

Driving Oregon's Elkhorn Scenic Byway

If a scenic drive filled with gold mining ghost towns, historical sites and gorgeous countryside sounds like a fun way to spend a day, then, the Elkhorn Scenic Byway (Route 7) in eastern Oregon is for you.

The 106-mile paved loop winds through the Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur National Forests, Elkhorn Mountains, passes beautiful lakes and rivers and encompasses an abundance of gold mining history.

Prospectors, photographers and history buffs alike will be delighted with the diversity along the route. This scenic drive begins and ends in Baker City, so gas up the rig, grab your camera and gold pan and buckle up!

BAKER CITY

Baker City's gold rush heyday was sparked by the discovery of gold in nearby Griffin Gulch in 1861. Henry Griffin's find led to decades of placer and lode mining in Baker County — producing more than two million ounces of gold. In fact, Baker County alone is responsible for two thirds of the gold found in the entire state of Oregon.

Whet your appetite for the area's golden history with a walking tour of the downtown area, officially recognized as a National Historic District. Of the 110 turn-of-the-century Victorian buildings here, so far 60 have been restored to their original elegance, including City Hall and the famous Geiser Grand Hotel.

Don't miss the interesting collection of nuggets at the US Bank on Main Street. The whopping 80.4-ounce "Armstrong Nugget" unearthed in 1913 by George Armstrong is on display during regular banking hours and stored safely in the vault at night. If you found this huge lump of placer gold today, it would be worth about \$136,000.

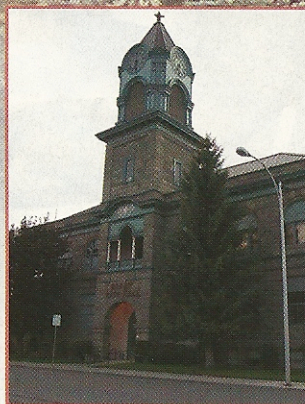
Visit the Chinese Cemetery on the edge of town and learn how this group of hard workers was largely responsible for the success of the gold mines and railroads in Baker County. Check your Gold Prospectors Association of America *Claims Club Membership Mining Guide* for directions to the two Baker County claims in the area. The Lost Dutchman's Mining Association Burnt River Camp property is also in the vicinity.

Gold, Ghost Towns & Gorgeous Scenery

by Denise Seith



Baker City Chinese cemetery



Baker City Hall



View of Flagstaff Hill

FLAGSTAFF HILL

(6 miles east of Baker City)

Between 1841 and 1850, nearly 100,000 pioneers outfitted their covered wagons and set out to follow the Oregon Trail — the mightiest westward migration in American history. Mining was one of the main incentives for taking this trip, and was a major influence on the settlement and early culture of eastern Oregon.

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center now sits atop the summit of Flagstaff Hill, where history practically comes to life — the extremely realistic dioramas inside the center are amazing.

Talk about walking in someone else’s footsteps — you can literally still trek in the original wagon wheel ruts here because the Center overlooks a well-preserved segment of the Oregon Trail. The dust and sagebrush are real enough, but listen closely and you just might hear braying oxen and creaking wagons (or is that just the wind?). The center is located on the previous site of the Flagstaff Gold Mine, which began operation in 1896. The outdoor lode mine exhibit is under development, but features a recreated five-stamp mill and other equip-

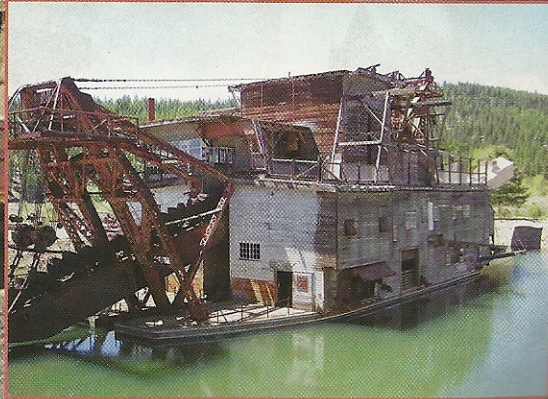
ment used to pulverize ore and recover gold. There’s also an outdoor wagon encampment.

