



#8

Solitude 3.8
 Scenery 4.8
 Accessibility 3.5
 X-factor 4.6

GENTLE GIANTS: THE HOH RIVER TRAIL WEAVES THROUGH NORTH AMERICA'S ONLY TEMPERATE RAINFOREST (OLYMPIC'S X-FACTOR) ON ITS WAY TO A ROCK-AND-ICE VIEW OF MT. OLYMPUS.

Olympic

Miracle-Gro National Park

On a climb from the Hoh River's silty riffles to high-country glacier views, pass through a moss-hung rainforest that might be the lushest place in America. By Michael Lanza

There must be a God for this to exist. The trees towering over Washington's Hoh River are more monstrous, more incandescently green than any I've ever seen. It's enough for hikers of all spiritual persuasions to see this place as irrefutable evidence of a superior being—a nature-loving Jehovah who created ferns the size of school buses and understories reeking with the intermingled stink of bursting life and mushy rot, and then wondered, "What if I keep adding water to this place?"

This valley gets 12 to 14 feet of rain every year—twice as much rain as Mumbai, India, which has an actual monsoon season. The result is photosynthesis on hyperdrive. Sitka spruce and western hemlock grow more than 200 feet tall,

their trunks and branches covered with mosses, ferns, and lichens. When the sun shines—intermittently from July through September—the thick canopy overhead imposes a permanent dusk on the forest. This is greenery like most have never seen, supersized in a sprawling palette of hues that would render a Crayola lab tech catatonic. Cherry on top: The path that cuts straight through it, the Hoh

PHOTO BY MICHAEL HANSON

River Trail, is virtually flat for its first 13 miles, gaining just 740 feet, facilitating a perfect gawking pace with sporadic views of the glacier-silted, meandering river. On this 34.8-mile out-and-back hike from the Hoh River trailhead to Glacier Meadows—the park’s ultimate backpack—I’ll spend three or four days enclosed in this wonder.

The ground from the trailhead is a shag of mosses, lichens, ferns, salmonberry, huckleberry, liverworts, and vine maple. Deadfall litters the forest floor like a giant’s game of jackstraw. Called “nurse trees,” these immense, rotting trunks serve as the “soil” in which new seedlings germinate, sending

roots to the ground and growing even as the fallen trees take decades, if not centuries, to decay fully. Nine miles out, just past the Olympus ranger station, we stroll

through a grove that makes terms like old-growth—or even ginormous—seem grossly inadequate. Trailside firs routinely measure 10 feet in diameter and 275 feet tall.

The valley has been this way for 5,000 years. Maybe it’ll remain like this forever. In 1938, the park service preempted the logging industry, setting these lands aside as “the finest example of primeval forests of Sitka spruce, Douglas fir, western hemlock, and western red cedar in the entire United States.” They could have said “Northern Hemisphere.” The only other enclaves like this are in Chile, New Zealand, and southern Australia.

At mile 13, I step from a trail that hasn’t wavered from its tranquil grade onto a narrow footbridge spanning a sheer gorge, with the Hoh raging 150 feet below my soles. (Look for ripe wild huckleberries near the bridge in late summer.) The flats end, and the sweat begins here on a four-mile haul gaining 2,843 feet up to the trail’s end at Glacier Meadows, where campsites lie a short walk from bull’s-eye views

[BEST WEEKEND]

Royal Basin

Dry out in the Olympics’ rain shadow on this 17-mile overnight.

Talk about a tale of two parks: Judging from the Hoh River Trail alone, it’d be fair to guess the entire Olympics are covered in teeming jungle and a shroud of fog. But 30 miles east, on the opposite side of the park, lies Royal Basin—and its arid, northern Rockies feel. It’s tucked into a horse-shoe of pinnacled, 7,000-foot peaks—among the highest on the peninsula—and the out-and-back hike to Royal Lake makes for an easy weekend in the middle of it all. Want to spice it up with a little off-trail peakbagging? You’ll find plenty of social paths leading to summit scrambles, and an ambitious hiker could extend the basic 17-miler into a weeklong alpine sampler.

From the trailhead, follow the Upper Dungeness Trail through the shade of towering Douglas fir and western hemlock a flat mile to the Royal Basin Trail; a late-day start gives you a good excuse to bed down in one of the riverside campsites just before the trail junction. Hike up the secluded valley of Royal Creek and pass thundering Royal Creek Falls before reaching fir-ringed Royal Lake, where several campsites look out on nearby cliffs and 6,500-foot Gray Wolf Ridge. It’s nice, to be sure, but the best is yet to come.

