



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2022.08.13

Mount Saint Helens National Volcanic Monument, Washington



I resisted the temptation – strong though it was -- to stay around the tiny town of Morton (WA) for the closing day of the Loggers Jubilee. Seriously, I think it would have been a kick to hang around the edges of the festivities, like an invisible man, and just observe the event. There is not much around Morton – no pro sports, no college sports, no race tracks, no golf courses – so this probably really is a big deal as a family event. I bet it would've been a fun day.

But, I had more National Parking to do. To be honest, though, today it would be National Volcanic Monumenting, which isn't really a verb, is it? Not even a gerund.

In 1980, Mount Saint Helens, 98 miles south of Seattle (WA) and 52 miles northeast of Portland (OR), blasted its north slope into oblivion. Fifty-seven people



were killed; 200 homes, 47 bridges, 15 miles of railways, and 185 miles of highway were destroyed. Millions of trees in the immediate area were smashed and splintered like toothpicks.

The devastating explosion took 1300' off the height of the peak. That means that Mount St. Helens is a **quarter of a mile shorter** now.

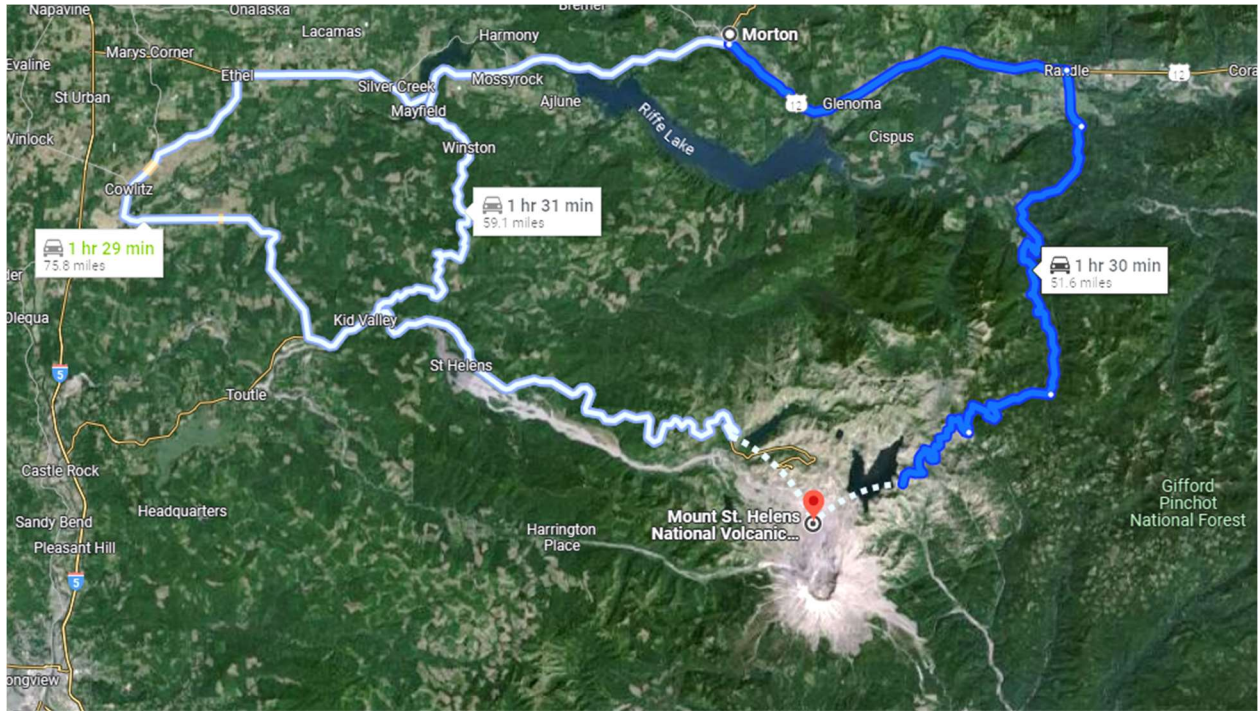
The massive landslide barreled into Spirit Lake, displacing the water in a violent wave that snapped all the trees on the mountain behind it and dragged them all back down when the water retreated. The flat,

gray plain that you see in the photo is not a stony beach; it is a floating logjam made up of thousands and thousands of barkless tree trunks that have clogged the north end of the lake for more than four decades.

The entrance roadway is still flanked by skeletal remains of what was once a great, lush, evergreen forest.

Getting to MSHNVM from Morton was not a straight shot. The town is due north of the mountain, but there is nothing close to a crow-flies route. GooGirl showed me three options, two heading west-then-east, and one east-then-west. The latter was the shortest, mileage-wise. The difference between the longest and shortest options was 24.2 miles in distance, but it was only one minutes in time (1:31 to 1:30). Man, you have to be in one big-ass hurry to log 24 extra miles just to save one minute, right?





It was obvious why the longer routes took the least time: the Squiggle Factor (SF). A quick glance at each route shows you how many slow turns you'll have to take through winding, uphill forest roads to reach your destination. Then again, though, the SF often has a direct relation to the SQ (Scenic Quotient).

Also, the average motorist is more likely to opt for the fastest route, meaning there should be less traffic on the slower option. That is, after all, how GooGirl always presents them to me. Even when I select the long way (for it's SQ or whatever), she will usually let me drive for a few miles then interject, "We've found a faster route, along [route] that will save [x] minutes. If you want to stay on your current route, tap 'No Thanks'." Now I have to take my eyes off the road, locate the harder-to-see "No Thanks" button and tap it or she will hijack my course to her liking.

And, hey, GooGirl, who is this "we" you are talking about? "We" have found a better route. You and who else?

