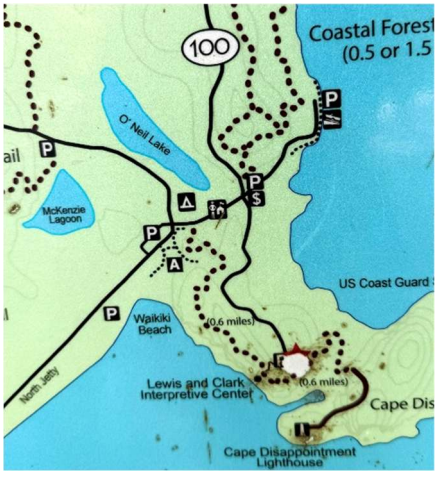
The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2026.07.12

Cape Disappointment, Washington





On a previous ride along the Pacific Coast, I tried to check this place out. The fog was about as thick as I've ever seen it out here, though, so I tabled the notion and put into the Some Other Time folder.

This time seemed Other enough. The sun was bright and there was none of that pesky gray marine layer between here and the horizon. The late-day temperature was "coastal cool" and the serpentine trail through the thick woods between the parking lot and the lighthouse looked very inviting indeed. I wish I had arrived earlier. There was more here than I expected.

The full hike of the Coastal Forest Trail must be beautiful, and I definitely would have liked to check out the North Head Trail that leads to McKenzie Lagoon.

Cape Disappointment is the southwesternmost point of Washington state. It is not “on the way” to anything. If you come out here, you’ll be turning around and taking the same road out. There’s a Coast Guard base, an old Civil War era fort (Fort Canby), an alcove with Waikiki Beach (seriously) and the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center.



It sits on the north side of the two-mile-wide mouth of the mighty Columbia River (photo below), which, of course, serves as the border of Washington and Oregon, pretty much.

See the way that white line (above) bends northward around that Island? That’s Sand Island, which is completely empty and has belonged to Oregon since they won a border dispute in 1904. I don’t know why they fought for it; there is nothing on it but some trees and a lot of beached logs. Not even nesting birds want anything to do with it, though they swarm to the much smaller East Sand Island, just to the east.



Stranger still, Sand Island moves. It’s basically a large sandbar that trees have taken root on, and the river’s powerful flow shapes and reshapes it. Records show that is has changed location significantly over time.

Cape Disappointment got its name from an explorer named John Meares, for whom Oregon's Cape Meares is named. In sailing the area, Captain Meares decided that there was actually "no river here" and expressed his feelings by assigning the name.



Seems weird to miss a *two-mile-wide river*, but I think the shifting sands of Sand Island and its ilk had a lot to do with that. If big ships can't navigate it, it didn't count as a river in Meares' book.

Significant dredging was done over the decades to make the river big-boat-friendly. East Sand Island is almost entirely comprised of dredged riverbed. Maybe that's why all those nesting birds like it so much.

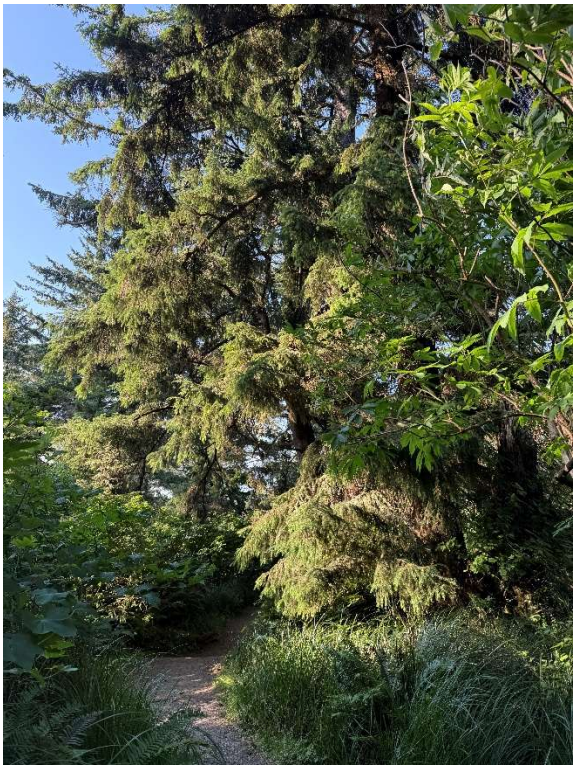
Anyway, all that had nothing to do with my visit. I pulled BluMax into the small parking area closest to the lighthouse, took a glance (shoulda taken two) at the posted map, and launched myself onto the trail.



