

FOSTER CHURCH

TURNING DOWN THE SOUND

*Travel Escapes in Washington's
Small Towns*





Stevenson

1,500

180

The Road: The fastest route, by a few minutes, to Stevenson, coming from the Portland area, is to take I-84 to Cascade Locks and cross the Columbia River on the Bridge of the Gods. Turn right on SR 14, and travel 3 miles to Stevenson. A more scenic route from the Portland area is to take I-5 north to Vancouver (Washington), turn east on SR 14, and continue about 45 miles to Stevenson. The views of the Oregon side of the river from Washington are some of the best in the Columbia Gorge.

Stevenson straddles SR 14 on the north side of the Columbia River Gorge about forty-five miles upriver from Vancouver. Across the river on the Oregon side, forested mountains rise sharply, and on wintry days, clouds hang above the cliffs and drop woolly shreds into pointed trees.

Coming into town in late afternoon, the person to look up is Bob Craig. Afternoons, he can be found at his brewpub, Walking Man Brewing, which is one street down from Main Street. He's a lean guy with a bushy white goatee, and if anyone personifies

the current spirit of the place, it's he. Craig had brewed beer at home for years when it occurred to him to brew for a profit and create a place in Stevenson where he could hang out. He found a big house and created a pub downstairs with an outdoor terrace for rare sunny days. He loves sipping beer and talking with customers, who come from all over the world. His own favorite brew? He likes Knuckledragger, a strong pale ale. "We are not afraid of flavor or alcohol," he says. "We believe in flavorful beers—big in-your-face beers."

Even with its tourist overlay, Stevenson manages to combine the attitudes of a small logging town, which it once was, and a twenty-first-century cyber city that draws a younger crowd with different education and expectations. Wireless Internet is available at no cost downtown and in the waterfront park, which says something about the town's aspirations. Highway strip downtowns usually lose their character, not to mention walkability, charm, and quiet, but Stevenson manages to be a real place, where people shop and exchange the day's news. Many of the businesses angle to tourists, but there's also a grocery, an auto parts shop, a florist, a barber, and a bank. Downtown also benefits from the Skamania County Courthouse, which anchors the street.

The town is built on a hillside that ends at the river. North of downtown are comfortable residential streets, and the schools, churches, and library that give a town its fabric. The area down hill from the main drag and across the railroad tracks was once Whiskey Flats, named for the seven saloons that flourished near the riverfront. The saloons are mostly gone, and now it's a park, a place to launch kite boards, a boat launch, and a cruise ship landing. Also, for the opposite of gravitas, look for a curious work of public art—a kinetic sculpture by Seattle sculptor Andrew Carson that spins and revolves and appears to play with the wind rather than the other way around.

Some of the best times to enjoy Stevenson are during town celebrations, such as Christmas in the Gorge and the Blues

and Brews Festival in June. Christmas in the Gorge, the first weekend in December, begins Friday with the Starlight Truck Parade. Fire trucks and service vehicles festooned with lights roll down Second Street, which is lined two or three deep on both sides with toddlers and parents. The parade clocks in at about a half hour long, which on a cold night that smells like snow is just about right. Saturday, several downtown shops offer free cookies, coffee, and cocoa, and two schools sponsor arts and crafts bazaars. Sunday, the Methodist Church Luncheon is held as a benefit for United Methodist Women in Missions. A hundred or more people attend, a mix of generations and occupations. They have their fill of the casserole of the year, wear mostly red, and support the proposition that there is no finer place on earth to spend Christmas than the Columbia Gorge.

The Blues and Brews Festival takes place in June at the Skamania County Fairgrounds. Note that admission to the Waterfront Jam is free on Friday night. Blues and bluegrass festivals have popped up all over the Northwest in the summer. Everyone loves the music and the sound fits the languorous days. The musicians must compete with their backdrop, which is surely one of the finest for any festival in the Northwest, at the edge of Rock Cove with a panoramic view of the Gorge. It's hard to escape a gorgeous view here.

The Basics: The Riverside Lodge near the river is a cozy place to stay. They leave earplugs in the rooms to muffle the roar of trains that run past. An inexpensive alternative is the Econo Lodge on the east end of town, which is clean and comfortable. The queen of them all is Skamania Lodge, on a hill behind town. In town, the Rio Mexican Café serves food and has an intimate bar, and there are several other places including the 130 Bar and Grill, the Crossing, and the Big River Grill.

In *Turning Down the Sound: Travel Escapes in Washington's Small Towns*, Foster Church guides adventurers—lifelong residents of the Northwest and visitors alike—to the small communities beyond the state's well-known urban center.

As in his previous book, *Discovering Main Street: Travel Adventures in Small Towns of the Northwest*, Church employs the skills of his Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism. He also shares his passion for encouraging tourists down less traveled paths—paths that curve beside valleys and wheat fields, travel along orchards and straits, and abut mountains and rivers.

Once inside these small towns, local flavors abound. Church reveals how each community's unique character informs its hospitality and culture: In Morton, the abandoned Roxy movie theater was re-opened to host lectures and live performances. In the town of Palouse, a once-lonesome farming community in the Washington wheat country is now home to antique shops and art galleries, and in the farming town of Ritzville, local farmers sculpt life-size figures from the American West out of sheets of steel and display them in the downtown.

With maps, photographs, and recommendations for more than thirty-five towns in all corners of the state, *Turning Down the Sound* vastly expands the resources available for readers and travelers keen on encountering what Church calls American tourism's last frontier: its small towns.

FOSTER CHURCH is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and was for twenty-seven years a staff writer for *The Oregonian*. He is the author of *Discovering Main Street: Travel Adventures in Small Towns of the Northwest*, a companion volume to *Turning Down the Sound*, and his travel articles have appeared in newspapers throughout the United States. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

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