SUMPTER

(30 miles west of Baker City)

Unlike most mining boom towns, Sumpter came to life rather slowly. It wasn’t the lack of gold, it was its remote location — only a winding wagon road led here from Baker City. First named Fort Sumter, the town was founded in 1862 by five prospectors from South Carolina who were originally just passing through on their way to the gold fields in California. After panning the gravels of Cracker Creek, they found gold and decided to stay.

Around 1895, Sumpter (the name had been changed by the post office) really sprang into action, thanks to the arrival of the stagecoach and railroad. The invention of the pneumatic drill and stamp mills for crushing ore paved the way for the establishment of numerous hard-rock mines (thousands are still hidden in the hills today). By the early 1900s, the once tiny town of Sumpter, now known as The Queen City, was home to more than 80



Sumpter bank vault

Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area

Sumpter dredge

businesses, 100 buildings (many of them brick) and more than 3,500 people. About the time the lode mines began to lose yield, dredging commenced in 1913, so the town continued to prosper — altogether recovering over \$10 million in gold (at \$35 an ounce).

The boom times didn't last, however, and after a devastating fire in 1917, the city was almost totally ruined. Then, along came Prohibition in the 1920s, closing saloons and hotels and drying up restaurants and all other businesses. The Sumpter Valley Railway discontinued its passenger service in 1937 and made its last run carrying timber and gold ore in 1947.

When costs outweighed profits, mining operations ceased in 1954. Folks had no choice then; they had to move on to find other jobs. Sumpter became a ghost town. Although the year-round population of Sumpter might be sparse today, it's not completely deserted. Some of the brick buildings are still standing, as is part of the Sumpter Bank vault. Special events take place during the summer which draw crowds of tourists.

The Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area is on the edge of town, so take advantage of the free self-guided tours of one of the country's largest gold dredges still on public display. This 1,240-ton Yuba-style dredge was one of three that produced \$4.5 million in gold between 1935 and 1954. The hull on this behemoth is 120 feet long by 52 feet wide by 11 feet deep. The Stacker is 96 feet long. Seventy-two buckets (10 cubic feet each) ran at a speed of 25 buckets per minute and 3,000 gallons of water per minute were supplied by one six-inch and two 10-inch pumps.

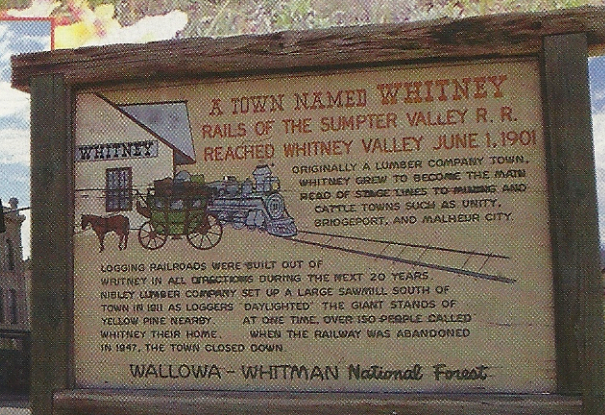
The steam-powered Sumpter Valley Railroad is also situated within the Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area. Fun five-mile trips between Sumpter and McEwen stations are offered on weekends and holidays from Memorial Day through the end of September.

While mining in and around Sumpter was very successful in the past, historians say that most of the gold in the Sumpter Valley is still waiting to be recovered, so you might want to pull out your gold pan or metal detector.

Granite cemetery.



Baker City, Geyser Grand Hotel



Whitney sign



Whitney ghost town

Just be extra careful not to trespass on the large number of federal and private mining claims here, most of which are clearly posted.