It was really nice in the woods, and there was nothing boring about the trail: there was very little straight or level about. When I quickly came to a fork, I confidently veered right. That took me to the Interpretive Center, which, of course, was closed. It did have a wide observation deck, and a pretty good view of the lighthouse, which was on a completely different peninsula (as any fool can see with two glances at the map on page 1).



Cape Disappointment Lighthouse, with Oregon in the distance



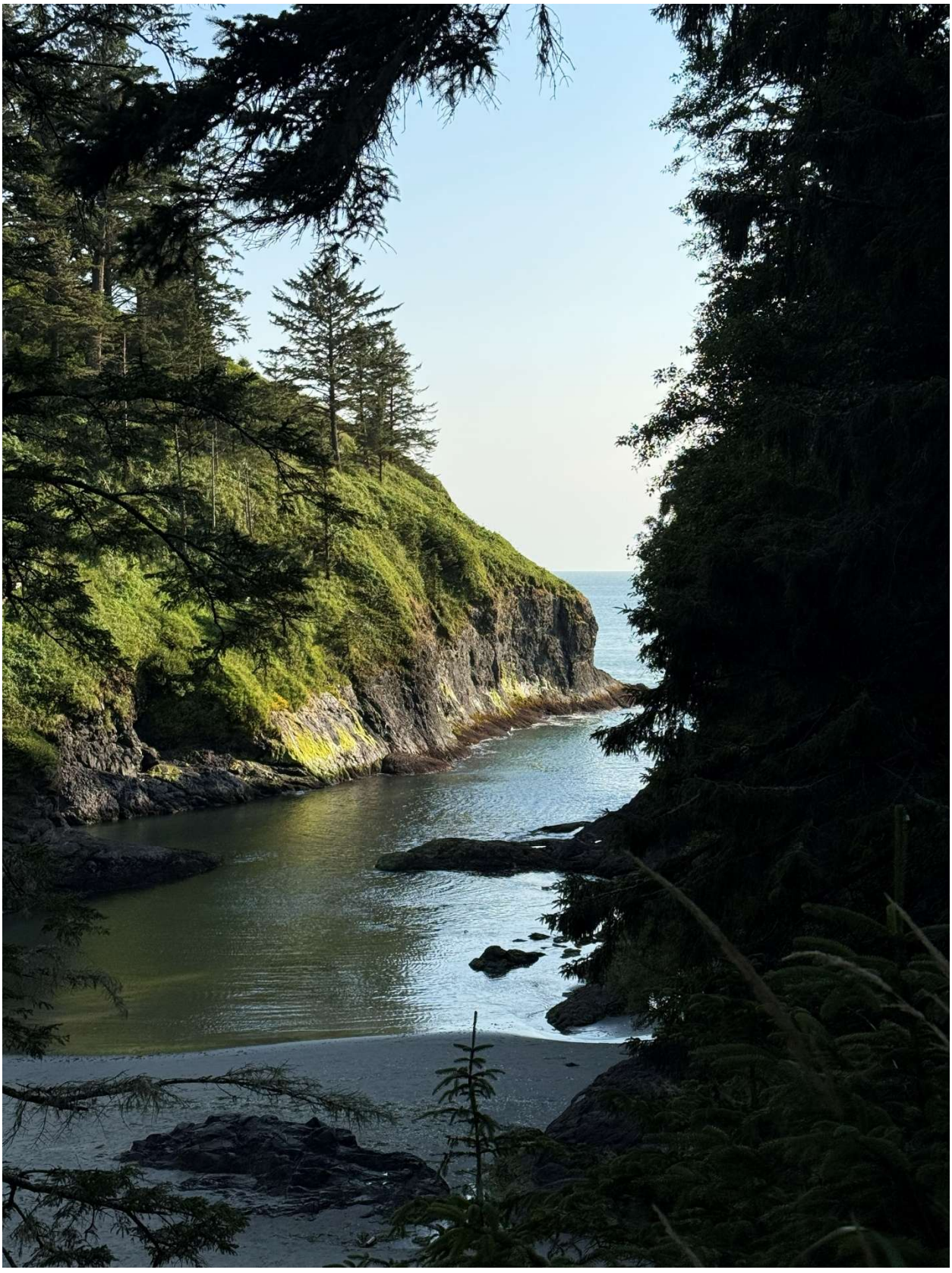
I was glad I got the faraway shot, but I wanted to get closer. I returned to the original trail and wound deeper into the woods until there was another fork. One arrow pointed to “Lighthouse” and the other pointed to the dire-sounding “Deadman’s Cove.”

