

Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness and Hell's Canyon  
Characterizing Heaven and Hell ©  
By Amber Borowski

When people grasp for descriptors about me, they usually fall back on the safe catchall phrase that I have “personality.” But have you ever happened upon a place that is dripping with it? My friend John and I had one such encounter just outside of Hell's Canyon National Recreation Area in Oregon when we stumbled upon Imnaha, a self-professed “tourism-be-damned” kinda town.

Now, when people say I have personality, I'm sure they are referring to my charm, vivaciousness and unfathomable wit. For Imnaha, personality means down home, eclectic and unapologetic. How else could one describe a town whose lifeblood is a funky tavern with hundreds of dollar bills stuck to the ceiling, and whose pinnacle event is the annual Bear and Rattlesnake Feed each September? Juxtapose this against a rustic bed and breakfast ranch down the road and you have an eclectic mix of irascible and charming.

Northeastern Oregon is all about character. In addition to its backwater hamlets, it boasts some of the steepest and deepest terrain in the United States. The 358,000-acre Eagle Cap Wilderness is characterized by snow-capped peaks, high-alpines lakes and meadows, crystalline streams, and U-shaped glaciated valleys. As if that weren't enough to tantalize outdoor folks, there are 47 trailheads that access more than 500 miles of trails.

Add that to the neighboring Hell's Canyon National Recreation Area, the deepest gorge on the continent. This cut of perdition hosts almost 700,000 acres of the most rugged wild lands on earth, and the wildest whitewater stretch of the Snake River, which straddles the Idaho and Oregon boundary. Ominous canyon rimrocks shoot down to the river, more than 1,000 feet deeper than the Grand Canyon.

### The Popular Chief

We started in Joseph, the gateway to these backcountry playgrounds. In 1998, *Sports Afield* touted it as one of the 50 best outdoor sports towns in the country. For the most part, Joseph has remained undeveloped with only a smattering of funky little cafés, some outdoor shops, a few hotels, and a gas station.

We followed Hwy. 82 through town and traced the perimeter of Wallowa Lake where glaciers slithered over the area eons ago. We planned to hike 18-miles roundtrip to Ice Lake where many backpackers set up base camp and then climb the Matterhorn. At 9,845 feet, it is the highest peak in a range that is referred to as the Alps of Oregon.

The peak season for the wilderness is July through September. Our visit was in April, which meant two things: there was a lot of snow and we were the only ones nuts enough to be in it.

Upon arrival in the empty parking lot at the West Fork Wallowa River trailhead, I obtained a free permit at the trailhead. We then loaded up our backpacks. In addition to my snowshoes, I crammed in all the comforts of home. Well, at least all the comforts for a very cold home—one with no heat and lots of snow.

We lasted about five minutes on the trail before we changed our route. The soupy, unconsolidated snow pack leading up to Ice Lake looked like the mouth of an avalanche waiting to roar. We instead took the right fork up Chief Joseph Mountain, a 14-mile roundtrip hike that climbs a few thousand feet to a meadow below the famous peak with a great view of the valley.

Minor patches of snow blotched the path up the gorge and icicles glistened along the walls of the cascading Wallowa River. We confronted an obstacle at the first bridge crossing: a tree had taken out the rail and a part of the bridge.

I nervously glanced at John, whose strategy for crossing was rather obtuse. Now, I am in no way criticizing him. All I am saying is that this chick[en]'s tactic would have been significantly different. Instead of using the tentative and safe approach, John pounded his foot with each step to check stability. If he was gonna go, it would be with gusto.

During the ascent, we had stunning views of the jagged Wallowa Mountains, sparkling rivers rushing by seas of waving tussocks, and the Wallowa Valley's picturesque lowland farms. In the distance, the faces of the Seven Devils Mountain in Idaho peered over the rise from 9,395 feet. The trail climbed gradually past rockslides with chirping pika playing hide-and-go-seek, through open meadows interspersed with lodge-pole pine and alpine fir, and the occasional luminous waterfall.

As we hiked, I asked John the origin of Chief Joseph. Rather than admit he was clueless, Chief of the Bridge-Pounding Dance attempted to fake it. "Well, he was a very famous chief," John paused as I suspiciously watched him. "And his name was Joseph." We burst out laughing—*that* was my commentary? We later found out at Joseph's grave bordering Wallowa Lake that he was the principal leader of the Wallowa Nez Perce who was a key player in treaty negotiations.

We were within a mile of the summit when a tenuous bridge of snow halted us over loose, unconsolidated mush. There was no telling if the sheet of snow had lost its strength from the balmy daytime temperatures and the traverse would be risky. I announced to John that conditions were too sketchy.

Now, his reaction by forging forward could be explained in three very male-oriented ways: 1) He did not hear me 2) He chose not to hear me 3) His definition of "sketchy" was that it would be cool to sketch his butt in the snow down the steep mountainside.

After taking a few steps, he finally succumbed to my female wisdom and we turned back.

### Hell's Canyon National Recreation Area

Contrary to its name, Hells Canyon Recreation Area (HCNRA) is paradise on earth. It includes portions of the Nez Perce, Payette, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests.

It was too early in the season to raft down Hell Canyon's famed Wild Sheep and Granite Creek rapids, and we had to skip Hat Point for the same reason. Balanced on the west edge at 6,982 feet, Hat Point is the best viewpoint into the deepest gorge in America. The Snake River coils at 1,276 feet below and Idaho's Seven Devil's Mountains Range looms at more than 9,000 feet.

