



Washington Cascades

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Why Go?

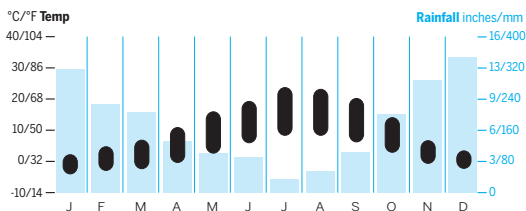
Grafted onto one of the more temperamental segments of the Pacific Ring of Fire, the Washington Cascades are a rugged, spectacular mountain range capped by five potentially lethal volcanoes: Mt Baker, Glacier Peak, Mt Rainier, Mt Adams and – fieriest of all – Mt St Helens.

Renowned for their world record-breaking precipitation and copious crevasse-covered glaciers, the highest Cascade peaks are vast stand-alone mountains that dominate almost every vista in the western state and create dry, scrubby, almost desert-like conditions further east.

Protected within a string of overlapping wilderness areas and national parks, the mountains offer some of the most awe-inspiring backcountry adventures in the US, if you don't mind bedding down in a tent and swapping your expensive Ralph Lauren scent for slightly less fragrant bug repellent. For the less outdoor-attuned, rarified Cascadian beauty can be glimpsed through the windows of cars, buses and trains, or enjoyed in a handful of classic 'parkitecture' lodges.

When to Go

Mt Rainier National Park



December–January Cascade ski areas get big dumpings of snow

February The 'Legendary Mt Baker Banked Slalom' snowboarding extravaganza

July–early October Higher elevations are snow-free from early July for a short, intense hiking season.

NORTH CASCADES

Dominated by Mt Baker and – to a lesser extent – the more remote Glacier Peak, the North Cascades is made up of a huge swathe of protected forests, parks and wilderness areas that dwarf even the expansive Rainier and St Helens parks to the south. The crème de la crème is the North Cascades National Park, a primeval stash of old-growth rain forest, groaning glaciers and untainted ecosystems whose savage beauty is curiously missed by all but 2500 or so annual visitors who penetrate its rainy interior.

Geologically different to the South Cascades, these wild northern giants are peppered with sharp, jagged peaks, copious glaciers and a preponderance of complex metamorphic rock. This gives them their distinctive alpine feel and has helped create the kind of irregular, glacier-sculpted characteristics that have more in common with the mountains of Alaska than the ‘rounder’ ranges further south. Thanks to their virtual impregnability, the North Cascades were a mystery to humans until relatively recently. Steep peaks such as Liberty Bell weren’t climbed until the late 1940s, the first road was built across the region in 1972 and, even today, it remains one of the Northwest’s most isolated outposts.

Mt Baker Area

Of all Washington’s snow-capped volcanoes, Baker is possibly the most majestic, a massive icy dome that towers over the US–Canadian border and is clearly visible everywhere from Vancouver, BC, to Seattle. Legendary among snowboarders and hikers, Baker has been revered by the indigenous natives of Puget Sound for millennia. The Coast Salish called it Koma Kulshan (White Sentinel), while the mountain’s modern name comes from Captain George Vancouver’s third lieutenant, Joseph Baker, who was allegedly the first European to spot it in 1792. Though over 3000 feet lower than Mt Rainier, Baker is a more volcanically active and snowier peak; the mountain actually holds the world record for snow in a single season (1140 inches in 1998-9).

Baker was first ascended by an Englishman, Edmund Coleman, in 1868. The modern route, though more straightforward than Rainier, requires travel across one of the mountain’s 10 permanent glaciers.

Sights

Mt Baker Scenic Byway

SCENIC HIGHWAY

The 57-mile drive east along Hwy 542 from metropolitan Bellingham to the otherworldly **Artist Point** through moss-draped forests and past melodious creeks is one of the Northwest’s most magic-invoking drives. Glacier, 33 miles in, is the last main settlement on the route. Seven miles further on, turn right on Wells Creek Rd and after half a mile you’ll encounter **Nooksack Falls**, which drop 175ft into a deep gorge. This was the site of one of America’s oldest hydropower facilities, built in 1906 and abandoned in 1997. Back on Hwy 542 the road begins to climb in earnest until you reach **Heather Meadows** at mile post 56. The Mt Baker Ski Area is here, and just up the road is **Austin Pass**, a picnic area and the starting point of several hiking trails.



Activities

Climbing

The two principal routes up Mt Baker ascend **Coleman Glacier**, on the northwest side of the mountain, and **Easton Glacier**, on the south side. Both require two to three days, with a night spent camping at the base of the glacier. Technical equipment is highly recommended. The northern ascent begins at the Heliotrope Ridge trailhead and continues across Coleman and Roosevelt Glaciers for a final steep and icy climb up the North Ridge to the summit. Novice climbers should consider classes and guided climbs. Contact the **American Alpine Institute** (www.aai.cc; 1515 12th St, Bellingham, WA 98225) in Bellingham, which offers general training programs, along with guided climbs up Mt Baker for \$590 (three days).

Hiking

While Mt Baker offers plenty of advanced hikes for experienced walkers, there are also a handful of easier options that leave from the Artist Point parking lot and are manageable for families. Most are snow-free by mid-July. The interpretive **Artist Ridge Trail** is an easy 1-mile loop through heather and berry fields with the craggy peaks of Mts Baker and Shuksan scowling in the background. Another option is the 0.5-mile **Fire & Ice Trail**, adjacent to the Heather Meadows Visitors Center, which explores a valley punctuated by undersized mountain hemlock. The 7.5-mile **Chain Lakes Loop** starts at the Artist Point