

Escape to Eastern Oregon

By Julia Atkinson

Are you here to firefight?

Half a dozen people asked me this over my two weeks in eastern Oregon – a barista, a gas station attendant, and the customer service representative at Verizon included.

Firefighting's the traveling profession here and it is the season. And apparently, firefighter's the easiest box to fit me in as a solo female traveler and obvious out of townner.

Luckily, I encountered no wildfires. I escaped Southern California on a whim and came up to a log cabin in Ukiah, Oregon, inside the Umatilla National Forest to explore the area. Ukiah, population 260, boasts one bar, a combination gas station / espresso shop I've yet to see open, pine trees and a river dotted with camp sites and swimming holes.



For those who find themselves in eastern Oregon, here my recommendations:



[Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site](#) – John Day, Oregon. Reopened for tours in July 2021. Building was locked up for years – a true time capsule, it's wild to see the vintage product labels and the last bottle of whiskey the owners stashed pre-prohibition (the rest were drunk by the city council members). Tours are free and definitely check out the Interpretative Center – hosts and local award winners provide great local story context. Started by Chinese immigrants involved in the gold strike, opened the first car dealership in eastern Oregon, kept local banks solvent during the Great Depression.

[Aspen Grove Interpretative Site](#) – Pendleton, Oregon. Worth a 5-minute stop. Off a dirt road off the Blue Mountain Scenic Byway, the fenced in grove shows the restoration of young

Aspen trees.

- [Pendleton Underground Tours](#) – Pendleton, Oregon. Tour Oregon's abandoned underground city.
- [TAMÁSTSLIKT CULTURAL INSTITUTE](#) – Pendleton, Oregon. As the website says, "the only museum on the Oregon Trail that tells the story of western expansionism from a tribal point of view."
- [Buckin Bean Coffee Roasters](#) – Pendleton, Oregon. Free coffee refills, good scones, and 5G Wifi across from Pioneer Park. Great for people watching; everyone knows everyone here, and I got a kick out of listening to the local crew of women knitters.
- [Sweet Irene's Coffee](#) – Pendleton, Oregon. Cute with a modern feel. Drive through or walk up to the window. Great nitro.

Saltwater Culture by Julia Atkinson

Local sports junkies mix with the occasional tourist at community-friendly coffee stand [Saltwater Culture](#) in Mission Beach, San Diego. Like the sign says, at Saltwater Culture, “it’s always friends over forecast.”



Two blonde baristas in beanies embody the friendly, oceanside culture. “Living the dream,” one barista says when a customer asks how she is. “That’s what we said when I crewed on yachts in Asia.” Another barista makes espresso in the back, sporting a bandaged hand from slipping at Sunset Cliffs after a sunset surf. “Get the first month deal on Groupon, it’s cheaper and comes with gear,” she tells a customer looking into membership at a nearby rock climbing gym.



Saltwater Culture’s a morning fixture for the local surf set. “Hey Nico,” the barista greets one surfer. “Do you want cinnamon on your cappuccino today? Any bread?” Breaking out one of the brightly painted mugs the owner brought back from Oaxaca, she shakes cinnamon over his drink. Pumpkin bread with chocolate chips heats up on the grill, filling the stand with the smell of melting chocolate.

Other early morning surfers join the coffee line, propping up their boards and pulling wallets out of backpacks with wet hands. A group of freedivers from the center next door, “[Just Get Wet](#),” idle on the sidewalk in front, fresh off a pool training session. “Everyone I’ve talked to says 100 meters down sucks,” one Australian freediver says. “I’m ready to go back to spear fishing and freediving just for me.”



Tourists ask to go into the freedive center to look at branded sweatshirts and dive gear. No one’s manning the center right now though – they’re all in Joshua Tree celebrating an employee’s birthday. One

tourist sits down at a small table, talking on the phone as he waits for coffee. "I don't want to be like Elon Musk is, I don't want to be the face of the brand," he says. "You always have to find a sacrificial lamb."