Though the official trail ends just past Royal Lake—near a house-size boulder called Shelter Rock—a user trail continues another mile to Royal Basin, a sprawling, marmot-inhabited alpine cirque flowered with lupine and gentian (July), beneath the dark ramparts of The Needles and Mts. Clark, Fricaba, and Deception. Here, the trail fades, but a faint, steep track leads southeast to a 6,663-foot pass and drops into pristine Deception Basin, a creek-cut bowl beneath the glacier of Mt. Mystery. It makes a stellar day trip.

Want more adventure? About 200 yards up the Royal Basin Trail (1.1 miles from the trailhead), a sign marks a good user trail to Mt. Baldy. It ascends 4,000 feet in just a few miles. But once you crest that rounded ridge, it’s open cross-country hiking southwest along Gray Wolf Ridge, with unobstructed views that include Mt. Baker to the north and Rainier to the east. Water is scarce, but a small, unnamed tarn northwest of the Mt. Baldy-Gray Wolf Peak saddle offers potential campsites. Safest descent back to the Royal Valley: Return the way you came. Our scout did find one alternate route that avoids cliffs—starting from a broad, flat, 6,400-foot saddle northeast of Mt. Walkinshaw—but judged it one of the scariest and steepest loose-scrree descents he’s ever made.

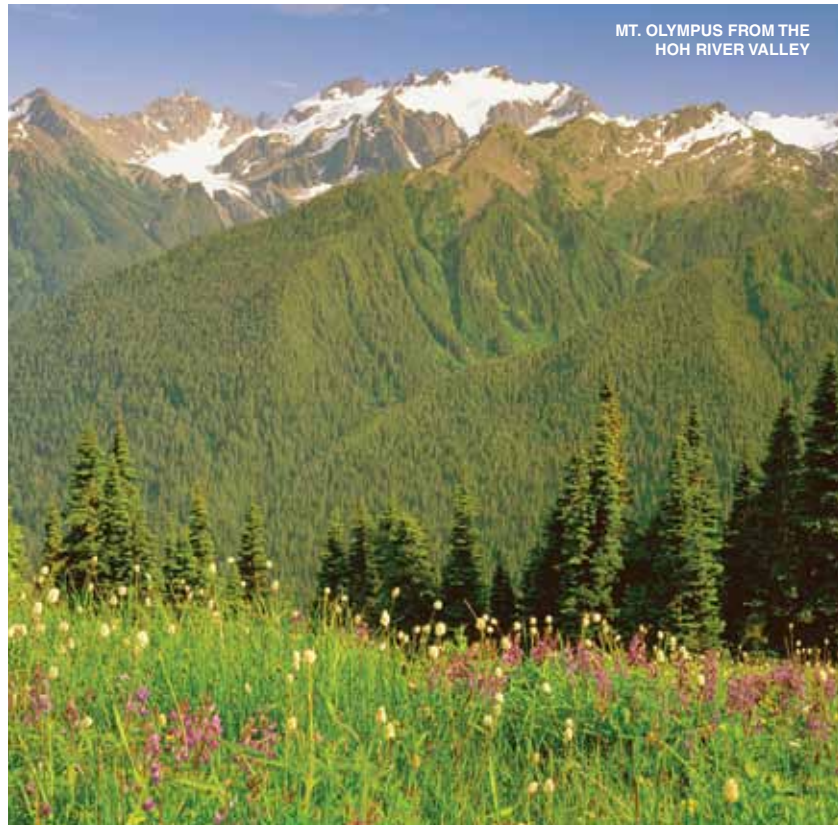
The way From US 101 east of Port Angeles (.7 mile east of Hooker Rd.), turn right on Taylor Cutoff Rd.; zero your trip odometer. At 5.2 miles, turn left onto FR 2870. Bear left at 6.1, 6.7, and 9.4 miles, then right at mile 12.5. At 15.1 miles, turn right onto FR 2860. Upper Dungeness trailhead is at mile 21.6.

PLUG AND PLAY: Key waypoints

- Mile 1.1** Turn right on Mt. Baldy Trail (0488741E 5301684N)
- Mile 3.1** Campsite (no water) on Mt. Baldy Trail (0487789E 5303277N)
- Mile 4.9** Summit of Mt. Baldy (0485929E 5304465N)
- Mile 8.9** Descend steep scree to Royal Basin Trail (0483106E 5299975N)
- Mile 10.6** Meadow campsites below Royal Lake (0484280E 5298246N)
- Mile 15.1** Royal Basin (0483853E 5296306N)
- Mile 15.8** Pass to Deception Basin (0483697E 5295342N)



PHOTO BY KIRKENDALL-SPRING PHOTOGRAPHERS



MT. OLYMPUS FROM THE HOH RIVER VALLEY

barren ridge of loose rock and dirt, a lateral moraine overlooking the Blue Glacier on 7,965-foot Mt. Olympus. Here, green surrenders to white, a vast mountain laced in the wedding-dress brilliance of snow, and the shaded jaws of the icefalls. It's easy to make a summit attempt, if you have the requisite skills, gear, and perhaps a guide. From Glacier Meadows, the round-trip entails a long day (10 hours or more) stair-stepping up and down 4,000 feet of ice and snow.

