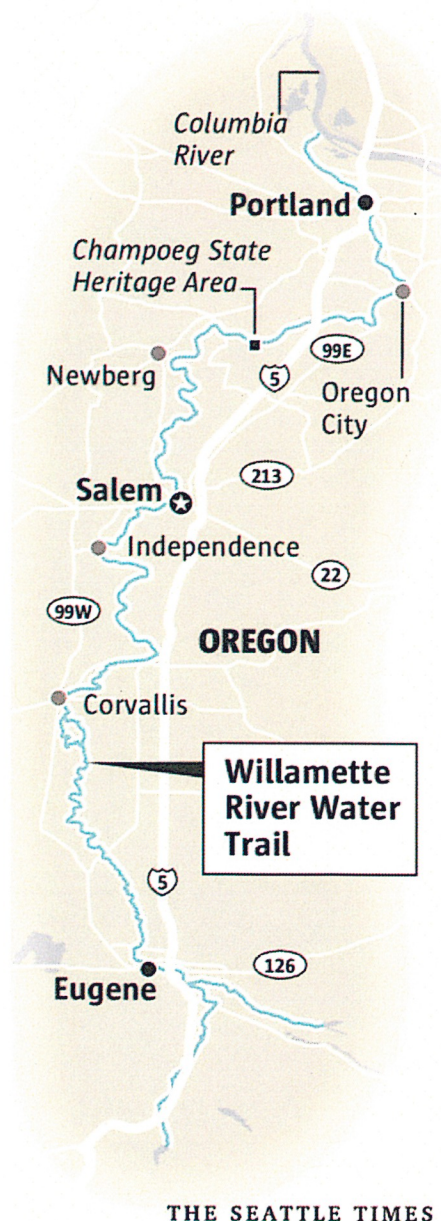


# The Seattle Times

## Peaceful paddles — with beer stops — on Oregon's Willamette Water Trail

July 22, 2015

CORVALLIS, Ore. — For most of us, Oregon's Willamette Valley conjures thoughts of lush berries, intriguing pinot noirs and gently rolling hills. But the Willamette River itself? While it created and still defines the valley, most people don't give the river much of a second thought.



But whether you're looking for a diversion from a trip to Portland or Eugene, or just seeking fresh paddling waters for a summer vacation, the river is worth getting to know, and the best way to do that, of course, is to be on the water itself. "Once people experience the river, they fall in love with it. They understand how much value it has and how wonderful it is," said Kate Ross, outreach coordinator for Willamette Riverkeeper, a nonprofit dedicated to exploring and restoring the river.

Willamette Riverkeeper and local and national governments created the Willamette River Water Trail, officially designated in 2008 and made a [National Water Trail](#) in 2012. Totalling 187 river miles, from south of Eugene to north of Portland, the trail connects a series of put-in or takeout spots as well as places to pull over for a quick picnic or an overnight camp.

You could almost paddle the trail's entire length without portaging, except that the locks at Willamette Falls near Oregon City are closed for renovation.

### A trip with a sip

To see for myself, I signed on for an afternoon kayaking-and-beer-tasting tour with Corvallis-based Cascadia Expeditions (\$89 for six hours; [cascadiaexpeditions.com](http://cascadiaexpeditions.com)), which does flat-water and

whitewater rafting and kayaking trips. But this stretch of the Willamette is nicknamed “The River of Mellow.” A small group of us floated 10 miles down the wide, greenish-blue river, letting its current assist our paddling, from Peoria County Park, near the town of Shedd, to Crystal Lake Park in Corvallis. Our guide, Cascadia’s Brett Gallagher, pointed out potential dangers — tree snags, underwater debris, rocks, and unexpected currents — of any river, even one as agreeable as this.

It’s easy to forget that farms, subdivisions and towns flank the river, because from the water, all you see are brush and trees. We heard bass-honking bullfrogs and watched tadpoles and tiny fish darting beneath our kayaks. Bald eagles and osprey scanned the river for prey, and a green heron eyed us from a rocky perch.

The banks are often deep and steep, but pebbly or even sandy beaches make for easy pullouts at some spots. We took advantage of a couple of these to pause and taste a few beers (all locally brewed, of course) as well as fresh berries, cheese and sausage.

While an organized paddle is the easiest way to do it, especially for newbies to river paddling, the river is open to everyone. Every few miles, there’s a state or city park with a put-in spot. The Willamette runs right through many of the valley’s towns, making for quick or overnight stops for refreshment and a taste of civilization. Other explorers camp all the way along their routes.

### **Rich in history**

During a recent Willamette Valley tour, I stayed at Feller House Bed & Breakfast ([thefellerhouse.com](http://thefellerhouse.com)), in Aurora, a 10-minute drive from Champoege State Heritage Area, outside Newberg. The sprawling park encompasses a former riverside-town site, a visitor center and innumerable shaded picnic tables. Boats, motored or not, can pull up to its dock for a break from the river, and visitors can even chat with rangers and volunteers (some dressed in 19th-century clothing) eager to share the area’s history.

Riverkeeper’s website, maps and brochures contain information on suggested itineraries, campgrounds, bathrooms and picnic areas. The organization hosts monthly “River Discovery” paddling trips. Volunteers can sign up to help with research and restoration projects.

Every August, up to 200 people sign up for Paddle Oregon, a five-day supported group kayak and canoe trip down the Willamette (Aug. 17-21 this year; [paddleoregon.org](http://paddleoregon.org)). “Not only do people get to know other people and make lasting friendships, they get an intimate experience of the river,” Ross said.



Local businesses are getting in on the fun, too. Near the town of Independence, Rogue Farms, where the famous craft-brewing company grows vegetables (think pumpkin beer), fruit and hops, is right on the river ([rogue.com/roguefarms](http://rogue.com/roguefarms)). About a quarter of its many weekend visitors arrive by water, pulling up for a quick drink or snack and live music or lawn games.

Just north of Salem, Arcane Cellars is on the river across from Willamette Mission State Park, which features an easy-access beach. Along with wine tasting, Arcane welcomes paddlers with bocce ball and even showers ([arcanecellars.com](http://arcanecellars.com)).

### **Small-town Oregon**

Every now and then, a small town punctuates the route, and every one is adorable, with the old-fashioned storefronts that populate most small-town main streets in the Northwest.

I stopped in the hamlet of Independence, 10 miles from the Rogue farm, after I spotted a 1950s-era gas station converted into something — I wasn't sure what, but something inviting, with red umbrellas out front, midcentury-looking blue bar stools, and random pieces of patio furniture.

It turned out to be a pub, [Mecánico](#), and its proprietor, Matthew Lind, is a big fan of the Willamette. He likes to put his kayak in upriver at Buena Vista, make a stop at the Rogue farm, and take out at Riverview Park, right behind his establishment.

"It's just a super-underutilized recreational area with gorgeous scenery," he said, filling me in on the history of Independence, once a hub for the logging industry that shipped timber from here to Portland via the Willamette. The river also carried fur trappers toward their rendezvous and settlers to their new home sites. These days, it's as valuable as ever, bringing a taste of nature to a whole new kind of adventurer.

### **If you go**

For detailed information about the **Willamette River Water Trail**, including planning help, lists of guides, shuttle service and more, see [willamettewatertrail.org](http://willamettewatertrail.org).

**Willamette Riverkeeper** has lots of information about the river, including paddling and an interactive map: [willamette-riverkeeper.org](http://willamette-riverkeeper.org).

**Willamette Valley Visitors Association:** [oregonwinecountry.org](http://oregonwinecountry.org)

**Travel Salem:** [travelsalem.com](http://travelsalem.com)