

Mount Saint Helens from Johnston Ridge

Chapter 10

MOUNT SAINT HELENS



Mount Saint Helens from Smith Creek Viewpoint

MT. SAINT HELENS NATIONAL MONUMENT

On May 18, 1980, a sleeping volcano came to life with an explosion that literally blew the top off one of the highest peaks in the Cascade Mountains. Tons of volcanic ash blew miles into the sky and flowed down from the crater like a fast moving avalanche. Trees in hundreds of square miles of forest were blown down or blasted clean of leaves and branches.

In the years since the big eruption, some areas of forest have started to recover, but the devastated landscape near the blast site remains dramatically desolate looking. A minor eruption in 2004, and continuing frequent small plumes of steam and ash fall are reminders that Mount Saint Helens is still very much an active volcano.

The Klickitat Indians that lived in southwestern Washington called this magnificent mountain Loo-Wit, and visited the slopes in summer and fall to harvest berries, roots, and medicinal plants. Early in the twentieth century, campgrounds and lodges around the lakes, rivers, and meadows were favorite family recreation areas for many Washingtonians. The vegetation is starting to return now, and some lakes have re-opened for recreational use, but there are no lodges or campgrounds within Mount Saint Helens National Volcanic Monument. Road access is limited, and traveling between the three major visitor areas on the northwest, east, and southern sides of Mount Saint Helens requires a lot of driving and at least a day of time in each.

If your time at Mount Saint Helens is limited, I recommend that you visit the part of the Monument accessed by State Highway 504, also known as Spirit Lake Memorial Highway. Stop at the Mount Saint Helens Visitor Center at Silver Lake for a great introduction, and then head directly for the Johnston Ridge Observatory viewing area at the end of Spirit Lake Highway, 51 miles from I-5.

If you're not in a hurry, stop at each of the visitor centers along Highway 504 on the way to Johnston Ridge, each with its own perspective on the history and geology of the area. Note that hours at all but the Silver Lake visitor center are very limited in winter, and Johnston Ridge is inaccessible from November to early May.

There are also some excellent views of Mount Saint Helens to be found on the east side of the National Monument. With more time to explore, plan on a day on the east side with a sunrise shoot from Windy Ridge area and hikes to Norway Pass, Spirit Lake, and the Pumice Plain.

Spirit Lake Highway

Five miles east of Interstate 5 along State Highway 504 is the Mount Saint Helens Visitor Center at Silver Lake. With excellent displays it is a great introduction to the whole Mount Saint Helens experience and the knowledgeable staff can give you the latest on conditions in the national monument. Sequest State Park campground just across the highway is a good base if you're camping or RVing.

Driving east on Highway 504 you'll come to Hoffstadt Bluffs Visitor Center at milepost 27 and then the Forest Learning Center after six more miles, each focusing on a different aspect of Mount Saint Helens, effects of the eruption, and the ecology of the surrounding area.

Just as you actually enter the National Monument you'll come to Elk Rock Viewpoint, with a great panoramic vista of Mount Saint Helens, the Toutle River Valley, and forested ridges to the east and north. Most of the area on either side of the highway was salvage logged after the big blast, and note the replanting in some places with a monoculture of noble fir. A few miles further on the highway is Castle Lake Viewpoint, with an even better view. If you're visiting in winter, these viewpoints may be as far as you can get if there has been recent heavy snowfall.



Mt. Saint Helens in winter from Castle Lake Overlook

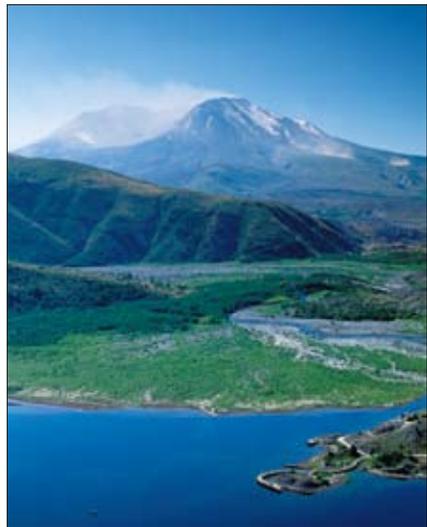
Photo advice: Look for a wide spot on the highway shoulder just beyond the turn for Castle Lake Viewpoint to pull over for another great view of the volcano. All of these viewpoints are best with late afternoon to sunset light; the volcanic peak silhouetted at sunrise is also a possibility.