This must be some psychological ploy by Google and/or Apple. If the voice – especially if you've chosen the female voice – says "The other way is faster; I think we should take it," the driver – especially if the driver is a male – is more likely to reject to the idea, just cuz. You know how that goes, right? I'm not saying he should, but I'm definitely saying he just might.

Removing the unilateral deduction from the moment, though -- by suggesting that "we", the omniscient Universal Committee of Prudent Route Selection, deem the other way to be superior, and that you maintain your chosen course at your peril (you dumbass) -- takes the onus of ego away.

Anyway, getting to this northeast entrance does involve driving on some *really* remote roads, especially starting at such a remote place as Morton. I was very much up for that, though. Half the ride, it seemed, was on narrow dirt roads through thick forest. A few times I found myself thinking, “This can’t be right, I must have missed a turn somehow.” But I kept on keepin’ on and, sure enough, I arrived just fine.



I wanted to enter from the east anyway, where the view of the blown-out slope, the still steaming caldera, and the devastated lake and countryside are best viewed.

My first view of MSH was in 2000. I do not recall which view area we went to, but came in from the west side, and arrived at a very good Visitor Center. But we were on the wrong side of the mountain.

The exhibits in the VC were what it was all about. They were informative and dramatic. But then we went outside onto the deck and said, “Wow, all that stuff happened way over there, huh?” It looked far away and small.

Next time, though, in 2006, I took the long way in, driving a couple hours east from I-5, then turning north for another hour to get to the lesser-known northeastern entrance. There were some info displays in the various turnouts and overlooks, but they were nowhere near as thorough as the ones at the VC.

To me, though, since I knew a lot about the eruption anyway, seeing the closer view of the blasted-open north face, and driving through the ravaged countryside was far more impactful. So much so, in fact, that I knew now, in 2022, that I had to come back to this side of the mountain and see how it had changed.

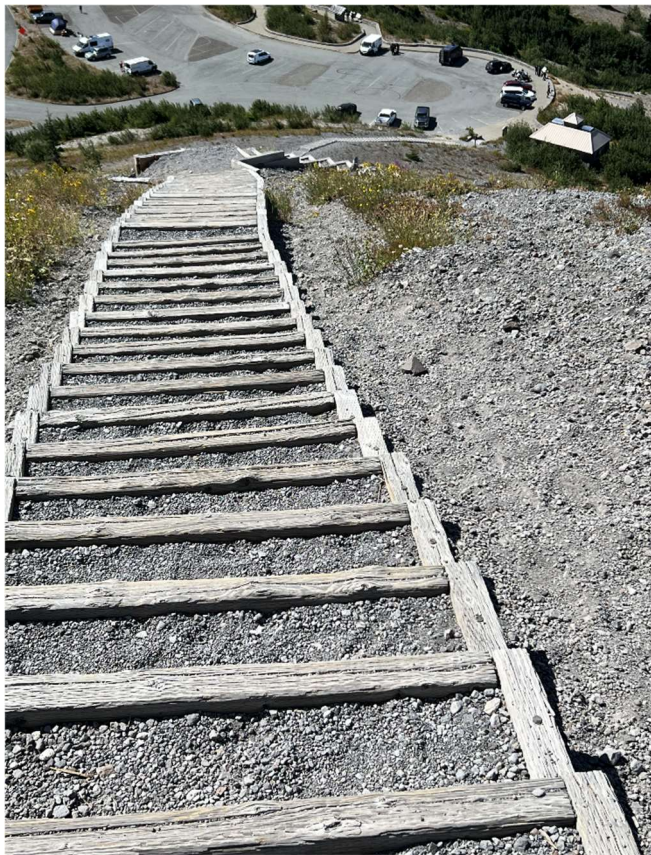
In 2006, I took photos of the mostly barren landscape. A couple of my 2022 pix were from the same spots.



2006 above, 2022 below. 16 years of new-growth forest has filled in a lot of bare spots.



The two pictures on the previous page give you a look at Nature's determined comeback. The top pic was taken 26 years after the blast. Not much has grown. In the 42-years-after photo, you can see how much greener and healthier the hillsides look.



NF-99 is the road that takes you into the Monument. Incidentally, MSHNVM is not a National Park Service property, despite the word “National” in its name. It is under the jurisdiction of the United States Forest Service, a branch of the Department of Agriculture. The “NF” in the road number stands for National Forest. So, don't expect to wield a NPS Pass here. There are signs saying that you need to purchase a USFS pass to enter, but there is no gate of any kind, and I saw nobody anywhere who seemed like any kind of official.

NF-99, nominally designated as Windyb Ridge Road, snakes along a twisting road with several overlooks: Blast Edge, Miner's Car (the rusted remnants of a car destroyed by the eruption), Meta Lakes, Cascade Peaks,

Independence Pass, and a few more. The best one, though, is the very last one: Windy Ridge.

This one has a large parking lot and is only 4.5 miles from the center of the caldera. The view from the lot is very good, but a long path with 200 or so wide wooden steps has been built up the south side of Windy Ridge, just daring you to climb it.

This day was quite nice, weather-wise, so I did climb the steps. The view of the mountain is grand, but the sweeping end-to-end view of Spirit Lake is tremendous. What a beautiful lake and forest that must have been! There were numerous campgrounds around the lake, including some summer camps for youth. Fortunately, the mountain had been giving enough warning signs that no campers were there when it blew it's top (and side).



All the hills you see here were covered with a lush blanket of deep green trees. It is beautiful now, even as the forest struggles to recover. But what a **wow** this viewpoint would have been before 1980.

I pulled BM into the Smith Creek Overlook, the penultimate one of NF-99, and had a relaxing lunch and took more photos—including the one on the next page -- before heading onward. I hope I get back here again in a few years.

