

# 101 Wonders

A 50-mile stretch of the Oregon Coast Highway offers vistas and adventures | By Aaron Ragan-Fore

**W**hen he finally reached the Oregon coast in 1805, William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition was moved to write: “Ocean in view! O! The joy!” So many of the sensory experiences open to Clark in his day—the dramatic sight of a jet-black orca fin cresting choppy blue waves, the buttery taste of a piece of salmon, the crisp scent of pine resin mingling in the air with a sea-spray tang—remain unspoiled today for visitors to the Oregon coast.

My favorite portion of the Oregon coast is the 50-mile stretch of Highway 101 between the towns of Newport and Florence. Whether it’s the setting for a romantic getaway or a family vaca-



LARRY GEDDIS

tion, this stretch of coast offers boundless attractions.

On the north end of this coastal strip of land is the visitor-friendly town of Newport, about 115 miles from Portland. Tucked between the Coast Mountains, Pacific Ocean and Yaquina Bay, the city is home to an active arts community, galleries and shops. While the Historic Bayfront—where grizzled fishermen in waders rub elbows with khaki-clad tourists—offers plenty of family fun, including whale-watching expeditions, lifelike statues of celebrities at The Wax Works, and a branch of Ripley’s Believe It or Not museum, I’ve spent Newport days that were just as fulfilling simply eating fish and chips out of a paper carton and watching the sea lions that have claimed one of the floating docks as their own in this operating fishing port.

The landward side of Bayfront, a shoreline-hugging thoroughfare that runs along the water, is lined by attractions and shops, while right across the street, a network of piers is home to hundreds of bobbing fishing trawlers. It’s easy to while away an hour simply watching boats enter and exit the harbor.

There’s no shortage of the aforementioned fish and chips in Newport, but my preference is the Lighthouse Deli’s walk-up lunch counter located on the Bayfront, where diners enjoy fried delicacies at one of the benches situated beneath an outdoor staircase. Afterward, Jennifer, my wife, likes to stroll along the bay, buying a bag of saltwater taffy at Aunt Belinda’s Candies, or stop by the Fish Peddler’s Market to stock up on fresh seafood to take back to the city.

Newport is home to Writers on the Edge, a literary organization that brings poets and authors to town for readings, and the annual storytelling festival “Stories by the Sea,” so it seems natural that the town is also home to a literature-themed hotel: The Sylvia Beach Hotel, named for post World War I expatriate literary



STEVE TERRILL

**Left:** Crab pots and floats sit on a dock beside the Yaquina Bay fishing fleet at Newport.

**Above:** Pacific Ocean waves crash on sea stacks at Seal Rock State Wayside.

maven Sylvia Beach (not some local surfing spot). The hotel, situated on a cliff above picturesque Nye Beach, caters to true book lovers, with rooms featuring imaginative touches dedicated to Hemingway, Dickinson, Twain and other literary legends. The Dr. Seuss room features a plethora of hats fit for a cat, for example, and the do-not-disturb tag on the Poe room’s doorknob reads “Dead to the world.”

Leave the Bayfront and cross the stunning Yaquina Bay Bridge and you’ll find the Oregon Coast Aquarium. Walking through the submerged tunnel system of the “Passages of the Deep” exhibit, we enjoy a shark’s-eye view of an ocean environment replete with the sleek, alien bodies of elegant bat rays sailing over-

head. Then there’s the incredible jellyfish exhibit. It’s difficult to imagine that these translucent creatures suspended before our eyes are more animal than plant.

Down the road from the aquarium, the Hatfield Marine Science Center, a working research arm of Oregon State University, engages visitors in the university’s mission of scientific exploration with hands-on learning activities and tidal touch pools that keep kids engaged. We never tire of having the grasping, gelatinous green arms of the anemones in the touch tanks grab hold of our fingers, convinced that our digits are their next meal.

From here, we wend our way along the coast, stopping in the minuscule town of Seal Rock, just 10 miles south of Newport,

Top: Morning light bathes Oregon's tallest lighthouse, Yaquina Head.

Bottom: Florence's Old Town is home to unique shops, galleries and restaurants.

for a spicy garlic bon sushi roll at Yuzen Japanese Cuisine. The building once housed a German restaurant, evident in the incongruous stained glass and carved wood throughout the dining room, but Yuzen's eccentricities just add to its appeal. As we leave, I wave goodbye to the grinning, 15-foot-tall cutout of Yuzen founder Hanamoto-san.