Getting there: Travel I-5 to Exit 49 at Castle Rock and head east on WA-504, following the signs for Mount Saint Helens.

Time required: The drive from I-5 to Coldwater Ridge on Spirit Lake Highway is about one hour plus stops at visitor centers and viewpoints.

Coldwater Ridge

For many years Highway 504 ended at Coldwater Ridge, which was the location for the main visitor center for Mount Saint Helens National Volcanic Monument. Soon after Johnston Ridge Observatory opened, budget constraints forced the closure of Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center. This was really a shame, not just because of the loss of some excellent interpretive exhibits and a great view of the mountain, but it provided a destination with warmth and services in winter. Fortunately, thanks largely to volunteer efforts, the facility is once again in use, reincarnated as the Mount St. Helens Science and Learning Center at Coldwater. It is not a full visitor center and hours are limited, but certainly worth a stop to check it out. In winter, Highway 504 is closed beyond Coldwater.



Coldwater Lake

worth the short walk to take in the scene. The lake didn't even exist prior to the eruption and was formed when an avalanche of rock dammed a stream in what had been a forested valley.

Photo advice: The view of Mount Saint Helens from the deck at the Science and Learning Center, while not quite as good as the view from Johnston Ridge, is very good. Best light is in late afternoon. The terrain nearby is a good place to get photos showing the ecological recovery in the blast zone.

Getting there: Drive WA-504 east from I-5 for 43 miles.

Time required: Half an hour is plenty for the standard view of the crater, but you may want to spend a lot more time if there is activity at the Science and Learning Center.

Nearby location: Birth of a Lake Trail is an easy, wheelchair accessible half-mile loop at the southwest side of Coldwater Lake. It's not a great place for landscape photography but

Johnston Ridge

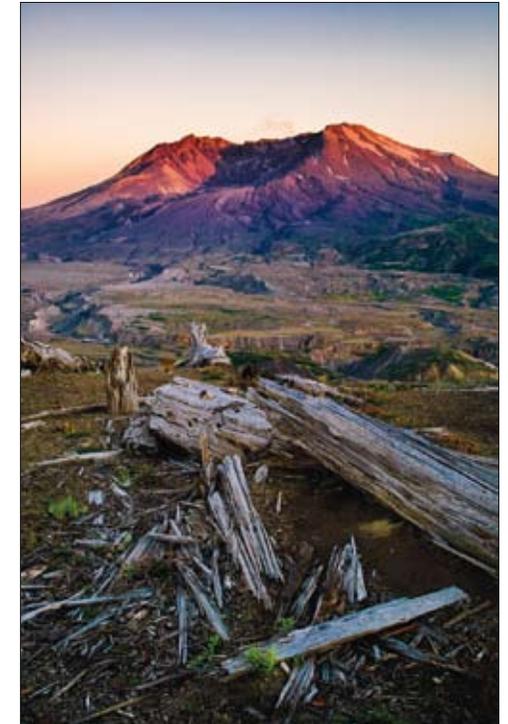
The closest and best easily accessible views of the crater, lava dome, and blast zone are from the visitor center and trails at the Johnston Ridge Observatory at the end of State Highway 504. Summer time means thousands of visitors per day to this viewpoint, but on a recent trip there were only a couple of other photographers in the area at sunset and I was the only person there at sunrise the following morning. Waiting for the light, it was delightful to hear, first the low, tentative howl and then the yip, yip, yip of a family of coyotes down in the Toutle River valley. Minutes after the sun hit the ridge, a hummingbird buzzed by, pausing briefly to check me out on his way to the summertime wildflowers on nearby slopes.

The view of Mount Saint Helens right from the observatory deck is excellent, but hike the quarter-mile Eruption Trail to the top of the hill next to the observatory for a little more elevation; interpretive plaques along the way explain the natural history of the area. I like the view a little further east, taking Boundary Trail #1 as it follows the ridgeline for about 2 miles to a point where there's a direct look south to the lava dome in the center of the crater as well as a clear view of the Toutle River course below. You can continue on Boundary Trail #1 for another half mile to the junction with Truman Trail, which will take you down into the valley and then options for a longer hike to Loowit Falls or east to Spirit Lake and Windy Ridge.

