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Oregon: the best of America

'All the aspects of the US in one state': Robert Cowan dons Western duds to ride - and climb - in Oregon.

Robert Cowan

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'See that pine tree with the burnt top?' A mile or so away, high on the ridge that blocks all views to the south-east, there is a forest of pine trees and most seem to have blackened tops. But I nod anyway. "There's an easy trail just to the right of that tree that leads up over the rim," says Bethany. "It's easier to get over there. Anywhere else and it's quite a climb."

What lies over the ridge, what we can't see from down here on the ranch, is the high desert. In my mind, I can picture the purple sage, the cactus, the coyotes and the rattlers sunning themselves on rocks. And for two days I've been desperate to climb up there, scale that rim, stare into the imagined limitless spaces that lie beyond.

Bethany can't understand it. From her cowboy boots and jeans to her plaid shirt and tousled blonde hair, she is every inch Miss Taciturn, the no-nonsense ranch girl. It's the practical that concerns Bethany, not the imaginary. She has led my son and me around the trails of the Long Hollow ranch in central Oregon, past the lush pasture and the grazing Herefords (pronounced hear-fords hereabouts), out into the range beyond where the deer and the antelope roam - and the jack-rabbits and the eagles and the elk, she says. She's shown us how to ford the streams and climb the rocky banks. We've ridden that cowboy dream out on those trails, hunched deep into big, lazy Western saddles, sucking in the crystalline air of early morning, with the sun, at 9.30, just starting to turn hot.

The views have been spectacular. Here in central Oregon the backdrop could almost be the work of a Hollywood scene painter: wood-framed ranch buildings shaded by tall cypresses, cattle in the fields, horses in the paddocks, a lake of an impossible blue. And on the horizon the jagged, volcanic peaks of the Cascade mountains: Black Butte, the Three Sisters, Broken Top, Three-Fingered Jack.

But every time the trail turns east, there's that rim of rock, a drawn curtain veiling the edge of the ranch. What's up there, we ask Bethany. "Oh, just the high desert." What's it like? "Oh, you know... desert." Is it worth the climb? "Mmm. Maybe."

So after our last morning ride, we pull off the cowboy boots we've been lent and head towards what we think is the pine with the blackened top, treading heavily to alert any dozy rattlesnakes. The air on the steepening slopes is heady with the smell of turpentine from the pines (Dick Bloomfeld, Long Hollow's owner, calls them junipers and hates them with a passion for all the water they suck up) and, by the time we reach the final rock wall that caps the ridge, breath is coming heavily.

There's no sign of Bethany's "easy trail", so it's a tricky clamber up 15 or 20 feet of rock face. And here it is: the high desert. The views are... well, non-existent. There's a hundred yards or so of low sage scrub and then another curtain across the horizon, this one of stunted pines. Of limitless spaces waiting to be explored. Zilch.

We turn to head back and - bang - there is one of the most stunning views you could imagine. The ranch, the mountains, the endless sapphire sky; in the bright sunshine and the moisture-free mountain air, the land seems to sparkle. We could almost be standing on the edge of creation in its first seconds, so pristine, so polished does it appear.

But that is the wonder of Oregon. It must be something to do with its relative geological newness and the fact that the state is a bridge between the dry south - California and Nevada - and the wet north of Washington, but every twist in the road, every hill crested, brings a surprise. In this one state, the scenery of almost the entire continental US can be found, though it can roughly be divided into two: the high, dry lands east of the Cascades, and the forests, rivers and lakes to the wet west, between the mountains and the Pacific.

The Long Hollow ranch is most definitely high and dry. It lies 10 miles or so outside Sisters, so archetypal a Hollywood vision of a Western town that it comes as something of a surprise to find that the flat-fronted wooden stores along the main drag actually have backs to them. A bit like one of those touristy Cotswold villages, Sisters is a little too well preserved, a little too twee to be fully authentic.

But there is nothing inauthentic about Long Hollow: a proper working ranch, but one that takes in guests along with the rearing of cattle and horses. The day begins with communal breakfast with the other guests, the ranch hands and Dick and Shirley, the owners. As the eggs, bacon and sausage, muffins and scones are passed around, talk is of the trails, of the stock, of a neighbour who's experimenting with raising alpaca, of the coyotes that try to take the new-born calves.

If, after Shirley's excellent breakfast, the visitor is more inclined to return to bed than head off on horseback, a quick stroll out of doors is as good as taking a cold shower. Though temperatures in the day in September when we visited can easily reach 80F or more, at night they fall to freezing. By 9am the sun has got real warmth in it, but the air still has an invigorating crispness: the perfect combination for a morning ride through the many miles of trails around the ranch.

