

Mt. Bachelor/Bend, Oregon

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SPRING SPORTS SPECTACULAR

*Central Oregon offers a cornucopia of spring sports. Just as the ski season winds down, golf, cycling, kayaking and are revving up.*

By Claire Walter

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From the balcony, where I stood to enjoy in the waning afternoon sun, I could hear my neighbors discussing what they wanted to do the following day. They weren't arguing, but rather talking enthusiastically, but their patio door was open and their voices carried in the late-day stillness. Eavesdropping was easier than trying to shut out their words, which, in truth, echoed our own decision dilemma. The dad next door was lusting to play golf, and the mom wanted to cruise the galleries in a nearby town looking for some art to put over their mantelpiece. There appeared to be two youngsters, who of course couldn't agree any more than their parents. One wanted to snowboard at Mt. Bachelor and another pleaded to be driven to Smith Rock to watch rock climbing, an activity he hoped to take up that summer. Theirs was not an atypical discussion for visitors to Central Oregon, an area of long (and overlapping) ski and golf seasons, a vibrant cultural life and sports possibilities from adrenaline-pumping whitewater kayaking to benign bicycle touring.

Our dilemma also was: what to do in a place where there is so much to do? Far from coastal Oregon's gray skies and frequent rain, the central part of the state is a high desert but, with dense forests and rushing streams, it doesn't feel like a dry desert, but rather just what it is: a real playground for outdoor enthusiasts, with enough culture, art, shopping and fine dining to veneer the area with sophistication. The dormant volcanoes comprising the Cascade Range soar from flat valleys to the sky. They define the region, imbue it with ever-changing vistas, and provide a spectacular backdrop for the farms and ranches that still prevail. With a moderate year-round climate, sports opportunities abound in what has also become a prime recreational region.

With a sizable regional airport, Redmond is the gateway to central Oregon. It is also centrally located, with trendy Bend, the Mt. Bachelor ski area and the Newberry National Volcanic Monument to the south; quaint and agrarian Sisters to the west; Madras and its native American culture and casino to the north; historic Pineville to the east, making it a good base for exploring all the options. That's why we were there—and I'm sure that was our neighbors' reason too.

For my part, I was like one of the kids next door and couldn't wait to get to the slopes. Mt. Bachelor is one of the giants of western American skiing. The difference between the base and summit elevations is 3,000 feet, with 71 runs on 3,600 acres of skiable terrain, a statistical way of saying "huge." At this commanding volcanic mountain, the ski season opens in mid-November and doesn't end until the 4<sup>th</sup> of July—one of the longest in the U.S. We loaded out ski gear into the car and set off early for what promised to be a bluebird day of spring skiing. After all, the sky was brilliant, with sun angling in from the east and casting a golden glow on the landscape. As we passed one of the Oregon's many state-maintained Sno-Parks [stet], which provide access to cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobile trails, a layer of clouds appeared on the horizon in the general direction of Mt. Bachelor.

When we pulled into the parking lot, we could see only the lowest portions of the lower slopes. "Bummer," we said to each other. When we boarded the high-speed chairlift, one of seven such express lifts at the mountain, our misgivings were realized. We rode instantly into the soupy fog of the cloud itself—a chilly, no-fun ride. The run down was even more discouraging. We had to crank our edges into the crusted-up morning snow surface and fight the vertigo that such a white-out produces. Mt. Bachelor snares more than 300 inches of snow a year, but in spring, skiers really crave sunshine and a slope blanketed in soft corn snow. Time for coffee, we decided, in the hopes that in the epic sun-cloud battle, the sun would win on this day. We boarded the lift once more to the Pine Marten mid-mountain lodge, where an espresso and juice bar called Pinnacles had recently opened.

We found spots by a picture window, dawdled over our lattes and debated about what we should have done that morning instead of skiing. Then, we saw our dreams of sunshine begin to come true. First, the sky lightened, and we watched skiers and snowboarders, more willing than we to endure the hardpack, casting faint shadows on the snow. Slowly, a view developed. First, treetops emerged from the mist, then a forest rilled by the white ribbons of ski runs emerged and finally an entire panorama unfolded. As the sun broke through the clouds, skiing suddenly held far more allure than caffeine-loading.

We looked for the run that we had previously skied but instead found ourselves one run over. A snow grooming machine had raked the hard snow, followed by sun and warming air temperatures that quickly softened the surface. It wasn't yet corn—that magical spring surface of snow that forms into small, moist bee-bee-like balls—but it was fast becoming so, particularly on east-facing runs. Mt. Bachelor, a beautiful volcanic cone shaped much like a child's drawing of a mountain, offers skiing on three sides, meaning that skiers can follow the sun or seek out the freshest, driest snow. When the clouds rose above Bachelor's 9,065-foot summit, the express chair to the top opened, and everyone save rank beginners headed up to the volcanic peak's uppermost 1,700 virtually tree-free feet. Even sturdy intermediates can handle the trio of groomed runs from the top, but it takes legs and nerves of steel to negotiate the super-steep cirque etched into the mountaintop's north face or the three adjacent, snow-loaded chutes.