Loowit Viewpoint, just west of Johnston Ridge Observatory, is also an excellent view of the volcano, with the possibility of getting some of the blasted and downed tree trunks in the foreground. Scattered clumps of lupine and paintbrush will provide spots of color in summer. There is a parking lot at Loowit, or walk half a mile west from the observatory on Boundary Trail #1.

The Johnston Ridge Observatory Visitor Center is open daily 10:00am to 6:00pm from about mid-May through the end of October. From November to early May the road is closed from either Coldwater Ridge or Coldwater Lake.

Photo advice: In mid-summer the sun's azimuth is far enough north that there



View from Loowit Viewpoint

is interesting light on Mount Saint Helens at both sunrise and sunset from Johnston Ridge. In spring and fall the mountain is heavily back or side-lit; that kind of lighting can be great for people portraits, but rarely works for mountains. As at most locations, shooting at dawn and dusk can result in outstanding photos. Peak wildflower bloom here, as well as most other areas surrounding the volcano, ranges from early July to early August.

Getting there: Follow WA-504 all the way to its end, 52 miles from Castle Rock on I-5 or 9 miles beyond Coldwater Ridge. The drive from Castle Rock to Johnston Ridge takes about 1.25 hours without stops.

Time required: Plan several hours for a sunrise or sunset shoot with time for the visitor center and to explore nearby trail views. At the very least allow an hour just to see the highlights once you arrive at the parking area.

Northeast Side of Mount St. Helens

While the major visitor centers and most visitor facilities are on the west side of Mount Saint Helens, the east side provides additional great opportunities for photography. Forest Service Roads 99 and 25 provide access to views of Spirit Lake and the vast area of forest blown down by the blast of the 1980 eruption. These routes are generally open from Memorial Day until snow blocks the roads. Keep in mind also that there are no stores, services or gas between Randle and Cougar on this side of Mount Saint Helens, nor is there cell phone reception in much of the area. Backpackers need to note that a permit is required for any backcountry camping, and they're only available during business hours at Forest Service ranger stations and the Mount Saint Helens visitor centers.



Iron Creek Falls

The USFS maintains a very nice developed campground at Iron Creek, and it's the only one for miles around. There is a quarter-mile nature trail in old-growth forest within the campground. Several miles south, Iron Creek Falls is a very short walk just off FR-25. The north facing 38-foot waterfall drops into a nice pool, and is in the shade both early in the morning and late in the afternoon. In spring and early summer, the creek shoots out over the cliff, almost in an arc; when water levels drop in later summer the creek drops more directly into the pool.

Several developed lookout points on Forest Road 99 afford views of Mount Saint Helens, Spirit Lake, and the surrounding blast zone. The Smith Creek Viewpoint has a very nice panoramic vista and is a good place to be at sunrise, both for the first light hitting Mount Saint Helens and for shooting the sunrise itself, with 12,281-foot high Mount Adams to the east as another dramatic focal point. Nearby Donnybrook Viewpoint has the best view of Spirit Lake, which is still partially choked with logs that have been floating on the surface for over 30 years. Both of these viewpoints are located at about milepost 15 on Forest Road 99. At the end of FR-99, a stair-step trail leads to a panoramic vista from the top of Windy Ridge. The viewpoint has a great view of Pumice Plain and Spirit Lake, but it's not a great location for photographing Mount Saint Helens itself because the southern part of the ridge interrupts the view of the volcano.



Spirit Lake at sunset from Donnybrook Viewpoint

Photo advice: The views of Mount Saint Helens from this side are all looking south to southwest and are going to be backlit after early morning, although around the summer solstice the sun sets far enough north to get some good light on the volcano. Being here for sunrise light is definitely worth the long drive in the dark. Hazy and overcast days don't work here at all.