On the return from the Blue Glacier, we see a dozen mountain goats above Glacier Meadows, then drop back into God's greenest Earth. 🍃



PHOTOS BY (LEFT TO RIGHT) LOREN IRVING/AGE FOTOSTOCK; W. WAYNE LOCKWOOD/CORBIS; JAMES RANDKLEV/CORBIS

[BEST WEEK]

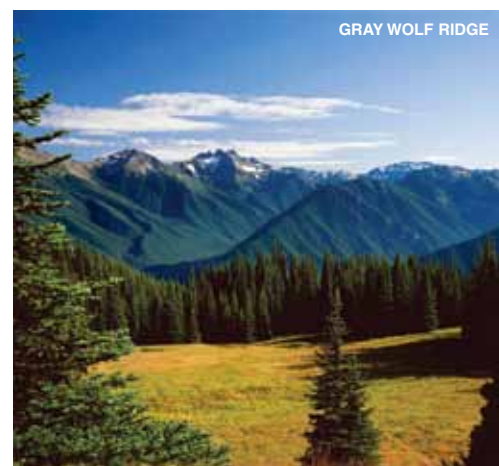
Four Passes Loop

Ride an elevation seesaw from giant trees to sweeping mountain views on this 43-mile circuit.

Some hikers want it all and have time to get it. This route tours enough old-growth and alpine passes overlooking mountains and glaciers to keep the go-long set happy. Big advantage: It can be done inside a week and promises a high likelihood of sunshine in summer (it's in the rain shadow; our scout saw five bluebird days). You'll hit four wildflower-strewn high passes between 5,500 and 6,500 feet—Gray Wolf, Lost, Cameron, and Grand—with above-treeline views of the multiple peaks and the heavy ice cap of Mt. Olympus. At the same time, you get up-close-and-personal encounters with soaring western hemlock, Alaska cedar, and Douglas fir, and numerous cascades and waterfalls.

The loop begins on Grand Ridge Trail, which traverses open meadows along a gently undulating ridge for 7.5 miles from Obstruction Point to Deer Park, staying mostly above 6,000 feet, with the gleaming glaciers of Olympus looming large to the south. After dropping 3,250 feet in 4.3 miles on the Three Forks Trail to Cameron Creek, spend your first night at Three Forks Camp. Next morning, descend a half mile to the Gray Wolf River, then make a gradual ascent of 4,150 feet over 9.2 miles up Gray Wolf Valley, through the meadows of Gray Wolf Basin, to 6,150-foot Gray Wolf Pass, with another expansive view of craggy peaks, including glaciated, 7,321-foot Mt. Anderson.

Another steep drop of 2,600 feet in 3.4 miles through dense forest brings you to the Dosewallips River Trail. Follow this upstream, rising gently through fir forest and wildflower meadows flanked by rocky peaks—Wellesley, Lost, Cameron, Fromme, and others—for 1.7 miles, to spend your second night at Bear Camp, beside the streamlike Dosewallips River. On your third morning, continue upstream 1.8 miles to Dose Meadows, then turn north onto the steep, 1,100-foot-in-a-mile climb to Lost Pass—which, at 5,600 feet, offers yet another mountain panorama. The views only get better on the two-mile alpine walk—through huckleberry meadows frequented by black bears in late summer—to Cameron Pass (6,500 feet), with vistas reaching from Olympus to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. You'll then make another big descent—2,400 feet in 3.5 miles—through meadows and along Cameron Creek. You'll see some huge Alaska cedars at the bottom, then pay for the pleasure by regaining all that lost elevation on the 2,300-foot ascent in 1.8 miles to 6,400-foot Grand Pass. While the view from the pass itself takes in much of the Olympic Mountains, walk 10 minutes up the gentle ridge to the unnamed, 6,701-foot summit to the west for perhaps the best view on this route, down to tiny Lake Lillian and across the deep, lushly green Hoh River Valley to Olympus. Camp either at Grand Lake, 2.5 miles beyond the pass, or at



GRAY WOLF RIDGE

Moose Lake (actually named for resident elk), a mile closer. The last day's walk of 3.5 miles along the Grand Pass Trail back to Obstruction Point follows another airy ridge above 6,000 feet, with yet more big panoramas of the mountains, glaciers, and deep valleys.

The Way From Port Angeles, take the Olympic National Park Highway 18 miles to Obstruction Point Road and follow it eight miles to its end.