or some combination thereof. But, however you access them, they are always exponentially worth the time and effort. Here are some of our favorites.

Minam River Lodge, minam-lodge.com

Miles from civilization and on the fringe of Oregon's spectacular 61,446-acre Eagle Cap Wilderness is the Minam River Lodge. Occupying an attractive plot of land near the banks of its namesake river, the lodge offers, among other things, unique access to one of the most strikingly beautiful protected areas in the state. The former hunting lodge has been spectacularly rebuilt into a retreat that showcases some of the best of the state's attributes—natural resources and top-tier food and drink. Guests can reach the lodge by taking an 8.5-mile hike or horseback ride or a charter flight to their airstrip. Once onsite, the accommodations range from wall tents and tipis to cabins and lodge rooms.

The main lodge houses the kitchen, dining room, a number

of reading nooks and a deck where wildlife sightings are common any time of day. It is open, architecturally clean and attractive, yet cozy. On top of all of that, there are the meals. The lodge has its own greenhouse and garden tended by Nicole Freshley. She does a lot to ensure that the garden is self-sufficient and that crops are grown sustainably. Culling influence from permaculture and organic growing methods, she composts, rotates crops and mulches to improve soil and crop vitality. Those harvested ingredients are then passed onto Chef Carl Krause. The Culinary Institute of America graduate was the chef at Portland's Biwa before coming to the lodge, where he augments what they grow with meats from local ranches. With Chef Krause's uncommon culinary intuition, the Minam Lodge kitchen produces a menu that would be worth the 8.5-mile hike itself. If you can tear yourself away from the lodge, the hiking options are limited only by your own willingness and physical capacity, and the pristine Minam River hides a few perfect swimming holes not too far from the resort grounds.

Mackay Bar Outfitters & Guest Ranch, mackaybarranch.com

Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness is as rugged and remote as it is distinctively scenic. The unreturnable river that the wilderness is named after is the legendary Main Salmon. In the heart of that remote territory, the waterway cuts through a dreamscape for backcountry activities—hunting, fishing, rafting, boating and more. The



Mackay Bar Outfitters and Guest Ranch

Salmon is the longest undammed, free-flowing river contained in a single state among the lower 48. And on its banks, some 340 miles from Boise, is the Mackay Bar Outfitters & Guest Ranch.

Purchased by Buck and Joni Dewey in December of 2012, the ranch is only accessible by raft, jet boat or charter plane to their private airstrip. Originally from McCall, Buck's family built a cabin a half mile from Mackay Bar, where he grew up fishing, hunting and, later, guiding throughout the wilderness area, including work for the Mackay Bar Outfitters. Joni owned and operated a CPA business in Grangeville until 2017 when she sold it to dedicate her time to ranch life. Having grown up hunting and spending summers on the Snake River, the transition to the Salmon wasn't terribly difficult. Now the young couple, along with eight-year-old son, Dax, spend most of their time hosting and guiding for guests at the ranch. Three cabins, four private rooms and the main lodge make up the facilities at the ranch. Family-style home cooked meals are served by the fireplace in the main lodge. They also specialize in group events from weddings to family reunions offering personalized backcountry activities, along with customized menus.



Mackay Bar Outfitters and Guest Ranch

Buck



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Ultima Thule Lodge

Ross Lake Resort, rosslakeresort.com

Washington’s North Cascades National Park is still somehow hiding in plain sight. One of the Northwest’s crown jewels, the more than 500,000-acre park is almost entirely protected wilderness. It is also home to one-third of all the

glaciers found in the lower 48 states, with over 300 of them. Deep within the park’s boundaries, the 20-mile-long Ross Lake was created by the damming of the Skagit River. At the southwest corner of the lake, you’ll find the Ross Lake Resort. Built in 1950, the resort is situated in a line of 12 individual

cabins and three bunkhouses built on log floats. It is the only facility on the lake and the only way to reach it is via the Diablo Lake Ferry or a hike coupled with a quick boat ride.

Despite their floating location, all cabins are completely furnished and include electricity as well as hot and cold running water. The cabins also come with kitchenettes, which you will be utilizing as there is no restaurant or store at the resort. The family-friendly establishment doesn’t charge for children under four and offers boat, kayak and canoe rentals, as well as rods and tackle for fishing. The lake and surrounding views are enough to keep most visitors occupied indefinitely, but if you prefer exploring on terra firma, miles of trails that explore the wilderness of the National Park can be accessed from the banks of the resort.

Note: Plan for your stay far in advance; Ross Lake Resort easily books up more than a year out.



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Ross Lake Resort

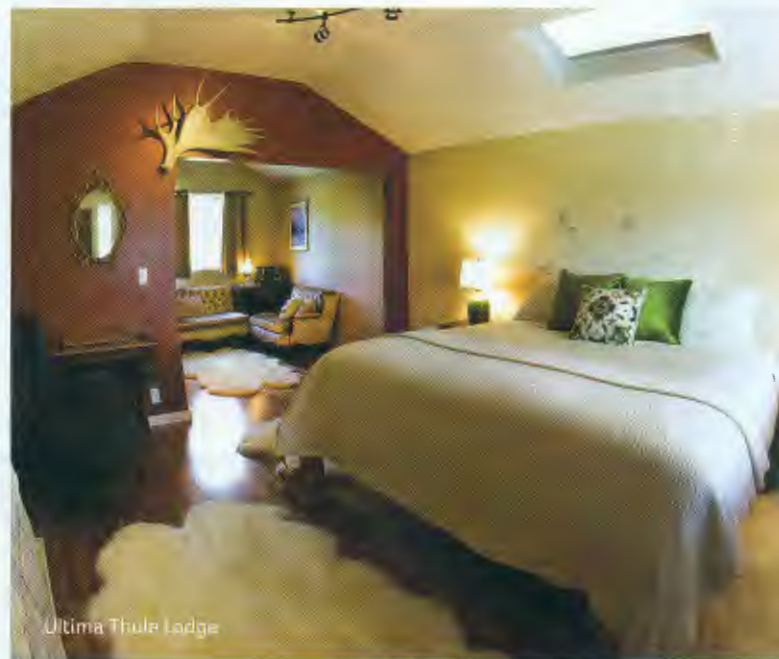


Ultima Thule, ultimathulelodge.com

If you really want to go off-road, there's no better place than the appropriately monikered Ultima Thule Lodge. The ancient Greeks used the name "Ultima Thule" to describe the unknowable realm beyond the charted world. That's a fair assessment of the massive valley that the Chitina River flows through. Eons before the arrival of European settlers, native Athabaskan tribes sent scouting parties into the valley, and when no expeditions returned, the area was deemed haunted and left unexplored.

Today that valley is in the middle of Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, the largest area managed by the National Park Service in the United States with a total of 13,175,799 acres, an expanse that could hold six Yellowstone National Parks. Completely untouched by humanity, it seemed like the perfect spot to John Claus, who staked a land claim under the Alaska Homestead Act in 1960. He then set about building a cabin for his family. Eventually, more Claus family members arrived and over time, constructed the Ultima Thule Lodge. The property sits 100 miles from the literal end of the paved and maintained road system, about 350 miles west of Anchorage. Your best option to reach the lodge is a chartered plane from there.

Guests stay in luxury cabins spread out on the property, meeting in the main lodge for meals. Donna Claus and her



staff utilize fresh Alaskan game and fish, vegetables pulled from the family garden, and home-baked everything for every meal—served at a banquet table that affords a floor-to-ceiling view of the valley. They also offer daily, customizable adventure tours that include hiking, fishing, skiing and flying—all at no extra cost. 🍷