Getting There: If coming from the north, travel WA-12 to Randle and then head south on WA-131, which becomes FR-25, for 20 miles. Turn right on FR-99, a mile past Iron Creek Falls, and follow the winding road into the Blast Zone to the viewpoints. Windy Ridge is about 16 miles from the junction with FR-25. If coming from the south, travel east from Woodland on WA-503, continuing east as the route becomes FR-90 near Cougar. Turn north on FR-25 and drive 25 miles to reach FR-99. Note that FR-25 and the other roads on the east side of the National Monument are closed due to snow in winter.

Time Required: Considering the drive to get here and time both for photography and learning about Mount Saint Helens and the eruption from the numerous interpretive sites and viewpoints, plan for at least a full day to visit this area.

Nearby Location: There are several other points of interest along this route, and also driving north on FR-26, that are worth exploring, particularly in wildflower season when you can juxtapose the new growth of flowers with the long-dead tree trunks in the blast zone.

Norway Pass

A very pleasant two-mile hike leads to one of the nicest views in all of Mount Saint Helens National Monument. Starting from the signed trailhead on FR-26 for Boundary Trail #1, the hike is about 4.5 miles round-trip, and although it's not overly strenuous, the first mile is a bit steep, gaining about 800 feet in elevation. It is a very popular hike, so count on lots of trail activity on summer weekends.

Climbing steadily in the first mile or so, it is mind boggling trying to image the power of the eruption, which was over seven miles away from this point and behind a fairly high ridge, and yet all the trees here and even further north and east were totally flattened. The views just keep getting better, with Mount Adams over Meta Lake to the east and Mount Rainier to the north. The real reason to do this hike, however, is the scene to the south from Norway Pass, a wonderful view over Spirit Lake to Mount Saint Helens. Continue on the trail, passing a junction to the left for Independence Pass, reaching Norway Pass about 2.2 miles from the trailhead. Downed trees, barkless and bleached silver by years of sun, make good foreground elements for landscape photos, highlighted by wildflowers in summer and huckleberry in early autumn.

There are sounds to compliment the sights here. You're likely to be buzzed by mosquitoes in summer, and perhaps hummingbirds, too. You might also hear the low whump-whump of grouse or the high-pitched squeal of bugling elk.

Photo advice: A sunrise shoot here is highly recommended. Don your headlamp pre-dawn and head up the trail while it's still dark. The early light will hit Mount Saint Helens beautifully. Sunset and dusk can also be excellent. Layer blending or HDR-type processing may be necessary to capture the range between shaded foreground, snow-capped mountain, and open sky. Norway Pass isn't thick with wildflowers, but there is a good assortment, with peak blossom time in late July and early August.

Getting there: If coming from the north, travel WA-12 to Randle and then head south on WA-131, which becomes FR-25, for 20 miles. Turn right on FR-99 and continue south for 9.2 miles, turning right on FR-26 to reach the trailhead in another mile. If coming from the south, travel east from Woodland on WA-503, continuing east as the route becomes FR-90 near Cougar. Turn north on FR-25 and drive 25 miles to reach FR-99. Note that FR-25 and the other roads on the east side of Mount Saint Helens are closed due to snow in winter.

Time required: Allow at least four hours so that you have plenty of time to explore and find just the right composition.

Nearby location: Walk south from Norway Pass on Independence Pass Trail for more views to the south. After following this route for 2.0 miles to Crater Viewpoint, you can loop back, in another 2.3 miles, on Boundary Trail.

Right: Mount Saint Helens from Norway Pass



Pumice Plain & Loowit Falls

Short of a summit climb from the south side, the closest you can get to the crater of Mount Saint Helens, is a hike across the Pumice Plain from Windy Ridge. As the name implies, the ground here is a large expanse of gravelly pumice. This gently sloping field isn't all that attractive as a photo subject most of the time, but in mid summer a purple carpet of low-lying lupine and penstemon covers large swaths of the plain.



Lupine & penstemon on the Pumice Plain

The trail to Pumice Plain starts at the southern side of Windy Ridge Viewpoint parking area. It's not a difficult trail, as the ups and downs are mostly at a gentle grade. There are actually several trail options once you reach the plain, and you'll likely want to wander some looking for the best compositions, so count on a round-trip hike of about 10 miles. The route is treeless, and may get quite warm on summer days, so pack plenty of water; because there is a good reason why Windy Ridge got its name, it is a good idea to bring a light jacket, too.

