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Wilson Ranches Retreat owner Phil Wilson (in the black hat) gives guests a true ranch experience. **OPPOSITE** The epic swimming hole at Juniper Creek.

The wild is calling

Just a short drive from Portland is pioneer country,
a cell phone dead zone of high desert and winding river.

In other words, pack up the Jeep and go

BY TED KATAUSKAS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN CLARK

AFTER 129 MILES through the Columbia River Gorge, we leave Interstate 84 and climb and twist into another world. From the verdant greens and soft shadows of the gorge, we emerge onto a treeless plateau of amber and gold hillocks and open sky. Square miles of dryland wheat and hay and bunchgrass roll out to every horizon.

The GPS leads us past weathered barns, a one-room schoolhouse, then onto a rutted dirt track along the John Day River. Finally the computer announces, in an Australian accent that seems appropriate for Oregon's outback, that we have arrived at our destination: pretty much nowhere.

This is John Day Crossing, a waypoint where wagon-train pioneers once forded the river near the end of their Oregon Trail journey, and site of the river basin's newest Bureau of Land Management (BLM) camping area. It's also a waypoint for our long weekend exploring in and around the John Day's 1,200-foot-deep Cottonwood Canyon, which is slated to become Oregon's second-largest state park in 2013.

My wife, Helen, and I are pioneers too, only with eye-rolling tweens, a five-month-old labradoodle, and a rented 4x4 loaded with the essentials: camping gear, 20 gallons of water, boil-a-meals, iPods, kibble, and chew toys. Not so long ago, Helen and I were the types who, for our honeymoon, flew to Germany with boxed bicycles to pedal the countryside for a month. After our son and daughter were born, we kept going for a while but began to default to packaged vacations. Not that there's anything wrong with Disneyland, except we craved a good old free-wheeling roadtrip.

As I begin to unload at the campsite, Helen and the kids chase after our pup, who has bolted to the river. Our camp neighbors, a father-sons trio finishing up dinner, give a wave and welcome. Bill Dupée and his boys, Zack and Baine, Portlanders like us who've headed east to find the Old West, are bow hunters out for venison (successfully, I judge from the carcass dangling from an elm tree). Bill proudly explains that Baine, who is 12, like



The John Day River basin only feels undiscovered.

my son, has just bagged his first buck, which will be in the family's freezer by midnight. A gust of wind rattles the trees, and Bill seems reluctant to leave. "I love the smell of sagebrush when the wind kicks up," he says.

I bid them farewell and join my family on the burbling knee-deep river. The pup, relishing his first swim, torpedoes through the water. The kids, unplugged for the first time in hours, splash and laugh after him. The water is so crystalline that the surface is both a mirror reflecting the sky and a window clear to the bottom. I notice two parallel grooves in the riverbed from bank

to bank, a track that wagon wheels carved some 150 years ago.

After our boil-a-meals and another frolic in the water for good measure, we nest into our mummy bags. I smell the sage when the wind kicks up, and as I drift off to sleep, the background music of the current rolling over river stones begins to sound like the grinding of wooden wheels.

The next day, we follow the one-lane gravel track away from the river, rattling along the rim of Hay Creek Canyon, where Mt. Hood shimmers on the western horizon. The road descends to the canyon floor, then switchbacks up again, skirting the



In Fossil, you'll find ... fossils, plus small-town charm and Wilson Ranches Retreat, where guests feast on family-style breakfast.

sandwiches at a soda fountain/bookstore that's an official far-east branch of Portland's Powell's empire. \$; 201 S. Main St., Condon; 541/384-4120.

RJ's Steaks Spirits Sports, the most popular restaurant in the desert town of Fossil, is known for its whiskey steak: rib-eye served with sautéed mushrooms and bacon in a whiskey sauce. \$\$; 415 First St.; 541/763-3335.

PIT STOPS

FOR SWIMMING Floods swept away much of the beach at **Juniper Creek** last year, but locals still rate it the loveliest swimming hole on the John Day River. *Off State 19, 4 miles east of Service Creek.*

FOR U-PICK The farmstand bins at **Thomas Orchards**, a third-generation farm a mile from the BLM's Lone Pine Campground, overflow with baseball-size peaches. But it's more fun to pick your own: In 20 minutes, you'll cart away \$20 worth of produce that would cost \$40 in Portland. *On State 402 near State 19, Kimberly; 541/934-2870.*

FOR HIKING A ranger leads a 90-minute guided hike to an amphitheater of fossil-rich, turquoise-hued volcanic clay cliffs at the end of the **Blue Basin's Island in Time Trail**, a half-mile-long footpath that's one of the most jaw-dropping hikes in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. *10:30 a.m. Fri-Sun; off State 19, 19 miles south of Kimberly; nps.gov/joda; \$4*



STAY

Until Cottonwood Canyon State Park opens next year, overnight options along the John Day River are limited to **Bureau of Land Management camping**. There are four campgrounds accessible by car or RV, with up to 10 sites each. They're "primitive," with fire rings, picnic tables, and a vault toilet, but no showers or potable water. So BYO water. Also bring cash for the self-service fee (typically \$5/night). There is also dispersed camping at a few more remote BLM areas (including John Day Crossing); some of these involve rutted dirt tracks best suited for high-clearance vehicles. *blm.gov/or/resources/recreation/johnday; \$4*

In Fossil, **Wilson Ranches Retreat**, the only B&B on a working ranch in eastern Oregon, quarters guests in a 1910 Sears Roebuck kit house and invites them to help move the cattle herd on horseback. Breakfast is family-style around a table that seats 18, with ranch boss Phil Wilson (equal parts Eastwood, Redford, and Jack Palance) at the head. *From \$79; wilsonranchesretreat.com*

EAT

At **Country Flowers**, midway between John Day Crossing and Service Creek, wheat farmers Darla and Sam Seale dish ice cream floats, sundaes, and

fringes of what will become Cottonwood Canyon State Park. It's a wilderness as far removed from civilization as I've ever experienced from behind the wheel of a car.

We cross Cottonwood Bridge, entrance of the future state park, where so many journeys have yet to begin. And ours will continue, following the course of the John Day to quirky towns like Fossil, where bona fide wranglers will take us on horseback over the range; to deep black swimming holes, where we'll wash away the dust of the trail; and to another deserted campground, where the moon and stars will reflect off the murmuring John. ■



Cottonwood Canyon is about 3 hours southeast of Portland. From I-84, take exit 104 onto U.S. 97 south, then State 206 east toward Condon.