WHITNEY AND BOURNE

Back in 1901, the Sumpter Valley Railroad also ran through nearby Whitney, originally a lumber town with a huge sawmill. Whitney closed down in 1947, but several old homesteads are still standing and make good photo subjects. The ghost town is located 11 miles southwest of Sumpter on North Fork Burnt River Road. Bourne is another such tiny ghost town situated seven miles outside Sumpter on Cracker Creek. Driving to Bourne is slow going. At the end of the dusty dirt road, you'll find a few occupied summer cabins and rusty remnants left in the hillsides by miners.

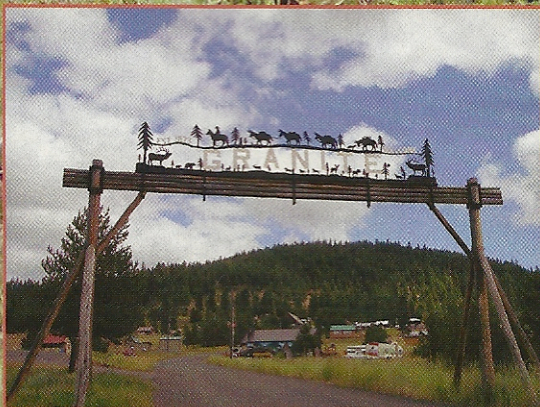
GRANITE

(15 miles northwest of Sumpter)

Quite by coincidence, the town of Granite has a very patriotic history. On July 4, 1862, Albert Tabor first discovered gold here and to honor the day, he called his

claim Independence. Upon applying for a post office, however, residents discovered that another small Oregon town was already called Independence, so the name was changed to Granite. The new name was spot on because of the quartz mining boom. By the early 1900s, the town was prospering and 15 businesses served the needs of the locals. But just as easily as it flourished, by the 1930s the mines began to fail and residents moved elsewhere to find their livelihood.

Beautiful ironwork now marks the entrance to this tiny town, and visitors will find several well-preserved buildings, a guest lodge, and a combination gas station, store and café. There's also an old and well-cared-for cemetery in town with a commanding view of 5,863-foot Blue Spring Summit (a popular snowmobiling area in the winter). Check out the epitaphs on many of the miners' tombstones. If you drive slowly through the streets of Granite, you'll notice the signage on the buildings and homes. These plaques tell



Granite sign



Whitney ghost town



Granite gold rock

about the structure's original purpose, owner, and history. If you crave privacy, Granite is the place to live today.

ANTHONY LAKE/ GRAND RONDE LAKE

After leaving Granite, enjoy 40 miles of pure mountain scenery as you travel over the 7,392-foot Elkhorn Mountain summit. Look for roadside remnants of rock walls left behind by early Chinese gold miners. You'll also find excellent opportunities for boating and fishing at crystal clear Anthony Lake and Grande Ronde Lake. Anthony Lake is the larger of the two. For experienced hikers, Gunsight Mountain offers some serious exercise, or take it easy and picnic in the historical gazebo that was built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps. A picturesque campground is next door.

HAINES

Following the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1884, Haines was a major supplier of mining, timber, and agriculture products and was known as "The Biggest Little City in Oregon." Today, the town is not quite as robust (the railroad stop was discontinued in 1962), but Main Street is still alive with a

charming general store, steakhouse, saloon, post office and more. The historical Chandler log cabin, the first cabin to have been built in Baker County in 1861, is worth a look. The Eastern Oregon Museum on Third Street often has been called "Grandma's Attic" because of its eclectic collection of over 10,000 household, farming, mining, and pioneer artifacts.

Although early gold prospectors, explorers, and Oregon Trail pioneers had it rough as they traversed and settled eastern Oregon, today's travelers will discover plenty of camping, dining and fun things to see and do along the Elkhorn Scenic Byway. And, even if you don't find any leftover gold along the route, you'll certainly have a wealth of photos and stories to your credit by journey's end!

Denise Seith is a freelance travel writer and treasure hunter in based in Salem, Oregon. She and her husband, Larry, own www.GoldRushTradingPost.com, an online prospecting equipment and supply store.



Anthony Lake and Gunsight Mountain



Haines-Chandler cabin