Through the trees, I could see the cove, driftwood strewn across its beach, a strange island in the Pacific inlet, and the southern wall alight in vibrant greenery. Had to go down there.

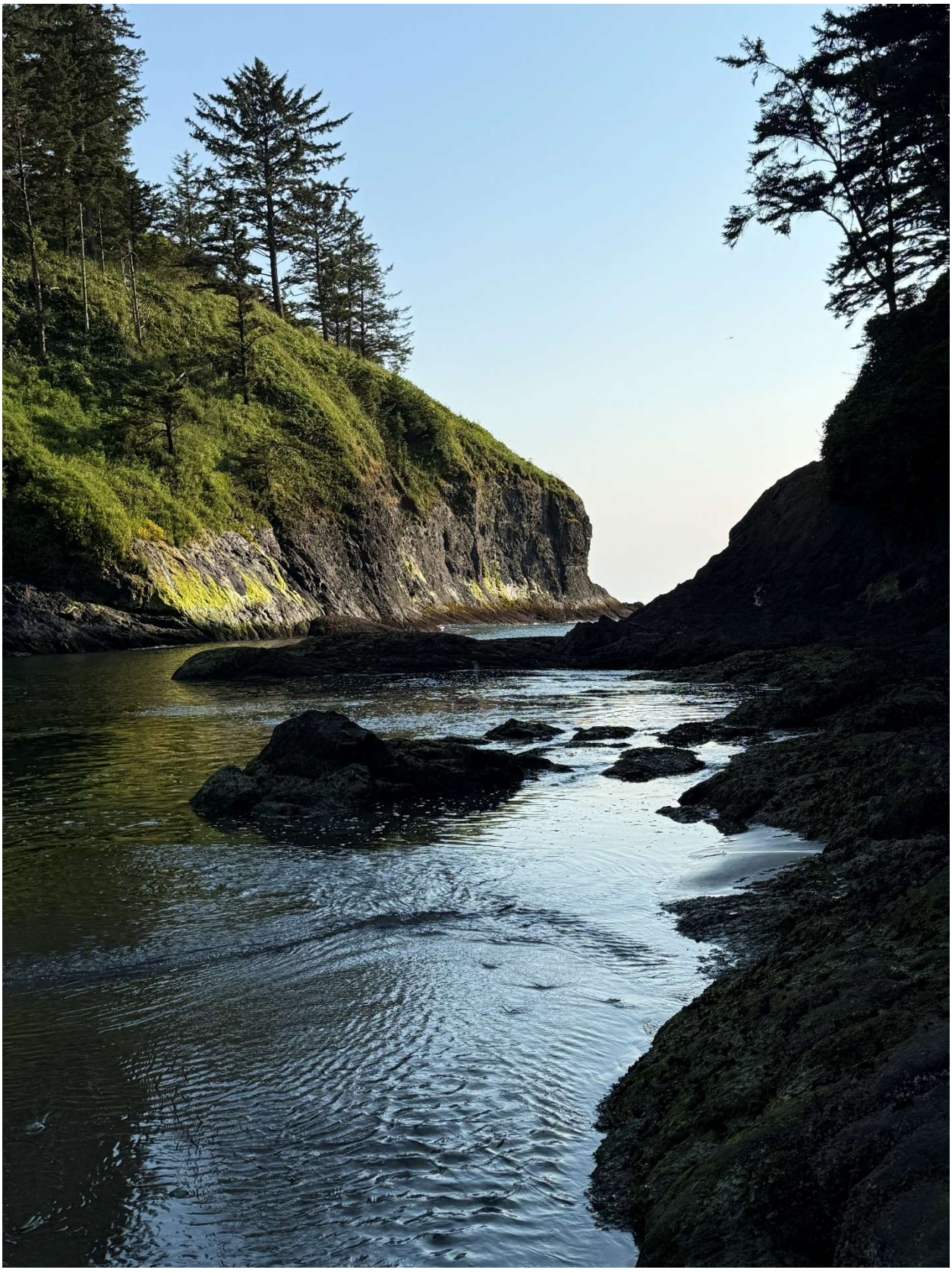
What a cool spot! The ocean water rippled gently onto the flat, packed sand, and the juxtaposition of sunny-side and shady-side was striking.