Then we're back on 101, taking in the crashing Pacific surf off to the right as the road winds along the coast. Soon, the tiny town of Yachats (that's YAH-hots) appears. It would be easy to dismiss this town, with a population of just more than 600, as little more than a gasoline and ice cream stop between tourism powerhouses Newport and Florence, but skipping the charming hamlet is a missed opportunity. In fact, Yachats just may be our favorite spot on the planet—which is why Jennifer and I chose it for our wedding. Stylish art galleries, eclectic gift shops and brightly colored houses line 101 as the highway cleaves to the coastline through town, then crosses a short bridge spanning the two cliffs that flank the sheltered Yachats River Beach, where the cool freshwater of the Yachats River flows directly into the sea. Here, kids can explore Yachats' rocky tidal pools, which are teeming with spiny gray anemones and rust-hued starfish.

Yachats is home to diverse lodging

options, including the eponymous Yachats Inn, which has luxury one-bedroom condos and standard hotel rooms. The nearby Shamrock Lodgettes in Yachats provide individual rooms or rustic private cabins overlooking the beach. Every bit as



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spectacular as the Heceta Head Lighthouse itself, the Queen Anne-style Keeper's House has been converted into a bed-and-breakfast offering unbelievable views and seven-course breakfasts. One of the inn's long-term guests seems particularly disinclined to check out: Rue—a mischievous resident ghost who locks doors and switches lights on and off—is said to be the spirit of a former keeper's wife. I can think of worse places to spend eternity.

For those who do linger, Yachats itself offers plenty of dining options. The Yachats River House is an upscale restaurant that more resembles a trendy Portland nightspot than a coastal highway dining spot, and perhaps it's the melding of the two

that makes the place unique. The River House has only been around for a year, but it's used that time to master the art of the crab bisque.

Directly across 101, The Drift Inn provides a family-friendly atmosphere, and

an eclectic menu featuring winning pub grub, vegan and vegetarian entrees, and inventive palate-pleasers such as black-berry-hazelnut salmon. The Drift is a great place to meet friends over dessert or a couple of beers, and soak up the live music playing virtually every night of every week.

The quaint Little Log Church in the center of Yachats hosts 30 to 40 weddings a year. The cross-shaped chapel dates to 1930 and is completely log-built. The adjoining museum showcases antiques and artifacts of coastal Oregon history, as well as an impressive seashell collection.

Driving the cliff-cleaving stretch of highway between Yachats and Florence to the south can be a bit nerve-wracking when Oregon's weather turns foul, but the visibility from high atop these craggy peaks of black rock can afford motorists stunning views of the sea. One of the best vantage points is Devil's Churn, in the Cape Perpetua Scenic Area, where sea spray spritzes your face while you stand on a narrow rock promontory overlooking a wave-beaten cliff base. In my admittedly biased opinion, these winding 101 switchbacks high above the crashing surf offer the most spectacular views on the entire west coast. The majestic fir and spruce forest sweeps down the mountainside, almost to the cliff's edge, and the contrast of the emerald green with the limitless blue of the sea below, marked by a streak of gold as the sun dips below the horizon each evening, is breathtaking each time I witness it.

The vista along this section of coast is accentuated by the sudden emergence of the brilliant red roof and gleaming white walls of the Heceta Head Lighthouse as it appears around a bend. The 1894 tower is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and is said to be one of the most photographed lighthouses in the world. The lighthouse, which is available for tours conducted by Oregon Parks and Recreation, is still used by fishermen to guide their way home, a romantic notion rekindled each time the light is lit. Over a century ago, it took the lighthouse keeper most of a day to return to his solitary post by horse and wagon after replenishing sup-

plies in Florence, 13 miles distant. These days, the trip takes only about 20 minutes by car.

Just about 14 miles south of Yachats on 101 are the Sea Lion Caves, an attraction that could exist only in eccentric Oregon. As you walk across the top of a cliff, 20 stories above the water, the visitors center itself doesn't look like much at first, but once inside, your perspective changes. A quick descent in an elevator straight down into the seaside cliff reveals a jaw-dropping walk on the wild side. The naturally occurring cavern would make Batman jealous and is home to hundreds of wild Steller's sea lions that come and go as they please. It's truly amazing to watch this colony of roaring, barking, napping, swimming animals, who often venture to less than 100 feet away from their bipedal guests. Male lions can grow to 11 feet and 2,000 pounds, but don't worry: There's 200 feet of solid rock between the critters and the parking lot up on 101. You'd think that all those seagoing mammals pressed together underground might start to smell a bit, well, briny after awhile ... and you'd be right. But don't worry, the caves are sealed by a fine-mesh, stainless-steel screen that keeps both species in comfort and safety.

