



The Indian Heaven Wilderness is a wonderland of small lakes, subalpine forest, huckleberries in season, and meadows. Autumn is a great time to visit Indian Heaven: The voracious mosquitoes are gone and the autumn colors vibrant.

Stairway to Heaven

Clear lakes, huckleberries and easy trails make Indian Heaven a delight

BY JOAN BURTON

The road to heaven isn't an easy one, but the road to Indian Heaven may be even harder.

The Indian Heaven Wilderness is a high volcanic plateau located between Mount Adams and Mount St. Helens. Though it's a federally designated wilderness area within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, it's not easy to find. Access roads snake around the wilderness, as though determined to confuse you and take you everywhere but where you want to go. Start out with a good road map, but also get the Green Trails maps of the Indian Heaven Wilderness: Lone Butte 365, Mount Adams West 366, and Wind River 397.

Once you have found one of the entry points, the terrain, generally at an

elevation of 4,000 feet, is made up of grassy meadows, shallow lakes, and little potholes. These potholes are former fumaroles—volcanic vents—that have filled in with warm water. The soil is filled with volcanic pumice.

Between these lakes is an agreeable landscape, predominantly alpine meadows and open forest of Douglas, alpine and noble firs. The trunks of the trees are shaggy with lichen, like old men's beards, mustaches and eyebrows. Unlike the North Cascades, where steep jagged peaks define the limits of where you can travel and every trail is filled with sharp stones, Indian Heaven gains and loses elevation gradually on wide dirt paths. The glaciers never reached this far south. Instead, volcanoes shaped this landscape: eruptions and lava flows built

up this plateau of lakes and meadows. Trees are widely spaced and underbrush is open. The boulders you do find are basalt, with telltale bubbles to indicate their origin.

Blueberries and huckleberries are thick in Indian Heaven. Archeological evidence indicates that tribes (including the Yakama, Klickitat, Wasco, Wishram, and Umatilla) have harvested berries here for more than 9,000 years. In August you can pick enough for a meal very quickly. Some of the bushes are full size, and some in the meadows are dwarf size, as though shrunk in scale. In July, the white torches of bear-grass bloom all along the trails. We saw flocks of camp robbers near our tents, frogs and mergansers in the lakes, and heard the coyotes singing at night.



GARY ROSE

Left: Camp at Thomas Lake.
Above: Mount Adams and Mount Rainier from Bird Mountain.

The lakes in some parts of the wilderness are so close together that you can choose from three or four within a few steps. Because they are relatively shallow and the water is clear and clean, swimming is excellent. Because of the moisture, mosquitoes here are also legendary; the best time to visit is from late August through October.

On the west side of the wilderness from Forest Road 65, the Thomas Lake entrance is a good choice because the first lake is only 0.75 mile from the trailhead. Within 250 feet of Thomas lie Dee, Heather, Eunice and Kwaddis Lakes. Walk on about 3.5 miles to Blue Lake, and within 250 feet lie Sahalee Tyee, Sebago, and Tombstone Lakes.

On the east side, the Cultus Creek entrance is easier to find and the trailhead is reached on a more obvious road, FS 24. Climb 700 feet in 1.75 miles to

Deep Lake, and Cultus Lake at 2 miles. From the town of Trout Lake on FR 60 after about 11 miles, you'll find the East Crater trailhead, which leads to a junction with the Pacific Crest Trail at Junction Lake.

To the north, from Indian Berry Fields on FR 24, you can reach Lake Chenamus and Placid Lake in less than 2 miles.

Because the total Wilderness is small, you can walk across the width of it in one day, if you wish. But a better plan is to stop at one lake, set up camp, and dayhike across the plateau, savoring one lake after another, like cookies. Each one is delicious, just a little bit different than the one before, and you won't want to stop until you've seen them all. ♦

Joan Burton is a WTA member from Seattle and author of Best Hikes With Kids: Western Washington and Cascades.

Trip Essentials

Indian Heaven Loop

Hikable: July–October

Round trip: 15

Elevation gain: 1,800 feet

Maps: Green Trails Lone Butte 365, Wind River 397

To get there: From the town of Trout Lake, take FR 24 north to Cultus Creek Campground

The route: Take trail 33 south 2 miles to Cultus Lake; continue south over a saddle to a junction with trail 179; go left, passing Lemei Lake; 2.5 miles south of Cultus Lake, turn right on the Pacific Crest Trail, looping back north and passing Bear Lake; continue on the PCT north past Deer Lake and the shoulder of Bird Mountain to a junction; turn right on Lemei Lake trail 108 back to Cultus Creek Campground.