This is a place I’d like to see in midday, but I **was** digging the shadows bigtime.

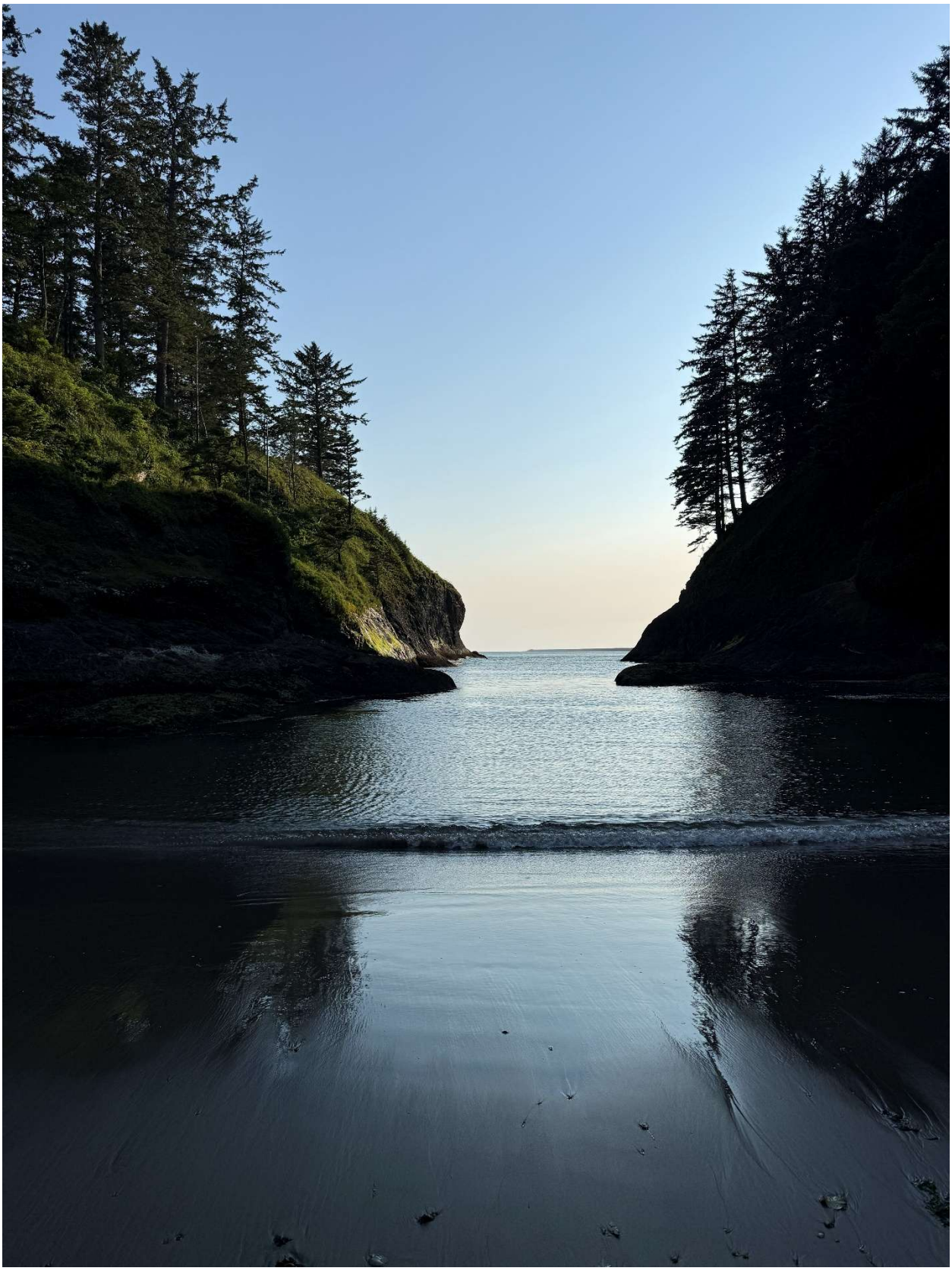




Deadman's Cove



Deadman's Cove



Deadman’s Cove, looking straight out at the Pacific Ocean.