And afterwards? We spend the afternoons exploring the neighbourhood, the towns of Sisters, Bend and Redmond, the canyons of the Deschutes river and the Smith Rock state park whose towering basalt cliffs attract swarms of rock climbers. At sunset, as the last climbers are rappelling back down to ground level, the rock faces turn a barely credible shade of gold. But it's worth staying longer. Once the last rays have died, the night sky is even more unbelievable. The altitude, the dryness of the air and the absence of light pollution provide the perfect conditions for an exceptional starscape, the Milky Way turning into a shining river of light.

Having travelled this far east into the West, we decided to head even deeper. "You ought to go and see the Painted Hills," Shirley had said over breakfast as we were talking about plans for post-trek tours. "They're worth a drive out." Typical rancher's understatement, and not the least preparation for the landscape that opened up as we turned off Highway 26 a couple of hours later.

The hills are low, gently rounded and totally astonishing. "Painted" does not even begin to describe them: it's more as if some cosmic hippy had tie-dyed an entire mountain range in green and cream, red and brown, gold and black, almost every shade imaginable.

The hills consist of layer upon layer of volcanic ash, each laid down in different epochs and each of a different colour. Over the millennia, the lifting and faulting, the erosion and weathering, have blended the different shades into a kind of psychedelic slide show. In the valley bottoms, vivid green fields of alfalfa and a lake of startling blue all add to the visual overload.

After the ranch, it was a quick tour of the rest of the state: the high prairie out towards the Idaho border, the breathtaking chasms of the Hell's Canyon wilderness area - deeper even than the Grand Canyon - the lakes and waterfalls of the Columbia river, and the spray-veiled bays of the majestic, ironbound Pacific coast. The trip meter in our rented red Durango showed that in two weeks travelling around Oregon we covered more than 1,300 miles. And although we had only once, briefly, crossed out of the state, we felt as though we had had a tour of the entire US. If you want to see all of America, look no further than Oregon.

Oregon basics

Robert Cowan's trip was organised by American Round Up (01404 881777, www.americanroundup.com), which offers a range of dude ranches throughout the West and South-West of the United States.

Ranch stays can be incorporated into a variety of tailor-made holidays. For example, a fly-drive to the Western US, taking in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, costs from £772 per person for two

weeks, including accommodation and car hire. A return flight to Montana costs from £584 per person, including taxes.

Tour of the highlights

Portland

The state's relaxed biggest city: perfect for touring on foot and well worth a couple of days. The locals like their food and wine: there's plenty of seafood, as you would expect, and California-type fusion cuisine. The wines, particularly the Pinot Noirs, are excellent.

Baker City

Way out east, the capital of the 19th-century gold rush and later a real Western "cow" town. The Geiser Grand hotel, a mahogany-and-marble Victorian extravaganza, has to be seen – and stayed in. Just outside Baker is the Oregon Trail Interpretative Centre, which tells of the hardships of the thousands of settlers who footslogged their way across the mountains and deserts in search of the promised land by the Pacific.

Hells Canyon

At more than 8,000ft, the deepest river gorge in the world is in the middle of a series of vast wilderness and recreation areas. There are day jet-boat tours or longer white-water rafting trips along the Snake River through the canyon, and a 200-mile road tour on the Hells Canyon Scenic Byway. Needs two or three days to do it any kind of justice.

Joseph and Enterprise

Perfect bases for touring the Hells Canyon area or the high prairies to the north. At Wallowa , just outside Joseph, a giddyng cable car takes visitors 4,000 feet up onto the edge of the Eagle Cap Wilderness area. Just as you thought you couldn't be impressed by another set of landscape views, here are a dozen more to take your breath away.

Pendleton

A little further north, up in the prairies, this is home to the famous Pendleton Round-Up rodeo and an unlikely secret: an underground city dug to keep citizens out of the snows of winter, but transformed during Prohibition into a netherworld of bars and brothels. Now they are just a visitor attraction, but the organised tour is fun. Nearby is the Umatilla reservation, with a moving visitor centre that tells of the many tragedies of the local tribes after encounters with settlers. The adjacent casino should be avoided.

Florence

The perfect base for touring the dramatic Pacific coast, or taking a beach buggy and letting rip on the 45 miles and 30,000 acres of dunes (not all open to motor vehicles).