Between Yachats and Florence, which is where we're headed, there's always time for a rejuvenating stroll through the serene green of the Darlingtonia Botanical Wayside five miles north of town, an 18-acre park featuring patches of graceful, but carnivorous, pitcher plants. Aptly referred to as "cobra lilies," these plants attract insects to an opening in the stalk, then confuse them as they try to exit. It may not sound appropriate for meditation, but the small park is the perfect place to reflect and catch your breath.

Continuing south, the topography changes abruptly from jagged and coastal to sandy and smooth. Here, 101 straightens out and runs past farms and stables offering beachfront horseback riding excursions. Soon, we reach the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area near Florence. At up to 500 feet above sea level, the Dunes seem specifically designed for sand-

## Attractions, dining and lodging

For more on the central coast call 541-484-5307 or visit [www.visitlanecounty.org](http://www.visitlanecounty.org).

### Newport

Oregon Coast Aquarium  
541-867-3474; [www.aquarium.org](http://www.aquarium.org)

Hatfield Marine Science Center  
541-867-0100; <http://hmssc.oregonstate.edu>

Fish Peddler's Market  
541-265-7057

Lighthouse Deli and Fish Company  
541-265-2400; [www.lighthouse дели.com](http://www.lighthouse дели.com)

Aunt Belinda's Candies  
541-265-2075

Sylvia Beach Hotel  
888-795-8422; [www.sylviabeachhotel.com](http://www.sylviabeachhotel.com)

### Seal Rock

Yuzen Japanese Cuisine  
541-563-4766

### Yachats

Heceta Head Lighthouse  
866-547-3696; [www.hecetalighthouse.com](http://www.hecetalighthouse.com)

The Little Log Church and Museum  
541-547-3976; [www.yachats.org/llc.html](http://www.yachats.org/llc.html)

Yachats River House  
541-547-4100; [www.yachatsriverhouse.com](http://www.yachatsriverhouse.com)

The Drift Inn  
541-547-4477; [www.the-drift-inn.com](http://www.the-drift-inn.com)

Adobe Resort  
800-522-3623; [www.adoberesort.com](http://www.adoberesort.com)

Shamrock Lodgettes  
800-845-5028; [www.shamrocklodgettes.com](http://www.shamrocklodgettes.com)

Yachats Inn  
541-547-3456; [www.yachatsinn.com](http://www.yachatsinn.com)

### Florence

Siuslaw Pioneer Museum  
541-997-7884; [www.florencechamber.com/RecAtt\\_PioneerM.htm](http://www.florencechamber.com/RecAtt_PioneerM.htm)

Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area  
541-750-7000; [www.fs.fed.us/r6/siuslaw](http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/siuslaw)

Sea Lion Caves  
541-547-3111; [www.sealioncaves.com](http://www.sealioncaves.com)

Hotel Lucia  
1/3 sq 4/C

Shoreline Ridge  
1/3 sq 4/C

castle architects tired of watching the tide turn their masterpieces to mush. Popular year-round with hikers, kite-flyers and all-terrain-vehicle enthusiasts, the incredible expanse of supreme silicate extends 40 miles along the coast between Florence and the town of Coos Bay to the south. The dunes are bordered by the Pacific, but this uber-beach is more for folks who think getting wet is overrated. A quick walk from the highway seemingly transports sand worshippers to a Saharan landscape, with windblown dunes of soft white sand extending as far as the eye can see. It's the ideal place to let the sun-warmed sand run between your toes.

Florence is one of Oregon's most popular tourist spots, and it's easy to see why. The city's primary attractions are the shops and restaurants of historic Old Town, a charming district of unique businesses housed in Victorian-era structures lining the Siuslaw River. This is the perfect place to explore galleries and antiques stores with a latte or ice cream cone in hand, or take a walk through the nearby sand dunes.

I'm partial to the Siuslaw Pioneer Museum in the center of Florence in the Old Town area. Housed in an old elementary-school building at the corner of Second and Maple streets, and still complete with that good, old-fashioned woody-school-house feel, the museum features antiques and exhibits related to coastal industries such as logging and fishing. Kids (and the occasional spirited adult) can ring an old school bell or try out a vintage telephone operator's kiosk.

From the natural to the nautical, the Central Oregon coast boasts enough diverse distractions to please most anyone. ●

*Writer Aaron Ragan-Fore was married in Yachats. He makes his home in Eugene, Oregon.*

### **Getting There**

*Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR; alaskaair.com) offers daily flights to Portland, Eugene and North Bend, Oregon, via sister carrier Horizon Air (800-547-9308; horizonair.com).*