From the trailhead, start walking on an old road on the eastern side of Windy Ridge, signed as Truman Trail. In about one mile you'll come around a bend to an incredible view of Mount Saint Helens—the crater and dome, with a mini-crater within the dome, are clearly visible and appear quite close. A little further on the trail, you'll see Pumice Plain and the purple carpet.

At 1.8 miles, continue past the junction with Abraham Trail to reach another junction at 2.2 miles. Truman Trail continues to the right, heading northwest and down the sloping plain toward Spirit Lake. Take the left fork for Windy Trail, which goes west across Pumice Plain and through the fields of flowers. Go right at then next junction at 1.1 miles and continue for another 1.5 miles to reach Loowit Falls. The trails are well marked with signs and cairns. At Loowit Falls, melted snow water plunges 186 feet into a narrow chasm. The landscape here, just below the open crater of Mount Saint Helens, is almost moon-like—just barren pumice, ash, and lava.

Make a loop trip by heading south from the falls on Loowit Trail, then turn right on Truman Trail to get back to Windy Ridge. There may be lots of flowers along Truman Trail, but the view of the crater is mostly blocked by a low ridge.

Photo advice: Mid-July to early August is best for the wildflowers. If you begin your walk pre-dawn, you'll get some great sunrise light on Mount Saint Helens from the trail at the south end of Windy Ridge. Early morning is also preferable for the flowers as the winds are generally lacking at that time. The terrain around Loowit Falls is very unstable and you can't get very close, so bring a moderate tele-zoom.

Getting there: Follow the directions above for the Northeast Side, driving FR-99 to its end at the large parking area at Windy Ridge Viewpoint.

Time required: Plan on most of a day if doing the complete loop around Pumice Plain and to Loowit Falls.

South Side of Mount St. Helens

The area to the south of Mount Saint Helens didn't receive a cataclysmic blast like the north side did, but it has been repeatedly covered with lava and mud flows from previous eruptions. With the exception of the Lahar Viewpoint, the views of Mount Saint Helens itself are not as good as those from the Johnston Ridge area and from the trails and viewpoints on the east side, but there are some sites that are certainly worth visiting.



Lupine at Lahar Viewpoint (photo by Kevin McNeal)

At Lava Canyon, a 3.3-mile round-trip trail follows the course that the Muddy River has cut through layers of lava over the centuries. When Saint Helens erupted in 1980, a massive mudflow, or lahar, scoured the canyon. The trail, which can be treacherously slippery when wet, includes a suspension bridge and a set of metal ladders to ascend/descend steep cliffs. There are several waterfalls in the canyon, but the views are rather distant.

Ape Cave is the most visited area on the south side of Mount Saint Helens. The cave is actually a lava tube, and at almost 2.5 miles long it is the third longest lava tube on the North American continent. If you plan to visit the cave, dress warmly and bring two flashlights.

Lahar Viewpoint offers a very nice view of the south side of Mount Saint Helens, looking right up into the notch that has resulted from glacial runoff and the lahar that scoured Lava Canyon. In spring and early summer, a broad, open area that was just barren ash a few years ago now sprouts an assortment of colorful wildflowers.

Note that the access roads to these areas may be snow-covered in autumn and FR-83 is closed in winter, re-opening at the end of May.

Photo advice: The vista from Lahar Viewpoint is looking almost due north, so is going to have very nice light in early morning and late afternoon; mid-morning to mid-afternoon the light is quite flat and not great for photography.

Getting there: From I-5 at Woodland, travel east for 32 miles on WA-503, Lewis River Road, to the northeast end of Yale Lake and continue east another 3 miles as the designation changes to FR-90. For Ape Cave: about a mile after reaching the dam at Swift Reservoir, turn left on FR-83, travel 1.7 miles and make a left onto FR-8303 and go another 2.2 miles to Ape Cave. For Lahar Viewpoint and Lava Canyon, proceed as above, but instead of turning on FR-8303, continue on FR-83 for 10 miles to the trailhead at the end of the road.

Time required: Count on several hours to a full day to visit these areas as they involve some slow, winding roads.

