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Cycling the Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway



By Leigh Pate

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The laughter and happy chatter rolled up the canyon walls. I looked down below at the black inner tubes that held reclining, bathing suit clad families and teens as they floated and flirted down the Yakima River curving below. I was navigating the canyon on a more sweat-inducing bicycle, rolling along the two-lane road built along the canyon cliffs that followed the river.

Despite having to work harder than the kids cooling off below, I was enjoying myself every bit as much. I sailed south though basalt cliff walls and golden-green sage fields spotted with clumps of brilliant yellow-flowered balsamroot, appreciating the gorgeous scenery, the welcome warmth and sunshine and the deceiving tailwind that made me feel like I could ride for days.

The Yakima River Canyon Byway that connects Ellensburg and Yakima through a beautiful canyon is a cyclist's dream. The route we chose was a simple 50 mile out and back starting at Helen McCabe Park two miles south of Ellensburg on Canyon Road and heading south 25 miles to the town of Selah for a lunch break. We retraced our route back up the canyon into the same headwind that pushed us forward earlier, admiring the views we missed from the new direction as we worked our way north and a much slower pace.

The canyon is full of reasons to stop and explore. Boat launches and some of the campgrounds tempt for canoeing, rafting, tubing or having a quick swim to cool down. The Yakima River is a designated Blue Ribbon Trout Fishery and is a premier destination for fly-fishing and the only Blue Ribbon designated River in Washington. There are hiking and mountain biking trails accessible along the way into the wilderness to the west of the river. And bighorn sheep, raptors and other wildlife can be seen from the saddle outside the heat of the day.

Watch for the Beck Memorial, named after Central Washington University professor who researched the geologic history of the area, as well as interpretive signs that describe the geologic history of lava flows, basalt cliffs, the formation of the Cascade mountains and the Yakima River's meandering progress to cut this beautiful canyon out of volcanic rock.

Tent and RV campgrounds make this area an easy destination for a weekend, with plenty of time to explore and play beyond the road on the bike. This ride is excellent as a spring or fall ride for "west of the mountains" riders wanting to train out of the rain. It can be shortened to be suitable for all levels of riders and families assuming basic bike handling skills to handle a two-lane road with low to moderate traffic and enough leg strength for some moderate climbing. Strong riders can extend the ride to Yakima via the Greenway Trail and into the hills and wineries beyond.

Details:

Location: Yakima River Canyon Road is SR 821. From Ellensburg take exit 109 from I-90. The town of Selah can be reached by following route 823 another 3 miles after Canyon Road ends into town. In Selah ask for directions to the Yakima Greenway trail or download a map from the link below if you wish to go on into Yakima. While there is some access to water and restrooms at the campgrounds along the way, riders should bring water, electrolytes and food.

Helpful links:

[Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway](#)

[Discover Selah: Yakima River Canyon](#)

[Yakima Greenway Path](#)

[Visit Kittitas: Helen McCabe State Park](#)

If a supported ride when the road has been closed to traffic is more your speed, check out the [Your Canyon for a Day Bike Tour](#) (May 20, 2012)

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