There is a strange little island that looms up from the shallow water. It's shaped a little like a submarine, and it has a scrawny-but-tough tree atop the conning tower. Signs ask the public to refrain from climbing on the island

I assumed I was here at low tide. The texture of the sand and the location of the gray driftwood indicated that most of that submarine would be underwater when the tide fills this inlet.

There was a family of five milling about on the beach when I got down there. I steered away from them to give them their space, but when I moved closer to get that island photo, the dad asked if I would take their picture.

They posed, I snapped, and I asked him where they were from. He said Hawaii. I wondered aloud which of us had come the farthest to be here. Well, I just looked it up on Google Earth and no matter where in Hawaii he lives, I got him beat. The farthest point of HI from that spot would be the western corner of Kauai: 2,607.5 miles. My "home" in Key West is 2,768.6 miles from Deadman's Cove.

Those are crowflight miles, of course. I started to figure out driving distance, then caught myself. I'm pretty sure they didn't drive all the way to Washington.



As I was writing this, I read a quote from someone who had been here: "It's like a hidden movie set." It's a very good description.

As you might guess, the cove got its cheerful name from the bodies of shipwreck victims that washed ashore. The mouth of the Columbia has earned the nickname "the grave-yard of the Pacific." The aforementioned shifting sands, combined with violent surf and heavy fog caused more than 2000 shipwrecks along the coasts of southern WA and northern OR.

In storms, the cove can experience 12-foot waves and extreme tidal surges.

The US government closed the cove to the public in 2001 due to those frequent perilous conditions, and the steep, constantly-eroding path that leads to it. Also, the trail to get there crossed the property line of the active USCG base there, which was not kopacetic with the military bigwigs, especially after 9/11.

In 2022, after significant work to stabilize the trail, plus a minor reroute and a new fence, Deadman's Cove was reopened to the public. On a beautiful evening like this, it's a tremendous place to be. In a storm, well, I'd pick somewhere else.

And, judging by the area's nickname, that kind of weather happens a lot. So, I got *really* lucky to find Cape Disappointment on such a beautiful afternoon.

This a **major** factor of roadtripping. You can choose your destination, reserve your accommodations well in advance, drive for days (or more) to get there, but arrive in the middle of:

- a drenching rain spell (i.e., Pacific NW in 2005, Nova Scotia in 2024),
- wildfire smoke (i.e., Alaska ’15, Jasper National Park ‘23),
- wildfire destruction (i.e., skeletal forests at Waterton Lakes NP in ’23)
- drought (i.e., bone dry Yosemite Falls ’23)
- extreme cold (i.e., 28-38˚ for a whole weekend at Crater Lake in ’26),
- extreme heat (i.e., 106˚ for a whole week in Eugene ‘25), or
- construction closures (i.e., West Rim Road at Crater Lake, or Plateau Point Trail at GCNP in 2025, or Valley of Fire in ‘23),

Or, your meticulously-scheduled arrival gets derailed by:

- mechanical woes (flat tire in ’22, brake job in ’23, major repairs in ‘24)
- medical issues (infected knee at Acadia in ’24, broken toe just 2 weeks ago)

So, when you come across a place where nasty weather is the norm, and you get prime conditions instead – like today -- you have to give a grateful nod to the road gods.

But, anyway, I hiked up the steep slope and back to the main trail towards the lighthouse. It was mostly on a wide, paved road, so it did not feel like a hike, just a walk up a steep incline.

The structure itself was not particularly impressive. It was badly in need of a paint job, and the upper window panes were hurtin’ for certain.