### Imnaha River Inn Bed and Breakfast

Whether you call it a bed and breakfast or a rustic lodge, I fell in love with Imnaha River Inn Bed and Breakfast. Located five miles from Imnaha and light years from civilization, one would think this an imprudent place for a 7,000-square foot B&B. Remote. Inaccessible. But for this reason Imnaha River Inn is able to work its magic on the borders of Hells Canyon.

Nick Vidan, who spent a lifetime building similar homes in Portland, built the gorgeous log and stone lodge. With its high vaulted ceilings, Imnaha River Inn is reminiscent of the grand lodges of the Adirondacks and Rockies built by industry scions in the early 1900s. He and his wife Sandy developed seven themed guest rooms including Elk, Fish, Bear, Cowboy, Indian and the Fishing Hole.

The B&B's greatest allure is not so much the lodge but the hosts. Nick and Sandy make this a personalized place with her home-cooked meals and his hilarious stories of the area's history and activities. And not to be forgotten is Eula, Nick's mother, who somehow topped them both when it came to cooking up humor and food.

Before going to bed, I stood out on the deck watching the Imnaha River wind through the valley. The orange moon pierced through the black-violet night and the silence penetrated. I gained an appreciation for this place where the Imnaha River and the star-studded heavens both seemed just a stone's throw away.

### Imnaha River Trail

We took Nick's advice and hiked the 10-mile roundtrip Imnaha River Trail (or Cow Creek Trail). Its allures include early spring access without snow, a profusion of wildflowers and front-row seats as the Imnaha River Valley's steep, jagged canyon narrows before merging with the Snake River

We followed the country road for 15 miles. Shortly after the B&B, the pavement turned into a steep, narrow dirt road that is negotiable with a passenger car but high-clearance vehicles are recommended.

We parked at the Cow Creek Bridge, checked out the salmon and steelhead trap sites in the river, and then hit the trail. The hike was enjoyable but Nick had warned us about rattlesnakes in the area so we kept our eyes open. Well, John kept his eyes open while I took his ears out with my yelps each time we spotted 'em.

After a leisurely (albeit stressful) 5-mile hike along the river, we reached the confluence with the Snake River. We stretched out on a rock and observed the gurgling waters clash, spurt and then merge into a fluid motion. American dippers dive-bombed the river, the sunbeams illuminating their heads as if their avian blood was radioactive.

As we reluctantly turned back, we heard a buzzing sound foreign to our environs. Soon, an anomalous motorboat passed by. "What is *that*?" I queried. John informed me it was a mail boat. "Well, where's the female boat?" I joked. His reaction confirmed that I am often my best (and only) audience.

We then drove the poorly maintained yet awe-inspiring mountain passage another 15 miles to Dug Bar in Hell's Canyon National Recreation Area and on the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail. Upon dropping down several feet to the Snake River, we reached the traditional crossing site where the Chief Joseph band forded immediately before the 1877 Nez Perce War. Although they did not know it at the time, this treacherous crossing was the band's farewell to their homeland.

We drove back up the steep gorge to the apex of the mountains and paused to venerate the 360-degree view. The only boundaries of this world were the mountains' hazy, purple curtains beyond which the horizon shimmered in the distance.

### Back to "Civilization"

I realize that extolling Imnaha is very atypical. Inevitably, most people who drive through town breeze right by its three buildings—the post office, the Imnaha Store and Tavern, and the café—without a second glance. And I can't really blame them.

But John and I were fortunate to stumble upon this hamlet when it came to life. Take a Thursday night, add some oil and oysters and you have one hoppin' fry-fest at the tavern. Daily coffee hour at 9 p.m. also brings the locals out in spades as the day's gossip is tossed around.

Built in 1908, almost 100 years of history is crammed on the tavern walls—old pictures, funny sayings, animal trophies and old license plates. Hundreds of dollar bills plaster the ceiling of this tavern that doubles as a general store. That night, the pool table doubled as a dinner table to accommodate the crowds.

I sauntered up to the bar to get the inside scoop. As luck would have it, I not only stumbled upon locals, but THE locals—Fred Warnock and Kelly Clark. Both have deep roots in Imnaha, and were delighted to share them with me.

Imnaha is best known for its annual Bear and Rattlesnake Feed, which is held the third weekend of September. The 12<sup>th</sup> annual party will feature a rodeo, parade, dance and yep, you guessed it—fried rattlesnake and barbequed bear. The event has grown so popular that more than 300 people killed and donated rattlesnakes for the cause last year, their signatures proudly displayed on a banner in the store.

As for the dollar bills, tradition has it that when the store finally closes its doors for the last time, they're throwing a huge retirement party. The money contains the name and phone number of those who want to be on the invitation list.

After an engaging evening, Fred announced that I needed to leave my mark on the ceiling. I pulled out a dollar bill and followed his instructions involving a pushpin and a quarter. I was then left alone to throw my bill at the ceiling in hopes it would find a place among the other revelers.

Sound easy? Think again. I knew my margin of error would be huge on this one. Fred and Kelly encouraged me. John pretended he did not know me. I won't divulge how many attempts it took but after the first few times (and close calls), the locals caught on that I am not someone to be ignored when a sharp projectile is placed in my hands.

When my dollar bill finally stuck, I had quite the audience. I'm not sure if their cheers were for my success or that they no longer felt threatened. Regardless, it was the perfect capstone to a charismatic region that gives a glimpse at both heaven and hell.

Eagle Cap Wilderness and Hell's Canyon National Recreation Area  
Visitor's Center  
88401 Hwy. 82  
Enterprise, OR  
(541) 5546

Imnaha Bed and Breakfast  
866-601-9214  
[www.imnahaRiverInn.com](http://www.imnahaRiverInn.com)