

# AMERICA'S GREAT WESTERN WATERWAY

The Columbia and Snake rivers deliver a rich feast for the eyes and lens.

*STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE SASS, SR.*

Looking east along the Columbia River, the Vista House observatory, built in 1918, is a popular stopover for those traveling the historic Columbia River Highway.

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## LEAVE A DAY OR TWO FOR PORTLAND

The Columbia River Gorge is fantastic, and starting our trip in Portland made it even better. We were in the city during its wild and crazy annual rose festival, usually held in late May and early June. The city was buzzing with fun. We photographed the beautiful International Rose Test Garden, watched the trials of international dragon boat races, toured the popular Widmer Brothers Brewing and fought for spectator space during the Starlight Parade. Leave a day or two before your cruising itinerary to spend some time in 'The City of Roses.' —G.S.

*Venture* heads east on her way to the small town of Cascade Locks, Oregon.  
**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A vendor prepares a bouquet at Portland's Farmer's Market.

**F**lashes of bright colors crisscross the river far ahead of us, some high in the sky, others on the water's surface, and all moving like crazed butterflies escaping the lepidopterist's net. As we approach this chaos of color, we see some humans attached to high-flying kites while others stand on rocket-fast boardsurfers, each trying to outdo the other with heroic, acrobatic stunts.

I am with boatbuilder Tony Fleming aboard *Venture*, his personal Fleming 65, for an exploration of the Pacific Northwest's Columbia and Snake rivers, and we have just arrived in Hood River, Oregon, known as the boardsurfing capital of the world. Strong prevailing westerlies are the norm in the Columbia River Gorge, and the swift, opposing river currents create conditions that attract wind-worshipping surfers from around the world. Fleming's captain, Chris Conklin, has to dodge and weave *Venture* through this maze of color, being careful not to get tangled in all the airborne rigging that is zig-zagging from one riverbank to the other.

As we enter the small harbor of Hood River, magnificent, snow-capped Mount Hood breaks through the low, fast-moving clouds, protectively looking down upon this little town on the hillside. After securing a spot along the town dock, we borrow a car from a friendly local and go exploring. First on our list is a quick drive back to the Bonneville Lock and Dam, which we had passed through the day before. Taking a fascinating tour of the dam's inner workings, we walk atop one of the massive, 60,000-kilowatt turbine generators, part of the dam's 1,200-megawatt hydroelectric power plant. The sophisticated control room reminds me of the movie "The China Syndrome."

Behind closed doors in a dark room sits a staff of official "fish counters" who meticulously record the seasonal migration data of salmon and steelhead. When building the dams and power plants along the Columbia and Snake rivers, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also built a series of fish ladders and hatcheries where salmon spawning activities can be viewed. Indeed, even before these dams were built, a controversy existed between those who wanted hydroelectric power and those who wanted to protect our natural resources. Based on recent data, both sides should be satisfied. There will be no shortage of salmon served at local restaurants, and today the dams generate 40 percent of the nation's hydroelectric power.

But what's a Pacific Northwest salmon without an excellent Oregon wine? So off we go on a 35-mile drive through the Hood River Valley known as the "Fruit Loop," where we taste some of the world's finest wines. Being in the rain shadow of Mount Hood, the valley has an ideal amount of precipitation for the pinot noir grape in particular. One locally produced pinot noir, in fact, was recently named number 3 on *Wine Spectator's* annual list of the world's top 100 wines. Conklin and I enjoyed a taste and decided *Venture's* wine locker could use a bottle or two of this delicate, hard-to-make gem.

Beyond wind, sports and wine, the Columbia River Gorge, which begins 15 miles east of Portland and stretches east for 80 miles, is also known for its spectacular scenery. Its canyons, 4,000 feet deep in spots, were created 15,000 years ago by the gigantic Missoula Floods. The





Beautiful Multnomah Falls is the most visited tourist site in the Pacific Northwest.  
**BELOW:** The fish ladders of Bonneville Dam enable salmon to return upriver to spawn.

colossal Bonneville landslide of 1000 A.D. further altered the landscape, which today attracts tourists and photographers from across the globe.

Cruising here does come with challenges: Conklin is reluctant to anchor overnight because of strong currents and unknown bottom conditions; marinas equipped to handle a boat of *Venture's* size, let alone welcome transients, are few and far between; and, of course, the locks have restricted openings for pleasure boats, as commercial barge traffic has priority.

Even still, when we look up at the natural beauty all around, none of us cares. Fleming, in addition to being a boatbuilder, also is an accomplished filmmaker and is shooting so much 4K video he wonders if he has enough memory cards to capture it all. I am shooting stills and have to download my cards every evening. Around every bend in the river is something more magnificent to see. For hours at a stretch, the conversation is limited to, "Tony, did you see that?" or "George, look at that!"

As we move up the Columbia River, we pass iconic Vista House, the historic observatory built more than 730 feet above the river at Crown Point, and then stop at famous Beacon Rock, the core of an ancient volcano that soars 850 feet above its base, where we tie up to wait for the next lock to open. Wherever there is a gap in the mighty gorge, the more than 11,000-foot-high Mount Hood reappears, wrapped in snow, reminding us that even on this hot summer day, the ski slopes are open.

Some of the more beautiful scenery of the gorge, a series of tall waterfalls set in lush rain forests, unfortunately is hidden from our route along the river, so I arrange to join a group of photographers for a bus tour. The breathtaking Latourell Falls, Bridal Veil Falls, Multnomah Falls and Horsetail Falls are all within an hour or two of downtown Portland. Multnomah Falls, with its nearly 620-foot plunge from Larch Mountain, is particularly stunning. I've never seen



*Venture* makes her way east past desert-like scenery along Snake River. **BELOW:** An old-fashioned carnival is one of several venues for Portland's Rose Festival.



so many cameras and iPhones focused on one scene.

Back aboard *Venture*, we pass The Dalles, a river city about 20 miles east of Hood River. The lush scenery begins to turn more arid and desert-like, and the temperatures begin to climb. The gorge officially ends about 15 miles past The Dalles. As we near the turnoff to the Snake River, the mountains become mostly bare of vegetation, and the brown canyon walls show their scars from the violent floods thousands of years ago.

Fleming and I continue nonstop capturing the dramatic scenery. We have traveled thousands of miles together, yet we have never seen anything quite like this epic route first made famous by Lewis and Clark.

It's an expedition worth making, indeed. **Y**

## SPOTLIGHT ON TONY FLEMING

Tony Fleming has always been a world traveler and adventurer. But above all, he has been one of the most successful boatbuilders in modern times. After spending 25 years helping to develop the Grand Banks line of trawler yachts, he founded Fleming Yachts. His timeless pilothouse design is one of the most popular production boats of all time, and today there are well over 200 Flemings, ranging from 53 to 78 feet, cruising the world. After taking delivery of hull number 1 of the Fleming 65, he turned over the daily operation of his company to his younger management team, so he could go cruising. He has traveled more than 50,000 miles on *Venture*, which he uses as a test bed for ideas and cruising gear. —G.S.

