

Snowcapped Passes by Day, a Frontier Town by Night — A 3-Day North Cascades Highway Road Trip

3 Days · I-Journey Travel Guide

The North Cascades Highway (State Route 20) is Washington's most dramatic mountain drive, climbing from old-growth rainforest to a 5,477-foot alpine pass before dropping into the sagebrush-and-orchard country of the Methow Valley. This 3-day self-drive loop out of Seattle passes the turquoise waters of Diablo Lake and the sheer granite of Washington Pass before two nights in the frontier-boardwalk town of Winthrop, using a real rental car, a real lodge and real small-town restaurants along the way.

DURATION

3 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

Late May–October

the only months the highway is reliably open; State Route 20 closes for the winter around late November or early December and typically doesn't reopen until mid-to-late April or May once avalanche crews clear the pass — check WSDOT's pass report before you go.

FROM

\$400 USD / person

for 2 people sharing a rental car, two nights of lodging and the meals listed; excludes flights to Seattle (SEA). North Cascades National Park itself has no entrance fee.

Day 1

Seattle to Diablo Lake & Winthrop

Pick up a rental car in Seattle and drive northeast into the North Cascades, stopping at a glacial-blue reservoir before climbing over the pass into the Methow Valley.

Rental Car: Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA)

~2.5 hours to Diablo Lake · rental from \$69 USD / day

Pick up a rental car at Sea-Tac and drive north on I-5 before turning east on State Route 20 at Sedro-Woolley.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car · 1-800-736-8222 · www.enterprise.com

Diablo Lake Overlook

~30 minutes · free

A roadside pullout above a glacier-fed reservoir so turquoise it looks tinted, the color coming from finely ground "glacial flour" suspended in the meltwater.

Washington Pass Overlook

~45 minutes · free

A short paved loop trail to the highway's high point at 5,477 feet, looking straight down the valley at the jagged granite spires of Liberty Bell Mountain.

Check-In: Sun Mountain Lodge

From \$260 USD / night, for 2 people

A ridge-top lodge above the Methow Valley with sweeping views of the Cascades, a short drive from Winthrop.

Day 2

Winthrop & the Methow Valley

A full day off the highway in the Methow Valley's old-west town of Winthrop, with its false-front boardwalks, a famous general store, and a local brewery for dinner.

Winthrop's Old-West Main Street

~1.5 hours · free to walk

A false-front, boardwalk downtown built in the 1970s to lean into the town's frontier-mining-era look, now lined with shops and cafes along the Methow River.

The Mazama Store

~1 hour · pastries from \$5 USD

A general store and bakery at the base of the highway's western approach, known among cyclists and hikers for cinnamon rolls and wood-fired pizza.

Dinner: Old Schoolhouse Brewery

~1.5 hours · dinner ~\$18–\$25 USD / person

A brewpub in a converted 1920s schoolhouse on Winthrop's riverside, pouring its own beers alongside pub food on a deck over the Methow River.

Check-In: Sun Mountain Lodge (2nd Night)

From \$260 USD / night, for 2 people

A second night at the same ridge-top lodge, with time for the pool, the spa or a sunset walk along the property's trails.

Day 3

Return Over the Pass to Seattle

A final crossing of the highway back toward Seattle, with one more stop at a viewpoint missed on the way in before returning the rental car.

Drive: Winthrop to Ross Lake Overlook

~1.5 hours · via State Route 20 westbound

A return crossing of Washington Pass and Rainy Pass, with the road tracing the Skagit River gorge back down toward the lowlands.

Ross Lake Overlook

~30 minutes · free

A viewpoint above a 24-mile-long reservoir straddling the Canadian border, framed by