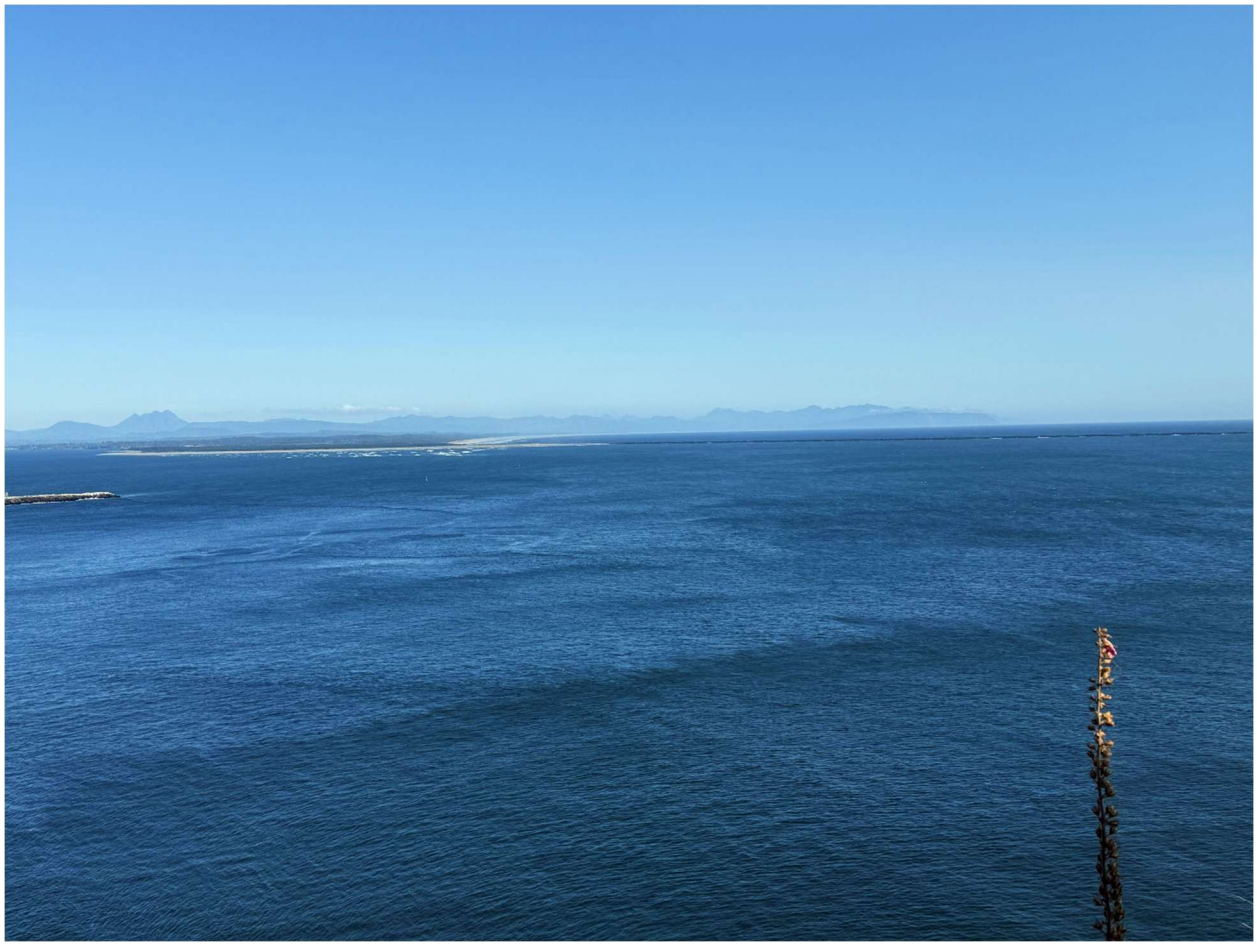
The light was first lit in 1856, and it is the oldest functioning lighthouse on the West Coast. It is still active, and it sounds like it better be; Washington is the most overcast state in the country, and it deals with an average of 165 days of fog per year.

The view from there was nice, but lacked any really distinct feature. I could see the mountains of Oregon to the south, and the vastness of the Pacific to the west.

To the north were some sheer cliffs, and then North Head, which also boasts a lighthouse. Mariners coming from the north could not see the one at Cape Disappointment until it was sometimes too late, so North Head Light was added in 1898.



Looking north from Cape Disappointment Light



Looking south to Oregon from Cape Disappointment Light

I had a Harvest Host brewpub waiting for me about an hour away and I wanted to arrive before darkness set in, so I headed down the slope and trail, back to BluMaxx, and deeper into Washington.