We skied back to Scapolo's, a mostly-Tuscan restaurant in the Pine Marten lodge, to stoke up on a lunch of excellent hearth-baked pizza and killer desserts. Recharged, we spent the afternoon on the west-facing runs of the Outback and the Northwest Territory. Ranging from smooth, medium-pitch cruising trails to steep, mogully glades, this

network of runs offered adrenaline-charging challenge a notch or two below the super-steeps at the summit. Once on our way back from Mt. Bachelor, we visited the snoozing dogs at Trail of Dreams, regretting that it was too late in the season for a dogsled ride.

From our first day and its slow start, the rest of the week picked up in pace. We returned to Mt. Bachelor to ski some more, because the snow was so good and the weather so benign, but then we tore ourselves away from the mountain to sample some of the region's other attractions. We shopped, gallery-hopped and lunched in the quaintly named communities of Bend and Sisters. Bend is a small, sophisticated city with a vibrant downtown and the latter a rustic backwater on the surface but equally with it when it comes to tempting objects to buy. Sisters was so named because it sits at the base of a volcanic trio known as the Three Sisters dining scene is bound no take a great leap forward now that the town finally is getting a municipal sewerage system, but way before the pipes were laid, it had galleries and antique shops galore and one of the finest clock shops in the country.

On rental bikes, we pedaled the 10½-mile Deschutes River Trail between Lava Island Falls and Benham Falls. We shared the trail with other cyclists as well as runners, older folks out for a spring stroll and a pair of chatting young moms pushing little ones in strollers. We paused at whim to watch kayakers, fly fishermen and even a couple of rafts on this beautiful river.

During short car trips from our Redmond base, we were thrilled by the variety of things to see and do closeby. We were enchanted by Sisters, a rustic little village in a broad valley that only last year put in municipal sewer lines. We spent a day exploring such remnants of this volcanic activity as Lava Butte, Pilot Butte State Park, the Lava River Caves and the Newberry National Volcanic Monument. Though it was a bit early there, we explored part of Newberry's massive five-mile-wide volcanic caldera, noteworthy for a 300-foot-thick obsidian flow. This shiny black rock is one of nature's hardest. At the Lava Lands visitor center, we learned more about what we were looking at with detailed explanations of volcanic activity and formations.

At the nearby High Desert Museum, we plunged into 150 acres depicting the natural and human history, geology and biodiversity of the eight Western states. The Desertarium, museum's acclaimed window on the high desert ecosystem, lived up their billing for quality and information, and its human history focus on Oregon was equally enlightening. The Oregon Trail was one of the key routes in the settlement of the West, and this thought-provoking museum depicts what was at the end of the trail. We could hardly tear ourselves away from the living history exhibit, which plunged us into life on an 1870s homestead—except that we were lured to the live river otters, porcupines, birds of prey and other critters housed in natural habitats.

If we'd had time, we would have hacked at one of the region's two dozen golf courses. Since we're not experienced golfers, the new Eagle Crest Mid Iron Course would be just our speed, rather than the two nearby championship courses which are way beyond our skills. If we hadn't been so busy skiing, cycling and sightseeing, we would have taken a picnic lunch in Drake Park, a lovely, tranquil haven right in downtown Bend. We rued that we did not have just one more day so we could visit the Museum at Warm Springs, a highly regarded tribute to the history and culture of the Paiute, Wasco and Warm Springs people who comprise the Confederation of Warm Springs Indians.

We chose instead, on our last day, to return to Mt. Bachelor. No clouds marred the morning. No hardpack covered the slopes. We skied around the mountain, following out inclinations and the sun. From the summit, we looked toward neighboring volcanoes—The Three Sisters, Broken Top and even massive Mt. Hood in the distance. Our last run of the day turned out to be our last run of the season, for spring had settled in elsewhere.

#### IF YOU GO

The Central Oregon Visitors Association (63085 North With a moderate year-round climate, sports opportunities abound, overlapping from season to season. Highway 97, Bend, OR 97701; 541-389-8799 or [www.covisitors.com](http://www.covisitors.com)) has information on the region in general. For ski information, contact Mt. Bachelor (P.O. Box 1031, Bend, OR 97709; 800-829-2442, 541-382-2442 or [www.mtbachelor.com](http://www.mtbachelor.com)).

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